CHAPTER ONE

For all the fertility of its soil and the solid virtues of the worthy folk who dwell upon it, when it comes to the grandeur of its landscapes it must be admitted that the Province of Holland has not been particularly favoured by the hand of the Creator. Down the centuries the many talented painters born amidst the relentless billiard-table flatness of that marshy delta have had no small difficulty finding suitable hills and forests to form the background to their pastoral arcadias, often being obliged to crib these from pattern books or from Italian artists of the Cinquecento, so that the rocky crags and pinewoods of Umbria loom incongrously above the velvety-green meadows around Gouda with their windmills, their water-filled ditches and their grazing cows. But there is likewise no denying that on a spring day when the sun is shining and the North Sea rainclouds have scudded by into Germany, the Dutch countryside can be as delightful as any in the world; at least to an onlooker who is not over-pedantic about his pastoral arcadias and has no objection to the local nymphs and shepherds being fair-haired and sturdily built, and wearing wooden clogs on their feet instead of sandals. The willows along the canal banks; the tall bulrushes of the meers bending to the salty breeze; the alder groves; the stately elms and poplars bursting into leaf along the country roads are all a joy to behold, while the clamour of birdsong in the thickets and the kikkering of frogs in the wayside ditches fill the wayfarer's ears with the sounds of life reawakening after the icy grey silence of winter.

Likewise, if our imagined traveller is not some goatskin-clad hermit perversely drawn to deserts and the lairs of wild beasts, his heart will surely be gladdened by the evidence on every side of peaceful industry

and contentment: by the neatly kept villages and the prosperous towns strewn so densely across that lush countryside that there is scarcely a church tower in all Holland from which half a dozen other church towers may not also be seen: by the spruce cottages amid their gardens; by the well-pruned orchards of apple and cherry trees in blossom; by the fat cattle browsing belly-deep in the succulent grass of the meadows after a winter of hay and turnips in their dark stalls; by the milkmaids in their starched aprons singing as they make their way to the dewy morning fields with a pail in one hand and a milking stool in the other; by the clack of weavers' looms in the cottages along the brick-paved and fastidiously swept village streets; by all the busy life of that rich and hard-working little country. For when Horace wrote "*Sterilisque diu palus, aptaque remis, Vicina urbes alit, et grave sentit aratrum*"* he might well have foreseen the Holland of fifteen hundred years later, wrested from Neptune's grasp by centuries of toil with spades and wheelbarrows, and now barricaded against its former landlord's return by the unceasing drudgery of poldering, canal-digging and dyke-raising. Because not a single Hollander that lives can ever forget that if his people rested so much as a month from their delving, the sea would infallibly come back and drown the lot of them.

In the year of Our Lord sixteen hundred and twenty-six the other nations of Christendom might be ravaged by famine, war and pestilence or haunted by the threat of them. Times were hard: the winters colder than before, the summers shorter, failed harvests more frequent. Plague was abroad; and likewise the warring armies that spread plague, so that scarcely a month passed without the news sheets bringing tidings from Germany of yet another hapless town pillaged and its inhabitants put to the sword in the course of the confused and brutal conflict that historians would later call the Thirty Years' War. Folk starved in France, folk rebelled in Austria, folk had their throats cut in Saxony and folk died of plague in the Duchy of Mantua. But all this misery somehow seemed to pass the Dutch Republic by, the sea and the great rivers that constantly threatened to drown it also having the welcome property of protecting it from its enemies. The war with

* "A marsh long barren and fit only for the oar, now feeds the towns about it and feels the heavy plough"

Spain, now into its second half-century, had long since become a distant affair which affected people's daily lives hardly at all: obscure sieges of obscure little towns in Flanders, and reports of sea battles months before somewhere off the coast of Brazil. The massacres of the Duke of Alva's day were now no more than grandfathers' tales told by the fireside; "de Spanjool" shrunk to a bogeyman for frightening unruly children at bedtime. Trade flourished, manufactures prospered, wages were high, bread was cheap, and all in all that seemingly most makeshift and precarious of nations – a monarchical republic barely half a century old and built on a partially drained swamp – had every reason to feel secure and well pleased with itself.

