

Chapter 29

In which Van Baerle, before leaving Loewestein, settles Accounts with Gryphus

The two remained silent for some minutes, Gryphus on the offensive, and Van Baerle on the defensive.

Then, as the situation might be prolonged to an indefinite length, Cornelius, anxious to know something more of the causes which had so fiercely exasperated his jailer, spoke first by putting the question, --

"Well, what do you want, after all?"

"I'll tell you what I want," answered Gryphus; "I want you to restore to me my daughter Rosa."

"Your daughter?" cried Van Baerle.

"Yes, my daughter Rosa, whom you have taken from me by your devilish magic. Now, will you tell me where she is?"

And the attitude of Gryphus became more and more threatening.

"Rosa is not at Loewestein?" cried Cornelius.

"You know well she is not. Once more, will you restore her to me?"

"I see," said Cornelius, "this is a trap you are laying for me."

"Now, for the last time, will you tell me where my daughter is?"

"Guess it, you rogue, if you don't know it."

"Only wait, only wait," growled Gryphus, white with rage, and with quivering lips, as his brain began to turn. "Ah, you will not tell me anything? Well, I'll unlock your teeth!"

He advanced a step towards Cornelius, and said, showing him the weapon which he held in his hands, --

"Do you see this knife? Well, I have killed more than fifty black cocks with it, and I vow I'll kill their master, the devil, as well as them."

"But, you blockhead," said Cornelius, "will you really kill me?"

"I shall open your heart to see in it the place where you hide my daughter."

Saying this, Gryphus in his frenzy rushed towards Cornelius, who had barely time to retreat behind his table to avoid the first thrust; but as Gryphus continued, with horrid threats, to brandish his huge knife, and as, although out of the reach of his weapon, yet, as long as it remained in the madman's hand, the ruffian might fling it at him, Cornelius lost no time, and availing himself of the stick, which he held tight under his arm, dealt the jailer a vigorous blow on the wrist of that hand which held the knife.

The knife fell to the ground, and Cornelius put his foot on it.

Then, as Gryphus seemed bent upon engaging in a struggle which the pain in his wrist, and shame for having allowed himself to be disarmed, would

have made desperate, Cornelius took a decisive step, belaboring his jailer with the most heroic self-possession, and selecting the exact spot for every blow of the terrible cudgel.

It was not long before Gryphus begged for mercy. But before begging for mercy, he had lustily roared for help, and his cries had roused all the functionaries of the prison. Two turnkeys, an inspector, and three or four guards, made their appearance all at once, and found Cornelius still using the stick, with the knife under his foot.

At the sight of these witnesses, who could not know all the circumstances which had provoked and might justify his offence, Cornelius felt that he was irretrievably lost.

In fact, appearances were sadly against him.

In one moment Cornelius was disarmed, and Gryphus raised and supported; and, bellowing with rage and pain, he was able to count on his back and shoulders the bruises which were beginning to swell like the hills dotting the slopes of a mountain ridge.

A protocol of the violence practiced by the prisoner against his jailer was immediately drawn up, and as it was made on the depositions of Gryphus, it certainly could not be said to be too tame; the prisoner being charged with neither more nor less than with an attempt to murder, for a long time premeditated, with open rebellion.

Whilst the charge was made out against Cornelius, Gryphus, whose presence was no longer necessary after having made his depositions, was taken down by his turnkeys to his lodge, groaning and covered with bruises.

During this time, the guards who had seized Cornelius busied themselves in charitably informing their prisoner of the usages and customs of Loewestein, which however he knew as well as they did. The regulations had been read

to him at the moment of his entering the prison, and certain articles in them remained fixed in his memory.

Among other things they told him that this regulation had been carried out to its full extent in the case of a prisoner named Mathias, who in 1668, that is to say, five years before, had committed a much less violent act of rebellion than that of which Cornelius was guilty. He had found his soup too hot, and thrown it at the head of the chief turnkey, who in consequence of this ablution had been put to the inconvenience of having his skin come off as he wiped his face.

Mathias was taken within twelve hours from his cell, then led to the jailer's lodge, where he was registered as leaving Loewestein, then taken to the Esplanade, from which there is a very fine prospect over a wide expanse of country. There they fettered his hands, bandaged his eyes, and let him say his prayers.

Hereupon he was invited to go down on his knees, and the guards of Loewestein, twelve in number, at a sign from a sergeant, very cleverly lodged a musket-ball each in his body.

In consequence of this proceeding, Mathias incontinently did then and there die.

Cornelius listened with the greatest attention to this delightful recital, and then said, --

"Ah! ah! within twelve hours, you say?"

"Yes, the twelfth hour had not even struck, if I remember right," said the guard who had told him the story.

"Thank you," said Cornelius.

The guard still had the smile on his face with which he accompanied and as it were accentuated his tale, when footsteps and a jingling of spurs were heard ascending the stair-case.

The guards fell back to allow an officer to pass, who entered the cell of Cornelius at the moment when the clerk of Loewestein was still making out his report.

"Is this No. 11?" he asked.

"Yes, Captain," answered a non-commissioned officer.

"Then this is the cell of the prisoner Cornelius van Baerle?"

"Exactly, Captain."

