

Emmuska Orczy

*The Laughing
Cavalier*

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338088116

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AN APOLOGY

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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 rancour of enemies. Nay, more! there must have existed at one time or another a man who possessed that 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 then 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 Blakeneyes 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 possessors 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, sweeping 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 city—I had a dream. I saw him 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 tap-room 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 Hal for his portrait in 1624 was the direct ancestor of Sir Percy Blakeney, known to history as the Scarlet Pimpernel.

EMMUSKA ORCZY, *Haarlem*, 1913.

THE PROLOGUE HAARLEM—MARCH 29th, 1623

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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 Berensteyn, 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 accomplices 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 Nassau, Stadtholder of Holland, Gelderland, Utrecht, and

Overijssel, 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 send 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 the 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 Stoutenburg 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 devotion 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 to-night. 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 elbowson the window-sill and rested her chin in her hands. The moon was not yet up and yet it was not dark; a mysterious light stil 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 sea-gulls astray ffrom their usual haunts.

Gilda looked out and listened—unable to understand this vague sense of oppression and 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 frim 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 for 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!"

The Prologue Part 2

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 windowsill. 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 a 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 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 to-night."

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 passionate will-power and half of anxious, agonizing 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 if it 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 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 recognized 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 haze; 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.

Chapter I—New Year's Eve

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If the snow had come down again or the weather been colder or wetter, or other than what 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 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 marvelously assuage. And had it been any other day of the year or any other hour of that same day of they 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-clasped 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 had 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 a 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 Zilcken, 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 Zilcken 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

'Schwarzer Kato' shown by Mynheer Beresteyn had been absolutely without a rival.

And as this group of noble councilors 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 these.

"Fourteen thousand florins did I pay for my 'Schwarzer Kato'," said Mynheer Beresteyn complacently, "and now I would not sell it for twenty thousand."

"There is 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 Zilcken.

"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 towards his fellow councilor.

"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 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 and sober town councilors who found themselves baulked of a coveted prize. But this I do not altogether believe; for these three eavesdroppers had already forgotten more about swearing than all the burghers of Haarlem put together had ever known.

In the meantime the town councilors had reached the foot of the steps: here they parted company and there was a marked coldness in the manner of some of them toward Mynheer Beresteyn, who still pressed his hand against his doublet, in the inner pocket of which reposed a bit of dormant vegetation for which he had that same afternoon paid no less a sum than fifteen thousand florins.

"There goes a lucky devil," said a mocking voice in tones wherein ripples of laughter struggled for ever for mastery. It came from one of the three men who had listened to the conversation between the town councilors on the subject of tulips and of tulip bulbs.

"To think," he continued, "that I have never seen as much as fifteen thousand florins all at once. By St. Bavon himself do I swear that for the mere handling of so much money I would be capable of the most heroic deeds...such as killing

my worst enemy...or...or...knocking that obese and self-complacent councilor in the stomach."

"Say but the word, good Diogenes," said a gruff voice in response, "the lucky devil ye speak of need not remain long in possession of that bulb. He hath name Beresteyn...I think I know whereabouts he lives...the hour is late...the fog fairly dense in the narrow streets of the city...say but the word..."

"There is an honest man I wot of in Amsterdam," broke in a third voice, one which was curiously high-pitched and dulcet in its tones, "an honest dealer of Judaic faith, who would gladly give a couple thousands for the bulb and ask no impertinent questions."

"Say but the word, Diogenes..." reiterated the gruff voice solemnly.

"And the bulb is ours," concluded the third speaker in his quaint high-pitched voice.

"And three philosophers will begin the New Year with more money in their wallets than they would know what to do with," said he of the laughter-filled voice. "'Tis a sound scheme, O Pythagoras, and one that under certain circumstances would certainly commend itself to me. But just now..."

"Well?" queried the two voices—the gruff and the high-pitched—simultaneously, like a bassoon and a flute in harmony, "just now what?"

"Just now, worthy Socrates and wise Pythagoras, I have three whole florins in my wallet, and my most pressing creditor died a month ago—shot by a Spanish arquebuse at the storming of Breda—he fell like a hero—God rest his soul!

But as to me I can afford a little while—at any rate for to-night!—to act like a gentleman rather than a common thief."

"Bah!" came in muffled and gruff tones of disgust, "you might lend me those three florins—'twere the act of a gentleman..."

"An act moreover which would eventually free me from further scruples, eh?" laughed the other gaily.

"The place is dull," interposed the flute-like tones, "'twill be duller still if unworthy scruples do cause us to act like gentlemen."

"Why! 'tis the very novelty of the game that will save our lives from dullness," said Diogenes lightly, "just let us pretend to be gentlemen for this one night. I assure you that good philosophers though ye both are, you will find zest in the entertainment."

It is doubtful whether this form of argument would have appealed to the two philosophers in question. The point was never settled, for at that precise moment Chance took it on herself to forge the second link in that remarkable chain of events which I have made it my duty to relate.