As the Sun ascended in the heavens in that month of May, passing from sober earthy Taurus into skittish airy Gemini, the vernal rising of the sap was apparent not just in the countryside but within the walls of the town of Leiden; and in particular in the stone-flagged hallway of the house *De Krokodijl* on the Tweede Boterstraat where the worshipful surgeon Meester Lukas van Backhuysen conducted his practice. On the oaken benches along each whitewashed wall there sat a row of country folk and their wives come into town for market day; and also for their annual blood-letting, which the almanacs and health manuals recommended should be performed in late spring after the body had recovered from the privations of winter and the liver was once more decocting natural blood in abundance. The most suitable time (they counselled) was the week after the first full moon in the month of May, as the Sun's ascent generated the bloody and moist humours that might putrefy and generate plague in the summer heat, but likewise when the Moon was on the wane, operations of bodily reduction such as blood-letting, hair-cutting and toenail-paring being inadvisable during the waxing phase.

Business was brisk this year. The plague had smitten England most grievously the previous summer following an unusually warm and wet spring. By God's merciful providence and prompt use of quarantine the Dutch provinces had escaped the worst of that particular outbreak. But people were taking no chances this year, which already looked set to be a warm one. So in the treatment room looking out onto the brick-

paved courtyard one rustic after another took off his frieze doublet and hung it on the peg, rolled up the left sleeve of his homespun shirt and grasped the wooden staff in his calloused, sinewy hand as the surgeon's apprentice Frans van Raveyck placed a tourniquet above the elbow and twisted it to bring up the veins. The pewter phlebotomy bowl with the cut-out in the rim was placed beneath the arm, and Meester van Backhuysen applied his spring-loaded fleam to one or other of the distended veins: the cephalic if the patient seemed of a heady temperament; the basilic if of a more liverish complexion; or if there were no such indications, then *quae maius turget, maius urget*,* which being Latin was surely a sound rule to follow. The surgeon pressed the trigger, and with a click the little semicircular blade flicked down to open the blood vessel a quarter-inch or so. The dark venous blood bubbled down into the bowl as the surgeon inspected it with an appraising eye – and usually the patient too, since although townsfolk were apt to be squeamish nowadays, country boors were still too accustomed to pig-slaughtering and colt-gelding to be much disconcerted by the sight of their own blood trickling into a basin.

A suitable amount of blood having been let – ten or twelve ounces depending on the patient's build and temperament – Frans wrapped a bandage about the arm and tied the ends with a neat reefknot. Standing by the window, the surgeon meanwhile swilled the blood around in the bowl to judge whether it was abnormally thin or thick; and finding that it was neither, emptied it into an earthenware crock. The farmer rolled down his sleeve and put his doublet back on, thanked the surgeon, dropped his eight stuivers into the copper pot by the door, and promised to see him again at the same time next year if God willed it – which there was every prospect that God would, given the evident vigour of his constitution. As the farmer departed Frans kept an ear cocked to make sure that the correct number of coins had clinked into the pot; for though these were prosperous times in Holland there were still rascals abroad who would not hesitate to cheat an honest tradesmen even under the all-seeing gaze of the deity. As the patient

* "That which swells the most, invites it the most"

closed the heavy-panelled oaken door behind him the surgeon wiped his fleam with a rag while his apprentice, a tall, handsome, well-made youth of fifteen (though he looked several years older) with a mane of coppery-red hair, decanted the crock of blood into a ten-gallon cask standing in the side room.

