

Chapter 26

A Member of the Horticultural Society

Rosa, beyond herself and nearly mad with joy and fear at the idea of the black tulip being found again, started for the White Swan, followed by the boatman, a stout lad from Frisia, who was strong enough to knock down a dozen Boxtels single-handed.

He had been made acquainted in the course of the journey with the state of affairs, and was not afraid of any encounter; only he had orders, in such a case, to spare the tulip.

But on arriving in the great market-place Rosa at once stopped, a sudden thought had struck her, just as Homer's Minerva seizes Achilles by the hair at the moment when he is about to be carried away by his anger.

"Good Heaven!" she muttered to herself, "I have made a grievous blunder; it may be I have ruined Cornelius, the tulip, and myself. I have given the alarm, and perhaps awakened suspicion. I am but a woman; these men may league themselves against me, and then I shall be lost. If I am lost that matters nothing, -- but Cornelius and the tulip!"

She reflected for a moment.

"If I go to that Boxtel, and do not know him; if that Boxtel is not my Jacob, but another fancier, who has also discovered the black tulip; or if my tulip has been stolen by some one else, or has already passed into the hands of a third person; -- if I do not recognize the man, only the tulip, how shall I prove that it belongs to me? On the other hand, if I recognise this Boxtel as

Jacob, who knows what will come out of it? whilst we are contesting with each other, the tulip will die."

In the meanwhile, a great noise was heard, like the distant roar of the sea, at the other extremity of the market-place. People were running about, doors opening and shutting, Rosa alone was unconscious of all this hubbub among the multitude.

"We must return to the President," she muttered.

"Well, then, let us return," said the boatman.

They took a small street, which led them straight to the mansion of Mynheer van Systems, who with his best pen in his finest hand continued to draw up his report.

Everywhere on her way Rosa heard people speaking only of the black tulip, and the prize of a hundred thousand guilders. The news had spread like wildfire through the town.

Rosa had not a little difficulty in penetrating a second time into the office of Mynheer van Systems, who, however, was again moved by the magic name of the black tulip.

But when he recognised Rosa, whom in his own mind he had set down as mad, or even worse, he grew angry, and wanted to send her away.

Rosa, however, clasped her hands, and said with that tone of honest truth which generally finds its way to the hearts of men, --

"For Heaven's sake, sir, do not turn me away; listen to what I have to tell you, and if it be not possible for you to do me justice, at least you will not

one day have to reproach yourself before God for having made yourself the accomplice of a bad action."

Van Systems stamped his foot with impatience; it was the second time that Rosa interrupted him in the midst of a composition which stimulated his vanity, both as a burgomaster and as President of the Horticultural Society.

"But my report!" he cried, -- "my report on the black tulip!"

"Mynheer van Systems," Rosa continued, with the firmness of innocence and truth, "your report on the black tulip will, if you don't hear me, be based on crime or on falsehood. I implore you, sir, let this Master Boxtel, whom I assert to be Master Jacob, be brought here before you and me, and I swear that I will leave him in undisturbed possession of the tulip if I do not recognise the flower and its holder."

"Well, I declare, here is a proposal," said Van Systems.

"What do you mean?"

"I ask you what can be proved by your recognising them?"

"After all," said Rosa, in her despair, "you are an honest man, sir; how would you feel if one day you found out that you had given the prize to a man for something which he not only had not produced, but which he had even stolen?"

Rosa's speech seemed to have brought a certain conviction into the heart of Van Systems, and he was going to answer her in a gentler tone, when at once a great noise was heard in the street, and loud cheers shook the house.

"What is this?" cried the burgomaster; "what is this? Is it possible? have I heard aright?"

And he rushed towards his anteroom, without any longer heeding Rosa, whom he left in his cabinet.

Scarcely had he reached his anteroom when he cried out aloud on seeing his staircase invaded, up to the very landing-place, by the multitude, which was accompanying, or rather following, a young man, simply clad in a violet-coloured velvet, embroidered with silver; who, with a certain aristocratic slowness, ascended the white stone steps of the house.

In his wake followed two officers, one of the navy, and the other of the cavalry.

