THE FIRST

SIR PERCY

Baroness Orczy

FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE 'SCARLET PIMPERNEL'

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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.

1: A Night on the Veluwe

A moonless night upon the sandy waste – the sky a canopy of stars, twinkling with super-radiance through the frosty atmosphere; the gently undulating ground like a billowy sea of silence and desolation, with scarce a stain upon the smooth surface of the snow; the mantle of night enveloping every landmark upon the horizon beyond the hills in folds of deep, dark indigo, levelling every chance hillock and clump of rough shrub or grass, obliterating road and wayside ditch, which in the broad light of day would have marred the perfect evenness of the wintry pall.

It was a bitterly cold night of mid-March in that cruel winter of 1624, which lent so efficient a hand to the ghouls of war and of disease in taking toll of human lives.

Not a sound broke the hushed majesty of this forgotten corner of God’s earth, save perhaps at intervals the distant, melancholy call of the curlew, or from time to time the sigh of a straying breeze, which came lingering and plaintive from across the Zuyder Zee. Then for awhile countless particles of snow, fanned by unseen breaths, would arise from their rest, whirl and dance a mad fandango in the air, gyrate and skip in a glistening whirlpool lit by mysterious rays of steel-blue light, and then sink back again, like tired butterflies, to sleep once more upon the illimitable bosom of the wild. After which Silence and Lifelessness would resume their ghostlike sway.

To right and left, and north and south, not half a dozen leagues away, humanity teemed and fought, toiled and suffered, unfurled the banner of Liberty, laid

down life and wealth in the cause of Freedom, conquered and was down-trodden and conquered again; men died that their children might live, women wept and lovers sighed. But here, beneath that canopy dotted with myriads of glittering worlds, intransmutable and sempiternal, the cries of battle and quarrels of men, the wail of widows and the laughter of children appeared futile and remote.

2

But to an eye trained to the dreary monotony of winter upon the Veluwe, there were a few faint indications of the tracks, which here and there intersect the arid waste and link up the hamlets and cities which lie along its boundaries. There were lines – mere shadows upon the even sheet of snow – and tiny white hillocks that suggested a bordering of rough scrub along the edges of the roads.

That same trained eye could then proceed to trace those shadowy lines along their erratic way ’twixt Amersfoort and the Neder Rhyn, or else from Barneveld as far as Apeldoorn, or yet again ’twixt Utrecht and Ede, and thence as far as the Ijssel, from the further shores of which the armies of the Archduchess, under the command of Count Henri de Berg, were even then threatening Gelderland.

It was upon this last, scarcely visible track that a horse and rider came slowly ambling along in the small hours of the morning, on this bitterly cold night in March. The rider had much ado to keep a tight hold on the reins with one hand, whilst striving to keep his mantle closely fastened round his shoulders with the other.

The horse, only half-trusting his master, suspicious and with nerves a-quiver, ready to shy and swerve at every shadow that loomed out of the darkness, or at every unexpected sound that disturbed the silence of the night, would more than once have thrown his rider but for the latter's firm hand upon the curb.

The rider's keen eyes were searching the gloom around him. From time to time a forcible ejaculation, indicative of impatience or anxiety, escaped his lips, numb with cold, and with unconsidered vehemence he would dig his spurs into his horse's flanks, with the result that a fierce and prolonged struggle 'twixt man and beast would ensue, and, until the quivering animal was brought back to comparative quietude again, much time was spent in curses and recriminations.

Anon the rider pulled up sharply at the top of the rising ground, looked round and about him, muttered a few more emphatic '*Dondersteens*' and '*verdommts*.'

Then he veered his mount right round and started to go back down hill again – still at foot-pace – spied a sidetrack on his right, turned to follow it for a while, came to a halt again, and flung his head back in a futile endeavour to study the stars, about which he knew nothing.

Then he shook his head dolefully; the time had gone by for cursing – praying would have been more useful, had he known how to set about it – for in truth he had lost his way upon this arid waste, and the only prospect before him was that of spending the night in the saddle, vainly trying by persistent movement to keep the frost out of his limbs.

For the nonce, he had no idea in which direction lay Amersfoort, which happened to be his objective. Apparently he had taken the wrong road when first he came out of Ede, and might now be tending towards

the Rhyn, or have left both Barneveld and even Assel considerably behind.

The unfortunate wayfarer did not of a surety know which to rail most bitterly against: his want of accurate knowledge as to the disposal of the stars upon a moonless firmament, so that he could not have told you, gaze on them how he might, which way lay the Zuyder Zee, the Ijssel, or the Rhyn; or that last mug of steaming ale of which he had partaken ere he finally turned his back on the hospitable doors of the ‘Crow’s Nest’ at Ede.

