Chapter 28

The Hymn of the Flowers

Whilst the events we have described in our last chapter were taking place, the unfortunate Van Baerle, forgotten in his cell in the fortress of Loewestein, suffered at the hands of Gryphus all that a prisoner can suffer when his jailer has formed the determination of playing the part of hangman.

Gryphus, not having received any tidings of Rosa or of Jacob, persuaded himself that all that had happened was the devil's work, and that Dr. Cornelius van Baerle had been sent on earth by Satan.

The result of it was, that, one fine morning, the third after the disappearance of Jacob and Rosa, he went up to the cell of Cornelius in even a greater rage than usual.

The latter, leaning with his elbows on the window-sill and supporting his head with his two hands, whilst his eyes wandered over the distant hazy horizon where the windmills of Dort were turning their sails, was breathing the fresh air, in order to be able to keep down his tears and to fortify himself in his philosophy.

The pigeons were still there, but hope was not there; there was no future to look forward to.

Alas! Rosa, being watched, was no longer able to come. Could she not write? and if so, could she convey her letters to him?

No, no. He had seen during the two preceding days too much fury and malignity in the eyes of old Gryphus to expect that his vigilance would relax, even for one moment. Moreover, had not she to suffer even worse torments

than those of seclusion and separation? Did this brutal, blaspheming, drunken bully take revenge on his daughter, like the ruthless fathers of the Greek drama? And when the Genievre had heated his brain, would it not give to his arm, which had been only too well set by Cornelius, even double force?

The idea that Rosa might perhaps be ill-treated nearly drove Cornelius mad.

He then felt his own powerlessness. He asked himself whether God was just in inflicting so much tribulation on two innocent creatures. And certainly in these moments he began to doubt the wisdom of Providence. It is one of the curses of misfortune that it thus begets doubt.

Van Baerle had proposed to write to Rosa, but where was she?

He also would have wished to write to the Hague to be beforehand with Gryphus, who, he had no doubt, would by denouncing him do his best to bring new storms on his head.

But how should he write? Gryphus had taken the paper and pencil from him, and even if he had both, he could hardly expect Gryphus to despatch his letter.

Then Cornelius revolved in his mind all those stratagems resorted to by unfortunate prisoners.

He had thought of an attempt to escape, a thing which never entered his head whilst he could see Rosa every day; but the more he thought of it, the more clearly he saw the impracticability of such an attempt. He was one of those choice spirits who abhor everything that is common, and who often lose a good chance through not taking the way of the vulgar, that high road of mediocrity which leads to everything.

"How is it possible," said Cornelius to himself, "that I should escape from Loewestein, as Grotius has done the same thing before me? Has not every precaution been taken since? Are not the windows barred? Are not the doors of double and even of treble strength, and the sentinels ten times more watchful? And have not I, besides all this, an Argus so much the more dangerous as he has the keen eyes of hatred? Finally, is there not one fact which takes away all my spirit, I mean Rosa's absence? But suppose I should waste ten years of my life in making a file to file off my bars, or in braiding cords to let myself down from the window, or in sticking wings on my shoulders to fly, like Daedalus? But luck is against me now. The file would get dull, the rope would break, or my wings would melt in the sun; I should surely kill myself, I should be picked up maimed and crippled; I should be labelled, and put on exhibition in the museum at the Hague between the blood-stained doublet of William the Taciturn and the female walrus captured at Stavesen, and the only result of my enterprise will have been to procure me a place among the curiosities of Holland.

"But no; and it is much better so. Some fine day Gryphus will commit some atrocity. I am losing my patience, since I have lost the joy and company of Rosa, and especially since I have lost my tulip. Undoubtedly, some day or other Gryphus will attack me in a manner painful to my self-respect, or to my love, or even threaten my personal safety. I don't know how it is, but since my imprisonment I feel a strange and almost irresistible pugnacity. Well, I shall get at the throat of that old villain, and strangle him."

Cornelius at these words stopped for a moment, biting his lips and staring out before him; then, eagerly returning to an idea which seemed to possess a strange fascination for him, he continued, --

"Well, and once having strangled him, why should I not take his keys from him, why not go down the stairs as if I had done the most virtuous action, why not go and fetch Rosa from her room, why not tell her all, and jump from her window into the Waal? I am expert enough as a swimmer to save both of us. Rosa, -- but, oh Heaven, Gryphus is her father! Whatever may be her affection for me, she will never approve of my having strangled her father, brutal and malicious as he has been.

"I shall have to enter into an argument with her; and in the midst of my speech some wretched turnkey who has found Gryphus with the death-rattle in his throat, or perhaps actually dead, will come along and put his hand on my shoulder. Then I shall see the Buytenhof again, and the gleam of that infernal sword, -- which will not stop half-way a second time, but will make acquaintance with the nape of my neck.

"It will not do, Cornelius, my fine fellow, -- it is a bad plan. But, then, what is to become of me, and how shall I find Rosa again?"

Such were the cogitations of Cornelius three days after the sad scene of separation from Rosa, at the moment when we find him standing at the window.

And at that very moment Gryphus entered.

He held in his hand a huge stick, his eyes glistening with spiteful thoughts, a malignant smile played round his lips, and the whole of his carriage, and even all his movements, betokened bad and malicious intentions.

Cornelius heard him enter, and guessed that it was he, but did not turn round, as he knew well that Rosa was not coming after him.

There is nothing more galling to angry people than the coolness of those on whom they wish to vent their spleen.

The expense being once incurred, one does not like to lose it; one's passion is roused, and one's blood boiling, so it would be labour lost not to have at least a nice little row.