"The cask's almost full, meester," he called, "Shall I fetch another one from the shed?" The surgeon winced, still irritated by the boy's Flemish accent. Though his new apprentice was plainly an intelligent and dextrous young fellow and a good replacement for the last one, drowned in a skating accident the previous winter, he was altogether too sure of himself for one so young, and was moreover an object of some interest to women patients, many of whom would insist on speaking French with him rather than Dutch once they learned that he came from near Dunkirk in the Spanish Netherlands. Van Backhuysen found it most unseemly that his servant and not himself should speak with his customers, especially when he could understand barely the half of what was being said and suspected that his apprentice was offering advice on diet, bathing and other matters outside a surgeon's competence. In fact young Van Raveyck was altogether far too much a man of the world for his taste. For one so young his experience was certainly broad, he having lived some years in England where his late stepfather was a surgeon, and also served aboard a Dutch warship in the previous year's disastrous expedition to Cadiz: both mighty tactless things to brag about in front of a master who had never been further abroad than Haarlem in his whole life. He was likewise in the habit of drawing up astrological charts, which though not *in itself* grounds for complaint – astrology was, after all, part of Leiden University's medical curriculum – might still cause unfavourable comment if it ever reached the ears of the consistory, because although the Reformed Church had not specifically forbidden star-gazing, the practice still came dangerously close to the divination for which King Saul had been condemned (and in any case, if God's foreknowledge was absolute, as Calvin declared, foretelling the future from the movements of the planets was a complete waste of time because there was nothing that could be done about it).

There had also been that business at Easter-morning service in the Pieterskerk, which the apprentice had attended with his master as the law dictated. Though the youth normally yawned and fidgetted his way through the predikant's sermon, or eyed young women on the other side of the nave, that morning he had been scribbling in a pocket-book, and though it had at first looked as if he might be making notes on the sermon (which would have been most commendable) it turned out on closer inspection to be fantastical drawings of some ludicrous contraption like a floating water-mill. People sitting on either side had noticed and murmured disapprovingly to one another, so that once they were outside the church Meester van Backhuysen had snatched the book from his apprentice's hands and after inspecting it had flung it into a canal. If a worthy burgher like himself was to maintain his moral credit and stand next year for election as vice-president of the Surgeons'Guild, then certain proprieties must be observed within his household; and his apprentice spending sermon time doodling in a notebook was most definitely beyond the bounds of propriety. If things continued like this then chastisement might be necessary; though quite how Meester van Backhuysen would go about that was something that he had not yet decided, given that the young Fleming was a good head taller than himself and already of an athletic build.

It was now late afternoon, but there were still patients to be bled before the clock of the Pieterskerk chimed six and the practice closed its doors. With any luck it should be the last of them for the year, because tomorrow was the Feast of the Ascension and a public holiday.

"How many patients do we still have?" Van Backhuysen called into the back room.

"Twelve when I last looked, meester," Frans replied.

"Nine or ten more pints, then. So close that cask when we're done and have Pietje roll it out for Floriszoon de Stront* to collect tonight. In this warm weather it'll clot if we leave it until tomorrow. He pays me

* "Floriszoon the Shit". In the 1620s in Holland many people still used the old patronymics "– szoon" and "– sdochter", though now increasingly qualified by their trade or their place of origin: "Jan Pieterszoon de Brouwer" or "Jan Pieterszoon van Breukelen". Hereditary surnames only became general towards the end of the century.

ten stuivers the cask. There's a market gardener out beyond the Hampoort who swears by it for manuring his onions and says that blood from the slaughterhouse is nothing like it for quality – though never breathe a word of that to our patients, because the grasping bumpkins would demand a refund if they knew that their blood was fattening the purse of an onion grower. Our Hollander countryfolk would grudge you the dirt from beneath their nails, and cheerfully put their eyes out with a cobbler's awl if they heard that the poorhouse guardians would give them a blind man's rattle for free."

The surgeon's grim face had brightened somewhat at the prospect of six o'clock and the end of a weary day. He was a stocky, bull-necked little man with a balding head and bluish goggle eyes made even more protuberant by thick-lensed spectacles with rims of tortoise shell which, along with the old-fashioned starched ruff round his neck, gave him a distinctly forbidding appearance. Though acknowledged to be one of the most adroit surgeons in all the Province of Holland, Lukas van Backhuysen was frankly not someone most people would wish to spend their time with even when he was not wearing his kid-leather apron and holding a scalpel or a cauterising iron. University-educated physicians might sometimes be welcome visitors nowadays; especially if their patients were female and the doctor was handsome, well-spoken and not over-addicted to purging and blood-letting. But surgeons were… well, surgeons. Few entered *De Krokodijl* with anything other than trepidation, and were not mighty relieved when *De Krokodijl's* jaws opened to release them back onto the street. For though the surgeon's trade was nowadays a respectable one and had long since quit the barber's shop where it began, its practitioners were still viewed with scarcely less fear and dismay than the public hangman. Once he was practising on his own account (his master suspected) the young Flemish coxcomb would soon discover that the looks and deportment of a dancing master sorted ill with the trade of bone sawyer and tooth puller.

