CHAPTER ONE

The twenty-fifth day of December in the year of Our Lord sixteen hundred and ten: the Feast of Our Blessed Saviour's Nativity. In the chill hours before dawn the midwinter stars still twinkled cold and remote in the great indigo vault of sky above the sedgy water-meadows of west Flanders. Amid the early-morning darkness there was still no visible token of human presence other than the tiny pinpoint of light seven or eight miles distant in Dunkirk where a lantern burned on top of Saint Eloi's belfry to guide mariners out on the wintry North Sea.

The year before, the King of Spain and his former Dutch subjects had concluded a twelve-year armistice after fighting one another hammer and tongs for the previous four decades. So ships making their way among the sandbanks of the Flanders coast now faced only the hazards of routine piracy or being driven ashore by a westerly gale. The country hereabouts had likewise become part of a vague, provisional entity called the Spanish Netherlands – chiefly to distinguish them from the Netherlands that were no longer Spanish. And meanwhile the inscrutable stars shone in the heavens above, majestically aloof from the scuffling knaveries of pirates on water and monarchs on land. The giant Orion – by this hour of the morning sunk up to his waist in the sea – brandished his mighty club at the fishes. The bright dot of Venus shone low on the eastern horizon as the first glimmerings of daylight began to suffuse the sky. Out beyond the fringe of sand dunes the salty grey waves lapped sullenly on the shore after days of being driven against the beaches by a north-westerly gale. The wind had veered eastwards during the night, and occasional flurries of snowflakes now fluttered out of the darkness to gather among the ice-locked reed stems that bordered the

drainage ditches and sluggish meandering streams of the Flanders marshes. A few miles southwards that dark, inchoate plain of swamps and rivermouths that extended down the coast all the way from Denmark came to a sudden stop against the chalk hills of Artois and the forest of Éperlecques, where wolves still made their lairs and wild boar rootled for beechmast among the black leaf-mould as they had done since the last Ice Age. Some centuries before the Romans arrived this land had emerged from the sea, only to be submerged again a few centuries after they left, so that in the days of the old Counts of Flanders ships could sail up the River Aa as far inland as Saint Omer. Within the collective memory of the country folk the Bredenarde had been a shallow estuary where fishermen cast their nets and wildfowlers set their traps for duck and widgeon. But then – as though the land were some giant snoring gently in his sleep, each breath lasting a millenium or more – the sea had retreated again, and this time had sealed its decision for posterity by trailing a line of sand dunes up the coast from Calais; each winter's storms extending the dunes a further mile or so until the whole of the Flanders marshes as far north as the Scheldt were cut off from the sea and rendered suitable for drainage by land-hungry peasants and the ingenious monks of the abbeys, toiling for centuries with spades and wheelbarrows to raise the dykes and dig the orderly grid of canals that would discipline wastrel swamps into docile hard-working ploughland and meadows. Yet for all their efforts the land hereabouts still seemed only a provisional and temporary thing; no more than water solidified for a while into earth, but always ready to turn back to its original element if the dykes were not maintained and the sluice-gates were allowed to rot: a congealed sea lapping against the foot of the chalk hills where pasture gave way to cornland and Flemish to French as the language of the country folk.

Before long there was sufficient light for vague shapes to emerge from the early-morning darkness. A long, black smudge was already visible among the water-meadows: too high and too solid to be yet another grove of alder trees. As the sky lightened it revealed a jagged outline of roofs: some of them in the middle high, crow-stepped gables of brick while others towards the edges were the low reed-thatched ridges

of wooden houses, then mere cottages, then hovels which might equally well provide shelter for men or for beasts. Above the roofs towards the eastern side of the smudge there became visible against the lightening sky a dark, rectangular bulk which slowly assumed the form of a great squared-off church tower with a pinnacle at each corner and a truncated turret in the middle like an overgrown pepper pot. Soon there was light enough to discern a little walled town standing on the banks of a slow-meandering, reed-fringed river winding its way through the marshes as though it was still in two minds about whether or not it should join the sea. Judging by the three church towers that rose above it, the town might once have been a place of some note, but was evidently no longer of any great consideration.

Here along the border between France and Flanders the towns had always been fortified. Half a century of intermittent warfare between the Kings of France and the House of Habsburg meant that the more important municipalities along the frontier were now surrounded by elaborate lace collars of ramparts and bastions traced out according to the latest fashions decreed by the military engineers of northern Italy. But as for the town of Houtenburg (or "Audainbourcque" as French-speakers called it), despite being situated less than a mile from the French frontier the place had not been deemed of sufficient importance for the Archduke's government in Brussels to spend any money on improving its fortifications. Turreted medieval walls of brown brick still surrounded it just as they had done two hundred years earlier in the days of the town's prosperity; before the sea retreated, when English wool ships had lain moored four abreast along the quaysides of a River Lommel now so choked with mud and reeds as to be scarcely navigable by a market-gardener's punt laden with cabbages; when the streets rang all day to the clacking of weavers' looms and the river changed colour every evening, red, green, yellow or blue, as the cloth-dyers drained their vats at the end of the day. All that wealth and glory had long since departed. Plagues, wars, the sea's retreat and changing fashions had put paid to the town's trade in woollen cloth and eaten away at its very fabric. Being constructed mostly of timber with thatched roofs, Houtenburg's houses had burned nicely during each of its regular pillagings by

warring armies; and even if they could be replaced quickly enough afterwards, each successive fire saw fewer of them being rebuilt, so that miserable squatters' shacks and empty spaces full of willow herb now occupied much of the town's back streets. The town council still met and municipal life still functioned after a fashion: buildings were patched up as they crumbled, and every few years yet another impressive-sounding but poorly-performing Italian or Dutch engineer was expensively hired to cut a canal through the marshes and the strangulating sand-dunes to reach the North Sea.

But with each year that passed there was less conviction in any of it and more of a sad, dispirited sense that there was no point any longer: that Houtenburg's great days were gone beyond recall and that its decline was now as irreversible as that of an old man with some wasting disease. One tower of the arched and turreted gateway on the Calais road had collapsed some years before, picked apart by ivy and winter frosts, and the rest was now shored up with timber scaffolding. As for the other gate, on the road leading across the marshes to Bergues, it was only kept in repair because it served as the town's gaol. But this hardly mattered any longer: the walls were nowadays only of symbolic value in distinguishing a small town from what might otherwise be a large village, and a battery of siege cannon would surely have pounded them to brick-dust in the course of a morning. The gates were still shut and barred at nightfall and opened again at dawn by the town sergeant self-importantly jingling his iron keys while the town drummer rattle-tat-tatted along behind him. But this was done nowadays only as a display of municipal pride, and to keep out the marauding beggars who had plagued the Flanders countryside ever since the Dutch truce and the disbanding of the armies. If a hostile force of soldiers came that way – or a theoretically friendly one, which amounted to much the same thing for anyone unlucky enough to be on its line of march – then Houtenburg was effectively as naked and at its mercy as the poorest hamlet out in the surrounding platteland.

