

## Chapter 17

### The First Bulb

On the following evening, as we have said, Rosa returned with the Bible of Cornelius de Witt.

Then began between the master and the pupil one of those charming scenes which are the delight of the novelist who has to describe them.

The grated window, the only opening through which the two lovers were able to communicate, was too high for conveniently reading a book, although it had been quite convenient for them to read each other's faces.

Rosa therefore had to press the open book against the grating edgewise, holding above it in her right hand the lamp, but Cornelius hit upon the lucky idea of fixing it to the bars, so as to afford her a little rest. Rosa was then enabled to follow with her finger the letters and syllables, which she was to spell for Cornelius, who with a straw pointed out the letters to his attentive pupil through the holes of the grating.

The light of the lamp illuminated the rich complexion of Rosa, her blue liquid eyes, and her golden hair under her head-dress of gold brocade, with her fingers held up, and showing in the blood, as it flowed downwards in the veins that pale pink hue which shines before the light owing to the living transparency of the flesh tint.

Rosa's intellect rapidly developed itself under the animating influence of Cornelius, and when the difficulties seemed too arduous, the sympathy of two loving hearts seemed to smooth them away.

And Rosa, after having returned to her room, repeated in her solitude the reading lessons, and at the same time recalled all the delight which she had felt whilst receiving them.

One evening she came half an hour later than usual. This was too extraordinary an instance not to call forth at once Cornelius's inquiries after its cause.

"Oh! do not be angry with me," she said, "it is not my fault. My father has renewed an acquaintance with an old crony who used to visit him at the Hague, and to ask him to let him see the prison. He is a good sort of fellow, fond of his bottle, tells funny stories, and moreover is very free with his money, so as always to be ready to stand a treat."

"You don't know anything further of him?" asked Cornelius, surprised.

"No," she answered; "it's only for about a fortnight that my father has taken such a fancy to this friend who is so assiduous in visiting him."

"Ah, so," said Cornelius, shaking his head uneasily as every new incident seemed to him to forebode some catastrophe; "very likely some spy, one of those who are sent into jails to watch both prisoners and their keepers."

"I don't believe that," said Rosa, smiling; "if that worthy person is spying after any one, it is certainly not after my father."

"After whom, then?"

"Me, for instance."

"You?"

"Why not?" said Rosa, smiling.

"Ah, that's true," Cornelius observed, with a sigh. "You will not always have suitors in vain; this man may become your husband."

"I don't say anything to the contrary."

"What cause have you to entertain such a happy prospect?"

"Rather say, this fear, Mynheer Cornelius."

"Thank you, Rosa, you are right; well, I will say then, this fear?"

"I have only this reason ---- "

"Tell me, I am anxious to hear."

"This man came several times before to the Buytenhof, at the Hague. I remember now, it was just about the time when you were confined there. When I left, he left too; when I came here, he came after me. At the Hague his pretext was that he wanted to see you."

"See me?"

"Yes, it must have undoubtedly been only a pretext for now, when he could plead the same reason, as you are my father's prisoner again, he does not care any longer for you; quite the contrary, -- I heard him say to my father only yesterday that he did not know you."

"Go on, Rosa, pray do, that I may guess who that man is, and what he wants."

"Are you quite sure, Mynheer Cornelius, that none of your friends can interest himself for you?"

"I have no friends, Rosa; I have only my old nurse, whom you know, and who knows you. Alas, poor Sue! she would come herself, and use no roundabout ways. She would at once say to your father, or to you, 'My good sir, or my good miss, my child is here; see how grieved I am; let me see him only for one hour, and I'll pray for you as long as I live.' No, no," continued Cornelius; "with the exception of my poor old Sue, I have no friends in this world."

"Then I come back to what I thought before; and the more so as last evening at sunset, whilst I was arranging the border where I am to plant your bulb, I saw a shadow gliding between the alder trees and the aspens. I did not appear to see him, but it was this man. He concealed himself and saw me digging the ground, and certainly it was me whom he followed, and me whom he was spying after. I could not move my rake, or touch one atom of soil, without his noticing it."