It was that very mug of delicious spiced liquor – and even in this hour of acute misery, the poor man contrived to smack his half-frozen lips in retrospective enjoyment – which had somehow obscured his vision when first he found himself outside the city gates, confronted by the *verfloekte* waste, through which even a cat could not have picked its way on a night like this.

And now, here he was, hopelessly stranded, without drink or shelter, upon the most desolate portion of the Veluwe. In no direction could the lights of any habitation be seen.

‘*Dondersteen!*’ he muttered to himself finally, in despair. ‘But I must get somewhere in time, if I keep following my nose long enough!’

3

In truth, no more lonely spot could be imagined in a civilized land than that wherein the stranded traveller now found himself. Even by day the horizon seems limitless, with neither tower nor city nor homestead in sight. By night the silence is so absolute that imagination will conjure up strange and impossible sounds, such as that of the earth whistling through

space, or of ceaseless rolls of drums and trampings of myriads of feet thousands of leagues away.

Strangely enough, however, once upon a time, in the far long ago and the early days of windmills, a hermit-miller – he must have been a hermit in very truth – did build one here upon the highest point of the Veluwe, close to the junction of the road which runs eastward from Amersfoort and Barneveld, with the one which tends southward from Assel, and distant from each a quarter of a league or so. Why that windmill was erected just there, far from the home of any peasant or farmer who might desire to have his corn ground, or who that hermit-miller was who dwelt in it before flocks of wild geese alone made it their trysting-place, it were impossible to say.

No trace of it remains these days, nor were there any traces of it left a year after the events which this veracious chronicle will presently unfold, for reasons which will soon appear obvious to anyone who reads. But there it stood in this year of grace 1624, on that cold night in March, when a solitary horseman lost his way upon the Veluwe, with serious consequences, not only to himself, but to no less a person than Maurice, Prince of Nassau, Stadtholder of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, and mayhap to the entire future history of that sorely tried country.

On a winter’s night such as this, the mill looked peculiarly weird and ghost-like, looming out of the darkness against the background of a star-studded firmament, and rising, sombre and dense, from out the carpet of glabrous snow, majestic in its isolation, towering above the immensity of the waste, its domed roof decked in virgin white like the mother-bosom of the wild. Built of weather-worn timber throughout, it had a fenced-in platform supported by heavy rafters all around it, like a girdle, at a height of twenty feet and

more from the ground; and the gaunt, skeleton wings were stretched out to the skies, scarred, broken, and motionless, as if in piteous appeal for protection against the disfiguring ravages of time.

There were two small windows close under the roof on the south side of the building, and a large, narrow one midway up the same side. The disposal of these windows, taken in conjunction with the door down below, was so quaint that, viewed from a certain angle, they looked for all the world like the eyes, nose, and pursed-up mouth of a gargantuan, grinning face.

4

If a stranger travelling through Gelderland these days had thought fit to inquire from a native whether that particular *molen* upon the Veluwe was doing work or was inhabited, he would of a certainty have been told that the only possible inhabitants of the *molen* were gnomes and sprites, and that if any corn was ground there it could only be in order to bake bread for the devil’s dinner.

The mill was disused and uninhabited, had been for many years – a quarter of a century or more probably – so any and every native of Gelderland and Utrecht would have emphatically averred. Nevertheless, on this same memorable night in March, 1624, there were evident signs of life – human life – about that solitary and archaic *molen* on the Veluwe. Tiny slits of light showed clearly from certain angles through the chinks of the wooden structure; there were vague sounds of life and movement in and about the place; the weather-worn boards creaked and the timber groaned under more tangible pressure than that of the winds. Nay, what’s more, two horses were tethered down below,

under the shelter afforded by the overhanging platform. These horses were saddled; they had nosebags attached to their bridles, and blankets thrown across their withers; all of which signs denoted clearly, methinks, that for once the mill was inhabited by something more material than ghosts.

More ponderous, too, than ghoulish footsteps were the sounds of slow pacing up and down the floor of the millhouse, and of two voices, now raised to loud argument, now sunk to a mere cautious whisper.

