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Books by
PIERRE VAN PAASSEN

DAYS OF OUR YEARS
AFRAID OF VICTORY
THE TIME IS NOW
THAT DAY ALONE
THE FORGOTTEN ALLY
EARTH COULD BE FAIR

PIERRE VAN PAASSEN

THE TOWER OF TERZEL

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The characters and situations in this work are wholly fictitious and imaginary; do not portray, and are not intended to portray, any actual persons or circumstances.

En considérant l'extrême faiblesse des hommes, les incompatibilités de leur fortune avec leur humeur, leurs malheurs toujours plus grands que leurs vices, et leurs vertus toujours moindres que leurs devoirs, je conclus qu'il n'y a de juste que la loi de l'humanité, et que le tempérament de l'indulgence.

Vauvenargues

When I reflect on the extreme weakness of men, how incompatible are their fortunes with their moods, how much greater their misfortunes are always than their vices, and how much their virtues are always inferior to their duties, I come to this conclusion—that the only just law is human kindness, and the only just disposition is leniency.

THE TOWER OF TERZEL

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Across the road from the small wayside chapel dedicated to Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows, about halfway between the flourishing village of Moorkerken and the town of Maere in East Flanders, there stood, until the German invasion of 1914, a manor house of considerable size and importance. Built in that rustic Saxon style of which few notable examples remain in the rural Netherlands, the house, as well as its vast surrounding domain, was the property of an ancient family by the name of Govaerts. An inscription hewn into the cornerstone recorded the fact that a certain Caspar Govaerts "finished putting the roof into place" on the day of St. Michael and All Angels in 1584. That was the year, it will be recalled, when the religious war in the Low Countries entered its most crucial stage, and when the fortunes of the Netherlands sank to their lowest ebb as a result of the death of William the Silent, Prince of Orange.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Guido Govaerts, a direct lineal descendant of the aforenamed Caspar, was fond of drawing the attention of his visitors to the marks of the torch on the lintel above the main entrance where the Spaniards had tried to set the house on fire at the time of their passage through the region following their defeat by Maurice of Nassau at Nieuwpoort in 1612.

Old peasants who remember the Govaerts mansion will sometimes tell the inquiring traveler that the original house stood with its back towards the sea. By this they do not mean that it was located in close proximity to the seashore, for there was a distance of a good five miles to the nearest beach. It means rather that, seen from the rear, the Govaerts place was a squat, beetle-browed structure, built low, as they say; its red-tiled, slanting roof reached nearly to the ground on the north side so as not to afford the wind from that direction an opportunity to catch hold of any protuberances and, at the same time, of course, the better to withstand the shock and fury of the storms which, as a rule, blow with intense force in that part of the world during the months of November and December.

The original house was a rather shallow structure. The front door of solid oak, furnished with a brass knocker, was flanked on either side by three tall bay windows. The seven windows in the façade upstairs, much shorter than those downstairs, were set deep in the wall. Spacious wings were added in subsequent centuries. Every generation of the Govaerts tribe, in fact, made some improvement or addition, so that at the time of which this chronicle speaks, the manor house looked very much like a square-shaped mediaeval fortress with a spacious inner courtyard. There was a double-storied east wing with six windows on each floor, and an equally long and high west wing. These wings were built at right angles to the original dwelling and were linked together in the rear by an immense stable. The stable was bisected by a covered gateway leading to the yard. Over the stables lay the rooms occupied by the farm hands permanently employed on the estate. Had it been possible to look down from the air, one would perhaps have gained the impression of a hamlet or small village with barns, peasant cottages, a granary, a coach house, a mill, a forge, tool sheds, and an indeterminate number of other smaller structures, sprawling in all directions.

The distance from the site of the former Govaerts manor to the sea may nowadays be covered on well-paved roads, and by a branch of the so-called Vicinal Railway, which connects the various resort towns and villages that have sprung up since the advent of the industrial age. In Guido Govaerts' day the area to the back of the house was, except for some level pastures and orchards immediately in the rear, a wild moorland interspersed with patches of shrubbery, stunted Lombardy poplars, pines, gnarled junipers and cedars.

Further back were fields of gigantic boulders, cast up, it seems, by some primeval volcanic eruption. Worst of all, in that area lay within living man's memory certain treacherous bogs and swamps that are known to have sucked under horse and rider in less time than it takes to say a paternoster. A narrow river, now wholly obliterated, wound its sluggish way towards the west through this wilderness of turf and slough. Beyond the moorland, still in a northwestern direction from the Govaerts manor, lay the dunes, chain upon chain of them, some of mountainous height, here and there overgrown with long yellow furze and thyme and tough ferns.

A traveler who does not venture beyond the wondrously fertile plains, the woodlands and the green fields of the Southern Netherlands can have no conception of the cruel barrenness of that region just beyond the Govaerts mansion which has been called the door or threshold of Flanders. It looks, indeed, more like the shriveled surface of an extinguished planet than the portal of a land generously dripping with milk and honey. Lizards and vipers live there, as well as hawks and black eagles and wild turkeys, foxes,

martens and yellow hares. Even an occasional wolf is encountered. But nothing grows there, except briars and brambles. The dunes are bare, pitted with the holes of adders and scorpions and scarred with limestone bones.

The area back of the Govaerts mansion is known as Vampire's Pit. Many graves have been found there, graves full of bleached and rotten bones of men, dressed in armor, who were buried with their weapons of war clasped to their breasts. Who they were—Normans, Burgundians, Englishmen, Italians, Spaniards or Austrians—cannot now be established. Men of all nations fought over that ground and drenched it with their blood. Indeed, since time immemorial the whole of Flanders has been an entrenched camp, the cockpit of Europe, a land torn asunder by factional strife, by hostile incursions, wars and revolutions. As long as men remember, the land has been studded with redoubts and serrated by long lines of strongholds and fieldworks on which time has laid a heavy hand, so that their moldering remnants can only be found today, if at all, by the excavator and the archaeologist.

It is reasonably certain that Vampire's Pit was one of the hiding places of the *Gueux* or Water Beggars, those patriots who, during the Spanish occupation of the Netherlands, went upon the high seas as pirates and buccaneers to harass the fleets of bigoted Philip II. Vampire's Pit is said to be one of the places where the Beggars cached their loot. Doubtless the weird signal of the rooster's crow answered by the lark's warbling notes, which served those partisans as challenge and password, was often heard in that savage retreat of rock and sand and pathless wilderness.

But there also, behind the safety of the dune walls, took place the festivals of rejoicing following a victory on land or sea, as when one or more of Medina Celi's well-stocked galleons fell into the patriots' hands and was towed into the sandy channels off the coast. Then the pipers piped and the drums and tambourines were thumped with an earsplitting roar for days and nights on end. Then wagonloads of women and girls rolled past the Govaerts farm from all over the Flemish Netherlands into those inhospitable regions where no Spanish *caballero* dared follow for fear of being caught and sent back to the Bloody Duke[1] with his nose and ears missing. Then the wine flowed in torrents. Barrels of smuggled spirits were staved in. The rolls of golden *caroli* which the Spanish king had intended for his generals and grandees were distributed among the women and girls, while the dunes resounded with the echo of their shouts and laughter, their love songs and the exciting wail of the primitive *dudelsack*.

[1] Don Alvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alva, who was sent by Philip of Spain to quell the revolt in the Netherlands.

Westward in the direction of France and eastward, to and beyond the border of Holland, the dunes stretch in an unbroken jagged line. In our time the destructive erosion and sand drifts have been brought under control by the prodigious efforts of the Belgian Government. Decades ago, in Guido Govaerts' day, the dune hills were still in constant motion, edging towards the sea in one generation, receding inland in the next. Sometimes the wind changed the contour of that chain of sandy mounds overnight.

The battle against wind and water, fought to a successful conclusion in recent years, was started in the eleventh century by the monkish orders, chiefly Cistercians, who built their religious houses on the dunes, such as the famous Abbey of the Dunes near the present fishing village of Coxyde which was one of the richest and most splendid monasteries in Flanders. It was a storehouse of precious manuscripts and hundreds of those wonderfully illustrated missals which are preserved in the museums of the Netherlands. The Abbey itself was swallowed up by the sea, but the work of the monks, who reclaimed the soil and turned a savage and inhospitable desert into a fertile oasis, still stands.

Behind the wall of sand was the great sea, the creator of the dunes, which in a single day could sweep them away again, as it had done more than once, and build up another area of sand and wild grass. The dunes sloped down towards the water in beaches of soft sand. The sea ran swiftly there because it moved in a channel, of which the farther shore lay under water, but very near the surface. There were hidden reefs thereabouts and so-called *wadden*, a Flemish word meaning submerged islands. These huge masses of clay were once part of the mainland. In the eleventh century they were torn loose in the titanic storms and tidal waves which crashed down upon the Flemish land. The largest and most fertile of these drowned islands was called Menardkerken. Another was Hoeveland.

One still has a sense of silent catastrophe in looking from one of the barren dune hills at the submerged land which is visible at low tide just below the waves. The horizon is grey, perhaps, dull and low, of inexpressible melancholy. Here and there the fine yellow sand dances before the breeze in wreaths and puffs, as of sulphurous smoke from a volcano. The furze shivers as if a singeing fire had touched its roots. It is as if one were standing on the blind verge of infinity, at the very edge of the world where God Himself despaired and left off transforming the chaos into cosmos.

But it was not ever thus. Not always were the wilderness and the water triumphant. Once that land now under the sea was peopled with a happy and prosperous multitude. Vast herds of cattle and sheep grazed upon those fields. There orchards bore rich fruit. There grain ripened. Flax grew, flowers and trees stood on the borders of the meadows, bread was baked, wool was combed, and linen was woven; a whole nation drew sustenance from this now submerged soil. Once there were cities upon those hidden islands, cities and villages and roads and churches and schools and monasteries and town halls of a design no longer known. Children played in the square, lovers walked in the lanes, kermesses and fairs were held, mead and beer were brewed, wars were fought on the highways. . . .

On the mainland, opposite the sunken islands, stands the ruined *Steen* or Castle of Terzel. This stronghold was the ancestral home of the Govaerts family. The tidal waves of the thirteenth century almost miraculously stopped short at the base of its towers and defense works. In subsequent ages the sea again threw up an outer wall of dunes for its protection, so that what remains of the castle today lies between two parallel rows of dunes, and no longer stands on the very edge of the shore.

Until recently the story was current that the Lord and Lady of Terzel and all their menservants and maidservants were spared in the great flood because no less than five of their children had gone forth on that maddest of the Crusades to liberate the tomb of the Saviour from the hands of the Turk. The five innocents did not return, no more than the tens of thousands of others whose defenselessness was deemed a stronger weapon than the knightly sword. In return for the sacrifice made by the parents, God, it is said, commanded the waters to halt when they reached the Castle of Terzel after overwhelming and blotting out the neighboring communities.

A square, stunted, but massive tower, in one corner of which ran a spiral stone staircase of one hundred and fifty steps, was all that remained of the castle in the days of Guido Govaerts. The rest—its banquet hall, bedrooms, stables, battlements and triple walls—was a heap of moss- and grass-covered, broken masonry. It was Toussaint Govaerts, the father of Caspar, who was responsible for the destruction of the *Steen*. He was the last Lord of Terzel and the ruin of the castle was his tomb, for he lay buried under the pile of rubble, brick and stone.

It came about in this manner:

One night in the late autumn of the year 1572, a man garbed in the gown of the Augustinians presented himself at the drawbridge and asked for

admission. It was a time of war and rumors of war, with bands of soldiers roaming the countryside, looting and burning. As a precaution, the drawbridge of Terzel Castle was raised at sundown and not lowered till full daylight. The monk stated that he was on a preaching mission in East Flanders on orders of the Bishop of Bruges, and that he had been surprised by the descent of night. The drawbridge was lowered and he was admitted into the castle. Dangerous as the times were, Toussaint Govaerts felt that a man of God should not be left to freeze and hunger so long as a warm corner and an abundance of food were available.

After having washed himself, the monk was introduced into the banquet hall where Toussaint, his wife and three daughters were at supper. The friar was a foreigner and spoke but few words of Flemish, a circumstance which immediately aroused the suspicion of Toussaint. How much preaching could a Spaniard do in a country where his language was almost unknown and, besides, was universally detested as the tongue of a cruel oppressor? Toussaint kept his eye on the brother mendicant all evening, but in the end he grew drowsy under the influence of the rich viands and wines of which he had partaken as generously as usual. The Flemings, as Master Rabelais has observed, were not only a warlike and hardy race, they were also brisk topers. Toussaint Govaerts was no exception.

Around ten o'clock, after listening to the visitor's pious stories, Messire Toussaint and the members of his family withdrew to their apartments. The monk was given a comfortable bed in one of the upper rooms, and the peace of night descended on the old *Steen* of Terzel and its occupants.

But it seems that about the time the clocktower struck eleven, the friar rose from his couch and went downstairs. To the men on guard in the hallway he pleaded illness. Holding his hands to his stomach and moaning as if he were in agony, he asked for a place on the bench by their side to warm himself in front of the hearth. He explained that he had eaten and drunk too well of the food and wines which the good host had so amply provided. As a poor mendicant, vowed to a life of poverty and abstinence, he was not accustomed to the sumptuous fare on the tables of Terzel. He had been led into temptation and was now paying for his sins. He must go outside. He must catch a breath of fresh air or perish. The pain in his bowels was unbearable. The monk seemed genuinely in distress, and the watchmen drew the bolt for him. Outside they heard him retch and vomit in the moat. Then all was quiet as they waited for him to return.

Suddenly they heard the chains of the drawbridge rattle through the hawsers. The bridge came down with a booming crash. When they ran

outside, the friar was gone. Instead, a company of Spanish soldiers with uplifted swords was racing over the lowered bridge.

The alarm was sounded. Dogs barked frantically. Men ran back and forth along the corridors, clattering up and down the stairs. There was shouting and tumult. The clash of swords was heard. Shots were fired. Women screamed.

The Spaniards hewed down the first Flemings they encountered, and quickly forced themselves into the castle. But by this time, men came pouring down the stairs and from the rear to the aid of the badly outnumbered watchmen. The Spaniards used their daggers against the Flemings, who had had no time to don their armor, and a terrific battle ensued.

The defenders were forced to give ground from the start. They might have been able to make a stand at the top of the broad staircase and on the balcony, and from there have counter-attacked, but the Spaniards received reinforcements from a company of infantry which had forced an entrance through the rear of the banquet hall. No matter how many of the attackers Toussaint and his men flung from the balcony, there were always more dashing up for the assault.

Toussaint soon realized that his was a lost cause. The enemy was superior in men and equipment. Half of his own guards were *hors de combat* or unable to get into the fray because of the cramped quarters. He therefore ordered one of his trusted lieutenants to find the Lady Govaerts and her daughters and conduct them, by way of a secret stairway in the rear of the castle and an underground passage, into the dunes where they would be out of danger. He ordered another man to go down to the cellar by a back stairway and open the barrels of gunpowder which were stored below. The man was to scoop the gunpowder into his helmet and sprinkle it on the floor and stairs leaving a thin, unbroken trail of the explosive from the cellar to the balcony in the banquet hall.

Swift as lightning the Flemings rushed at their foes. They were like a living death, hacking the Spaniards with their swords, lunging, stabbing, or felling them with their bare fists. The leader of the Castilian company, one Don Fernando d'Avila, forged upwards over the heap of wounded and slain, making straight for the spot where Toussaint Govaerts stood at the top of the stairs.

Toussaint caught the attacker on the point of his sword and, as the man missed his grasp on the balcony, quickly heaved him over the banister. There was one fearsome cry as Don Fernando crashed on the flagstones below.

The second in command headed the next onrush. He, too, was hurled high in the air, like a stone from a catapult. There was another crash as his armored carcass struck the pavement. Then he stirred no more. Seeing the Spaniards dismayed by the death of their leaders, Toussaint and his men took advantage of their momentary discomfiture. They rushed down the stairs and managed to drive the attackers back to the great doorway. But at the foot of the stairway Toussaint was gravely wounded by a poniard in his side. He staggered back up the stairs.

When he saw that his lieutenants had returned from their respective missions, and he knew that his wife and children were safe and that the gunpowder was in place, he withdrew into one of the bedrooms that gave on the balcony.

The Spaniards shouted victory. Like a pack of wolves they came darting up the stairway. The hall and all the rooms downstairs were crowded with them. Others tried to press in from outside. It seemed as if the whole of the Bloody Duke's army was arrayed against the Castle of Terzel.

While the Spaniards battered down the door behind which the last Flemings had barricaded themselves, Toussaint Govaerts made the sign of the cross and calmly applied a torch to the trail of gunpowder on the floor. There was a short hissing sound and a flash as the powder caught fire. Then, with the speed of lightning, a sizzling snake of smoke writhed over the floor and down the back stairway. An instant later there was a deafening explosion and the main building leaped into the air.

That was the Samson-like end of Toussaint Govaerts, of the Castle of Terzel, and of at least four hundred of the Duke of Alva's dreaded infantry.

Toussaint's son Caspar, who was with the army of Louis of Nassau, brother of the Prince of Orange, when the disaster occurred, did not restore the castle. And all that remained of the once proud *Steen*, which served as the guardian of the sea approaches to the Flemish coast during the first part of the Eighty Years' War, was the stunted tower where Guido's children often played.

The tower stood some fifty or sixty feet from the pile of rubble under which rested the bones of Toussaint and his attackers. There were three floors, each containing three small rooms and one large hall with a fireplace. The top floor, once the clock room from which had been struck the castle's hour of doom, was inhabited by bats and crows, and was strewn with all manner of debris. From the flat roof with its balustrade of solid stone, Guido's boys could look over the length and breadth of Flanders. They

could count no less than fifty-nine church steeples ranged in a wide semi-circle around their paternal home in the valley.

On national holidays, such as the day when the Flemish people commemorate the Battle of the Golden Spurs, in which the flower of the French nobility was destroyed by the burghers and peasants of the Low Countries, the sons of Guido were in the habit of flying the flag of Flanders, with the black lion rampant on a yellow field, from the roof. Colas, Guido's second son, claimed that from the ramparts of the old *Steen* he could see the colossal tower of Veere on the island of Walcheren to the north. This seemed an exaggeration, although the city of Bruges and its score of steeples lying in the other direction were distinctly visible on a clear day.

The section of beach from the Tower of Terzel to the Holland border is called Christopher Bay, after the black-bearded Saint Christopher who is said to have lived thereabouts before the parishes of Menardkerken and Hoeveland were swallowed by the sea. Of course, the good Christopher's sojourn in Flanders is as much a figment of pious imagination as the landing of the three Marys in the South of France. According to the *Acta Sanctorum*, Christopher was a native of pagan Syria and suffered martyrdom under the Emperor Decius in the early part of the third century, a time when the history of Flanders was still enveloped in impenetrable fog. But that makes little difference to the Flemish peasants who have, in emulation of painters like Matsys and Memling, adopted and appropriated Saint Christopher in the same manner as they have localized the Gospel story by placing the birth, miracles and passions of Christ in a setting curiously reminiscent of the environment of Ghent and Antwerp.

As the painting by the brothers Van Eyck on the wall of the cathedral in Gouda shows, Christopher was a man of extraordinary height. He measured no less than twenty feet, and is reputed to have been the strongest human being on earth since Goliath the Philistine. As in Syria, so in Flanders, Christopher made his living as a fisherman. On occasion, he also served as ferryman between the beach on the mainland and the parish of Menardkerken.

One evening, towards dusk, so the legend goes, Christopher had been repairing his nets and was strolling by the waterside looking at the sky and at the birds flying overhead when he was approached by a small boy who asked to be taken across. The last ferry had left and the tide was running low. The giant ferryman took delight in the boy and gladly hoisted him to his shoulders and started for the opposite shore. Hundreds of times he had carried belated travelers to their homes in Menardkerken when the ebb made the launching of a boat impossible.

All went well, the boy and his bearer laughed happily together until they reached the middle of the channel where there was only a trickle of shallow, muddy water. Scarcely had Christopher set foot in the streamlet when, without any warning sign or discernible cause, the water began to rise rapidly. Christopher at once lengthened his stride but the water kept pace with him. In an astonishingly short time it came up to his knees and then to his waist. Thinking of the possibility of returning to the beach, the ferryman glanced around for a moment. What he saw made him quickly give up the idea of turning back.

Behind him the sea was rising like a black coiling monster that seemed bent on snatching his burden from his arms. As its growling roar grew more menacing, Christopher redoubled his efforts to escape from its frightful grasp. The safety of the island's shore seemed near at hand. In another instant he would be on firm land. But now the storm lashed at him as if it were jealous and desperate. The water rose to the dimensions of a flood. The waves came up to his breast, to his mouth. Whipped into fury, the elements fought against him with all their might. The wind, fierce and cold, blew in his face. Bravely, but not a little frightened, Christopher pressed onward. The swirling undercurrents nearly swept him off his feet. Summoning all his strength, he fought his way forward foot by foot until at last the island's shore lay within reach of his hands. With one final mighty effort he staggered out of the water. They were safe.

Still shaken by the ordeal and panting for breath, Christopher put down the child and looked at it. Only then did he realize that he had carried the meaning of the world—hence his name, Christophorus, he who carries Christ.

Saint Mary the Virgin's convent was built on the spot where Christopher picked up the divine burden. But the convent was washed away in the great flood of the thirteenth century. All that remained was the footprints of the Christ boy in the sand. In 1793, at the time of the French invasion, the monks carried away this precious relic which bore witness to the Saviour's last visit on earth. A succeeding generation of monks forgot where its predecessors had placed the relic. That it was securely hidden, in the crypt of some old church or monastery, perhaps in an iron coffer in some neglected garret or under the flagstones of a humble peasant cottage, of this there was never any doubt. Hundreds of pious souls, forgetting the world, have searched diligently for it since that time as for a pearl of great price.

And still the quest goes on. For in each generation men and women abandon father and mother and love and riches to go in search of the sacred footprints. And well it is that there always have been such. For it was said of old that he who seeks shall find and to him that knocks shall be opened. When the footprints of Christ are found, the world will weep tears of joy, for the hour of its redemption will have struck.

Then, according to the ancient prophecy, will ring out the bell of Saint Christopher in the Mary Tower on the drowned island of Menardkerken. From that island, which was the first to sink beneath the waves, will sound the signal for the resurrection of the dead.

At God's command the island will rise from the ocean as pure and lovely as a bride adorned for her bridegroom. The slime and filth of centuries of submersion will be washed away in a haze of fine golden dust. The sea will pour off the land as the melting snow runs down the hillocks in springtime. The east wind will dry the soil, and the trees and the grass, suffocated by the salty silt for centuries, will suddenly spring back to life and into full bloom.

With the trees will slowly become visible the pillars and the archways, the flying buttresses, the aerial galleries, the moldings, the capitals and the marble columns set with precious stones of the sunken cathedral of Menardkerken. Mysteriously lighted by a golden sun, its steepled towers will gleam through the mists as they rise slowly towards the sky. Fires will seem to have been kindled behind the stained-glass windows. The rays of the sun, clinging to the pink marble, will make the walls seem to vibrate as if they were living beings in whom is the breath of life.

Then the swelling notes of great organs and the sound of an immense choir will rise from the depths of the church. A host of maidens and boys dressed in white robes will advance to the shore. Led by priests in their most splendid vestments, swinging silver censers and perfuming the air with the sweet smell of aloes, their heads crowned with the martyrs' diadem, the immense throng of the redeemed will stand by the water's edge and stretch forth their hands in supplication to be reunited with the Flemish motherland.

And from all the wide land as far as the eye can reach, and beyond the horizon, from Brussels and Maastricht, from Antwerp and Cadzant, even from the mountains of the Ardennes and the valleys of the Meuse, the people will make themselves ready to meet their brothers who were long lost and have been found again.

And the multitudes will fall on their knees and weep with gladness.

And their song will rise upwards till it reaches the highest heavens, even the mansions of the Lord, where the angels will join in a dance of holy

ecstasy. Then God Himself, says the legend, will shake with laughter as His children both in heaven and on earth unite in happiness and adoration forever.

But above the singing and the chanting and the laughter of that day will sound the sweet tinkle of the Bell of Saint Christopher in the Mary Tower, which will be heard clearest in the old manor house of Moorkerken where Guido Govaerts lived. For that is the nearest human habitation.

2

Rising from his armchair, where he had been sitting motionless before the dying wood fire since suppertime, Guido Govaerts looked at the waterclock on the mantelpiece, casually brushed the tobacco ashes off his clothes and began to walk slowly to and fro, up and down the enormous room which took up the entire ground floor of the east wing in the old manor house.

Guido's hands were loosely clasped behind his back, his greying head bent forward pensively so that his chin nearly touched the strands of the golden necklace which he, in common with a few other Flemish landowners of the old stamp, still wore in token of their wealth and their noble descent.

There is a life-sized painting of Guido Govaerts from the hand of his son Colas in the burgomaster's room in the town hall of Moorkerken. It is of a man well above average in height, broadshouldered, with a clean-shaven face, a ruddy-colored skin and a firm but delicately modeled mouth.

He is shown in a frock coat, a high wing collar and a flowing black tie, while he holds a large black hat in his left hand and an umbrella in the right. It is probably the costume he wore when he attended sessions of the township council, or when he went to Antwerp or to Maere on business. This evening he was dressed peasant-fashion, in a collarless, close-fitting sleeved-vest, with a double row of gilt buttons running down the front. His trousers were tucked into heavy, thick-soled boots which reached halfway to his knees. Around his waist was a broad leather belt studded with copper nailheads.

Seeing him in a different environment, with his florid complexion and his slightly rocking walk, a stranger might very well have taken him for a Dutch sea captain. His back was as straight as a candle. His step and his movements in general were as solid and deliberate as those of a commander on the bridge of an ocean liner. In England and other foreign countries Guido Govaerts would perhaps have been called a squire, or a gentleman farmer, for he was unquestionably the richest man in the district of Moorkerken and his influence extended far beyond the confines of that

parish. To the peasants of the neighborhood he was simply known as *Heer* Guido, the word *heer* meaning lord, master, or merely sir. It is a term of deference, and no longer carries, as formerly it did, a connotation of hereditary nobility or aristocracy.

After half a dozen rounds of the room, Guido stopped abruptly before a concealed door in the paneling of the wall. He opened it and peered down the dimly lit, narrow passage leading to the stables. The warm smell of a hundred head of cattle invaded the room. He raised his head and sniffed the air testingly. Having reassured himself that all the lamps in the stable were extinguished, he closed the door and resumed his slow pacing. With a furtive eye he now also watched the play of shadows on the wall and across the massive sideboard. As he approached the oil lamp hanging above the long oaken table in the middle of the room, he saw his shadow grow to fantastic, almost monstrous proportions. His head seemed to become detached from his body and to roll on by itself amidst the smoke-blackened crossbeams on the ceiling. A moment later, when he drew nearer to the so-called Lord God's corner where three wax candles burned before a white marble statue of the Saviour, the black shape on the wall shrank into the outline of a misshapen dwarf. With an involuntary shudder, Guido turned his eyes away from the ungainly apparition.

Now and then he sighed as a man who endures physical discomfort or pain, or who carries the weight of an undivulged secret in his soul. Several times he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand or, coming to a brief standstill in his wanderings around the table, he shook his head in an impatient, half-angry manner as if seeking to cast off some disturbing thought. His pipe had gone out, but he still kept its short clay stem tightly clamped between his teeth.

He was scratching his cheeks and chin meditatively when he heard the swishing sound of a sudden downpour on the shuttered windows. He stopped in his tracks, cocked his head to one side and stood listening to the rain. Then he shrugged indifferently and went on pacing the sagging polished boards, which creaked and groaned under his weight at every step. He was not troubled about the long rainy spell they had had that year, although spring was far advanced and work on his estate, as everywhere else, lagged seriously behind.

No, it wasn't the rain that worried Guido. That evening his mind ran on far more serious matters. The crops would ripen anyway, he thought. They always did. Perhaps a little later than last year; what did it matter? Two weeks hence, at Pentecost, the cattle would be taken from their winter quarters, and moved into the young-green meadows. As was customary, he

had ordered linseed from Riga. That would still come in time for the sowing. The Russians were punctual; he could count on them. Right after his visit to the fall fair in Antwerp, where he intended to buy a new pair of dray horses, he would repair the wings of the windmill and put a fresh layer of tar on its roof. In December he would go to Furnes for the annual procession of the Sacred Host. The whole year's program passed before his mind's eye. It did not differ essentially from the ordinary run of things in other years. Guido Govaerts knew precisely what was going to happen and when, for he was the master and his word was law.

There is a time for everything, he said to himself in an undertone, a time for sowing and a time for reaping, a time to laugh. . . . Yes, and a time to take stock of one's life and to search one's heart, as he found himself doing almost in spite of himself that evening. He wondered what had plunged him into so melancholic and depressed a mood. That day of all days! Could it be the weather, the incessant rain and the dreary, wan light of the sun?

"Bah, it always rains in Flanders," he grumbled. Never before had a little rain dampened his spirits or upset his equanimity. To the contrary! Heer Guido would probably not have admitted it in so many words, for he stood on his dignity, but it was nevertheless true that he rather liked the rain, and the more rain the better. It could blow and howl and pour and he would be not a whit the less cheerful on account of it. As a matter of fact the members of his household had noticed more than once that the Heer of Moorkerken's spirits seemed to rise in the measure that an ordinary, every-day drizzle changed to a veritable cloudburst. That was something in the Govaerts blood. Wind and rain drew those men outside as others might be tempted by a clear spring day. Guido's father, the old *patroon*, had been about in all kinds of weather. Storm was his element. The peasants still spoke of it as "a real Govaerts night" when the autumn winds came up suddenly and in fierce blasts stripped the last vestige of verdure from orchards and fields.

Guido recalled now that it was a chance remark by Modeste Verhagen at breakfast which had plunged him into that somber mood. Modeste was his major-domo, the oldest worker on the estate, an immovable and indispensable fixture in the affairs of the farm. The villagers called him the *Remplaçant*, for he replaced the Heer of Moorkerken on occasion. He was the bookkeeper and the superintendent, the master's alter ego, a respected and very useful person in spite of his age. Yes, it was Modeste's greeting which had cast a pall over Guido's spirit. When Modeste had spoken, the future suddenly appeared before Guido as a tattered rag flapping in the wind.

"God's blessing on you, Heer Guido," Modeste had said as he sat down to breakfast. "God's blessing on you. You're sixty today. . . ."

He had stopped short as he saw a cloud pass over the *patroon's* face. He, too, remembered suddenly. For it was at the age of sixty that Guido's father had been carried off by a galloping inflammation of the lungs following the drinking of a cup of ice-cold water from the well on a hot summer day. Master and servant finished their meal in silence, and Guido went off in the rain in the direction of the village of Moorkerken. He did not return till dusk, and then came back by way of the wild dune lands and the shore. All that day, even when he was eating his favorite dish of rabbit pasties at the hostelry of "The Golden Trumpet" in the village, the words of Modeste had stayed with him. The phrase ran in his head like a haunting refrain. He could not shake off its disturbing spell. Even now, in the evening, it soured his existence.

"You're sixty today, Heer Guido. Sixty! Thunders and sacraments," he swore. "Threescore years!" He repeated the Psalmist's words perhaps for the hundredth time that day. "Threescore years . . . and maybe ten more if we're very strong. I've never before troubled myself about the passage of time. What has come over me? What's the matter with me?" The thought would not leave him.

He walked over to one of the windows, pulled it open and pushed the wooden shutters out. The smell of broken earth wet with spring rain came into the room. The air was heavy with moisture, but the rain had stopped as suddenly as it had started. Guido peered into the night and filled his lungs from the soft breeze. Light from the big oil lamp fell over his shoulders. It lit up the wet, gleaming boughs of the apple trees outside. He thought he saw something move in the orchard and heard the scrape of footsteps on the gravel path directly beneath his window. He leaned forward to locate the source of the sound. But the turning of the door knob in the room behind him diverted his attention. He looked around inquiringly. It was Modeste, noisily clicking and shuffling his slippers, carrying a tray of glassware.

"That's Maria out there," Modeste said, suspecting the reason for Guido's presence at the open window. "She has a young soldier with her, and it has been going on for hours. . . ."

"Let them be, for God's sake and for Christ's sake," said Guido with caustic bitterness, as he poured himself a glass of brandy from the decanter. "What did you do at their age—darn your socks or what?" he asked almost angrily.

He had not wanted to say that. He had wanted to say, “I confess I was churlish and unreasonable with you this morning.” Modeste was not an ordinary servant. He was a brother in spirit, an old friend to whom Guido was attached as to a father. He did not want to ruffle the old man’s sensibilities. But the agitation in his own heart had not passed and he said: “Are you jealous of the young people? Can’t they have a little happiness?”

“It’s not that, Heer Guido,” Modeste replied humbly. “But that girl, that Maria, simply can’t keep her eyes open in the morning. Yesterday she spilt a pail of milk. . . . Last week she fell into the mire pit. . . . She’s drunk with sleep in the morning. . . . It’s nothing less than scandalous.” The old man shook his head disapprovingly. “And in such weather, and right under your window. . . .”

“What has the weather to do with it?” Guido asked, his face suddenly breaking into a broad smile for the first time that day. “You’re more likely to strike fire in beating the water than to keep the tabbies in the house when they feel that way. What can you do about it?” he asked, draining a second glass of brandy. “I myself made love in the snow when I was in garrison at Bruges. Thunders! I was really forced to do it, you might say; a fellow hadn’t another place to take his girl in that holy city. When I come to think of it, her name, too, was Maria!”

He chuckled, for that was one of the most pleasant recollections of his youth. Modeste smiled a wry smile and nodded his wizened old head. He always smiled wryly.

Guido wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his vest and began filling his pipe. He turned to Modeste who stood by the window holding up his hand in a warning gesture as if to say, what’s that I hear?

“What you hear out there, Modeste, old friend,” said Guido laughingly, “is the sap rising in the trees. That’s our good Mother Flanders swelling and growing. There will be a bumper crop this year. Mark my word! The air is full of love!”

But Modeste would not so quickly be appeased. “I don’t recall so brazen a hussy as that Maria as long as I’ve been on this estate,” he went on, muttering and shaking his head, as he pulled in the shutters and closed the window. “Imagine the shamelessness, the gall of it, bringing her lover right under the master’s window.”

“Ah, Modeste,” Guido said soothingly, “she made no calculations about it, you may be sure. When a woman is in love, she’s oblivious to her environment and to the whole universe. They simply can’t help it, Modeste. And I must tell you frankly, I rather like this Maria. I like to see her walk

across the barnyard. There's a pleasant swing to her hips. Upon my soul, it does me good to see her. She has a body like a snake. She's a piquant little woman, Modeste. I wouldn't have been disappointed at all if I could have listened a bit to her cooing and babble just now. Do you know that Urbain thinks it's the best entertainment in the world to listen to a pair of lovers sighing and moaning and billing and cooing and kissing and telling each other all kinds of foolish things."

"Where does he hear that, in the confessional?" Modeste raised his bushy eyebrows in surprise.

"Heavens, no!" Guido burst into laughter. "People don't speak of their love affairs to their confessors. They go to the priest only with their woes and troubles after the damage has been done, you know that. Uncle Urbain has another way of finding out the secrets of love in Maere. His vegetable plot adjoins the park that runs around the cathedral. That park is the Garden of Venus, you might say, the temple of love, the lovers' lane of Maere. All the young ones gather there at night. Winter or summer, rain or snow, it makes not the slightest difference. Now you must remember that the benches in that park stand with their backs against the garden wall of the vicarage. All Uncle Urbain has to do is take off his shoes and step on a chair and lean over the top of the wall and he can hear every word that's said or whispered on the other side. Such goings-on! *Fantastique!*

"Of course," he went on, "the young lovers can't see Urbain and he can't see them, for he waits till dark before he mounts his observation post. At times he has to bite his lips to keep from laughing out loud. Once he actually tumbled off his chair when he heard a fellow call his girl by all the birds' names he could think of. Little can, cana, canary," Guido mimicked, "sweet turtle dovekin, cuckoo, cuckoo-roo dear. . . ."

Modeste interrupted by clearing his throat. "If you will excuse me," he said, throwing Guido a disapproving side-long glance, while the prominent Adam's apple in his scrawny neck moved nervously up and down, "I don't call that a very edifying pastime for a priest. I really thought the Heer Vicar of Maere had more sense."

Guido roared with laughter. "They miss a great deal, Modeste, the priests do, I mean. Let us not begrudge them a little vicarious pleasure. Besides, that innocent little game of spying by Uncle Urbain is very useful. In several instances, after listening to certain conversations on those park benches, he has been able to drop a word, a suggestion, a hint, in the right place just at the right moment. And he has prevented some bad scandals in the town of Maere, and in some of the best families, too, take it from me. . . ."

Guido scraped the ashes together on the hearth and threw on a few fresh sticks of pine. He sat down in the armchair to watch the wood catch fire. Modeste had taken a seat by the table. The superintendent's gnarled hands lay in front of him. They were heavily veined and colored like a duck's webfoot. His white hair was closely cropped, baring a flat skull and making his face appear broader. His extraordinarily long and pointed nose was generally taken for a sign of shrewdness in business. He was reputed to be a man who knew how to think for himself. The truth was that he never committed himself on any question of importance. However, his significant silences only served to strengthen his reputation for subtlety and wisdom. When he spoke he was in the habit of plucking at his yellowish mustache. His lower lip pouted somewhat as if he were aware that he was making an important statement. At moments his dark and lively eyes sparkled feverishly, then died down despondently under the cover of his white eyelashes.

Guido urged him to take a drink. "Uncle Modeste," he said, using the term by which the old superintendent was familiarly known in the neighborhood, "take at least one glass to warm yourself. You have your years like everybody else. Besides, this weather makes for rheumatism. It gets into your bones. . . ."

Modeste's face wrinkled graciously, but he shook his head. Was Heer Guido aware, he asked, that last year at this time the flax was already in the ground? Did he know that they had had new potatoes on the table on the eighteenth of June, the anniversary of Waterloo, and that not a single furrow had so far been plowed this year? Modeste repeated all the old sayings about April being a dirty cheat and about May being as unreliable as a lying old witch. Such weather as they had had this spring he hadn't seen in all his seventy-two years. It made prisoners of men and beasts. You rode from one chair to the other in front of the fire, burned your shins and lost your temper while itching to go to work. If Heer Guido wanted to know the real truth about the matter, he would tell him. It looked very much as if something had happened to the sun.

To be sure, the sun was sick. Something had gone wrong up on high; Modeste pointed upwards. Couldn't that be? he asked Guido seriously. Couldn't it be that the machinery had grown rusty, that some bolt or other had become loose, or that a catch had slipped so that the sun could not be lifted to its proper place at the appointed time? Didn't a broken spring in the carillon at Moorkerken sometimes prevent the bells from ringing out? "Definitely, something is amiss up there!" Modeste said with finality,

nodding his head. “Perhaps the sun has lost her way and is whirling around like a crazy wheel up there in the void. . . .”

Guido began to say that the wind would soon blow a hole in the clouds and dry up the land, when footsteps were heard in the hall. Presently a young man dressed in the cassock of a seminarist came into the room. The boy’s resemblance to Guido was so striking that no one could for a moment have doubted the nature of their relationship. Father and son were of the same height and build, and they had the same mannerisms and features except that Sylvain’s pale face seemed of a finer, more spiritual grain. There was something almost feminine about the boy’s movements.