"We'll have bled all the ignorant clodhoppers by six o' clock", Van Backhuysen called to his assistant, "so tell Hentje to bolt the front door, then call in the next bumpkin. While the blood-letting season is

certainly good for business, it does somewhat resemble sheep-shearing: the only difference being that the shearer is not obliged to exchange baas with the sheep concerning the weather and the prospects for this year's damson crop."

The remaining dozen customers having duly been relieved of their blood and sent on their way with their humoral balance restored for the rest of the year, the day's business concluded with Frans counting out the takings and entering the amount in the ledger while the servant Dolle Pietje, a tractable idiot-boy of about eighteen, swept out the treatment room, then hammered the bung into the cask of blood and rolled it across the courtyard to the canal's edge for the night-soil man to collect along with the day's privy buckets. As the church clock rang half-past six Frans and his master sat down to their supper after the customary long-winded grace. It was not a sumptuous meal. The surgeon was austere in his tastes and disinclined to spend money on food: so as on most weekday evenings it was boiled kapucijners* scattered with a few cubes of fat bacon and half a fried onion, washed down with a single one-quart tankard of watery table beer. They sat alone in the oak-panelled upper room lit by the sun now declining below the crow-stepped gables across the canal. Van Backhuysen's wife had died in 1618 as a result of that year's spectacular comet, catching a chill after venturing onto the house leads in her dressing gown to view it; and two years previously his only daughter had forsaken the parental home for that of a maltster in Alphen after wilfully refusing the various members of the Surgeons' Guild presented by her father, declaring that after twenty years amid cries of pain and the smell of cauterised flesh she would sooner marry Floriszoon de Stront than spend the rest of her life with another surgeon. Since then, knowing that when he died or retired the practice would have to be sold for lack of an heir to continue it, the surgeon had devoted himself to the one true and enduring passion of his life, which was the pursuit of money.

Though no one would have suspected it from his meagre table and his sparse household furnishings, Lukas van Backhuysen was a wealthy man. His late wife had brought him a substantial dowry; the surgical

* Chick-peas.

practice had prospered; and he had lately inherited a stud farm near Linschoten from a bachelor uncle – and promptly sold it since he had no interest in breeding anything except coins. As they ate the surgeon instructed his pupil in the arcane ways of finance: for though acknowledged to be a most capable practitioner, Van Backhuysen had in recent years become disenchanted with surgery and wondered whether, instead of following his father's trade, he might not have done better to enter a counting-house in Amsterdam where his skill at money-juggling might have advanced him further in life and given him more satisfaction than three decades of setting broken bones and pulling rotten teeth. The surgeon's repertoire was (after all) limited by the amount of pain that a patient could endure, by loss of blood and by the risk of the wound turning septic, all of which precluded venturing any deeper into the human body than was necessary to remove a bladder stone or relieve pressure on the brain by trepanning a skull. Here in Leiden the market for lithotomy had long since been cornered by a few specialists; so the range of ailments that presented themselves for his treatment each day was in truth a very limited one, and demonstrated only that whatever blind gods dole out our ration of earthly misfortunes must have a very limited and clownish sense of humour, like boors at a wedding feast placing a turd in the bridegroom's hat and laughing their stupid faces purple when he puts it on his head to leave. Year in, year out it was the same few oafish jests: shinbones to be set after scaffolding had collapsed; the cracked ribs of tilers fallen from roofs; millers' fingers crushed in their mill cogs; boils on the neck and buttocks from grimy clothes worn too long; stab wounds after brawls outside taverns; depressed fractures of the skull (triangular from roof tiles, oval from cudgel blows) and of course the drawing of decayed teeth and letting of blood each spring. The truth of the matter was that Meester van Backhuysen had long since reached the limits of his profession, and was now sick and tired of it: the screams, the blood, the patient squirming under the knife, the foul dressings, the stink of burnt flesh and the odour of pus and gangrene which seemed to cling to a man's clothes. Finance, however, offered room for imagination; for inventiveness, for daring, for spinning pirouettes on the ice. Compared

with plodding, predictable surgery its possibilities were without limit.