Two men were, in effect, inside the millhouse at this hour. One of them – tall, lean, dark, in well-worn, almost ragged, black doublet and cloak, his feet and legs encased in huge boots of untanned leather which reached midway up his long thighs, his black bonnet pushed back from his tall, narrow forehead and grizzled hair – was sitting upon the steps of the steep, ladder-like stairs which led to the floor above; the other – shorter, substantially, even richly clad, and wearing a plumed hat and fur-lined cloak, was the one who paced up and down the dust-covered floor. He was younger than his friend, had fair, curly hair, and a silken, fair moustache, which hid the somewhat weak lines of his mouth.

An old, battered lanthorn, hanging to a nail in the wall, threw a weird, flickering light upon the scene, vaguely illumined the gaunt figure of the man upon the steps, his large hooked nose and ill-shaven chin, and long thin hands that looked like the talons of some bird of prey.

‘You cannot stay on here for ever, my good Stoutenburg,’ the younger of the two men said, with some impatience. ‘Sooner or later you will be discovered, and–’

He paused, and the other gave a grim laugh.

‘And there is a price of two thousand guilders upon my head, you mean, my dear Heemskerk?’ he said drily.

‘Well, I did mean that,’ rejoined Heemskerk, with a shrug of the shoulders. ‘The people round about here are very poor. They might hold your father’s memory in veneration, but there is not one who would not sell you to the Stadtholder if he found you out.’

Again Stoutenburg laughed. He seemed addicted to the habit of this mirthless, almost impish laugh.

‘I was not under the impression, believe me, my friend,’ he said, ‘that Christian charity or loyalty to my father’s memory would actuate a worthy Dutch peasant into respecting my sanctuary. But I am not satisfied with what I have learned. I must know more. I have promised De Berg,’ he concluded firmly.

‘And De Berg counts on you,’ Heemskerk rejoined. ‘But,’ he added, with a shrug of the shoulders, ‘you know what he is. One of those men who, so long as they gain their ambitious ends, count every life cheap but their own.’

‘Well,’ answered Stoutenburg, ‘’tis not I, in truth, who would place a high price on mine.’

‘Easy, easy, my good man,’ quoth the other, with a smile. ‘Hath it, perchance, not occurred to you that your obstinacy in leading this owl-like life here is putting a severe strain on the devotion of your friends?’

‘I make no appeal to the devotion of my friends,’ answered Stoutenburg curtly. ‘They had best leave me alone.’

‘We cannot leave you to suffer cold and hunger, mayhap to perish of want in this God-forsaken eyrie.’

‘I’m not starving,’ was Stoutenburg’s ungracious answer to the young man’s kindly solicitude; ‘and have plenty of inner fire to keep me warm.’

He paused, and a dark scowl contracted his gaunt features, gave him an expression that in the dim and

flickering light appeared almost diabolical.

‘I know,’ said Heemskerk, with a comprehending nod. ‘Still those thoughts of revenge?’

‘Always!’ replied the other, with sombre calm.

‘Twice you have failed.’

‘The third time I shall succeed,’ Stoutenburg affirmed with fierce emphasis. ‘Maurice of Nassau sent my father to the scaffold – my father, to whom he owed everything: money, power, success. The day that Olden Barneveldt died at the hands of that accursed ingrate I, his son, swore that the Stadtholder should perish by mine. As you say, I have twice failed in my attempt.

‘My brother Groeneveld has gone the way of my father. I am an outlaw with a price upon my head, and my poor mother has three of us to weep for now, instead of one. But I have not forgotten mine oath, nor yet my revenge. I’ll be even with Maurice of Nassau yet. All this fighting is but foolery. He is firmly established as Stadtholder of the United Provinces – the sort of man who sees others die for him. He may lose a town here, gain a city there, but he is the sovereign lord of an independent State, and his sacred person is better guarded than was that of his worthier father.

‘But it is his life that I want,’ Stoutenburg went on fiercely, and his thin, claw-like hand clutched an imaginary dagger and struck out through the air as if against the breast of the hated foe. ‘For this I’ll scheme and strive. Nay, I’ll never rest until I have him at my mercy as Gérard in his day held William the Silent at his.’

‘Bah!’ exclaimed Heemskerk hotly. ‘You would not emulate that abominable assassin!’

‘Why not call me a justiciary?’ Stoutenburg retorted drily. ‘The Archduchess would load me with gifts. Spain would proclaim me a hero. Assassin or executioner – it only depends on the political point of view. But doubt

me not for a single instant, Heemskerk. Maurice of Nassau will die by my hand.’

‘That is why you intend to remain here?’

‘Yes. Until I have found out his every future plan.’

‘But how can you do it? You dare not show yourself abroad.’

