THE LAUGHING CAVALIER

Baroness Orczy

Copyright & Information

The Laughing Cavalier

First published in 1914

This edition published in 2011 by House of Stratus, an imprint of
Stratus Books Ltd., Lisandra House, Fore Street, Looe, Cornwall, PL13 1AD, UK.

Typeset by House of Stratus.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and the Library of Congress.

EAN	ISBN	Edition

0755111273 9780755111275 Print

0755127331 9780755127337 Kindle

075512734X 9780755127344 Epub

www.houseofstratus.com

About the Author

Emmuska Orczy was born in Tarnaörs, Heves, in Hungary, the daughter of a composer, Baron Felix Orczy, and Countess Emma Wass.

Her parents left Hungary in 1868, fearful of the threat of a peasant revolution. They lived in Budapest before moving to Brussels and then on to Paris. There, she studied music with limited success before the family moved on again; this time to London, at which point her interest turned to art. She studied at the West London School of Art, followed by Heatherley's School of Fine Art, where she met a young illustrator, Henry Montague MacLean Barstow, the son of an English clergyman who was to become her friend, lover, and husband in a happy marriage that lasted nearly fifty years. They were to have one son.

> *"My marriage was for close on half a century one of perfect happiness and understanding, of perfect friendship and communion of*

thought. The great link in my chain of life which brought me everything that makes life worth the living."

To start with there was little money and the pair worked as translator (Orczy) and illustrator, before she embarked upon a writing career in 1899 which, to start with, was not a success. By 1901, however, she had produced a second novel and a string of detective stories for a magazine which were received a little more kindly. In 1903, in co-operation with her husband, she wrote a play about an English aristocrat, Sir Percy Blakeney, whose mission in life was to rescue French aristocrats from the extreme events affecting their class during the French Revolution.

The play got off to a shaky start, but soon developed a following and eventually ran for four years in the West End of London. It was translated and revised and performed in many other countries. In tandem with the play, Orczy novelized the story and this became a huge success. There followed over ten sequels which featured the central character, Blakeney, along with his family and other members of what was referred to as the *League of the Scarlet Pimpernel*. The first of these, *I Will Repay,* was published in 1906 and the last, *Mam'zelle Guillotine,* in 1940.

She also wrote many other novels, mainly romances, but also within another genre she mastered; detective fiction. *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* was one of the first novels to feature a female detective. *The Old Man in the Corner* stories are of particular significance, as they represented a new departure in fiction, with an 'armchair' detective literally attempting to reveal solutions based on logic alone.

Success brought financial reward and eventually she bought an estate, Villa Bijou in Monte Carlo, Monaco,

which was to become her home and where her beloved husband died in 1943. England, however, remained important to her and in addition to working tirelessly during the First World War in aid of the recruitment of male volunteers for the services, it was in Henley-on-Thames, near London, that she died in 1947.

Many film and TV adaptations of Orczy’s work have been made, and her novels remain sought after and avidly digested by successive new generations of readers.

An Apology

Does it need one?

If so it must also come from those members of the Blakeney family in whose veins runs the blood of that Sir Percy Blakeney who is known to history as the Scarlet Pimpernel – for they in a manner are responsible for the telling of this veracious chronicle.

For the past eight years now – ever since the true story of the Scarlet Pimpernel was put on record by the present author – these gentle, kind, inquisitive friends have asked me to trace their descent back to an ancestor more remote than was Sir Percy, to one in fact who by his life and by his deeds stands forth from out the distant past as a conclusive proof that the laws which govern the principles of heredity are as unalterable as those that rule the destinies of the universe. They have pointed out to me that since Sir Percy Blakeney's was an exceptional personality, possessing exceptional characteristics which his friends pronounced sublime and his detractors arrogant – he must have had an ancestor in the dim long ago who was, like him, exceptional, like him possessed of qualities which call forth the devotion of friends and the rancour of enemies. Nay, more! there must have existed at one time or another a man who possessed that same sunny disposition, that same irresistible laughter, that same careless insouciance and adventurous spirit which were subsequently transmitted to his descendants, of whom the Scarlet Pimpernel himself was the most distinguished individual.

All these were unanswerable arguments, and with the request that accompanied them I had long intended to comply. Time has been my only enemy in thwarting my intentions until now – time and the multiplicity of material and documents to be gone through ere vague knowledge could be turned into certitude.