Sylvain was Guido’s youngest son. He had come home for the Christmas vacation the winter before, and had not yet returned to the school at Roesselaere where he was a student for the priesthood. There was nothing mysterious or reprehensible about this prolonged absence from the seminary. The boy suffered from an ailment which no one had been able to diagnose. There had been several alarming fainting spells. At times he seemed to experience difficulty in breathing in the classroom. With this went a general physical lassitude which his teachers attributed to decline in strength and the beginning, perhaps, of consumption. At any rate the Superior at Roesselaere had written the Heer of Moorkerken expressing deep concern over the young man’s health.

Guido was not so easily frightened. He suspected the true nature of affairs at once. “We men of the Govaerts breed,” he told Modeste when the unfavorable reports about Sylvain’s health began to arrive, “are simply not made for study and books. We have to be up and doing, out there with the plow and the horses, in the stable, in the sawmill, in the fields. When he was a student, Uncle Urbain went through the same trouble as Sylvain. A man can’t suddenly become a bookworm when his fathers have been tramping the clay for a thousand years. That takes some adjusting.”

Sylvain was a prodigious reader and the library at Roesselaere was well stocked with works on Flemish folklore, history and poetry. Through these Sylvain had ranged at will for two long years. The strain had simply been too great. Something had snapped. Rest was the only cure, and ample doses of fresh country air.

The boy had spent the last few months on the farm, most days in dreamy inactivity. On others he would go off alone, rambling all over the estate and over the district, inventing and pouring forth endless stories to himself in which one adventure flowed out of the other, and the tale flowed from one day to the next. In the evening he sat by the fireside talking with his father or staring into the flames. His gaze seemed then to take on an expectant

quality. Sometimes it almost seemed to transform him into a stranger. When the evening was warm, father and son often walked up and down the poplar-lined road together.

This evening Sylvain was unusually late. He had left the house shortly after daybreak and had not come in for the noonday meal or for supper. Guido looked at his son with a questioning glance as he entered the room. The boy's cassock was wet, his boots were splashed with mud.

Before approaching his father and Modeste, the young man turned in the direction of the Lord God's corner, bowed his head and crossed himself. Then he came nearer and stood by the table opposite Modeste.

"I would have been earlier," he said with a smile that illumined his whole face, "but I met one of the Teniers children on the road, and I was delayed. It was little Elise, you know, Father. Her mother had sent her to Moorkerken to look for Antoine. . . ."

"Who was drinking his head off, as usual, I suppose," interrupted Guido.

"Yes, he was. I sent the girl back, and went to look for her father myself. It was such foul weather that the child might have come to harm; she had only a thin cotton dress on and a shawl around her neck. . . ." He turned towards the door saying he wanted to look for something to eat. But Guido's next question drew him back.

"Did you find Antoine?"

"Yes, I found him. He was lying by the side of the road near 'The Black Knight'. . . ."

"The filthy pig!" Modeste exclaimed. "All those Teniers boys are good-for-nothing sots and drunkards. They are the most worthless, contemptible workers in the district. They let their wives and children starve, and think of nothing but swilling strong drink. Nothing can be done with them. The best thing is to leave them to their swinish fate. The eldest brother drowned in the Meye River two years ago. Just walked in one dark night. Drunk, too. It's a godforsaken crew. . . ."

"God never forsakes any man, Uncle Modeste," Sylvain suddenly spoke up, his face reddening.

Guido ignored his son's remark. "What did you do with Antoine?"

"I took him home."

"That's five miles from the tavern. Could he walk?"

"I carried him part of the way," Sylvain said. "He was quite sober when he reached home. His wife was waiting for him at the door. I told them

Antoine could come here when the plowing gets under way. They were so glad. . . ."

Modeste looked at the boy with a mixture of amazement and disgust on his face. Guido was silent for a moment. "You must not exert yourself that way, my boy," he said, "it can't be good for you. . . ."

"There's no use bringing that fellow here," Modeste said angrily. "He'll work one week, collect his wages on Saturday night, and go and soak himself in whisky. His wife will never see a cent of his money. It's a wasted effort. We've had that man here a dozen times. It's always the same story. . . ."

"If Father agrees to let him come to work," Sylvain said to Modeste, taking a step nearer so that the light of the big lamp above the table shone full in his face, "if Father agrees to that, Antoine promises never to touch another drop."

Modeste gasped in astonishment. But Guido nodded. His son's eyes were looking straight into his own. They were curious eyes, of the lightest blue and very changeable. Sometimes there was in the boy's eyes that softness and purity which is found in those of people continually concentrated upon some cherished pursuit. At other moments, as this evening, they seemed strangely inexpressive, with the filmed unobservant look of an eagle. It was impossible to tell whether they looked far into the distance or inwardly. They seemed fixed in a stare, in perpetual surprise, as if they beheld strange and wondrous things that were hidden and unknown to others. The country folk ascribed special powers to persons who had eyes like the youngest Govaerts boy. They could not only see and distinguish objects more clearly than others, they could, it was thought, evoke secret and unworldly things. Guido had similar eyes, although a shade less unusual, which he had in turn inherited from his mother, "the Mad Lady of Moorkerken," as the peasants still called the woman who had lost her life in giving birth to him.

Few, besides Modeste Verhagen and some of the old men and women in the neighborhood, remembered "the mad Lady." Although it was sixty years since she had died, stories about her still went the rounds in the peasant cottages on long winter evenings. Strange stories they were, almost unbelievable about so quiet and beautiful a woman as she had been when she married Guido's father and came to live at the manor house. To the poor and the tenants on the estate she had been inexhaustibly kind, an angel in human form. It was remembered that her voice had been soft and musical. She had sung unfamiliar songs, but she had also wept frequently.

There had been something terribly wrong with that girl. Old men told of having seen her ride through the dunes and over the desolate moorland towards the Holland border in the dead of night, her long hair flying in the wind, her clothing torn to tatters, as she whipped her horse frantically, almost cruelly, to make it race ever faster, as if she were bent on some desperate errand. Others had seen her walking by the shore on fierce nights when the rain beat down mercilessly. They had seen her standing there all alone on one of those wild paths or smugglers' trails close to the water's edge, where only vagabonds and poachers ventured on their evil business, singing one of her sad songs, or talking and laughing in a high-pitched, unfamiliar voice as if conversing with someone, although no other creature, human or animal, was in sight. It was the things she saw, the peasants believed, which had driven her to madness and death. . . .

Guido stared in front of him. He thought of his mother as Sylvain and Modeste left the room together. He soon followed upstairs, a candlestick in one hand, a sheaf of papers in the other. He had promised Modeste in parting to go over some accounts in the small office adjoining his bedroom. But having undressed and crossed himself, he climbed at once into the high bedstead and blew out the candle. As a rule he dropped off to sleep as soon as he lay down. But that night all the mental turmoil of the day came back to assail his brain; the dark, unconscious alarm persisted. Logic failed to dispel the sense of oppression he had experienced since Modeste's reference to his age.

Sixty years, he murmured almost automatically, as he pulled a cover over himself. Sixty years, and what was there to look forward to? Another ten years perhaps of planting and harvesting and worrying and striving, and then what? Then leave the estate to that pale-faced, oily-tongued slicker of a Frenchman who had married his daughter Amorie? Rudolph, Guido's eldest son, had not been heard from for so many years that Guido had given up hope of ever seeing him again. Clearly, his son-in-law would inherit. A Frenchman, God have mercy, would possess the land which he, Guido, and his fathers had tended and nourished for hundreds of years. That was the law. There was no circumventing the law. Guido grew more and more excited. He must abide by established customs and traditions. He could not very well disinherit his only daughter.

"Thunders and sacraments!" he growled. What did a girl like Amorie, a normal, healthy, well-formed and well-brought-up Flemish daughter, ever see in that unctuous, grimacing, ink-licker of a husband of hers? And what would a weasel-worded mannikin like that Jacques Bonnefous do with the

farm once he, the master, was gone? He'd sell it, of course, Guido muttered to himself.

"He'll sell it! No doubt of it." The fellow would most likely spend the rest of his days subdividing the land, drawing up liens and acts and deeds and mortgage bills, and stick stamps and seals to all that legal *paperasserie*, and then he would parcel out the estate to goatherds and potmenders and other worthless beggars of that sort. A fellow with a mentality like that, a pretty babbler, an addlehead who had served as a flunkey, as a factotum in one notary's office after the other since his boyhood, would never acquire the strength of character, the plain sense, the gumption, to exercise authority and to give direction to the work on a big estate with its hundreds of laborers and tenants and its thousand and one things to plan and do.

Why, the whole population of Moorkerken depended on the way things went on the Govaerts estate! If I go wrong, if anything goes wrong with my place, thought Guido, hundreds of people will be ruined. His disquietude rose to indignation as his imagination ran away with him.

"A scribbler, a pen-pusher!" he muttered contemptuously. That Bonnefous had busied himself with official flummery and rigmarole so long that his brain might well have turned to parchment. Even if that notary clerk tried to run the estate, he would most likely enforce the rules with a rigidity such as human affairs did not permit. Like as not he would turn the manor into a hostelry with a tavern downstairs, and rent out the pastures and plantations to the highest bidder.

In his imagination Guido could already see the painted sign his son-in-law would hang out to attract customers to the tavern. Of course, Guido said to himself with a dry bitter chuckle, the public notice would be drawn up in French. French was all the fashion now. Even the milkmaids and the plowboys, God forgive them, tried to talk it. What would the notary clerk put on the board? Wouldn't it be something like this: *A l'Enseigne de la Reine de Flandres*? At the Sign of the Queen of Flanders? "Thunders and sacraments!" Guido exploded, jumping out of bed. "By all that's holy! No! I say: no! It's not going to happen! I'd sooner burn the place over my head, and be buried under the ashes!"

He opened the window and sat with his elbows resting on the sill, his chin cupped in his hands. The turbid light revealed a murky sky. The moon was a hazy, pale-reddish sickle in the west. It rode in and out of a mass of spuming froth. Guido watched the clouds break up and scatter before that lunar scimitar, disperse in ragged fragments, in birds' feathers and rabbits' hairs, and reform into misty woolpacks and balls of grey smoke and vapor. He could hear the muted thud of horses' hoofs stamping on the stall floor

and the quavering lament of a newborn calf, and he thought of a time when he had heard other sounds in the night in the old house: the strange, half-anguished, half-joyous cry of a woman in birth pangs, the laughter of little children. . . .

The Heer of Moorkerken stirred uneasily, and then grew rigid. With unseeing eyes he stared into the night. Now he suddenly knew the secret source of the mental disquietude that tormented him, the hidden spring of that galling pessimism which made him lose his composure in the presence of loyal old friends like Modeste Verhagen and that made him, often in spite of himself, irritable and shortspoken with the most guileless among his acquaintances. Now he knew why he no longer looked at people with benevolence, but sullenly and angrily, as though they were guilty before him.

It wasn't so much the prospect of growing old. Fundamentally that didn't trouble him in the least. He felt as young as ever. His strength hadn't declined. He could still outwork and outrun and outride any man in the neighborhood.

He was alone; he felt deserted, abandoned. That was the trouble with him. None of his own blood remained with him on the farm. That was the shadow which progressively darkened and embittered his days and nights. He was surrounded by strangers, by persons who were good and kind in their way, but who, nevertheless, were beholden to him in one way or another, and who therefore were not altogether disinterested in their attitude towards him. Shaking his head in sadness, he went back to bed.

True, Sylvain was home. But Sylvain was only temporarily under the paternal roof. Sooner or later he would either return to school or become a wanderer on the face of the earth, as were his two elder brothers. There would be no use trying to keep Sylvain back when he felt his turn had come.

When Sylvain's turn comes, he will go, priest or no priest, Guido thought. Then no power on earth can stop him. It's in the blood. Sylvain won't be able to escape the call of the blood any more than the others. "I wouldn't be in the least surprised," the Heer of Moorkerken mumbled, as he tossed from one side of the bed to the other, "if, on completing his studies, Sylvain volunteers for some missionary post or other, and goes as far away from Flanders as he can get, to the end of the world, as likely as not, to the most outlandish place in existence, to convert devil-worshipers and fire-eaters with rings through their noses and other stinking savages of that kind. See if he doesn't!"

Of course, Sylvain might remain home indefinitely. Guido had been disquieted about his youngest son of late. It was undeniable that a change had come over him. Day in, day out, he roamed over the countryside. More than once, Guido learned, he had slipped across the Holland border to visit one of those strange heretical assemblies which abounded in that country. And then there were the long hours he spent in and around the ruins of the mediaeval castle and its crumbling tower by that desolate stretch of dune land. What could he be looking for there? He is avoiding company, Guido said to himself, and seeks solitude. That isn't a healthy sign in one so young. He had always felt that Sylvain was not like any of his other children. There was a mark on the boy, something unusual about him.

As thoughts of his own mother, "the Mad Lady," flashed through Guido's mind, he gave a half-stifled exclamation. Could it be that the boy's mind was wandering as his grandmother's had? Her troubles, too, had begun with slipping out of the house and roaming through the waste places and the moors. . . . No, that couldn't be. Guido tried to reassure himself. Sylvain was merely of a serious turn of mind, that was all. He read a great deal. It was but natural that he should walk out and turn things over in his mind. There was nothing unusual in that, nothing mysterious. Sylvain simply felt the need to be alone. Unlike his brother Colas, he took a serious view of life. To Colas, the whole of existence was a summer joke. He was always ready to laugh and carry on. Sylvain just dreamed and stared.

Sometimes when Guido sat talking with him by the fireside, he noticed that the boy wasn't paying the least attention. His mind was far away. He looked as if he were in a trance. Guido had to call him back to reality. That was very disturbing. But at other times—most of the time, in fact—Sylvain was so polite and attentive to everyone, and his face lighted by such a sweet and tender smile, that it was plain he had nothing to hide, and Guido felt perfectly reassured.

And yet . . . What had Sylvain said the other night when Uncle Modeste remarked that the weather wasn't fit for a dog to be out? What did Sylvain say then? Oh yes! "Uncle Modeste," he said, "we must always be ready to go out and meet Christ!" Uncle Modeste had seemed thunderstruck. Who wouldn't be? What could one answer to that? Always ready to meet Christ! What did the boy mean? Even Guido had not dared to ask his son for an explanation, because of the strange look in the boy's eyes. The recollection made Guido shudder. It was inexplicable. Was the boy seeing visions, was he sick?

Come to think of it, that incident with the dog recently had been something out of the ordinary. Nobody could do anything with that wild

animal until Sylvain came home. He was a ferocious half-wolf, a growling cur nobody could approach, who had to be kept on a chain fastened to his kennel. Then Sylvain came, and now the dog followed him around like a little lamb, all meekness and fidelity. Nobody had ever heard of anyone having so much power over animals. Sylvain only needed to talk to them or show himself in their presence when they were restless or frightened, and they quieted down at once. His nearness was often enough. It was really uncanny.

Only last Christmas they had had another proof, and a most striking one, of the boy's influence over the beasts. Liza, a young cow, one of Guido's fine Jersey breed, was having her first calf. Before long it became apparent that she would have a hard time of it. The pains started about two days before Sylvain was expected home from school.

Liza was in great difficulties; she had fallen on her side and was kicking and straining and exhausting herself in vain efforts. Everybody was out in the stables, for her moaning and groaning could be heard all over the house. The girls were crying. Uncle Modeste was trembling like a leaf. After the first day, Liza's moans turned to a long-drawn-out, anguished, lowing lament, most pitiful to hear. The pain must have been unendurable. The poor beast was in mortal agony. She lay weltering in her own blood, her tongue hanging out and dripping foam.

This went on for the better part of forty-eight hours, two nights and two days. Uncle Modeste didn't think there was the least chance of saving her. This was also the opinion of the stableboys and of the peasants who had come in, attracted by the cow's bellowing roar.

At about suppertime on the second day, Guido was ready to use the ax to end the animal's suffering, when Theresa, the wrinkled old housekeeper, came into the stable to tell him that Sylvain had arrived. Guido put the ax in a corner, saying that he would be back after supper. He'd give Liza one more hour. After that he could not delay any longer. He himself was shaken by the sight of so much suffering. Just then Sylvain, who had heard the cow's distressful lowing in the house, walked into the stable. He looked at her for a moment and then, lifting his cassock, knelt near her head and began stroking her eyes. The stable boys warned him to watch out for Liza's kicking and tossing, but Sylvain went on. The animal grew quiet immediately. Then he whispered in her ear and hugged her neck and in half an hour's time the calf was born. It was incredible; yet it was true.

The boy rose to his feet as the men pulled the calf away with ropes. Strangely enough Liza's eyes were on Sylvain and not on her calf. All the wildness and fear had gone out of them; they were now as gentle and serene

as they had always been. And Sylvain stood there quietly, nodding his head and smiling. Guido watched the scene in breathless amazement, and so did everyone else. But when Sylvain stepped outside to walk back to the house, Guido, who carried the lantern, noticed that his son was weeping.

The whole neighborhood still talked of the almost unbelievable circumstances attending the birth of Liza's calf. Only Sylvain never mentioned the incident again and no one, least of all Guido, ventured to question him about the incident.

"Ready to meet Christ!" He thought of the words again. It was undeniable that there was something peculiar and unfamiliar, something almost unearthly, about his youngest son. Guido was painfully aware of it. There was also, one could not deny it, a certain aura about him, a spiritual atmosphere which induced restfulness and confidence.

Guido had noticed that the peasants and especially their womenfolk looked upon Sylvain with a sort of superstitious awe. When they came near him they always tried to touch his hands or his clothes. They seemed to sense what they called a superior "presence." His touch was regarded as a blessing. Even Uncle Modeste fell strangely silent when Sylvain entered the room or sat down at table. More than once Guido caught the old superintendent staring with open-mouthed incomprehension at Sylvain. When the boy crossed himself or when he knelt down in the Lord God's corner in the big room downstairs, Modeste would bow his head reverently. But you could not tell whether it was the Saviour he honored or Sylvain. For when Sylvain was not home, Uncle Modeste paid not the least attention to the sacred statue in the corner.

Guido got out of bed and relit the candle. He looked in the mirror and saw that his face was flushed. Then, dropping back on the bed, he put his arms under his head and closed his eyes tightly as if to exclude his thoughts. It was no use. The rain and the wind rattled at the window again. But the thoughts flowed on like a flood on the hum of the night.

There also awoke in him his old feeling for women. "How can it be otherwise than that my sons leave me?" he asked. "I acted the same way towards my father in my youth."

Sometimes in the days of his youth, there had been a red flare in his soul, and he had not been his own master. That had been the dark and mysterious Govaerts blood seething in him. It was then as if an evil power had toyed with him. His first serious love affair lay forty-one years in the past. But he remembered it as if it were yesterday. Instead of returning to Moorkerken, where his father was expecting him following his military

discharge at Bruges, he went off with a girl and wandered all over France. He recalled her like a dream more painful than pleasant. He had lost her in Marseille to a sailor who picked a quarrel with him in an absinthe dive in the Old Port quarter. Guido was beating his opponent's face to a pulp when a bystander, one of the sailor's friends, drew a knife and stabbed the Fleming in the back. Guido was taken to the hospital and hovered between life and death for weeks, and when he was discharged, his girl and the sailor had left town together. His father came to fetch him home to Moorkerken.

Then, soon after, there had been a brief romance with a young widow whom he had met at the fair in Brussels. He installed her in the inn at Maere and went to see her every night, until it developed that she was playing the gallant with other men in the daytime. When he learned of her faithlessness, Guido wanted to kill himself.

There had been half a dozen other women whose history was not to be touched except with a pair of tongs. Only when he met Clasina, the daughter of the Heer van Goerée, did he settle down, although his earlier experiences had permanently tainted his attitude towards women.

He felt ashamed whenever he recalled those mad escapades. That feeling of shame and remorse had grown sharper with the passing of the years. On certain occasions, as on this night, it turned into bitterness and hostility against himself. He had been a weakling, a fool, a brainless ass, to let those elemental instincts drive him into paths he did not want to follow. He had been like a blind horse that does not know where its master leads it. Lacking will or wit of his own, he had been shifted like a chessman from square to square. Into what ludicrous situations, what misery, his wild passions had plunged him! It was a miracle he had come through with his life.

Fortunately, he mused, there was nobody alive today who remembered any of the more scabrous details. Nobody, except perhaps Uncle Modeste! Modeste remembered. Modeste never forgot anything. Guido could tell by the old man's eyes. Only the other day Guido had put his arm around Maria's waist as she was about to lay the table for breakfast. Just then Modeste walked in. Guido quickly let go of her, but in Modeste's eyes, faithful as those of a dog, there crept such a look of reproach and disappointment that Guido was ill at ease with the old superintendent for the rest of the day.

"I'm not cured even now, and I'm sixty," he sighed forlornly. "It can't be helped, I suppose; I seem to be made that way. Why didn't God make me otherwise? Or rather, why didn't He let me live in the time of Abraham and Jacob and David and all the other great saints you read about in the Bible? Nowadays the pastors are always telling the people to follow the Christian

way of life. They must not covet their neighbor's wife, nor his farm, nor his house. They must avoid gluttony and drinking to excess, and adultery and all the other things that are called sin. It is God's will, the priests say, for us to live sober and righteous lives. No doubt they are right. But God has not always demanded such austerity of creatures of flesh and blood. Those patriarchs, now, God's best friends, who were always held up as examples to us, surely they took their pleasure where they found it; in the tent, at home, by the roadside, everywhere! And never a word of reproach from God. Never! God must have entertained other ideas in those days about what's right and wrong. Or take King Solomon! How many wives did he have? Could it be that a man had a thousand wives? Thunders! God must have approved of that, too. For Solomon is lauded as a man of great wisdom. What, in heaven's name, is God's will in these matters?"

Suddenly Guido exploded in a dry chuckle. He caught his head in his hands and shook with mirth. He remembered asking Brother Adrian what the Church's teaching was on the subject of marital relations. Brother Adrian was a *Barrevoeter*, a barefooted monk who went around begging for the big cloister over by the Holland border. He was dead now, God rest his soul. Years ago he used to come around and stay at the manor house overnight on his begging trips in the countryside.

Once, shortly after Guido's marriage to Clasina van Goerée, he asked the monk whether there were any divine rules, any churchly prescriptions, governing a married man's relations with his wife.

"There certainly are," Brother Adrian had said. "A man may not love his wife for the sake of mere bodily pleasure. That's sin—grievous sin, in fact. Husband and wife must banish all lascivious thoughts from their minds when they meet. They must go about their business quickly and at the same time solemnly as if performing an important religious act or ceremony."

The purpose of the divine institution of matrimony, Brother Adrian added, was procreation, the begetting of children, for God said: Be fruitful and multiply. Christians must never go beyond that command. They must not indulge their carnal appetites, if they wanted to reap the reward of heaven. . . .

Guido's face beamed as he sat on the edge of the bed. He came near laughing aloud when he remembered Clasina's indignation when he mentioned Brother Adrian's advice: "Don't you dare try any of your solemnities with me, Guido Govaerts!"

"And if I sin?" he asked.

“The hypocrites!” she had said fiercely. “They make of the holiest a crime!”

Ah, there was a woman! The Heer of Moorkerken shook his head disconsolately. Why had she died so soon, leaving him with four small children? God, what a day that was! He felt as if he were sinking into a pit every time he thought of it. He remembered how the children sat by his side in the pew as the parish priest chanted the Requiem, and how the little ones, in their innocent unawareness of the disaster that had befallen them, one after another took the silver aspergillum from his hands to sprinkle the black-draped coffin of their mother with holy water.

He remembered, too, how surprised they had all been, upon coming home from the funeral, to see that the biggest of the oaks in front of the house had crashed to the ground during their absence. There was no wind that day, and when the tree was cut up a few days later, it proved sound to the core. Even Modeste, who knew all mysteries, had shrugged his shoulders and looked thoughtful. Guido had no doubt that it had something to do with his wife’s death. Hadn’t Clasina often leaned against that tree and lovingly stroked its rough unfeeling bark with her fingers as if she were touching the hands of an old friend? Undoubtedly it was a mystery! Trees were perhaps not so unfeeling and inanimate as people glibly said they were. Perhaps they had a way of sensing danger, or they felt the friendship of human beings in a way of which we have not the slightest conception.

Amorie was the first of the children to go. In Bruges, where she was sent to school with the *masœurkins*[2] to learn lacemaking and embroidery and the like, she had met that human counting machine and prowler in houses of mourning, Jacques Bonnefous, whose hemorrhoids compelled him to sit on an air cushion in the notary’s office. Guido grew angry whenever he thought of his son-in-law. A shrewd, calculating, impertinent intruder, he called him now.

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[2] A combination of the French words *ma sœur* and the Dutch-Flemish diminutive affix: -kin or -ken; a common appellation of nuns in Flanders.

He was convinced, for instance, that the inordinate, almost indecent haste which Amorie had shown about her wedding preparations was wholly Bonnefous’ doing. He wanted to get his fingers on the money Amorie had inherited from her mother. That was the man’s sole ambition: grab and grab

some more. The girl had never told a lie in her life until she met that Frenchman. A month or so after making his acquaintance, Amorie began to hint darkly about there being a child on the way. That was Bonnefous' method of forcing Guido to give his consent for an early wedding. And now, fully ten years after the wedding, there still wasn't any child. . . .

Then two of his sons had left. Rudolph, his eldest, went first. Then Colas. Of course, Colas did come home occasionally and he did write letters. Rudolph never wrote. Rudolph, a sturdy man, radiant with health, red-cheeked and moderately tall, with his mother's dark eyes, had won the riding contest at Maere at the age of eighteen and the gold cup for archery at the same fair. He was a farmer by instinct, a hard silent worker, who went through his tasks in a businesslike fashion. He would have been a most promising successor.

Guido felt a pang of regret whenever he thought of his eldest son. Sometimes he half-blamed himself for Rudolph's abrupt departure and for his long absence. Why hadn't he let his heart talk to the boy that time when Louise died and Rudolph's distress was beyond words? He had suddenly appeared so terribly alone, so much in want of a friend, of a father. All he had done, Guido remembered now, was to pat his son reassuringly on the back. He had sought to cheer him up with light, inconsequential talk. Worst of all, he had even proposed a trip to Antwerp together to take his son's mind off the dead girl.

What miserable ineptitude! What hypocrisy! It was all part and parcel of that cursed habit of suppressing one's true feelings. "I never seem to have the courage to say plainly what goes on deep down in me," Guido mused. "There's always the fear of saying or doing anything out of the ordinary which prevents me from giving the word that is needed, or the act of sympathy that might heal or soothe a wounded soul. I am always stifling my innermost feelings. Rudolph's heart cried out to me and mine cried out to him. Yet I was silent.

"For days I could see the anguished, mute appeal for help, for understanding, in his eyes. Still I could not break out of my prison of conventionality for one minute for my boy's sake. A tear, a cry, a curse, an outburst of rage might have set us both free."

Beads of sweat appeared on Guido's forehead as he thought of Rudolph. Never before had the Heer of Moorkerken owned himself so completely in the wrong and reproached himself so bitterly for his neglect, for his cowardice and lack of compassion. If only he could, he would do anything in the world to make amends to Rudolph, and set things straight again. But Rudolph was gone. It did not seem likely now that he would ever return.

There was no doubt about it: they would have made an ideal couple, his Rudolph and Louise, the only daughter of Guido's friend René van Abeele, a girl so lighthearted, so carefree, so amazingly lovely, as to be almost unbelievable. When she visited the old manor house, the place seemed to light up with her luminous gold hair. It was as if a new spirit invaded the somber old corners. She was almost too pure, too ethereal, to be true. There was something in her character, a simplicity, a warmth, that made everyone love her. Rudolph, on the other hand, was soberminded, rather taciturn, businesslike, with a high sense of duty and responsibility. The two complemented each other perfectly. He was happy in her presence and she in his. They had been sweethearts since early youth. Everyone knew they were destined for each other, and that Louise would be the next chatelaine at Moorkerken manor.

They were to be married in a month's time when Louise died suddenly. She fell ill with a fever, and was gone in three days. Something died in Rudolph, too, when the news came from the Abeele estate late one evening. At first, it seemed, he did not fully grasp the extent of the disaster that had probably ruined his life. There was a questioning, uncomprehending look on his face when the news was told him as he came in from a hard day's work. He looked like a traveler who had lost his way and who anxiously scans his surroundings for a landmark, a sign to orientate himself. Then gradually sorrow took hold of him, overwhelmed him, fairly obliterated every other sentiment in his heart.

He grew thin and haggard. His work no longer interested him. He performed his duties in a listless, mechanical fashion. He sought solitude; his silence became formidable. It was as if not being able to hear the one beloved voice any more, he wanted to hear none at all. He seldom spoke, even in answer.

He grew brutally offensive and unbearable to the peasants with whom he came in contact in his daily tasks. He could not tolerate any of them near him, snarled his reply when anyone came for a word of advice or instruction. He had begun to spend a lot of time in the tavern. Some nights he came home drunk; some nights he didn't come home at all.

About a year later, Rudolph announced his intention of going abroad, probably to Holland, to study scientific agricultural developments. Guido was not surprised. He approved heartily. A change of environment would do Rudolph good. He probably wanted to build his life anew, acquire other interests, enlarge his knowledge of the world.

Later, however, Guido knew that his son hadn't gone to Holland at all, or at least that he hadn't remained in the neighboring country for any length of

time. There had been no letter; but a business acquaintance from across the border came one day to tell Guido that Rudolph had sailed from England to South Africa, and in that country had joined a group of Boers and their families on a trek from Cape Province to find themselves new homes across the mountains and rivers to the north. That was all Guido knew of his eldest son. It was distressingly little.

Was the boy alive? Had he survived the journey in that savage land of which one heard rumors about packs of wild animals and fanatical tribes who massacred the white settlers periodically? Of course Rudolph could take care of himself. Guido wasn't worried on that score. That fellow could hold his own with any man. He had served in the cavalry. He knew his way about with horses. He could mow a field quicker than anyone. People still talked of the time Rudolph crawled under a cart, which had broken down under a load of beets, and lifted that enormous weight with his back so that the others could take off the damaged wheel and repair it.

One read accounts of those treks in South Africa; of men and women and children driving thousands of miles into wild and unexplored regions; of whole caravans of covered wagons pulled by oxen, rolling on for months and months; and then of sudden attacks by hordes of painted Zulus or Hottentots with assegais, and of desperate battles in that inaccessible wilderness and of a mere handful of survivors continuing on their dangerous venture. Who could tell if Rudolph's bones lay rotting behind a clump of bushes, or in some mountain pass where he and his companions had been ambushed? Or perhaps he had come through the ordeal and married one of the Dutch farmers' daughters in the new land and was now working his head off amid the rocks and sun-baked veldts of that African desolation? Guido could only hope that such was the case. At any rate, he considered Rudolph his lost son. He did not expect ever to see him again.

Colas he would see again. Colas lived in Paris. Colas was an artist, a painter. But why Colas chose to live in Paris was more than his father could understand. The boy had done so well in Antwerp at the Academy that Guido expected him to remain in that city for good. Hadn't Antwerp been the home of the greatest painters of all time? Why go to Paris?

Father and son had debated that point time without end. Wasn't there anything to paint in Flanders? Were there meadows of such amazing green and orchards so colorful anywhere else on earth? If there were, Guido had never heard of them. Here, right at home, were rivers and forests and cities and castles and hills and valleys, everything a painter's heart could desire. Why then go to France? Because Paris was more picturesque and grimy and dissolute? Was that it? Was it for inspiration's sake, was the atmosphere

more conducive to creative work, or was it because of the new technique that Colas said he could learn there? His son's arguments in favor of Paris made Guido alternately burst into laughter or into fits of fury. It couldn't be anything very wholesome or sane that a young man could learn in Paris among all those vagabonds and prostitutes and good-for-nothing revolutionaries in the cafés and meeting halls of the Latin Quarter.

One heard of other Flemish boys who went to Paris. What became of them? Guido would ask his son. Were they successful? Did they acquire fame, or were they a credit to their families and to their nation? To the contrary! They all left with high hopes and ambitions, but eight out of ten changed their names or repudiated their Flemish origin before they were a year abroad. Most of them, it seemed, got tangled up in those milieus where absinthe and dissipation ruined them.

Why should Colas throw his talents and his good health into that sink of iniquity and political disorder? Hadn't Rubens and Ostade and the Van Eycks and the Breughels, father and son, found their inspiration right here in their own country, unquestionably the most blessed land on earth? Or, if Colas wanted to do portraits instead of still lifes and landscapes, where were there such beautiful women as in Antwerp or Ghent or even in Bruges? Compared to the Flemish women, those of Paris, in so far as Guido had ever seen or heard anything of them, looked like so many poor miserable starvelings who seemed never to have eaten a square meal in their lives. In Paris people didn't even know how to talk properly. They always used their hands and fingers like the deaf and dumb in some sign language or other.

Guido had nothing but contempt for the French. In his opinion nothing good had ever come out of France or ever would. Underneath their polish and all their pretended gallantry, the French were ferocious monsters whose drunken worship of the slogans of liberty, equality and brotherhood had contaminated nation after nation and had plunged the world into misery time and again. Beware of the French, Guido would warn Colas. And stay on your own ground. If Colas wanted, he could have a studio and bring as many friends as he liked.

And what did Colas say to all that? That boy had an answer for everything. He talked back. He talked back to everybody. He blurted out anything that came into his mind. There wasn't the slightest symptom of arrogance or vanity in Colas, although he would spout enormities about going to Paris with conqueror's blood in his veins and taking the world by storm. That was simply the braggart in him. Colas had always been a loud boy, the loudest boy, the biggest mischiefmaker, in Moorkerken. What a lot of trouble he had caused in his schooldays! It was one thing after another.

He did not exactly insult his teachers; no, you couldn't say that. But he made them the butt of his jokes and pranks. He ridiculed their pompousness and pretentions and what he called their pointless pedantry. He mimicked their voices, their mannerisms, their gait. He made them the laughingstock of the community. The hilarity he evoked among his classmates drove the dignified old pedagogues out of their minds.

Colas was as tall as Guido and Sylvain, a couple of inches taller than Rudolph. With his head thrown back, his chest squared and his brown curly hair all unruly, he used to barge into his father's room, no matter who was visiting him, the Burgomaster of Moorkerken, the Baron van Abeele or a delegation of peasants, and soon he had everybody laughing until the rafters of the house shook. It was the same at school. It was good money wasted to send Colas to any school at all. He didn't stay in a single one for more than a month. After a few weeks they had enough of him. He had irremediably upset discipline and tradition. The authorities simply sent him home with a report that he was inadaptable or incompatible or something of the sort, which meant that he was undesirable.

At home he argued with everybody, with Modeste, with Theresa, with the stableboys, with the seamstresses, the milkmaids. There was no holding him back. The whole atmosphere in the house changed the moment Colas came home. He turned everything upside down. He played the cheeriest of tunes on his cornet on the roof in the middle of the night. He rode the red bull which nobody could manage. He made the ducks drink brandy. He taught the girls ribald songs, such as the one about the lady who had two husbands, one for her soul and one for her body, and how the two got mixed up accidentally. He dressed himself up in the clothes of a gendarme, put on false whiskers and came into the hallway, clanking a saber and asking the flustered Modeste where he could find a certain rebel and anarchist named Guido Govaerts who was wanted for sedition, lèse-majesté, polygamy and four or five other heinous crimes. What didn't he do? He made a kermess, a travesty, of the most solemn occasions.

Hadn't Colas, the last time he was home, sneaked up to old Theresa's room on the Day of the Dead when that old lady had gone to the cemetery to decorate the graves of her relatives? And hadn't he painted, on the wall near her bed, a ghost with a face resembling that of her departed husband, so that Theresa, on entering her room at night, dropped the candlestick and came running downstairs, shrieking hysterically that Joris had come back to haunt her? Yes, Colas had to have his pranks and plots, like that other painter, Jan Steen, who was a brewer at the same time and who introduced a brace of

live geese in the steaming kettle of malts and hops in order, as he said, to liven things up a little in the brewery.

But Colas despised Rubens, the same Rubens whom Guido venerated as the greatest artist of all time and as a noble Flemish patriot. When Colas talked of Rubens, which happened not infrequently, he spoke gaspingly with a hiss of simmering hatred. It may all have been pretense, just another outburst of garrulity, plus a determination to outdo himself in radicalism and to shock his father. You could never tell with Colas. It may very well be that Colas railed at Rubens for no other reason than that his father worshiped him. The boy liked to start an argument, and Rubens was as good a subject as any.

Rubens, in Colas Govaerts' judgment, was more than anyone else responsible for the fact that the Flemish people enjoyed the dubious reputation of being a sensual and bovinely stupid lot. Never had the master painted a Fleming with an intelligent face. Never had he put a pure, spiritual woman on the canvas. A fine Flemish patriot, that Rubens, Colas would sneer!

To be sure, the historians might tell us that the great Peter Paul was the most sedate and solid bourgeois of his day, a model husband who liked nothing better than to smoke his pipe and watch his wife—his sixteen-year-old wife! Colas would say with emphasis—embroidering a pair of slippers for her lord.

He was probably a pillar of the church, too, as well as a member of the volunteer fire brigade, and a partaker of snuff. But that was just what made him such a contemptibly vile hypocrite, Colas would tell his father, in that roaring, laughing voice of his.

The man was simply incapable of doing anything on an honest, human scale. It wasn't enough for him to show a saint walking in a garden with a book in his hands. No, Rubens must put his angels on horseback and turn the good Lord into a Peeping Tom spying on Eve in the Garden of Eden. Saint Anne's buttocks, under the "immortal" one's brush, became kettledrums and banners to rouse the burghers against the Spaniards.

It was reported of Rubens that he invariably referred to Flanders in the Italian language as "*la mia carissima patria, la mia dolce Fiandra*." Why did he speak habitually in Italian? Why? Let Guido explain that if he could. In spite of all the man's noble protestations of patriotism and love for Flanders, he had done more harm to his dear, sweet fatherland than all its enemies and detractors put together. Did Guido know that the Holy Father

steadfastly refused to allow a single one of Rubens' paintings to hang in the Vatican?

He, Colas, might prefer to live abroad in Paris, but he would never, no matter how famous he became—and there was no doubt on that score, he would certainly, as surely as the sun would rise tomorrow, fill the earth with his renown—he would never, no matter what happened, put Flanders or the Flemish people to shame or in an evil light. He swore it by the memory of his sainted mother. He swore it by the Battle of the Golden Spurs. He swore it, with a gargantuan laugh, by the whiskers of both Peter and Paul, Master Rubens' own two patron saints. He would not do such a thing for any earthly consideration. He would rather destroy himself!

Guido smiled when he thought of Colas' superlatives and exaggerations. One of these days he would be back with a new crop of stories from Paris. The boy carried an inexhaustible store of funny anecdotes in his head. He had just written that he had found some kindred souls in the Club of the Independents in Paris, a set of artists and writers who recognized no authority or rules and who, like himself, were out to build a new heaven and earth. One or two of these friends might come along to Moorkerken and do a little sketching around the village. He heartily recommended to his father a certain Hele Helson, a Viking, a son of the Valkyries, who was making all Paris take notice. Hele Helson was the Richard Wagner of the brush! God! What paintings that man produced! Guido should see them! Hele might be induced to bring a few canvases with him.