Thin tatters of cloud straggled across the sky as the stars began to fade. The east wind swayed the frost-rimed, crow-picked corpses of two highway robbers hanged the previous August which still dangled rag-

gedly from the gallows on the mound known as the Galgenheuvel, across the river from the Calais Gate where the old Roman road to Cassel had crossed the Lommel and where the Counts of Flanders had later built their wooden fort – the Houten Burcht – to deter the Vikings from rowing inland towards Saint Omer. As yet nothing stirred within the town walls, for today was a church holiday and in any case at this darkest season of the year the hours of daylight were too few for the spinning of linen thread, which was Houtenburg's staple industry nowadays, and there was likewise little work to be done in the fields which came almost to the foot of the town's walls. But before long a faint glow could be seen making its way up the spiral staircase in one corner of the great church tower, appearing at each window slit in turn as the panting sacristan Nollekens, candle-lantern in hand, climbed the four hundred and thirteen steps leading up to the wooden belfry. There was a pause as he took off his cloak and regained his breath, sweating from his exertion despite the early-morning chill. Then a harsh, discordant clanking like the beating of a soup ladle inside an iron cauldron began to echo through the sleeping streets below as he lugged at the rope of the church's only remaining bell: a cracked iron one which had been used for sounding the Angelus until the year 1592, when Queen Elizabeth's soldiers had ransacked the town and taken the church's magnificent peal of six bronze bells back to England to melt down for cannon. There had been talk ever since of replacing them; but given the present sorry state of the town's finances there could be no question of it. So for want of anything better the dismal iron bell continued to set the townsfolk's teeth on edge eight times a day, ringing out the hours of the church offices to regulate their lives in a town still without a municipal clock. Today though, it being a holy day of obligation and Mass having already been celebrated at midnight, Matins was being rung an hour later than usual.

Most of the townsfolk still lay snoring in their beds: many sleeping off the effects of kerstbier; the dark, potent brew with which Christ's birthday was traditionally celebrated in this part of Flanders. But some were already up and about. Just inside the Calais Gate, in a cowshed leaning against the wall of the town's principal inn, the *Cheval Noir*, a

lantern guttered in the draught while sounds of distress came through the clapboard walls. It was the voice of a young woman; evidently in some pain. Her moans became cries, competing with the strident clangour of the church bell, until they reached a climactic shriek. There was silence from the cowshed for a few moments, then the indignant squalling of a baby justly outraged at being so rudely thrust from the dark, heart-thumping warmth of its mother's womb into the chill air of a winter's morning. The bell ceased its clanking at last, and as it did so the door of the miserable shed opened to reveal a man in his forties silhouetted against the flickering lamplight, bleary-eyed and with his blond beard and short-cropped hair uncombed, carrying a leather bag and with a cloak thrown around his shoulders against the cold since he was still in his shirtsleeves. He turned to speak with a stocky, middle-aged woman as she wiped her bloodied hands on a piece of rag.

"Very well, Vrouw Anna, I shall entrust her to your care since there seems to be no further need for my services. A fine lusty boy, the mother young and strong and the birth without complications; so I imagine that both of them will fare well or ill enough from now on without my aid."

"I'm sorry to have had to call you out at this hour, Mijnheer Willenbrouckx, and on Christmas morning too, but the matter was beyond my competence. An incision had to be made, and the town council would take away my licence if I'd done it myself."

"Think nothing of it: being called out at all hours is part of the surgeon's lot." He smiled. "But certainly it's a singular enough occurrence, to have a virgin giving birth in a stable on the twenty-fifth of December. It reminds me of a story I once heard somewhere…"

"Come now, mijnheer, not so very much out of the ordinary. Five years ago I had to attend a gentlewoman near Rieteghem who was in childbed though still *virgo intacta*. Her husband was a notorious fool, and I was called upon later to testify in the bishop's court when she petitioned for an annulment. I had to explain in great detail to those lascivious old priests how a woman could fall pregnant even though her maidenhead was still unbroken – though I still think they neither understood nor believed me."

"Indeed so: though this case was what we call *hymen septatus*, which is a different matter from simple *hymen intactus* resulting from a feeble husband. As you saw, it was an extra membrane between the vaginal walls. But there; all that it called for was a simple snip with my scissors and the child's head came out without any further trouble. Do you have any idea who the woman might be, though? As municipal surgeon I shall have to make arrangements for her and the child to be lodged, then admitted to the Hôtel-Dieu if they have no other means of support. For the moment though we'll place her in the inn: mere Christian charity forbids us from leaving her lying in the straw of a cow-byre on Christmas day when the snow falls outside. Did she give you any hint of who she might be and where she comes from?"

"Not in the slightest, Mijnheer Willenbrouckx: I was called to attend her only an hour ago. The ostler Pieterken came knocking on my door and said that a woman was groaning in labour in the cowshed and what was he to do? And by the time I reached her the poor soul had more pressing matters on her mind than giving me her name. I thought at first that she must be some beggar's drab come into the town rather than give birth in a wayside ditch: Lord knows there's been enough of those lately. But I saw that she wore a good dress, though torn and bespattered, and likewise heard that her speech was of the better sort and not of the fields and muddy hovels: perhaps a lady's maid seduced by her master and left with child then cast out when her belly could no longer be hidden. What brought her to Houtenburg, though, I've no idea. She must have come into the town as the gate was closed yesterday evening and tumbled into the first nook she could find to be out of the wind and snow."

The surgeon nodded sadly in agreement. "A common enough tale in these times, Vrouw Anna. The poor creature isn't the first; and I very much doubt whether she'll be the last." He clutched his cloak together at the collar. "Anyway, please to bring me the bill for your services so that I can submit it to the council after the holiday. And in the mean time speak with Vrouw Cellier to provide her a room with a bed and firing: also swaddling clothes for the infant against an invoice."

"Begging your pardon, mijnheer, but I think the council may well

refuse to honour my bill, or Vrouw Cellier to give me credit since so many other bills have been refused of late. The échevins may well say that Houtenburg's poor-chest is for succouring the folk of Houtenburg and not for every vagabond in Flanders who comes knocking at our gate."

The surgeon sighed, and fumbled in his purse to extract two silver shillings. "More than likely; so as usual I shall have to attend their next sitting and plead the woman's case like Pericles before the council of Athens to prise a few miserable coppers from their grasp. They will gravely inform me that times are hard in Flanders by reason of the peace – as they were formerly hard by reason of the war – and that charity begins at home; if indeed it begins even there. So pay Vrouw Cellier in advance, and I shall seek reimbursement later on. By the time our worshipful échevins have reached a decision on the matter the boy will probably be in breeches and fathering brats of his own."

The midwife curtsied. "You're a munificent gentleman, Mijnheer Willenbrouckx, and the whole of Houtenburg says as much."

"I'm not a gentleman, just a barber-surgeon; which is a trade not a calling and therefore confers no gentility. And behind its doors the whole of Houtenburg will say that I am either a gullible fool to pay the bills of the rabblement from my own pocket, or that I dispense largesse to the undeserving poor because I hope to be elected mayor one day, though I've often said that I would sooner be ducked in the Lommel with a dead cat hung round my neck than fill that office. Anyway, see to it that the woman and her infant are looked after, and bring the bills and dockets to me at my house after Mass." He turned to leave. "Oh, and my best wishes to you and Meester Boudewijns on the occasion of Our Lord's nativity."

The surgeon departed, and the midwife returned to the young woman lying in the straw on some hempen sacks beneath an old horse blanket. She was exhausted, and her dark blond hair had come loose and hung in straggles over her shoulders. But she seemed happy enough as the blood-smeared morsel of life that had just fought its way out of her lay sucking blindly at her breast. Vrouw Boudewijns made sure that all the afterbirth had been expelled, then carefully collected it and the

umbilical cord in a wooden pail; partly from fear that it might be taken by witches and used for casting spells; partly because there was a ready market for dried umbilical cords among the fishermen at Gravelines, who wore them around their necks as a talisman against drowning.

