

Chapter 20

The Events which took place during those Eight Days

On the following evening, at the usual hour, Van Baerle heard some one scratch at the grated little window, just as Rosa had been in the habit of doing in the heyday of their friendship.

Cornelius being, as may easily be imagined, not far off from the door, perceived Rosa, who at last was waiting again for him with her lamp in her hand.

Seeing him so sad and pale, she was startled, and said, --

"You are ill, Mynheer Cornelius?"

"Yes, I am," he answered, as indeed he was suffering in mind and in body.

"I saw that you did not eat," said Rosa; "my father told me that you remained in bed all day. I then wrote to calm your uneasiness concerning the fate of the most precious object of your anxiety."

"And I," said Cornelius, "I have answered. Seeing your return, my dear Rosa, I thought you had received my letter."

"It is true; I have received it."

"You cannot this time excuse yourself with not being able to read. Not only do you read very fluently, but also you have made marvellous progress in writing."

"Indeed, I have not only received, but also read your note. Accordingly I am come to see whether there might not be some remedy to restore you to health."

"Restore me to health?" cried Cornelius; "but have you any good news to communicate to me?"

Saying this, the poor prisoner looked at Rosa, his eyes sparkling with hope.

Whether she did not, or would not, understand this look, Rosa answered gravely, --

"I have only to speak to you about your tulip, which, as I well know, is the object uppermost in your mind."

Rosa pronounced those few words in a freezing tone, which cut deeply into the heart of Cornelius. He did not suspect what lay hidden under this appearance of indifference with which the poor girl affected to speak of her rival, the black tulip.

"Oh!" muttered Cornelius, "again! again! Have I not told you, Rosa, that I thought but of you? that it was you alone whom I regretted, you whom I missed, you whose absence I felt more than the loss of liberty and of life itself?"

Rosa smiled with a melancholy air.

"Ah!" she said, "your tulip has been in such danger."

Cornelius trembled involuntarily, and showed himself clearly to be caught in the trap, if ever the remark was meant as such.

"Danger!" he cried, quite alarmed; "what danger?"

Rosa looked at him with gentle compassion; she felt that what she wished was beyond the power of this man, and that he must be taken as he was, with his little foible.

"Yes," she said, "you have guessed the truth; that suitor and amorous swain, Jacob, did not come on my account."

"And what did he come for?" Cornelius anxiously asked.

"He came for the sake of the tulip."

"Alas!" said Cornelius, growing even paler at this piece of information than he had been when Rosa, a fortnight before, had told him that Jacob was coming for her sake.

Rosa saw this alarm, and Cornelius guessed, from the expression of her face, in what direction her thoughts were running.

"Oh, pardon me, Rosa!" he said, "I know you, and I am well aware of the kindness and sincerity of your heart. To you God has given the thought and strength for defending yourself; but to my poor tulip, when it is in danger, God has given nothing of the sort."

Rosa, without replying to this excuse of the prisoner, continued, --

"From the moment when I first knew that you were uneasy on account of the man who followed me, and in whom I had recognized Jacob, I was even more uneasy myself. On the day, therefore, after that on which I saw you last, and on which you said -- "

Cornelius interrupted her.

"Once more, pardon me, Rosa!" he cried. "I was wrong in saying to you what I said. I have asked your pardon for that unfortunate speech before. I ask it again: shall I always ask it in vain?"

"On the following day," Rosa continued, "remembering what you had told me about the stratagem which I was to employ to ascertain whether that odious man was after the tulip, or after me ---- "

"Yes, yes, odious. Tell me," he said, "do you hate that man?"

"I do hate him," said Rosa, "as he is the cause of all the unhappiness I have suffered these eight days."

"You, too, have been unhappy, Rosa? I thank you a thousand times for this kind confession."

"Well, on the day after that unfortunate one, I went down into the garden and proceeded towards the border where I was to plant your tulip, looking round all the while to see whether I was again followed as I was last time."

"And then?" Cornelius asked.

"And then the same shadow glided between the gate and the wall, and once more disappeared behind the elder-trees."

"You feigned not to see him, didn't you?" Cornelius asked, remembering all the details of the advice which he had given to Rosa.

"Yes, and I stooped over the border, in which I dug with a spade, as if I was going to put the bulb in."