Well, let him, thought Guido, let him bring his paintings. Let them all come! He was lonely without his sons. What a time that had been when all the children were still home with him! Rudolph and Colas and Amorie and little Sylvain. All that brood and their little cousins and friends getting in your way, getting under your feet at every step, in the stables, in the hallway, in the barnyard, wherever you went. When they filled the house with their shouts and laughter or came tumbling out of the haylofts or turned up in the most unexpected places, as the pigsties, by heaven, or the sawmill garret; when none of their folly and gaiety surprised you; when they chased the calves in the field and fell into the ditches; when they made the dogs bark and made the hens flee cackling down the driveway as if the very devil were at their heels. That was paradise, that was the highest good a man could experience on earth. Guido realized this now. Or when they were ill in the night with a cold or some other children's ailment, and they cried out in fear of some frightening image seen in a dream, and you had to get up and look after them and reassure them and put them back to sleep!

Then there had been something to live for! Guido was aware, now that it was too late, that the joy of life lay not in the peace and uneventful serenity which at present prevailed on the estate, but in all the little cares and vexations, the worries and mortifications and responsibilities of former times, in all that nursing and washing and dressing and undressing and gamboling. He wished things could be again as they had been of old.

Now, if Rudolph would come home and bring back a flock of children, or even if Amorie and Jacques . . . Then life would return. Then he would feel young again. Then he would work and plan again with animation. Then there would be something to look forward to. Then there would be a family around the table at nights; not strangers, but his own flesh and blood.

That crustiness which had come over him of late, that secret annoyance, that tendency to eye each new acquaintance as if he expected an affront or a demand on his generosity, would fall from him like a discarded cloak. Relationships would be natural and human again. Then there would be some pleasure in life. But that could never be. Never! . . .

Unless, unless, of course . . . he caught himself, unless he should marry again. In that case there still was a chance to recapture the old delights and satisfaction, and the dignity of a staunch Flemish home.

When he thought of that miserable, drink-sodden fool of an Antoine Teniers whom Sylvain had carried home, he felt a pang of envy. Because, for all his sottishness and poverty, Antoine was in reality better off than he, Guido, the Heer of Moorkerken, the proprietor of the largest and most prosperous estate in all East Flanders. He envied the man because of his seven children.

The family lived in a squalid hut on the edge of the moor amid sand heaps and shrubbery. The windowpanes were all cracked and patched with strips of newspapers, the door hung crooked, the holes in the walls were stuffed with loam and discarded jute bags. Those people hadn't a cent in the world, their children went ragged and barefoot to school. But each time Guido passed by, he heard the place resound with the joyous, boisterous laughter of the young ones. The woman, too, in spite of her husband's incorrigible habits, was always genial. She was dressed shabbily, in a faded skirt and somebody's cast-off jacket, but she waved her hand as gracefully to Heer Guido from the doorway as if she were the chatelaine of a castle saluting a fellow landowner.

It's the children, Guido thought, who keep those people in good humor. It can't be anything else; for they have nothing else. He must tell Theresa to be sure to send over some clothing to the Teniers on the morrow. Theresa

should take care of those children. Lovely children they were, especially Elise, the one Sylvain had met on the road. He knew her well. Sometimes she walked a piece along the road with him and held his hand and asked him questions and called him grandfather. . . . That was no way to send a young child out in the rain with only a thin shawl around her shoulders. Such things should not happen so long as the closets in the manor house were stacked with clothing, dresses and shawls and coats, which his own children had outgrown long ago.

Marry again? At sixty? The thought embarrassed Guido, as it always did. He was universally respected. He was credited with generosity as well as honesty, and he would never descend to any unworthy action, or to a level below his station in life. After all, he was the Heer, who should set an example in word and deed. That was his father's dictum. What would his friends, the landowners on the other estates, think if he should marry again? How would they take it? He had entertained the idea before, but had always abandoned it, or put it away in the forget-book. Something or other had always cropped up to divert his attention from the pursuit of those half-made plans.

Basically he was a shy man, slow-spoken, even timid, when it came to women. He felt embarrassed, at a disadvantage, in their presence. Clasina had been the sole exception. There were ladies at Moorkerken and Maere and on certain neighboring estates who had not been slow in hinting to Heer Guido that they would not be averse to keeping him company at the half-deserted manor house. There was the Lady van Abeele, for instance, only forty-five, the widow of his friend René, and mother of Rudolph's Louise, who ordered her clothes from Paris, tunics with wide sleeves that bared the arm to the shoulder, and flesh-colored stockings. Rich as a fairy princess she was, and not without good looks either.

Often she had expressed sympathy for him in his lonely condition when she saw him on Sundays leaving church. She had begun by pitying the children for being without a mother's care and affection. Instead of giving up, after Rudolph and Colas and Amorie had left, the Lady van Abeele redoubled her attentions. She even paid Guido a visit, and he visited her in turn on her estate on the other side of Moorkerken. She sang an aria from Offenbach for him and accompanied herself on the piano. He was deeply impressed with her richly furnished house and extensive property.

But Guido was not a master of gallant conversation. He stuttered and blushed like a peasant boy admitted to a grand salon for the first time. Lady van Abeele had put on her most alluring gown for the occasion, and her face was painted like that of a porcelain doll. Guido had never seen such costly

adornments as the necklace and bracelets and rings she wore. Half the time he spent in the Abeele salon he sat silently computing the value of the lady's jewelry. When she seated herself near him on the sofa and addressed him with the familiar "thou," he could not find the right things to say, his tongue felt paralyzed. He lost his composure and went away without saying the expected word.

Perhaps it was better that way. God knows! Once or twice more he had been on the point of asking some woman to be his wife. But at the last moment he shrank back, invented some lame excuse or other, and quietly resumed his old ways at the house.

Nearer home, too, there had loomed the risk of dangerous entanglements. Only recently, for example, he had noticed that his slippers which he habitually misplaced were now standing neatly by the side of his bed where he could not miss seeing them when he came into the room. There was always a box of sulphur sticks on the night table. His pipes were cleaned and there was fresh water in the decanter. These changes had come about since Maria had taken the place of the old chambermaid; the same lighthearted and lovesick Maria who had brought her soldier-friend under his window last night. Theresa told Modeste and Modeste told Guido that Maria, in making up the master's bed, spent an unconscionably long time in the room dusting and polishing and arranging. And Theresa had seen with her own eyes how the young girl took the master's pillow and held it against her breast and kissed it and then smoothed and straightened it. What could be the meaning of all that?

Of course, there could be no question of the Heer of Moorkerken's marrying a chambermaid. That would never do. That would make him the laughingstock of the whole neighborhood. Then even Colas would refuse to come back under his roof. If he was going to marry, he must stop dallying and postponing, and become serious about the matter at last. He was sixty years of age. There was not much time to lose.

He must go to Antwerp at the first opportunity and consult his cousin Charlotte, Caesar Govaerts' wife, who lived in one of those patrician houses on the Keyzerlei, the Avenue of the Emperor. Charlotte was dependable, a woman of the world and a wise counsellor. She would advise and help him and perhaps bring him together with Mathilda, the young woman he had met at Charlotte's house the year before when he was in Antwerp on his annual visit to the great fair. Charlotte, he could depend on it, would speak her mind openly and fully about Mathilda without fear, prejudice or false restraint. He knew that as a member of the family she had his interest at heart.

Mathilda must have been in her middle twenties when Guido saw her for the first time at his cousin's home. Reddish-blonde, nearly as tall as he, with a dazzling creamy skin, pleasant face and manners and a well-shaped figure, she had deeply stirred the sensitive heart of the Heer of Moorkerken. Her simple, congenial ways, coupled with a certain freedom of speech, made Guido feel at home with her from the first. It was not often that he felt so completely at ease in a woman's presence.

They went out to the fair, ate waffles together, drank wine in the gorgeously gilded and mirrored booths. They danced and rode in the carrousel and inspected the agricultural exhibits, among which were several of Guido's prize milch cows. She pleased him enormously, and he often thought of her and her frank laughter and of the confident way she leaned on his arm. He remembered every detail of her face, the slightly arched nose, her amazingly beautiful teeth and above all her eyes and her long dark lashes. Her eyes were of a bluish green shot through with gold. Guido had never seen eyes of that color before.

Charlotte always gave a dinner in Guido's honor on the night before his departure after a stay of a week or ten days. On that occasion Mathilda wore a pale-green gown daringly cut both in front and in back. Guido had difficulty in keeping his eyes off her splendid shoulders and her half-bared bosom.

As he thought of that evening, he suddenly made up his mind. He would go and see her again. He would not wait till the autumn fair. He must go at once and speak with Charlotte. He would let himself be guided by Charlotte's advice. She was intelligent as well as kindhearted. Colas had stayed at her home during the two years he studied at the Art Academy, the only time the boy behaved as a normal human being. It was Charlotte's calm and judicious influence which had really tamed the boy, in so far as he could be tamed.

If Charlotte thought that Mathilda would make Guido a suitable wife, if she felt that the difference in their respective ages was no hindrance, and that Guido really stood a good chance, he was sure Cousin Charlotte would not hesitate to say so. And conversely, if Charlotte should think for some reason or other that Guido had better put thoughts of marriage out of his head, or that the girl, a city dweller all her life, was not likely to be happy in the rural atmosphere of Moorkerken, then, in that case, Guido would also accept his cousin's verdict. Charlotte knew his circumstances intimately, his habits, his foibles, the character of his children. She would be the best judge.

The circumstances which had prevented Mathilda from marrying at an earlier age were no mystery to Guido. Caesar had told him about it. After

her father's death, the girl tried to manage the hotel he had left her, but this involved her in serious financial difficulties. The hotel was heavily mortgaged, and for a time Mathilda served as a mere employee earning a meager salary in the establishment where she had once been the mistress.

Suddenly Guido wondered if he should perhaps buy the mortgage and place the hotel on a paying basis, by making long overdue renovations and putting a capable manager in charge, and then present Mathilda with a debt-free, prosperous enterprise on their wedding day. That would be an excellent gift. In that way his wife would have an income of her own. It would make her feel less dependent on him, and their marriage relationship would at the same time be devoid of the least taint or suspicion of condescension on his part. He thought his wife would approve of such an arrangement.

His wife? "*Sakkerloot!*" He caught himself, and laughed at his own words. Wasn't he taking things too much for granted? Wasn't he running a mile ahead of himself?

He saw Mathilda away from the metropolitan environment in which he had first seen her, away from the comforts and luxury of Charlotte's magnificent home, transferred to the old manor house at Moorkerken with its low-ceilinged rooms, their smoke-blackened, centuries-old panels, the creaky stairways and the large kitchen where he often ate in the company of the servants. One could smell the stables in every room of the house. His own clothes, even his best which he kept in a closet full of mothballs, gave out an odor of cattle and horses. Considering all this, wouldn't a girl like Mathilda feel like a fish out of water?

Wasn't it asking a good deal of a well-bred woman to take up her abode in Moorkerken? And what would she think of Uncle Modeste and of Theresa—wrinkle-faced, sharp-eyed Theresa with her cracked voice. He hoped Mathilda would not interfere in the lives of these loyal old souls, who were bound to be somewhat uncommunicative and ill at ease at first in the presence of a new mistress. Maybe, before bringing her home permanently, he had better invite Mathilda to visit the place first, and ask her to meet the people with whom she was to be associated for the rest of her life. . . . Would the wedding be in the village church, he wondered, or in St. Mary's at Antwerp. Which would she prefer? Question upon question, one more vexing than another, rose in Guido's mind.

And Sylvain? How would Mathilda get along with his youngest son, and what would the situation be like if Colas returned and if there ever should be other children?

Guido felt his confidence and optimism waning rapidly. He lay with his arms under his head staring at the open window. He thought of Sylvain's entry into the living room that evening. He would never permit anything to come between himself and that boy, not Mathilda nor a thousand Mathildas, no matter how good and beautiful and desirable. "It would break my heart," he said grimly. "It would kill me."

Guido sat up in bed. The long-drawn-out elastic voice of a rooster was heard outside. The Heer of Moorkerken felt relieved. At last the long, restless night was drawing to an end. There must be some light in the sky, he thought, else that bird wouldn't make so much noise. He would get up presently to take a look at the east. Perhaps the rainy season had come to an end, and this very day would be a proper one to start the plowing. Whatever the weather, rain or shine, they would soon have to get busy. He decided he would not, after all, go to Antwerp immediately. One should not precipitate matters. In the night everything always looked black. The new day would bring new counsel. It wouldn't be wise to try to take Mathilda by storm. He would first speak to Uncle Modeste about the matter, and perhaps write a letter to Cousin Charlotte. He began to formulate the contents of the letter in his head. "Dear Charlotte," he muttered, and again: "Dear Charlotte. . . ." But he got no further.

On the other hand, wasn't it all very childish, he thought as he laced his high boots, wasn't it rather pathetic that he, Guido Govaerts, the Heer of Moorkerken, should not be man enough to carry out a resolution by himself? Why shouldn't he go to Antwerp at once, look for the young woman and frankly ask her hand in marriage? There was nothing dishonorable in that, nothing to be ashamed of. Why hesitate? Why use Charlotte as an intermediary?

In former times, he had read somewhere, men raided neighboring countries and tribes, and simply seized the women they liked and carried them home. Sometimes they fought for their brides. Well, he, Guido, would infinitely prefer a hard battle to this cautious, circumspect circling around the subject. Why shouldn't he make a direct approach, as he did when he wanted to buy a piece of land or undertake some other important venture?

He splashed some water on his face and looked out the window as he dried himself. He saw a light moving in the stables. The boys must be up, feeding the cattle. Guido heard the stamp of horses in their stalls. There were also sounds downstairs in the house—probably Theresa busying herself with breakfast. The day had started. All the old tasks and frets were coming to life with the first streaks of dawn. He felt eager to take up the work again. If it's dry today and we get busy, he thought, I shall probably

forget about Mathilda before the noon hour. Those sensual visions of the night didn't last if a man had work to do. He buttoned his jacket, clasped the necklace around his throat and went downstairs. Outside he rubbed his eyes and gazed at the sky. He searched anxiously for a break in the clouds. It was too dark yet to see clearly, but he sniffed the air. "The sky is clearing," he said. "The wind comes from the right corner."

He walked around the front of the house in the direction of the stables, and looked in through one of the low windows. He saw the figure of Maria pass by. On one of the feed bins sat a stableboy, a young man named Floris. Floris' legs dangled alongside the bin and his feet played a tattoo on the box. Every time Maria passed he made as if to seize her. Guido could not hear what was said, but the broad grin on Floris' face and the halfhearted, perfunctory way in which Maria kept the boy's hands from her breasts made words superfluous.

Guido walked around the stable and came out on the driveway in front of the house. The lamps were lit in the dining room and in the hallway. He could hear the shrill, cracked voice of Theresa in the kitchen. She was scolding one of the young maids. Now the front door suddenly opened and the cassocked figure of Sylvain stood silhouetted against the lighted hallway for an instant. The boy closed the door noiselessly and turned to the right, following a side path that led through the apple orchard to the main road. He walked lightly and quickly. He was probably on his way to early Mass in the village. He would have an hour and a half to walk. Although he felt like exchanging a few words with his son, Guido did not call him. To begin with, he wanted to tell Sylvain, though it was futile, that he should eat some breakfast before starting on the long tramp. He wasn't a priest yet; he had taken no vows. It wasn't required of him to go without food before assisting at the Mass. He also wanted to say that Theresa should make up a bundle of clothing for the children of Antoine Teniers, and that the man himself could come to work as soon as the plowing got under way.

Guido stood looking after his son as he disappeared in the vapors amid the glistening, moisture-laden branches of the orchard. The outline of fields and woods and cabins was still blurred. He could see the boy's shape darting in and out of the black distorted shadows of the poplar trees on the highway. "We must always be ready to meet Christ!" Guido repeated the words to himself. "There he goes, out to meet Christ, and as like as not he will turn up with someone like Antoine Teniers on his shoulders, the most abandoned dog in the community."

Guido started towards the house. He had not taken a dozen steps when he stood still again. His head went up slowly. What was that he heard? He

cupped his ears. The sound of distant bells, very faint, hardly perceptible, came from the direction of the sea. He listened intently. That was not the ordinary sound of bells. In that plangent toll there was the silver clash of water, the clear note of the bird and the soft swish of leaves, all blended in one, an exquisite peal transcending in purity every sound on earth. Guido held his breath and stood as if riveted to the ground. Then the bells stopped and he looked around in the direction where Sylvain had still been visible a moment before. The boy had now disappeared from view. Slowly the Heer of Moorkerken walked towards the door of the house. On the threshold he met Uncle Modeste, who had just come from the stables.

"Did you hear that?" asked Guido.

"Hear what?" Modeste looked up in surprise.

"The bells?"

"No, Heer Guido, I did not hear a sound."

"Listen," Guido said, putting his hand on Modeste's arm, "there they go again. Do you hear?"

Both stood motionless, their eyes uplifted, their mouths open.

"Do you hear now?" Guido asked after a while.

"No, Heer Guido, upon my soul, I hear nothing," Modeste said, shaking his head.

3

When she strolled with her husband in the Place du Meir and the busy neighboring shopping streets, Mathilda Govaerts made so striking an appearance that passers-by frequently glanced at her with unusual interest. She walked with quiet, unaffected dignity, her voice and gestures faultlessly at ease. Women scrutinized her clothes and accessories with looks of admiration, and sometimes of envy. It may very well have been that they took her for a visiting foreign artiste, one of the cast playing at the nearby Flemish National Theater, or else for a local heiress, the daughter of one of the great merchant families of Antwerp. Surely no one, meeting this gracious young matron at the side of the elderly country gentleman, would have suspected that a few weeks earlier she had been engaged as a maid, making up beds for sea captains and river pilots and the like in a dilapidated little hotel in the dock quarter, and that on occasion she had even served behind the bar in the same obscure establishment.

Whenever Mathilda entered a restaurant or shop, a buzz of whispers would greet her entrance and all eyes would turn in her direction. And more than once, one or another of the town's dandies, or one of the old boulevardiers in passing, would adjust his eyeglass with an ostentatious flourish, and, impudently disregarding Guido's presence, fix her with an approving or a wondering stare.

Such incidents did not seem to embarrass Mathilda greatly. If the unobservant Guido noticed anything, he probably took it as a tribute to himself that his wife's personality should cause such a stir. For one thing, the Heer of Moorkerken did not know what jealousy was. Besides, he walked with his head in the clouds. He was in love. Half the time he didn't know what he was saying or doing, or what others said or did. He had eyes and ears only for Mathilda.

He had been so carried away with joy when Mathilda accepted him that he promptly forgot about his resolution to question Charlotte regarding his bride's antecedents. Even that preliminary step, about which he had debated with himself so often on the farm, he had entirely neglected. All the

depressing shadows of yesterday had vanished from his mind. Now that she was his wife, Guido thought, it would not only be bad taste but quite unforgivable on his part to meddle in the girl's private affairs. Those questions that had vexed him in the past had lost their urgency and significance. She had accepted him on sight. He was glad to do the same. He must not let anyone suspect, least of all Mathilda herself, that he had ever entertained the least doubt.

Every time he looked at her, the gleam of her teeth, the grace of her form, the glory of her hair, a thrill went through his frame. The almost imperceptible, maddening sheen of her skin made him lose his customary calm. When she put her arm around his shoulders, his ears reddened like a schoolboy's. He stuttered, he talked arrant nonsense, and bragged like his own son Colas. Indeed, he did not deny it: he felt like a boy. The sun was shining in his heart, he told Cousin Charlotte.

Guido Govaerts became a new man in Antwerp. He changed from his coarse, ill-fitting rustic clothing to a frock coat and morning trousers made by one of the master tailors of the city. He wore a silk hat. He carried a pair of gloves, and affected the finest linen and cravats that money could buy. In deference to Mathilda's suggestion he went to the length of wearing button shoes, although he let it be known by many a half-suppressed oath that they pinched his toes unmercifully. Upon entering the vestibule of Charlotte's house after a promenade with his bride, he ripped the shoes off, as he was wont to kick off his wooden clogs at home, and handed them to the surprised valet to be exchanged for a pair of slippers. "Good God!" he would sigh. "What a relief! Those shoes prevent me from thinking and talking properly."

It was noticed, however, that in spite of these sartorial innovations, there always remained a certain rough individuality about Guido's movements and demeanor. In his case the old adage about clothes making the man was not borne out at all. No matter how fastidiously Mathilda made him dress, his deportment always let through something of the provincial, something of the rustic. His speech, often a mere remark of his, caused the greatest merriment among Charlotte's dinner guests, not only because of its pithy and frank allusions to life and things on the farm, but because he habitually and purposely expressed himself in the broadest peasant dialect. He roared with laughter over his own jokes. He slapped his thighs like a yokel and, as regularly as clockwork, after the first course was served, he would, without compunction, unfasten the lower button of his waistcoat and loosen his belt. He blew on his soup, he scraped his plate, and mopped up the gravy with a piece of bread. All this noisy activity was accompanied by grunts of deep

satisfaction and lip-smacking, and the incoherent mumblings of a man with his mouth full.

Caesar Govaerts' secret delight in Guido's table manners equaled the visible annoyance of his wife and Mathilda. At first everyone would tactfully correct the Heer of Moorkerken when he made some slip or other in table etiquette, or when he stood in slippers and shirtsleeves on the stoop of the distinguished house on the Keyzerlei, exchanging pleasantries with anyone who happened to come along, be he milkman, costermonger, or beggar. Guido treated everybody as an equal, as a Flemish brother. And that, of course, wouldn't do at all.

Nervously agitating her lorgnette and intoning French through her nose, Charlotte forced herself to remind him that he was not at Moorkerken, but on the most patrician street of Europe. Guido's attitude towards the lower classes, she said loftily, was not only unbecoming—it was dangerous. She simply could not permit him to carry on like that. She had her position in society to keep up. She had to keep in mind the dignity of an ancient house. Couldn't dear Guido see that?

And one thing, she said, he must promise her faithfully; he must never, never again take snuff so long as he was her guest. *Ça, par exemple, ça passait toutes les bornes.* That was going beyond all the limits of propriety; sneezing and wheezing and blowing one's nose in the salon, as he had the other night, in the presence of Alderman Lauwerse and his wife, and the French consul, too, Monsieur Picard and Madame. Couldn't Guido see that he was seriously embarrassing her, as well as dragging his own illustrious family name through the mire?

But Guido only looked up in surprise and said naïvely: "And how is it with the King then? He uses the same brand of snuff as I do. He even chews it like tobacco. His whiskers are all stained yellow with it. He's always flicking his beard to brush off some snuff. I saw that myself when I went up with a delegation. And the Queen, they say, isn't averse to a little pinch herself. How do you, dear Charlotte, clear your head in the morning in this stuffy town with all that smoke from the steamboats and locomotives?"

The man was incorrigible! He would smile and sigh under these admonitions the live-long day, but he couldn't be made to see what was wrong about going for a day's fishing on the river in the company of the washerwoman's husband, or why he should not some morning join the fowlers whom he saw passing with their nets and cages before dawn on their way to snare finches and larks in the mist-shrouded hedges and meadows outside the city. He still must put his feet under the watertap upon rising every morning and tell everybody—that was the worst of it, telling

everybody about it—that he had discovered the surest preventive against catching a cold. And still he must wear that nightcap fastened with strings like a dowager's goffered bonnet, no matter how much and how often Mathilda complained that he looked like his own grandfather.

"Now there," he would reply quite seriously, "now there, Mathilda, you're talking of a great, good man. When you come to Moorkerken I'll show you the windmill he built and the coach house. Those oaken beams you'll see there, he cut them with his own ax. No saw for Servaes Govaerts! No sir! He wouldn't hear of it. It didn't seem to him he was doing things with his own hands when he used a saw. I still have his ax. It's a double-faced broadax, sharp as a razor and unwieldy as a chunk of lead. I'll show it to you. Remind me of it! Incidentally, that Servaes Govaerts, my grandfather, was the fellow who effectively shut up the Emperor Napoleon the time he passed through Flanders. Surely you've heard of that incident, Mathilda, haven't you? Napoleon was in the company of the notables of Moorkerken and Maere surveying the wooded hills by the Meye River through which he planned to cut a military road.

" 'What do you say, Monsieur the Councillor?' the Emperor suddenly asked Servaes Govaerts.

" 'I say, Monsieur,' replied my grandfather, '*à bas la dictature!* To hell with your dictatorship!'

"And this is what I say now," Guido would add goodnaturedly, "*à bas la dictature!* The way everybody is prodding and trying to improve me, you'd think this house was a reformatory and I the only inmate. . . . I do want to catch a few finches, though, Mathilda," he went on in the same imperturbable voice. "You simply can't snare any of those birds around Moorkerken. I met a young fellow back of the house, in the alley, you know, by the public pump, a pigeon fancier he is, who sells fried fish and spirits, who tells me he knows just the right spot. It's near the old forts, on the other side of the Scheldt. So I'll have to be off good and early. . . ."

In public, Mathilda spoke to him in French, which she had learned in the convent school. Guido would not answer her in that tongue, although he understood it perfectly. He could not bring himself to speak the language of a nation which he felt had exercised an unfavorable influence on the development of his own people. He did not grow angry when he was urged to speak French. He merely told Mathilda that he was too old to adopt new fashions and mannerisms, that his own sons would laugh in his face if at his age he began to ape the moderns. In the end he had his way. Mathilda promised that at home, in Moorkerken, she, too, would abide by the old traditions and rules.

At such moments, Guido, looking at her face, grew silent with adoration. He worshiped her. Why hadn't he made bold two years ago to ask her hand in marriage? Two years of his life wasted in futile fret and worry. . . .

One day he made a remarkable discovery about Mathilda, something well-worth remembering and telling Colas when next they met. On second thought, he decided, he wouldn't tell Colas at all. He would keep it to himself. It was something too serious to be bandied about. One never knew how Colas would take such things. Colas might laugh his head off, or make all sorts of silly comparisons. But that his discovery was as curious as it was thought-provoking, he had no doubt. It made Guido pensive for days.

It so happened that on one of their many walks in the city, Mathilda took him to visit the Cathedral, the great seven-naved basilica which is the largest and the most beautiful Gothic church in all the Netherlands. Historically, the building is of interest because in its vast interior took place the first so-called "image-storm," that fierce onslaught of the Calvinist iconoclasts which may be said to have ushered in the Reformation in the Low Countries. . . .

Our Lady's of Antwerp is the repository of many, if not most, of Rubens' paintings. Guido saw them all, but he stopped longest before the impressive "Descent from the Cross" in which the Master had surpassed himself. The freshness of color, the purity of the light, the wealth of detail that emanate from the picture, overwhelmed Guido. He could not tear himself away.

The crude cross still stands erect, although only the upper part is visible. Three ladders lean against it. The body of Christ has been detached and hangs in the middle of the painting in a huge cloth of warm yellow. Over the crossbeam, two muscular workmen bend forward and downward, gently letting down the sacred body. Saint John, the favorite disciple, his foot poised on a ladder, looks on as the holy burden is lowered. The mother of Jesus is there, and Mary Kleophas. In a half-circle around the corpse stand four other persons.

Mary Magdalen kneels in the foreground. But she is not the sad-eyed, breast-beating, repentant, sinful woman other artists have made of her. She is the beloved friend . . . of Peter Paul Rubens. She is the apple of the Master's eye, the fond child of his artistic soul. In her Rubens has portrayed his ideal, the Flemish woman in all her beauty: soft and white in body, with golden hair, the lines of her face expressing the kindest of hearts; a mixture of childlike simplicity and virginal love.

The Magdalen occupies first place in the painting. She is in the middle foreground, next to Christ Himself. Her hand touches His feet. His feet

brush her shoulders. . . .

And what was the most striking peculiarity about the Magdalen? She resembled Mathilda! She resembled Mathilda like a twin sister. Never was there such a miracle of similarity. It actually looked as if Mathilda had served Rubens as a model for one of his greatest pictures.

Guido gazed in astonishment from the painting to his wife's face, and back again. He was startled into speechlessness. He could not get over it. The resemblance delighted and alarmed him at the same time. It was weird, too, almost frightening. Guido wondered silently if he should not take it as a sign, as a token, as a reproach for his earlier doubts and vague misgivings concerning Mathilda's past. The idea upset him. Or, was it perhaps the other way around; had he been allowed to make the strange discovery in order that he might have assurance that his marriage had received a higher sanction?

He brooded over the incident as they walked home. All that evening he was absent-minded, speaking little, scratching his head in perplexity and wonder. But it never entered his mind that Mary Magdalen, besides representing Rubens' ideal, was also the woman from whom no less than seven devils had been cast.

Then he thought of Colas again. How had Colas dared scoff at Rubens' art? How had he dared praise the French women in his father's presence? Not for a thousand of Colas' little Parisiennes would he, Guido, exchange the splendid, noblehearted Flemish woman by his side, in her gown of heavy yellow brocade cut in the old Brussels style with the tight-sleeved undergown laced so that the full curve of her bosom was visible. He could not keep his eyes off Mathilda. Her shoulders, her hair, her delicately tapering fingers, everything about her, reminded him of the Magdalen. . . .

She was always in his mind. When Mathilda and Charlotte went out together on shopping expeditions or attended to other feminine affairs, Guido could not bear to remain alone in the house. He grew restless. He wasn't himself without Mathilda. For hours on end he wandered through the streets, straying from the Keyzerlei, losing his way and finding it again. He roved along the docks and through the slums, into neighborhoods where his top hat evoked hoots and jeers and his dialect brought gales of laughter. On those walks he thought and wondered about the people he met, about their pasts, their present circumstances, whether they were happy, how many children they had, and from what part of Flanders they had originally hailed. He acquired a goodly number of acquaintances in the working-class districts, especially among the women and children. But he also longed for the day when he could go home with Mathilda.

Two weeks after the wedding they paid a visit to Moorkerken. But they returned to Antwerp the same evening. Mathilda inspected the house, and gave orders to clean and paint everything. She would order new furniture and fittings in the city, and make the necessary rearrangements of the rooms upon her return in a month or six weeks. She went from room to room, followed by Guido, Uncle Modeste and old Theresa, critically examining every article in her path. She laughed at sight of the old-fashioned sofas and chests of drawers, and shook her head in mock horror at curtains and draperies. The ornamental lamps in the bedrooms made her exclaim: "Why, all this is mediaeval!" Heavens! How could Guido ever have endured living in such a stuffy atmosphere, in rooms that were cluttered up like museum halls! Everything was to be renovated, repainted, replaced. "I'm not going to leave one stone upon another," she smiled triumphantly at Guido. "You won't know the old house a week after I've been living in it."

"Excuse me," said Uncle Modeste, suddenly overcoming his usual timidity in the presence of strangers, "does the Lady mean that the walls are to be painted, too, or only the woodwork?" He addressed the question to Guido, who was standing with his back to the huge fresco of the Battle of the Golden Spurs with which Colas had adorned the hallway at the base of the stairs.

Guido turned around, looked at the picture and waited for Mathilda's answer.

"There are paintings and pictures on all these walls, I notice, even on the ceilings," Mathilda replied pensively. And then she resolutely shook her head. "We don't need them. They don't belong. It isn't good taste. Paint them over. Yes, clean the walls!"

Modeste gasped as Guido said, "Lady Govaerts is the mistress henceforth. It's her house. Let her do as she likes. . . ."

That was too much for the old Remplaçant. "But the furniture!" he blurted. How could he be expected to discard the tables and sideboards, and the solid bedsteads in which one Govaerts after the other, Heer Guido himself and all his four children, had been born? Surely the good Lady could not be thinking of throwing these precious heirlooms out the window as so much rubbish. The furniture was as good as new, as strong and well polished as on the day it first came from the cabinetmaker in Maere. Modeste looked appealingly at Mathilda as if he were an advocate defending an innocent person at the bar of justice.

But Mathilda stared back so fiercely that Modeste instinctively took a step backward. Angrily she cried out: "Who is the mistress here, you or I?

Out with all that trash, I say! Away with it! And those bedsteads! They smell of death! Throw them on the manure pile where they belong. I don't want to see anything of this furniture when I return." Her breast was heaving as she lifted her train and stalked from the hall into the living room.

"And that, too," she exclaimed, pointing to the Lord God's corner where the three tiny lamps burnt before the statue of Jesus. "That you can put somewhere else, out of sight, I mean. Things like that do not belong in a living room. . . ."

At the words of the new chatelaine, Theresa made the sign of the cross as if she beheld an evil spirit.

Uncle Modeste looked questioningly at Guido, whose face had grown livid. But the master avoided the old superintendent's eyes. He did not know himself what to make of the abrupt change in Mathilda, unless it was that Modeste's presence irritated her, and that she had from the start taken a dislike to that most inoffensive of human beings.

When Guido looked at Mathilda again, she had regained her composure. She smiled at him as if nothing had happened. The radiance of her face caused his own expression to soften, too, immediately.

But when Guido, instead of helping her into the waiting carriage, insisted that it would take but ten more minutes to show her Servaes Govaerts' famous ax-hewn beams in the coach house, Mathilda almost exploded again. Good God, she thought, must we stay any longer in this dreary, lugubrious place with those two incredible servants shuffling about? Her bosom and shoulders rose with exasperation as she walked down the driveway with Guido and the superintendent, who were busily discussing some detail about the cultivation of beets. Guido did not see how his wife glanced back over her shoulder at the old house, and the derisive frown that passed over her face.

The day which had started out so pleasantly with the train journey from Antwerp to Maere was completely spoiled for Mathilda. She wanted to get away as quickly as possible, back to the city, back to the lights and the busy streets. She felt she had seen enough, and more than enough, of the old mansion. What further need was there to look around? Everything was of the same dull, stupid flatness! Perhaps some fresh paint and decorations and furniture might bring a little cheerfulness and color to the house, but she doubted it now. She knew what lay ahead for her. She had taken in the situation at a glance. She was soul-sick, unnerved, utterly disgusted over what she had found. She was going to be buried alive in this insufferably depressing dark hole. It would be like a prison to her. Why, in driving up,

they had not encountered one living creature all the long way from Maere to the manor!

"It's going to be a long, long night of boredom for me," she thought, "a humdrum existence, a weary joyless life with an old husband and a lot of dull-witted peasants around. I know I can have fine clothes and jewels and the like. But what good is all that when one's freedom is gone?"

It was fearfully sultry weather; the sky looked like the copper-colored dome of a furnace. There was not a breath of wind, not a cloud in sight as far as the horizon. The sun beat down on the ripening grain, heat waves danced and shimmered above the roofs of the silos along the highway. For lack of water, some sparrows and pigeons were fluttering and wallowing in the dust on the road. Modeste was saying to Guido that the oats would shrivel up if no relief came. "We must have rain, Heer Guido," he complained, "and quickly, and a lot of it, if the rye is to be saved."

"It will come," Guido said, wiping the sweat off his brow. "I feel it in my bones."

As they walked along the highway in the direction of the coach house, the smith, Robert Brero, emerged from his forge to greet Guido. "Blessings on you and the Lady!" he called from afar, for the smithy stood back a good distance from the main road in a small cluster of linden trees. Guido motioned to him to come nearer. Robert's vibrant voice had shaken Mathilda from her depressing reverie.

The blond-bearded giant who walked up to them as they stood waiting might have played the role of a Teuton god in a Wagnerian opera. His face was smeared with soot, his hands as black as ink, but his pale curly hair stood out like a golden nimbus, and his eyes were a transparent, childlike blue. His leather apron hung loosely over his naked torso, the sun played a rippling tattoo with the muscles of his arms as he strode forward. Stretching out his hand towards Guido, he bared his teeth in a frank smile and said: "Will you excuse my appearance?"

Guido immediately started to talk with him about some metal hoops that were needed for the cart wheels. The man stared at Mathilda over Guido's shoulder as if he beheld an apparition. He only half understood what the Heer of Moorkerken was saying to him.

When they walked by the smithy a few minutes later, after inspecting the coach house, Robert had not gone inside. He stood in the doorway of the forge, leaning on his sledge hammer. Mathilda, who walked behind her husband and Modeste, glanced in his direction and briefly fluttered her handkerchief. Then, in a quasi-absent-minded gesture, she dropped it on the

ground. The smith waited a few moments before picking it up. He still stood gazing after her as the carriage rolled away.

Sylvain was not home the day his father and Mathilda called. He came into the hall shortly after they had driven off, while Modeste and Theresa still sat on the bench talking of their first encounter with the new Lady of Moorkerken. The young man at once noticed something amiss with the old people. He sat down with them and inquired about the cause of their worried expressions. Uncle Modeste could no longer be silent about the matter which Guido had systematically concealed from his son.

"The new Lady," Modeste began, "visited the house this afternoon." When Sylvain asked in surprise what the old man could mean, Modeste poured out the whole story. "I mean," he said, "the lady your father has just married. And she is going to rule here with an iron hand. She said so herself. The house is to be changed from top to bottom. Master Colas' paintings are to be smeared over, and the furniture is to be thrown out."

Sylvain looked about him in open-mouthed astonishment. Modeste went on describing Mathilda's appearance and Heer Guido's discomfiture when the lady lost her temper.

"She actually snarled at me," Modeste said, "as if I were some unclean beast, a piece of vermin that had sneaked into the house." No, the first visit of the new Lady of Moorkerken did not augur too well. Modeste was shocked and pained.

"Do you know, Sylvain, my boy," he said suddenly, "I have but once in my life seen such a cold and cruel pair of eyes as that woman has. I should perhaps not say it, but she reminded me very much of a certain she-thing that lived in the village of Moorkerken long before you were born. That one was a barmaid at the tavern of 'The Booted Cat.' People said she bewitched the young men with whom she consorted. And 'tis as true as I stand here that every one of her lovers committed suicide, one after the other. It was ghastly. . . . First there was Simon, an uncle of that Antoine Teniers you took home one night last spring when we had that rainy spell. The fellow hanged himself from a tree out in Vampire's Pit. Then there was Ivo Smetten. About my own age he was. He swallowed powdered glass. She bewitched her lovers with those snake eyes of hers. When that wanton got tired of a young man, she just ordered him to do away with himself. Haven't you ever heard of a snake hypnotizing a bird, Sylvain? Well, the new Lady of this manor has eyes just like a snake, just like that female devil at 'The Booted Cat.' . . ."

"We mustn't judge too hastily, Uncle Modeste," Sylvain said. "Surely, Father is not the kind of man to let himself be bewitched by anybody. Besides, there are no such things as witches. Witchcraft is not something Christians believe in."

"Well," Modeste said, shaking his head, "that remains to be seen. I must say that I never saw Heer Guido act so strangely as he did this afternoon. He wasn't himself, that I will say without hesitation. He was intimidated by that woman. You could see that. You could feel it. Heer Guido couldn't find his tongue. He seemed bereft of a will of his own. He hadn't a word to say when the Lady stood there and calmly ordered us to clear out the Lord God's corner as if it were a nest of rats. 'Take that stuff out of my sight,' she said. 'Put it somewhere, anywhere, but not in the living room. . . .' "

Sylvain blanched and jumped to his feet. He wanted to hear no more. Hurriedly he ran upstairs, leaving Modeste to pour out his tale of woe and suspicion into the always attentive ear of Theresa.