"Are you comfortable now, my dear?" she asked. "That's a fine lusty boy you have there and well worth all your pain and trouble. Just look at his red hair."

The young woman smiled weakly. "Thank you for your help to a poor stranger. I must pay you…"

"No need for that now: I'll speak with the landlady of the inn and have you moved to a bed as soon as you're strong enough to walk; also have the kitchenmaid warm you a bowl of water to wash the child with."

"But I can pay you; only that I have no money about me now: I had to leave Sottebecque yesterday evening in haste. But once I can send word to my friend there…"

"Stop this babbling about payment, child" (the woman was about twenty-two and Anna Boudewijns nearing fifty). "When children decide to be born they will be born, and take no heed of whether there's money enough to pay for it. It was ever so since Eve gave birth to Cain – and as you yourself now know, since this was plainly your first child." The midwife paused, not quite sure how to put the next question, which was none the less an important one since it would determine how the woman would be viewed by the poorhouse guardians: whether as a respectable person fallen upon misfortune or a cozening vagrant imposing upon the town's charity. "Do you have a husband?" she asked at last. "That you were still a virgin makes me suppose not."

The young woman looked shocked. "No, this is no bastard infant. I am – or was – a married woman, as you may see by this ring on my finger" (she indicated a ring of brass or some such paltry metal, already brownish and discoloured). "I'm a widow who lost her husband some seven months ago, in France, only three weeks after we were married. My husband and I lay together but once, and it was then that he begot my child. But he married me afterwards. And now I am his widow."

"Who then shall I say that you are? If you wish for this town's char-

ity I shall have to give a name to the poorhouse guardians, and likewise arrange for your child to be baptised like a good Christian." The young woman's reply caused the midwife to catch her breath suddenly.

"My name before my marriage was Catherine Maertens. But now I am the Widow Ravaillac".

It was ten o'clock, and the High Mass for Christmas Day was coming to an end in the great draughty, echoing nave of the abbey church of Saint Wolverga; so splendid in the days of the town's wealth but now as meagre and shabby as the rest of that decayed municipality of perhaps two thousand souls. It had been intended as the greatest church in west Flanders, its tower five hundred feet high so that it could cock a snook at Saint Eloi's in Dunkirk and Saint Winoc's in Bergues, and indeed be visible on a clear day from as far away as Ypres or even Ghent, lifting its head high above the flat countryside to proclaim Houtenburg's wealth and prestige to the whole of Flanders and beyond. But even before the River Lommel began to choke with silt, about the year 1420, the tower had run into difficulties. Despite being built by the best stonemasons using the finest limestone brought by ship from Caen, it became clear as the tower rose that the marshy ground beneath it was simply too soft to bear its massive weight. By the time the masons had reached three hundred feet it was already leaning four or five degrees out of true. Attempts were made to correct the tilt by means of heavy weights and by digging beneath the foundations on the high side. But in the end the opinion of all the experts was that the tower might topple over if it went any higher. So a halt was called, leaving a leaning, squared-off edifice surmounted by a pinnacle at each corner and by a timber belfry clad with lead.

But further misfortunes had followed. A raid inland by the Dutch rebels in 1574 had led to the abbey's treasures being looted and the buildings set alight. Scarcely recovered from that calamity, the church and town had again been pillaged and burned by the English in 1592 during an Anglo-Dutch attempt to take Dunkirk from the landward side. A fire caused by a bolt of lightning the following year had consumed much of the roof, already stripped of its lead by the English to make musket balls. The town was plundered once more in 1596 by the

troops of Henri IV of France pursuing their war against the Spaniards, then set on fire in 1601 by Spanish soldiers mutinous after being left unpaid for the past four years. The great church consisted now of a whistling-bare nave and two ruinous aisles boarded up against the weather, all the gilded reliquaries, the fine carved and painted altars and the brocade hangings having long since been stolen or burned or used as blankets to drape horses stabled in the sanctuary. All that remained of its former splendour was the ornate stone tomb of Saint Wolverga who had been beheaded by the still-pagan Flemings near Watten about 600 AD, and had then picked up her head and walked with it under her arm all the way to Houtenburg where – for reasons best known to herself, since she had just covered five or six miles in a headless state – she finally dropped dead and was buried, to the universal wonderment of the people: and their considerable profit in the centuries that followed, once she became the saint of first resort all over Flanders for the healing of boils, carbuncles and other pustular lesions of the skin. Her feast was still celebrated on the 15th of September each year with a three-day fair which brought visitors from all over the region to buy and sell their goods and partake of the town's local speciality: Wolvergapuisten or Furoncles de Sainte Wolvergue*: little round choux-pastry buns filled with saffron-tinted custard and a dab of cherry jam.

The vigil Mass at midnight had been the feast-day's main religious event. But the town's échevins were nowadays mostly the local landed gentry, and a journey along muddy country roads in the black of a midwinter night would have been unreasonable to expect of them. So the quality had came into Houtenburg for the Mass on Christmas morning, to see and to be seen and for their wives to appraise one another's toilettes, and then depart back to their manor houses having performed their annual civic duty. The Mass itself was a perfunctory affair and the townspeople were left afterwards to spend the day as they chose. This was a holy day of obligation, so guild regulations forbade work and most of the menfolk would sit in the taverns after Mass drinking their pewter quart-pots of kerstbier, which was famously provocative of violence towards wives and servants once the drinkers had stumbled their

* Saint Wolverga's boils.

way home. The town's seigneur Achilles van Beausart de Roblés, the mayor Antoine Cabeljauw and the congregation of notables and their wives were gathered towards the front of the nave in their feast-day finery, the ladies seated – insofar as the hoops of their farthingales would permit – on stools by kind permission of the Abbé Gosaerts in recognition of their degree and sex, while Houtenburg's meaner sort stood graded according to their rank and condition towards the back of the nave, finishing near the great doorway with the beggars, cripples and whores who laughed, gossiped, cracked hazelnuts, scratched themselves, farted and cast dice throughout the Mass even during the elevation of the blessed sacrament. The abbé gave his benediction, and the congregation filed out of the church into the square.

Snow was now falling in a half-hearted sort of way, the flakes collecting in the crevices of the brick paving as the wind scurried them along. On the church steps the quality bowed and curtsied and doffed their hats, or received bows and curtsies and had hats doffed to them according to their rank and their degree of their kinship and affinity, since the town's burghers and the gentry from round about were now bound to one another by two centuries' worth of cousinships and intermarriage, so that it was scarcely possible any longer to separate the landed squires with their coats of arms and their Spanish patents of nobility from the old burgher families whose great-grandfathers had made their money as master weavers and wool merchants. For their part the gentlefolk were happy to let the menu-peuple leave the church first rather than rub shoulders with them. It was December now and the frosts had set in: fleas were somnolent and people no longer stank as badly as they had in August. But there were still plenty of contagions to be caught, not to speak of other people's lice which the physicians were unanimous in declaring to be much more pernicious than one's own since, being generated from alien sweat, they might contain all manner of corrupted humours. Even so, it was still doghouse-cold inside the great draughty church, and the ladies in their décolletéd satin gowns and starched ruffs were by now visibly shivering, anxious to don their cloaks and return as soon as possible to their domestic firesides.