"Where is the prisoner?"

"Here I am, sir," answered Cornelius, growing rather pale, notwithstanding all his courage.

"You are Dr. Cornelius van Baerle?" asked he, this time addressing the prisoner himself.

"Yes, sir."

"Then follow me."

"Oh! oh!" said Cornelius, whose heart felt oppressed by the first dread of death. "What quick work they make here in the fortress of Loewestein. And the rascal talked to me of twelve hours!"

"Ah! what did I tell you?" whispered the communicative guard in the ear of the culprit.

"A lie."

"How so?"

"You promised me twelve hours."

"Ah, yes, but here comes to you an aide-de-camp of his Highness, even one of his most intimate companions Van Deken. Zounds! they did not grant such an honour to poor Mathias."

"Come, come!" said Cornelius, drawing a long breath. "Come, I'll show to these people that an honest burgher, godson of Cornelius de Witt, can without flinching receive as many musket-balls as that Mathias."

Saying this, he passed proudly before the clerk, who, being interrupted in his work, ventured to say to the officer, --

"But, Captain van Deken, the protocol is not yet finished."

"It is not worth while finishing it," answered the officer.

"All right," replied the clerk, philosophically putting up his paper and pen into a greasy and well-worn writing-case.

"It was written," thought poor Cornelius, "that I should not in this world give my name either to a child to a flower, or to a book, -- the three things by which a man's memory is perpetuated."

Repressing his melancholy thoughts, he followed the officer with a resolute heart, and carrying his head erect.

Cornelius counted the steps which led to the Esplanade, regretting that he had not asked the guard how many there were of them, which the man, in his official complaisance, would not have failed to tell him.

What the poor prisoner was most afraid of during this walk, which he considered as leading him to the end of the journey of life, was to see Gryphus and not to see Rosa. What savage satisfaction would glisten in the eyes of the father, and what sorrow dim those of the daughter!

How Gryphus would glory in his punishment! Punishment? Rather savage vengeance for an eminently righteous deed, which Cornelius had the satisfaction of having performed as a bounden duty.

But Rosa, poor girl! must he die without a glimpse of her, without an opportunity to give her one last kiss, or even to say one last word of farewell?

And, worst of all, must he die without any intelligence of the black tulip, and regain his consciousness in heaven with no idea in what direction he should look to find it?

In truth, to restrain his tears at such a crisis the poor wretch's heart must have been encased in more of the aes triplex -- "the triple brass" -- than Horace bestows upon the sailor who first visited the terrifying Acroceraunian shoals.

In vain did Cornelius look to the right and to the left; he saw no sign either of Rosa or Gryphus.

On reaching the Esplanade, he bravely looked about for the guards who were to be his executioners, and in reality saw a dozen soldiers assembled. But they were not standing in line, or carrying muskets, but talking together so gayly that Cornelius felt almost shocked.

All at once, Gryphus, limping, staggering, and supporting himself on a crooked stick, came forth from the jailer's lodge; his old eyes, gray as those of a cat, were lit up by a gleam in which all his hatred was concentrated. He then began to pour forth such a torrent of disgusting imprecations against Cornelius, that the latter, addressing the officer, said, --

"I do not think it very becoming sir, that I should be thus insulted by this man, especially at a moment like this."

"Well! hear me," said the officer, laughing, "it is quite natural that this worthy fellow should bear you a grudge, -- you seem to have given it him very soundly."

"But, sir, it was only in self-defence."

"Never mind," said the Captain, shrugging his shoulders like a true philosopher, "let him talk; what does it matter to you now?"

The cold sweat stood on the brow of Cornelius at this answer, which he looked upon somewhat in the light of brutal irony, especially as coming from an officer of whom he had heard it said that he was attached to the person of the Prince.

The unfortunate tulip-fancier then felt that he had no more resources, and no more friends, and resigned himself to his fate.

"God's will be done," he muttered, bowing his head; then, turning towards the officer, who seemed complacently to wait until he had finished his meditations he asked, --

"Please, sir, tell me now, where am I to go?"

The officer pointed to a carriage, drawn by four horses, which reminded him very strongly of that which, under similar circumstances, had before attracted his attention at Buytenhof.

"Enter," said the officer.

"Ah!" muttered Cornelius to himself, "it seems they are not going to treat me to the honours of the Esplanade."

He uttered these words loud enough for the chatty guard, who was at his heels, to overhear him.

That kind soul very likely thought it his duty to give Cornelius some new information; for, approaching the door of the carriage, whilst the officer, with one foot on the step, was still giving some orders, he whispered to Van Baerle, --

"Condemned prisoners have sometimes been taken to their own town to be made an example of, and have then been executed before the door of their own house. It's all according to circumstances."

Cornelius thanked him by signs, and then said to himself, --

"Well, here is a fellow who never misses giving consolation whenever an opportunity presents itself. In truth, my friend, I'm very much obliged to you. Goodbye."

The carriage drove away.

"Ah! you villain, you brigand," roared Gryphus, clinching his fists at the victim who was escaping from his clutches, "is it not a shame that this fellow gets off without having restored my daughter to me?"

"If they take me to Dort," thought Cornelius, "I shall see, in passing my house, whether my poor borders have been much spoiled."