Chapter 19

The Maid and the Flower

But poor Rosa, in her secluded chamber, could not have known of whom or of what Cornelius was dreaming.

From what he had said she was more ready to believe that he dreamed of the black tulip than of her; and yet Rosa was mistaken.

But as there was no one to tell her so, and as the words of Cornelius's thoughtless speech had fallen upon her heart like drops of poison, she did not dream, but she wept.

The fact was, that, as Rosa was a high-spirited creature, of no mean perception and a noble heart, she took a very clear and judicious view of her own social position, if not of her moral and physical qualities.

Cornelius was a scholar, and was wealthy, -- at least he had been before the confiscation of his property; Cornelius belonged to the merchant-bourgeoisie, who were prouder of their richly emblazoned shop signs than the hereditary nobility of their heraldic bearings. Therefore, although he might find Rosa a pleasant companion for the dreary hours of his captivity, when it came to a question of bestowing his heart it was almost certain that he would bestow it upon a tulip, -- that is to say, upon the proudest and noblest of flowers, rather than upon poor Rosa, the jailer's lowly child.

Thus Rosa understood Cornelius's preference of the tulip to herself, but was only so much the more unhappy therefor.

During the whole of this terrible night the poor girl did not close an eye, and before she rose in the morning she had come to the resolution of making her appearance at the grated window no more.

But as she knew with what ardent desire Cornelius looked forward to the news about his tulip; and as, notwithstanding her determination not to see any more a man her pity for whose fate was fast growing into love, she did not, on the other hand, wish to drive him to despair, she resolved to continue by herself the reading and writing lessons; and, fortunately, she had made sufficient progress to dispense with the help of a master when the master was not to be Cornelius.

Rosa therefore applied herself most diligently to reading poor Cornelius de Witt's Bible, on the second fly leaf of which the last will of Cornelius van Baerle was written.

"Alas!" she muttered, when perusing again this document, which she never finished without a tear, the pearl of love, rolling from her limpid eyes on her pale cheeks -- "alas! at that time I thought for one moment he loved me."

Poor Rosa! she was mistaken. Never had the love of the prisoner been more sincere than at the time at which we are now arrived, when in the contest between the black tulip and Rosa the tulip had had to yield to her the first and foremost place in Cornelius's heart.

But Rosa was not aware of it.

Having finished reading, she took her pen, and began with as laudable diligence the by far more difficult task of writing.

As, however, Rosa was already able to write a legible hand when Cornelius so uncautiously opened his heart, she did not despair of progressing quickly enough to write, after eight days at the latest, to the prisoner an account of his tulip.

She had not forgotten one word of the directions given to her by Cornelius, whose speeches she treasured in her heart, even when they did not take the shape of directions.

He, on his part, awoke deeper in love than ever. The tulip, indeed, was still a luminous and prominent object in his mind; but he no longer looked upon it as a treasure to which he ought to sacrifice everything, and even Rosa, but as a marvellous combination of nature and art with which he would have been happy to adorn the bosom of his beloved one.

Yet during the whole of that day he was haunted with a vague uneasiness, at the bottom of which was the fear lest Rosa should not come in the evening to pay him her usual visit. This thought took more and more hold of him, until at the approach of evening his whole mind was absorbed in it.

How his heart beat when darkness closed in! The words which he had said to Rosa on the evening before and which had so deeply afflicted her, now came back to his mind more vividly than ever, and he asked himself how he could have told his gentle comforter to sacrifice him to his tulip, -- that is to say, to give up seeing him, if need be, -- whereas to him the sight of Rosa had become a condition of life.

In Cornelius's cell one heard the chimes of the clock of the fortress. It struck seven, it struck eight, it struck nine. Never did the metal voice vibrate more forcibly through the heart of any man than did the last stroke, marking the ninth hour, through the heart of Cornelius.

All was then silent again. Cornelius put his hand on his heart, to repress as it were its violent palpitation, and listened.

The noise of her footstep, the rustling of her gown on the staircase, were so familiar to his ear, that she had no sooner mounted one step than he used to say to himself, --

"Here comes Rosa."

This evening none of those little noises broke the silence of the lobby, the clock struck nine, and a quarter; the half-hour, then a quarter to ten, and at last its deep tone announced, not only to the inmates of the fortress, but also to all the inhabitants of Loewestein, that it was ten.

This was the hour at which Rosa generally used to leave Cornelius. The hour had struck, but Rosa had not come.

Thus then his foreboding had not deceived him; Rosa, being vexed, shut herself up in her room and left him to himself.

"Alas!" he thought, "I have deserved all this. She will come no more, and she is right in staying away; in her place I should do just the same."

Yet notwithstanding all this, Cornelius listened, waited, and hoped until midnight, then he threw himself upon the bed, with his clothes on.

It was a long and sad night for him, and the day brought no hope to the prisoner.

At eight in the morning, the door of his cell opened; but Cornelius did not even turn his head; he had heard the heavy step of Gryphus in the lobby, but this step had perfectly satisfied the prisoner that his jailer was coming alone.