As the acknowledged heads of local society, Monsieur and Madame

de Roblés left first, she to climb into the ponderous family coach with the coat of arms on the doors and he to hoist himself stiffly on to his horse, since though the gout plagued him nowadays he was still a former officer of King Philip, and for a military man to ride in a coach like a priest or a lady's maid would fatally undermine his dignity. The rest of the town's notables then followed them down the church steps in a cascade of holiday black. Michel de Willenbrouckx, his wife Laetitia and their only surviving child Regulus, a solemn little boy of five, exchanged their bows and seasonal greetings with the rest of Houtenburg's better sort. In this world of infinite gradations of rank a mere barber-surgeon, however competent, came well down the scale of social acceptability even if he did have a "de" to his family name (though he seldom used it) and his wife was also of gentle birth, a Collaert no less, a member of that great Dunkirk dynasty of ship owners and occasional pirates who had married into most of the landed families of west Flanders. This entitled him to the courtesy title of "mijnheer" instead of plain "meester", since she was a "mevrouw" by birth and her husband must therefore be of equal degree and consideration with her. He knew perfectly well though that the cordiality shown towards him was a result not so much of his social rank as of his calling. For whether kings or beggars, we are all children of Eve and equally heirs to the ills and accidents of the flesh, so that even the most fanatical sticklers for hierarchy and precedence will usually take care to stay on friendly terms with the man who might one day have to set their broken leg or pull out an aching tooth. So it was joyeux Noël Monsieur et Madame le Chirurgien, and an affable enough nod from the seigneur and his lady as they departed (though they still had a bill outstanding for one of her teeth extracted at Martinmas) and goede morgen Mijnheer en Mevrouw Willenbrouckx, and even some perfunctory doffing of hats from the lowest ranks of the quality as the couple made their way down the steps and across the square, Laetitia muffled in her new wine-red cloak with the fox-fur collar and Regulus in his best Sunday suit of black velvet with a fine beaver-felt hat on top of his blond curls.

At the foot of the church steps Vrouw Boudewijns and her husband the town's apothecary greeted the surgeon. While Laetitia consulted

Meester Boudewijns about a powder for her migraines (her health having been poor for some years past) the midwife took the surgeon aside.

"Mijnheer Willenbrouckx, the young woman who was delivered of a child this morning…"

"What of her? Is she well?"

"Perfectly well, pleasing your honour, and now moved to a room in the inn as you instructed me. But there's more to this than first appeared. The state of the poor woman's head troubles me more than that of her body."

"What do you mean?"

"I asked for her name, to have Vrouw Cellier make out a docket for the poorhouse guardians. And she told me that her name is the Widow Ravaillac."

"The Widow *who*…?"

"The Widow Ravaillac. She says that her husband died in France some seven months ago, after they had been married only three weeks, leaving her with child."

Willenbrouckx considered for a while. "Well, I suppose that she *might* well enough be a widow though still a virgin: stranger things have been known. And as for the Ravaillac part, the name's uncommon enough to be sure, but still not the sole property of that villain who stabbed King Henri. When I studied surgery in Paris years ago I knew a canon lawyer called Charles Raffailac from Poitiers who died from having a stool broken over his head in a wine shop after he threatened to excommunicate the landlord for refusing him credit."

"By your leave, mijnheer, that's not all. After I left her I met with old Goosens from the toll-house on the Calais road. And he says that as darkness was falling yesterday a crowd of some thirty or forty of the rabblement from Sottebecque came along with sticks and stones chasing a young woman heavy with child, calling out that she was a witch and a whore and bore the Devil's whelp in her belly and much else such nonsense besides. He dropped the barrier pole across the road and demanded what their business was on the King of Spain's territory. So she ran ahead of them, and anyway it was growing dark and beginning to snow. So after some shouting and calling of names and throwing a few

stones after her they quit their pursuit and went home. Likewise the town sergeant says that just as he was closing the Calais Gate yesterday evening a woman in great terror with a nine-month belly and her hair hanging down and her clothes all torn and spattered begged him to let her through so that she could find a hole to hide in. He thought that she must be a mad beggar-woman and let her through the postern, but lost sight of her after that."

"Hmmm, how very singular: not every poor vagrant woman who comes into this town to drop her child bears the name of a regicide, or arrives chased by a mob seeking her life. I fear that, as you say, her trouble may be an addled head and an incontinent tongue. To provoke people as dull and lethargic as the Sottebecquois into chasing her to the gates of Houtenburg on Christmas Eve when they should have been drinking themselves insensible certainly argues a certain talent for stirring up trouble."

"And the name Ravaillac? Should that set people against her so long afterwards and so far from Paris?"

"Vrouw Anna, it's still less than nine months since the French lost their king to that madman's dagger – and were left with a nine-year old boy as his heir, and four or five rival claimants for the throne. It was only by good luck and the infinite mercy of God that they avoided a new civil war over the succession. If I were a subject of young King Louis I'd certainly be mighty neuralgic about some foolish woman bandying around the name of Ravaillac. Anyway, see to it that she and her child are comfortable and lack for nothing – but counsel her that in future she keeps a wiser tongue in her head unless she wishes to be chased out of this town as well. For I think that the name she lays claim to is one that will win her few friends even here in Flanders."

As the family walked back to their house *De Salamander* on the Kortestraat the surgeon was thoughtful. The dramatic events in Paris the previous May had come to the ears of the folk of Houtenburg a week or so later only as a distant rumbling, like that of a thunderstorm too far off to menace the local crops: someone else's misfortune for once rather than their own. For months past it had been rumoured that Henri IV of France had been massing an army to go to war with the

Emperor Rudolf over some obscure duchies in the Rhineland; which would certainly have meant his going to war sooner or later with the Emperor Rudolf's Spanish cousins and invading Flanders once more. The townsfolk knew only too well that when armies were on the march, whether those armies were French or Spanish would make but little difference to a small frontier town like Houtenburg too poor to defend itself but still rich enough to have something worth stealing. So although no one was imprudent enough to say so (all God-fearing folk being agreed that regicide was the foulest crime imaginable short of murdering God Himself) the news of the French king's sudden death had been greeted with a certain quiet relief. The week before the assassination folk working in the fields – or so they said afterwards – had seen an army of ghostly warriors fighting in the evening sky above the distant hills of Artois, which certainly betokened trouble for someone. It was reported likewise that a prodigiously large fish had been brought ashore at Mardyck with mysterious markings upon its flanks which scholars said spelled out "Woe Unto Men" in Hebrew on one side (the signification of which was plain) and "Thrice Times Thirty" on the other in Greek (which might mean anything at all). In the last days of April a traveller passing through the town on his way from Brussels to Calais had announced to the drinkers in the pot-room of the *Cheval Noir* that the French king had been stabbed to death in Paris: which was singular to say the least of it, he being still very much alive at the time, and caused the wiseacres to say afterwards that clearly Spain and the Jesuits must have had some hand in the matter. Then in the third week of May came the authentic news of the assassination, and an apprehensive week or two afterwards, with two English gentlemen on their way home from Italy reporting that Amiens and Doullens had shut their gates for fear of civil war. Around the middle of June a band of twenty or thirty French gentlemen, diehards of the Catholic League, came galloping on to Spanish territory near Audruicq pursued by the Governor of Calais's horsemen after they had tried and failed to start an uprising in the town. But in the end it had all blown over and young Louis was duly proclaimed King with his mother as Regent until he came of age. As for Henri's war against the Emperor, nothing more was heard of it

and the great army camped near Mézières was quietly disbanded, which led many to suspect that His Majesty's liege subjects might themselves have been less than happy with the idea and had perhaps looked the other way as the assassin followed the royal coach through the streets from the Louvre.