"Poor Sylvain!" Modeste sighed, shaking his head, as the young man's footsteps died away on the stairs. "The future looks pretty dark for him, I'm afraid, and for Heer Guido as well, and for all of us, what with that devil incarnate moving into this house. Do you realize," he asked Theresa suddenly, "that we are to strip the mansion of all that's in it, and that I haven't the faintest notion as yet where to get the men to lug out the old things and cart and unpack the new? Heer Guido told me we may expect the first crates and cases in a week's time. He said the painters ought to be on the job no later than the day after tomorrow. Where, in God's name, am I to get painters at this time of the year? Can you tell me? Does he think I can shake them out of my sleeve?"

He followed Theresa into the kitchen and sat down on a bench near the cookstove, muttering and growing angrier every minute. "Heer Guido wasn't himself this afternoon," he said, plucking nervously at his mustache. "He knows we are at the height of the summer's activity, and that we can't spare a single man from the work on the land. Still, at such a time he must come and order all these vast changes in the house. And still worse, at such a time he must get married. Why couldn't he wait a few months? Why all this confounded hurry?

"I suppose," he added, lowering his voice to a whisper, and bringing his face close to Theresa's ear, "I suppose he was burning up with desire for a touch of that she-snake's poisonous skin. What do you think? . . . I know him. I know Guido Govaerts. I've looked after him ever since he was a boy. His dad, the old *patroon*, said to me one day: 'My Guido has a heart of gold, but when it comes to women he's a fool.' And so he is, by God! How often

haven't I warned him and kept him from making an ass of himself with some woman or other. . . . Why didn't he drop me a hint of what he was up to, that he was slipping again?

"Ah, it's too late now," he sighed. "A man who sits down on a stove because it's so nice and warm cannot expect anything but blisters later on. I tell you, Theresa, we are building a nest here for a viper, for a wanton; yes, for a wanton. I know what I am saying. I know the kind of woman he brought here this afternoon. I looked into her green eyes as we stood out there in the hall. I saw the way she looked at Robert Brero. 'Is that the way the wind blows?' I said to myself. 'Is that the kind you are? I thought so. I thought so from the moment I clapped eyes on you, you strumpet.'

"Robert stood there like a stone monument. He was plainly dumfounded. He was petrified with excitement. He's a bit of a skirt-chaser, anyway, Robert is. He had a woman in that forge of his one evening last week. Some little seamstress from the Abeele estate, she was, a poor creature who has an illegitimate child. But he never in his life expected, I wager, to get the sign from such a gorgeous lady as Heer Guido's new wife.

"Gorgeous lady!" Modeste laughed sarcastically. "What am I saying? I wonder where she was brought up, that hellcat? She literally threw herself at Robert, right there under Guido's nose. I've never seen such utter disregard for decency, such lewdness. How long have she and Heer Guido been married? Two weeks, isn't it? And already she is playing the bawd. I saw her, I spotted her," he said to Theresa, who was shaking her head incredulously.

"It's an amazing thing when you come to think of it, Theresa," he said, after a moment's silence, "how such people always find each other. Water always finds its own level, they say. So do these trollops and whoremongers. They jump across all the hurdles of class and caste and religion and race, right into each others' arms. Nothing seems to be able to keep them apart. They must have a secret sign or something by which they recognize their own kind. When there are loose women about in the district, as last year when those Gypsies passed through, you remember, they make straight for Brero, our smith, never for anyone else. How do they know? And by God, the new Lady Govaerts did the same. There must be a peculiar attraction about that boy Robert. . . ."

Modeste was not far wrong in his strictures and conjectures. On the way back to Antwerp, after she and Guido had dined at the hotel in Maere, Mathilda fully recovered her good spirits. Guido had opened the compartment window, so that a faint breeze, warm and fragrant, swept in like a touch of tender hands. Mathilda stretched and stiffened her body in

voluptuous enjoyment. She patted Guido's arm, and pointed through the window at the lights of the villages slipping by.

He was drowsy from the heavy food and wine they had consumed at the hostelry. He wanted to forget the unpleasant incident at the manor house. He had been trying to put it out of his mind for hours. There was no denying, of course, that Mathilda's sudden fury had taken him by surprise and that it had considerably unnerved him. It hurt him to hear her speak harshly to the old servants. Her imperious attitude had also put him in a preposterous light with Modeste and Theresa.

As his head began nodding to the rhythm of the wheels, and his wife held his hand, he wondered whether some bitterness lay underneath Mathilda's goodness, as a result of having experienced much in life that was unlovely. He didn't want to delve into that. He would never rake up the past. If bitterness existed in her heart, she was to be pitied, and it was but the more reason for him to love her and help her banish whatever evil memories haunted her.

As soon as she felt her husband's head sag on her shoulder, Mathilda abandoned herself to thoughts of the man she had seen standing in the doorway of the forge that afternoon. A feeling of gladness came over her, so intense that she longed to laugh, to scream, to run wild. The bliss of it made her heart beat tumultuously. She glanced sideways at the sleeping Guido, and her lips curved in a smile of pity. His mouth was slightly open and a thin trickle of saliva ran from the corner of his lips to his chin. She wiped it off hastily. Then she gazed out the compartment window. Many stars shone on high.

"Guido is old," she thought, shrugging almost imperceptibly, "but that smith with his blond hair and iron muscles is young and strong and desirable, and he knows I want him. What a pity he wore that leather apron this afternoon! I dare say he's thinking of me now. Now I know there is something to look forward to in Moorkerken. There will be at least one compensation for the solitude and tedium of that old house." Her eyes narrowed to mere strips of luminous opal. Again and again, she sighed and smiled in ecstasy, impelled by desire and anticipation.

During his long sojourn in Antwerp that summer, Guido met many of the city's notables at Charlotte's dinner table; he also made the acquaintance of a number of the champions of the growing Flemish nationalist movement.

On certain nights of the week, Charlotte's salon was the meeting place of a company of politicians and would-be politicians, artists, writers and intellectuals, all adherents of the most radical nationalist school of thought. At first Guido was not a little shocked by the tone of irreconcilable hostility that prevailed on the subject of the Belgian Government. Few of those present had a good word for what they called "the Belgian monstrosity." A crackle of hatred crept into the voices of others whenever they mentioned the regime.

Guido knew the weaknesses of the Belgian state as well as anyone. Its creation out of widely divergent French- and Flemish-speaking provinces had been a mere compromise, perhaps only a temporary makeshift in the constantly clashing interests and the fluctuating alignments of the great powers. Belgium, he knew, was a mere buffer state between France and England without any inner cohesion or higher claim to existence. Guido felt no happier than any other patriotic Fleming over the inclusion of Flanders in that state. He regretted the separation of Flanders from Holland, and was well aware of the fundamental policy of the Belgian state: to denationalize the Flemings, deprive them of their folkways, traditions and even of their language in favor of a homogeneous French-speaking nation.

But Guido was also a landlord, a pillar of the established order; he wore the decoration for civic merit in the lapel of his frock coat. He did not like to hear anyone question or assail the supreme authority of the State. In other words, he was a loyal citizen. Yet before long he felt strangely elated to be in the company of such frank and courageous men. He sensed with especial vividness that they were not merely dabbling in phrases and banalities. When they spoke of wrongs and gave facts and figures which intensified their grievances, they were not alluding to personal affairs. Their grievances were those of the inarticulate mass of the Flemish people. They were fighting for the people's right to live in its own way, according to its own particular lights and character.

Guido sat quietly in a corner when these gatherings took place. He drank in every word, but spoke so little himself that sometimes it looked as if he had fallen asleep with his eyes open. He could not immediately form an opinion for himself on the subjects under discussion. At times, too, there was such a tangle of voices and ideas in the drawing room that Guido felt like someone who tries to follow a conversation in a foreign language.

"Unless the peasants are aroused, and learn to fight for their national rights, Flanders is doomed," Honoré Ramaeker, the poet, would declare. "The Flemish upper classes are rapidly becoming assimilated into the French-speaking framework that is held out to them by the Government. For

them it means advancement, well-being, and social tranquility. For the peasants it means nothing. They will have to fight, and fight to the bitter end, fight till blood flows in torrents. There is no other way."

Ramaeker had a strain of Spanish or Italian in his blood, and when he spoke his dark eyes smoldered with an unhealthy fire. Each time he returned to Charlotte's house, he was in an even more raging humor.

He always began talking in a low, murmuring voice, which gradually increased in speed and intensity, until in the end he was hoarse with emotion and bitterness. His words came like a downpour. "I hate Belgium. I hate the very name of the beast!" he would cry out, shaking his fist and moistening his lips nervously. His tirades generally broke off in a violent coughing spell. He would draw out his handkerchief, press it to his lips and remain silent for the rest of the evening.

Ramaeker lived with his two elderly sisters in a small house on Jacob van Artevelde Street, and eked out a miserable existence by tutoring boys who were backward in their studies. For a time he had edited a small newspaper in which he advocated closer cultural relations with Holland as a means of checking the deterioration of the spoken and written language among the Flemish people, whose ablest poets and artists were deserting them for the French language. For this he was called a traitor and an Orangist by the gentlemen of "*la grande presse*," who always belittled the Flemish language and sought to replace it with French.

His journal had ceased publication after a sensational court trial in which the issue was not, of course, the tone and content of Ramaeker's articles—that would have been too transparent—but a piece of fraudulent advertising with the insertion of which he, as editor, had had nothing to do, but for which he was nonetheless held morally responsible. He never spoke of this humiliating experience. Most of his time he devoted to reading and lecturing before small groups of workmen and farmers in the hope of instilling a love and respect for their native tongue among the people. Unbeknown to her husband, Charlotte, who was a distant relative of the poet, took care of his two sisters.

"What then is to be done?" Charlotte asked one evening in the stillness that followed one of Ramaeker's most vehement animadversions. Either she did not notice or she blandly disregarded Caesar's signals warning her that the conversation had taken a dangerous turn.

"What is to be done?" broke in young Abbé Cyriel Vos, who served as a chaplain to a community of Beguines.[3] "That is something which everyone must decide for himself. As for me, I know my duty." The young cleric had

dreamy blue eyes. He drank his wine grimly, as though from a sense of duty. His voice was timid and hesitant until he was challenged; then it would suddenly take on an aggressiveness that brooked no contradiction.

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[3] Beguines are elderly women, spinsters or widows, who live together in individual cottages in a Beguinage, or Court of Beguines. They make religious vows of poverty and chastity, are under the direction of a Mother Superior, but, unlike nuns, they are free to return to the world. They occupy themselves with lacemaking and embroidery. The only remaining Courts of Beguines are to be found in Antwerp, Amsterdam, Breda and Bruges.

"Tell us," Guido called out. He was sitting on the edge of his chair behind the grand piano, and he hadn't said a word up to that time. "Tell us, please. If the trumpet gives out an uncertain strain, who will prepare himself for battle?"

"I will tell you," replied the Abbé, walking in Guido's direction and pointing a long finger at him. "If I were to frame a litany, Heer Guido, I would put in a prayer to be repeated by every man, woman and child in Flanders upon rising in the morning and upon going to bed at night. It would run this way: 'O Lord, grant me the grace and the courage to remember at all times that I am a Fleming, and that Belgium is not my fatherland.' I would hammer that into the people's mind because . . ."

"Charlotte," interrupted Caesar, who had stood at one side smoking a cigar but who now shuffled towards the door, "did you notice whether I left my pince-nez on the buffet downstairs?"

"You did!" said Charlotte curtly.

Caesar nodded and disappeared.

"We Flemings have a country, and still we are an oppressed people. Oppressed by a minority, at that!" Ramaeker exclaimed.

"Yes, but don't forget that France, a great power, stands behind that minority," said a tall young man who stood next to Mathilda. He was the son of City Councillor Lauwerse and a musician of promise. "The Belgian Government is not alone," he said. "It has the backing of its sponsors, the French. . . ."

"The Belgian Government! The Belgian Government! Why do you always use that word? There are no Belgians. There are only Flemings and

Walloons," Ramaeker shouted in an agony of intensity. "I repeat what I've said a hundred times: there's no other way but to repudiate the connection. We must tear ourselves loose."

"Ramaeker, you are like all those prophets who preach the will without finding the way," Dr. Josson said quietly. A distinguished-looking middle-aged man with a pointed blond beard, he served as librarian at the Academy. "Have our people today the will, the imagination, the daring, for so great a venture as to tear themselves loose, launch a revolution, and perhaps form an independent state?"

"We must preach it to them night and day," Ramaeker said earnestly. "The people must be aroused from their slumber. The great people that produced the Flemish Renaissance is sinking to the level of Balkan peasants. We're stagnating culturally. We're dying. Death is no program!"

"I deplore as much as you the backward state of our people," Dr. Josson said. "But I do not think anything would be gained by a revolution, by tearing ourselves away from the Belgian kingdom. Always remember that we live in a world that persists in moving and changing its mind. Don't give in to the fret of the moment. After all, the seasons do follow each other. National states come and go. If we can nourish some patience, I feel a better world is on the way."

"There can be no better time to arouse the people," Ramaeker retorted hotly, "than when their minds are poisoned by foreign ideas and a foreign language. They will perish before the dawn of your better day. We must put a stop to the flow of poison into their veins. . . ."

"Quite so! But how?" Dr. Josson asked.

"It seems to me that the patient must first learn, must first have a realization that he is sick," Charlotte suggested.

"That's right, begin at the beginning," Dr. Josson agreed. "Begin at the beginning means: start with the language. We must begin to speak our own language again. . . ."

"Don't we speak our own language now?" Guido asked.

"We speak dialects," Dr. Josson replied. "This one here, another one in another locality, a third a few miles down the road. We must unify the language, speak the language as it ought to be spoken in a civilized grammatical manner. . . . Today our people feel secretly ashamed, inferior, because our upper classes speak so much French. The common people, the bloc of four million peasants who do not know that language, feel themselves almost of a lesser quality, not so clever, not so well instructed.

The people must learn to take pride again in their own tongue. They must learn that Flemish is as civilized and cultured a language as French."

The son of City Councillor Lauwerse interrupted: "I believe that before the national question is solved in Belgium, or anywhere else in Europe, we shall be face to face with the social question. The social question will bring the mass of the Flemish peasants and the French-speaking industrial workers into one front. The lines of battle will change entirely. . . ."

"You're speaking of the class war," said Guido.

"Yes," replied Lauwerse, "the class war will overshadow all other questions. You, Heer Guido, and I, we may well have to change positions in days to come. We're together on the national question now. Tomorrow we may be on different sides of the barricades. . . ."

"That may be so," said Guido quietly, "but I will always be with my people."

Caesar was seldom present during these hot and furious debates. At the first sign of controversy—trouble, Caesar called it—he would nod almost imperceptibly in Charlotte's direction and leave the room, mumbling something about a need to clear his head. Nobody paid any attention to him, except that his departure generally acted as a signal for tongues to be loosened properly.

Political questions did not interest Monsieur Govaerts. In fact he rather disliked new ideas of any sort. His motto was Leave well enough alone, and don't awaken sleeping lions, with special reference to that animal of leonine depiction which served as the emblem of the Flemish nationalist movement. In other words he was for the status quo: no changes, no innovations, and above all no zeal; keep things as they are; for safety's sake, provide a soundproof room for the enthusiasts and hotheads to blow off steam and to spout their *bouffonades*. That was all that was required, he would say, if you wanted social peace. For this opinion and others like it, he was put down as a liberal. In reality, he was merely a retired merchant; as such, at least, he was listed on the city's tax rolls.

Approximately of Guido's own age, Caesar was totally bald and afflicted with an unpleasant squint. He had no eyebrows. A drooping mustache of a clayish color was the only hirsute adornment remaining from an attack of fever he had suffered at the age of forty. At the Stock Exchange he was rated a man of good sense—shrewd, sound, cautious. But he was also suspected of belonging to the Masonic Order; this caused Modeste, who believed, as many rustics did, that Freemasons drank the blood of little children and

committed other acts of unmentionable depravity in the secrecy of their lodges, to live in perpetual fear lest the impressionable Guido be contaminated by his cousin and initiated into the satanic rites. Modeste need not have troubled himself on that score. On this, as on every other point, Caesar Govaerts was a liberal; that is, he was satisfied to let every man stew in his own juice.

To look at this Maecenas, one would have taken him for a fishmonger, or a schoolmaster in disgrace, so negligently, even shabbily, did he dress. Caesar had enormous flat feet shaped like tennis rackets which he dragged and shuffled like a sacristan in a funeral procession. His face was covered with red blotches and his pear-shaped nose was the color of vermilion. He was self-conscious about his bad eyes and kept them closed when he conversed with anyone face to face. When he forced himself to smile, he bared a set of sharply pointed teeth.

Billiards was ostensibly Caesar's only passion, but it was common knowledge that he played the game in the filthiest cafés in the most disreputable quarters of town. If common gossip was to be believed, he also had other fish to fry in those suspicious neighborhoods. In short, he was suspected, as the Flemish saying goes, of squeezing the cat in the dark.

On the other hand he was immensely rich, and hence, universally respected. Not he, but his father, had amassed a huge fortune in the East India trade before the separation of Flanders from Holland. Caesar took excellent care of the family treasure. Although no longer active in business, he still served as director on the boards of several important commercial enterprises. Besides, he owned houses and land and steamboats and breweries, and he clipped coupons.

He treated Guido with the amused tolerance of the city dweller for the rural eccentric. For Mathilda he entertained a fatherly sort of affection since her marriage to the squire. She had been coming to his house since childhood. It was said he had known her parents and saved them from the poorhouse. What price Mathilda or her family had paid for these services was a secret known only to Charlotte. Caesar and Mathilda still exchanged an occasional knowing glance, whose significance, however, was lost upon the others in the salon.

4

Sylvain was rarely about the house during those first busy months after Mathilda and Guido returned to the manor. He was often up and out before dawn, coming back so late that it looked as if he wanted his return to remain unnoticed. Could it be, Guido wondered, that his son was trying to avoid Mathilda—did he, for some reason, feel ill at ease in her presence?

But that was absurd! They got on perfectly well together. On one or two occasions Guido had heard the boy address Mathilda quite affectionately as *moederken*, little mother. Wasn't that an encouraging sign? And didn't they present a picture of ideal harmony when they played duets on the new piano that evening when the Lady van Abeele and her son François and certain other landowners from the neighborhood came to offer their felicitations? Whenever Sylvain showed up at breakfast, both Mathilda and the boy were in the best of spirits.

But where did he go, on those entire days when he was away from home? And where and what did he eat? That was what troubled old Theresa. Indignantly she asked Guido if he thought it the proper thing for the son of the Heer of Moorkerken to walk off with a crust of moldy bread in his pocket and to slake his thirst from ditches and ponds by the roadside. Where did the boy hide himself the live-long day? Had someone asked Sylvain, he probably would have been unable to answer.

Frequently he didn't know where he went, nor where he had been. When he wandered off, a deep frown on his forehead, his chin on his chest, hands clasped behind his back, he was oblivious of his surroundings. He scarcely noticed the passage of time; morning, noon or evening, it made little difference to him. All was confused in his mind, as though he were in a dream.

Summer ended early that year in a whirling downpour. Autumn brought a never-ending drizzle that transformed the roads into interminable quagmires. Sylvain could be seen plodding through the mud and slush and driving rain like some fugitive ghost. In his heart reigned the same overwhelming sadness that rose from the moldering fields, from the palsy-

stricken woods, from the mute and colorless hamlets, and from the sodden crucifixes that stretched their mournful arms over the roads. The short, sunless days crawled by, bleak and dull, filled with the ceaseless sound of splashing water. Sylvain became aware that night had fallen only when his foot stumbled against some object or when he bumped into a fence or a tree.

When he thought of the peasants and their children shut up in the drab, rain-soaked huts, his heart grew warm with love. But when he talked with some of the younger men, David Teniers or Robert Brero and others, who read pamphlets, attended meetings in Maere, and did not conceal their hatred for the manor folk whose greed and selfishness they held responsible for the poverty and misery of the peasants, he was plunged into distress.

"The manor people," said David Teniers, "squeeze the life out of us. We have nothing but barren land to till. Yet they harry us, and drive us to still deeper ruin. We become poorer and poorer, and they grow richer and richer. Is that God's will, Sylvain?"

Sylvain did not know what to answer. He was crushed by despair.

What good was it, he thought, to seek Christ in mysterious footprints, in mystic contemplation, in ritual and ceremonial, in prayer even, if children went hungry and their elders lived like animals—drink-sodden, illiterate, superstitious, coarse and filthy? God can be reached only through man and the man who neglects his fellows will never reach God. Sylvain felt a deep sense of personal involvement in the tragedy of the peasantry—the most abjectly miserable peasantry of Europe, as Robert Brero told him, because by governmental policy it was a peasantry intentionally degraded.

He wanted so much to help. But how? Who was responsible? Obviously, he thought, the class that enriched itself from peasant thrift and labor: the landlord class, a handful of privileged families, the class to which his own father belonged. But could he tell Guido that to follow Christ meant to live as pure as a child before God, to sacrifice everything, to suffer, to give up his wealth, to embrace poverty for Christ's sake? Could he say that? No, he could not, for he himself shared in the benefits and privileges accruing from the social position of his class; he, too, belonged to the oppressors. He was torn by an uneasy sense of humiliation when he thought of his own position. He loathed himself for it; he was a coward, a traitor to Christ, for not taking up his cross and exhausting himself in sorrow and suffering so that those around him, and those that would come after him, might live in peace and security. They cannot live the good life, the life of God, he thought, until their wounds are healed, until their economic condition improves. And if we do not sacrifice ourselves, we who know the light, if we do not increase the

powers of love and reason for others, the people will sink deeper and deeper into their squalor and beastliness.

Trudging home in the evening, when the slumbering trees stood out against the sky and the orchards loomed grey, he was frequently aroused from his reveries by shadows moving in the darkness of the hedgerows. The shrubbery-covered shores of the Meye River were peopled with dim figures. He heard whispers and laughter. Often he knew by the voices who they were, boys and girls of the neighborhood, sometimes mere children who were playing at love in the lanes and the sheltered nooks. He took no notice of them, but he could not help hearing the softly breathed words, the giggling, the smothered laughter, the sighs, and the rustling sound of struggles.

Once in a while he looked through the window of a rural tavern into the smoke-filled taproom, crowded to capacity with men and boys of all ages. Their heads lolled impotently on their shoulders as they bellowed at the top of their voices and guzzled from bottles and glasses. He listened to their ribald songs and foul language and watched them come out singly to vomit, or swarm out in shouting crowds to settle a quarrel.

“Holy soil, my native soil, Holy Mother Flanders, very holy,” he would whisper the words of the old hymn, “how low have you fallen!”

During the summer, when Guido was still in Antwerp, Sylvain had assisted Modeste and the workmen with the transformation of the house. When he saw all the discarded furniture, temporarily stored in the stable, it seemed to him that the chairs and tables and chests had fled there in a panic. In their fear and despair, they had climbed on top of each other and there had died.

As Guido had ordered, he and Modeste distributed most of the discarded furniture among the neediest peasants. For himself, he retained a few armchairs, a table, a couch, a commode and rugs, the painting of his grandmother, and the sacred objects from the Lord God’s corner. These he loaded on a cart and transported to a room in the old Tower of Terzel. He set up the statue of the Saviour in a corner, with the hands outstretched in the direction of Christopher Bay.

Every day he returned to replenish the oil in the lamps. The room in the old tower became a place of retreat for him, a refuge from the storm that raged in his young life. “Here, some day,” he mused, standing by the open window, looking out on the beach, “here the vision will appear. Here the end of suffering will be announced. Here will dawn the better day for which mankind has longed throughout the ages; that glorious day full of dread and

joy, when the bells will ring out, and Flemish eyes will behold the ineffable wonder, when Paradise itself will become visible on earth." He kneeled before the statue and prayed passionately for the advent of that day.

In the daytime, he frequently sat in the doorway of a peasant's hut, chatting with the old women at their spinning wheels or their needlework. With the simple folk and the children he was particularly gentle. Sometimes he walked to Moorkerken in the afternoon and waited in the neighborhood of the schoolhouse for the children to come out. Accompanying them on the long homeward journey, he told them stories or played games with them.

When his father came home, he put a stop to the boy's working in the fields. Sylvain had got into the habit of seeking out the poorest peasants and helping them clear their property of rocks and boulders. Such work was too heavy for him. He exerted himself too much, lifting and carrying huge stones. Some days he coughed incessantly. When he learned about his son's activities, Guido was secretly disconcerted. His conscience troubled him. He didn't like to be reminded of the fact that the Teniers and the Ostades and the Van Kempens and many other peasants would a thousand times rather heave and drag and toil like beasts of burden on their own piece of ground than come to the Govaerts estate and have a much easier time working for him.

After that Sylvain strayed more and more frequently in the direction of Vampire's Pit, that bleak and forbidding region in back of the manor. The eerie, almost palpable solitude of that wilderness seemed to draw him; it was as if he went to meet a dear friend there.

And such was indeed the case. Not one, but hundreds of friends looked and waited for him. The wild birds, the singing sparrows, the bobolinks, and all the creeping and slinking things knew him from afar. All these creatures came to him boldly. The pigeons flew out to meet him, circling around his head, flapping their wings and perching on his shoulders, cooing and nodding to express their satisfaction at having him in their midst. A badger came out of his hole as soon as Sylvain whistled, and then followed him around like a little dog. In his presence martens and weasels lost their instinctive fear of man. He seemed to know the language of each creature.

Sylvain walked among them as if in a trance. All things visible and invisible gradually faded and merged into the strange character of half dream and half reality. His mind was free, without any desire. He was in another world, in an indescribable presence. He had a sense of sky and earth and all things bound in some obscure divinity. Vampire's Pit was no longer an abomination, it was Paradise. To roam there filled him with inexpressible peace.

But those moments when he felt an ecstasy, as at the holiest moment of the Holy Mass, did not last for long. Wandering about, he would stare at the ground with unseeing eyes, or he would sit on a rock listening to the breeze in the shrubbery on the dunes, and watching the sand curl and eddy in tiny wreaths of glistening crystals. He would look up, alarmed, fear written on his face, at the slightest unusual noise. He could be heard talking to himself, and moaning and sighing.

. . . "What must I do? What am I? Why is everything in its appointed place in this world, and I alone am driven as by a fever? Who are you, invisible one, that drives these arrows into my heart, these terrifying dreams? Why are the little children cold and hungry? How can I help? I want to help, God; what can I do?" Sylvain longed to take all the children in his arms and soothe and hush them. Sometimes he would fling himself on the ground face downward and whisper to the earth.

When the black clouds came up from the sea and the wind made the knotted pines sigh and creak, or when a sudden squall of rain clattered down upon the bushes, he would sit up eagerly and laugh. Had he heard a voice? Was that someone speaking? Or was it another illusion? Was that God's voice? No, it could not be. For if God spoke, Sylvain was convinced, he would not be able to bear the power of it. He would be consumed instantly as if cast bodily into seething metal.

Often when the boy was out, Guido nervously paced the big room downstairs until, unable to bear the suspense, he would order his horse saddled and ride out to look for his son. Memories of his mother, the Mad Lady of Moorkerken, flashed through his mind. He could not bear the thought of Sylvain's solitude in the desolation of Vampire's Pit. And yet he was fearful, too, of finding him. Where would it all end?

On one of his far-flung excursions, Sylvain inadvertently crossed the Dutch border and fell in with a peasant who told him that a miracle had happened in the nearby community of Sint Anna, where a new sect, known as the Watchers, had lately come into existence. A child at death's door, given up by all the doctors, had been brought into the assembly of the Watchers and had been cured by the laying on of hands. The leader of the cult, a certain Cosyn Kok, had performed the miracle. He had raised the child to its feet and it had walked off clapping its hands for joy. The stranger said he had seen the wonder with his own eyes.

Sylvain did not doubt the peasant's word in the least. He thanked the man and decided to investigate for himself the next time he was in the

vicinity of Sint Anna parish. And so, walking in that neighborhood one Sunday evening a few weeks later and hearing the sound of singing come from a barn, he entered and stood near the door.

It took him several minutes to become accustomed to the semi-obscurity of the hall. When he could distinguish objects more clearly, he saw that there were over a hundred men, women and children present. There were no benches or chairs. The people were sitting on the floor or half-lying on their elbows on piles of straw ranged in three or four wide semi-circles around a small platform made up of planks laid across barrels. On the platform stood a man dressed in the traditional Zeeland-Flemish costume: a short black cloth jacket, a necklace of a few strands of red coral beads fastened with a silver clasp, knickerbockers, and black-painted wooden shoes. The man's hair was snow-white and he wore tiny golden rings in his ears.

A solitary lamp, a mere farm lantern, hung above the platform. The speaker's wrinkled face was kind and serious. He stuttered badly, but he managed to say that until recently he had felt surrounded by a mass of enemies whose presence was sensed rather than seen, and from whom emanated a loathsome, clammy, slimy fluid. It was as if he felt the icy breath of death fanning his cheeks. It took him a long time before he realized that the frightening, almost tangible shapes which encompassed him were his own sins. It was the Evil One himself who held him in a diabolical embrace. Then, summoning all his strength to escape or to fight off the apparition, he had lifted his voice and called out: "O God, be merciful unto me, Cosyn Kok, the most miserable of sinners!" At once the grasp on his throat relaxed and the hideous visitation vanished.

In its stead, a pure heavenly light poured into his soul. He now felt God's presence very near. He was like a child who is led by its father's hand towards the light. All around him was light now, he exclaimed, making a wide, awkward, sweeping motion with his hands. Everything in the world had taken on a new significance. Problems over which he had formerly puzzled in vain were now clear as crystal. " 'Not I live henceforth,' " he quoted with bated breath, " 'but Christ lives in me.' "

His head dropped on his breast and he seemed to be thinking. Then a woman seated near Sylvain began to sing in a clear contralto. All those present rose to their feet and held their hands above their heads.

I see, O Lord, a door wide open,
The light comes streaming in to me . . .

They sang the hymn, as only Dutch congregations sing, with the slow grandeur of an operatic chorus. Sylvain was deeply moved.

For weeks after his first encounter with the Watchers, he did not go near the place again. When he casually looked in once more, again piqued by curiosity, he ran into serious trouble.

It appears that the assemblies in Kok's barn, as was almost inevitable by reason of the absence of trained theologians, had gradually taken on a political tinge. Except for Kok, who was a small landowner, nearly all the adherents of the new cult were drawn from that social class which is commonly described as underprivileged—unemployed laborers, handy men, tinkers, migratory workers and jacks-of-all-trades. There were even some beggars.

From the Bible, which they had newly discovered, the Watchers learned that they were no longer slaves and servants but "sons and heirs." Jesus had said that he came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly. This saying did not refer to the hidden, mystical treasures alone. The Lord, they felt, had been one of their own, wounded and forsaken like themselves. He would not deceive them. Obviously, he had meant to include all departments of human existence in his embrace. They wanted to apply their new-found freedom to their own material circumstances, to the workaday world. By primitive reasoning, they had arrived at the point where so many sectarians throughout the ages had arrived—just before they were hunted down and crushed. Going back to the teachings of Jesus, and taking them seriously, the Watchers had unwittingly become anarchists. Their ideas found fertile ground among the rural populace of Zeeland-Flanders, where, as everywhere else in Holland, messianic expectations and anticipations of a golden-aged, divine kingdom remained very vivid. Branches of the new cult, conventicles they were called, sprang up in one village after another and gained scores of new adherents at each Sunday-evening service. Here and there, as in the parishes of Rilland and Bath, the Watchers felt sufficiently sure of themselves to come out in the open. They paraded through the streets behind blood-red banners on which were painted the images of a cross and a huge loaf of bread.

Soon city newspapers began to express alarm over the proportions the movement was assuming. The peasants were talking of forming a *Boerenbond*, or Peasant League, which was to be international in scope in that it proposed to draw its membership from the population on either side of the border. Clearly it was high time for the authorities to investigate these goings-on, and to put a stop to the agitation for collectivization, which put the peasants in a more and more intemperate, not to say rebellious, mood.

Before the authorities could interfere, however, the Watchers movement broke up in a series of bitter internecine quarrels. One or two of the

conventicles challenged the authority of Cosyn Kok, who, they felt, was overly cautious and too prone to temporize. They wanted a certain Dirk Hovy to be the leader of the movement because the Prophet, as Hovy was called, proposed immediate action. All attempts to bring the two factions together ended in failure and tempers rose higher. Then Cosyn Kok was denounced as Antichrist by Prophet Hovy, and the fat was in the fire.

Sylvain paid his second visit to Kok's barn the night the squabble reached its height. He could make neither head nor tail of the violent diatribe that was being delivered from the platform as he entered and stood near the door. Bellowing like the bull of Bashan and banging the table in front of him with his fist, a pitifully bow-legged farmer with a red beard and scrofulous eyes was swearing by all that was holy that he for one would no longer stand for Dirk Hovy's damnable heresies and soul-snatching tricks.

"That devil and his gang of apes," he shouted, "have no right to call themselves Watchers, seeing that they have broken away from us—from the one true church. They'll either have to give up the name or come back to us as penitents. I propose that we march over to their service now, in a body, without any delay, and tell Dirk and the other fools to their faces where they get off. . . . Come, brothers; come, Watchers," he called, moving his hands in a sweeping, beckoning gesture, as he climbed down from the platform, "let's cut ourselves some good stout cudgels from the willows by the ditch and go over to the backsliders' meeting house."

When the red-bearded man stopped talking, a low growl went through the room, and then there was pandemonium. A dozen other would-be speakers tried to mount the platform and make themselves heard above the general uproar. Everyone talked and yelled and screamed at once. It was a chorus of incoherence and chaos.

Suddenly the door flew open and a mob of shouting, disheveled men and women stormed inside. Many of the newcomers brandished sticks and flails and some even carried pitchforks. Hovy's followers had apparently stolen a march on the original Watchers and had come to demand an accounting of their own.

Kok's congregation was stunned by surprise. But the suspense lasted only for a moment. There were angry shouts and denunciations. A blistering altercation started between two men standing face to face by the door, quite near Sylvain. Fists rose defiantly and the first blows were struck. Instantly, the barn was turned into a bedlam of fighting men and women who beat each other to the floor and tore the clothes off each others' backs. Each chose his own opponent, throttling and gouging, fist against fist, brute strength against brute strength, crushing, tearing, wallowing on the ground.

The noise was deafening. Clawing and shrieking, the women flung themselves into battle, like curs attacking a rival pack. The men fought grimly, taking and dealing out blows without uttering a sound.

Sylvain caught a glimpse of the red-bearded speaker of the evening, his teeth bared like a wolf's, straddling another man's chest and pushing his thumbs into his eyes. He saw Cosyn Kok, his torso bare and bleeding profusely from a wound in his neck, trying to reach the lantern above the platform, probably with the intention of extinguishing it. But a peasant's club caught him across the knees, and he was brought down.

Sylvain wanted nothing better than to get out. He had been pushed far inside the hall, and slowly made his way back to the door. But some of the attacking party, a group of young peasants armed with cudgels, barred the exit and pushed him back roughly when another step would have brought him outside.

"Back, you son of Belial!" growled a young farmer in shirt sleeves. "Don't try to sneak out before you get your medicine."

Sylvain stepped back, aghast, only to be flung bodily into the same sentinel's arms by a woman who ran up behind him and who sought to reach the door herself. The big peasant lifted his cudgel and aimed a blow at the woman's head. Sylvain's hand shot out and held the man's arm in an iron grip.

"Hey, fellows!" cried the peasant, "help me! Stop this funny fellow with the white collar!"

In an instant Sylvain was surrounded and helpless. One of the peasants deliberately took off a wooden shoe and struck Sylvain across the face. The blood gushed from his nose and mouth. Another ripped off his collar and, throwing it on the floor, wiped his feet on it.

"Why do you strike me?" Sylvain gasped, half-dazed by the blow. "I did you no harm."

"What in hell is going on here?" roared a stentorian voice from the door.

They all whirled around, letting their sticks and cudgels clatter to the floor. The *maréchaussée*[4] had arrived. The voice was that of the commandant of the district, a man wearing an enormous busby,[5] who ostentatiously rattled his saber as he stepped inside. All over the hall the fighting stopped as if by magic.

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[4] Rural Dutch mounted police who are dressed like Hussars.

[5] Tall bear-skin cap.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?" asked the commandant, looking over the crestfallen peasants. "Saints of God, you call yourselves, and you fight like devils! *Allay*, men," he motioned to a dozen troopers who had come in behind him, "line them up, and bring them along. In the name of the law, I place you all under arrest for disturbing the peace on the Lord's day." He laughed dryly. "Tonight the Watchers are going to do a little watching from behind the barred windows of the lockup at Sint Anna."

"Excuse me," Sylvain said, going up to the commandant, "I really don't belong here."

"I can see that," the officer replied, looking at Sylvain's blood-smeared face and torn clothing. "You belong in *'t hok*, my fine hero, in the hole, under the dungeon. You must be one of the ringleaders. You're bleeding like a stuck pig. Here, men," he turned to the troopers, "put the cuffs on this young fighting cock. We'll teach him a lesson."

Sylvain put out his hands meekly and a trooper clamped on the manacles. Between the horses of the *maréchaussée*, the long file of prisoners tramped the three miles to the village of Sint Anna.

Sitting on the stone floor of the crowded jail with the peasants, Sylvain listened to their tales of woe. They were not sorry about their bruises and torn clothes. They were worried about their wives and children. What was to become of them if the district judge should deal out a stiff sentence, as well he might, on the morrow? Disturbing the peace is no light offense in Holland; but disturbing the peace on the Sabbath is a sin for which there is no forgiveness. The peasants groaned at the prospect of a long incarceration until Cosyn Kok suggested that one or two should perhaps take the entire blame for the disturbance upon themselves. That would absolve scores of others.

The peasants agreed readily enough. But who would be the scapegoat, who would sacrifice himself, who could best afford a long absence from work? Whose wife and children would suffer least if the breadwinner were locked up?

"I'll take the blame," Sylvain said suddenly. "The judge will easily believe I started the disturbance, for I am a stranger. I belong across the border. I did wrong in coming to your assembly, anyway, for I am a Catholic; I deserve to be punished."

It took Guido, who learned of his son's arrest the next day, nearly a week to liberate Sylvain from the clutches of the law.

"You had no business with those confounded heretics in the first place," he said to his son on the way home. "But why, in heaven's name, you should have taken the blame upon yourself is altogether beyond me. It's a good thing the judge didn't believe you, or you would have gone to the penitentiary for three months. Tell me, why did you accuse yourself?"

"Father," Sylvain answered, "think of the suffering that could have been prevented."

Guido had no reply. He drove on in silence. From time to time he looked sideways at Sylvain and shook his head uncomprehendingly.

5

With her hands on her hips, humming a little tune, Annemarie, the blonde barmaid, walked across the taproom of “The Ducal Court” to the marble-topped table nearest the stove where the retired postmaster, Monsieur Louis Longuet, and three of his friends were playing dominoes. Dropping a little curtsy, she informed the gentlemen that the four o’clock train had just pulled in. “The Ducal Court” is the modern, three-story hotel opposite the railway station in the historic town of Maere. Once a major cloth market, Maere has for the last three hundred years been numbered among the so-called “dead cities” of Flanders. Nothing of importance ever happens there. A tooth falls out, a funeral goes by, a drunken peasant is taken to the lockup, lovers stroll in the park around the moldering cathedral, and the train from Antwerp arrives at four in the afternoon. If it is five minutes late, the incident becomes a topic for discussion at the supper table.

