

Chapter 32

A Last Request

At this solemn moment, and whilst the cheers still resounded, a carriage was driving along the road on the outskirts of the green on which the scene occurred; it pursued its way slowly, on account of the flocks of children who were pushed out of the avenue by the crowd of men and women.

This carriage, covered with dust, and creaking on its axles, the result of a long journey, enclosed the unfortunate Van Baerle, who was just beginning to get a glimpse through the open window of the scene which we have tried - with poor success, no doubt -- to present to the eyes of the reader.

The crowd and the noise and the display of artificial and natural magnificence were as dazzling to the prisoner as a ray of light flashing suddenly into his dungeon.

Notwithstanding the little readiness which his companion had shown in answering his questions concerning his fate, he ventured once more to ask the meaning of all this bustle, which at first sight seemed to be utterly disconnected with his own affairs.

"What is all this, pray, Mynheer Lieutenant?" he asked of his conductor.

"As you may see, sir," replied the officer, "it is a feast."

"Ah, a feast," said Cornelius, in the sad tone of indifference of a man to whom no joy remains in this world.

Then, after some moments, silence, during which the carriage had proceeded a few yards, he asked once more, --

"The feast of the patron saint of Haarlem? as I see so many flowers."

"It is, indeed, a feast in which flowers play a principal part."

"Oh, the sweet scents! oh, the beautiful colours!" cried Cornelius.

"Stop, that the gentleman may see," said the officer, with that frank kindness which is peculiar to military men, to the soldier who was acting as postilion.

"Oh, thank you, Sir, for your kindness," replied Van Baerle, in a melancholy tone; "the joy of others pains me; please spare me this pang."

"Just as you wish. Drive on! I ordered the driver to stop because I thought it would please you, as you are said to love flowers, and especially that the feast of which is celebrated to-day."

"And what flower is that?"

"The tulip."

"The tulip!" cried Van Baerle, "is to-day the feast of tulips?"

"Yes, sir; but as this spectacle displeases you, let us drive on."

The officer was about to give the order to proceed, but Cornelius stopped him, a painful thought having struck him. He asked, with faltering voice, --

"Is the prize given to-day, sir?"

"Yes, the prize for the black tulip."

Cornelius's cheek flushed, his whole frame trembled, and the cold sweat stood on his brow.

"Alas! sir," he said, "all these good people will be as unfortunate as myself, for they will not see the solemnity which they have come to witness, or at least they will see it incompletely."

"What is it you mean to say?"

"I mean to say," replied Cornelius, throwing himself back in the carriage, "that the black tulip will not be found, except by one whom I know."

"In this case," said the officer, "the person whom you know has found it, for the thing which the whole of Haarlem is looking at at this moment is neither more nor less than the black tulip."

"The black tulip!" replied Van Baerle, thrusting half his body out of the carriage window. "Where is it? where is it?"

"Down there on the throne, -- don't you see?"

"I do see it."

"Come along, sir," said the officer. "Now we must drive off."

"Oh, have pity, have mercy, sir!" said Van Baerle, "don't take me away! Let me look once more! Is what I see down there the black tulip? Quite black? Is it possible? Oh, sir, have you seen it? It must have specks, it must be imperfect, it must only be dyed black. Ah! if I were there, I should see it at once. Let me alight, let me see it close, I beg of you."

"Are you mad, Sir? How could I allow such a thing?"

"I implore you."

"But you forget that you are a prisoner."

"It is true I am a prisoner, but I am a man of honour, and I promise you on my word that I will not run away, I will not attempt to escape, -- only let me see the flower."

"But my orders, Sir, my orders." And the officer again made the driver a sign to proceed.

Cornelius stopped him once more.

"Oh, be forbearing, be generous! my whole life depends upon your pity. Alas! perhaps it will not be much longer. You don't know, sir, what I suffer. You don't know the struggle going on in my heart and mind. For after all," Cornelius cried in despair, "if this were my tulip, if it were the one which has been stolen from Rosa! Oh, I must alight, sir! I must see the flower! You may kill me afterwards if you like, but I will see it, I must see it."

"Be quiet, unfortunate man, and come quickly back into the carriage, for here is the escort of his Highness the Stadtholder, and if the Prince observed any disturbance, or heard any noise, it would be ruin to me, as well as to you."

Van Baerle, more afraid for his companion than himself, threw himself back into the carriage, but he could only keep quiet for half a minute, and the first twenty horsemen had scarcely passed when he again leaned out of the carriage window, gesticulating imploringly towards the Stadtholder at the very moment when he passed.

William, impassible and quiet as usual, was proceeding to the green to fulfil his duty as chairman. He held in his hand the roll of parchment, which, on this festive day, had become his baton.

Seeing the man gesticulate with imploring mien, and perhaps also recognising the officer who accompanied him, his Highness ordered his carriage to stop.

In an instant his snorting steeds stood still, at a distance of about six yards from the carriage in which Van Baerle was caged.

"What is this?" the Prince asked the officer, who at the first order of the Stadtholder had jumped out of the carriage, and was respectfully approaching him.

"Monseigneur," he cried, "this is the prisoner of state whom I have fetched from Loewestein, and whom I have brought to Haarlem according to your Highness's command."

"What does he want?"

"He entreats for permission to stop here for minute."

"To see the black tulip, Monseigneur," said Van Baerle, clasping his hands, "and when I have seen it, when I have seen what I desire to know, I am quite

ready to die, if die I must; but in dying I shall bless your Highness's mercy for having allowed me to witness the glorification of my work."

It was, indeed, a curious spectacle to see these two men at the windows of their several carriages; the one surrounded by his guards, and all powerful, the other a prisoner and miserable; the one going to mount a throne, the other believing himself to be on his way to the scaffold.

William, looking with his cold glance on Cornelius, listened to his anxious and urgent request.

Then addressing himself to the officer, he said, --

"Is this person the mutinous prisoner who has attempted to kill his jailer at Loewestein?"

Cornelius heaved a sigh and hung his head. His good-tempered honest face turned pale and red at the same instant. These words of the all-powerful Prince, who by some secret messenger unavailable to other mortals had already been apprised of his crime, seemed to him to forebode not only his doom, but also the refusal of his last request.

He did not try to make a struggle, or to defend himself; and he presented to the Prince the affecting spectacle of despairing innocence, like that of a child, -- a spectacle which was fully understood and felt by the great mind and the great heart of him who observed it.

"Allow the prisoner to alight, and let him see the black tulip; it is well worth being seen once."

"Thank you, Monseigneur, thank you," said Cornelius, nearly swooning with joy, and staggering on the steps of his carriage; had not the officer

supported him, our poor friend would have made his thanks to his Highness prostrate on his knees with his forehead in the dust.

After having granted this permission, the Prince proceeded on his way over the green amidst the most enthusiastic acclamations.

He soon arrived at the platform, and the thunder of cannon shook the air.