"Oh, yes, yes, he is in love with you," said Cornelius. "Is he young? Is he handsome?"

Saying this he looked anxiously at Rosa, eagerly waiting for her answer.

"Young? handsome?" cried Rosa, bursting into a laugh. "He is hideous to look at; crooked, nearly fifty years of age, and never dares to look me in the face, or to speak, except in an undertone."

"And his name?"

"Jacob Gisels."

"I don't know him."

"Then you see that, at all events, he does not come after you."

"At any rate, if he loves you, Rosa, which is very likely, as to see you is to love you, at least you don't love him."

"To be sure I don't."

"Then you wish me to keep my mind easy?"

"I should certainly ask you to do so."

"Well, then, now as you begin to know how to read you will read all that I write to you of the pangs of jealousy and of absence, won't you, Rosa?"

"I shall read it, if you write with good big letters."

Then, as the turn which the conversation took began to make Rosa uneasy, she asked, --

"By the bye, how is your tulip going on?"

"Oh, Rosa, only imagine my joy, this morning I looked at it in the sun, and after having moved the soil aside which covers the bulb, I saw the first sprouting of the leaves. This small germ has caused me a much greater

emotion than the order of his Highness which turned aside the sword already raised at the Buytenhof."

"You hope, then?" said Rosa, smiling.

"Yes, yes, I hope."

"And I, in my turn, when shall I plant my bulb?"

"Oh, the first favourable day I will tell you; but, whatever you do, let nobody help you, and don't confide your secret to any one in the world; do you see, a connoisseur by merely looking at the bulb would be able to distinguish its value; and so, my dearest Rosa, be careful in locking up the third sucker which remains to you."

"It is still wrapped up in the same paper in which you put it, and just as you gave it me. I have laid it at the bottom of my chest under my point lace, which keeps it dry, without pressing upon it. But good night, my poor captive gentleman."

"How? already?"

"It must be, it must be."

"Coming so late and going so soon."

"My father might grow impatient not seeing me return, and that precious lover might suspect a rival."

Here she listened uneasily.

"What is it?" asked Van Baerle. "I thought I heard something."

"What, then?"

"Something like a step, creaking on the staircase."

"Surely," said the prisoner, "that cannot be Master Gryphus, he is always heard at a distance"

"No, it is not my father, I am quite sure, but ---- "

"But?"

"But it might be Mynheer Jacob."

Rosa rushed toward the staircase, and a door was really heard rapidly to close before the young damsel had got down the first ten steps.

Cornelius was very uneasy about it, but it was after all only a prelude to greater anxieties.

The flowing day passed without any remarkable incident. Gryphus made his three visits, and discovered nothing. He never came at the same hours as he hoped thus to discover the secrets of the prisoner. Van Baerle, therefore, had devised a contrivance, a sort of pulley, by means of which he was able to lower or to raise his jug below the ledge of tiles and stone before his window. The strings by which this was effected he had found means to cover with that moss which generally grows on tiles, or in the crannies of the walls.

Gryphus suspected nothing, and the device succeeded for eight days. One morning, however, when Cornelius, absorbed in the contemplation of his bulb, from which a germ of vegetation was already peeping forth, had not heard old Gryphus coming upstairs as a gale of wind was blowing which shook the whole tower, the door suddenly opened.

Gryphus, perceiving an unknown and consequently a forbidden object in the hands of his prisoner, pounced upon it with the same rapidity as the hawk on its prey.

As ill luck would have it, his coarse, hard hand, the same which he had broken, and which Cornelius van Baerle had set so well, grasped at once in the midst of the jug, on the spot where the bulb was lying in the soil.

"What have you got here?" he roared. "Ah! have I caught you?" and with this he grabbed in the soil.

"I? nothing, nothing," cried Cornelius, trembling.

"Ah! have I caught you? a jug and earth in it There is some criminal secret at the bottom of all this."

"Oh, my good Master Gryphus," said Van Baerle, imploringly, and anxious as the partridge robbed of her young by the reaper.