Willenbrouckx himself had treated one of the English travellers for a toe gone septic after a horse had trodden on it in an inn yard. They talked in a mixture of Latin and French while the Englishman puffed at his tobacco pipe; a habit by now very widespread among that strange island people but still sufficiently novel in Flanders for people to turn and point in the street. It appeared that Sir Giles Bassingbourne, Member of Parliament for Oakham in the county of Rutland, had been in Paris on the very day of the murder.

"Of course sir," he said, "you may be sure that the whole place was soon as alive with rumour as an Irishman's beard is with lice. People said that for certain the Jesuits were behind it all, and that those artful knaves had contrived for two wagons to block the street ahead of the King's coach. Others said that Queen Marie had hired the murderer, outraged by the King's endless adulteries. But others said that no, it was not the Queen repaying the King for his mistresses, but his former mistress Madame de Verneuil revenging herself on him for marrying Queen Marie when he had previously undertaken to marry herself. Others still said that the murderer's sister had been seduced by the King and left with child, then abandoned by him: but all discounted that tale since though old Henri was marvellously incontinent and wherever he went bastards sprang up afterwards in his footsteps like asphodels in Apollo's…" (Sir Giles paused for a moment so that the surgeon could admire the elegance of this classical allusion) "…no man ever knew him behave ungenerously towards his doxies or refuse to acknowledge the children he had begotten. So in the end, sir, everyone and no one was the culprit, and you might have fancied that perchance His Majesty was grown so tired of life that he hired the assassin himself. But for my own part…" he paused with a knowing air to pack down the tobacco in his pipe, then blew a puff of smoke "…I give but little credence to such idle conjectures, and think that the murderer was rather a plain madman: a

great red-haired lummock of a fellow all dressed in green whom I think I once saw myself loitering beneath the arcades outside the Louvre. For all concur that, since no man saw him strike the blow, he could easily have slipped away afterwards and no one the wiser; but instead he stood there like a poor silly sheep – *stultus ovis simul* – with the dagger all bloody in his hand waiting to be seized."

He laid the pipe aside. "I ask you, sir, does such seem to you to be the behaviour of a hired assassin? My own father served with Sir John Norris in the Low-Country wars and was in Delft when the Prince of Orange was shot dead by the villain Gérard. Yet even though that rogue was as desperate a fanatic as ever lived, as he demonstrated by his steadfastness under torture and afterwards on the scaffold, even he had a pair of inflated bladders with him so that he might swim the palace moat, and a horse waiting saddled on the other side, and would infallibly have made his escape if Sir Roger Williams had not run after him and brought him to the ground. Yet this Ravaillac fellow of ours was no such man of violence: indeed by all accounts was uncommonly pious and had never so much as hurt a fly in his whole life before; a lawyer's clerk turned schoolmaster, if you please…"

Willenbrouckx paused in his work and looked up, smiling. "If that is true, then I hope that on the Day of Judgement it will be considered by the Almighty as a plea in mitigation."

Sir Giles looked at him uncomprehending. "What do you mean, sir…?"

"I meant, that though many who have the charge of schoolboys must consider homicide twenty times a day, the wonder is that so few actually pass from the thought to the deed. The brats must have provoked the poor fellow beyond all measure, that instead of killing one of them he went and stabbed the king instead."

The Englishman looked bewildered: neither his French nor his Latin were quite equal to such conceits. He laughed nervously. "Yes…yes…Indeed so: a most judicious observation to be sure. But whatever the fellow's motives, there's no denying that his execution provided a rare spectacle for the people of Paris. You could scarcely move in the streets for the crowds that came to watch – though I sup-

pose that precious few of them can have seen anything. Our landlady doubled the rent for our room, declaring she could find a thousand who would pay as much. They say that the roof of a house near the Hôtel de Ville collapsed from the number of people that had paid to perch upon it. And such lamentation and weeping of crocodile's tears as you never heard in all your days! 'Le pauvre bon roi Henri!' and 'Ce scélerat d'assassin!' from folk who when we had sat at supper with them two days before were calling for anyone who loved God and his holy church to put an end to the life of such a heretical adulterous tyrant, and were there no men left in France to wield the knife? The French – saving your honour sir, because I take you by your name to be Flemish – are a fickle and changeable people, inconstant as so many weathercocks, and nothing good is to be expected of them."

The Willenbrouckx family arrived home and were greeted by the housekeeper Anke Scarlakens, a sturdily built Flemish peasant woman in her mid-fifties who had managed the household with formidable competence these past fifteen years – and as well that she could too, now that Mevrouw's health was so fragile and she confined so often to her bed. After dinner Willenbrouckx went to his study to read, lighting a tallow candle as the early winter dusk descended. He read for a while, a chapter or two of the *Scriptores Historiæ Augustæ* concerning the Emperor Commodus Antoninus, who seemed by all accounts to have been a most egregious oaf, then tired of it and took out his lute to pluck a few tunes since, as befitted a medical man, he was a tolerably good amateur musician.

The end of another year in the town of Houtenburg, he thought to himself, marked in suitable style by the arrival of yet another deranged beggar-woman to place a further charge upon the public purse. He was forty-three now, too old to advance much further in his profession. He had come to it as most surgeons did, by following his father's trade in a barber's shop in the town of Poperinghe, though the family were minor landed gentry come down in the world, which gave them the "de" in their name though he himself never used it except on official documents. But then at the end of his apprenticeship the desire to see the world beyond Flanders had gripped him, and he had signed articles as

a surgeon's mate aboard one of King Philip's ships, the galleon *San Isidoro*, at Lisbon in the fateful spring of 1588. There had followed a three-month waking nightmare of fighting their way up the English Channel on the far left flank of the Invincible Armada, battered for days on end by the heavier guns of the nimbler English ships until the orlop deck was a charnel-house of the dead and dying, stinking of vomit and gangrene. Then the chaos off Calais, where they came to anchor at last to await Parma's invasion barges – only to cut their cables in panic as the English fireships drifted in among them. And afterwards the confused mêlée off Gravelines, and the terrible gale-battered journey up the North Sea and around the Shetlands, then back south again wallowing in the storm-driven Atlantic breakers off the west coast of Ireland – which the ship missed by a hair's breadth while the *Santissima Trinidad* was driven on to the rocks of Blasket Island before their horrified gaze with the loss of her entire crew. Then coming ashore again in Santander ninety-four days later, starving, filthy, wasted away with sickness and rotten provisions and treated like so many malefactors for their failure.

There had followed years as a military surgeon with Verdugo and Farnese and a half-dozen lesser commanders floundering among the waterlogged meadows and ditches of Holland; at Zutphen, Deventer, Gronigen and Breda; battles, skirmishes and sieges; each one exactly like the last with only the rain-sodden autumns and the ice-bound winters to separate campaign from campaign. The blaring of trumpets and horses' neighing above the thunder of artillery and the rattle of musketry; powder smoke rising into the summer sky among the wheeling swallows; shot-torn flesh and dying men's groans: tighten the tourniquet, detach a flap of skin to cover the stump, then cut round quickly with the curved knife to sever the muscles; saw through the bone and sear the ends of the blood vessels then leave the assistants to dress the stump and on to the next ; sorting those who might still live from the wretches whom only the chaplain could help while two hundred other such unfortunates lay outside the surgeon's tent beneath the sun's glare or the weeping Dutch drizzle, imploring his help. Good training, to be sure, in making rapid and accurate assessments; a quick and certain

hand with knife, saw and bullet probe; many injuries that no civilian surgeon would ever be called upon to deal with; and also some quiet satisfaction that so many of his patients survived to be discharged and spend the rest of their lives begging outside the town gates of a dozen kingdoms. He was even modestly proud to have contributed somewhat to the art of battlefield surgery by devising a probe with a white porcelain tip, since the sound that it made tapping against a bullet was subtly different from that when it encountered a fragment of bone and likewise the lead of the bullet left an unmistakable streak of grey upon it.