Now at last I am in a position to present not only to the Blakeneys themselves, but to all those who look on the Scarlet Pimpernel as their hero and their friend – the true history of one of his most noted forebears.

Strangely enough his history has never been written before. And yet countless millions must during the past three centuries have stood before his picture; we of the present generation, who are the proud possessor of that picture now, have looked on him many a time, always with sheer, pure joy in our hearts, our lips smiling, our eyes sparkling in response to his; almost forgetting the genius of the artist who portrayed him in the very realism of the personality which literally seems to breathe and palpitate and certainly to laugh to us out of the canvas.

Those twinkling eyes! how well we know them! that laugh! we can almost hear it; as for the swagger, the devil-may-care arrogance, do we not condone it, seeing that it has its mainspring behind a fine straight brow whose noble, seeping lines betray an undercurrent of dignity and of thought.

And yet no biographer has – so far as is known to the author of this veracious chronicle – ever attempted to tell us anything of this man’s life, no one has attempted hitherto to lift the veil of anonymity which only thinly hides the identity of the Laughing Cavalier.

But here in Haarlem – in the sleepy, yet thriving little town where he lived, the hard-frozen ground in winter seems at times to send forth a memory-echo of his firm footstep, of the jingling of his spurs, and the clang of his

sword, and the old gate of the Spaarne through which he passed so often is still haunted with the sound of his merry laughter, and his pleasant voice seems still to rouse the ancient walls from their sleep.

Here too – hearing these memory-echoes whenever the shadows of evening draw in on the quaint old city – I had a dream. I saw just as he lived, three hundred years ago. He had stepped out of the canvas in London, had crossed the sea and was walking the streets of Haarlem just as he had done then, filling them with his swagger, with his engaging personality, above all with his laughter. And sitting beside me in the old tavern of the “Lame Cow”, in that self-same taproom where he was wont to make merry, he told me the history of his life.

Since then kind friends at Haarlem have placed documents in my hands which confirmed the story told me by the Laughing Cavalier. To them do I tender my heartfelt and grateful thanks. But it is to the man himself – to the memory of him which is so alive here in Haarlem – that I am indebted for the true history of his life, and therefore I feel that but little apology is needed for placing the true facts before all those who have known him hitherto only by his picture, who have loved him only for what they guessed.

The monograph which I now present with but few additions of minor details, goes to prove what I myself had known long ago, namely, that the Laughing Cavalier who sat to Frans Hals for his portrait in 1624 was the direct ancestor of Sir Percy Blakeney, known to history as the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Emmuska Orczy,
Haarlem, 1931

Prologue

Haarlem, March 29, 1623

The day had been spring-like – even hot; a very unusual occurrence in Holland at this time of year.

Gilda Beresteyn had retired early to her room. She had dismissed Maria, whose chatterings grated upon her nerves, with the promise that she would call her later. Maria had arranged a tray of dainties on the table, a jug of milk, some fresh white bread and a little roast meat on a plate, for Gilda had eaten very little supper and it might happen that she would feel hungry later on.

It would have been useless to argue with the old woman about this matter. She considered Gilda's health to be under her own special charge, ever since good Mevrouw Beresteyn had placed her baby girl in Maria's strong, devoted arms ere she closed her eyes in the last long sleep.

Gilda Beresteyn, glad to be alone, threw open the casement of the window and peered out into the night.

The shadow of the terrible tragedy – the concluding acts of which were being enacted day by day in the Gevangen Poort of 'S Graven Hage – had even touched the distant city of Haarlem with its gloom. The eldest son of John of Barneveld was awaiting final trial and inevitable condemnation, his brother Stoutenburg was a fugitive, and their accomplice, Korenwinder, van Dyk, the redoubtable Slatius and others, were giving away under torture the details of the aborted conspiracy against the life of Maurice of Naussau, Stadtholder of

Holland, Gelderland, Utrecht and Overyssel, Captain and Admiral-General of the State, Prince of Orange, and virtual ruler of Protestant and republican Netherlands.

Traitors all of them – would-be assassins – the Stadtholder whom they had planned to murder was showing them no mercy. As he had sent John of Barneveld to the scaffold to assuage his own thirst for supreme power and satisfy his own ambitions, so he was ready to sent John of Barneveld's sons to death and John of Barneveld's widow to sorrow and loneliness.

The sons of John of Barneveld had planned to avenge their father's death by a committal of a cruel and dastardly murder: fate and the treachery of mercenary accomplices had intervened, and now Groeneveld was on the eve of condemnation, and Soutenburg was a wanderer on the face of the earth with a price put upon his head.