‘That is my business,’ replied Stoutenburg quietly, ‘and my secret.’

‘I respect your secret,’ answered Heemskerk, with a shrug of the shoulders. ‘It was only my anxiety for your personal safety and for your comfort that brought me hither tonight.’

‘And De Berg’s desire to learn what I have spied,’ Stoutenburg retorted, with a sneer.

‘De Berg is ready to cross the Ijssel, and Isembourg to start from Kleve. De Berg proposes to attack Arnheim. He wishes to know what forces are inside the city and how they are disposed, and if the Stadtholder hath an army wherewith to come to their relief or to offer us battle, with any chance of success.’

‘You can tell De Berg to send you or another back to me here when the crescent moon is forty-eight hours older. I shall have all the information then that he wants.’

‘That will be good news for him and for Isembourg. There has been too much time wasted as it is.’

‘Time has not been wasted. The frosts have in the meanwhile made the Veluwe a perfect track for men and cannon.’

‘For Nassau’s men and Nassau’s cannon, as well as for our own,’ Heemskerk rejoined drily.

‘A week hence, if all’s well, Maurice of Nassau will be too sick to lead his armies across the Veluwe or elsewhere,’ said Stoutenburg quietly, and looked up with such a strange, fanatical glitter in his deep-sunk

eyes that the younger man gave an involuntary gasp of horror.

‘You mean–’ he ejaculated under his breath; and instinctively drawing back some paces away from his friend, stared at him with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

‘I mean,’ Stoutenburg went on slowly and deliberately, ‘that De Berg had best wait patiently a little while longer. Maurice of Nassau will be a dying man ere long.’

His harsh voice, sunk to a strange, impressive whisper, died away in a long-drawn-out sigh, half of impatience, wholly of satisfaction. Heemskerk remained for a moment or two absolutely motionless, still staring at the man before him as if the latter were some kind of malevolent and fiend-like wraith, conjured up by devilish magic to scare the souls of men. Nor did Stoutenburg add anything to his last cold-blooded pronouncement. He seemed to be deriving a grim satisfaction in watching the play of horror and of fear upon Heemskerk’s usually placid features.

Thus for the space of a few moments the old moles appeared to sink back to its habitual ghost-haunted silence, whilst the hovering spirits of Revenge and of Hate called up by the sorcery of a man’s evil passions held undisputed sway.

‘You mean–’ reiterated Heemskerk after awhile, vaguely, stupidly, babbling like a child.

‘I mean,’ Stoutenburg gave impatient answer, ‘that you should know me well enough by now, my good Heemskerk, to realize that I am no swearer of futile oaths. Last year, when I was over in Madrid, I cultivated the friendship of one Francis Borgia. You have heard of him, no doubt; they call him the Prince of Poets over there. He is a direct descendant of the illustrious Cesare, and I soon discovered that most of the secrets

possessed by his far-famed ancestor were known to my friend the poet.’

‘Poisons!’ Heemskerk murmured, under his breath.

‘Poisons!’ the other assented drily. ‘And other things.’ With finger and thumb of his right hand, he extracted a couple of tiny packets from a secret pocket of his doublet, toyed with them for awhile, undid the packets and gazed meditatively on their contents. Then he called to his friend. ‘They’ll not hurt you,’ he said sardonically. ‘Look at this powder, now. Is it not innocent in appearance? Yet it is of incalculable value to the man who doth not happen to possess a straight eye or a steady hand with firearms. For add but a pinch of it to the charge in your pistol, then aim at your enemy’s head, and if you miss killing him, or if he hold you at his mercy, you very soon have him at yours. The fumes from the detonation will cause instant and total blindness.’

Despite his horror of the whole thing, Heemskerk had instinctively drawn nearer to his friend. Now, at these words, he stepped back again quickly, as if he had trodden upon an adder. Stoutenburg, with his wonted cynicism, only shrugged his shoulders.

‘Have I not said that it would not hurt you?’ he said, with a sneer. ‘In itself it is harmless enough, and only attains its useful properties when fired in connection with gunpowder. But when used as I have explained it to you, it is deadly and unerring. I saw it at work once or twice in Spain. The Prince of Poets prides himself on its invention. He gave me some of the precious powder, and I was glad of it. It may prove useful one day.’