"And he, -- what did he do during all this time?"

"I saw his eyes glisten through the branches of the tree like those of a tiger."

"There you see, there you see!" cried Cornelius.

"Then, after having finished my make-believe work, I retired."

"But only behind the garden door, I dare say, so that you might see through the keyhole what he was going to do when you had left?"

"He waited for a moment, very likely to make sure of my not coming back, after which he sneaked forth from his hiding-place, and approached the border by a long round-about; at last, having reached his goal, that is to say, the spot where the ground was newly turned, he stopped with a careless air, looking about in all directions, and scanning every corner of the garden, every window of the neighbouring houses, and even the sky; after which, thinking himself quite alone, quite isolated, and out of everybody's sight, he pounced upon the border, plunged both his hands into the soft soil, took a handful of the mould, which he gently frittered between his fingers to see whether the bulb was in it, and repeated the same thing twice or three times, until at last he perceived that he was outwitted. Then, keeping down the agitation which was raging in his breast, he took up the rake, smoothed the ground, so as to leave it on his retiring in the same state as he had found it, and, quite abashed and rueful, walked back to the door, affecting the unconcerned air of an ordinary visitor of the garden."

"Oh, the wretch!" muttered Cornelius, wiping the cold sweat from his brow. "Oh, the wretch! I guessed his intentions. But the bulb, Rosa; what have you done with it? It is already rather late to plant it."

"The bulb? It has been in the ground for these six days."

"Where? and how?" cried Cornelius. "Good Heaven, what imprudence! What is it? In what sort of soil is it? In what aspect? Good or bad? Is there no risk of having it filched by that detestable Jacob?"

"There is no danger of its being stolen," said Rosa, "unless Jacob will force the door of my chamber."

"Oh! then it is with you in your bedroom?" said Cornelius, somewhat relieved. "But in what soil? in what vessel? You don't let it grow, I hope, in water like those good ladies of Haarlem and Dort, who imagine that water could replace the earth?"

"You may make yourself comfortable on that score," said Rosa, smiling; "your bulb is not growing in water."

"I breathe again."

"It is in a good, sound stone pot, just about the size of the jug in which you had planted yours. The soil is composed of three parts of common mould, taken from the best spot of the garden, and one of the sweepings of the road. I have heard you and that detestable Jacob, as you call him, so often talk about what is the soil best fitted for growing tulips, that I know it as well as the first gardener of Haarlem."

"And now what is the aspect, Rosa?"

"At present it has the sun all day long, -- that is to say when the sun shines. But when it once peeps out of the ground, I shall do as you have done here, dear Mynheer Cornelius: I shall put it out of my window on the eastern side from eight in the morning until eleven and in my window towards the west from three to five in the afternoon."

"That's it! that's it!" cried Cornelius; "and you are a perfect gardener, my pretty Rosa. But I am afraid the nursing of my tulip will take up all your time."

"Yes, it will," said Rosa; "but never mind. Your tulip is my daughter. I shall devote to it the same time as I should to a child of mine, if I were a mother. Only by becoming its mother," Rosa added, smilingly, "can I cease to be its rival."

"My kind and pretty Rosa!" muttered Cornelius casting on her a glance in which there was much more of the lover than of the gardener, and which afforded Rosa some consolation.

Then, after a silence of some moments, during which Cornelius had grasped through the openings of the grating for the receding hand of Rosa, he said, -
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"Do you mean to say that the bulb has now been in the ground for six days?"

"Yes, six days, Mynheer Cornelius," she answered.

"And it does not yet show leaf"

"No, but I think it will to-morrow."

"Well, then, to-morrow you will bring me news about it, and about yourself, won't you, Rosa? I care very much for the daughter, as you called it just now, but I care even much more for the mother."

"To-morrow?" said Rosa, looking at Cornelius askance. "I don't know whether I shall be able to come to-morrow."

"Good heavens!" said Cornelius, "why can't you come to-morrow?"

"Mynheer Cornelius, I have lots of things to do."

"And I have only one," muttered Cornelius.

"Yes," said Rosa, "to love your tulip."

"To love you, Rosa."

Rosa shook her head, after which followed a pause.