In fact, Gryphus was beginning to dig the soil with his crooked fingers.

"Take care, sir, take care," said Cornelius, growing quite pale.

"Care of what? Zounds! of what?" roared the jailer.



"Take care, I say, you will crush it, Master Gryphus."

And with a rapid and almost frantic movement he snatched the jug from the hands of Gryphus, and hid it like a treasure under his arms.

But Gryphus, obstinate, like an old man, and more and more convinced that he was discovering here a conspiracy against the Prince of Orange, rushed up to his prisoner, raising his stick; seeing, however, the impassible resolution of the captive to protect his flower-pot he was convinced that Cornelius trembled much less for his head than for his jug.

He therefore tried to wrest it from him by force.

"Halloa!" said the jailer, furious, "here, you see, you are rebelling."

"Leave me my tulip," cried Van Baerle.

"Ah, yes, tulip," replied the old man, "we know well the shifts of prisoners."

"But I vow to you ---- "

"Let go," repeated Gryphus, stamping his foot, "let go, or I shall call the guard."

"Call whoever you like, but you shall not have this flower except with my life."

Gryphus, exasperated, plunged his finger a second time into the soil, and now he drew out the bulb, which certainly looked quite black; and whilst

Van Baerle, quite happy to have saved the vessel, did not suspect that the adversary had possessed himself of its precious contents, Gryphus hurled the softened bulb with all his force on the flags, where almost immediately after it was crushed to atoms under his heavy shoe.

Van Baerle saw the work of destruction, got a glimpse of the juicy remains of his darling bulb, and, guessing the cause of the ferocious joy of Gryphus, uttered a cry of agony, which would have melted the heart even of that ruthless jailer who some years before killed Pelisson's spider.

The idea of striking down this spiteful bully passed like lightning through the brain of the tulip-fancier. The blood rushed to his brow, and seemed like fire in his eyes, which blinded him, and he raised in his two hands the heavy jug with all the now useless earth which remained in it. One instant more, and he would have flung it on the bald head of old Gryphus.

But a cry stopped him; a cry of agony, uttered by poor Rosa, who, trembling and pale, with her arms raised to heaven, made her appearance behind the grated window, and thus interposed between her father and her friend.

Gryphus then understood the danger with which he had been threatened, and he broke out in a volley of the most terrible abuse.

"Indeed," said Cornelius to him, "you must be a very mean and spiteful fellow to rob a poor prisoner of his only consolation, a tulip bulb."

"For shame, my father," Rosa chimed in, "it is indeed a crime you have committed here."

"Ah, is that you, my little chatter-box?" the old man cried, boiling with rage and turning towards her; "don't you meddle with what don't concern you, but go down as quickly as possible."

"Unfortunate me," continued Cornelius, overwhelmed with grief.

"After all, it is but a tulip," Gryphus resumed, as he began to be a little ashamed of himself. "You may have as many tulips as you like: I have three hundred of them in my loft."

"To the devil with your tulips!" cried Cornelius; "you are worthy of each other: had I a hundred thousand millions of them, I would gladly give them for the one which you have just destroyed."

"Oh, so!" Gryphus said, in a tone of triumph; "now there we have it. It was not your tulip you cared for. There was in that false bulb some witchcraft, perhaps some means of correspondence with conspirators against his Highness who has granted you your life. I always said they were wrong in not cutting your head off."

"Father, father!" cried Rosa.

"Yes, yes! it is better as it is now," repeated Gryphus, growing warm; "I have destroyed it, and I'll do the same again, as often as you repeat the trick. Didn't I tell you, my fine fellow, that I would make your life a hard one?"

"A curse on you!" Cornelius exclaimed, quite beyond himself with despair, as he gathered, with his trembling fingers, the remnants of that bulb on which he had rested so many joys and so many hopes.

"We shall plant the other to-morrow, my dear Mynheer Cornelius," said Rosa, in a low voice, who understood the intense grief of the unfortunate tulip-fancier, and who, with the pure sacred love of her innocent heart, poured these kind words, like a drop of balm, on the bleeding wounds of Cornelius.