Annemarie’s announcement was made at the same hour every day, except on Sundays, when the players stayed home. It was the signal for these four gentlemen to finish their game and pay their bill. Accordingly, they pulled out their watches, verified the time, pushed their chairs back, took down their hats and coats from the clothes tree, and walked over to the street side of the taproom where a large plateglass window offered them a view of the small square in front of the station and of the incoming passengers.

In summertime Postmaster Longuet and his companions were warned five minutes in advance of the train’s arrival, to give them an opportunity to cross the square and take personal delivery of their newspapers. When it rained or the weather was otherwise inclement, they remained inside, and watched events through the window. This they were doing now.

They could see white puffs of smoke rising from the locomotive and dissolving above the station roof. Two horse-drawn carriages, one an open fiacre, the other a closed four-passenger vehicle, stood in the square. The drivers, whips in hand, were standing near the station door, engaged in lively conversation. Presently both men straightened up and deferentially tipped

their tall silk hats to a gentleman with a black beard who came out of the station door. The four retired functionaries in "The Ducal Court" bent nearer the window in order to get a better view.

"Who in God's name is that?" asked Postmaster Longuet.

"He looks like the devil himself," said Mijnheer Ryker, a former tax collector, who peered over Longuet's shoulder. "I wouldn't like to meet that customer on a dark night, not I."

The man with the black beard was seen to engage the open carriage. He slapped the driver familiarly on the back as if he were an old friend. The luggage was placed on the front seat, the coachman climbed on the box, and the stranger got into the carriage. The four citizens pressed their noses against the window in anticipation of the moment when the fiacre should pass the hotel. The driver cracked his whip and the wheels rattled over the cobblestones. The carriage had not gone a hundred feet when the watchers saw the stranger pull the coachman's coat tails and motion toward "The Ducal Court."

"Good heavens!" Ryker exclaimed, "he's coming in here!" The carriage was indeed stopping before the hotel. As by common consent, the four trooped back to their seats and a moment later the stranger stamped into the taproom. He swept his hat off with a wide flourish, bowed his head in the direction of the other guests, and seated himself by the door. Postmaster Longuet immediately busied himself with distributing the dominoes while casting uneasy, searching glances at the newcomer.

The stranger appeared to be in his thirties, of an athletic build, with eyes that matched his raven-black beard and hair. He wore a dark-green, belted sports jacket, riding breeches and tightly laced high boots. None of the domino players had ever seen anyone dressed like that before.

"A foreigner," Ryker said under his breath.

"That's obvious," Postmaster Longuet replied. "Any fool can see that."

"He looks like a dressed-up Gypsy to me," Notary Fabian whispered, as he glanced at the stranger over the rim of his glasses. "What does a fellow like that want in Maere, I'd like to know. . . ."

With his eyebrows raised, the stranger sat gazing at the ceiling. He seemed to have yielded to a thoughtful mood. From time to time he stroked his square-cut beard from the neck upwards, while a thin smile played about his lips. Then, looking down at the table, he broke up a match box and piled the chips on the ash tray. His hands were very brown. His warm black eyes turned in the direction of the door as a lame boy came in to bring the gentlemen their newspapers. The stranger also bought a journal.

“That’s for you,” he said to the boy, who looked at the coin he received as if he could not believe his eyes.

“He speaks Flemish,” Fabian said, “so he’s no foreigner. But I’ll wager anything in the world that he wears that beard for a disguise. Go outside, Ryker! You have the youngest legs. Ask Pieter the coachman if he knows anything.”

Ryker rose to his feet and started for the door. The bearded man looked at him, but Ryker dropped his eyes. Then the stranger slapped the marble table with the flat of his hand to summon the barmaid. Annemarie replied and came hurrying into the room. The man looked up and measured her with his eyes. When she came near he smiled broadly, revealing a set of gleaming white teeth. The maid laughed heartily at his remarks, and presently walked back to fetch his order. The stranger looked after her with evident satisfaction, and produced his pipe. Ryker had come back in the meantime and sat down with his friends.

“Well, what did you find out?” Notary Fabian asked.

“He’s a foreigner most likely, as you said.” Ryker bent over the table and talked in a whisper. “But he speaks Flemish. That’s true also. He has three traveling bags of an English make, and three rifles.”

“Rifles?” they asked in chorus.

“What does he want with rifles here in Maere? He isn’t permitted to bring deadly weapons into this town,” Notary Fabian said. “It’s against the law.”

“He’s not staying here,” Ryker said, “he’s going on to Moorkerken. He’s probably a hunter.”

“Did he say to whom he was going in Moorkerken?” Longuet asked.

“No, all he told Pieter was that he wanted to be home at suppertime.”

“Home? Did he say his home is in Moorkerken? Now I have it.” Notary Fabian’s face brightened. “Wait a minute now, I have it. I know who he is. I recognized him the moment he stepped into this room. That’s Guido Govaerts’ eldest son, the one who went to Africa. I’m sure of it. The beard fooled me for a moment. His father brought him to my office several times when he was a lad. Yes sir, that’s Guido Govaerts’ son Rudolph, as sure as I’m sitting here!”

“I thought you said he was a Gypsy,” Longuet said sarcastically.

They all looked at the stranger, who had engaged the barmaid in animated conversation. He was trying to persuade her to sit down and have a drink with him.

Notary Fabian was not mistaken. The man in the outlandish clothes was indeed Rudolph Govaerts. But he was not the moody farm lad who had left eight years before. Life had done something to Rudolph. The African sun had burnt the peasant shyness out of him. He had conquered his morose and self-communing nature. He had become a man of the world. The man at whom the domino players of Maere sat staring unabashed was perfectly at ease.

He was joking and laughing with Annemarie, pouring the contents of one glass after another down his throat. She leaned slightly forward, her hands on the table, greatly enjoying the moment. Suddenly he half-lifted himself in his seat and bringing his face close to hers, blew the girl's hair aside. At the same time he bared his teeth in a playful gesture as if he were going to bite her ear. She drew back quickly and told him to remember where he was.

"You're the most impatient man I ever saw," she said.

Rudolph laughed in a soft, ironic voice. "I haven't touched such a delicious Flemish skin in years and years," he said.

"Did you hear that?" Fabian asked. "Fast work, eh? I would never have thought it of him. He was so timid he didn't open his mouth when his father used to bring him into my office."

"You can never tell with these Govaerts boys," Ryker said. "They're a queer lot. I'm told old Guido was quite a ladies' man, too, in his younger years."

"He still is," Fabian replied. "Have you seen that new wife of his?"

"We all saw her," Longuet said. "Don't you remember when she arrived with Guido from Antwerp after the wedding?"

"Of course, of course, I forgot, but that was two years ago," Fabian said. "You should see her now. Man alive, it makes your mouth water to look at her."

"Country air," Longuet mumbled. "It's the country air and the sun that bring out the bloom."

"It'll be a little awkward for Guido," Ryker said, "if Rudolph moves in at the manor. He'd better look sharp."

"What do you mean?" Fabian asked.

"What *can* I mean?" Ryker motioned in the direction of Rudolph. "If that fellow over there and the new wife hit it off together, it'll be a devil of a mix-up! Can't you see old Guido blow up?"

"He'd kill him," Longuet said.

“He wouldn’t do that,” Fabian replied. “I know him. He’s too softhearted for anything like that. Besides, don’t forget, Sylvain is home, too.”

“A sad case, that Sylvain, a God-seeker isn’t he?” Longuet asked.

“He’s a sick boy,” Fabian said. “He inherited the malady of his grandmother, the Mad Lady of Moorkerken. Have you ever heard of her?”

The four silently marched out of the taproom. Except for Rudolph, they were the last customers. Outside they stood still and peered back through the window. They could see Rudolph pull up a chair and motion to Annemarie to sit down. She glanced around the room first, then with a hesitant smile, she complied.

“You’ll see the most beautiful woman in East Flanders if you’re going to Moorkerken,” Annemarie said.

“Who’s that?”

“The wife of the squire out there.”

“Is she better-looking than you?” Rudolph asked.

“Stop your flattery. Of course she is. She’s gorgeous.”

“Do you know her?” Rudolph asked.

“In a way,” Annemarie replied. “I worked in her hotel in Antwerp.”

“Is that where the squire met her?”

“No, the squire met her at the home of his cousin, the councillor.”

“Caesar Govaerts?”

“You seem to know these people. How is that?” Annemarie said.

“Everybody has heard of them. This Caesar Govaerts is a prominent merchant.”

“Yes, that he is. But he is also the worst rakehell in all Antwerp. I know him only too well, the squint-eyed old goat. God, what a monster of wickedness! He thinks he can buy any woman.”

Rudolph laughed. “Is he as bad as all that?”

“You’d better ask the squire’s wife in Moorkerken if you get to see her. Mathilda knows him better than I do. I never had anything to do with him.”

“Did she, did—eh—Mathilda?” Rudolph asked softly.

“Mathilda was his protégée,” Annemarie said slyly.

“His protégée, eh?” Rudolph grinned. “Then how did she come to marry his cousin?”

“That’s a long story,” Annemarie said evasively, “and besides, it’s not mine to tell.”

"Oh, come now. I'm not going to repeat it."

"I really don't know much about it," she said slowly. "But it was common gossip around the hotel that the councillor's wife found out how much time he was spending with Mathilda and put a stop to it. There was nothing like a scandal, you know, but there must have been some arrangement because a few weeks later Mathilda went to live at their home in the Keyzerlei. At least she stayed there very frequently. The Caesar Govaerts had both been friends of her family, you understand."

"I see," Rudolph nodded. "They palmed off Caesar's cast-off love on the squire, is that it?"

"I wouldn't put it quite that way. The squire was a foolish lovesick old man. He visited the Govaerts in Antwerp. Mathilda was there, the innocent little orphan girl. The squire fell in love with her at first sight—a squire as rich as they come, mind you! Wasn't she lucky?" she asked. "You should have seen the clothes and the presents he bought her. But he's a good man," she added, thoughtfully. "He comes in here occasionally. He's our most generous customer."

"And was Caesar the only admirer?"

"Almost the only one. Well, there was a ship's captain—a Captain Cavelaer, but I could never find out if anything really went on between them. And besides," she said as she arose, "I'm talking too much. I've got work to do." She softened her words with a smile as she walked away.

It was dark when Rudolph arrived at the manor house. He entered by way of the kitchen, where Theresa was presiding as head of the long board at which all the servants were assembled. The old housekeeper was ladling out soup. Catching sight of Rudolph, she hastily put down the tureen and threw her hands over her head. The black-bearded stranger, who had come in without knocking and strode through the kitchen as if he were lord of all, called her by name and cheerfully wished her a good evening. She stared at him speechlessly. But Uncle Modeste, who happened to enter, immediately recognized him. Cackling her amazement like a disturbed old hen, Theresa came over to look at him closely.

"You frightened me with your beard, Dolphie," she said. "When you came in you reminded me so much of the Villain of Ghent, who was executed when I was a little girl for poisoning twenty-six people, that I thought you were his ghost. His name was Franciscus and he . . ." But Rudolph wasn't listening. Preceded by Modeste, he walked rapidly into the large room where Guido, Mathilda and Sylvain were at supper. Guido, his

face pale, rose slowly from his chair, and tears came into his eyes as he embraced his son.

"I would not have recognized you with that beard," he said, measuring Rudolph with his eyes. Sylvain also embraced his brother. Then without a word, Rudolph walked over to Mathilda and, bending respectfully, kissed her hand.

The Heer of Moorkerken would have preferred to speak privately with his son of the change that had taken place in the household before bringing him into Mathilda's presence. When Rudolph had appeared behind Modeste, a sudden cold fear had seized Guido. He felt vaguely that he would be called upon to give an accounting of himself, that he would have to apologize for his marriage. His hands were numb and his knees trembled when he rose to greet his son. But the easy, deferential manner in which Rudolph saluted Mathilda quickly reassured him. His apprehensions of a moment before seemed absurd. After all, what was there to apologize for? He hadn't done Rudolph any injustice in marrying Mathilda. His son had left of his own free will, taking his share of his mother's inheritance.

Guido looked attentively at his eldest son. Was this the solitary and uncommunicative boy who formerly sat at table with downcast eyes silently eating his meals? Was this his son Rudolph, this well-dressed man who at once captured Mathilda's attention with his description of the changes he had noticed in her native city of Antwerp and of the Parisian styles in women's clothes, and who talked of London and Amsterdam and Cape Town as if they were mere villages in East Flanders?

Then Rudolph said casually that he had learned all the news—all the details of what had happened on the farm during his absence—before setting foot in the house.

"Who told you?" Guido asked. "Did you drop in at Cousin Charlotte's in Antwerp?"

"No," Rudolph replied, glancing at Mathilda. "I stayed at a small hotel in Antwerp with the captain of the ship that brought me from England. It seems Cousin Caesar is the owner of that hotel. At any rate they knew all about you—and about everybody else. Then I learned some more in Maere. I was in that old gossip mill, 'The Ducal Court.' Incidentally, I ran into some of your old friends there," he said to Guido. "Fabian, the notary, didn't seem a day older. He had that same pinched look. I swear he was wearing the same greasy frock coat he had on eight years ago. Longuet was with him and some other old fossils I didn't know. They were playing dominoes just as on the day I left."

Rudolph laughed as he told them about the curiosity of the domino players, and how one of them had even left the taproom to question the coachman.

Sylvain alone noticed that Mathilda had grown pale. Rudolph's words and his laughter seemed to convey a provoking knowledge of something which aroused Mathilda's uneasiness. She quickly hid her embarrassment by joining in the general banter, but Sylvain had sensed the strain.

The conversation turned to the changes Mathilda had introduced in the manor house. Rudolph admired the new decorations and draperies in the dining room. He had noticed that out in the hall one of his brother Colas' masterpieces no longer arrested the passer-by with its stark portrayal of French knights weltering in their own blood. "Heavens, what a carnage that was!" he said. "Hearts, lungs and intestines were flying in all directions!" They all laughed.

Guido proposed that they show Rudolph all the renovations, and as they rose and stood around the table for a moment, Rudolph spoke of the rifles he had brought and inquired about the possibilities of doing some hunting in the dune lands near Christopher Bay.

While the men talked together, Mathilda regarded Rudolph intently. His eyes, deep-set and fringed with lashes as long as a woman's, were of unfathomable depth, alluring and dangerous. His face, hardened and browned in the African wind, reminded her of the Flemish portraits in the museums of Brussels and Antwerp—the diplomats and the artists and the financiers, the descendants of the Florentine colonists who had settled in Ghent and Bruges during the Middle Ages. She shuddered involuntarily when he turned for an instant to smile at her, as if he had been aware of her thoughts. It was a fascinating face, but the face of a man without conscience, a man utterly unscrupulous in spite of his polished manners. When he turned to her again, he gallantly offered his arm.

Guido followed, contentedly sending up thick clouds of tobacco smoke. The Heer of Moorkerken was pleased that his wife and his son hit it off so well together. They went from room to room, Mathilda explaining and Rudolph commenting admiringly on her discriminating taste.

They reached the end of the tour in what Rudolph called the "*grand salon*," the large room in the west wing, formerly used as a storage place, which Mathilda had turned into an almost exact replica of Charlotte's drawing room on the Keyzerlei. Such elegance and splendor Rudolph said he had never seen in his life. His eyes swept admiringly over the curtains and tapestries. "Perfect!" he exclaimed, bowing to Mathilda. "It's a dream!"

Mathilda smiled and Guido nodded his head, grinning with satisfaction. Then, as they stood in the middle of the room, Guido asked Rudolph where he had left his baggage.

"I left everything on the kitchen porch."

"I'll get them for you," Guido said. "I'm curious to see those rifles you've brought." He turned to his youngest son. "Come, Sylvain, give me a hand. Modeste is too old to carry such things and the others have probably gone to bed."

When they were out of earshot, Rudolph turned to Mathilda. "Captain Cavelaer asked after you. It was on his ship that I traveled from England. He sends you his regards."

Stepping back, Mathilda leaned against the wall, as if suddenly overcome by fatigue.

He smiled impudently at her distress. "Don't worry, Mathilda," he said, "I know how to keep a secret. Did you know that Annemarie, the girl who formerly worked at your hotel, is now employed at 'The Ducal Court' in Maere? I promised I'd bring her word from you one of these days."

"Was it to Annemarie you spoke in Maere?" Mathilda asked in a shaking voice.

Rudolph nodded in reply. Then footsteps and voices were heard in the hall, and when Sylvain and Guido re-entered the room Mathilda was pointing out the graceful lines of the crystal chandelier. Rudolph suddenly interrupted her with an apologetic gesture, and rushed forward to relieve his father of the heavy portmanteau.

"I should have done this myself," he said, "but I was so impressed with the magnificence of the room that I scarcely noticed your leaving."

"It's no trouble whatever," Guido replied affably, "no trouble, I assure you. But those rifles are certainly excellent. Where did you buy them?"

"I bought two in London," Rudolph answered, "and the other I brought with me from Africa. This one is a Mauser, a killer. There are some notches on the butt, you'll notice. The English ones are Lee-Metfords."

As Guido and Rudolph were unpacking the rifles and putting them on the table, Sylvain quietly placed the remaining luggage on the floor and looked with questioning eyes at Mathilda, who had involuntarily put her hand to her throat. "Something unpleasant, something bad, happened in this room while Father and I were away," he thought, and he left abruptly without saying a word.

Mathilda, seeing the men's absorption in the guns, also slipped out of the room. In the hallway she almost collided with Uncle Modeste, who came shuffling from behind the staircase with a lantern in his hand. The old man stopped and, watching her race up the stairs, shook his head, and continued on his self-imposed but wholly unnecessary nightly inspection tour.

When Mathilda heard Guido enter the bedroom an hour later, she pretended to be asleep. She listened to him undress and wash. Then, he opened the window and she knew he was looking at the sky. He always did that. He went through all these motions as through a ritual. In a minute he would kneel down to say his prayers and then he'd be snoring. She felt she could not bear it.

Rudolph, that black devil with his cruel smile. . . . He had already uttered a threat. Would he keep quiet? He had said he would, but there was always a condition attached with men of his kind.

Her mind was in a turmoil. Could she tell Guido the truth and brave his scorn—and perhaps be sent from the house like a dishonest servant girl? On the other hand, if Guido should prove magnanimous and forgive her—what then? Wouldn't that result in pitting father against son? She imagined the tension which would result from a confession on her part. Life would become unendurable. Neither man would give in. There might even be violence. Yet she knew that if she refused anything Rudolph might ask, he would not rest till he had finally undermined and destroyed her position. Instinctively, she knew he could not be trifled with. But if she gave in to him, would that be the end of it?

If only she could talk to Annemarie before Rudolph saw the girl again. Annemarie had always been a good friend. She would help again. If Annemarie kept Rudolph sufficiently interested, it would divert his obviously amorous attentions from herself. . . .

But no. She realized at once that she didn't want Rudolph to be interested in Annemarie—or in any woman but herself.

Long ago she had learned how to exploit her beauty. It should not be hard to keep Rudolph in line. And it would not be a matter of giving in, since they apparently felt the same way about each other. There were risks involved, of course, but if they were careful . . .

Life with Guido had become senseless. Why shouldn't she have some diversion? Guido clung to his farm and to the petty cares and duties at Moorkerken as a drowning man to a plank. Listening to him, one would think that nothing mattered in the whole wide world but that farm of his. All day long one heard nothing but discussions about horses and cattle and beets

and flax and hogs and feed and milk. She was sick to death of the whole business. All that talk about blooming and blossoming and bringing forth fruit was repulsive. She did not want to bloom and bear fruit. . . . "I'd rather be buried eight feet underground," she whispered, "deep enough to prevent anything from growing out of me, not even a tree, or a flower."

In wintertime, with its mud and snow and rain, they were locked up in the house for months on end. It was like living in a box. In summer they went to bed before the sun was wholly down. The only visitors were peasants who talked again of the same dreary old problems: horses, potatoes, grain and hogs. Was that living? She wondered how Guido, how anyone, could stand it. . . .

The trip to the village church on Sundays provided the only relaxation from the week's drudgery. Even so, it was a poor substitute for the opera and the theaters and the coffeehouses and the other delights of Antwerp. True, once a year she was allowed to go along to watch Guido march in the solemn procession of the hooded penitents in Veurne.

If he thought he did her a favor with that paltry pantomime, he was naïvely mistaken. What did he do it for—he and all those thousands of men who took part in the parade? To expiate the sin of a soldier, dead hundreds of years; a man who had taken the sacred wafer from his mouth one morning at communion, wrapped it in a cloth and, returning to his lodging, fried it over the fire under the delusion that in reducing it to powder he would make himself invulnerable. The man had paid for the outrage by being burnt at the stake. Wasn't that enough? Must Guido and the others keep up the farce of expiating the man's crime with a procession each year? Why did Guido take such pleasure in that silly spectacle?

True, once a year he took her to Antwerp for a week. But then she was obliged to follow him around like a schoolgirl, visiting horse shows and cattle-judging contests and other such unappetizing spectacles. She felt as if she were buried alive in the gloomy rooms at Moorkerken.

Sylvain, too, with those strange, half-accusing, half-pleading eyes, which reminded her of the eyes of saints in sacred pictures—why was he there? She felt a strong aversion for Sylvain. Sometimes he looked at her so reproachfully that she felt as if a knife had cut into her soul. He seemed able to read one's innermost thoughts, even before they were fully formulated. How was it, for instance, that he always looked up so expectantly at table when one merely thought of him? He would look at you suddenly as if he had heard you call him by name. It was weird.

What if Sylvain should some day begin to read aloud what he saw in her mind? Mathilda shuddered. She did not in the least doubt that he was capable of it. Often the boy's presence, in the dining room or in the carriage driving to church on Sundays, made her uncomfortable. It was as if her conscience were sitting next to her. She was afraid of him. A boy like that, she thought, really didn't belong in a normal household with normal people. Why didn't Guido send him back to school, or else marry him off to some pretty heiress on one of the estates—stir the boy's blood back to life that way, instead of letting him run around like some male Beguin, like one of those ninnies, those simple-minded God-seekers?

Yes, now that Rudolph had come back, it would be a distinct gain if Sylvain should leave. But it would be better still if Guido would get rid of that scrawny-necked old eyesore of a Modeste. Why didn't Guido send the doddering old fool packing, as she had urged him several times? Why did he never accede to his wife's wishes? Was she never to have her way?

At times, Mathilda hated the superintendent. The man was like a watch dog, always snooping and peeping and sniffling and spying for Guido, always sticking his nose into everything. It was unbearable. She wished something would happen to him. The sniveling sneak!

She dug her fingernails into her hand viciously when she thought of the sly, casual way in which he had broken up her idyll with Brero. He had always managed to come between them. He seemed to materialize out of thin air at the most inopportune moments. She had given herself no end of trouble in arranging meetings with the smith. In the afternoon she strolled past the smithy and, in a few hasty words, made arrangements for a rendezvous. In the evening, when Guido retired early, or when he was attending a prolonged session of the county council in Moorkerken, she'd venture out in the meadow behind the stables, following the path through the shrubbery to the shore of the Meye. And just when she thought she would find Robert by the fence, where he had promised to meet her, Modeste would turn up. He would come shuffling along a side path, whistling a tune or clearing his throat or breaking off a willow twig. He would act as if he didn't even see her—as if he happened to be quite accidentally in the vicinity, returning from an errand to some peasant cottage or the like. It drove her to frenzy the way he managed to frustrate her every time she had a clandestine appointment with the blond giant.

Only once had she fooled the old superintendent, or had she? She could not be sure. He might have seen her after all. At any rate, she had not seen him. Her heart pounded at the memory of that meeting. It was Sint John's night, the shortest of the year, when one day follows close on the heels of

the previous one. She had taken advantage of an old folk custom to leave the house in pitch-dark.

For it is on Sint John's night that unmarried Flemish girls run naked to the nearest river to take a hasty dip and flee back to their homes as if all the devils and witches were at their heels. It is an old custom dating from pre-Christian days—a survival of paganism. The Church has thundered against it, but has never been able to eradicate it—no more than the secret worship of sacred oaks in the forest or throwing the jawbone of a horse into the fire at midnight. The girl who succeeds in bathing in the dark on Sint John's night is sure to win the heart of the lover she wants in the ensuing year.

But it isn't dark very long that night—perhaps an hour, maybe two, no more. A girl must make sure to be back in the house before the first light of dawn, else the magic doesn't work. And it is a fearful night besides. Sint John's replaced an earlier festival which was a monstrous Sabbath of unclean spirits. Witches and gnomes and hag-faced vampires rode forth in the sky in those short dark hours to cavort in obscene revelry and to sing their sacrilegious canticles. The old people said that some years they could still hear the ribald, heathen wassail, the screaming of lost souls, and the cries of lickerish devils lusting for the blood of virgins. Paphia, the mother of harlots, was out that night, snakes coiling lasciviously around her red-stained breasts; and goats and satyrs, witches and devils, danced an endless lecherous saraband.

On that night, so rich in ancient legend, when the country girls dash to the water and run back naked to their homes, they no longer fear to encounter satyrs and devils. Instead, farm lads, swains, lovers and would-be lovers are on the lookout, hiding in the bushes and by the fences, hoping for a starry night or an early dawn to catch the girls by surprise.

The event was the talk of farmhouses and cottages for weeks in advance. For days the maidens were in a dither of anticipation. Mathilda told Guido that she, too, would watch the fun that year. He had shaken a warning finger at her. "Be careful the parish priest doesn't find out! He will be terribly angry if you set a bad example. He's violently against the practice."

When Guido was asleep, she heard Maria, the young chambermaid, patter down the stairs in her bare feet. Mathilda soon followed. By the dim light of the stars she caught a glimpse of the girl's nude body slipping in and out of the trees in the apple orchard. But Mathilda did not run to the water. She rushed to the forge where Robert Brero was waiting, and she stayed with him a full hour. The first rays of the sun were creeping into the green bushes when she fled back to the manor, a few steps behind the dripping Maria.

The morning after Rudolph's return, Mathilda was the first downstairs. She was dressed in the same gown of light-green velvet she had worn the night before. Rudolph, with a gallant bow, said that it was even more becoming in daylight. The windows were open and the room was full of the fragrance of autumn. Guido said he could smell the sea and the pine forests of Vampire's Pit. He proposed that they go for a ride; they could take a rifle along and try to shoot a hare or two. Mathilda jumped from her chair, saying that she would run upstairs to change quickly. They could ride along the beach, Guido said, and stop for lunch in the village of Duindorp near the border. Sylvain would be there, too, about noontime, for he was taking the dogcart to deliver a message from Guido to the local burgomaster.

When they sat down to lunch in the small hotel, Sylvain remarked that the Dutch newspapers he had found in the lobby, while waiting for the others to arrive, carried bad news from Africa. "It seems," he said, "that a large party of Boers has been ambushed by a native king. . . ."

"That means they've been massacred," Rudolph said grimly. "That means men, women and children have been ruthlessly slaughtered again. God! I'm glad I wasn't there. No man can have any idea what such a thing means who hasn't seen it with his own eyes."

"Have you seen such a thing?" Guido asked.

"Yes," Rudolph said, "and I'll never forget it. It was a nightmare. I saw nearly three hundred persons who were slaughtered like that. . . ."

"Were you ambushed?" Sylvain asked.

"No." Rudolph shook his head. "I came upon the scene after it was all over. I was fortunate; I had been sent to fetch help. Of those who stayed behind only two survived. We found them buried under the bodies of the slain. You can't imagine how gruesome it was. The blacks had literally cut those people to pieces. Little children had their heads torn clean off their bodies. That was the worst, the sight of those children. . . ."

Guido asked how his son had become involved in such a bloody business, and Rudolph told them the story of his experiences in Africa. After landing in Johannesburg, he said, he had met some Boers who were laying in supplies to take to their settlement in the northernmost corner of the Transvaal, on the banks of the Limpopo River. At the invitation of a man named Christiaan Wessels, he had joined them on the return journey. Rudolph had wanted to see that land which was free for the taking, before seeking work in the gold fields.

“It was in their settlement, which was called Zegersdorp,” he said, “that I saw the horror of a Zulu attack. It happened about three months after I got there. We had been warned that a big Zulu force was on the prowl and that it was slowly converging on Zegersdorp from three sides. One afternoon, when Christiaan Wessels and some others were out hunting, they came upon a Zulu patrol about twenty miles away from the settlement. They hurried home to prepare for an attack, and I offered to ride to Pietersburg, another Boer settlement about sixty miles away, to get help.

“When I rode off I came upon another Zulu patrol,” he went on, “but in the other direction. I passed within a hundred feet of their campfire. I felt their assegais whirring past my head, but I rode hard and reached Pietersburg a half-hour sooner than I had expected. Unfortunately, it was late and the men in Pietersburg were slow in assembling. The company of about a hundred men didn’t get under way until after midnight. It was difficult finding the way back through the roadless bush, for there was a new moon and it was stygian dark. About dawn we halted for breakfast. We had just dismounted, when one of the men who had been riding ahead came back to tell us he had heard the sound of musketry fire from the direction of Zegersdorp. We were then still a good hour’s ride from the settlement. Quickly we remounted and rode as fast as we could, but the nearer we came the less firing we heard. About a mile away from Zegersdorp we could smell burning tar, but the firing seemed to have stopped. We knew then what awaited us in the settlement. . . .

“We learned from the two survivors,” Rudolph said, after a pause, “what those Boers of Zegersdorp went through that morning. What they saw, as soon as it was light, was a solid wall of black bodies advancing across the fields. The blacks were shoulder to shoulder, first two, then three, then four and then ten layers deep, bearing down upon them like a flood of death. The naked bodies were smeared with white and red paint, and they were screaming their bloodcurdling war cries. No matter how rapidly the Boers fired, they could not make an opening in that solid human wall. Where one Zulu fell, two or three more took his place.

“They were like a flood that breaks through the dikes—impossible to hold back. The dead and wounded piled up in a heap of twisting bodies and clawing hands and feet, but more broke through the ranks from behind and rushed for the palisades.

“The bodies of the dead and wounded served as a platform for the final wave of Zulu warriors. Suddenly a section of the palisades was torn loose and collapsed and the first blacks jumped into the enclosure. They were cut

down but others followed more rapidly than the Boers could dispatch the first. Finally, Zulus poured into the enclosure from all sides.

"Then the Boers were overwhelmed, smothered, and buried under the swarm of hacking, biting, tearing blacks who howled like maniacs. A score of surviving Boers managed to withdraw to the schoolhouse where the women and children were. But it was only a matter of minutes before the Zulus tossed burning torches on the roof and set the building on fire. Then they battered down the door with their iron clubs and rushed in. There was a short scuffle inside—and in two minutes it was all over.

"When we reached the settlement, the schoolhouse was still burning but the Zulus had left. They could still be heard shouting and yelling on the river shore. Some who had stayed behind were going around dispatching their own wounded with a blow of their clubs. We shot them down. . . ."

"God! How horrible!" Guido had listened with open mouth. "It takes courage to be a farmer in South Africa! But you had enough of it, I dare say?"

"Yes, I went to the gold fields after that," Rudolph said.

Shortly after eleven on a Saturday night three weeks after Rudolph's return to Moorkerken, the tavern and hostelry of "The Booted Cat" burned down. "The Booted Cat" was part of the Govaerts estate. It stood then and now stands again (for it was rebuilt after the fire) at the point where the roads to Maere and Moorkerken intersect, about a mile and a half distant from the manor house, in a hamlet of beech-shaded cottages occupied by estate workers and peasants employed on the upper part of Guido's farm, the part nearest the Meye River. Guido had leased the tavern to a man named Pol Verhelst, who also acted as superintendent on that remote section of the estate.

The cause of the fire was never established. It started in a hayloft over the stable immediately in the rear of the hostelry proper. It was suspected, but never verified, that vagabonds or migratory workers, having secretly sought shelter in the hayloft, had been careless with a candle or had dropped a spark while lighting their pipes.

Otherwise, that Saturday night was like any other, although Guido had noticed an excessive amount of humidity, a heavy atmospheric pressure, which was rare for so late in autumn. It made him wipe his brow more than once as he listened to Sylvain playing the piano. After a game of whist with Mathilda, he retired, saying that he intended to attend early Mass in the village. There had been more traffic than usual on the highway earlier in the

evening, as there always was on a Saturday night when peasants, a week's wages in their pockets, went to the tavern on the corner, as they called "The Booted Cat."

When Guido looked out the window before saying his prayers, the night was still; only the trees murmured and a fine drizzle was falling. He could hear the bubble of water and the barking of dogs somewhere in the distance.

He was awakened half an hour later by a commotion under his window. Farm lads were shouting and running to and fro. He could hear the stable doors being opened and the rattle of carts and the stamp of horses' hoofs. He jumped out of bed, looked out the window and saw at once what was amiss.

In the far distance, beyond the apple orchard and the poplars of the highway, there were crimson bushes of flame. The sky was lurid, a doomsday color; and as he watched, the glow turned vividly red. He could see tongues of fire multiplying above the trees and, presently, huge rolling flames shot up like balls of fire that exploded in mid-air and left a pillar of black smoke billowing upward. The fire illumined the landscape for miles around.

In a flash Guido got into his clothes and raced downstairs. The house was already astir. Modeste met him in the hallway. "Out, out, out, everybody out!" Guido shouted. "Perhaps we can save something yet! Tell the boys to bring all the buckets we have! And the handpump! It looks bad!"

"It is bad," Modeste replied. "The whole place must be burning—house, stable, barns, silos, everything. . . ."

But Guido was already out of earshot. He had mounted his horse, which a groom had ready in front of the house, and galloped off.

Five minutes later he thundered into the small square in front of the tavern where a crowd of men and women had gathered to watch the fire. Pol Verhelst ran forward to meet him and seized the bridle of his horse as he dismounted. "All your family safe, Pol?"

"Yes, *patroon*!"

"The horses out? The cattle?"

"All out, Heer Guido!"

"Thunders and sacraments!" he roared, turning to the crowd, his face distorted with anger, "get busy! Form a bucket chain to the river! Quick! Here are the boys with the pump!" He pointed to the cartloads of estate workers who were now arriving.

Rudolph awakened as one of the last carts drove away from the manor. He put on a dressing gown and went out into the upstairs hallway to see

what was the matter. He stopped halfway down the hall when he noticed Mathilda standing by a window, watching the fire. He fastened the belt of his dressing gown and went nearer. She turned as if she had been waiting for him.

They stood close, heads bent and almost touching, shoulders and thighs almost in contact. She wore nothing save a thin night garment. Emotion made her breathing light and shallow, and her body trembled. He touched her slightly and she swayed toward him, yieldingly. Then he put his arm around her and drew her to him. They stood silently, clinging to each other.

A cart rattled by beneath the window, the bluish light of a lantern on its driving seat casting an eerie glow on their faces. Rudolph leaned forward—it was Modeste, driving out belatedly to the fire, who looked up at him. Mathilda, too, saw the superintendent as he glanced at the window. Trembling with rage, she freed herself from Rudolph's arms and fled to her room.

When Guido returned, she was still sobbing mutely into her pillow. Lightning blazed across the sky, thunder roared and a torrent of rain poured down.

"If it had rained like that an hour ago," Guido said, "we would have saved 'The Booted Cat'!"

A few days later the Heer of Moorkerken, who had been summoned to Maere by a letter from Notary Fabian, rode off shortly after noon. Rudolph and Mathilda left an hour later. They were going to inspect the ruins of Terzel Castle which, Mathilda claimed, she had never seen. They rode leisurely, talking of things they saw by the roadside, until they were out of sight of Uncle Modeste, who stood gazing after them. Then Rudolph flicked the horses into a fast trot. Half an hour later he fastened the bridles to a clump of shrubbery, and they were counting the stone steps of the spiral staircase which he had climbed so often in his youth. As they neared the second floor, Rudolph said that if they were lucky and the tide was low, they would be able to see the outline of the drowned villages of Hoeveland and Menardkerken below the surface of the shallow water. When they stopped on the landing to catch their breath, Mathilda leaned out of the window and clapped her hands at sight of the sea. Rudolph pulled open the heavy oaken door and gave an exclamation of surprise.

"The old place is inhabited," he said to Mathilda. "Look!"

They saw that the narrow Gothic windows had been refitted with glass. Heavy armchairs stood in the corners; there was a chest, and a table and, in front of the great hearth, a low couch covered with a rug. Rudolph opened

the chest and pulled out a piece of clothing which he held up for Mathilda to see. “A woman lives here?” he asked.

“No, it’s a cassock,” Mathilda said. “Sylvain’s retreat, didn’t you know? Don’t you recognize the old furniture? See, these are rugs that lay in the hall and that, that statue, stood in the Lord God’s corner in the east wing. . . .”

Rudolph gazed at the three tiny lamps burning before the statue.

“How considerate of our little brother,” he said mockingly. “He has made a convenient little nest for us.”

Finding the lock rusty and broken, he violently pulled the door shut and moved a high-backed chair in front of it. Mathilda had seated herself in one of the old armchairs. She tried to say casually that the discarded furniture fitted perfectly in that mediaeval setting, but she was so emotionally upset that it was difficult to speak calmly. A fierce struggle was raging within her. One moment she was almost overcome with ecstatic anticipation. In the next, she was repelled by Rudolph’s matter-of-factness, by his seemingly taking everything for granted. She wanted to be wooed and loved; her heart cried out for affection and tenderness, but Rudolph apparently was not interested in the fine points of love-making. His experience, she suspected, with a shudder of disgust, had been almost exclusively with bought women. He acted as if it were a foregone conclusion that he could do as he liked, as if she were a newly purchased slave. Mathilda half-rose from her chair in protest, but she sank back inertly. It was too late. There was no escape now. Rudolph noticed her agitation. He took a small leather case from his breast pocket, opened it, and held it up for Mathilda to see. The case contained a string of valuable pearls intended to be twined, Venetian fashion, in a woman’s hair.

“I brought these from Italy,” he said. “They will look marvelously well on you.”

Mathilda rose limply from her chair and took the case from his hand. In the same moment, his arms were around her and he kissed her full on the mouth. They stood swaying together for a moment, then Rudolph lifted her and, walking back to the chair, sat down with her on his lap. She wanted to ask for whom he had purchased the pearls, long before he knew that he would meet her at Moorkerken. She wanted to ask many other things, but Rudolph’s hand was fumbling nervously with the fastenings of her riding skirt. The touch of his fingertips made her feel giddy. His arms were like steel around her waist. She was no longer herself. She floated in a mixture of madness and vertigo. She relaxed against his shoulder and closed her eyes, but he drew her head up and her lips responded with longing, a blind rapture

of desire. When he lifted her again, and carried her to the couch, she lay helpless in his arms.

Later Rudolph lit a fire on the hearth, opened the basket of provisions and uncorked the wine. They drank in turn from an earthen cup they had found in Sylvain's pantry. Then, sitting before the fire, he told her of his visits to the European capitals.

He had gently unfastened her arms and, resting his elbows on his knees, he sat with his head cupped in his hands. Mathilda drew away a short distance and glanced at his face from the side. She saw a profile cold as marble. Rudolph had his teeth clenched, a frown furrowed his forehead and, now that he was not smiling, his lips were thin and straight. He lacked the gentle lines of goodness which were in the faces of Guido and Sylvain. He was gazing fixedly in front of him and apparently he too was in a reflective mood.