From across the Grootemarkt, there where stands the cathedral backed by a network of narrow streets, there came a series of ear-piercing shrieks, accompanied by threatening cries and occasional outbursts of rough, mocking laughter.

"A row," said Socrates laconically.

"A fight," suggested Pythagoras.

Diogenes said nothing. He was already half way across the Markt. The others followed him as closely as they could. His figure, which was unusually tall and broad, loomed

weirdly out of the darkness and out of the fog ahead of them, and his voice with that perpetual undertone of merriment rippling through it, called to them from time to time.

Now he stopped, waiting for his companions. The ear-piercing shrieks, the screams and mocking laughter came more distinctly to their ears, and from several by-streets that gave on the Market Place, people came hurrying along, attracted by the noise.

"Let us go round behind the Fleishmarkt," said Diogenes, as soon as his two friends had come within earshot of him, "and reach the rear of the cathedral that way. Unless I am greatly mistaken the seat of yonder quarrel is by a small postern gate which I spied awhile ago at the corner of Dam Straat and where methinks I saw a number of men and women furtively gaining admittance: they looked uncommonly like Papists, and the postern gate not unlike a Romanist chapel door."

"Then there undoubtedly will be a row," said Socrates dryly.

"And we are no longer likely to find the place dull," concluded Pythagoras in a flute-like voice.

And the three men, pulling their plumed hats well over their eyes, turned without hesitation in the wake of their leader. They had by tacit understanding unsheathed their swords and were carrying them under the folds of their mantles. They walked in single file, for the street was very narrow, the gabled roofs almost meeting overhead at their apex, their firm footsteps made no sound on the thick carpet of snow. The street was quite deserted and the

confused tumult in the Dam Straat only came now as a faint and distant echo.

Thus walking with rapid strides the three men soon found themselves once more close to the cathedral: it loomed out of the fog on their left and the cries and the laughter on ahead sounded more clear and shrill.

The words "for the love of Christ" could be easily distinguished; uttered pleadingly at intervals by a woman's voice they sounded ominous, more especially as they were invariably followed by cries of "Spaniards! Spies! Papists!" and a renewal of loud and ribald laughter.

The leader of the little party had paused once more, his long legs evidently carried him away faster than he intended: now he turned to his friends and pointed with his hand and sword on ahead.

"Now, wise Pythagoras," he said, "wilt thou not have enjoyment and to spare this night? Thou didst shower curses on this fog-ridden country, and call it insufferably dull. Lo! what a pleasing picture doth present itself to our gaze."

Whether the picture was pleasing or not depended entirely from the point of view of spectator or participant. Certes it was animated and moving and picturesque; and as three pairs of eyes beneath three broad-brimmed hats took in its several details, three muffled figures uttered three simultaneous gurgles of anticipated pleasure.

In the fog that hung thickly in the narrow street it was at first difficult to distinguish exactly what was going on. Certain it is that a fairly dense crowd, which swelled visibly every moment as idlers joined in from many sides, had

congregated at the corner of Dam Straat, there where a couple of resin torches, fixed in iron brackets against a tall stuccoed wall, shed a flickering and elusive light on the forms and faces of a group of men in the forefront of the throng.

The faces thus exposed to view appeared flushed and heated—either with wine or ebullient temper—whilst the upraised arms, the clenched fists and brandished staves showed a rampant desire to do mischief.

There was a low postern gate in the wall just below the resin torches. The gate was open and in the darkness beyond vague moving forms could be seen huddled together in what looked like a narrow unlighted passage. It was from this huddled mass of humanity that the wails and calls for divine protection proceeded, whilst the laughter and the threats came from the crowd.

From beneath three broad-brimmed hats there once more came three distinct chuckles of delight, and three muffled figures hugged naked swords more tightly under their cloaks.

Chapter II—THE FRACAS BY THE POSTERN GATE

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Thus am I proved right in saying that but for the conglomeration of minor circumstances within the past half hour, the great events which subsequently linked the fate of a penniless foreign adventurer with that of a highly honorable and highly esteemed family of Haarlem never would or could have occurred.

For had the three philosophers adhered to their usual custom of retiring to the warmth and comfort of the *Lame Cow*, situate in the *Kleine Hout Straat*, as soon as the streets no longer presented an agreeable lolling place, they would never have known the tumult that went on at this hour under the very shadow of the cathedral.

But seeing it all going on before them, what could they do but join in the fun?

The details of the picture which had the low postern gate for its central interest were gradually becoming more defined. Now the figure of a woman showed clearly under the flickering light of the resin torches, a woman with rough, dark hair that hung loosely round her face, and bare arms and legs, of which the flesh, blue with cold, gleamed weirdly against the dark oak paneling of the gate.

She was stooping forward, with arms outstretched and feet that vainly tried to keep a foothold of the ground which snow and frost had rendered slippery. The hands themselves were not visible, for one of them was lost in the shadows

behind her and the other disappeared in the grip of six or eight rough hands.