Frans spooned the unappetising greyish-brown mush into his mouth from his earthenware bowl, Hentje having over-boiled the kapucijners as usual. As he did so he asked himself inwardly why he was required to pay two hundred and fifty guilders a year board and lodging in order to fare so wretchedly, far worse than he had done as a lowly surgeon's mate aboard a warship, in addition to which the Zeeland Admiralty had paid him and not he them. Meanwhile the surgeon, who was a quick eater, had already finished and was now holding forth upon his favourite topic in recent days, his dealings in copper: Venus's ruddy metal which he boasted of having discovered how to transmute into silver.

"Of course," he said, "the merest fool can see that copper is now the most profitable of the base metals to be trading in."

"And why should that be, meester?" Frans enquired with inward weariness, sensing that an intelligent – but not *too* intelligent – question was required from him at this point. Van Backhuysen answered with his accustomed air of one explaining that water is wet, that night is dark and that Wednesday occupies the space between Tuesday and Thursday otherwise there would be a gap in the week.

"Profitable, firstly, by reason of its scarcity. The Kopparberg mine at Falun in Sweden is the greatest in Europe and produces some four or five hundred tons of that metal *per annum*. But despite the many improvements in its smelting introduced lately by my associate Mijnheer de Geer, to whom the King of Sweden has lately granted the concession, the production there is likely to increase but little. A new mine is being sunk at a place called Nya Koppargruva, and I myself have invested money in it. But the work there is slow and difficult, and little is to be expected from it these next five years at least. So the supply of copper looks set to remain the same while the demand for it grows beyond all measure."

Frans yawned inwardly, a skill that he had cultivated of late. "And how is that, meester?"

Van Backhuysen smiled the self-satisfied little smile of one who, though but of the middling sort in the world's estimation, is still party

to information such as princes and their ministers might be glad to have. He leaned forward over the table, looking about him before he spoke and lowering his voice as though the Count-Duke Olivares might be perched upon the wainscoting and the Elector of Saxony hanging by his fingertips below the window ledge.

"The Emperor's war against the German Protestants proceeds apace, and likewise our own war with Spain, so the demand for cannon bronze would be brisk at the best of times. But my latest intelligence is that the King of Sweden now purposes war against his cousin the King of Poland; that likewise Christian of Denmark has sent his army to aid the German Protestants, while his nephew Charles of England prepares war against France to atone for his recent failure against Spain. But even without so many wars a-brewing, the demand for copper would still be strong: two or three shiploads each year for the Spanish mints to strike into coin; and probably as many again now that King Philip is rumoured to be taking silver coin out of circulation in order to pay his army in Flanders. The demand for copper cannot but increase mightily this year while the supply remains the same. So as a prudent man of business I have invested much of my fortune in purchasing it ahead. Do you know what that means, young man, to purchase ahead?"

Frans tried hard to appear interested: as a fledgling man of science, finance was an opaque and frankly rather boring subject for him. "I fear not, meester: the ways of money are still mysterious to me."

"Allow me to enlighten you, then. Let us suppose that I were to purchase twenty tons of Swedish plate copper at five stuivers the pound inclusive of lading and freight? How much would that come to?"

Having been taught the Pythagorean tables by his stepfather when he was a child, Frans calculated quickly:

"Five stuivers times two thousand four hundred makes twelve thousand stuivers the ton, which divided by twenty comes to six hundred guilders the ton. So the entire shipment would cost twelve thousand guilders." The surgeon nodded.

"Good, very commendable: a bookkeeper with an abacus could scarcely have done it quicker. So if the price of copper on the Amsterdam exchange were six hundred and twenty guilders the ton –

which it is as we speak – what profit would I then make?" Frans thought for a few moments, then replied "Four hundred guilders, meester."

"Excellent: I see you have the makings of a man of business. Yes: an adequate profit, but not a handsome one. How much would I gain, though, if I had purchased my copper at six hundred guilders the ton and sold it for eight hundred guilders?" Frans calculated again: two hundred guilders above the purchase price, and two hundred tons of the metal… "In that case, you would make four thousand guilders on the shipment."