But to build up a proper career as a surgeon, he now saw, it would have been better to have joined the guild in Ypres at twenty-five not thirty-five, to have married a nice girl from a surgical family and to have established his practice in a wealthy town rather than in this impoverished hole of a place. True, the office of municipal surgeon which his wife's relatives had secured for him in Houtenburg was by no means a contemptible one; for though the town itself was poor and down-at-heel, there was the countryside round about and the local gentry as customers, who preferred to be attended by a surgeon with refined manners and clean fingernails who spoke good French and Spanish as well as Flemish. Though no one at the time saw any connection between the two, the fastidious cleanliness which so many of his fellow surgeons laughed at meant that the death rate from infection among his patients was gratifyingly low, and he had even begun of late to build up a remunerative practice in cutting for bladder stone, with perhaps only one in ten of his patients dying of blood poisoning afterwards, whereas with other lithotomists it might be half or two-thirds. Likewise the post carried a small official salary and brought a certain prestige, even at the price of constant conflict with the town physician Doctor Gilbert Hooftius who, having himself had his natural ignorance enhanced by studying medicine at Louvain and the Sorbonne, despised all surgeons as unlettered empirics no better than so many cobblers or wheelwrights. But when all was said and done it was still a dismal backwater with few prospects for anything better. His once-blond hair now turning grey, he felt that life had passed him by, sitting in a dreary, damp little provincial town in an obscure province with an ailing wife – her suffering all the

worse because he loved her so dearly – and four out of their five children now lying in their graves. It was sad. But life was a sad and painful business ending always in death, as a surgeon had more reason than most mortals to know. At last he snuffed out the candle and went to bed, on his own to avoid disturbing Laetitia's sleep. In a few days yet another year would end. And yet another one would begin: in all probability exactly the same as the one before it and the one after it, and be thankful only if things got no worse.

At eight o'clock the next morning, Saint Stephen's Day, the midwife knocked on the door of the surgeon's house.

"Mijnheer Willenbrouckx, if you please, I've come about the young woman."

"What's the matter, Vrouw Anna? Does she now claim to be the widow of some other great villain? Perhaps Gilles de Rais this time or the Emperor Caligula?"

"She claims no such thing, mijnheer, but babbles a great deal of other nonsense. I fear she has childbed fever."

"Well then, call Doctor Hooftius and not me. That learned fool should soon usher her into the next world with his hired knaves Galen and Aristotle to help him."

"By your leave, mijnheer, she asks in particular that you should attend her. She says she has an important charge to entrust to you, and no one else can be relied upon to do it."

The surgeon snorted. "What, must I put on my cloak and turn out of doors in the snow at the whim of every mazy-headed pauper that comes through the gates of this town?"

"She's very insistent, Mijnheer Willenbrouckx. And by the look of her I fear that she may not be with us much longer. Childbed fever has carried off many a woman hereabouts these past few months."

In this the midwife was perfectly correct: despite her intelligence and her expertise in the delivery of children she had no way of knowing that after attending each woman with puerperal fever she would as often as not transfer the infection to her next patient; in this case from a miller's wife at Kwaadhove who had died of the fever on the afternoon of Christmas Eve and whom she had helped to wash and lay out. It was

a form of blood poisoning which progressed rapidly and was usually fatal.

In the end Willenbrouckx was overcome by his better feelings, and having had no other patients to attend to that day beyond a few festive beer casualties, went with her to the *Cheval Noir*, where he found the young woman bright-eyed and flushed with fever, though the baby lying beside her in a makeshift cradle was sleeping peacefully enough.

"You wished to speak with me." Willenbrouckx said, "And seeing that you are clearly a person of some consideration, I felt that I must attend you." He sat down on a stool on one side of the low bed and the midwife at the other side.

Catherine grasped his hand. "Promise me, mijnheer, as you love God, that you will have my baby baptised tomorrow as a good Catholic…"

"Of course I promise: we shall take him to the church to be christened as soon as a priest can be engaged."

"… and that you will name the child in memory of my poor late husband."

Willenbrouckx looked apprehensively across at the midwife, who seemed as nonplussed as himself. "And what name would you have us give the boy? I fear that…"

"François Ravaillac, the child's father, who is dead now and burned to ashes; who has no tomb for any to weep over, and none to bear his name, which all men execrate, nor anything else in the world except myself, a dying woman with his ring still on my finger, and this poor innocent babe of his."

"But such a name as that: how can we…?" She clutched his hand so fervently that the bones creaked.

"Promise me this! Promise this to a woman who may die this very night! For the sake of Our Saviour and the Blessed Virgin his mother, promise me this last thing!"

Vrouw Boudewijns tried to calm the young woman, who was plainly growing delerious, mopping her brow with a damp towel. But she only fell to sobbing so grievously that a Tartar would have taken pity on her. So in the end, before the surgeon administered her a calm-

ing draught and they left, they had both promised to name the boy as she desired. After they came out of the room they conferred for a while on the dark staircase.

"Mad. Quite mad." The surgeon said. "The Widow Ravaillac indeed: such moonshine stuff as never was."

"But she said it as well when I attended her after the delivery" the midwife replied, "even when the cord was scarcely cut. She was certainly not raving then; in fact most calm and composed for a woman who had just given birth. Why do you suppose she said it, if it were mere fancy?"

"Vrouw Anna, the two of us have worked together for many a long year attending to the sick in body of this town, and likewise to the sick in mind. So you know as well as I do that mad people will often seek to redeem the wretchedness of their condition by associating themselves in their fancy with great persons or notable villains. Not five years since we had a young woman arrive in the Hôtel-Dieu most insistent that she was the surreptitious child of the Archduchess Isabella stolen by gypsies and afterwards brought up in a cellar by the Jesuits. And despite old Hooftius attaching a whole jar of leeches to her brows to draw off the madness and purging her to the very gates of the underworld, she persisted a good six months in her nonsense and narrowly escaped being hanged for sedition. Likewise two years since when the brigand chief Bleektandt was broken on the wheel at Steenvoorde, with thirty cudgels hung afterwards around the rim to signify the number of his victims, there were a half-dozen women in this town who claimed to have been his mistress and to be with child by him. But now we've both gone and indulged this poor madwoman in her deranged fancies. I fear no good can come of it."

"What else were we to do?" the midwife asked. "The poor creature was fairly raving and implored us so that I thought my heart would break. But what now? If we do as she wishes then we might as well christen her child Judas Iscariot and have done with it."

"I wish I knew: I've often been given deathbed commissions, but never one as strange as this. Anyway, go along now if you please, and speak with Canon Blanchard to appoint a time for the child's baptism.

As for a christening robe, use the old one that we keep for such charity cases. But for the moment, say nothing of the child's name. I must consider what to do."

So they parted, and Willenbrouckx returned home, went to his study and called for Anke. She brought him a pewter mug of beer warmed at the kitchen fire.

"Anke" he said, "I would ask a small favour of you."

