

Chapter 64

MONSEIGNEUR.

At this moment another man entered the hall, and came forward respectfully.

"Ah! it is you, my friend," said the burgomaster.

"Myself, monsieur," replied the man.

"Monseigneur," said the burgomaster, "it is the man whom we sent to reconnoiter."

At the word "monseigneur," addressed not to the Prince of Orange, the new comer made a movement of surprise and joy, and advanced quickly to see better who was designated by this title. He was one of those Flemish sailors, of whom the type is so recognizable, being marked, a square head, blue eyes, short neck, and broad shoulders; he crushed in his large hands his woolen cap, and as he advanced he left behind him a line of wet, for his clothes were dripping with water.

"Oh! here is a brave man who has swum back," said monseigneur, looking at the man with his accustomed air of authority.

"Yes, monseigneur, yes; and the Scheldt is broad and rapid," said the

sailor, eagerly.

"Speak, Goes, speak," said monseigneur, knowing how a sailor would prize being thus called by his name.

Thus from that minute Goes addressed himself to the unknown exclusively; although, having been sent by another, it was to him that he should have given an account of his mission.

"Monseigneur," said he, "I set out in my smallest bark and passed, by giving the word, through all our ships, and reached those cursed French. Ah! pardon, monseigneur."

The stranger smiled and said, "Never mind, I am but half French, so should be but half cursed."

"Then monseigneur pardons me?"

He nodded, and Goes went on.

"While I rowed in the dark with my oars wrapped in cloth, I heard a voice crying, 'Hola! bark, what do you want?' I thought it was to me that the question was addressed, and was about to reply something or other, when I heard some one cry behind me, 'Admiral's boat.'"

Monseigneur looked at the council.

"At the same moment," continued Gues, "I felt a shock; my bark was swamped, and I fell into the water, but the waves of the Scheldt knew me for an old acquaintance, and threw me up again. It was the admiral's boat taking M. de Joyeuse on board, and which had passed over me; God only knows how I was not crushed or drowned."

"Thanks, brave Goes, thanks," said the Prince of Orange, putting a purse into his hand. However, the sailor seemed to wait for his dismissal from the stranger, who gave him a friendly nod, which he valued more than the prince's present.

"Well," said monseigneur to the burgomaster, "what do you say of this report? Do you still doubt that the French are preparing, and do you believe that it was to pass the night on board that M. de Joyeuse was leaving the camp for his ship?"

"But you are a diviner, then, monseigneur," cried the bourgeois.

"Not more than Monseigneur the Prince of Orange, who is in all things of my opinion, I am sure. But I, like him, was well informed, and know well those on the other side, so that I should have been much astonished had they not attacked to-night. Then be ready, gentlemen, for if you give them time, the attack will be serious."

"These gentlemen will do me the justice to own," said the prince, "that before your arrival I held exactly the same language to them that you now do."

"But," said the burgomaster, "why does monseigneur believe that the attack is about to commence?"

"Here are the probabilities. The infantry is Catholic; it will fight alone; that is, on one side. The cavalry is Calvinist; they will fight alone on another side. The navy is under M. de Joyeuse, from Paris, who will take his share of the combat and the glory. That is three sides."

"Then let us form three corps," said the burgomaster.

"Make only one, gentlemen, with all your best soldiers, and leave any of whom you may be doubtful in close fight to guard your walls. Then with this body make a vigorous sally when Francois least expects it. They mean to attack; let them be forestalled, and attacked themselves. If you wait for their assault you are lost, for no one equals the French at an attack, as you, gentlemen, have no equals at defending your towns."

The Flemings looked radiant.

"What did I say, gentlemen?" said William.

"It is a great honor," said the unknown, "to have been, without knowing it, of the same opinion as the greatest captain of the age."

Both bowed courteously.

"Then," continued the unknown, "it is settled: you will make a furious sortie on the infantry and cavalry. I trust that your officers will so conduct it as to defeat your enemies."

"But their vessels?" cried the burgomaster. "The wind is northeast, and they will be in our city in two hours."