Feeling her eyes on his face, he turned and smiled. Then he threw himself back on the low couch and with his hands under his head lay staring at the heavy crossbeams on the ceiling. Mathilda had risen and walked over to the sun-bathed window. When she looked out she saw someone standing by the horses, stroking their foreheads, and she suppressed an exclamation of alarm. It was Sylvain. The horses pulled at their bridles as he walked away. Rudolph heard them and asked Mathilda if anything was wrong. Unable to speak, she shook her head.

Now Sylvain knows, she thought. Tomorrow it will be Modeste and Theresa. How long can Guido be kept from finding out? She urged Rudolph to get up and return to the manor before sunset. To wait till dark, she said, would set the servants gossiping and, besides, if they didn't ride off soon, Guido would be back from Maere and, like little children, they would have to think up all kinds of excuses and explanations. She tried to say it as pleasantly and casually as possible, but Rudolph only mumbled. She looked down at him. He seemed to be dozing; his lips were half-parted and his breath came regularly.

She walked back to the window, pangs of disillusionment, remorse and fear stabbing at her heart. Slowly the sickening, tormenting realization dawned upon her that in coming to this room she had made an irreparable error. She had allowed herself to be trapped by the silent man on the couch. From this hour onward, she thought, he feels he holds me securely in his power and for as long as he chooses to use my body. Wasn't that the meaning of his insolent, vaunting smile and his inconsiderate ignoring of her

now? In all his dealings with her, and even this afternoon, he had shown no genuine feeling for her. “He does not know what love is,” she said to herself. “He is utterly selfish and ruthless. He does not even make a pretense of affection. He treats me as he might treat a woman of the street.”

She remembered that when she had spoken about Guido’s wrath in the event he discovered her unfaithfulness, Rudolph had merely shrugged. “I can easily put myself beyond reach of the old man’s vengeance,” he had said. He had given no thought to what the consequences of discovery might be for Mathilda. Once he had laughed about his father’s belated matrimonial venture, calling it an old man’s last erotic fling, a senile, lecherous aberration, not taking into account the humiliation such contempt inflicted on Mathilda, who felt herself degraded to the level of a concubine.

Her lips were white; her breathing choked her as she stood by the window. She glanced back at Rudolph, but he had drawn the cover over his shoulder and was snoring.

Suddenly she realized that Rudolph had not again mentioned what she was most eager to hear: the conversation he had had with the captain of the ship which had brought him to Antwerp. She remembered the man vaguely —Captain Cavelaer. How much had he told Rudolph? How much did Rudolph really know? She dared not awaken him to ask. She knew he would only smile and leave her questions unanswered. He would have neither time nor patience to listen to her helpless, broken words. Of that she was certain. She put her hands over her face as spasms of emotion clutched her throat. Suddenly Rudolph sat up, jumped from the couch and, without looking at her, put on his clothes. “Come,” he said, holding the door open, for her, “if you’re afraid of the wolf, don’t go into the forest. If we ride fast we will be home before the old fool returns.”

They rode silently until they met Sylvain on the moor trail. “I was up in your room,” Rudolph called out. “I climbed the tower to have a look at the sea and found the door of your room open.” Sylvain only nodded his head and they rode on.

They reached the manor house half an hour before Guido’s return. Rudolph was in the stable and Mathilda had gone to her room when the Heer of Moorkerken entered the house on the arm of his youngest son.

In the days that followed, Rudolph rode out often with his father. They went hunting and they called on neighbors in Moorkerken and Maere and at the other estates in the vicinity. Guido, showing off his eldest son, was the proudest man in the world. And how different Rudolph was! The change

that had come over him was miraculous; Guido did not stop wondering about it. Rudolph was kind and affable to everyone they met. He talked of renovating the buildings and extending the farm, of planting a small park of trees around the house, and of tearing down the stables and the granary, and putting them up again back in the moorland, away from the residence. They were all things Guido wanted to hear.

And that moorland, too, Rudolph said, pointing in the general direction of Vampire's Pit. Wasn't it time it was put under cultivation? There was no need to buy land from the neighbors so long as they owned all these thousands of acres of heath and swamp and *geest* which could be reclaimed and rendered productive through drainage. Rudolph didn't see why they couldn't start the work right away, this very autumn perhaps. The weather was still exceptionally clear. Why couldn't they start the drainage system now, before the frost got into the ground? What was done, was done! They could continue the work next spring. In two years, three years, they would have crops from that waste. They could plant flax there and rye, and who could say if, in a few years' time, the soil wouldn't be good enough for beets?

That was the kind of talk which went straight to Guido's heart. To work, to plant, to build had been his life. Rudolph's return strangely agitated the Heer of Moorkerken. The hopes and plans with which he had once been so fervently occupied, but which had lain dormant in his mind, were reviving one by one. There was a new flush on his brow one morning as they rode to Maere, when Rudolph said, "How beautiful Flanders is! One would think that the earth is about to burst into bloom before our eyes, although it is autumn."

The tears sprang into Guido's eyes and his lips trembled. "Yes," he said, "there isn't a land like it anywhere. You, Rudolph, have seen the whole world. You speak with authority."

"You have no idea," Rudolph said to his father, as they rested their horses on a hilltop and stood looking down on the endless expanse of brown earth from which the rye had been garnered a few weeks before, "you have no idea how fiercely a man may long at times to be back in his own land, in the land of his fathers, how he yearns sometimes to look at his own fields. Now that I stand here again with you, I feel how much I am part of it all. I feel I am the course of the wind and the smell of the drying hay. The way the rain slants here in Flanders, it's me, it's my way. Nothing surprises me. Every living thing acts naturally, the way I expect it to act, as I would act myself. Now I know why our peasants kiss the soil before they start sowing in the springtime, and call it mother. There's something holy in the

relationship between man and the land. I never knew it before. And though I am considerably hardened and not by any means given to sentiment, I feel almost ready myself to fall prostrate on this earth and embrace it lovingly.

"We shall make this land produce ten times more than it ever did," Rudolph said on another occasion. "We shall get machines such as they have in Holland and Denmark, and you will see miracles. They do the work of a hundred men and need the attention of only one or two operators. And when we have machines," he added with a laugh, "we will be able to get rid of that army of pensioners you keep around the place. When I see the people you have working here, I sometimes think you are running a home for the aged and the halt. Half of them are crippled and stiff with rheumatism and other old people's ailments. It's the brotherhood of Uncle Modeste. Half of them seem to be his age."

Guido, too, had to laugh, but he grew serious at once. He did not like the prospect of getting rid of old employees. It was like cutting chunks out of his own life.

"I'm so used to them," he said, "and they're so used to me that it would be cruel to separate us before our time. And besides," he added, "machines cost a lot of money, too much money." Guido was not a poor man, not by any means. In fact he was rich, but rich in land, in immovable property, not in money.

"Don't let that worry you," Rudolph replied with a dry chuckle. He took a bankbook from his breast pocket, opened it and held it before his father's eyes.

"You can read, can't you?" he said.

Guido peered at the figures. "Five hundred thousand!" he exclaimed. "Thunders and sacraments!"

"Yes, and these are not little Belgian *frankskens*, Father, these are pounds sterling. This is English money. It equals twenty-five million francs. I have more elsewhere."

Guido stood perplexed, his mouth open. "I've never heard of such figures except in the budget discussions in parliament," he said.

"Yes, and this money is going to be put to work," Rudolph added, tapping his breast pocket.

Rudolph did not merely talk about going to work; he actively started, not shunning the humblest labor or waiting for directions or suggestions. He set the pace on the estate. He was here, there, and everywhere at once, helping, advising, judging, spurring on the laggards. His father noticed with satisfaction that he was still a hard worker. Nothing seemed to escape his

attention. One day he would be putting new hinges and strips on a stable door which was rotted with age. On another, he would be straightening the wattle fence in the pound where the cows were driven at milking time. One morning, just after dawn, when Guido stepped out of the house to catch his first breath of air and look at the sky, he saw Rudolph perched precariously on a ladder which stood on the gallery of the windmill. He was tearing the old tattered tarpaulins off the wings and replacing them with new sails. That dangerous work, which Guido had postponed a dozen times, was finished before breakfast.

Such was Rudolph's way, always doing something useful, something that had to be done, something that could not be left to the inexperienced or to clumsy, lazy farm hands.

Just to have the feel of the plow in his hands and to reassure himself that he hadn't forgotten how to handle it, Rudolph proposed that he break up a piece of pasturage lying by the Maere road. Although it was not customary to plow in the fall, Guido agreed with pleasure. He could see that it did his son good to walk along the damp furrows behind the plow, his nostrils greedily drinking in the raw, vivid scent of the broken earth, the bitter smell of grass cut by the plowshares. In Africa the earth and the grass had a different smell, Rudolph told his father, who watched him draw his first candle-straight lines in the loam. And a different taste, too. There was less salt in the Flemish soil, it seemed. It tasted sweeter. Sweeter? Guido could well believe it. The Heer of Moorkerken would not have disagreed if he had said that Flemish earth tasted like ambrosia and nectar, the celestial food of the gods. Picking up a lump of clay, and rubbing it into a small ball between the palms of his hand, Guido brought it to his lips and put his tongue to it. Yes indeed, it did taste sweet. He had never noticed it before. He smiled happily. Wonderfully sweet!

When the machines arrived, Guido was forced to discharge first a dozen and then a score of farm hands. He hated to do it, but he realized that the men had become superfluous. First he dismissed the younger ones who, he thought, could easily find work elsewhere. Men came long distances to watch and admire the machines chugging and steaming in Guido's fields; peasants, estate owners, representatives of the agricultural department and still others. But there were also some heated discussions, and a good deal of grumbling went on in the taverns at night. The peasants were alarmed; the machines were robbing them of their livelihood. They felt that now they were less able than ever to compete with the estate owners. Even if they put all their efforts and their poor holdings together, it would still be useless.

There was an incident, too, which Rudolph related to his father one evening as the family was at dinner—an incident that filled Guido with dismay.

That morning, Rudolph said, as he was walking to the new stables and servants' quarters which they had begun to build a quarter of a mile down the road towards the moorland, a young man came up to him and asked for a job. Rudolph asked who he was.

"I'm David Teniers," the boy said.

"Are you a son of Antoine?" Rudolph asked.

"No, my father was André Teniers, the charcoal burner."

"Are you married?"

"No," the boy replied, "I'm single. The likes of us can't afford to get married."

Rudolph ignored the surly remark. "Don't your people have land of their own?"

David laughed. "Land," he said with a sneer and a note of self-pity. "You can't call it land. It's a plot of sand and stones. We can hardly make potatoes grow on it."

Rudolph recalled the remote, isolated place bounded by dunes on one side and by worthless marshland on the other.

"Why don't you work it better?" he asked. "Pick up the stones to begin with. You have half a dozen brothers and sisters. Why don't you all work together and make the land pay for itself?"

David looked at Rudolph obstinately with a scowl on his face. "We could make the land pay if we could get our hands on some that was any good," he said, "if you Govaerts and a few like you didn't own it all. What is there for us to do but starve and look on while you build palaces and swill wine and good food!"

Rudolph laughed. "Are you a socialist?"

"It doesn't matter what I am. I'm for what's right. The earth belongs to us all. All of us have a right to be fed by it."

"But you'll have to work first," Rudolph replied. "You have land and you don't work it!"

"I told you, it can't be worked," David shouted angrily. "You can't squeeze blood from a stone. I'd like to see you try it."

"Try what?" asked Rudolph.

"Try and make something of that piece of ground on which we live. God Himself couldn't make a go of it." And then he said, "Don't be offended,

Heer Govaerts, but let me ask you something. How much land does your father own? It's twenty or thirty thousand acres, isn't it? And how much does the Lady van Abeele own? Even more than that, I think. There are a lot of you in Flanders that own land. But you can't eat two men's food any more than I can. It's a shame! It's unjust! But it won't last forever, I can tell you that! We peasants are stronger than you landowners because there are more of us. Some day we will take what belongs to us. All things have an end. We can't go on much longer this way. . . ."

"If you dare to take anything that doesn't belong to you, David, my boy," Rudolph replied, "I'll take great pleasure in shooting your bottom full of lead. Then you can have your brothers and sisters pick the pellets from your buttocks as they should be picking stones from your land. Aren't you ashamed to talk that way?"

"I'm not ashamed before you, you Bluebeard!" David shouted.

Rudolph laughed at the incident, but his father looked stern.

"Why did he call you Bluebeard?" he asked.

"Well, I declare," Rudolph laughed nervously, "can't you see? Because of the color of my beard, of course. I hope you don't think the boy took me for the Bluebeard of the legend, the fellow who murdered his wives in the secret room."

"Is that all David said?" Sylvain asked suddenly.

Rudolph whirled in his chair and faced his brother. "Yes, that's all. Why do you ask? What else could he say?"

"I merely asked," Sylvain said, and looked down at the tablecloth. But Mathilda could tell by his puzzled expression that he knew more. And indeed Sylvain did know more. He had been to Moorkerken that day and had heard from several people at the post office that one of the Teniers boys was at "The Black Knight" drinking with a crowd of young peasants and boasting how he had stood up to "the black Govaerts devil." Bluebeard wasn't the only name David Teniers had called Rudolph. There had been an exchange of gross and violent insults. David had revived certain rumors about a barkeeper's daughter who had disappeared about the time of Rudolph's sudden departure eight years before. "What did you do with Solange?" David had challenged him. "Now you are playing around with another girl, that Annemarie who serves at "The Ducal Court" in Maere. What are you going to do when you have had enough of her?"

That was the kind of language that passed on the road between David Teniers and Heer Rudolph Govaerts.

“They don’t like me,” Rudolph said to his father. “They blame me for having introduced machinery into the district. . . .”

Guido nodded sadly, but Sylvain looked wonderingly at his brother and Mathilda glanced hastily in his direction. If only she knew what Sylvain was thinking!

Since Rudolph’s return Mathilda had changed a great deal. Her voice was pitched higher and was constrained, as if her throat were caught in a nervous spasm. The witchery had gone out of her smile, and there were often wrinkles on her brow.

Whenever Guido was absent, and he had recently been away more than a week, there was no escape from Rudolph. She tried to avoid him but he found ways to break in upon her solitude. He came knocking at her door. He did not threaten, he simply said they would ride to the tower at such and such a time and that she was to be ready. Once he kept her there far into the night. They came home just before daylight when the milkmaids were already in the stable. She hoped the servants did not notice, but how could they help seeing them?

Sometimes she sat in her room, her hands folded in her lap, tormenting her brain to discover a way out of the trap into which she had walked so willingly. In her emotional confusion, she struggled against the spell in which Rudolph held her. The relationship had become an agony to her. Why had she let it go that far? Could she still turn back? Could she still go to Guido and tell him everything, tell him about her past in Antwerp and throw herself on his mercy? Could she do that, now, after what had happened with Rudolph? No. It was too late.

Tears came into her eyes as she realized that there were two quite distinct women alive in her, the one steadfast and loyal to her obligations, the other driven blindly by her uncontrollable desires. She was helpless in the grip of her erotic need for Rudolph. She had tried to combat it; she had locked herself in her room, she had tried to read and play the piano. In the hope of quenching the fire in her blood, she had walked in the silent fields and the roads when the dusk trailed its luminous haze over the river.

In such moments she longed to go away, to seek something—she knew not what. And yet she knew. She detested Rudolph’s callousness, his selfishness. He seldom looked at her without obviously being conscious of his superiority over her. He treated her as if she were a prostitute. There was not the slightest chance that their relationship would ever turn into a calmer, nobler love. Yet she could not do without him. She could not break with

him. She would die without him. She went to the tower with him against her will and better judgment, yet she went gladly and eagerly.

When she thought of Guido she thought of an old man, of a father. She felt pity for him and a somewhat condescending but still warm motherliness —the kind one would have for a helpless, innocent, dear child. But it was not maternal embraces she longed for, nor for a grand old patriarch, warmhearted and kind though he might be.

6

The Heer of Moorkerken, dressed in his dun-colored long-sleeved vest, a peakless fur cap jauntily set on the back of his head, walked slowly to and fro on the avenue from the manor house to the main highway. He was smoking his pipe and watching the clouds floating southward through the steely, violet tinted sky. A tender froth of hoarfrost clung to the trees and fences like a sheen of polished silver; the night wind had sealed the ditches with a thin, ruffled layer of ice. In the barnyard, on the moorland and the road, the light snow of the previous evening lay like a bluish, lacy vestment. Rooks sat chattering on the roof near the warmth of the chimney.

All morning flocks of wild geese had been passing overhead. They flew in V-formation, showing that at a higher altitude winter's cold had set in. In the distance, far beyond the flat landscape, the sound of ax blows came from the pensive line of the pine forest. The air was transparent as crystal, so crisp and fragile that Guido could distinctly hear the carillon in the clocktower of Moorkerken play "The Flemish Lion." He listened attentively, his lips moving as in prayer with the words of the hymn.

He was deeply satisfied with the state of affairs on the farm. Rain had fallen but rarely that autumn. The grain had ripened early. As soon as the rye was garnered, the barley had been full and ready. In other years the trees were stripped of their foliage long before this. Now, yellowed and dry, to be sure, they still rustled softly in the breeze. Even the usual storms that came thundering over the Flemish land from the northwest in the late autumn had failed to arrive, or had made a detour, for once sparing Moorkerken.

Guido rubbed his hands and thrust them into his trouser pockets. It had indeed been an extraordinary year with Rudolph in charge of the work. The cattle were in the stables. All the work was done. Winter could come if it wanted to. The bins were full, the garrets stuffed with fruit, the tarpaulins stretched tightly over the bulging haystacks. The slaughtering lay behind; the hams and bacon were hanging in the smokehouse. All that remained to be done was the threshing and putting a cover of earth over the huge pits

where Rudolph had stored the potatoes to keep them from freezing. Guido drew heavily on his pipe, and blew out a dense cloud of smoke.

A peasant went by while he stood at the foot of the driveway. “God’s blessings, Heer Guido!” the man called out, sweeping off his hat. “And on you, friend, blessings without end,” Guido kindly returned the man’s greeting.

He walked back to the house, entered the living room and sat down in his armchair before the wood fire. It was shortly before noon. In two weeks it would be Christmas. It occurred to him that he might take Mathilda to Antwerp for the holidays. Perhaps that would cheer her. Lately she had been so reticent and sad. She seemed to have lost something of her old vivacity. Guido admitted to himself that life at Moorkerken was not all that a young woman could wish. He rose from his chair and pulled out the drawer of the small writing table in the corner. He would write Cousin Charlotte immediately. Rudolph looked in but, seeing his father occupied, he withdrew. Theresa spread the linen cover over the big table in the center of the room. Suddenly Maria the chambermaid came in and said to Guido: “There’s a man coming up the driveway who’s walking on his hands! A whole crowd of children is following him. There’s a lady, too. . . .”

Guido looked at her in astonishment. “That must be Colas,” he gasped. He strode rapidly into the hallway and flung open the front door.

“Father!” boomed a resonant voice. “Here I am, lost son number two! But who is that bandit with the black beard?” He pointed to Rudolph, who had come out on the porch. Rudolph grinned in return. Guido laughed and threw his arms around Colas’ shoulders.

“Thunders and sacraments!” Colas exclaimed, using his father’s expletive, “you squeeze me like Samson squeezed the pillars of Gaza.” He broke away and said: “Here, Father, this is my wife, Esther.” Gently he took the arm of the young woman, who had come up behind him, and led her to his father. Guido took off his fur cap and bowed.

“None of that!” Colas protested. “None of that now! Esther, what have you got your arms for? Put them around the neck of that man in the peasant blouse and you’ll be able to tell your grandchildren that you embraced the coeternal father of the greatest artist of all times. . . . Father,” he said without pausing, “give me some money! We didn’t pay the coachman. The fellow wouldn’t take French coins. He said they were counterfeit, as they probably are. He’s waiting out there now for some of the unadulterated floos of this glorious realm of Belgium. Give me some!

“Upon my soul,” he went on, as Guido fumbled in his pockets, “that coachman was the worst scoundrel I ever set eyes on. He started out by taking the wrong turn just outside Maere. When I told him about it, he said: ‘Who’s driving this hack?’ ”

“What’s your name?” Colas asked Maria, who had appeared in the hall.

When she replied, he said: “Well, Maria, for once you’ll have to be Martha, and do a good deed. Run out and give the coachman this money. And tell that ruffian he doesn’t need to hurry but that I fully expect him to jump into the ocean tomorrow morning at a quarter to eight, he and his knock-kneed nag. Tell him that’s straight from the successor of Buonarotti, otherwise known as the divine Michelangelo. . . .”

“I can’t remember all that, sir,” she said.

“Then try and tell him in your own sweet way that I said he has a face like a . . .”

“Just give the man his money,” Guido interrupted curtly, “and hurry.”

“What’s this?” Colas boomed, as he walked into the hall. “Who had the effrontery to efface the symbol of the artist’s golden youth?” With mock indignation, he pointed to the blank wall where the Battle of the Golden Spurs had formerly raged.

“Where’s my fresco? Where’s my mural? Where’s the river of blood? Where are the immortal Flemings who slaughtered the French for the good of posterity? Esther,” he called, “look at this! Here is where I had that painting of my realistic period. I told you about it. It’s gone! It’s beneath this layer of whitewash.”

“We’ve modernized a bit,” Guido said apologetically.

“Modernized? What do you mean, modernized? Hey, there’s Theresa!” Colas roared anew, as the old housekeeper rushed into the hallway, wiping her hands on her apron. “Theresa, the last of the Vestal Virgins! You look perfectly modernized, Aunt Theresa, dear! I’d say you had stepped fresh from the Paris boulevards.”

“Do I indeed, Master Colas? It’s kind of you to say so!”

“Tell me, Theresa, have they modernized your room, too? I mean is the ghost still on your wall or have they laid that, too?”

“No, Master Colas, I could not part with it. It’s still there. It looked so much like my dear Joris, the face I mean, that I begged for it to be spared.”

“Well done, Theresa, noble woman! Here, let me kiss you for that! You are keeping the lamps burning through the night of Philistine obscurantism. Coming generations will call you blessed!” Colas assured her solemnly.

“Esther, this is Theresa, who fell in love with a ghost. I literally recreated her husband for her. . . . Ah!” he called out, as Mathilda came down the stairway, “this must be Madame Mère!”

Mathilda was dressed in a dark-red silk gown and wore high-heeled gold-brocaded slippers. She smiled at the newcomers, and extended her hands from afar.

“Guido Govaerts, Heer of Moorkerken,” Colas turned to his father, “my compliments, sir! Madame Mère, allow me to kiss your hand. You’re a dream from Rubens. . . . Incidentally, Father,” he turned to Guido again, “I take back all I said about Rubens, or nearly all; that is, I’ve reached the conclusion that . . .”

“Will you kindly hold your tongue for a minute,” Guido said in exasperation, “and give someone else a chance to put in a word?”

“I’ve not begun to talk,” Colas replied. “Besides, how can there be polite conversation when all talk at once? Did I tell you I met a man on the train who said he knew you?”

“Who was it?” asked Guido.

“Esther, what was that man’s name who spoke to me on the train?”

“Which one do you mean?” Esther asked. “You talked to so many people!” Everybody laughed, Colas loudest of all.

“Yes, that’s true, I did ask a few questions. I was investigating, you see. I was feeling out sentiment, you might say, about the coming annexation!”

“What annexation?” Guido asked, in shocked surprise.

“How should I know?” Colas said. “Isn’t Flanders always being annexed? Isn’t it about time we were annexed again? Maybe it’s the Laplanders or the Montenegrins who ought to be given an opportunity this time. Now, Esther, what was the name again of that image of perfidy, you know, the one I said had a nose like a cucumber?”

“The gentleman said his name was Fabian,” Esther replied.

“Fabian! That’s right! What a dirty traitor’s squint he had in his eye! How can you possibly associate with such horrible trash, Father?”

“But Mijnheer Fabian is the distinguished notary of Maere,” Guido said, “there is nothing wrong with his nose or his eyes as far as I know. It’s true, he wears a pince-nez occasionally.”

“That’s it,” Colas said, “he was probably traveling incognito. A good friend of mine in Paris once . . . Uncle Modeste!” Colas held out his arms. “Uncle Modeste! Why, you’ve grown younger than ever! How delightfully modernized you look!”

The old man took off his hat, nodded his bald head and opened his toothless mouth in a smile. He kissed Colas on both cheeks.

"Esther, here is His Excellency Modeste Verhagen, my father's alter ego, Heer Guido's conscience. Uncle Modeste, do you remember when I set your pants on fire?"

"I've forgiven you, Colas."

"Forgiven me, I like that. Do you know why I did it? I did it because you slapped my bottom so often that I wanted to see you slap your own. And you did! Remember?"

They went in to lunch, Guido and Esther leading the way. Colas looked around at the new furniture and his eyes fell on the empty Lord God's corner.

"My God," he cried, in feigned astonishment, "where is Jesus? Don't tell me he's gone back to Galilee! Christ is no longer in Flanders! Man, what a relief! Now I know Flanders is modernized indeed! Whose idea was it, anyway, to scrap that relic of the age of superstition? I admit I was always scared of that pale reproachful face in the corner. I'll be able to eat in peace without having to think that I must love my neighbor by giving him the best cut.

"When you come to think of it," he rambled on with careless indifference, "there's something inhuman in the Christian religion, something that goes against the grain. Love your neighbor, to be sure! It sounds so fine! But how can you, when your neighbor is a cutthroat? . . . Christianity really ought to be abolished as an institution contrary to the best interests of the human race. Nowadays nobody cares a damn about it anyway. . . ."

"Be quiet," Modeste warned, "here comes Sylvain."

"Sylvain? *Introibo in altare*," Colas called out to his brother, intoning the first words from the rubric of the Mass. "Esther, meet the future Pope, Sylvanus Duodecimus, the first Flemish Pope since Adrian V!

"Sylvain, when you get to the Vatican, may we all come and visit you? I know a whole battalion of artists in Paris who will be happy to be associated with me, the illustrious elder brother of the Pontiff, in decorating your apartments for you! And the throne room, don't forget! D'you know what I'd like to put on the walls? . . . No, I'd better keep it as a surprise! You'll see when the time comes."

"Will you hold your beak shut for a second?" Guido said. "I can't hear myself think."

"By the way, Sylvain, I met a priest on the train today. . . ."

“Good Lord! Again?” Guido sighed.

“Yes,” Colas laughed, “upon my soul, he was the only priest I talked with on this occasion. He was from Hasselt. He looked the spitting image of that *papzak*, that bag of porridge, who used to run the brewery in Maere. We went into the station buffet at Ghent together for some refreshment.

“ ‘*Heer Oom*,’[6] I said, ‘what’s your rank?’

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[6] *Heer Oom*, literally: Sir Uncle, usual mode of addressing a Roman Catholic clergyman in the Southern Netherlands.

“ ‘My rank?’ he says.

“ ‘Yes, your position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, I mean.’

“ ‘Oh, that,’ he says, ‘I’m just a popgun! That’s all!’

“ ‘A popgun? What’s that?’

“ ‘A minor canon!’ ”

“What do you say if we sit down?” Guido asked, shaking his head. “You must be hungry!” He turned to Esther. “*A quelle heure avez vous quitté Paris?*”

“Don’t ask her in French, Father,” Colas said, uncorking a bottle. “Ask her in Flemish! It was I who taught her the language of angels and saints. It was an easy matter, I must say. Esther was a good pupil. She took to it naturally.”

“That’s wonderful.” Guido looked approvingly at Esther. “That’s indeed good news.”

“Did you find it difficult?” Mathilda asked.

“Not too difficult,” Esther said. “You see, I knew a little German to begin with. My parents are from Alsace. After all, Flemish, like Dutch, is a Nether-German idiom, isn’t it? Besides, I am Jewish. We Jews pick up a language quickly. We often have to. . . .”

“Yes, folks,” Colas said, “my wife is of the race of the Mother of God. I told you, Father, I always reach for the highest. . . .”

“You’re welcome in Flanders,” Guido said with fine feeling, bowing his head in her direction.

“And doubly welcome,” Sylvain added, “as belonging to the people which gave us our dear Saviour. . . . We Flemings ought to understand the Jews well. We are an oppressed people ourselves.”

"That we are indeed," Guido agreed, nodding his head vigorously.

"Be silent, for God's sake, and for Flanders' sake, and for all our sakes!" Colas cried. "Spare me your nationalistic jeremiads for another time! I'd like to know who is oppressing you now? If you are oppressed, you deserve it a thousand times. You destroyed the finest Flemish army that ever was with a pail of whitewash. You deserve no pity at all! That's all I shall say on the subject just now." His tone changed to one of solemn incantation. "At this time I drink to your good fortune and health, Heer Guido Govaerts," he said lifting his glass, "and to Madame Mère! *Gezondheid!*" They all drank.

"Be careful," Mathilda said with a smile, "I heard a wise old man say once that good fortune is the father of many sorrows."

"If that wasn't a paradox," Esther replied, "it would seem that the unfortunate are really the happy ones."

"How's that?" asked Colas.

"They at least have the satisfaction of knowing they can blame fate for their condition," Esther answered, "whereas the others on whom good fortune smiles can only blame themselves when misfortune befalls them."

"Why misfortune, why talk about it?" asked Colas with a show of irritation, as he poured himself a second glass.

"You didn't understand me, Colas, I'm afraid," Esther continued quietly. "I mean that good fortune seems to be the greatest of misfortunes that can befall a person in our day because . . . because almost invariably we lack the capacity to utilize good fortune to our advantage. We feel, at good fortune's table, like the swineherd at the king's. You probably remember the story. He won the princess and, in the end, gained half the kingdom in the bargain. But the story ends just when it becomes interesting. The swineherd who goes around in silks and velvet grows thin and pale precisely because of his good fortune. When he lies in the princess' golden bed, he thinks back to the fat ankles of the milkmaid. He won't be satisfied until he has a pair of wooden shoes on his feet again and he holds the manure fork in his hand instead of a scepter. . . . It's the same with us; however feverishly we pretend to welcome the new and the extraordinary, when Fortune opens her doors and beckons to us from her throne, we grow hesitant and look longingly at the corner beside mother's old chimney."

"Perhaps you are right," Colas agreed, "but there are exceptions, I for instance. . . ."

"There is not one exception in a hundred—no, not one in a thousand," Esther objected. "You are no exception yourself. You are a confirmed conservative at heart!"

"I, a conservative? Father? What did I ever conserve, preserve or deserve?"

"Very little," Guido said dryly.

"Very little, *hein*? I know it," Colas said dejectedly. "But tell me, who blotted out my paintings on the ceiling of this room, all the cherubs, the Prophet Moses over there on the other side, and all the other prophets, major and minor, including Guido Gezelle[7] with the bulging forehead, above the sideboard. . . . My God, what a disaster! *Où sont les neiges d'antan?* My heart is faint, I must have another drink. . . ."

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[7] Famous Flemish poet.

"Drink," said Guido, "but keep quiet. You're really impossible today."

Rudolph had not taken part in the conversation. He sipped his wine and listened attentively, confining himself to an occasional chuckle or a perfunctory nod. He was chiefly preoccupied with Esther. She fascinated him strangely. He had never, so far as he could remember, been face to face with a Jewess in his life. He expected women of that race to be short and fat, pale-faced, with deep, burning black eyes, somewhat oily, olive-colored skin and full, sensual lips; women who, Oriental-fashion, were loud and boisterous and who shamelessly exhibited their charms and their jewels. But here, right in front of him, was a girl who said she was a Jewess and who was fresh and rosy-cheeked, with regular features and dark-blond hair.

Esther was tastefully dressed. Her manner was unaffectedly calm and distinguished. A serene kindness, a gentle, tolerant will to understand, emanated from her wondrously dark grey, lively and intelligent eyes.

There must be a catch somewhere, he thought. Perhaps it was the slightly trilling timbre in her full, low voice, that troubled him inwardly. He was conscious that something about her upset his peace of mind. He wanted to hurt her, destroy the equanimity of her spirit. Her presence rasped on his nerves. He looked at her calm eyes with impudent curiosity, and grew more tense the longer he watched her.

A half-amused, half-mocking smile played about his lips when he spoke abruptly, addressing no one in particular. "Don't you think that all this good fortune you are talking about is principally a question of making money?" He rubbed his thumb rapidly over his index finger in an incredibly eloquent

gesture, while with his other hand he pressed down his upper lip so that the bridge of his nose suddenly curved like a hawk's. Esther blanched and Colas sat rigid, the blood draining from his face. But Guido, without further thought, laughed heartily and Mathilda's eyes sparkled encouragingly at her lover.

"I've never been in Alsace," Rudolph said, "but I've been around the world a bit, and the most important thing I've found in life is money. Money has all the magic that was just mentioned here. Those shiny little round discs, whether they are called francs or dollars, are the power that makes the world go around. . . . They really bring the noblest inclinations of the human heart to the surface. Respect, friendship, honors, love, literally everything, belongs to the man who has money. . . .

"A man who has money," he went on, "may be the greatest ignoramus or nincompoop in the world; nevertheless, off come the hats of the sycophantic majority in his presence. 'Good morning, Your Excellency! We hope Your Highness slept well. We trust we did not disturb you with our grubbing and grumbling. What would Your Highness desire now? Just command us: this man's vineyard, that fellow's daughter? Just speak the word. The whole world is at Your Excellency's service. . . .' "

He looked around the table with a leer. But no one answered. After a moment of silence he went on. "Politicians will tell you that states and police forces and armies and empires and churches are all set up for the protection of virtue and thrift and the family—and all the rest of it. In reality all those safeguards exist solely to protect money. Money means good fortune as nothing else does. . . ."

Guido looked at his eldest son in astonishment. The others, too, were silent. Only Sylvain replied. "There is much truth in what you say," and he reddened to the roots of his hair, "but you are certainly wrong in one thing: love—genuine love—cannot be bought for money. Behind his back, all the sycophants of whom you spoke utterly despise the powerful moneyed man. And the really worth-while things in this world are not accomplished by the power of money. It is more often the humble and the poor, those who have no money at all, who achieve the things that are most worth while. . . ."

"Yes," put in Rudolph quickly, "that's true, the humble do occasionally smash things up, and grab what does not belong to them. . . . Just think of the Commune of Paris. Those were nice people, those ladies they called *pétroleuses* who set the city on fire. It was a happy coincidence that the French had a man with the will power and common sense of a Thiers to shoot down those noble idealists. If he hadn't done so, all Europe would have gone up in flames."

“I do not mean revolutionaries.” Sylvain looked helplessly around the table. “I mean that if you take the commonest navvy, an illiterate peasant, and you give him an ideal, he will be transformed into a hero. He will sacrifice his all. . . .”

“Because he has nothing to lose.”

“Not true.” Sylvain shook his head as he tapped the tablecloth with nervous fingers. “Not true at all! The greatest, those who have brought the human race forward, were men who had nothing to gain for themselves. They were often men whose personal interests clashed directly with the ideals they espoused. Men like William of Orange, for instance. . . .”

“Don’t bring up that arch-heretic!” Rudolph said.

“I’m not talking of his religion, I’m saying that he sacrificed everything, his wealth, his position, his life, for the people of these Netherlands. . . . Was our Lord rich?” he asked, after a moment’s hesitation, “and Francis of Assissi or Saint Augustine and all the saints?”

“I can see very well,” Rudolph said coldly, his eyes narrowing to slits, “why you haven’t continued at the seminary. You were just one step ahead of expulsion, my boy! If the Father Superior at Roesselaere knew a tenth of the sentiments you harbor, he would have sent you packing long before. . . .”

Sylvain sat back as if he had received a blow in the face. But Colas, noticing his younger brother’s discomfiture, said heartily, “Don’t let that worry you, Sylvain! I was expelled from every school in East Flanders, but it didn’t keep me from becoming the greatest artist of our time.

“My genius,” he boomed, “could not be encompassed within the narrow walls of one of those breeding places of mediocrity. If I had my way, I would place a charge of gunpowder under every schoolhouse in Flanders tomorrow morning and blow it to atoms. That would be my recommendation for school reform! Radical, one big explosion!

“Father,” he went on, turning to Guido, “why don’t you take up my proposal with the school board? You don’t need to give me credit. You can say the idea is all your own. Tell them that we have to start somewhere. And so why not let Moorkerken have the honor of being a pioneer in modern education? . . .”

“You,” Rudolph said, ignoring the general laughter, and pointing his finger at the troubled Sylvain, “you talk like one of those socialists. You have been reading some bad books, I suspect. I’ve noticed some queer literature lying about this house lately. In fact some damned queer literature for a future shepherd of souls. Social science, trade unions, materialism. . . .”

“I don’t believe in materialism,” Sylvain countered quietly, “I’ve just been telling you that! *You* believe in materialism; we have just heard you reduce everything to material values in the most cynical way: religion, honor, the family, the fatherland, the courts of justice, everything! You are the materialist here. . . .”

Rudolph made a gesture of contempt. His dark eyes were savage as he looked at Sylvain and at Esther, as if they were in league against him.

He turned to Guido. “Now I know, I think, who’s responsible for the state of unrest among the peasants. It’s your little son, who has been going around blabbing that rot about ideals and aspirations and rights. That’s the kind of patter those socialists peddle among the ignorant. You know what their ideals are, of course?” he asked. “To get their hands on your property. That’s their program! That’s all they want! It’s the pestilential motive of greed and jealousy which animates the souls of the so-called humiliated and dispossessed around here.” He gave the last words an unctuously mocking emphasis. “You must have noticed yourself how disrespectful and sullen they’ve become of late. . . .”

Guido looked at him with growing amazement. What was Rudolph driving at? The devil of contradiction seemed to have moved into his son’s heart. What had caused the abrupt change in his behavior? Guido looked uneasily in the direction of Esther. But her eyes were downcast. She was seemingly absent-minded, toying with a dessert spoon.

“I told you what that David Teniers called me the other day,” Rudolph went on. “That was gratitude for you after all you’ve done for that family of drunkards and good-for-nothings.”

“Don’t say that!” Sylvain interrupted. “Do not say such things. They are good at heart, believe me, I know them. The Teniers children are the loveliest . . .”

“They are swine, all of them,” Uncle Modeste said, from the foot of the table. “I’ve known three generations of Teniers—fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. There isn’t a serious bone in the body of any of them. They think of nothing but making merry. They all drink like troopers and the girls all turn out to be strumpets. . . .”

“Father,” Sylvain said, his lips trembling, “sometimes I think I see the face of Christ in the faces of those people. . . . Even if they are swine and sots and all the things Uncle Modeste calls them, I can’t help it, I see it. . . .” There were tears in his eyes. Esther looked sharply at the excited boy at her side.

“There we go again!” Rudolph laughed mockingly. “Seeking Christ in the soul of the people. What utter rot!” he spluttered rudely. “I tell you, your Christlike peasants don’t exist anywhere. Those brutes have no soul. Haven’t we learned our lesson? Are we going to coddle them till they get the upper hand and burn the roof over our heads? Do you know what I think they need? They need the whip! That’s what they need, your dream peasants. That’s the language they understand! A sharp crack on their shins, or on their numbskull heads, once in a while, to remind them of their station in life.