Van Systems, having found his way through the frightened domestics, began to bow, almost to prostrate himself before his visitor, who had been the cause of all this stir.

"Monseigneur," he called out, "Monseigneur! What distinguished honour is your Highness bestowing for ever on my humble house by your visit?"

"Dear Mynheer van Systems," said William of Orange, with a serenity which, with him, took the place of a smile, "I am a true Hollander, I am fond of the water, of beer, and of flowers, sometimes even of that cheese the flavour of which seems so grateful to the French; the flower which I prefer to all others is, of course, the tulip. I heard at Leyden that the city of Haarlem at last possessed the black tulip; and, after having satisfied myself of the truth of news which seemed so incredible, I have come to know all about it from the President of the Horticultural Society."

"Oh, Monseigneur, Monseigneur!" said Van Systems, "what glory to the society if its endeavours are pleasing to your Highness!"

"Have you got the flower here?" said the Prince, who, very likely, already regretted having made such a long speech.

"I am sorry to say we have not."

"And where is it?"

"With its owner."

"Who is he?"

"An honest tulip-grower of Dort."

"His name?"

"Boxtel."

"His quarters?"

"At the White Swan; I shall send for him, and if in the meanwhile your Highness will do me the honour of stepping into my drawing-room, he will be sure -- knowing that your Highness is here -- to lose no time in bringing his tulip."

"Very well, send for him."

"Yes, your Highness, but ----"

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing of any consequence, Monseigneur."

"Everything is of consequence, Mynheer van Systems."

"Well, then, Monseigneur, if it must be said, a little difficulty has presented itself."

"What difficulty?"

"This tulip has already been claimed by usurpers. It's true that it is worth a hundred thousand guilders."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, Monseigneur, by usurpers, by forgers."

"This is a crime, Mynheer van Systems."

"So it is, your Highness."

"And have you any proofs of their guilt? "

"No, Monseigneur, the guilty woman ---- "

"The guilty woman, Sir?"

"I ought to say, the woman who claims the tulip, Monseigneur, is here in the room close by."

"And what do you think of her?"

"I think, Monseigneur, that the bait of a hundred thousand guilders may have tempted her."

"And so she claims the tulip?"

"Yes Monseigneur."

"And what proof does she offer?"

"I was just going to question her when your Highness came in."

"Question her, Mynheer van Systens, question her. I am the first magistrate of the country; I will hear the case and administer justice."

"I have found my King Solomon," said Van Systens, bowing, and showing the way to the Prince.

His Highness was just going to walk ahead, but, suddenly recollecting himself he said --

"Go before me, and call me plain Mynheer."

The two then entered the cabinet.

Rosa was still standing at the same place, leaning on the window, and looking through the panes into the garden.

"Ah! a Frisian girl," said the Prince, as he observed Rosa's gold brocade headdress and red petticoat.

At the noise of their footsteps she turned round, but scarcely saw the Prince, who seated himself in the darkest corner of the apartment.

All her attention, as may be easily imagined, was fixed on that important person who was called Van Systens, so that she had no time to notice the humble stranger who was following the master of the house, and who, for aught she knew, might be somebody or nobody.

The humble stranger took a book down from the shelf, and made Van Systens a sign to commence the examination forthwith.

Van Systens, likewise at the invitation of the young man in the violet coat, sat down in his turn, and, quite happy and proud of the importance thus cast upon him, began, --

"My child, you promise to tell me the truth and the entire truth concerning this tulip?"

"I promise."

"Well, then, speak before this gentleman; this gentleman is one of the members of the Horticultural Society."

"What am I to tell you, sir," said Rosa, "beside that which I have told you already."

"Well, then, what is it?"

"I repeat the question I have addressed to you before."

"Which?"

"That you will order Mynheer Boxtel to come here with his tulip. If I do not recognise it as mine I will frankly tell it; but if I do recognise it I will reclaim it, even if I go before his Highness the Stadtholder himself, with my proofs in my hands."

"You have, then, some proofs, my child?"

"God, who knows my good right, will assist me to some."