Gilda Beresteyn could not endure the thought of it all. All the memories of her childhood were linked with the Barnevelds. Stoutenburg had been her brother Nicolaes' most intimate friend, and had been the first man to whisper words of love in her ears, ere his boundless ambition and his unscrupulous egoism drove him into another more profitable marriage.

Gilda's face flamed up with shame even now at recollection of his treachery, and the deep humiliation which she had felt when she saw the first budding blossom of her girlish love so carelessly tossed aside by the man whom she had trusted.

A sense of oppression weighed her spirits down tonight. It almost seemed as if the tragedy which had encompassed the entire Barneveld family was even now hovering over the peaceful house of Mynheer Beresteyn, deputy burgomaster and chief civic magistrate of the town of Haarlem. The air itself felt heavy as if with the weight of impending doom.

The little city lay quiet and at peace; a soft breeze from the south lightly fanned the girl’s cheeks. She leaned her elbows on the window-sill and rested her chin in her hands. The moon was not up and yet it was not dark; a mysterious light still lingered on the horizon far away where earth and sea met in a haze of purple and indigo.

From the little garden down below there rose the subtle fragrance of early spring – of wet earth and budding trees, and the dim veiled distance was full of strange sweet sounds, the call of night-birds, the shriek of seagulls astray from their usual haunts.

Gilda looked out and listened – unable to understand this vague sense of oppression and of foreboding: when she put her finger up to her eyes, she found them wet with tears.

Memories rose from out the past, sad phantoms that hovered in the scent of the spring. Gilda had never wholly forgotten the man who had once filled her heart with his personality, much less could she chase away his image from her mind now that a future of misery and disgrace was all that was left to him.

She did not know what had become of him, and dared not ask for news. Mynheer Beresteyn, loyal to the House of Nassau and to its prince, had cast out of his heart the sons of John of Barneveld whom he had once loved. Assassins and traitors, he would with his own lips have condemned them to the block, or denounced them to the vengeance of the Stadtholder for their treachery against him.

The feeling of uncertainty as to Stoutenburg’s fate softened Gilda’s heart toward him. She knew that he had become a wanderer on the face of the earth, Cain-like, homeless, friendless, practically kinless; she pitied him far more than she did Groeneveld or the others who were looking death quite closely in the face.

She was infinitely sorry for him, for him and his wife, for whose sake he had been false to his first love. The gentle murmur of the breeze, the distant call of the waterfowl, seemed to bring back to Gilda's ears those whisperings of ardent passion which had come from Stoutenburg's lips years ago. She had listened to them with joy then, with glowing eyes cast down and cheeks that flamed up at his words.

And as she listened to these dream-sounds others more concrete mingled with the mystic ones far away: the sound of stealthy footsteps upon the flagged path of the garden, and of a human being breathing and panting somewhere close by, still hidden by the gathering shadows of the night.

She held her breath to listen – not at all frightened, for the sound of those footsteps, the presence of that human creature close by, were in tune with her mood of expectancy of something that was foredoomed to come.

Suddenly the breeze brought to her ear the murmur of her name, whispered as if in an agony of pleading: "Gilda!"

She leaned right out of the window. Her eyes, better accustomed to the dim evening light, perceived a human figure that crouched against the yew hedge, in the fantastic shadow cast by the quaintly shaped peacock at the corner close to the house.

"Gilda!" came the murmur again, more insistent this time.

"Who goes there?" she called in response: and it was an undefinable instinct stronger than her will that caused her to drop her own voice also to a whisper.

"A fugitive hunted to his death," came the response scarce louder than the breeze. "Give me shelter, Gilda – human bloodhounds are on my track."

Gilda’s heart seemed to stop its beating; the human figure out there in the shadows had crept stealthily nearer. The window out of which she leaned was only a few feet from the ground; she stretched out her hand into the night.

“There is a projection in the wall just there,” she whispered, hurriedly, “and the ivy stems will help you… Come!”

The fugitive grasped the hand that was stretched out to him in pitying helpfulness. With the aid of the projection in the wall and of the stems of the century-old ivy, he soon cleared the distance which separated him from the window-sill. The next moment he had jumped into the room.

Gilda in this impulsive act of mercy had not paused to consider either the risks or the cost. She had recognised the voice of the man whom she had once loved, that voice called to her out of the depths of boundless misery; it was the call of man at bay, a human quarry hunted and exhausted, with the hunters close upon his heels. She could not have resisted that call even if she had allowed her reason to fight her instinct then.