"Well," -- Cornelius at last broke the silence, -- "well, Rosa, everything changes in the realm of nature; the flowers of spring are succeeded by other flowers; and the bees, which so tenderly caressed the violets and the wall-flowers, will flutter with just as much love about the honey-suckles, the rose, the jessamine, and the carnation."

"What does all this mean?" asked Rosa.

"You have abandoned me, Miss Rosa, to seek your pleasure elsewhere. You have done well, and I will not complain. What claim have I to your fidelity?"

"My fidelity!" Rosa exclaimed, with her eyes full of tears, and without caring any longer to hide from Cornelius this dew of pearls dropping on her cheeks, "my fidelity! have I not been faithful to you?"

"Do you call it faithful to desert me, and to leave me here to die?"

"But, Mynheer Cornelius," said Rosa, "am I not doing everything for you that could give you pleasure? have I not devoted myself to your tulip?"

"You are bitter, Rosa, you reproach me with the only unalloyed pleasure which I have had in this world."

"I reproach you with nothing, Mynheer Cornelius, except, perhaps, with the intense grief which I felt when people came to tell me at the Buytenhof that you were about to be put to death."

"You are displeased, Rosa, my sweet girl, with my loving flowers."

"I am not displeased with your loving them, Mynheer Cornelius, only it makes me sad to think that you love them better than you do me."

"Oh, my dear, dear Rosa! look how my hands tremble; look at my pale cheek, hear how my heart beats. It is for you, my love, not for the black tulip. Destroy the bulb, destroy the germ of that flower, extinguish the gentle light of that innocent and delightful dream, to which I have accustomed myself; but love me, Rosa, love me; for I feel deeply that I love but you."

"Yes, after the black tulip," sighed Rosa, who at last no longer coyly withdrew her warm hands from the grating, as Cornelius most affectionately kissed them.

"Above and before everything in this world, Rosa."

"May I believe you?"

"As you believe in your own existence."

"Well, then, be it so; but loving me does not bind you too much."

"Unfortunately, it does not bind me more than I am bound; but it binds you, Rosa, you."

"To what?"

"First of all, not to marry."

She smiled.

"That's your way," she said; "you are tyrants all of you. You worship a certain beauty, you think of nothing but her. Then you are condemned to death, and whilst walking to the scaffold, you devote to her your last sigh; and now you expect poor me to sacrifice to you all my dreams and my happiness."

"But who is the beauty you are talking of, Rosa?" said Cornelius, trying in vain to remember a woman to whom Rosa might possibly be alluding.

"The dark beauty with a slender waist, small feet, and a noble head; in short, I am speaking of your flower."

Cornelius smiled.

"That is an imaginary lady love, at all events; whereas, without counting that amorous Jacob, you by your own account are surrounded with all sorts of swains eager to make love to you. Do you remember Rosa, what you told me of the students, officers, and clerks of the Hague? Are there no clerks, officers, or students at Loewestein?"

"Indeed there are, and lots of them."

"Who write letters?"

"They do write."

"And now, as you know how to read ---- "

Here Cornelius heaved a sigh at the thought, that, poor captive as he was, to him alone Rosa owed the faculty of reading the love-letters which she received.

"As to that," said Rosa, "I think that in reading the notes addressed to me, and passing the different swains in review who send them to me, I am only following your instructions."

"How so? My instructions?"

"Indeed, your instructions, sir," said Rosa, sighing in her turn; "have you forgotten the will written by your hand on the Bible of Cornelius de Witt? I have not forgotten it; for now, as I know how to read, I read it every day over and over again. In that will you bid me to love and marry a handsome young man of twenty-six or eight years. I am on the look-out for that young man,

and as the whole of my day is taken up with your tulip, you must needs leave me the evenings to find him."

"But, Rosa, the will was made in the expectation of death, and, thanks to Heaven, I am still alive."

"Well, then, I shall not be after the handsome young man, and I shall come to see you."

"That's it, Rosa, come! come!"

"Under one condition."

"Granted beforehand!"

"That the black tulip shall not be mentioned for the next three days."

"It shall never be mentioned any more, if you wish it, Rosa."

"No, no," the damsel said, laughing, "I will not ask for impossibilities."

And, saying this, she brought her fresh cheek, as if unconsciously, so near the iron grating, that Cornelius was able to touch it with his lips.

Rosa uttered a little scream, which, however, was full of love, and disappeared.