Through the mist and in the darkness it was impossible to see whether the woman was young or old, handsome or ill-favored, but her attitude was unmistakable. The men in the forefront of the crowd were trying to drag her away from the shelter of the gate to which she clung with desperate obstinacy.

Her repeated cries of "For the love of Christ!" only provoked loud and bibulous laughter. Obviously she was losing her hold on the ground, and was gradually being dragged out into the open.

"For the love of Christ, let me go, kind sirs!"

"Come out quietly then," retorted one of the men in front, "let's have a look at you."

"We only want to see to color of your eyes," said another with mock gallantry.

"Are you Spanish spies or are you not? that's all that we want to know," added a third. "How many black-eyed wenches are there among ye? Papists we know you are."

"Papists! Spanish spies!" roared the crowd in unison.

"Shall we bait the Papists too, O Diogenes?" came in dulcet tones from out the shadow of the stuccoed wall.

"Bah! women and old men, and only twenty of these," said his companion with a laugh and a shrug of his broad shoulders, "whilst there are at least an hundred of the others."

"More amusing certainly," growled Socrates under the brim of his hat.

"For the love of Christ," wailed the woman piteously, as her bare feet buried in the snow finally slid away from the protecting threshold, and she appeared in the full light of the resin torches, with black unkempt hair, ragged shift and kirtle and a wild terror-stricken look in her black eyes.

"Black eyes! I guessed as much!" shouted one of the men excitedly. "Spaniards I tell you, friends! Spanish spies all of them! Out you come, wench! out you come!"

"Out you come!" yelled the crowd. "Papists! Spanish spies!"

The woman gave a scream of wild terror as half a dozen stones hurled from the rear of the crowd over the heads of the ringleaders came crashing against the wall and the gate all around her.

One of these stones was caught in mid air.

"I thank thee, friend," cried a loud, mocking voice that rang clearly above the din, "my nose was itching and thou didst strive to tickle it most effectually. Tell me does thine itch too? Here's a good cloth wherewith to wipe it."

And the stone was hurled back into the thick of the crowd by a sure and vigorous hand even whilst a prolonged and merry laugh echoed above the groans and curses of the throng.

For an instant after that the shouts and curses were still, the crowd—as is usual in such cases—pausing to see whence this unexpected diversion had come. But all that could be seen for the moment was a dark compact mass of plumed hats and mantles standing against the wall, and a triple glint as of steel peeping from out the shadows.

"By St. Bavon, the patron saint of this goodly city, but here's a feast for philosophers," said that same laughter-loving voice, "four worthy burghers grappling with a maid. Let go her arm I say, or four pairs of hands will presently litter the corner of this street, and forty fingers be scattered amongst the refuse. Pythagoras, wilt take me at two guilders to three that I can cut off two of these ugly, red hands with one stroke of Bucephalus whilst Socrates and thou thyself wilt only account for one apiece?"

Whilst the merry voice went rippling on in pleasant mocking tones, the crowd had ample time to recover itself and to shake off its surprise. The four stalwarts on in front swore a very comprehensive if heterogeneous oath. One of them did certainly let go the wench's arm somewhat hastily, but seeing that his companions had recovered courage and the use of their tongue, he swore once again and more loudly this time.

"By that same St. Bavon," he shouted, "who is this smeerlap whose interference I for one deeply resent? Come out, girl, and show thyself at once, and we'll deal with thy protector later."

After which there were some lusty shouts of applause at this determined attitude, shouts that were interrupted by a dulcet high-pitched voice saying quietly:

"I take thee, friend Diogenes. Two guilders to three: do thou strike at the pair of hands nearest to thee and while I count to three..."

From the torches up above there came a sharp glint of light as it struck three steel blades, that swung out into the open.

"One—two—"

Four pairs of hands, which had been dragging on the woman's arm with such determined force, disappeared precipitately into the darkness, and thus suddenly released, the woman nearly fell backwards against the gate.

"Pity," said the dulcet voice gently, "that bet will never be decided now."

An angry murmur of protest rose from the crowd. The four men who had been the leaders of the gang were pushed forward from the rear amidst shouts of derision and brandishing of fists.

"Cowards! cowards! cowards! Jan Tiele, art not ashamed? Piet, go for them! There are only three! Cowards to let yourselves be bullied!"

The crowd pushed from behind. The street being narrow, it could only express its desire for a fight by shouts, it had no elbow-room for it, and could only urge those in the forefront to pick a quarrel with the interfering strangers.

"The blessing of God upon thee, stranger, and of the Holy Virgin..." came in still quivering accents from out the darkness of the passage.

"Let the Holy Virgin help thee to hold thy tongue," retorted he who had the name Diogenes, "and do thou let my friend Socrates close this confounded door."

"Jan Tiele!" shouted some one in the crowd, "dost see what they are doing? the gate is being closed..."

"And bolted," said a flute-like voice.

"Stand aside, strangers!" yelled the crowd.

"We are not in your way," came in calm response.