“I’m not seeking Christ,” he said grimly. “That’s something for the monks in the cloisters, and the little Beguines in their houses of retreat. I am trying to raise cattle and sell milk and grow beets and flax and grain and potatoes and whatever the market requires. If we’d all talk that mumbo-jumbo of Sylvain’s, our peasants would take us for weaklings. Do you know, Father, what happened on the Abeele estate the other day? There was a drunken lout who refused to climb onto the roof and repair the chimney when François ordered him to. ‘It’s too slippery up there. Do it yourself!’ the peasant told François. ‘I have a wife and five children. Do it yourself! Go and break your own neck!’

“Do you know what François did?” Rudolph asked, looking around the table. “He took that peasant by the scruff of the neck and he turned him upside down and thrashed him. That’s what he did! And then the fellow did climb on the roof. . . .”

“And did break his neck,” Guido interrupted. “I heard about it. It was a sad business. You don’t advise me to start beating my people, I hope? What’s the matter with you, anyway, Rudolph? If any peasant has a claim on me, he can come and see me. That’s the way it has always been on this farm. No man has ever been turned away from my door. . . .”

“Well, you will soon be singing a different tune,” Rudolph sneered. “Did you hear what happened to Heer Wynant Verriest at Steenkerken?”

“I don’t know him,” Guido said. “Isn’t he the landlord about whom there was so much talk in the papers last year—the one who locked some of his peasants in a barn and then had them flogged on their bare backs by his estate workers? Is that the man, Uncle Modeste?”

“Yes,” Modeste nodded his head. “He’s coming up for trial for it. . . .”

“He won’t,” Rudolph interrupted. “He’s dead. He died the day before yesterday. I was just going to tell you. Wynant Verriest and his son Badouin were walking along the road to Steenkerken last week when they were met by a mob of peasants. They had been drinking and were crazy, excited,

cursing, shouting—the usual thing. They stopped Heer Wynant and said, 'How long before you owners will give us some land?'

" 'Not before hell freezes over,' says Wynant courageously, like that. 'Begone now!' he tells them, 'or I'll have you flogged off my property. I'm not afraid of you. Go home and sleep off your drunken insolence.'

"Do you know what those savages did?" Rudolph continued. "They laid hold of Heer Verriest and his son and took them down to the river. They waded into the water with them and tied the two men to one of the pillars of the bridge. Then the peasants went back ashore, started drinking, and waited for the tide to come up. When the water came up to Verriest's head, the peasants pelted him with stones. The police arrived just in time, else the two men would have drowned. Wynant died as the result of wounds on the head. His skull was fractured. . . ."

"That's horrible," Guido said, "but that happened in West Flanders. Our peasants are different, I think."

"Are they?" Rudolph sneered. "Do you know that those lovely Teniers children throw stones at my horse whenever I pass their cottage? That's only the beginning. That's the way it starts. Do you think they'd do such a thing if their parents didn't egg them on? I can't go to Moorkerken and pass that tavern of 'The Black Knight' where the peasants hang out without hearing jeers and catcalls and insults. Some actually spit when they pass me on the road."

Sylvain reddened—a sign that he was about to speak. "Perhaps there are special reasons . . ." he began.

"Hold your tongue," Rudolph said sharply.

"I thought you just said that the moneyed man is universally loved," Colas said with a snicker.

"Fool!" Rudolph shouted. "Jew-lover!"

Colas, his face pale as death, seized a wine bottle by the neck, spilling the last red drops on the white cloth, and rose to face Rudolph. The two glowered at each other.

"Sit down!" Guido bellowed. "Sit down, both of you! Thunders and sacraments! Don't dare rise till I say so, or I'll knock your brains out!" His huge fist pounded the table so that the dishes rattled. He rose to his feet, towering over his sons, his face purple with rage. The veins on his forehead stood in knotted blue cords and his lower jaw moved with vehement emphasis as he looked from Rudolph to Colas to Sylvain, and back again. Then he steadied himself against the table.

"You!" he said to Rudolph, "you bring me those guns of yours! D'you hear?"

"My guns? What do you want with them? Aren't you forgetting that I'm thirty-two years old, that I . . ."

"Silence! I forget nothing! Bring me those guns or clear out! One or the other. I am the master here!"

"And you," he turned to Sylvain, but his wrath was already subsiding, "you get ready to go back to school after the Christmas vacation. Write a letter today to Roesselaere and say that you will return in January. You're wasting your time at home! You're apt to grow lazy, and laziness is the devil's pillow.

"You will all be here," he went on, looking around the table, "on New Year's morning when the peasants come to visit me. I want you to hear what I have to say to them. Uncle Modeste," he turned to the old superintendent, "let the people know that I expect everybody here on New Year's. I have something of importance to tell them.

"Esther," he said humbly, "please forgive me for the fact that you were insulted at my table. I can never forgive myself. . . ." His voice broke, and slowly he walked out of the room.

In the hall, he met Theresa. "Put the Lord God's corner back in order, Theresa dear, will you? I mean, put the statue and the holy lamps in the living room. Get Sylvain to help you."

Then he turned away and wiped his eyes. "My sons are back," he said to himself, "but what good is it? I had looked forward so much to this hour. . . ."

The next day, Colas and Sylvain took Esther for a drive over the hard country roads. The wind had shifted to the north and the sky was becoming overcast. Clouds, monstrous in size, slowly but steadily drew a dull veil over the sun. Huge and black, they rolled up menacingly, drawing closer and closer to the earth. Then the pleasant smell of snow came into the air and the clouds dissolved into a dim shimmering whiteness that fell unceasingly. In an hour's time the countryside lay buried under a mantle of white.

The almost inaudible rustle of the quietly falling flakes reduced even Colas to silence. He looked at the landscape as if he saw it for the first time. He drank in the muted colors as greedily as a thirsty man drinks wine. It was as if he were a mirror. The windmills turning lazily in the white haze turned in his heart; the clouds sweeping towards the horizon were reflected in his

soul. He remembered that as a child he had cried when the rainbow disappeared before he could draw it on paper and copy its colors. Esther glanced at him, amazed to see him so quiet.

The snow muffled all sounds. The metallic rattle of the wheels had faded into a slight swishing that was felt rather than heard, until finally the carriage seemed to glide on air. The spires of the village churches put on ermine bonnets, and the clanging melodies of the carillons dropped to the intimate tinkle of a music box.

When they drove through the narrow streets of Moorkerken, a crowd of children playing in the snow greeted them with cries of joy and pelted them with snowballs. And the dogs, frisking about and licking the snow, barked at the carriage and ran after it.

When they were in open country again, Colas saw that the meadows were disappearing, that the highways had vanished, that the villages were lost in a silvery sheen, that the ponds had become invisible—that all Flanders was transformed into one vast white plain.

The bite of turf smoke from a peasant chimney made the horses throw up their heads and snort angrily. Here and there icicles were beginning to form under cottage eaves. The great farmhouses lay still at the end of the driveways. The only sign of life was the smoke from their chimneys. It seemed as if Nature herself was setting the scenery appropriate for the coming holy day.

Rudolph had remained in his room since the incident of the day before. It was better to keep out of his father's sight for a little while. He knew that with Guido a storm passed as quickly as it came up. The patriarch, he thought with an inward chuckle, had merely wanted to show off his authority, reassure himself of his power, show the distinguished company, that Jewish woman especially, that he was still the master whom everybody obeyed unconditionally. In a day or two Guido would have forgotten about the guns. The man was really exciting himself about nothing. If he knew what was going on between his wife and his eldest son, he would have reason to explode.

Rudolph wandered about his room, pacing from one window to the next, his hands clasped behind his back. When Colas, Sylvain and Esther crossed the barnyard to the stables, he suddenly stood still and watched with half-closed eyes.

"She's not at all bad-looking," he had murmured, "quite passable in fact for a Jewess." Esther had a light, swinging walk; her manner was resolute

and sure. Rudolph looked at her with interest. Now that he saw her with Sylvain and Colas, he realized how tall she was. She was speaking to Sylvain, but he could not distinguish her words, although the window was open. “That woman has a will of her own,” he thought, “but if I could have had her in Africa it wouldn’t have lasted long.”

He smiled as he remembered an African incident, even as he admired Esther’s elegant clothes. How had Colas ever come to hook up with her, he wondered. There must be some money in her family. For all his foolishness and bragging, Colas was a pretty shrewd customer. He couldn’t keep a wife like that from the sale of his miserable paintings; not even Guido’s allowance would suffice for that. “There must be some other sources of income in that delightful family,” Rudolph said aloud, and laughed obscenely to himself. He watched the trio drive off and resumed his pacing.

A moment later he heard the front door close and saw Guido stride towards the stable. The squire was met by a groom leading a saddled horse. The old man mounted, sniffed the air, pulled his fur cap over his ears and trotted off in the direction of Moorkerken. Rudolph sat down in the armchair by the window and stroked his beard. He thought of Mathilda. The cessation of work on the big farm and the advent of cold weather had recently kept Guido in the house for days on end. Rudolph hadn’t had an opportunity to speak with Mathilda privately. Not only that; he felt she was drifting away from him. She had shown touches of irritation and hostility recently. She tried to avoid his eyes, she refused to play cards with him, pleading a headache or fatigue, and she generally withdrew at an early hour, leaving him alone with Guido and Sylvain.

Rudolph rose from his chair. He was resolved to have it out with her. There was no better time than the present, with everybody fortuitously absent from the house. He walked across the hallway to the other wing and knocked at her door. She seemed to have been waiting, for the door opened instantly.

“I thought you would come,” she smiled enticingly. “We seem to be all alone in the house. Guido went to see the Burgomaster of Moorkerken. Tell me, what do you think of your brother’s wife?” she asked, leading him into the room.

Rudolph wrinkled his nose. “Any rags, any bones, any bottles today?” he sang. “Do put on your habit, Mathilda. We can take a ride ourselves this afternoon. Nobody will notice our absence. . . .”

“Except Modeste,” Mathilda said, holding up her finger in a warning gesture.

“No, he’s gone, too, the damned old scarecrow. This is one time when he won’t know what is happening. I saw him drive off in the dogcart. . . .”

“But if Sylvain should take Esther and Colas to see his new apartment in the tower, and they find us there, what then?”

“Can’t we be looking at the tower too?” Rudolph laughed. “Can’t we be interested in archaeology, just as they are? Moreover, Sylvain won’t go to the tower today. He took the tilbury. I saw them leave. He won’t drive the tilbury on those moor trails. He has too much sense for that. Come, get dressed! I’ll have the horses ready in two minutes. . . .”

Modeste had indeed driven off with the dogcart. He had gone to the tower to fetch back the statue and the votive lamps. “The quicker that’s done, the better,” he said to himself. “Perhaps it will bring back peace and decency to this house. The way things are going now, anything may happen. The devil of discord has taken up his abode with us. He’s come to join that other devil, the slimy one of lust, who’s been here quite some time. There’ll be other devils along shortly. Once they start coming, there’s never an end. . . .”

He tied the pony to a tree behind the ruined castle and walked over to the tower. “I’ll have to make two or three trips up and down these stairs,” he said to himself. “First the statue, that’s the heaviest, then the three votive lamps and the candlesticks. . . .”

Puffing and panting, he climbed the spiral stone staircase. On the first landing, he looked out the window. “There,” he said, “it’s going to snow. I think I felt some flakes on my face. . . .”

He put his hand out, palm upward, to feel. “Is it snow, or is it rain?” he muttered. Then he gasped and drew back as if he had been stung. He had seen two horses coming along the trail across the moor. “Good God in heaven! It’s Rudolph and Mathilda. . . . What’ll I do?”

He tried to open the door to the large room on the first landing but could not unfasten it. He jerked and heaved with all his strength but the door wouldn’t budge. “Sylvain must have nailed it up,” he panted. “Up the stairs, then!” He ran as fast as his old legs could carry him. Rudolph’s voice could already be heard below.

The room which Sylvain had cleaned and refurnished was fortunately open and Modeste ran inside. His heart was beating violently. “What shall I do?” he panted. “Shall I pretend to be busy removing the sacred objects? Maybe that will be best. But I simply cannot do it, can’t lift my arms. I’m exhausted. I haven’t an ounce of strength left. Shall I sit in one of the chairs

and pretend to be resting? No, Rudolph will think I've come to spy, to prevent his tête-à-tête with Mathilda. . . ."

He went into the kitchen beyond the large room and, flinging open the door of the provision closet, he stepped inside. The door wouldn't close entirely but there was no time to waste. Rudolph and Mathilda had come into the large room. Modeste could see Rudolph as he threw his hat and gloves on the couch in front of the fireplace. "I'll light a fire," he heard Rudolph say. "It's chilly here. . . ."

Rudolph opened the kitchen door and passed within a few inches of Modeste. He repassed an instant later, his arms piled high with blocks of wood, but he left the kitchen door open. Now the superintendent could see Mathilda too. She was sitting on the low couch in front of the fireplace, watching Rudolph light the fire. The room filled with smoke and Modeste felt like coughing.

The fire flared up and the smoke slowly evaporated. Rudolph had opened the door to the landing to clear the air in the room. Presently he returned and sat next to Mathilda on the couch. Modeste could see Mathilda's face in profile. "Witch, wanton bitch," he muttered under his breath. He put his hand over his mouth to keep from coughing. The silence in the other room made him listen more intently.

"I wish you'd throw that statue and those lamps out of the window," he heard Mathilda say. "They're ghastly. They make you think you're in a church." Rudolph did not answer. "Be patient, be patient," he heard Mathilda say next. "Wait a minute, Rudolph, you'll tear my dress!"

Rudolph had drawn Mathilda onto his knees. One arm was around her waist, the other was on her shoulders, pulling down her gown. For a moment he caught sight of Rudolph's bearded face, illumined by the flames which shot up with a roar into the chimney. The young master's dark eyes seemed to look straight at him. Modeste felt shivers run down his spine. Then he saw Rudolph loosen Mathilda's hair. It fell in beautiful golden strands over her bare shoulders and breast. . . . "Ah Rudolph!" he heard her whisper.

Modeste looked away. The irritation in his throat had become unbearable, perspiration streamed down his face. "I must cough or I'll die," he thought. "But if I cough, I'm a lost man. Rudolph will drag me out of the closet and hurl me down the stairs. . . ."

The old superintendent was in agony. He could not bring himself to look into the room again. His throat itched as if someone were tickling it with a feather. His knees trembled and he had to support himself against the wall of

the closet. He felt faint; his strength was failing him. He was growing dizzy. In another minute he must cough, or die.

He didn't know how long the suspense lasted, but suddenly he heard Mathilda say: "It's growing dark outside. We must hurry!"

A few minutes later he heard their shoes clattering rapidly down the stone stairway. . . .

Modeste staggered out of his hiding place, more dead than alive, and sank into one of the armchairs. His body was soaking wet and he moved a little nearer the fire.

He must have been sitting there half an hour when he heard footsteps ascending the staircase. The sound made him tremble, but he could not rise; he was paralyzed with fear. Was Rudolph returning? If so, he was lost. Yet he could not move, he was utterly powerless to rise. . . .

Sylvain pushed open the door and saw the superintendent by the fire.

"What's wrong, Uncle Modeste?"

"I'm faint," Modeste whispered. "I strained myself running up the stairs. I came here to fetch the statue home. It was too much for me. I lit a fire and have been resting a while."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Sylvain said. "I came to do the same thing. We went for a drive but it started to snow so heavily that we went home. Then I remembered Father's order to put the Lord God's corner back in shape. When I saw the dogcart below, I suspected you had come. Just go downstairs, Uncle Modeste, and I'll carry everything down. I am so glad you, too, thought of the statue."

Guido had not returned when Rudolph and Mathilda reached the manor. Rudolph went up to his room. He felt elated that his meeting with Mathilda had passed off without attracting any attention and that she was as enamored of him as ever. "One must be bold," he thought. "It's the audacious and not the meek who will inherit the earth, and a little something else besides, if they insist." He laughed inwardly, threw himself on the bed and lay staring at the ceiling.

Presently footsteps sounded on the stairs. He heard Colas' booming voice and Esther's reply. When he heard their door close, he dressed and went to the stable to saddle a fresh horse. He mounted and rode off down the driveway. First he thought of going to meet his father and returning with him to the manor, but when he came to the fork in the road he turned his horse in the other direction, towards Maere.

At “The Ducal Court” a waiter informed him that Annemarie had suddenly left and gone back to Antwerp. The news displeased Rudolph. He ordered a drink and soon left again. The light of the rising moon threw dark-blue shadows on the snow-burdened summits of the poplars and on the roofs of the houses he passed. He rode his horse across the dune lands till white flecks of foam bespattered its flanks. Around seven o’clock he turned up at “The Black Knight.” He had no desire to return home and sit at table with the others.

Rudolph ordered his horse to be stabled and fed. As he entered the public room, he noticed half a dozen men, elderly peasants and workers from neighboring estates, gathered in a corner of the bar. They were in the midst of a lively conversation, laughing uproariously. But his entrance had the effect of a clap of thunder from a clear sky. The laughter froze on the men’s lips and conversation stopped as if a signal had imposed silence. He walked through the room in a painful, sensible stillness. He touched the rim of his hat and pronounced the customary word of greeting, but there was no answer. Gritting his teeth, he allowed his eyes to pass quickly over the men. They had all turned their backs or averted their faces.

With an indifferent shrug, he went into the restaurant at the rear. He seated himself at a small table facing the door so that he could observe at a glance what went on in the taproom. The men had resumed their conversation, but they were less boisterous now. Soon they drifted out, one after another. Rudolph was the only remaining guest in the place.

It was suppertime—too early for the nightly gathering of the peasants at “The Black Knight.” They would start to come in around eight o’clock. Rudolph figured that he could have a quiet, leisurely meal and be gone before the place became crowded again. Ordering a bottle of brandy, he poured himself a glass. The strong liquor had the effect of a quickening fire.

The host himself came in to put a linen cover on the table, and presently returned carrying a tray with a tureen of soup and some silverware. Rudolph fell to with inordinate zest. The hot liquid, even more than the brandy, made his spirits rise, and he responded cheerfully when another guest entered the dining room and wished him a timid good evening. The man was a stranger of middling height and with a marked pallor. Rudolph looked at him keenly. The newcomer appeared quite worn out. When he had seated himself, he ordered a small glass of brandy which he mixed with water.

“Allow me,” Rudolph said genially, reaching over to the man’s table. “Pour yourself a good drink! You seem to be tired. There’s nothing like a tumbler of good brandy to revive hope in the human breast.” He laughed at

his own words. The man thanked him, accepted the proffered bottle and poured himself a full glass.

"Still, I haven't much hope," he said to Rudolph, shaking his head sadly. "This is my fourth day in the district and I haven't sold ten francs' worth of merchandise."

"What are you selling?" Rudolph asked.

"I go from house to house with my bundle," the man said. "Cotton goods, underwear, shawls, socks—you know, the usual stuff. But the peasants aren't buying. They have no money."

"It's the wrong season," Rudolph said, breaking off a piece of bread. "There is no work on the farms in wintertime; consequently many of them are without a regular income. . . ."

The peddler shook his head. "I've traveled this district a dozen times," he said, "but it was never so bad as now. And yet they had bumper crops around here this year. I've never seen such a lack of ready cash. They tell me, though, that it's the fault of the machines which are being introduced on the big estates. Some peasants have been out of work for a year."

"They should work their own land more intensively," Rudolph said curtly.

"That's just what they object to," the stranger replied. "They say there is no sense in doing that. They can never hope to compete with the large estates now that machinery does most of the work there. The estate owners can afford to sell much cheaper than formerly but the peasants can't make any profit at all."

"Is that what they tell you?" Rudolph asked.

"Yes. They are practically unanimous on that point. It's the same story I hear at every cottage. . . ."

"I expect you have been talking to some of the lazy ones who expect to lie on their backs and have fried pigeons fly into their open mouths. They have plenty of money, I assure you. But they keep it in the old sock, under the mattress, you know, or in a tin box up the chimney. It's all pretense, all that talk about poverty and hard times, and about the machines taking their jobs away. . . ."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew what goes on here at night," the stranger replied with a significant shake of the head.

"What goes on where?" Rudolph demanded, putting down his fork, and gulping down a glass of wine.

“Here in this inn, right over there in that taproom.” The peddler motioned with his head in the direction of the bar. “Every night that I’ve been here it’s been a near-riot. The place is crowded with farmers. And the talk they fling out. . . . My God! I don’t think it bodes anybody any good. Some bad things are brewing in Moorkerken. I can tell you that. And it’s the same over at Appelkerken and in Abeele village where I was last week. I wouldn’t want to be a landowner when these peasants cut loose. There’ll be hell to pay. . . .”

Rudolph laughed. “You’re easily scared, it seems. Don’t you know all that bold talk is just so much wind and fury? They’re braggarts, that’s what they are. They get a drink of bad rum under their belts and they feel themselves heroes. They say they’re going to do this, do that, and the other thing. They boast till they’re blue in the face. It’s always been that way. But nothing ever comes of it. They end up by going home and beating up their wives. That’s as far as they get.” He laughed again. “And besides, if anything should happen, don’t forget the city is but a few hours away. The gendarmes would be on the spot before those rowdies had broken one single window. It just takes a notice by telegraph. . . .”

“But suppose the gendarmes refuse to intervene,” the peddler said. “Suppose they say they won’t beat up their brother Flemings. What will you do then? You know all these Flemings are peasants under their skins. They stick together like brothers. . . .”

Rudolph eyed the man with growing surprise. “If that’s the case,” he said, “we’ll make sure the gendarmes are Walloons. That’s what we’ll have to do! That’s the advantage of living in a country with two races. You don’t think Walloon gendarmes would refuse to give a mob of Flemish peasants a good beating, do you, or shoot them down if need be, by God?”

“It’s possible,” the stranger said slowly, “but around here everybody seems to be for the peasants, and that includes the clergy.”

“You mean an isolated priest here and there; I know that. You can’t expect anything else,” Rudolph said. “But you can’t say that the clergy as a whole is involved in this agitation against the landowners. That would be unnatural.”

“Why unnatural?”

“In the first place, the clergy is far more beholden to the landowners than to the peasants. In the second place, many priests themselves belong to landowners’ families. It’s two hands on one belly. . . .”

The man shook his head. “Of such there are only a few, a very few,” he said. “Most pastors are of peasant stock. I do not think there is another

country on earth, except perhaps Ireland, where the clergy and the mass of the people are so close as here in Flanders. The priests are definitely on the peasants' side in this matter. It's true, of course, they do not give the same reasons for their opposition to the manor houses as the peasants do. The priests are chiefly disgusted with the way the landowners live and carry on. They are alarmed because they see the old traditions of thrift and religion and morality trodden underfoot and held up to ridicule in the big country homes. They are growing afraid. . . ."

"Afraid of what?" Rudolph asked, his eyebrows arched, as he cut a leg off the chicken in the large platter which had been placed before him and transferred it to his plate.

"They're afraid that the small men will follow the big men; as master so villein, you know the old saying. The rich families are no longer setting an example. Why, I met a man the other day who told me that in one particular homestead right here in this neighborhood all the seven deadly sins are present in human form. . . ."

"Where would that be?" Rudolph asked, looking up from his plate.

"I don't know, he didn't say," the man replied. "He said there was vanity, outrageous luxury, lust, sloth, and all of the other deadly sins."

"Murder, too, I suppose?" Rudolph laughed.

"Yes, murder, too!" the man nodded.

"Who was that man?" Rudolph asked sharply.

"He was a Portuguese merchant, or so he said. We rode in the same compartment on the train coming down here from Antwerp the other day."

"A Portuguese merchant? What did he want here?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. He spoke bad French and no Flemish at all."

"Are you sure he was a Portuguese? What was his name?" Rudolph asked, a note of alarm in his voice.

"He did tell me his name," the peddler said. "Let's see now, have I forgotten it? Rodrick, I think he said it was, yes, Rodricks, something like that. . . ."

Rudolph dropped his fork and stared at the peddler. "And what was it he said?"

"Well, he said that at one of the big manors in this vicinity, they were hiding a murderer. . . ." The peddler shrugged his shoulders.

Rudolph wanted to learn more but the words froze on his lips. He made a great effort to control himself, but his hand shook so violently that the peddler asked if anything was wrong. "Are you unwell?"

“The coffee is too hot,” Rudolph said. “I burnt myself.”

He tried to smile but his face darkened again. David Teniers stood in the doorway. The boy stared at him insolently and their eyes met. The clatter of wooden shoes on the plank floor of the taproom indicated that other peasants were arriving. As David turned away, Rudolph hurried with his meal.

“It seems there’s going to be another meeting tonight,” the peddler remarked, getting up from his chair. “You’ll be able to hear for yourself what mood they are in. As for me, I’ve heard enough. I’m dead tired. I think I’ll hit the old straw sack upstairs. . . . Good night!” He walked off wearily.

He had scarcely left the room when another man appeared in the doorway. This individual calmly leaned his shoulder against the doorpost and, folding his arms, followed every movement of Rudolph’s knife and fork. Rudolph frowned and looked at the man, but the peasant did not stir. Then a second man came up and stood looking over the first man’s shoulder, and presently a third and a fourth, until the opening between the two rooms was entirely blocked with their bodies. Rudolph was uncomfortable under their stare.

“Would you all like a drink?” he said.

No one answered. One spat on the floor and, scraping his wooden shoe noisily through the spittle, walked off. Another took his place. All looked at Rudolph as if he were a curiosity at the fair. He wanted to shout at them to clear out. Also, he wanted to call the host, pay his bill and leave. But he did not want to betray his agitation. He realized that he was in an embarrassing situation. In order to leave he would have to pass through that doorway, unless he wanted to climb out through the window or vanish through the kitchen door. That would never do, he decided, as he glanced casually at the scowling young faces. He couldn’t lower his dignity to that extent; he would never hear the last of it. The royal road was the only way for him. . . .

Fortunately, there seemed to be a diversion in the other room, for the peasants turned about and left him to look at their backs. Above the turmoil of voices and the stamping of wooden shoes, Rudolph could hear one man speaking clearly in a high, excited voice. The man mentioned the name of Potter. That, Rudolph knew, was the name of the young superintendent on the estate of François van Abeele, where a peasant had been killed in an accident in November. The cause of the accident was still under investigation. But the man was not speaking of the peasant. It seemed that something had also happened to the superintendent.

“No, no, that’s not the way it went,” somebody yelled above the babel. “Ho! Will you all shut up for a moment? . . . Now, let me tell you how it

happened. They took this Potter man," the voice went on, "and they heaved him right into his own goddamned threshing machine. Plop! Clack! There he lay!

" 'Let me out! Let me out!' he cries. 'I'll call the police!' 'Go ahead, call the police,' Jan Gysbrechts tells him. 'Go ahead. Shout all you want!'

" 'I'll give you fifty francs, a hundred francs, if you let me out,' the Potter man yells. But Gysbrechts deals him a blow on the nose that splits him right open. And then somebody starts the engine and the threshing arms come down and him still yelling: 'Let me out! Let me out!' They let him out all right, but not until his damned head was bashed in. That's the way it went. I know. I saw the whole thing. . . ."

"Serves him right!" somebody said in a deep voice. And then all chimed in, until the noise in the other room became deafening. Somebody began to play a harmonica. A peasant with a clear young voice sang:

Toen Pier-la-la in 't kistje lag al met z'n billekens bleut,
En niemand die het beter wist of Pier-la-la was deut.

When Pier-la-la lay in his coffin with his buttocks bare,
Then nobody had a doubt that Pier-la-la was dead. . . .

It was the old song of Pier the Plowman, who was beaten up by the Bloody Duke's henchmen and left for dead, but who revived to take fearful revenge.

The chorus was taken up by all the peasants. They stamped their clogs on the floor and roared:

I revive, said Pier-la-la!
I revive, watch out, sa-sa! . . .

Then the same high-pitched voice sang an obscene ditty that made the crowd alternately snigger and roar with laughter. There were calls for beer and brandy to reward the entertainers. While the noise was at its peak, Rudolph quietly pushed aside the small dining table and put on his gloves.

The moment he rose to his feet, the music and the tumultuous conversation in the other room came to an abrupt stop. The atmosphere became tense with anticipation. Suddenly Rudolph stood in the doorway, a hundred pairs of eyes focused on him. The men made way for him with maddening slowness. Although seething with rage, Rudolph appeared calm and unconcerned, his hands in the pockets of his jacket. He threw a casual glance at the harmonica player who sat perched on the bar taking a swallow from a mug of beer. The lad looked back, quickly put down the mug and placing his fingers on the keys of his instrument, sang insolently:

O, lieve Mathilda,
Als g'eens wist wat ik wilde . . .

Oh my Mathilda dear,
If only you knew
What I want of you . . .

The peasants roared the song as Rudolph walked through the room. The crowd went wild. Some doubled up with hiccoughs and laughter: Oh dear Mathilda! If only you knew. . . .

Rudolph felt as if he had been slapped in the face, but he stopped to light his pipe. All around him men bellowed and screamed like maniacs. When he reached the porch of the inn and stood waiting for his horse, which the host himself had gone to fetch, the peasants started to sing a parody of a rollicking old Water Beggar song about the gay goings-on at the old Tower of Terzel on a day of victory.

Rudolph mounted his horse with deliberate calm. The whole noisy troop pressed outside to see him depart, and the courtyard rang with their shouts. "Tell Guido we'll see him on New Year's morning!" someone called out.

"With a threshing machine!" another voice chimed in.

"No, with a shotgun!" yelled a young man who stood close to Rudolph's horse. It was David Teniers. He glowered at Rudolph and deliberately spat on his riding boots.

Calmly Rudolph wiped his boot against the horse's belly, put his foot back in the stirrup and at the same time ripped his riding crop from its holster. Leaning over, he lashed David squarely across the face. The boy doubled up with pain. Then Rudolph spurred his horse and the peasants scattered in all directions. He could hear them shouting their curses after him.

It was shortly after nine o'clock, and he met no one on the homeward journey except a few peasants who were on their way to the inn. The horse labored in the snow, but Rudolph vented his rage on the animal, whipped it and drove his spurs into its flanks as if all the furies were at his heels. Reaching the estate, he cut across the apple orchard, still using his spurs mercilessly. Suddenly his mount stumbled, and he was pitched forward over its neck. He got up unhurt and brushed the snow off his clothes. Taking his horse by the bridle, he tried to make the animal rise.

The horse whinnied softly and trembled. Rudolph struck a sulphur match and, by its brief flare, saw that one of the animal's forelegs had sunk into the ground, and that the other was doubled up in a dangerous twist. He pulled at

the bit. The horse strained but could not raise itself. A man came out of the stable carrying a hurricane lantern and Rudolph called him over.

"We'll have to dig him out," the stableboy said. "If he hasn't broken that leg, he'll break it in trying to free himself."

The boy went back to fetch help and some tools. A moment later Guido came out of the house, accompanied by Modeste and Sylvain. Others were coming from the stable with lanterns and ropes.

"What happened?" Guido asked.

"Stepped into a marmot's hole, I suppose," Rudolph said. "I couldn't see it under the snow. . . ."

Guido walked over to the horse and patted its neck. The beast groaned and struggled, tossing its head so that flecks of foam flew in all directions.

"Thunders and sacraments!" Guido cried. "This animal is soaked in sweat. You must have ridden like the devil. What's the sense of that? Why did you try to cut across the orchard? You know as well as I that the ground is soft here and full of holes. You must be out of your mind."

"Don't worry and don't shout so much!" Rudolph said. "I'll get him up." He walked over to the fallen horse and beat it savagely between the ears with his riding crop.

"Stop! The man is insane," Guido shouted, as he snatched the riding crop from his son's hand.

"Stand back there, everybody. Here, give me a shovel!"

Guido began to dig. Attracted by the shouts, Colas and Esther came out of the house. Two stableboys helped Guido clear away the snow and mud.

"That's as far as we can go," Guido said, handing the shovel to Colas. "We'll have to roll him over on his side now."

Two or three men took the horse's head and began to pull it slowly sidewards. The animal snorted violently, then groaned piteously.

"He's sinking deeper with every heave," Modeste said. "The mud is sucking him down. He's lost, I'm afraid."

As Modeste spoke, Sylvain walked up to the horse's head and started to stroke the spot where Rudolph's blows had fallen. Sylvain went down on his knees and bent over. Unfastening the bit, he handed it to his father.

"Be careful now," Colas shouted. "If he gets up he'll trample you."

"Let him alone!" Guido said curtly.

Sylvain put his hands around the horse's chin and rested his face against its head. Two or three times he swayed gently to the right. The horse swayed with Sylvain and then quietly rolled over on its side. The leg was out.

Sylvain rose to his feet and the horse jumped up with a bound. Its left leg hung limp. Guido tried to feel the knee, but the horse shied back violently when he touched it. “Broken, I guess,” Guido mumbled, glaring at Rudolph.

Sylvain walked back to the horse, which had taken a few hopping steps. He took the injured leg between his knees and moved his hand over it. When he touched the wounded knee, the horse flung up its head as if it had been stabbed. “It’s sore, eh?” Sylvain asked, looking at the horse’s eyes. The animal’s head came down. Its lips and nose rubbed against the boy’s cheeks.

“There’s no break, Father,” Sylvain said. “It’s just a sprain.”

Guided through the apple orchard by the lanterns of the stableboys, they all walked back to the manor house. Guido, with Esther by his side, was far in the lead. From his high-pitched voice and his abrupt impatient gestures, it was easy to tell that he was still very indignant about his eldest son’s carelessness. Sylvain and Rudolph followed at a short distance. Sylvain was silent but Rudolph, who had been strangely impressed with his brother’s handling of the fallen horse, looked at him and said: “That was wonderfully well done, Sylvain.” When Sylvain smiled Rudolph added, “I wonder if you could pull out a man as well, if he should get into a bad hole?”

Sylvain glanced up sharply. “Are you in trouble, Rudolph?” he asked. “Are you speaking of yourself?”

“No, of course not,” Rudolph said quickly, with a nervous laugh which did not escape Sylvain.

“I wish I could help,” Sylvain said, “no matter who the man is.”

They went into the house, but Modeste and Colas continued on past the door. Walking around the building, they presently stepped into the cabin which the superintendent had had built for himself at the rear. Modeste had taken Colas into his confidence on what he called Rudolph’s criminal relationship with Mathilda.

“I’m all the time in dread,” he said, when he had locked the door and closed the shutters, “that your father will find out. In that event I wouldn’t give a *sou* for Rudolph’s life.”

“Nor would I,” Colas said. “I certainly wouldn’t want to be in Rudolph’s boots when Father discovers that his . . . honor has been . . . tampered with. I think Rudolph should be warned at once. How would it be if Sylvain and I went up to his room and gave him an ultimatum—to stop forcing his attentions on Mathilda or we’d tell Father.”

“I’ve thought of that,” Modeste replied. “But I came to the conclusion that it wouldn’t be safe for you or for Sylvain to take the initiative. In the first place, Sylvain couldn’t stand up to Rudolph for a minute. One word of

insult or a slur and that boy is reduced to silence. . . . Suppose Rudolph said go ahead, tell Father, and that he would then deny everything? Where would you be then? He'd say that his brothers were conspiring against him, blackening his character in order to have Heer Guido disinherit him. . . ."

"But we have your word for it that he was with Mathilda in the room in the tower. . . ."

"My word won't be of much value," Modeste said. "Don't forget, blood creeps where it may not run. Your father will be very reluctant to believe a stranger's word against that of his own son or against that of his wife. . . ."

"Still, he would have received a warning. He would watch carefully after that. . . ."

"It would be hell in this house," Uncle Modeste said. "Three people would be watching each other like hawks. In the end there'd be an explosion anyway, and a scandal such as was never seen before in all East Flanders. It'll all end in disaster. Mark my words! And I knew it from the first moment they set eyes on each other, those two—from the first time they rode out to the old tower together one afternoon a few weeks after your brother's arrival. I watched them. I could not help seeing what went on. . . ."

"But you did not actually see them enter the tower together, did you?"

"Rudolph admitted it to Sylvain when they met on the road on the way back. . . ."

"Still, that is no proof. . . ."

"I saw them together in that room when I went to fetch the statue back. I saw more than enough."

"Have you ever thought of Uncle Urbain?" Colas asked. "He could probably take father aside and drop a hint. He's a very wise man. As a priest he has seen all sorts of family situations. . . ."

"That's no solution," the superintendent replied. "If the Vicar drops a hint, Heer Guido will want to know the whole truth at once. He might not even have the patience to verify it. He'd just go up to Rudolph and shoot him down. . . ."

"And Mathilda next. . . ."

"No, he wouldn't harm her. He loves her too much. To discover that Mathilda had deceived him would break his heart. He'd be finished, crushed. . . . The only way is for me to go to Antwerp and do a little investigating. . . ."

"Why to Antwerp?"

“You see,” Modeste’s voice dropped to a whisper, “you see, I have a notion—I don’t know where I got it—but I have a notion, a feeling, that they knew each other before Rudolph came back here. Your brother has some secret hold over that woman. . . .”

“What makes you think that Rudolph knew Mathilda in the past, or that he has some power over her? You have the queerest notions. . . .”

“Colaskin, my boy, it’s only a hunch, only a surmise, but I’d almost stake my life on it: there is something between those two, something more than mere physical attraction. These old eyes of mine have seen a lot in their day. They seldom deceive me. I know human beings. I tell you that girl isn’t the same as when she came here. She’s not really in love with him. She’s afraid of him. She was here two years before Rudolph’s return, and while she was sometimes moody and demanding, usually she was cheerful and genial. Everybody got to like her. Now she’s continually moody. Maybe she’s full of remorse. Yet she keeps on going with Rudolph. I can’t make her out.”

“Genial and cheerful?” asked Colas. “I thought she tried to have you dismissed when she first came!”

“That’s true. She wanted Heer Guido to get rid of us both, of Theresa and me. But your father put his foot down on that, thank God. I don’t know what I would have done if he had sent me away. I don’t know any other place in this whole wide world. I was born on this farm and so was my dear wife that’s gone and my children who now live in the city. . . . But it was only a whim on Mathilda’s part, I imagine. Just a passing whim, you might say. She was somewhat taken aback at first, I imagine, by our wrinkled old faces. We scared her. We didn’t fit in properly among all the fine new things she introduced into this house, you understand. But she soon got used to us, and ever since then, she has treated us with the utmost respect. I must say what’s true, Colas; she has a good heart, even if she is a wanton. Only a month ago on my birthday, I was surprised when she presented me with a scarf so fine and costly that I haven’t dared to take it out of the box. Let me show it to you, it’s here in my dresser.

“Isn’t that fine? Real silk!” the superintendent said, showing Colas the scarf. “Yes, as I’ve said, she has a good heart, but she’s helpless in Rudolph’s power. She is afraid. A big change has come over her. Do you know she sometimes sits for hours in the salon just staring and staring, her hands in her lap and her fists clenched? And then she is pale and red by turns and her foot is restless. At table she is unnaturally silent. You can see for yourself: she forces herself to talk and to smile. But there is the look of a hunted dog in her eyes. She’s terribly agitated. I’ve seen her jump up

suddenly upon hearing Rudolph's voice in the hall and put her hands to her heart as if it's the executioner who's come to fetch her. . . ."

"But what are we going to do?" Colas asked.