But now that he stood before her in rough fisherman’s clothes, stained and torn, his face covered with blood and grime, his eyes red and swollen, the breath coming in quick, short gasps through his blue, cracked lips, the first sense of fear at what she had done seized hold of her heart.

At first he took no notice of her, but threw himself into the nearest chair and passed his hands across his face and brow.

“My God,” he murmured, “I thought they would have me tonight.”

She stood in the middle of the room, feeling helpless and bewildered; she was full of pity for the man, for

there is nothing more unutterably pathetic than the hunted human creature in its final stage of apathetic exhaustion, but she was just beginning to co-ordinate her thoughts, and they for the moment were being invaded by fear.

She felt more than she saw, that presently he turned his hollow, purple-rimmed eyes upon her, and that in them there was a glow half of a passionate willpower and half of anxious, agonising doubt.

“Of what are you afraid, Gilda?” he asked suddenly, “surely not of me?”

“Not of you, my lord,” she replied quietly, “only for you.”

“I am a miserable outlaw now, Gilda,” he rejoined bitterly, “four thousand golden guilders await any lout who chooses to sell me for a competence.”

“I know that, my lord…and marvel why you are here? I heard that you were safe – in Belgium.”

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

“I was safe there,” he said, “but I could not rest. I came back a few days ago, thinking I could help my brother to escape. Bah!” he added roughly, “he is a snivelling coward…”

“Hush! for pity’s sake,” she exclaimed, “someone will hear you.”

“Close that window and lock the door,” he murmured hoarsely. “I am spent – and could not resist a child it if chose to drag me at this moment to the Stadtholder’s spies.”

Gilda obeyed him mechanically. First she closed the window; then she went to the door, listening against the panel with all her senses on the alert. At the further end of the passage was the living-room where her father must still be sitting after his supper, poring over a book on horticulture, or mayhap attending to his tulip bulbs. If he knew that the would-be murderer of the

Stadtholder, the prime mover and instigator of the dastardly plot, was here in his house, in his daughter's chamber… Gilda shuddered, half-fainting with terror, and her trembling fingers fumbled with the lock.

"Is Nicolaes home?" asked Stoutenburg, suddenly.

"Not just now," she replied, "but he, too, will be home anon… My father is at home…"

"Ah!… Nicolaes is my friend… I counted on seeing him here…he would help me I know…but your father, Gilda, would drag me to the gallows with his own hand if he knew that I am here."

"You must not count on Nicolaes either, my lord," she pleaded, "nor must you stay here a moment longer… I heard my father's step in the passage already. He is sure to come and bid me good night before he goes to bed…

"I am spent, Gilda," he murmured, and indeed his breath came in such short feeble gasps that he could scarce speak.

"I have not touched food for two days. I landed at Scheveningen a week ago, and for five days have hung about the Gevangen Poort of 'S Graven Hage trying to get speech with my brother. I had gained the good will of an important official in the prison, but Groeneveld is too much of a coward to make a fight for freedom. Then I was recognised by a group of workmen outside my dead father's house. I read recognition in their eyes – knowledge of me and knowledge of the money which that recognition might mean to them. They feigned indifference at first, but I had read their thoughts. They drew together to concert over their future actions and I took to my heels. It was yesterday at noon, and I have been running ever since, running, running, with but brief intervals to regain my breath and beg for a drink of water – when thirst became more unendurable than the thought of capture. I did not even know which way I

was running till I saw the spires of Haarlem rising from out the evening blaze; then I thought of you, Gilda, and of this house. You would not sell me, Gilda, for you are rich, and you loved me once," he added hoarsely, while his thin, grimy hands clutched the arms of the chair and he half-raised himself from his seat, as if ready to spring up and to start running again; running, running, until he dropped.

But obviously his strength was exhausted, for the next moment he fell back against the cushions, the swollen lids fell upon the hollow eyes, the sunken cheeks and parched lips became ashen white.

"Water!" he murmured.

She ministered to him kindly and gently, first holding the water to his lips, then, when he had quenched that raging thirst, she pulled the table up close to his chair, and gave him milk to drink and bread and meat to eat.