Thus Cornelius did not even look at Gryphus.

And yet he would have been so glad to draw him out, and to inquire about Rosa. He even very nearly made this inquiry, strange as it would needs have

appeared to her father. To tell the truth, there was in all this some selfish hope to hear from Gryphus that his daughter was ill.

Except on extraordinary occasions, Rosa never came during the day. Cornelius therefore did not really expect her as long as the day lasted. Yet his sudden starts, his listening at the door, his rapid glances at every little noise towards the grated window, showed clearly that the prisoner entertained some latent hope that Rosa would, somehow or other, break her rule.

At the second visit of Gryphus, Cornelius, contrary to all his former habits, asked the old jailer, with the most winning voice, about her health; but Gryphus contented himself with giving the laconical answer, --

"All's well."

At the third visit of the day, Cornelius changed his former inquiry: --

"I hope nobody is ill at Loewestein?"

"Nobody," replied, even more laconically, the jailer, shutting the door before the nose of the prisoner.

Gryphus, being little used to this sort of civility on the part of Cornelius, began to suspect that his prisoner was about to try and bribe him.

Cornelius was now alone once more; it was seven o'clock in the evening, and the anxiety of yesterday returned with increased intensity.

But another time the hours passed away without bringing the sweet vision which lighted up, through the grated window, the cell of poor Cornelius, and

which, in retiring, left light enough in his heart to last until it came back again.

Van Baerle passed the night in an agony of despair. On the following day Gryphus appeared to him even more hideous, brutal, and hateful than usual; in his mind, or rather in his heart, there had been some hope that it was the old man who prevented his daughter from coming.

In his wrath he would have strangled Gryphus, but would not this have separated him for ever from Rosa?

The evening closing in, his despair changed into melancholy, which was the more gloomy as, involuntarily, Van Baerle mixed up with it the thought of his poor tulip. It was now just that week in April which the most experienced gardeners point out as the precise time when tulips ought to be planted. He had said to Rosa, --

"I shall tell you the day when you are to put the bulb in the ground."

He had intended to fix, at the vainly hoped for interview, the following day as the time for that momentous operation. The weather was propitious; the air, though still damp, began to be tempered by those pale rays of the April sun which, being the first, appear so congenial, although so pale. How if Rosa allowed the right moment for planting the bulb to pass by, -- if, in addition to the grief of seeing her no more, he should have to deplore the misfortune of seeing his tulip fail on account of its having been planted too late, or of its not having been planted at all!

These two vexations combined might well make him leave off eating and drinking.

This was the case on the fourth day.

It was pitiful to see Cornelius, dumb with grief, and pale from utter prostration, stretch out his head through the iron bars of his window, at the risk of not being able to draw it back again, to try and get a glimpse of the garden on the left spoken of by Rosa, who had told him that its parapet overlooked the river. He hoped that perhaps he might see, in the light of the April sun, Rosa or the tulip, the two lost objects of his love.

In the evening, Gryphus took away the breakfast and dinner of Cornelius, who had scarcely touched them.

On the following day he did not touch them at all, and Gryphus carried the dishes away just as he had brought them.

Cornelius had remained in bed the whole day.

"Well," said Gryphus, coming down from the last visit, "I think we shall soon get rid of our scholar."

Rosa was startled.

"Nonsense!" said Jacob. "What do you mean?"

"He doesn't drink, he doesn't eat, he doesn't leave his bed. He will get out of it, like Mynheer Grotius, in a chest, only the chest will be a coffin."

Rosa grew pale as death.

"Ah!" she said to herself, "he is uneasy about his tulip."

And, rising with a heavy heart, she returned to her chamber, where she took a pen and paper, and during the whole of that night busied herself with tracing letters.

On the following morning, when Cornelius got up to drag himself to the window, he perceived a paper which had been slipped under the door.

He pounced upon it, opened it, and read the following words, in a handwriting which he could scarcely have recognized as that of Rosa, so much had she improved during her short absence of seven days, --

"Be easy; your tulip is going on well."

Although these few words of Rosa's somewhat soothed the grief of Cornelius, yet he felt not the less the irony which was at the bottom of them. Rosa, then, was not ill, she was offended; she had not been forcibly prevented from coming, but had voluntarily stayed away. Thus Rosa, being at liberty, found in her own will the force not to come and see him, who was dying with grief at not having seen her.

Cornelius had paper and a pencil which Rosa had brought to him. He guessed that she expected an answer, but that she would not come before the evening to fetch it. He therefore wrote on a piece of paper, similar to that which he had received, --

"It was not my anxiety about the tulip that has made me ill, but the grief at not seeing you."

After Gryphus had made his last visit of the day, and darkness had set in, he slipped the paper under the door, and listened with the most intense attention, but he neither heard Rosa's footsteps nor the rustling of her gown.

He only heard a voice as feeble as a breath, and gentle like a caress, which whispered through the grated little window in the door the word, --

"To-morrow!"

Now to-morrow was the eighth day. For eight days Cornelius and Rosa had not seen each other.