"You have yourselves six old ships and thirty boats at St. Marie; that is a mile off, is it not? That is your maritime barricade across the Scheldt."

"Yes, monseigneur, that is so. How do you know all these details?"

Monseigneur smiled.

"I know them, as you see; it is there that lies the fate of the battle."

"Then," said the burgomaster, "we must send aid to our brave seamen."

"On the contrary, you may dispose otherwise of the 400 men who are there; twenty brave, intelligent, and devoted men will suffice." The Antwerpians opened their eyes in surprise.

"Will you," continued monseigneur, "destroy the French fleet at the expense of your six old vessels and thirty boats?"

"Hum!" said the Antwerpians, looking at each other, "our ships are not

so old."

"Well, price them," said the stranger, "and I will pay you their value."

"See," said William softly to him, "the men against whom I have to contend every day. Were it not for that, I should have conquered long ago."

"Come, gentlemen," continued the stranger, "name your price, but name it quickly. I will pay you in bills on yourselves, which I trust you will find good."

"Monseigneur," said the burgomaster, after a few minutes' deliberation with the others, "we are merchants, and not soldiers; therefore, you must pardon some hesitation, for our souls are not in our bodies, but in our counting-houses. However, there are circumstances in which, for the general good, we know how to make sacrifices. Dispose, then, of our ships as you like."

"Ma foi, monseigneur," said William, "you have done wonders. It would have taken me six months to obtain what you have done in ten minutes."

"This, then, is my plan, gentlemen," said monseigneur. "The French, with the admiral's galley at their head, will try to force a passage. Make your line long enough, and from all your boats let the men throw grappling-irons; and then, having made fast the enemy's ships, set fire to all your own boats, having previously filled them with combustible

materials, and let your men escape in one reserved for the purpose."

"Oh!" cried William, "I see the whole French fleet burning."

"Yes, the whole; then no more retreat by sea and none by land, for at the same time you must open the sluices of Malines, Berchem, Lier, Duffel, and Antwerp. Repulsed by you, pursued by your open dykes, enveloped on all sides by these waters unexpectedly and rapidly rising, by this sea, which will have a flow, but no ebb, the French will be drowned--overwhelmed--destroyed."

The officers uttered a cry of joy.

"There is but one drawback," said the prince.

"What is it, monseigneur?"

"That it would take a day to send our orders to the different towns, and we have but an hour."

"And an hour is enough."

"But who will instruct the fleet?"

"It is done."

"By whom?"

"By me. If these gentlemen had refused to give it to me, I should have bought it."

"But Malines, Lier, Duffel?"

"I passed through Malines and Lier, and sent a sure agent to Duffel. At eleven o'clock the French will be beaten; at one they will be in full retreat; at two Malines will open its dykes, Lier and Duffel their sluices, and the whole plain will become a furious ocean, which will drown houses, fields, woods, and villages, it is true, but at the same time will destroy the French so utterly, that not one will return to France."

A silence of admiration and terror followed these words; then all at once the Flemings burst into applause. William stepped forward, and, holding out his hand, said: "Then, monseigneur, all is ready on our side?"

"All; and, stay--I believe on the side of the French also."

And he pointed to an officer who was entering.

"Gentlemen," cried the officer, "we have just heard that the French are marching toward the city."

"To arms!" cried the burgomaster.

"To arms!" cried all.

"One moment, gentlemen," cried monseigneur; "I have to give one direction more important than all the rest."

"Speak!" cried all.

"The French will be surprised; it will not be a combat, nor even a retreat, but a flight. To pursue them you must be lightly armed. No cuirasses, morbleu! It is your cuirasses, in which you cannot move, which have made you lose all the battles you have lost. No cuirasses, gentlemen. We will meet again in the combat. Meanwhile, go to the place of the Hotel de Ville, where you will find all your men in battle array."

"Thanks, monseigneur," said William; "you have saved Belgium and Holland."

"Prince, you overwhelm me."

"Will your highness consent to draw the sword against the French?" asked the prince.

"I will arrange as to fight against the Huguenots," replied the unknown, with a smile which his more somber companion might have envied.