He seemed quite dazed, conscious only of bodily needs, for he ate and drank ravenously without thought at first of thanking her. Only when he had finished did he lean back once again against the cushions which her kindly hand had placed behind him, and he murmured feebly like a tired but satisfied child: "You are an angel of goodness, Gilda. Had you not helped me tonight, I should either have perished in a ditch, or fallen into the hands of the Stadtholder's minions."

Quickly she put a restraining hand on his shoulder. A firm step had echoed in the flagged corridor beyond the oaken door.

"My father!" she whispered.

In a moment the instinct for his life and liberty was fully aroused in the fugitive; his apathy and exhaustion were forgotten; terror, mad, unreasoning terror, had once more taken possession of his mind.

"Hide me, Gilda," he entreated hoarsely, and his hands clutched wildly at her gown, "don't let him see

me…he would give me up…he would give me up…”

“Hush, in the name of God,” she commanded, “he will hear you if you speak.”

Swiftly she blew out the candles, then with dilated anxious eyes searched the recesses of the room for a hiding-pace – the cupboard which was too small – the wide hearth which was too exposed – the bed in the wall…

His knees had given way under him, and, as he clutched at her gown, he fell forward at her feet, and remained there crouching, trembling, his circled eyes trying to pierce the surrounding gloom, to locate the position of the door behind which lurked the most immediate danger.

“Hide me, Gilda,” he murmured almost audibly under his breath, “for the love you bore me once.”

“Gilda!” came in a loud, kindly voice from the other side of the door.

“Yes, father!”

“You are not yet abed, are you, my girl?”

“I have just blown out the candles, dear,” she contrived to reply with a fairly steady voice.

“Why is your door locked?”

“I was a little nervous tonight, father dear. I don’t know why.”

“Well! open then! and say goodnight.”

“One moment, dear.”

She was white to the lips, white as the gown which fell in straight heavy folds from her hips, and which Stoutenburg was still clutching with convulsive fingers. Alone her white figure detached itself from the darkness around. The wretched man as he looked up could see her small pale head, the stiff collar that rose above her shoulders, her embroidered corslet, and the row of pearls round her neck.

“Save me, Gilda,” he repeated with the agony of despair, “do not let your father hand me over to the Stadtholder…there will be no mercy for me, Gilda…hide me…hide me…for the love of God.”

Noiselessly she glided across the room, dragging him after her by the hand. She pulled aside the bed-curtains, and without a word pointed to the recess. The bed, built into the wall, was narrow but sure; it smelt sweetly of lavender; the hunted man, his very senses blurred by that overwhelming desire to save his life at any cost, accepted the shelter so innocently offered him. Gathering his long limbs together, he was soon hidden underneath the coverlet.

“Gilda!” came more insistently from behind the heavy door.

“One moment, father. I was fastening my gown.”

“Don’t trouble to do that. I only wished to say good night.”

She pulled the curtains together very carefully in front of the bed: she even took the precaution of taking off her stiff collar and embroidered corslet. Then she lighted one of the candles, and with it in her hand she went to the door.

Then she drew back the bolt.

“May I come in?” said Mynheer Beresteyn gaily, for she remained standing on the threshold.

“Well no, father!” she replied, “my room is very untidy… I was just getting into bed…”

“Just getting into bed,” he retorted with a laugh, “why, child, you have not begun to undress.”

“I wished to undress in the dark. My head aches terribly…it must be the spring air… Good night, dear.”

“Good night, little one!” said Beresteyn, as he kissed his daughter tenderly. “Nicolaes has just come home,” he added, “he wanted to see you too.”

“Ask him to wait till tomorrow then. My head feels heavy. I can scarcely hold it up.”

“You are not ill, little one?” asked the father anxiously.

“No, no…only oppressed with this first hot breath of spring.”

“Why is not Maria here to undress you. I’ll send her.”

‘Not just now, father. She will come presently. Her chattering wearied me and I sent her away.”

“Well! goodnight again, my girl. God bless you. You will not see Nicolaes?”

“Not tonight, father. Tell him I am not well. Good night.”

Mynheer Beresteyn went away at last, not before Gilda feared that she must drop or faint under the stress of this nerve-racking situation.

Even now when at last she was alone, when once again she was able to close and bolt the door, she could scarcely stand. She leaned against the wall with eyes closed, and heart that beat so furiously and so fast that she thought she must choke.

The sound of her father’s footsteps died away along the corridor. She heard him opening and shutting a door at the further end of the passage where there were two or three living-rooms and his own sleeping-chamber. For a while now the house was still, so still that she could almost hear those furious heartbeats beneath her gown. Then only did she dare to move. With noiseless steps she crossed the room to that recess in the wall hidden by the gay-flowered cotton curtains.