Van Systems exchanged a look with the Prince, who, since the first words of Rosa, seemed to try to remember her, as if it were not for the first time that this sweet voice rang in his ears.

An officer went off to fetch Boxtel, and Van Systems in the meanwhile continued his examination.

"And with what do you support your assertion that you are the real owner of the black tulip?"

"With the very simple fact of my having planted and grown it in my own chamber."

"In your chamber? Where was your chamber?"

"At Loewestein."

"You are from Loewestein?"

"I am the daughter of the jailer of the fortress."

The Prince made a little movement, as much as to say, "Well, that's it, I remember now."

And, all the while feigning to be engaged with his book, he watched Rosa with even more attention than he had before.

"And you are fond of flowers?" continued Mynheer van Systems.

"Yes, sir."

"Then you are an experienced florist, I dare say?"

Rosa hesitated a moment; then with a tone which came from the depth of her heart, she said, --

"Gentlemen, I am speaking to men of honor."

There was such an expression of truth in the tone of her voice, that Van Systems and the Prince answered simultaneously by an affirmative movement of their heads.

"Well, then, I am not an experienced florist; I am only a poor girl, one of the people, who, three months ago, knew neither how to read nor how to write. No, the black tulip has not been found by myself."

"But by whom else?"

"By a poor prisoner of Loewestein."

"By a prisoner of Loewestein?" repeated the Prince.

The tone of his voice startled Rosa, who was sure she had heard it before.

"By a prisoner of state, then," continued the Prince, "as there are none else there."

Having said this he began to read again, at least in appearance.

"Yes," said Rosa, with a faltering voice, "yes, by a prisoner of state."

Van Systems trembled as he heard such a confession made in the presence of such a witness.

"Continue," said William dryly, to the President of the Horticultural Society.

"Ah, sir," said Rosa, addressing the person whom she thought to be her real judge, "I am going to incriminate myself very seriously."

"Certainly," said Van Systems, "the prisoner of state ought to be kept in close confinement at Loewestein."

"Alas! sir."

"And from what you tell me you took advantage of your position, as daughter of the jailer, to communicate with a prisoner of state about the cultivation of flowers."

"So it is, sir," Rosa murmured in dismay; "yes, I am bound to confess, I saw him every day."

"Unfortunate girl!" exclaimed Van Systems.

The Prince, observing the fright of Rosa and the pallor of the President, raised his head, and said, in his clear and decided tone, --

"This cannot signify anything to the members of the Horticultural Society; they have to judge on the black tulip, and have no cognizance to take of political offences. Go on, young woman, go on."

Van Systems, by means of an eloquent glance, offered, in the name of the tulip, his thanks to the new member of the Horticultural Society.

Rosa, reassured by this sort of encouragement which the stranger was giving her, related all that had happened for the last three months, all that she had done, and all that she had suffered. She described the cruelty of Gryphus; the destruction of the first bulb; the grief of the prisoner; the precautions taken to insure the success of the second bulb; the patience of the prisoner and his anxiety during their separation; how he was about to starve himself because he had no longer any news of his tulip; his joy when she went to see him again; and, lastly, their despair when they found that

the tulip which had come into flower was stolen just one hour after it had opened.

All this was detailed with an accent of truth which, although producing no change in the impassible mien of the Prince, did not fail to take effect on Van Systems.

"But," said the Prince, "it cannot be long since you knew the prisoner."

Rosa opened her large eyes and looked at the stranger, who drew back into the dark corner, as if he wished to escape her observation.

"Why, sir?" she asked him.

"Because it is not yet four months since the jailer Gryphus and his daughter were removed to Loewestein."

"That is true, sir."

"Otherwise, you must have solicited the transfer of your father, in order to be able to follow some prisoner who may have been transported from the Hague to Loewestein."

"Sir," said Rosa, blushing.

"Finish what you have to say," said William.

"I confess I knew the prisoner at the Hague."

"Happy prisoner!" said William, smiling.

At this moment the officer who had been sent for Boxtel returned, and announced to the Prince that the person whom he had been to fetch was following on his heels with his tulip.