The surgeon nodded. "A most generous profit, in other words. But do you not foresee a snag here?" He raised one eyebrow quizzically and cupped his chin in his hand, drumming his fingers on the table as though he did not really expect anyone less astute than himself to come up with the answer. If so, he was to be disappointed.

"I suppose," Frans replied, "that if the price at Amsterdam had risen by two hundred guilders the ton, then the price demanded by the suppliers in Sweden would also rise as soon as news reached them, and that you would therefore obtain your shipment of copper only at a price so high that it would wipe out most of your profit."

"Quite so, and very intelligent of you to have spotted it: that demand very soon drives up the price being asked by the brokers. But suppose that six months before, those brokers had signed a contract with me to supply the copper at the stated price on the stated day, even though the price being demanded had risen greatly in the meantime? What would happen then?"

"If your suppliers were unable to default on their obligation, then you would make a handsome profit while they would weep most bitterly for their folly."

"Indeed they would. And just such a contract I have; signed, sealed and locked in the drawer of my desk: for the supply of two hundred tons of Swedish plate copper at the price of six months ago, when it was but three hundred and twenty guilders the ton, but to be delivered a month hence, by which time the price will – I am entirely confident of it – have doubled or tripled."

"If I might ask, where will you store the copper? I have little idea of

what a ton of copper looks like, but I would imagine that two hundred tons of it would occupy a space considerably greater than the shed in our yard, and likewise require many labourers to load and unload it." The surgeon sighed indulgently, as became a man of experience instructing a youth who though plainly shrewd, was still not as shrewd as himself.

"Who said anything of storing or handling the copper? That might have been the case in my grandsire's day when a merchant slept above his warehouse and held his entire stock within hand's reach for fear of thieves. But the world has moved on since those days, and sitting on top of a houseful of barley-malt or reeking cowhides is not the way our modern commerce is conducted. Though I shall be the copper's lawful owner for a season, I shall never touch it nor even set eyes upon it. It will be paid for tomorrow, which is Ascension Day, by a bill of exchange, and will remain my property only until it reaches its destination and is paid for by the purchaser with another bill of exchange. The metal will never enter any Dutch harbour, but will instead make its way directly from the port of Gävle in Sweden to its final destination.

"And where might that destination be, meester?" The surgeon leaned across and lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper.

"Upon your life, tell no man of it. But the ship's destination is….Santander."

"But Santander is in Spain. And the Republic has been at war with Spain these past five years, since the truce expired…"

"Quite so. But the ship is a Rouen vessel and therefore neutral, and in any case I have taken the precaution of having the copper declared through a merchant in Copenhagen. So we need not fear it being seized as contraband."

"But copper is surely contraband whoever owns it," Frans objected, "being of such utility to the Spaniard in pursuing his war against us?" But Van Backhuysen merely sniffed, entirely untroubled by such niceties.

"A moralist might argue thus; and a prating jurist like Doctor Grotius might likewise assert that it was against the laws of Holland to

trade with the enemy. But no businessman worthy of the name would ever be troubled a single moment by such idle quibbling. Trade is trade; and if we sell the Spaniard copper to make cannon, the Spaniard also sells us lead to make the musket bullets we fire back at him. Anyway, the copper in question is destined not for King Philip's gun foundries but for his royal mint, where it will be mixed with a little silver to make an alloy which they call vellón – just enough to remove from it the obloquy of being pure copper – then struck into maravedí coins which ten million greasy superstitious Spanish beggars will press into the palms of their greedy fat friars for saying Masses to buy their relatives out of purgatory; and likewise steal them from one another to purchase their miserable daily ration of cat's-piss wine and coarse barley bread, which is all the diet those haughty rogues can afford to nourish their idleness." Frans looked down at the greyish mess of peas in his bowl and wondered whether he in industrious Holland was indeed faring much better than the ragged ladrones and picarillos of Castile. But the surgeon continued.