He carefully closed the first packet and slipped it back into the secret receptacle of his doublet; then he fell to contemplating the contents of the second packet – half a dozen tiny pillules, which he kept rolling about in the palm of his hand

‘These,’ he mused, ‘are of more proved value for my purpose. Have not De Berg,’ he added, with a sardonic grin, as he looked once more on his friend, ‘and the Archduchess, too, heard it noised abroad that Maurice of Nassau hath of late suffered of a mysterious complaint which already threatens to cut him off in his prime, and which up to now hath baffled those learned leeches who were brought over specially from England to look after the health of the exalted patient? Have not you and your friends, my good Heemskerk, heard the rumour, too?’

The young man nodded in reply. His parched tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth; he could not utter a word. Stoutenburg laughed.

‘Ah!’ he said, with a nod of understanding. ‘I see that the tale did reach your ears. You understand, therefore, that I must remain here for awhile longer.’

And, with absolute calm and a perfectly steady hand, he folded up the pillules in the paper screw and put them back in his pocket.

‘I could not leave my work unfinished,’ he said simply.

‘But how–’ Heemskerk contrived to stammer at last; and his voice to his own ears sounded hoarse and toneless, like a voice out of the grave.

‘How do I contrive to convey these pillules into the Stadtholder’s stomach?’ retorted Stoutenburg, with a coarse chuckle. ‘Well, my friend, that is still my secret. But De Berg and the others must trust me a while longer – trust me and then thank me when the time comes. The Stadtholder once out of the way, the resistance of the United Provinces must of itself collapse like a house of cards. There need be no more bloodshed after that – no more sanguinary conflicts. Indeed, I shall be acclaimed as a public benefactor – when I succeed.’

‘Then – then you are determined to – to remain here?’ Heemskerk murmured, feeling all the while that anything he said was futile and irrelevant.

But how can a man speak when he is confronted with a hideous spectre that mocks him, even whilst it terrifies?

‘I shall remain here for the present,’ Stoutenburg replied, with perfect coolness.

‘I – I’d best go, then,’ the other suggested vaguely.

‘You had best wait until the daylight. ’Tis easy to lose one’s way on the Veluwe.’

The young man waited for a moment, irresolute. Clearly he was longing to get away, to put behind him this ghoul-infested *molen*, with its presiding genii of hatred and of crime. Nay, men like Heemskerk, cultivated and gently nurtured, understood the former easily enough. Men and women knew how to hate fiercely these days, and there were few sensations more thoroughly satisfying than that of holding an enemy at the sword’s point.

But poison! The slow, insidious weapon that works like a reptile, stealthily and in the dark! Bah! Heemskerk felt a dizziness overcome him; sheer physical nausea threatened to rob him of his faculties.

But there was undoubted danger in venturing out on the arid wild, in the darkness and with nought but instinct and a few half-obliterated footmarks to guide one along the track. The young man went to the door and pulled it open. A gust of ice-laden air blew into the great, empty place, and almost knocked the old lanthorn off its peg. Heemskerk stepped out into the night. He felt literally frightened, and, like a nervous child, had the sensation of someone or something standing close behind him and on the point of putting a spectral hand upon his shoulder.

But Stoutenburg had remained sitting on the steps, apparently quite unmoved. No doubt he was accustomed to look his abominable project straight in the face. He even shrugged his shoulders in derision when he caught sight of Heemskerk's white face and horror-filled eyes.

'You cannot start while this blind man's holiday lasts,' he said lightly. 'Can I induce you to partake of some of the refreshment you were good enough to bring for me?'

But Heemskerk gave him no answer. He was trying to make up his mind what to do; and Stoutenburg, with another careless laugh, rose from his seat and strode across the great barn-like space. There, in a remote corner, where sacks of uncrushed grain were wont to be stacked, stood a basket containing a few simple provisions; a hunk of stale bread, a piece of cheese and two or three bottles of wine. Stoutenburg stooped and picked one of these up. He was whistling a careless tune. Then suddenly he paused, his long back still bent, his arm with the hand that held the bottle resting across his knee, his face, alert and hawk-like, turned in an instant towards the door.

'What was that?' he queried hurriedly.

Heemskerk, just as swiftly, had already stepped back into the barn and closed the door again noiselessly.

'Useless!' commented Stoutenburg curtly. 'The horses are outside.'

'Where is Jan?' he added after an imperceptible pause, during which Heemskerk felt as if his very heart-beats had become audible.

'On the watch, outside,' replied the young man.

Even whilst he spoke the door was cautiously opened from the outside, and a grizzled head wrapped in a fur bonnet was thrust in through the orifice.

'What is it, Jan?' the two men queried simultaneously.

‘A man and horse,’ Jan replied in a rapid whisper. ‘Coming from over Amersfoort way. He must have caught sight of the *molen*, for he has left the track and is heading straight for us.’

