

Chapter 24

The Black Tulip changes Masters

Cornelius remained standing on the spot where Rosa had left him. He was quite overpowered with the weight of his twofold happiness.

Half an hour passed away. Already did the first rays of the sun enter through the iron grating of the prison, when Cornelius was suddenly startled at the noise of steps which came up the staircase, and of cries which approached nearer and nearer.

Almost at the same instant he saw before him the pale and distracted face of Rosa.

He started, and turned pale with fright.

"Cornelius, Cornelius!" she screamed, gasping for breath.

"Good Heaven! what is it?" asked the prisoner.

"Cornelius! the tulip ---- "

"Well?"

"How shall I tell you?"

"Speak, speak, Rosa!"

"Some one has taken -- stolen it from us."

"Stolen -- taken?" said Cornelius.

"Yes," said Rosa, leaning against the door to support herself; "yes, taken, stolen!"

And saying this, she felt her limbs failing her, and she fell on her knees.

"But how? Tell me, explain to me."

"Oh, it is not my fault, my friend."

Poor Rosa! she no longer dared to call him "My beloved one."

"You have then left it alone," said Cornelius, ruefully.

"One minute only, to instruct our messenger, who lives scarcely fifty yards off, on the banks of the Waal."

"And during that time, notwithstanding all my injunctions, you left the key behind, unfortunate child!"

"No, no, no! this is what I cannot understand. The key was never out of my hands; I clinched it as if I were afraid it would take wings."

"But how did it happen, then?"

"That's what I cannot make out. I had given the letter to my messenger; he started before I left his house; I came home, and my door was locked, everything in my room was as I had left it, except the tulip, -- that was gone. Some one must have had a key for my room, or have got a false one made on purpose."

She was nearly choking with sobs, and was unable to continue.

Cornelius, immovable and full of consternation, heard almost without understanding, and only muttered, --

"Stolen, stolen, and I am lost!"

"O Cornelius, forgive me, forgive me, it will kill me!"

Seeing Rosa's distress, Cornelius seized the iron bars of the grating, and furiously shaking them, called out, --

"Rosa, Rosa, we have been robbed, it is true, but shall we allow ourselves to be dejected for all that? No, no; the misfortune is great, but it may perhaps be remedied. Rosa, we know the thief!"

"Alas! what can I say about it?"

"But I say that it is no one else but that infamous Jacob. Shall we allow him to carry to Haarlem the fruit of our labour, the fruit of our sleepless nights, the child of our love? Rosa, we must pursue, we must overtake him!"

"But how can we do all this, my friend, without letting my father know we were in communication with each other? How should I, a poor girl, with so little knowledge of the world and its ways, be able to attain this end, which perhaps you could not attain yourself?"

"Rosa, Rosa, open this door to me, and you will see whether I will not find the thief, -- whether I will not make him confess his crime and beg for mercy."

"Alas!" cried Rosa, sobbing, "can I open the door for you? have I the keys? If I had had them, would not you have been free long ago?"

"Your father has them, -- your wicked father, who has already crushed the first bulb of my tulip. Oh, the wretch! he is an accomplice of Jacob!"

"Don't speak so loud, for Heaven's sake!"

"Oh, Rosa, if you don't open the door to me," Cornelius cried in his rage, "I shall force these bars, and kill everything I find in the prison."

"Be merciful, be merciful, my friend!"

"I tell you, Rosa, that I shall demolish this prison, stone for stone!" and the unfortunate man, whose strength was increased tenfold by his rage, began to shake the door with a great noise, little heeding that the thunder of his voice was re-echoing through the spiral staircase.

Rosa, in her fright, made vain attempts to check this furious outbreak.

"I tell you that I shall kill that infamous Gryphus?" roared Cornelius. "I tell you I shall shed his blood as he did that of my black tulip."

The wretched prisoner began really to rave.

"Well, then, yes," said Rosa, all in a tremble. "Yes, yes, only be quiet. Yes, yes, I will take his keys, I will open the door for you! Yes, only be quiet, my own dear Cornelius."

She did not finish her speech, as a growl by her side interrupted her.

"My father!" cried Rosa.

"Gryphus!" roared Van Baerle. "Oh, you villain!"

Old Gryphus, in the midst of all the noise, had ascended the staircase without being heard.

He rudely seized his daughter by the wrist.

"So you will take my keys?" he said, in a voice choked with rage. "Ah! this dastardly fellow, this monster, this gallows-bird of a conspirator, is your own dear Cornelius, is he? Ah! Missy has communications with prisoners of state. Ah! won't I teach you -- won't I?"

Rosa clasped her hands in despair.

"Ah!" Gryphus continued, passing from the madness of anger to the cool irony of a man who has got the better of his enemy, -- "Ah, you innocent tulip-fancier, you gentle scholar; you will kill me, and drink my blood! Very well! very well! And you have my daughter for an accomplice. Am I, forsooth, in a den of thieves, -- in a cave of brigands? Yes, but the Governor shall know all to-morrow, and his Highness the Stadtholder the day after. We know the law, -- we shall give a second edition of the Buytenhof, Master Scholar, and a good one this time. Yes, yes, just gnaw your paws like a bear in his cage, and you, my fine little lady, devour your dear Cornelius with your eyes. I tell you, my lambkins, you shall not much longer have the felicity of conspiring together. Away with you, unnatural daughter! And as to

you, Master Scholar, we shall see each other again. Just be quiet, -- we shall."

Rosa, beyond herself with terror and despair, kissed her hands to her friend; then, suddenly struck with a bright thought, she rushed toward the staircase, saying, --

"All is not yet lost, Cornelius. Rely on me, my Cornelius."

Her father followed her, growling.

As to poor Cornelius, he gradually loosened his hold of the bars, which his fingers still grasped convulsively. His head was heavy, his eyes almost started from their sockets, and he fell heavily on the floor of his cell, muttering, --

"Stolen! it has been stolen from me!"

During this time Boxtel had left the fortress by the door which Rosa herself had opened. He carried the black tulip wrapped up in a cloak, and, throwing himself into a coach, which was waiting for him at Gorcum, he drove off, without, as may well be imagined, having informed his friend Gryphus of his sudden departure.

And now, as we have seen him enter his coach, we shall with the consent of the reader, follow him to the end of his journey.

He proceeded but slowly, as the black tulip could not bear travelling post-haste.

But Boxtel, fearing that he might not arrive early enough, procured at Delft a box, lined all round with fresh moss, in which he packed the tulip. The

flower was so lightly pressed upon all sides, with a supply of air from above, that the coach could now travel full speed without any possibility of injury to the tulip.

He arrived next morning at Haarlem, fatigued but triumphant; and, to do away with every trace of the theft, he transplanted the tulip, and, breaking the original flower-pot, threw the pieces into the canal. After which he wrote the President of the Horticultural Society a letter, in which he announced to him that he had just arrived at Haarlem with a perfectly black tulip; and, with his flower all safe, took up his quarters at a good hotel in the town, and there he waited.