"Solicitous for morality as always, I have asked the Pieterskerk dominie for his opinion on the matter, and he says that the Reformed Church teaches that the intention behind an action is what matters and not the final consequences of it, which are known to God through his absolute foreknowledge but remain opaque to us mere worldlings. Otherwise the inn-keeper who provided the knife with which the villain Ravaillac stabbed King Henri of France" (Frans winced at these words, though the surgeon did not see it) "would have been as guilty as that foul regicide himself. No young fellow, the copper is destined purely to strike money – which all would surely agree is a common need of mankind in its fallen state – so I suffer no moral qualms in the matter: in fact consider that I will have struck a blow for Holland and the Protestant cause by making the Spaniard pay good silver for his shipment of copper; in addition to which I shall be a great deal richer, and will be able to invest the profits in even more remunerative trading: perhaps buying myself shares in the East India Company. All of which greatly exceeds the miserable farthing-and-halfpenny profits that I might have expected from a lifetime of pulling rotten teeth and letting

the blood of country clowns. He paused.

"Aha, that reminds me: according to your ephemerids the half-moon is tomorrow, is it not?"

"It is indeed, meester: the 22nd of May."

"Very good then: in view of that fact, and that tomorrow is Ascension Day, and that fifty years of Reformed religion have not yet reformed our poorer sort out of their addiction to papist feast-days, I think that we shall have but little business. I shall therefore grant you a day's holiday so that you may go to the fair in Haarlem. But be sure that you are back here by curfew, and that you return in a sober and orderly state. For if you come back all bloodied from brawling and bespewed with beer, I shall see to it that you have no more holidays this year. Do you understand?" Frans thanked his master and said that he understood perfectly: and with that supper concluded with the customary long-winded prayer of thanksgiving. Frans paid Dolle Pietje a stuiver to run round with a message informing his stepbrother Regulus that he had been granted his day's holiday and would meet him next morning to go to Haarlem. Then he made his way up the creaking stairs to his living quarters in the attic.

There was still daylight enough to read by at the table under the garret window, so Frans would not have to light the single tallow dip that his master allowed him each week. He hung his doublet from the nail behind the door and sat down to write his weekly letter – in French as usual, not Flemish – to the 13-year old sister of his schoolmate Ghisbertus Lambrechts in the little Flanders town of Houtenburg where he was born. He had made the acquaintance of Artemise Lambrechts while staying with the family the previous Christmas, and had soon discovered that he liked her very much, she being a notably vivacious and intelligent girl as well as rather pretty in a black-eyed, birdlike sort of way. So when he came to Leiden he had solemnly promised that he would write to her each week; and in fact usually did so two or three times a week, since he knew that whatever attracted his own lively curiosity would surely interest her as well. Frans had drawn up an astrological chart earlier that day, and felt moved to share it with her:

…for I see that Venus is today and tomorrow in opposition to the ascendant, which is Sagittarius, and is likewise in quadrature with Saturn and Mercury, which betokens mutability in all matters touching commerce and travel. And though I do not feel either of us to be much threatened by such a constellation (my own natal sign being Capricorn which is an earthy sign, and yours Libra which is an airy one), I think that it may bode ill for any venture upon water, and look with some foreboding upon my trip to Haarlem tomorrow by the beurtvaart. But the weather is set fine and I am a strong swimmer, so you must not concern yourself on my behalf. I have observed anyway that the perils we envisage are seldom the ones that come to pass: for does not Aquinas write that 'Sapiens homo dominatur astris'? By which that worthy doctor meant (I suppose) that the stars warn us of our peril if we have the wit to read them, but do not force us into that peril, and that a wise man by taking due account of them may avoid whatever hazards they predict.*

As the light grew dim and the sun sank below the sand dunes that separate Leiden from the sea, Frans signed, folded and sealed the letter and placed it in the basket with the rest of the household's mail so that Hentje could take it next morning to the tavern at the end of the street for the post courier to collect. Then he undressed, lay down beneath his two blankets on the straw palliasse on the floor, and fell within a few seconds into the profound sleep of youth, untroubled by the apprehension that experience teaches us, free as yet of the gnawing rancours and regrets that accumulate with the years like gravel in the bladder and rheumatism in the joints. As for Meester van Backhuysen, he had retired to his study after supper, and sat there until late clacking his abacus beads and scratching in his business ledger. By the time the church clock struck nine and the night watchman came by to tell people to bank up their kitchen fires, *De Krokodijl* was silent and still, with just a single candle burning in an upper room. Only the occasional dog barked in Leiden's empty streets as Floriszoon de Stront's night-soil scow came gliding through the faint mist that hung above the oily-dark waters of the canal, its proprietor working a scull resting in a forked post at the stern. Its bow bumped gently against the landing-stage, and