‘Some wretched traveller lost on this God-forsaken waste,’ Stoutenburg said, with a careless shrug of the shoulders. ‘I have seen them come this way before.’

‘But not at this hour of the night?’ murmured Heemskerk.

‘Mostly at night. It is easier to follow the track by day.’

‘What shall we do?’

‘Nothing. Let the man come. We’ll soon see if he is dangerous. Are we not three to one?’

The taunt struck home. Heemskerk looked abashed. Jan remained standing in the doorway, waiting for further orders. Stoutenburg went on quietly collecting the scanty provisions. He found a couple of mugs, and with a perfectly steady hand filled first one and then the other with the wine.

‘Drink this, Heemskerk,’ he said lightly; and held out the two mugs at arm’s length. ‘It will calm your nerves. You too, Jan.’

Jan took the mug and drank with avidity, but Heemskerk appeared to hesitate.

‘Afraid of the poison?’ Stoutenburg queried with a sneer. Then, as the other, half-ashamed, took the mug and drank at a draught, he added coolly: ‘You need not be afraid. I could not afford to waste such precious stuff on you.’

Then he turned to Jan.

‘Remain outside,’ he commanded; ‘well wrapped in your blanket, and when the traveller hails you pretend to be wakened from pleasant dreams. Then leave the rest to chance.’

Jan at once obeyed. He went out of the *molen*, closing the door carefully behind him.

5

Five minutes later, the hapless traveller had put his horse to a trot. He had perceived the *molen* looming at the top of the rising ground, dense and dark against the sky, and looking upon it as a veritable God-sent haven of refuge for wearied tramps, was making good haste to reach it, fearing lest he himself dropped from sheer exhaustion out of his saddle ere he came to his happy goal. That terrible contingency, however, did not occur, and presently he was able to draw rein and to drop gently if somewhat painfully to the ground without further mishap. Then he looked about him. The mill in truth appeared to be uninhabited, which was a vast pity, seeing that a glass of spiced ale would – but no matter, ’twas best not to dwell on such blissful thoughts! A roof over one’s head for the night was the most urgent need.

He led his horse by the bridle, and tethered him to a heavy, supporting rafter under the overhanging platform; was on the point of ministering to the poor, half-frozen beast, when his ear caught a sound which caused him instantly to pause first and then to start on a tour around the *molen*. He had not far to go. The very next moment he came upon a couple of horses tethered like his own, and upon Jan, who was snoring lustily, curled up in a horseblanket in the angle of the porch.

To hail the sleeper with lusty shouts at first, and then with a vigorous kick, was but the work of a few seconds; after which Jan’s snores were merged in a series of

comprehensive curses against the disturber of his happy dreams.

'*Dondersteen!*' he murmured, still apparently half asleep. 'And who is this *verfloekte plepshurk* who ventures to arouse a weary traveller from his sleep?'

'Another weary traveller, *verfloekte plepshurk* yourself,' the other cried aloud. Nor were it possible to render with any degree of accuracy the language which he subsequently used when Jan persistently refused to move.

'Then, *dondersteen*,' retorted Jan thickly, 'do as I do – wrap yourself up in a blanket and go to sleep.'

'Not until I have discovered how it comes that one wearied traveller happens to be abroad with two equally wearied and saddled horses. An I am not mistaken, *plepshurk*, thou art but a varlet left on guard outside, whilst thy master feasts and sleeps within.'

Whereupon, without further parley, he strode across Jan's outstretched body and, with a vigorous kick of his heavy boot, thrust open the door which gave on the interior of the mill.

Here he paused, just beneath the lintel, took off his hat, and stood at respectful attention; for he had realized at once that he was in the presence of his betters – of two gentlemen, in fact, one of whom had a mug of wine in his hand and the other a bottle. These were the two points which, as it were, jumped most directly to the eye of the weary, frozen, and thirsty traveller: two gentlemen who haply were now satiated, and would spare a drop even to a humble varlet if he stood before them in his full, pitiable plight.

'Who are you, man? And what do you want?' one of these gentlemen queried peremptorily. It was the one who had a bottle of wine – a whole bottle – in his hand; but he looked peculiarly stern and forbidding, with his

close-cropped, grizzled head and hard, bird-like features.

‘Only a poor tramp, my lord,’ replied the unfortunate wayfarer, in high-pitched, flute-like tones, ‘who hath lost his way, and has been wandering on this *verdommte* plain since midnight.’