She paused close beside these.

“My lord!” she called softly.

No answer.

“My lord! my father has gone! you are in no danger for the moment!”

Still no answer, and as she paused, straining her ears to listen, she caught the sound of slow and regular breathing. Going back to the table she took up the candle, then with it in her hand she returned to the recess and gently drew aside the curtain. The light from the candle fell full upon Stoutenburg's face. Inexpressibly weary, exhausted both bodily and mentally, not even the imminence of present danger had succeeded in keeping him awake. The moment that he felt the downy pillow under his head, he had dropped off to sleep as peacefully as he used to do years ago before the shadow of premeditated crime had left its impress on his wan face.

Gilda, looking down on him, sought in vain in the harsh and haggard features, the traces of those boyish good looks which had fascinated her years ago; she tried in vain to read on those thin, set lips those words of passionate affection which had so readily flown from them then.

She put down the candle again and drew a chair close to the bed, then she sat down and waited.

And he slept on calmly, watched over by the woman whom he had so heartlessly betrayed. All love for him had died out in her heart ere this, but pity was there now, and she was thankful that it had been in her power to aid him at the moment of his most dire peril.

But that danger still existed, of course. The household was still astir and the servants not yet all abed. Gilda could hear Jakob, the old henchman, making his rounds, seeing that all the lights were safely out, the bolts pushed home and chains securely fastened, and Maria might come back at any moment, wondering why her mistress had not yet sent for her. Nicolaes too was at home, and had already said that he wished to see his sister.

She tried to rouse the sleeping man, but he lay there like a log. She dared not speak loudly to him or to call his name, and all her efforts at shaking him by the shoulder failed to waken him.

Lonely and seriously frightened now Gilda fell on her knees beside the bed. Clasping her hands she tried to pray. Surely God could not leave a young girl in such terrible perplexity, when her only sin had been an act of mercy. The candle on the bureau close by burnt low in its socket and its flickering light outlined her delicate profile and the soft tendrils of hair that escaped from beneath her coif. Her eyes were closed in the endeavour to concentrate her thoughts, and time flew by swiftly while she tried to pray. She did not perceive that after a while the Lord of Stoutenburg woke and that he remained for a long time in mute contemplation of the exquisite picture which she presented, clad all in white, with the string of pearls still round her throat, her hands clasped, her lips parted breathing a silent prayer.

“How beautiful you are, Gilda!” he murmured quite involuntarily at last.

Then – as suddenly startled and terrified, she tried to jump up quickly, away from him – he put out his hand and succeeded in capturing her wrists and thus holding her pinioned and still kneeling close beside him.

“An angel of goodness,” he said, “and exquisitely beautiful.”

At his words, at the renewed pressure of his hand upon her wrists she made a violent effort to recover her composure.

“I pray you, my lord, let go my hands. They were clasped in prayer for your safety. You slept so soundly that I feared I could not wake you in order to tell you that you must leave this house instantly.”

“I will go, Gilda,” he said quietly, making no attempt to move or to relax his hold on her, “for this brief

interval of sleep, your kind ministrations and the food you gave me have already put new strength into me. And the sight of you kneeling and praying near me has put life into me again."

"Then, since you are better," she rejoined coldly, "I pray you rise, my lord, and make ready to go. The garden is quite lonely, the Oude Gracht at its furthest boundary is more lonely still. The hour is late and the city is asleep…you would be quite safe now."

"Do not send me away yet, Gilda, just when a breath of happiness – the first I have tasted for four years – has been wafted from heaven upon me. May I not stay here awhile and live for a brief moment in a dream which is born of unforgettable memories?"

"It is not safe for you to stay here, my lord," she said coldly.

"My lord? You used to call me Willem once."

"That was long ago, my lord, ere you gave Walburg de Marnix the sole right to call you by tender names."

"She has deserted me, Gilda. Fled from me like a coward, leaving me to bear my misery alone."

"She shared your misery for four years, my lord; it was your disgrace that she could not endure."

"You knew then that she had left me?"

"My father had heard of it."

"Then you know that I am a free man again?"

"The law no doubt will soon make you so."

"The law has already freed me through Walburg's own act of desertion. You know our laws as well as I do, Gilda. If you have any doubt ask your own father, whose business it is to administer them. Walburg de Marnix has set me free, free to begin a new life, free to follow at last the dictates of my heart."