* "A wise man is stronger than the stars".

the night-soil man's boy stepped ashore to collect the day's pail of slops, then rolled the cask of blood down a plank onto the foredeck. Floriszoon duly noted it on his slate, then flicked the mooring line free of the bollard post and pushed the scow off to resuming his sculling. The vessel disappeared ghostlike beneath the brick arch of a bridge, leaving the sulphurous, rankly corporeal scent of privy buckets trailing behind it in the night air as the only evidence of its passing.

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Since our chronicler has seen fit to mention the affair of the notebook and the church sermon, which I confess I had entirely forgotten about with the passage of years, for fear that the reader may think me to have been in those days a gadabout apprentice and an idle fellow who would cast dice or pick his teeth during divine service, for my own reputation's sake I consider that I must offer some account of what in fact took place; for though a Flemish Catholic by birth and inclination, and never of the Dutch Reformed persuasion, I trust that even in my youth I would never have been so ill-bred and lacking in manners as to behave in an unseemly fashion while others were about their devotions. No: what had set my mind to work that morning was the predikant's sermon; or rather, not the sermon itself, which was deathly-dull and dwelt largely upon the varieties of eternal damnation that the Reformed faith has to offer; whether superlapsarian, sublapsarian, postlapsarian or antelapsarian. The preacher was but lately arrived at the Pieterskerk fresh from the university, and in order (I suppose) to show the congregation what good value they were getting for their stipend and how learned a fellow he was, he used Our Lord's admonition that rather than be damned it were better if a man had a millstone hung around his neck and were cast into the depths of the sea, to launch into a general disquisition upon millstones. He explained that the millstones of those days were not the great discs of stone five or six foot across that we have in Holland – which clearly no man would be able to lift, and the sinner must needs stay where he was until a dozen or so stout fellows arrived to cast it and him into the sea – but small hand-mills the

size of a Gouda cheese, with a hole in the middle for the grain to be poured into and turned by a wooden handle. And (he declared) wind- and water-mills such as we have nowadays were unknown to the ancients. At this I bridled somewhat, having once lived in Colchester in England where my stepfather's friend Doctor Mompesson the antiquary had shown me fragments of Roman millstones found near Fingringhoe where the Romans had built (he supposed) a tide-mill on a small river tributary to the Colne, and by measurement he had deduced that their diameter must have been about that of modern ones. And that recollection in its turn occasioned a sudden conceit, that if the mill at Fingringhoe stood still and the water of the incoming tide drove the wheel, then since Aristotle says that all motion is relative, might it not be equally possible for the water to stand still and the mill to move upon it impelled by the wheel? And that notion at once set me thinking how the wheel might be turned to propel the mill: whether by men turning cranks, or by a horse in a treadmill, or perhaps by a windmill driving it through cogs. Quite deaf by now to the predikant's droning and entirely forgetful of where I was, I pulled my notebook and pencil out of my pocket and began to lim such a device: a double-hulled ship with a mill-wheel in the middle driven by a treadmill, so that the wheel's paddles impinged upon the water and drove the vessel along. It was only when I heard the murmurs and whispers of those around me, and the preacher paused in his discourse to glower down at me from the pulpit, that I became aware that divine service was not the place for such speculations. My master was afterwards most irate with me and flung my notebook into the canal as we made our way home. And I grant that he might have had some reason for his anger, for though by no means the most lenient of governors and of a somewhat rebarbative character, he was a just man withal and most solicitous for my education. As for my double-hulled ship driven by a paddle wheel, however, that too must wait forty or so years before it came to fruition, and the further history of it need not concern us here. So by our chronicler's gracious leave, and to spare us any further such pointless digressions, I will now take up the narrative.