"Ask, mijnheer, and as always I shall do my best to oblige you." She said it without irony: though they were master and servant their relationship was a long and mutually respectful one, with Anke never hesitating to speak her mind on family matters.

"I know that you collect pamphlets and broadsheets, since every time a peddler comes to the kitchen door I see you scrabbling for a shilling in your purse."

Anke sniffed. "I may be only a humble housekeeper, mijnheer, but I still like to know what goes on in the great world." This was true: unusually for a serving-woman Anke was literate; and not just in Flemish but in French as well. And she did indeed like to keep up with events: especially wonders and prodigies, and also executions, which she never missed and would often walk long distances to attend if there were none in prospect in Houtenburg. She would often say that for children, one good hanging was a better lesson in morality than a hundred sermons.

"Your interest in public events is most commendable, Anke. So might I ask you to lend me your store of such literature for an hour or so? There's something that I need to be quite sure of."

"Certainly, mijnheer." She curtsied and bustled out, happy that such a learned gentleman as Mijnheer Willenbrouckx should be seeking her advice on matters requiring more informed judgement than the collection of bacon fat or the removal of moths from woollen bed-curtains. Her position as housekeeper to the municipal surgeon gave her considerable prestige among the wives in the Market Place, who would often seek her advice on their various ailments, so it was doubly gratifying now for the master to be seeking her advice as well. She returned a few minutes later from her room in the garret carrying a brass-hinged lime-

wood box, which she placed on the table before returning to the kitchen. Willenbrouckx opened the box and found inside it two bundles of folded papers, one tied up with red ribbon and the other with green. He untied the green bundle and found that it consisted of pamphlets relating to prodigies:

True Relation of a Two-Headed Foal Born Lately Near Wormhout; *A Mighty Whale Washed up on the Strand at Nieuwpoort*; *The Great Stone of Iron That Fell from the Sky at Hazebrouck on Trinity Sunday*; *A Bull-Calf with the Face of a Man Lately Born Near Tongeren*; *A Man-Child with the Face of a Bull Lately Born Near Waereghem*, and so on and so forth.

He tied it up again and opened the other bundle, which consisted of broadsheets relating to notable crimes and their consequences: usually crude woodcuts of the deed and the subsequent retribution accompanied by the malefactors' last words from the scaffold – real or invented – and concluded by doggerel verses pointing out the moral of the story. The titles were predictable:

Authentic Narration of the Atrocious Poisoning of Her Husband by a Tallow Merchant's Wife of Bailleul and Her Subsequent Trial and Burning; *Ten Murdering Brigands Broken on the Wheel at Rijssel, with the True History of their Foul Crimes*, and so forth.

The surgeon leafed through the twenty or so sheets of paper until he found what he was looking for. It was a quarto sheet folded in two and bearing eight successive panels, two per side, each depicting a scene and accompanied by a caption in French, Dutch and Latin. The quality of the copper engravings was fine and minutely detailed; the work (he noted) of "*Willem Swaanenberg, Leiden, anno 1610*". Willenbrouckx saw at first glance that Swaanenberg and his assistants (for the work was too much for one engraver to have done in so short a time) had more than a passing acquaintance with the public buildings of Paris: the Louvre palace and the Hôtel de Ville which he remembered well from his student days.

The pamphlet was entitled *A True and Authentic Narration of the Most Horrible and Unnatural Murder of Henri IV, King of France and Navarre, in the Rue de la Ferronerie in the city of Paris on the 14th day of*

May 1610, and of the Subsequent Execution of the Monstrous Regicide François Ravaillac on the Place de la Grève on the 27th day of the Same Month.

The first panel showed the Devil looking on approvingly from above the housetops as a man in a broad-brimmed hat and cloak standing on the wheel of a coach lunged in through the window to stab the King seated inside.

I. *Urged on by Satan his master, the foul and unnatural murderer Ravaillac plunges his dagger into the breast of the father of his people, that best and most benevolent of princes King Henri IV of France.*

II. *Blood pouring from his mouth, the king is carried by his attendants back to the Louvre but expires on the way. The monstrous villain Ravaillac is meanwhile seized with the fatal dagger still dripping in his hand. Despite being put to the severest torments he maintains that he acted alone.*

III. *Following his condemnation, with a torch in each hand the hellish parricide Ravaillac is carried in a tumbril from the Conciergerie Prison to the Place de la Grève before a vast crowd thronging the streets.*

IV. *Clutching the knife with which he committed his detestable crime, the unnatural monster Ravaillac's right hand is burned off in a brazier of pitch and sulphur. Flesh is then torn from his breast, arms and thighs with red-hot pincers, after which boiling oil, burning resin and molten lead are poured into the wounds. Despite these torments and the urging of his confessors he still refuses to name his accomplices.*

V. *Four horses are harnessed to pull the foul assassin Ravaillac asunder. After an hour, the beasts having proved unequal to the task, the onlookers help them to complete their work.*

VI. *Driven mad with grief and rage, the crowd hurl themselves upon the hellish miscreant Ravaillac's dismembered trunk and limbs and*

tear them to pieces. His remains are afterwards gathered up and burned and the ashes fired from a cannon.

VII. *The monstrous regicide Ravaillac's father and mother are commanded to leave the realm within thirty days and never to return. Meanwhile the cottage where he was born in the village of Touvres and the house where he lived in the town of Angoulême are pulled down, and the places where they once stood are made into dunghills and places of everlasting infamy.*

Willenbrouckx paused here. In itself, the doleful catalogue of horrors described in the pamphlet moved him very little. Pain was an inescapable part of every man's life, and no one knew that better than a surgeon, who had every day to slice into living flesh, set broken bones and cauterise ulcers without the slightest regard for his patient's sufferings: who indeed would be failing in his professional duty if he paid any heed to their cries beyond instructing his assistants to hold them down more firmly. Though himself the kindest and most benevolent of souls, he had to inflict atrocious pain as part of his job for the simple reason that the consequences would otherwise be far worse. And though he avoided such melancholy ceremonies himself and felt a certain distaste for people who treated them as an entertainment, he took a very similar view of the execution of criminals: as the painful but necessary cutting out of diseased tissue from the body politic. He had himself studied surgery in France during the Wars of Religion which old Henri had brought to an end; had seen with his own eyes the refugee-crammed towns stalked by plague and famine and the deserted countryside with its burnt-out, ransacked villages amid fields covered by thistles. So he considered that on balance the maniac whose wanton deed might well have plunged the country back into such misery had got off lightly. No, he took no view on the rights or wrongs of the matter; he was looking for something else entirely. And in the very last panel he found it: a hall full of venerable bearded gentlemen in ruffs, counsellors' robes and tall hats; many of them with a hand raised as if to make a point or to indicate agreement.