"For the moment, my lord," she retorted coldly, "you are not free even to live your old life."

“I would not live it again, Gilda, now that I have seen you again. The past seems even now to be falling away from me. Dreams and memories are stronger than reality. And you, Gilda…have you forgotten?”

“I have forgotten nothing, my lord.”

“Our love – your vows – that day in June when you yielded your lips to my kiss?”

“Nor that dull autumnal day, my lord, when I heard from the lips of strangers that in order to further your own ambitious schemes you had cast me aside like a useless shoe, and had married another woman who was richer and of nobler birth than I.”

She had at last succeeded in freeing herself from his grasp, and had risen to her feet, and retreated further and further away from him until she stood up now against the opposite wall, her slender white form lost in the darkness, her whispered words only striking clearly on his ear.

He too rose from the bed and drew up his tall lean figure with a gesture still expressive of that ruthless ambition with which Gilda had taunted him.

“My marriage then was pure expediency, Gilda,” he said with a shrug of the shoulders. “My father, whose differences with the Stadtholder were reaching their acutest stage, had need of the influence of Marnix de St Aldegonde; my marriage with Walburg de Marnix was done in my father’s interests and went sorely against my heart…it is meet and natural that she herself should have severed a tie which was one only in name. A year hence from now, the law grants me freedom to contract a new marriage tie; my love for you, Gilda, is unchanged.”

“And mine for you, my lord, is dead.”

He gave a short, low laugh in which there rang a strange note of triumph.

“Dormant, mayhap, Gilda,” he said as he groped his way across the darkened room and tried to approach her. “Your ears have been poisoned by your father’s hatred of me. Let me but hold you once more in my arms, let me but speak to you once again of the past, and you will forget all save your real love for me.”

“All this is senseless talk, my lord,” she said coldly, “your life at this moment hangs upon the finest thread that destiny can weave. Human bloodhounds you said were upon your track; they have not wholly lost the scent, remember.”

Her self-possession acted like a fall of icy-cold water upon the ardour of his temper. Once more that hunted look came into his face; he cast furtive, frightened glances around him, peering into the gloom, as if enemies might be lurking in every dark recess.

“They shall not have me,” he muttered through set teeth, “not tonight…not now that life again holds out to me a cup brimful of happiness. I will go, Gilda, just as you command…they shall not find me… I have something to live for now…you and revenge… My father, my brother, my friends, I shall avenge them all – that treacherous Stadtholder shall not escape from my hatred the second time. Then will I have power, wealth, a great name to offer you. Gilda, you will remember me?”

“I will remember you, my lord, as one who has passed out of my life. My playmate of long ago, the man whom I once loved, is dead to me. He who would stain his hands with blood is hateful in my sight. Go, go, my lord, I entreat you, ere you make my task of helping you to life and safety harder than I can bear.”

She ran to the window and threw it open, then pointed out into the night.

“There lies your way, my lord. God only knows if I do right in not denouncing you even now to my father.”

“You will not denounce me, Gilda, he said, drawing quite near to her, now that he could see her graceful figure silhouetted against the starlit sky, “you will not denounce me, for, unknown mayhap even to yourself, your love for me is far from dead. As for me, I feel that I have never loved as I love you now. Your presence has intoxicated me, your nearness fills my brain as with a subtle, aromatic wine. All thought of my own danger fades before my longing to hold you just for one instant close to my heart, to press for one brief yet eternal second my lips against yours. Gilda, I love you!”

His arms quickly closed round her, she felt his hot breath against her cheek. For one moment did she close her eyes, for she felt sick and faint, but the staunch valour of that same Dutch blood which had striven and fought and endured and conquered throughout the ages past gave her just that courage, just that presence of mind which she needed.

“An you do not release me instantly,” she said firmly, “I will rouse the house with one call.”

Then, as his arms instinctively dropped away from her, and he drew back with a muttered curse: “Go!” she said, once more pointing toward the peaceful and distant horizon now wrapped in the veil of night. “Go! while I still have the strength to keep silent, save for a prayer for your safety.”

Her attitude was so firm, her figure so rigid, that he knew that inevitably he must obey. His life was in danger, not hers; and she had of a truth but little to fear from him. He bowed his head in submission and humility, then he bent the knee and raising her gown to his lips he imprinted a kiss upon the hem. The next moment he had swung himself lightly upon the window-sill, from whence he dropped softly upon the ground below.