‘What do you want?’ reiterated Stoutenburg sternly. ‘Only shelter for the rest of the night, my lord, and – and – a little drink – a very little drink – for I am mightily weary, and my throat is as dry as tinder.’

‘What is your name?’

At this very simple question the man’s round, florid face with the tiny, upturned nose, slightly tinged with pink, and the small, round eyes, bright and shiny like new crowns, took on an expression of comical puzzlement.

He scratched his head, pursed up his lips, emitted a prolonged and dubious whistle.

‘I haven’t a name, so please your lordship,’ he said, after a while. ‘That is, not a name such as other people have. I have a name, in truth, a name by which I am known to my friends; a name–’

‘Thy name, *plepshurk*,’ commanded Stoutenburg roughly, ’ere I throw thee out again into the night.’

‘So please your lordship,’ replied the man, ‘I am called Pythagoras – a name which I believe belongs by right to a philosopher of ancient times, but to which I will always answer, so please your High and Mightiness.’

But this time his High and Mightiness did not break in upon the worthy philosopher’s volubility. Indeed, at the sound of that highly ludicrous name – ludicrous, that is, when applied to its present bearer – he had deliberately put mug and bottle down, and then become strangely self-absorbed, even whilst his friend had given an involuntary start.

‘H’m! Pythagoras!’ his lordship resumed, after a while. ‘Have I ever seen thine ugly face before?’

‘Not to my knowledge, my lord,’ replied the other, marvelling when it would please these noble gentlemen to give him something wherewith to moisten his gullet.

‘Ah! Methought I had once met another who bore an equally strange name. Was it Demosthenes, or Euripides, or–’

‘Diogenes, no doubt, my lord,’ replied the thirsty philosopher glibly. ‘The most gallant gentleman in the whole wide world, one who honours me with his friendship, was pleased at one time to answer to that name.’

Now, when Pythagoras made this announcement he felt quite sure that lavish hospitality would promptly follow. These gentlemen had no doubt heard of Diogenes, his comrade in arms, the faithful and gallant friend for whom he – Pythagoras– would go through fire and water and the driest of deserts. They would immediately accord a welcome to one who had declared himself honoured by the friendship of so noble a cavalier. Great was the unfortunate man’s disappointment, therefore, when his glib speech was received in absolute silence; and he himself was still left standing under the lintel of the door, with an icy cold draught playing upon him from behind.

It was only after a considerable time that my lord deigned to resume his questionings again.

‘Where dost come from, fellow?’ he asked.

From Ede, so please your lordship,’ Pythagoras replied dolefully, ‘where I partook–’

‘And whither art going?’ Stoutenburg broke in curtly. ‘I was going to Amersfoort, my lord, when I lost my way.’

‘To Amersfoort?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Mynheer Beresteyn hath a house at Amersfoort,’ Stoutenburg said, as if to himself.

‘It was to Mynheer Beresteyn’s house that I was bound, my lord, when I unfortunately lost my way.’

‘Ah!’ commented my lord drily. ‘Thou wast on thy way to the house of Mynheer Beresteyn in Amersfoort?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘With a message?’

‘No, my lord. Not with a message; I was just going there for the wedding.’

‘The wedding?’ ejaculated Stoutenburg, and it seemed to Pythagoras as if my lord’s haggard face took on suddenly an almost cadaverous hue. ‘Whose wedding, fellow?’ he added more calmly.

‘That of my friend Diogenes, so please your lordship, with the Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn, he–’

‘Take care, man, take care!’ came with an involuntary call of alarm from Heemskerk; for Stoutenburg, uttering a hoarse cry like that of a wounded beast, had raised his arm and now strode on the unfortunate philosopher with clenched fist and a look in his hollow eyes which boded no good to the harbinger of those simple tidings.

At sound of his friend’s voice, Stoutenburg dropped his arm. He turned on his heel, ashamed no doubt that this stranger-varlet should see his face distorted as it was with passion.

This paroxysm of uncontrolled fury did not, however, last longer than a moment or two; the next instant the lord of Stoutenburg, outwardly calm and cynical as before, had resumed his haughty questionings, looked the awestruck philosopher up and down; and he, somewhat scared by the danger which he only appeared to have escaped through the timely intervention of the other gentleman, was marvelling indeed if he had better not take to his heels at once and run, and trust his safety and his life to the inhospitable

wild, rather than in the company of this irascible noble lord.

I think, in fact, that he would have fled the very next moment, but that my lord with one word kept him rooted to the spot.