VIII. *Sitting in solemn session, the Parlement of Paris decrees that from now until the end of time, under pain of death, no person in the King of France's domains shall ever again bear the accursed name of Ravaillac.*

Willenbrouckx laid down the pamphlet and reflected. So if it was now a hanging matter to be called Ravaillac in the King of France's territories – whose border was not a mile away from where he now sat – then it would be no less than a felony to give that name to a new-born child; effectively placing a noose around the infant's neck along with its chrisom robe. But he had made a promise to a dying woman, and the surgeon was (all were agreed) a man who took his promises very seriously indeed. So he took a piece of paper and a lead pencil and began to scribble various combinations of christian and surnames. At last an idea came to him: the distant memory of a poor little hamlet amid the heaths and peat bogs of Drenthe near the town of Hardenberg where he had been billeted for five rain-soaked months in the winter of 1591, after the Dutch rebels had taken Gronigen and Verdugo had sought to take it back from them, until brimming rivers and an empty pay-chest had obliged his army to go into winter quarters. He wrote out the name three or four times, holding the paper at arm's length to consider it critically since his eyesight was now starting to grow dim with advancing years. At last he was satisfied, and called Anke up from the kitchen to return the box of pamphlets and thank her for her assistance. To salve his conscience and exonerate himself at the Last Judgement of the charge of promise-breaking he could (he thought) always plead hardness of hearing, for having spent so many years practising surgery with cannon thundering next to his tent he could truthfully lay claim to a certain dullness in the ears, which was on balance an advantage rather than a handicap for a surgeon. In any case it mattered little, since the child's mother would soon be dead of fever, so only Vrouw Boudewijns would survive as a witness to his undertaking.

And so the next day, the 27th of December 1610, in the abbey church of Saint Wolverga in the town of Houtenburg in the county of

Flanders, before the required two godparents Michel de Willenbrouckx, surgeon, and Anna Boudewijns, midwife, a male infant was duly and perfunctorily baptised *in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti* by the young Canon Blanchard, who had three more brats to christen that morning. The boy bawled loudly as the icy font-water was dribbled on to his forehead. And afterwards in the vestry his name, distorted from "Frans van Rawijk" by the vagaries of Flemish orthography, was inscribed in the great parish register as "Frans van Raveyck, firstborn child of the Widow Catherine van Raveyck, traveller; place of abode unknown; currently lodged at the *Cheval Noir* inn".

And thus inauspiciously began the history of one of the most original and inventive minds even of that century so replete with exceptional spirits and mighty talents. For we must all be born somewhere, and in the end it is not where or how we begin our life that matters but what we do with it afterwards.

* * *

Though I might quibble with his remarks regarding the name "Rawijk", and cannot think how he came by that information, since my stepfather always told me my name was derived rather from the barony of Raveyck which is near Turnhout in the county of Brabant (though its castle is long since demolished), I must agree with our chronicler's wise observation that how a man lives his life is more important than how he begins it. For many notable fools were born in palaces, while many who later did great things in the world first saw the light of day in surroundings every whit as unpropitious as my own. Throughout my life the knowledge that I share the day of my nativity with Our Saviour Jesus Christ, and likewise the outward appurtenances of it, such as a stable in a poor lowly little town to be born in and a virgin for a mother, has always been a singular source of strength to me. For like myself, Our Lord was subject to calumny and vilification throughout his life on Earth and suffered much opposition from those who remained wilfully blind to the truths that he revealed to them. To be sure, unlike Jesus I have not been put to death (though I came quite close to it on a number of oc-

casions) while it remains to be seen whether I shall be able to rise from the dead on the third day. But despite those discordancies Our Saviour and I were always borne up alike by the knowledge that even if the outward circumstances of our birth were lowly, our paternities were unusual to say the least of it.

The same stars preside alike over castles and cowsheds, and over the nativities of princes and beggars. As soon as I was of an age and wit to have some understanding of these matters I cast my own natal chart, having the advantage of a precise time for it since my mother remembered that I came into the world at around ten minutes past seven o'clock on the morning of the 25th of December, as the church bell finished ringing for Matins. And I discovered with no great surprise that the course of my later life could easily have been foretold from the constellation that presided over my birth. Sagittarius ascending with Jupiter its ruler in the seventh house portended a life of great successes, but of equally great checks, when the largeness of my designs would prove greater than the means for carrying them out: one where passion and the urge to master the elements would be accompanied by great mutability and sometimes – I freely confess it – a facility in too many matters for me ever to be truly the master of any of them, so that flux, movement and the great watery vastness of the ever-shifting sea would be the common themes of my life. The Sun being in the first house decreed that I should be fiery, proud and full of vigour in whatever I essayed, impatient of the timid little souls of clay that so often surrounded me. But the conjunction of warm, generous, abundant Venus and dry, melancholic old Saturn in the second house was an unfortunate one, since it meant that my facility for gaining wealth would be equalled only by my aptness to lose it all again, and that like the tides of the ocean gold and silver would flow away from me just as readily as they flowed towards me. Likewise the moist and fickle Moon predominating in the fourth house indicated that my life would be one of movement and journeying, never tarrying long in one place, and always restless so that no sooner had I arrived somewhere and set down my bags than I would be up again and off somewhere else. The heavens rule our destinies, and could we but read them aright all things in past,

present and future would be plain to us.

My name likewise, though given to me quite fortuitously in order to disguise my paternity, turned out to be so aptly and prophetically chosen that I was never in the slightest tempted to change it from mangled Flemish to its pristine French form even if it were not still, I assume, a hanging offence to bear that name in the King of France's domains. For the name Raveyck, though my stepfather chose it for its similarity of sound to "Ravaillac", is in itself most apposite since it is derived (scholars agree) from the conjoining of the two words "raaf" – which is to say, "raven" in the Netherlandish tongue – and "eyck" which signifies an oak tree. Throughout my life these two components in my name have shaped my earthly destiny as inexorably as the stars themselves. The raven, though by common consent the wisest and most subtle of birds (Athene's owl is a mere fool by comparison), is also reputed both in the legends of the ancients and in the fireside tales of our country boors to be a bird of ill omen; the bringer of bad tidings and the tatler of secrets. It was the raven who brought Apollo the news that Coronis had made a cuckold of him, and was therefore the cause of Aesclepius his son being entrusted to the centaur Chiron, who taught him the art of medicine, which I suppose should make that bird the emblem of all us doctors: not least because many a husband since Apollo has first learned of his wife's playing him false from a physician examining his water in a flask. In the epics of the old Goths two such birds, Hugin and Munin, sat upon the shoulders of Odin and spoke wise counsels into his divine ears. And the raven, like myself, is a perpetual roamer and though he does not migrate at set seasons or along regular paths in the sky like the storks or the swallows, never stays long in any one place but continually ventures afield in search of new domains. And the other part of my name, the oak tree? Why that signifies steadfastness and fortitude against the battering of the rowdy storms, so that our word "robust" comes from the Latin *robur*, signifying oak wood: a debt which I duly acknowledged when King Louis ennobled me by taking a raven sitting in an oak tree as my coat of arms, and likewise when I built a house in France, named it "Corbeauchêne". The choice of an appropriate Latin name however, once I began to corres-

pond with my fellow virtuosi in that language, caused me no small amount of head-scratching. At first I considered "Franciscus Roboreus"; but that made me sound a dull wooden fellow, as though my feet were rooted in the soil and leaves sprouted from my ears. Then I tried "Franciscus Corvinus", which though it sounds scholarly enough with its suggestion of flapping black robes and musty libraries, entirely omits the oak-tree part. So in the end I settled for "Franciscus Ravecius". But you may know me throughout these histories as plain Frans Michielszoon van Raveyck while in the Low Countries (the "Michielszoon" I added later on to honour my stepfather, though patronymics were by that time somewhat fallen out of favour) or François de Ravècques when in France, or Doctor Francis Ravick in England. But in the end, as Monsieur de Montaigne so justly observes, what does a name signify other than that which men have agreed among themselves that it shall signify? I am who I am; I could be no one else even if I desired it; and I fancy that no single hair on my head would change its colour were I to have been christened either Woodlouse or Zeus King of the Gods.