Gryphus, therefore, on seeing that Cornelius did not stir, tried to attract his attention by a loud --

"Umph, umph!"

Cornelius was humming between his teeth the "Hymn of Flowers," -- a sad but very charming song, --

"We are the daughters of the secret fire

Of the fire which runs through the veins of the earth;

We are the daughters of Aurora and of the dew;

We are the daughters of the air;

We are the daughters of the water;

But we are, above all, the daughters of heaven."

This song, the placid melancholy of which was still heightened by its calm and sweet melody, exasperated Gryphus.

He struck his stick on the stone pavement of the cell, and called out, --

"Halloa! my warbling gentleman, don't you hear me?"

Cornelius turned round, merely saying, "Good morning," and then began his song again: --

"Men defile us and kill us while loving us,

We hang to the earth by a thread;

This thread is our root, that is to say, our life,

But we raise on high our arms towards heaven."

"Ah, you accursed sorcerer! you are making game of me, I believe," roared Gryphus.

Cornelius continued: --

"For heaven is our home,

Our true home, as from thence comes our soul,

As thither our soul returns, --

Our soul, that is to say, our perfume."

Gryphus went up to the prisoner and said, --

"But you don't see that I have taken means to get you under, and to force you to confess your crimes."

"Are you mad, my dear Master Gryphus?" asked Cornelius.

And, as he now for the first time observed the frenzied features, the flashing eyes, and foaming mouth of the old jailer, he said, --

"Bless the man, he is more than mad, he is furious."

Gryphus flourished his stick above his head, but Van Baerle moved not, and remained standing with his arms akimbo.

"It seems your intention to threaten me, Master Gryphus."

"Yes, indeed, I threaten you," cried the jailer.

"And with what?"

"First of all, look at what I have in my hand."

"I think that's a stick," said Cornelius calmly, "but I don't suppose you will threaten me with that."

"Oh, you don't suppose! why not?"

"Because any jailer who strikes a prisoner is liable to two penalties, -- the first laid down in Article 9 of the regulations at Loewestein: --

"'Any jailer, inspector, or turnkey who lays hands upon any prisoner of State will be dismissed.'"

"Yes, who lays hands," said Gryphus, mad with rage, "but there is not a word about a stick in the regulation."

"And the second," continued Cornelius, "which is not written in the regulation, but which is to be found elsewhere: --

"'Whosoever takes up the stick will be thrashed by the stick.'"

Gryphus, growing more and more exasperated by the calm and sententious tone of Cornelius, brandished his cudgel, but at the moment when he raised it Cornelius rushed at him, snatched it from his hands, and put it under his own arm.

Gryphus fairly bellowed with rage.

"Hush, hush, my good man," said Cornelius, "don't do anything to lose your place."

"Ah, you sorcerer! I'll pinch you worse," roared Gryphus.

"I wish you may."

"Don't you see my hand is empty?"

"Yes, I see it, and I am glad of it."

"You know that it is not generally so when I come upstairs in the morning."

"It's true, you generally bring me the worst soup, and the most miserable rations one can imagine. But that's not a punishment to me; I eat only bread, and the worse the bread is to your taste, the better it is to mine."

"How so?"

"Oh, it's a very simple thing."

"Well, tell it me," said Gryphus.

"Very willingly. I know that in giving me bad bread you think you do me harm."

"Certainly; I don't give it you to please you, you brigand."

"Well, then, I, who am a sorcerer, as you know, change your bad into excellent bread, which I relish more than the best cake; and then I have the double pleasure of eating something that gratifies my palate, and of doing something that puts you in a rage.

Gryphus answered with a growl.

"Oh! you confess, then, that you are a sorcerer."

"Indeed, I am one. I don't say it before all the world, because they might burn me for it, but as we are alone, I don't mind telling you."

"Well, well, well," answered Gryphus. "But if a sorcerer can change black bread into white, won't he die of hunger if he has no bread at all?"

"What's that?" said Cornelius.

"Consequently, I shall not bring you any bread at all, and we shall see how it will be after eight days."

Cornelius grew pale.

"And," continued Gryphus, "we'll begin this very day. As you are such a clever sorcerer, why, you had better change the furniture of your room into bread; as to myself, I shall pocket the eighteen sous which are paid to me for your board."

"But that's murder," cried Cornelius, carried away by the first impulse of the very natural terror with which this horrible mode of death inspired him.

"Well," Gryphus went on, in his jeering way, "as you are a sorcerer, you will live, notwithstanding."

Cornelius put on a smiling face again, and said, --

"Have you not seen me make the pigeons come here from Dort?"

"Well?" said Gryphus.

"Well, a pigeon is a very dainty morsel, and a man who eats one every day would not starve, I think."

"And how about the fire?" said Gryphus.

"Fire! but you know that I'm in league with the devil. Do you think the devil will leave me without fire? Why, fire is his proper element."

"A man, however healthy his appetite may be, would not eat a pigeon every day. Wagers have been laid to do so, and those who made them gave them up."

"Well, but when I am tired of pigeons, I shall make the fish of the Waal and of the Meuse come up to me."

Gryphus opened his large eyes, quite bewildered.

"I am rather fond of fish," continued Cornelius; "you never let me have any. Well, I shall turn your starving me to advantage, and regale myself with fish."

Gryphus nearly fainted with anger and with fright, but he soon rallied, and said, putting his hand in his pocket, --

"Well, as you force me to it," and with these words he drew forth a clasp-knife and opened it.

"Halloa! a knife?" said Cornelius, preparing to defend himself with his stick.