‘So,’ resumed Stoutenburg coolly after awhile, ‘thou, fellow, art a bidden guest at the marriage feast, which it seems is to be solemnized ’twixt the Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn and another *plepshurk* as low as thyself. Truly doth democracy tread hard on the heels of such tyranny as the United Provinces have witnessed of late. Dost owe allegiance, sirrah, to the Stadtholder?’

‘Where Diogenes leads, my lord,’ replied Pythagoras, with a degree of earnestness which sat whimsically upon his rotund person, ‘there do Socrates and I follow unquestioningly.’

‘Which means that ye are three rascals, ready to sell your skins to the highest bidder. Were ye not in the pay of the lord of Stoutenburg during the last conspiracy against the Stadtholder’s life?’

‘We may have been your honour,’ the man replied naively; ‘although, to my knowledge, I have never set eyes on the lord of Stoutenburg.’

‘’Twere lucky for thee, knave, if thou didst,’ rejoined Stoutenburg with a harsh laugh, ‘for there’s a price of two thousand guilders upon his head, and I doubt not but thy scurrilous friend Diogenes would add another two thousand to that guerdon.’

Then, as Pythagoras, almost dropping with fatigue, was swaying upon his short, fat legs, he jerked his thumb in the direction where the tantalizing bottles and mugs were faintly discernible in the gloom. My lord continued curtly: ‘There! Drink thy fill! Amersfoort is not far. My man will put thee on thy way when thou hast quenched thy thirst!’

Quench his thirst! Where was that cellar which could have worked this magic trick? In the corner to which my lord was pointing so casually there was but the one bottle, which my lord had put down a while ago, and that, after all, was only half full.

Still, half a bottle of wine was better than no wine at all, and my lord, having granted his gracious leave, took no more notice of the philosopher and his unquenchable thirst, turned to his friend, and together the two gentlemen retired to a distant corner of the place and there whispered eagerly with one another.

Pythagoras tiptoed up to the spot where unexpected bliss awaited him. There was another bottle of wine there beside the half-empty one – a bottle that was full up to the neck, and the shape of which proclaimed that it came from Spain. Good, strong, heady Spanish wine!

And my lord had said ‘Drink thy fill!’ Pythagoras did not hesitate, save for one brief second, while he marvelled whether he had accidentally wandered into Elysian fields or whether he was only dreaming. Then he poured out for himself a mugful of wine.

Twenty minutes later, the last drop of the second bottle of strong, heady Spanish wine had trickled down the worthy Pythagoras’ throat. He was in a state of perfect bliss, babbling words of supreme contentment, and seeing pleasing visions of gorgeous feasts in the murky angles of the old millhouse.

‘’Tis time the *plepshurk* got to horse,’ Stoutenburg said at last.

He strode across to where Pythagoras, leaning against the raftered wall, his round head on one side, his sugarloaf hat set at the back of his head, was gazing dreamily into his empty mug.

‘To horse, fellow!’ he commanded curtly. ‘’Tis but a league to Amersfoort, and thy friend will be awaiting thee.’

The old instinct of deference and good behaviour before a noble lord lent some semblance of steadiness to Pythagoras' legs. He struggled to his feet, vainly endeavoured to keep an upright and dignified position – an attempt which, however, proved utterly futile.

Whereupon my lord called peremptorily to Jan, who appeared so suddenly in the doorway that, to Pythagoras' blurred vision, it seemed as if he had been put there by some kind of witchery. He approached his master, and there ensued a brief, whispered colloquy between those two – a colloquy in which Heemskerk took no part. After which, the lord of Stoutenburg said aloud: 'Set this worthy fellow on his horse, my good Jan, and put him on the track which leads to Amersfoort. He has had a rest and a good warm drink. He is not like to lose his way again.'

Vaguely Pythagoras felt that he wished to protest. He did not want to be set on his horse, nor yet to go to Amersfoort just yet. The wedding was not until the morrow – no, the day after the morrow – and for the nonce he wanted to sleep. Yes, sleep! Curled up in a blanket in any corner big enough and warm enough to shelter a dog.

Sleep! That was what he wanted; for he was so confoundedly sleepy, and this *verfloekte* darkness interfered with his eyes so that he could not see very clearly in front of him. All this he explained with grave deliberation to Jan, who had him tightly by the elbow and was leading him with absolutely irresistible firmness out through the door into the white, inhospitable open.

'I don't want to get to horse,' the philosopher babbled thickly. 'I want to curl up in a blanket and I want to go to sleep.'

But, despite his protestations, he found himself presently in the saddle. How he got up there, he