For a few minutes longer she remained standing beside the open window, listening to his footfall on the flagged path. She could just distinguish his moving form from the surrounding gloom, as he crept along the shadows towards the boundary of the garden. Then as for one brief minute she saw his figure outlined above the garden wall, she closed the window very slowly and turned away from it.

The next morning she was lying in a swoon across the floor of her room.

1: New Year’s Eve

If the snow had come down again or the weather been colder or wetter, or other than it was…

If one of the three men had been more thirsty, or the other more insistent…

If it had been any other day of the year, or any other hour of any other day…

If the three philosophers had taken their walk abroad in any other portion of the city of Haarlem…

If…

Nay! but there’s no end to the Ifs which I might adduce in order to prove to you beyond a doubt that but for an extraordinary conglomeration of minor circumstances, the events which I am about to relate neither would not nor could ever have taken place.

For indeed you must admit that had the snow come down again or the weather been colder, or wetter, the three philosophers would mayhap all have felt that priceless thirst and desire for comfort which the interior of a well-administered tavern doth so marvellously assuage. And had it been any other day of the year or any other hour of that same last day of the year 1623, those three philosophers would never have thought of wiling away the penultimate hour of the dying year by hanging round the Grootemarkt in order to see the respectable mynheer burghers and the mevrouws their wives, filing into the cathedral in a sober and orderly procession, with large silver-clapsed Bibles under their arms, and that air of satisfied unctuousness upon their faces which is best suited to the solemn occasion of watch-night service, and the desire to put oneself right

with Heaven before commencing a New Year of commercial and industrial activity.

And had those three philosophers not felt any desire to watch this same orderly procession they would probably have taken their walk abroad in another portion of the city from whence…

But now I am anticipating.

Events crowded in so thickly and so fast, during the last hour of the departing year and the first of the newly born one, that it were best mayhap to proceed with their relation in the order in which they occurred.

For, look you, the links of the mighty chain had their origin on the steps of the Stadhuis, for it is at the foot of these that three men were standing precisely at the moment when the bell of the cathedral struck the penultimate hour of the last day of the year 1623.

Mynheer van der Meer, Burgomaster of Haarlem, was coming down those same steps in the company of Mynheer van Zlicken, Mynheer Beresteyn and other worthy gentlemen, all members of the town council and all noted for their fine collections of rare tulips, the finest in the whole of the province of Holland.

There was great rivalry between Mynheer van der Meer, Mynheer van Zlicken and Mynheer Beresteyn on the subject of their tulip bulbs, on which they expended thousands of florins every year. Some people held that the Burgomaster had exhibited finer specimens of “Semper Augustus” than any horticulturist in the land, while others thought that the “Schwarzen Kato” shown by Mynheer Beresteyn had been absolutely without a rival.

And as this group of noble councillors descended the steps of the Stadhuis, preparatory to joining their wives at home and thence escorting them to the watch-night service at the cathedral, their talk was of tulips and of

tulip bulbs, of the specimens which they possessed and the prices which they had paid for them.

“Fourteen thousand florins did I pay for my ‘Schwarzen Kato’,” said Mynheer Beresteyn complacently, “and now I would not sell it for twenty thousand.”

“There’s a man up at Overveen who has a new hybrid now, a sport of ‘Schone Juffrouw’ – the bulb has matured to perfection, he is putting it up for auction next week,” said Mynheer van Zlicken.

“It will fetch in the open market sixteen thousand at least,” commented Mynheer van der Meer sententiously.

“I would give that for it and more,” rejoined the other, “if it is as perfect as the man declares it to be.”

“Too late,” now interposed Mynheer Beresteyn with a curt laugh, “I purchased the bulb from the man at Overveen this afternoon. He did not exaggerate its merits. I never saw a finer bulb.”

“You bought it?” exclaimed the Burgomaster in tones that were anything but friendly toward his fellow councillor.

“This very afternoon,” replied the other. “I have it in the inner pocket of my doublet at this moment.”

And he pressed his hand to his side, making sure that the precious bulb still reposed next to his heart.

“I gave the lout fifteen thousand florins for it,” he added airily, “he was glad not to take the risks of an auction, and I equally glad to steal a march on my friends.”

The three men who were leaning up against the wall of the Stadhuis, and who had overheard this conversation, declared subsequently that they learned then and there an entirely new and absolutely comprehensive string of oaths, the sound of which they had never even known of before, from the two solemn