"We must do something—that's clear. For if we don't, we'll have a tragedy on our hands. And one tragedy will bring another in its wake and so on. There'll be no end to it. . . ."

"Are you the only one that's aware of this liaison?"

"How can you ask such a thing?"

"Well, you're the only one who has seen them come and go together."

"How about Sylvain?" Modeste asked. "And don't you think that all the maids know and the plowboys and all the peasants in the neighborhood? Do you know that whenever Theresa mentions the Lady Mathilda's name in the kitchen or in the wash house everybody begins to snicker? Of course such things don't remain hidden. They can't remain hidden. Only your father is blind and deaf, poor man. . . ."

"You'd think that Mathilda would exercise some care."

"Mathilda is anxious enough, I dare say. But not Rudolph. I'm sure she would rather creep into the ground than be seen riding out with him, and always to the old tower. Rudolph doesn't seem to care. He has some hold over her, and power is the curse of a creature like your brother. He is proud and vindictive, cunning, impulsive and unprincipled. The violence of his passions is something terrible, something to be afraid of, Colas. . . ."

Colas laughed. "I think his bark is worse than his bite. I am not afraid of him."

"Be careful, Colas, he's rich and unscrupulous. The combination is bad. . . . I'm not going to mix with him, but I mean to protect your father's honor. That's my duty. . . . As I told you, I am thinking of going to Antwerp one of these days, to do a little investigating. In the first place, I am going to see Cousin Charlotte. After all, Cousin Charlotte is responsible for everything. She is the one who introduced your father to the Lady Mathilda. She brought them together. Maybe she knows the secret back of it all. Perhaps she will know what to do. I expect she will at least be able to advise us. What do you say?"

"When are you going?"

"I think I'll go during Christmas week. I can't say which day. But right after the holy day."

"Perhaps I'll go with you."

“That would be fine, Colas. Cousin Charlotte will be happy to see you. You were always her favorite. But I wouldn’t bring your wife, if I were you. It wouldn’t do to be washing our dirty family linen in front of your lady. . . .”

“You needn’t worry,” Colas replied. “She won’t come along if she knows the kind of errand we’re on.”

“And when we’re in Antwerp,” Modeste said, “we’ll have to look up a certain Portuguese merchant by the name of Rodriguez. There’s something between Rudolph and this man that may have some bearing on the whole affair. It has to do with your brother’s stay in Africa. It seems this man and Rudolph knew each other over there. . . .”

“How do you know that, Uncle Modeste?”

“I know it from Robert Brero, our smith. This man Rodriguez came to Robert’s forge and inquired after Rudolph. He talked quite a bit with Robert, but Robert couldn’t make head or tail of his story. At one point the man showed Robert a dagger, and said: ‘Tell Rudolph Govaerts that Rodriguez is around, and that he won’t rest until he has ripped the guts out of him!’ ”

“Did Robert tell Rudolph?”

“Yes,” Modeste answered, “and Robert says that Rudolph became so pale that he thought he was going to faint. Rudolph told him to keep his mouth shut about the incident. He told Robert to let him know at once if the man came around again. Rudolph was frightened out of his wits. . . .”

“I told you,” Colas said, “he’s a coward at heart. . . .”

In the days that followed, Rudolph was like a man bitten by a tarantula. When anyone spoke to him, he flared up like a maniac. Nowhere could he find rest for his weary body or composure for his tormented brain. His eyes, sunk deep into their sockets, were smoldering, shifty slits of black fire. He felt like crying out, screaming, running away. He was trying to hide his disquietude from others, but it became more and more difficult to control the fear that obsessed him. He felt that fate, with octopus arms, was reaching out for him from the past, from the impenetrable bush of Africa where he had spent seven years of his life, where he had grown rich, but also whence he had fled in mortal terror back to his father’s house.

First it was Brero, the smith, who had warned him about the strange Portuguese who was searching for him with a dagger. Then the peddler he had met by accident at “The Black Knight” had mentioned the name Rodriguez. Rudolph shuddered whenever he pronounced the name. “What does he want of me?” he asked himself. “Of course, I know perfectly well what he wants. He wants revenge . . . to rip the guts out of me, as he told

Robert. Twice in a month's time he has given a sign of himself. The next time . . . He must be keeping a permanent watch over me, over all my comings and goings. . . . Where can I go? He has trailed me all the way here from German East Africa. . . . If he was able to locate me here in Flanders, he'll find me in America, or Australia, or wherever I go. . . ."

Walking to the corner of the room, he unstrapped his valise. From the bottom he drew a revolver and opened it to make sure it was loaded. Then he placed it on the chair beside the bed. "This will never leave me again," he said grimly. "If it's my life he's after, I'll sell it at a high price." He rubbed the nape of his neck with the flat of his hand like a man who is drowsy and wants to wake up.

In the night, Sylvain, who slept in the next room, heard him pace the floor and talk to himself and moan in a pitiful, forlorn and helpless manner. Once or twice he thought he heard Rudolph whimper like a child. Finally, he got up and knocked at his brother's door.

"Rudolph," he whispered, with his mouth to the keyhole, "Rudolph, is anything wrong? Can I be of any help? Are you sick?" For answer Rudolph flung the door open and faced him with a revolver. Sylvain stepped back, terror-stricken. But Rudolph came nearer and, bringing his face close to his brother's, snarled, "Get back where you belong! Mind your own business!"

After nearly a week of sleepless nights, Rudolph was almost on the point of talking with his father about the events in Africa which had caused him to flee, and which had now put him in a grave predicament. Guido, he thought, would know a way out. His father might go to the authorities with him and demand protection. Perhaps he could even have the Portuguese apprehended and deported. God knows what, anything, if only the dreadful suspense would come to an end.

Yet, when he saw his father's untroubled face at breakfast, and Guido began to talk of the value and blessing of the deep snow for the land, Rudolph's courage failed. He answered mechanically and ate his meal in silence. Guido did not even notice that his son's hands trembled, and that the appealing look of a trapped animal crept into his eyes once or twice, as he was on the verge of unburdening his conscience.

Mathilda and Sylvain entered the room and Rudolph knew that he had missed his opportunity. Yet he had to speak to someone. He was too intelligent to deceive himself any longer with the illusion that he could overcome the threatening danger by his own devices. He had to get support.

After breakfast he rode out to Maere and called on Uncle Urbain. The Vicar of Maere was a man of understanding, as gentle as he was learned,

whose profession had taught him to keep a secret. Rudolph was determined to tell Uncle Urbain everything.

But when he walked into the Vicar's study, and the white-haired priest tenderly embraced him, the same feeling of impotence came over him that had silenced him in his father's presence. It was as if someone had flung a rope around his neck and was twisting the knot. Uncle Urbain offered him a glass of punch. He said he thought Rudolph might be suffering from a touch of malaria. He looked in a medical book for symptoms and fetched a small medicine chest from which he took a bottle, and poured a few drops into Rudolph's glass.

On taking his leave, Rudolph opened his wallet and laid some banknotes on the writing desk.

"What's this for?" Uncle Urbain asked. "You know I don't need it and that I am not supposed to take it."

"Take it, please," Rudolph implored, "and lay it out for the good of the church . . . and for my soul!"

The old priest was silent for a moment. His keen blue eyes searched Rudolph's troubled face. "If there's anything wrong, Rudolph, my son, don't hesitate to tell me," he said. But Rudolph shook his head and, after taking Uncle Urbain's outstretched hand, he went out.

7

On the morning of the second day before Christmas Colas and Esther, accompanied by Sylvain, went to Maere to meet the Southern Express which was to bring Hele Helson, the Swedish painter, from Paris. Because the tilbury was being repaired, they took the more ornate, four-wheeled family coach in which Guido and Mathilda usually drove to church on Sunday. Before they had gone halfway, the keen wind of early morning rose again and a fine snow began falling. They reached Maere after some delay, only to be told that they were still much too early—the Paris train, according to telegraphic advice, not having pulled into Ghent as yet. There would probably be a good many hours of waiting. Consequently they went to "The Ducal Court," stabled their horses and had lunch. After lunch Colas sat down with Notary Fabian and his cronies to play a game of dominoes, while Esther and Sylvain went to call on Uncle Urbain.

It was nearly seven o'clock when the train finally puffed into the station. Colas ran forward to meet his friend Hele, but he was slow to recognize the other two passengers as his brother-in-law Jacques Bonnefous and his sister Amorie. The Bonnefous had not written Guido, since they wanted to surprise him. They had made the journey from Ghent in the same compartment with Hele and had thus become acquainted. Uncle Urbain had accompanied Esther and Sylvain to the station. When he noticed that Amorie was in an advanced state of pregnancy, the old priest took Esther aside and suggested that the two women and Jacques spend the night at the vicarage. He thought it a grave risk for Amorie to make the journey to Moorkerken at so late an hour and in such weather.

The storm was now blowing with full fury, the powder-like snow piling up into enormous drifts. The small company was forced to wade knee-deep merely to reach "The Ducal Court," and the six miles to the manor house looked forbidding indeed. But Amorie would not hear of staying at Maere. She hadn't seen her father for years, and was not going to be deterred by a little snow, as she put it, now that she was so near. Uncle Urbain shrugged in resignation. If they insisted on going, he would suggest that Sylvain do the

driving. He didn't trust Colas with the horses, and said so frankly. After dropping the old priest at his presbytery, where he once more repeated his invitation, they set out on the homeward journey. Amorie was placed in the rear of the coach between her husband and Esther, and covered with all the available blankets and robes. Colas and Hele occupied the seat facing them, and Sylvain sat on the box outside.

As long as they were in Maere, where the light of the street lamps guided horses and driver, all went well. But as soon as they reached the country road, where it was pitch-dark and the storm-driven wind cut like a razor, Sylvain realized that Uncle Urbain's advice should have been followed. He had to trust entirely in the instinct of his horses. The darkness and the lashing snow cut off his view of the road completely.

Inside the carriage Colas and his friend Hele, indifferent to the violence of the storm, were singing snatches of a Parisian song that was then much in vogue:

La baronne avait du monde,
Mais c'étaient ses quatre sœurs,
Dont trois brunes, l'autre blonde,
Qu'avient huit-z-yeux ravisseurs.

The baroness had callers,
But they were her own four sisters,
Three brunettes and one was blonde,
But all their eight eyes were truly ravishing. . . .

The heavy carriage lurched perilously, sometimes skirting the ditches on either side of the road. After an hour the horses were pulling with the greatest difficulty, advancing at a slow walk, snorting and blowing and wading in the packed snow up to their bellies. The travelers inside had grown quiet. Sylvain was freezing. Finally, he stopped the coach and, jumping down, told the others that if they wanted to make headway, they would have to walk ahead of the horses and break a trail.

Hele and Colas came out at once. For another hour they tramped, heads down, fighting their way forward step by step. By then, they should have been at the manor house, but they were less than halfway. There was no possibility of turning the heavy coach around on the narrow road, nor could they turn off into some driveway to seek hospitality at one of the farmhouses or peasant cottages. They could not see a foot ahead. The snow was like a flapping curtain blotting out everything. They scarcely knew where they were.

Here and there the hard road, covered with a sheet of ice, had been swept bare of snow by the bitter northwest wind. The heavy carriage had skidded

before on similar places, missing the ditch by a matter of inches. Now, suddenly, it slid sideways and would have gone into the ditch had it not crashed into a tree.

Sylvain detached one of the lanterns from the box to examine the damage. The tree was wedged between the left front wheel and the carriage and the left rear wheel hung over the ditch. They had to unhitch the horses and even Amorie had to come out of the carriage. Then Colas and the Swedish giant lifted the coach out of the trap as if it were a child's toy. Finally, they were able to continue their journey, but the mishap had cost them half an hour.

Hele's blond beard had frozen stiff and his eyelashes were powdered with snow. He still tried to keep the company in good spirits, shouting Parisian songs at the top of his voice, but there was no answering laughter from inside the carriage. The silence frightened Sylvain. Was anything wrong with Amorie? He dared not ask. Hele began to tell him, shouting against the wind, where the best meals could be had in Paris. Smoked ham at the restaurant "Les Lilas," fried rabbit at the "Moulin de la Galette" on the top of Montmartre. Down in a little hole in the wall on the Rue Lepic, they served you *rognons sautés*, or if you wanted, a calfshead cooked in red wine. . . .

The Swede soon gave up, seeing that he could not arouse any enthusiasm, even in Colas. The journey had become a grim struggle. The fierce wind lashed mercilessly at their frozen faces. Pitiless cold surrounded them and even the horses began to show signs of exhaustion. How much farther was it to the manor house? Could they possibly have passed the driveway? No, that was not likely; the horses would know when to turn in. . . .

All at once they saw lanterns in front of them. Horses and riders loomed up in the white whirlwind. Then they heard Guido's voice. "I thought you were in trouble," he shouted. "I've been uneasy about you all evening."

He laughed when he saw Hele's frozen whiskers. "Who is this old man of the woods? He looks like Sint Neek himself!" Colas introduced the painter, and Sylvain ran up to tell his father that Amorie was in the carriage and that her condition required extraordinary care. "We would have come quicker but for her."

Guido was dumfounded for a moment. "Amorie? What a surprise! Can it be true? Good God! Now I know why I was so troubled all afternoon. Amorie!"

Then he began giving orders. “Here, men,” he called to the stableboys who had accompanied him, “here, hitch another team in front of these horses! You, Colas, take my horse and ride ahead to the house. Tell them to fire up! Wake up Mathilda! Wake up Theresa! Tell her to put the soup on the stove and heat some wine!”

“You,” he pointed to a groom, “you, Paul, get on the box and drive. We are going to walk ahead of the coach to tramp down the snow!”

Arm in arm with Sylvain and Hele and the other boys, he set off at a trot as if he were not sixty-two but sixteen.

“Do you think it will be a boy?” he shouted to Sylvain. “Thunders and . . . no,” he corrected himself, “Blessed Lady of Flanders, this is a wonderful surprise! That Amorie, eh! Who would have thought it of her! After all these years, too!” He did not mention Jacques Bonnefous. Amorie’s husband didn’t count in Guido’s calculations.

They reached the foot of the driveway in half an hour and Guido could no longer curb his impatience. With a shout he stopped the driver and, while Sylvain held the lantern, he flung open the door of the carriage and lifted Amorie to the ground. An instant later he strode with her in his arms up the driveway as if he carried a parcel of feathers.

Jacques Bonnefous had fainted with the cold and had to be lifted out. Two grooms carried him into the house and deposited him on the sofa in the drawing room.

Mathilda, who had been laying the table, followed Guido upstairs to take care of Amorie, just as Hele and Colas came in with Esther. Hele went over to the fire and began picking icicles out of his beard. He stared at the Lord God’s corner. “What is it, Bébé?” he asked, addressing Colas by his Parisian nickname and pointing to the three devotional lamps burning before the marble statue. “What is that?”

“Oh that,” Colas replied with a shrug, “that’s just a quaint ornament, something to fill a corner. . . .”

Guido, entering the room at that moment, did not hear his son’s words. Walking to the corner, he made a profound obeisance, placed two fat candles in the golden sticks at either side of the statue, and laid another bundle of tapers on the small serving table nearby. Turning to Theresa, who had taken over the work of setting the table, he said: “Aunt Theresa, see to it that the candles don’t go out so long as Amorie is in the house. Do you think it will be a boy?” He waited anxiously for her answer.

“I think so,” she said with an emphatic movement of her long chin. “In fact, I feel sure.”

“Glory to God!” Guido exclaimed. “Aunt Theresa, you know, of course, that I have you down in my will. I’ll make it better yet if what you say comes true. . . .”

Just then Amorie came in with Mathilda. Sylvain also appeared, followed by Rudolph and Uncle Modeste. The room was in a tumult, and Guido nodded with satisfaction.

“Children,” he said as they sat down to table, “I would not be surprised if the bells of Sint Christopher rang out tonight. I am at peace with the whole world to see you all here. Say the *benedicite*, Sylvain!”

When everybody had gone to bed and the house had grown still, Sylvain made the final turn of the stables for his father. Guido had been too nervous and preoccupied to make the customary rounds himself. Not that the physical exertion in the snowdrifts and the long exasperating wait of the afternoon had exhausted his strength. He felt as strong as ever—yes, stronger perhaps. There was an old homily running through his mind about a man’s youth being renewed like an eagle’s. His step was as resilient as that of a boy. But he could not tear himself away from the house for a minute. It was as if he, the sixty-two-year-old greyhead, and not Jacques Bonnefous, was the husband of the young expectant mother under his roof. Jacques, restored by innumerable beakers of hot red wine, snored the sleep of righteous bureaucrats on a couch in the small dressing room next to the guest room where his wife, propped up with pillows, lay in the big sculptured bed with its enormous canopy and green baize curtains. Mathilda sat talking with her. The door was open to permit Guido to go in and out as he wished.

Secretly he was worried lest the exacting trip in the jolting carriage had done Amorie some harm. He told Modeste he was thinking of ordering out the snowplow that very night to clear the road to Maere, so that medical help might be fetched at short notice if his daughter should require it. Guido was grateful for Uncle Urbain’s perspicacity in sizing up Amorie’s condition, for his offer to keep her in Maere for the night, and no less for the fact that the priest had insisted on Sylvain doing the driving.

“If Colas had driven,” Guido told Modeste, “we might now have a very sick girl in this house.”

The crash against that tree had been quite severe. Guido had been out to the coach house to inspect the damage. The side of the carriage was badly dented. That was the thing that worried him: the jar must have been terrific.

He was in and out of Amorie's room, ostensibly to ask questions and to gossip but in reality to reassure himself again and again that the girl felt as well as she gaily said she did. At any rate, the snowplow must be out at dawn. The storm might last for days. The road must be kept clear, even if it meant work for everybody on the estate during the entire holy season.

In the stable, Sylvain lingered a while around a newborn calf which was sickly because, Uncle Modeste said, it had been born in wintertime. The little beast, thin and awkward, stood forlornly by its mother's side, its head hanging down, its eyes dull and lusterless. Sylvain mixed some water and milk in a pail and after long coaxing managed to make the animal drink. Then, reassuring himself that the horses which had made the arduous trip to Maere had been properly dried and fed, he went to the coach house and took from the carriage a book Uncle Urbain had given him to read. He did not feel sleepy in the least.

Back in the living room he threw a few blocks of wood on the embers, watched them burst into flame and seated himself at the big table in the center. Because he could still hear doors opening and closing upstairs and his father's heavy footsteps going to and fro, he put his hands over his ears and soon floated off to regions far from Moorkerken and Flanders.

The book was *The Golden Legend* by Jacques de Voragine, a yellowed old tome of immense size, two columns of Gothic script to the page. He looked at the illustrations on the title page: the four Evangelists, the adoration of the Magi and the star above the stable of Bethlehem. Then he began to read the history of the saints and martyrs. It seemed to follow an established pattern: they grew up for Christ, believed in Him, refused to sacrifice on the altars of false gods, were tortured and died full of sanctity. There was an infinite number who had paid the supreme penalty: bishops and monks, virgins and prostitutes, beggars and lords of royal blood, naked hermits, old men, children, women of every age and condition of life. They had all been deemed worthy, regardless of their station or race, to testify by their life and death to the glory of God.

Saint Agnes had her throat pierced by a sword, Saint Christine had her breasts torn off with a pair of pincers, Saint Julienne was scourged, Anastasia burnt, and Saint Andrew, although nailed to a cross, still preached to twenty thousand persons. The executioners exposed the lacerated bodies of the saints to the flies after having smeared them with honey. They tore them, burnt them, flayed them, drowned them, garrotted them. No torture was omitted. The martyrs were made to walk on broken glass and burning

coals. They were thrown into ditches filled with snakes and scorpions. They were buried alive, hung up by their hair, made to swallow molten lead. They were seated on chairs of bronze that were first heated to a white-hot pitch. They had crowns of iron driven into their heads. Their fingers were smashed on anvils, their tongues torn out, their eyes pierced with red-hot irons. . . . Still, all that suffering and torture could not make a single one deny the Lord. They were faithful unto death.

Sylvain was no longer conscious of time or place. In order to see better he had hoisted himself up onto the table and was holding the book right under the lamp. How could these men and women have withstood their fearful ordeals? And what was the reward for their fidelity? Angels came to succor Saint Vincent in the prison cell where he languished, his feet nailed to a plank. Saint Lawrence declared that the grill on which he was being roasted felt as cool as a spring day. Saint Cecilia, thrust into a bath of boiling water, said that it was only as if a little draft of cold wind passed over her body. Death had been a delight to these martyrs. They rejoiced that they were found worthy to undergo the most grueling tests. The eleven thousand virgins massacred by the Huns in the neighborhood of Cologne, the ten thousand crucified on Mount Ararat, Saint Eulalia on the burning pile, all, all claimed it a joy to suffer the most savage and hellish barbarities for the sake of their faith.

Soon Sylvain came to the story of Saint Catherine, the girl born to the purple and renowned for her learning; at the age of eighteen, she disputed with and overcame fifty grammarians appointed by the Emperor Maximus to confound her. In Sylvain's eyes, Catherine was the most invincible of all the saints. She was wise and patient and, by her powers of persuasion and gentleness, she brought men and women to a better life.

He wanted to be a follower of Saint Catherine. If only he had the wisdom to speak to men! If only he had faith as strong as hers! Her life, he thought, contained a valuable lesson for himself. Every time he revolted in pride or when he allowed violence to carry him away, when he acted rudely or spoke harshly to anyone, he would think of Saint Catherine. As a child she refused to play frivolous games and later shunned the delights of the world by giving up her estates and dwelling among the poor, sharing her black bread with them, binding up the wounds of beggars and lepers, going into pestiferous slums to help the outcasts and the forsaken. That was really doing God's will, Sylvain thought.

But was it, really? He sat up with a start, and moved from the table into his chair. Did God really take delight in all this self-laceration and self-

abasement? Was that serving God! You're doubting again, Sylvain, he told himself. The evil of doubt is entering your soul. . . .

His father came quietly into the room. Guido had taken off his boots and was walking around in his stockinged feet—all for Amorie's sake, of course. Sylvain spoke of the things he had just read and Guido listened like a child. Colas and Esther came in as Sylvain, who stood with his back to the door, told his father that, in his opinion, nothing which led to human suffering could be the result of God's will.

Esther explained that, hearing voices downstairs, her curiosity had got the better of her. "We had to come down," she said, "and join in. You were speaking of suffering when we came in. Colas and I saw so much of it recently that we were actually sick."

"In Paris?" Guido asked.

"No," Esther replied, "in the mining villages in Hainaut where Colas did some sketching."

"You wouldn't believe it, Father," Colas said, "how those people live. The pigsties on this farm are cleaner than their huts. I'm not exaggerating in the least. They're hungry, they're dirty, they're illiterate, they're everlastingly drunk and fighting among themselves. Their children swarm with vermin. Their women go in rags and tatters. They're a little above beasts, just a little, not much. . . ."

"Is it as bad as that?" Guido asked.

Esther nodded. "It's worse," she said, "because there seems no way out. It's the new industrialism. . . ."

"The new industrialism of which we are so proud, of which our newspapers speak in such glowing terms," Sylvain said, his face reddening. "The people suffer through no fault of their own, and there is no way out. It's horrible!"

"For a time perhaps," Guido said reassuringly. "The situation is bound to improve. It must improve. Wealth is being created. Who will be the beneficiaries? Where will all that wealth go?"

"Where it always went," Colas said grimly, "into the pockets of the few."

"It won't always be that way, I hope," Guido said.

"You hope, he hopes, they hope, we all hope," Colas said. "But that doesn't put bread into the mouths of those starvelings we saw, does it, Esther?"

"But national riches are piling up," Guido countered. "Didn't you read the figures the other day? The treasury has an enormous surplus."

“But the people remain poor,” Sylvain blurted.

“What do you mean, they remain poor?” Colas asked. “They get constantly poorer. I read of an English beggar who said to someone: ‘I possess Australia and Africa and India. I am an Englishman. The whole world bows in homage to me. . . . But I starve to death!’ And that fellow wasn’t a beggar by his own fault either. He was seeking work. He had been seeking it for weeks and months.”

“Yes, there’s unemployment in England,” Guido assented. “Things don’t go well there.”

“There’s unemployment here, too,” Colas put in. “Half the iron foundries stand idle. More than half the glass factories are shut down. It’s the same story everywhere in Europe—unemployment and starvation.”

“I can’t understand it,” Guido said, shaking his head. “I’m a farmer, not an industrialist. I wish I could get to the bottom of it. It seems terribly inconsistent: so much wealth and still so much poverty.”

“You see, Father, what happens is this,” Esther said. “Factories produce and produce. Stocks pile up to the height of mountains. Suddenly there is too much of everything. There is a superabundance. That is what is known as overproduction. There is so much that it can no longer be sold at the same profit as before. What do the industrialists do then? They discharge their employees. That’s the first remedy they apply. Because there are vast stock-piles of foodstuffs in the warehouses, the workers who produced the foodstuffs may starve. There is too much of everything and therefore there is poverty and misery.”

“But such a system cannot be right!” Sylvain said. “It cannot last. It’s unchristian. . . .”

“It cannot last, you say?” Colas demanded. “But it must last. If the existence of the system is endangered we’d have to go to war to protect it. For when there’s war, the system works again. Then it can produce again. . . .”

“Who would fight for such a cause?” Sylvain asked.

“You and I,” Colas replied. “You and I and everybody.”

“I shall fight only if and when my country is in danger, that’s what I have always said,” Guido remarked.

“The more naïve a people are, the easier it is to get around them,” Colas retorted. “We will be told that very thing, namely, that our country is in danger. Then we’ll go out to war in the belief that we fight and die for our fatherland. In reality we’ll die for big business. . . .”

Guido was silent for a moment. “What is to be done?” he asked. “Tell me frankly, Sylvain, must we divide up with them?”

“For God’s sake and for my sake, don’t do that!” Colas implored. “What an idea! What would become of me if you handed your property over to the poor?”

“What does Christ want us to do?” Sylvain asked. “His is the only command that counts, Father. Maybe we should sacrifice ourselves. Only in the measure that we dare sacrifice ourselves can God’s truth advance.”

“I wish you wouldn’t bring that up,” Colas said. “What’s the sense? What has God to do with the economic system? That system is governed by other than divine laws. God is veneer put on by the rich to keep the poor away.”

“You haven’t joined the Freemasons, I hope?” Guido asked.

“Heavens, no!” Colas exclaimed. “Do you think that childish stuff interests me? I belong to no society or club, except the Independent Artists. I’m an individualist. It’s true, some call individualism enmity towards God. *Alors*, so be it! I’m God’s enemy. What can I do about it?”

“No, you are not God’s enemy!” Sylvain cried. “God’s enemies are not the professed agnostics and the atheists. God laughs at them, I dare say. They don’t worry Him. God’s real enemies are those who oppress His children, those who bind them up in economic and social and intellectual chains, those who make men go to war against each other, those that make men suffer. And those,” he added with fire, “who declare the chains they fasten around the necks of others sacrosanct and untouchable, they are God’s worst enemies. . . .”

When Guido and the others went upstairs, Sylvain remained in the living room. He was to act as watchman that night, calling Guido at once if Amorie should ring the bell by her bedside. He stared at the votive candles burning before the white statue. He had taken up the book again, but it lay loosely in his lap. Only a few embers remained in the fireplace. He watched them glow ruddily and then crumble into grey ash when a sudden gust swept down the chimney.

The storm had apparently spent its strength. The snow pattering on the windows sounded more like the soft babble of a million tiny spirits than like the swashing squalls of an hour before. Sylvain felt too drowsy to rise from his seat and investigate. His eyelids fluttered sleepily, his head nodded a few times and then sank inertly onto his breast. In a few moments his mouth

dropped slightly open and his regular breathing showed that he was fast asleep. He did not even notice when the heavy book slid from his knees and clattered noisily to the floor.

He dreamed he was alone on an immense raft. The water around him was ink-black but at the same time as transparent as crystal. It was night, the sky was invisible, yet he could distinguish every object on the raft quite clearly. His brother Rudolph's horse stood nearby. The animal looked at him intently and then looked down and shuddered. Sylvain wanted to see what had disquieted the horse. He could look right through the spaces between the planks of the raft into the water. On the bottom of that glassy sea he saw trees and plants rocking gently to and fro in the current, and among them a dark object moved. He could not tell whether it was a huge fish or some other submarine creature. It swam to the surface and rested its head for a moment on the edge of the raft. The horse reared in fright, but when Sylvain looked back the monster had disappeared.

Scanning the surface of the immense black pool he could not catch sight of the apparition again. Suddenly he became aware that there was no shore anywhere. In whatever direction he looked his eye met nothing but the same jet-black, luminous fluid expanse. He wondered where the light came from but could not discover its source. He grew restless and afraid, and moaned softly in his sleep. Tiny beads of sweat appeared on his forehead and above his lips. A nameless anxiety overpowered him as he thought he heard the roar of a cataract or a waterfall in the distance. Was he drifting toward disaster? Was the raft moving or was it stationary?

He walked to the end of the raft and looked into the water. With growing uneasiness he noticed that the raft was moving imperceptibly at first, then picking up speed. Presently it raced along at a frighteningly rapid tempo. His fear turned to panic. He felt like crying out but he could not form the words. It was as if some strong hand clutched his throat. He looked around. The horse was gone. In its place stood David Teniers and his little brothers and sisters. They were holding hands and smiling at him. Suddenly David's face changed into that of Christ. Sylvain was not a little surprised: David was not a religious boy at all. What had David in common with Christ? All at once he was back in the living room at the manor house. Uncle Modeste came in and, bending his head close, whispered, "*Magister adest et vocat te.* The Master is out there, and He calls you." Sylvain got up, trembling, and ran into the hall.

His father was standing there, holding the sick calf. Guido's voice sounded strangely unfamiliar; his face, too, had changed. He said the time had come to take the calf to the slaughterhouse in Maere. Sylvain tied a rope

around the animal's neck and it followed him willingly. Outside it was summer. The heat struck him in the face as he opened the door and strode down the driveway. A lark rose from the undergrowth by the roadside and sang its way into the sky.

A great sadness came over Sylvain as he looked at the calf which did not know where he was leading it. He sat down on a whitewashed landmark by the side of the road and, burying his head in his hands, wept silently. As he wept, he found himself in his own room writing a letter to the principal of Roesselaere announcing his impending return. But he could not make the sentences sound coherent. The letters danced before his eyes, the ink ran in large blotches, the paper curled inward at the corners. Chagrin at his inability to write made him weep again. At once, he was back by the side of the road.

The calf had disappeared but Uncle Modeste was standing by his side, saying again: "The Master is there, and He calls you. . . ." Sylvain got up and looked over the meadows for the calf. He saw it in the distance galloping madly towards the moor. Running as fast as he could and panting with the exertion, he went in pursuit. His feet seemed to have grown as heavy as lead. At last he saw the calf disappear into some bushes. When he came near and carefully moved the branches aside, he found the animal grazing peacefully. He approached stealthily, rope in hand, but suddenly the calf wasn't a calf any more. It was Elise Teniers, the girl he had found wandering on the highway one evening. She was picking daisies and held a bouquet of the flowers. She came to him with a smile and held up her hand. "Listen, Sylvain," she said, "the bells are ringing over at Christopher Bay. The Lord is coming!"

Sylvain awoke with a start. His knee had touched the brass tongs by the side of the hearth. With a metallic clatter they had dropped on the flagstones. Still under the spell of his strange dream, he blinked unsteadily at the white statue in the corner. He could hear his father's heavy footsteps coming down the stairs, and he rose to meet him.

"We'll start shoveling the snow in front of the house," Guido said without any preliminaries. "Amorie is doing well. She is sleeping peacefully. But we can't afford to take chances. I'll have the snowplow out at dawn. Go and wake the boys. It will be a hard day's work for them, and we shall all have to lend a hand, I suppose."

Sylvain waded out into the wet snow. The wind had veered around to the south. In the kitchen the day had begun. Glancing through the window on his way to the quarters of the farm hands, he saw Theresa moving between the clouds of vapor rising from the pots and kettles on the big cookstove.

This was the day when the cakes were baked and the geese roasted and the puddings boiled and the pears and apples stewed for tomorrow's feast.

Tomorrow, after Mass, the table would be spread and the candles lit and the finest silver would be used and the Yule logs would flame high in the chimney. For tomorrow it was Christmas, the birthday of the Saviour.

It was Christmas morning. Only Amorie and Esther could stay behind, Guido said, when the family made ready to attend church service. Everyone else must go. That was the way it had always been at the manor house. It was a custom as inflexible as a law of the Medes and Persians; on that day of days nobody was allowed to stay behind. On ordinary Sundays Guido readily accepted an excuse, although he went to church himself, rain or shine; but on Christmas and Easter and on the national holiday when special prayers were said for the King and for the welfare of the country, he accepted no excuse. Even Theresa, in spite of her lamentations and protestations that her constant attendance in the kitchen was of the utmost importance, found no grace in Heer Guido's eyes that morning.

"But suppose," the old woman said, in a last effort to make Guido relent, "suppose a burglar comes into the house in my absence? Have you ever thought of that?"

"A burglar?" Guido exclaimed. "That's one of the reasons you're coming along, Aunt Theresa. I would not leave you alone to face a burglar for all the money in the world," he laughed. "Besides," he continued more seriously, "there are no burglars in Flanders, and surely not on the day the Lord is born. We may be wicked but we are not so wicked as all that. Burglars? Whoever heard of burglars in Flanders? *Allay oop!* Get ready. The soup and the geese can wait for a couple of hours. You can ride in the coach with us. Put on your best dress, you know, the fine black gown with the mother-of-pearl necklace. Hooo! You will look like a fairy princess!"

There was no escape for Theresa. But now Esther and Amorie and Hele wanted to come along, too, and Guido was overjoyed. At once he began to allot the available seats. "The women in the coach. I myself will drive on account of Amorie. Sylvain, Modeste, and Jacques in the tilbury. Rudolph, Colas, and Hele on horseback, the maids in the old carriage." Yes, he knew, the old carriage was drafty. So, let it be a little drafty! What harm could a little fresh air do to a pack of Flemish girls? The grooms and stableboys on the other horses.

"*Allay!* Sylvain, run out and see if the harnesses are polished. Make the boys polish them till they gleam. And the bells and the plumes on the

horses' heads! Don't forget!"

The Heer of Moorkerken was in his element. He was in and out of the hallway and on the porch inspecting everyone's clothes. His own boots were polished to a mirrorlike brightness. He wore his frock coat, the one he had been married in, with a white collar and a flowing silken cravat. On his vest dangled his father's thick golden watch chain with the medallion containing a lock of Clasina's hair. On the lapel of his coat shone the jeweled decoration he had received from the King's own hand.

Then the caravan was off, Guido in the lead looking around from his seat on the high driver's box to see that everyone was in line. It was a splendid day of blue silence: the air was crisp and invigorating; the sun, now pallid and frozen, had deposited a thin layer of powdered gold on the fields of snow. The hoarfrost on the trees glittered like rose crystal.

Guido could not be silent, his heart was too full. This was the day of days, a new day, a new beginning, and he saw his own land anew.

"Look, Rudolph!" he called to his son, who rode silently beside the coach. "Look at those yews by the windmill. Wouldn't you say they were of liquid bronze?" And pointing with the whip to the distant dunes and forest, which the sun seemed to turn into a miniature of gold: "Look, the burning bush! Tell me, is there another land like ours anywhere on earth! Heaven could not be more beautiful!"

Hele rode up, wildly waving his hands. "It's glorious! It's immense!" he shouted in French. Even the horses seemed to have caught the festive spirit, nodding their red-plumed heads in the most stately manner imaginable. They passed peasant families proceeding on foot, and farm carts and carriages and landaus. Everybody from miles around was going to church. Towards the end of the journey, as they drove into the narrow streets of Moorkerken, they fell in behind the rich *carrosse* of François van Abeele and his mother. It became a royal procession. Uncle Modeste, beside Sylvain on the driver's seat of the tilbury, could no longer restrain himself. To Guido's great joy, the old superintendent had brought his trombone and was now blowing the notes of "The Flemish Lion," in unison with the carillon.

They entered the church and filed into their pews, the carillon still playing. Suddenly the bells of the clocktower broke into jubilant clangor. The organ burst forth with "*Adeste, Fideles*," as the priest in his pleated alb, amidst a blaze of candles, preceded by the crucifix and accompanied by his acolytes, appeared at the altar.

The clan of the Teniers was late as usual. The whole crowd of them, in their wooden shoes, clattered right up to the sanctuary rail and, turning

around, scanned the pews for empty seats. Guido quickly pulled Elise and two of the other children into the Govaerts' family box, holding the smallest close to his knee.

Then there was a hush. Incense rose in bluish clouds from the sanctuary towards the ceiling, crossing the shafts of golden winter light that streamed through the window. Every eye was on the celebrant and on the tapers burning in the silver candlesticks on the white altar. At times the priest turned around with outstretched hands, uttering the sacred Latin words. There was a tinkling of bells as, covering his hands with the cope, he held the golden monstrance aloft. With everyone else, Guido sank on his knees, beat his breast and bowed his head in adoration.

Then the priest mounted the pulpit and spoke with zeal and eloquence of the significance of Christmas: the birth of the Redeemer had been a turning point in the world's history; it had ushered in the rebirth of the human race and the redemption of Flanders. He was one of the younger school, uttering the Flemish with solemnity and dignity. "In this dear land of ours, Christ Himself walked as a child, and He still walks."

Guido nodded his head to show that he was fully in agreement. He listened in rapture at the close of the service, when the organ and the violoncellos and the fresh boyish voices of the choristers intoned the great hymn:

> We praise thee, O Mother! we acknowledge thee to be the Virgin.
> Thee, the star of the seal the splendor of the Eternal Father illuminates.
> To thee all angels cry aloud, the Heavens and all the powers therein.
> The Cherubim and Seraphim with us with lowly voices proclaim:
> Virgin, Virgin, Virgin of Virgins, without peer!

The whole congregation rose to their feet and joined in the chorus:

> Thou art the Queen of Heaven, thou art the Mother of Flanders, the mistress of the whole world;
> Thou, to deliver fallen man, didst clothe in flesh the Son of the Highest. . . .
> We pray thee, help the servants of Christ in Flanders, redeemed by the precious fruit of thy womb,
> Make them to be numbered with the saints in glory everlasting.
> O holy Lady, save the people of Flanders. . . .
> Govern them and lift them up forever!
> Have mercy upon the land of Flanders, Mother of Sorrows. . . .
> Thou art our Mother, and the Mother of the Son Who sitteth on the right hand of God! . . .

The congregation slowly filed out, the triumphal song of carillon and organ soaring over them. At the door there was an enormous crush, with introductions and salutations and handshakes and laughter and calls of recognition. The square soon filled with a milling crowd of men, women and children, as carriages and carts drove up to take the worshipers home. Young

men, farmers' sons, apprentices and such-like, all in their stiff Sunday clothes, took up positions in front of the church where they could watch and ogle the girls coming down the steps. Although the Govaerts family had been seated in the front pew, close to the altar rail, they were among the first to reach the exit, everybody making way for the Heer of Moorkerken and his distinguished company. Guido waved in all directions, answering greetings and wishing everybody "Happy Noel!" Uncle Modeste climbed onto the driver's seat next to Guido and, producing his trombone again, puffed out his withered cheeks like a postilion. "Noel! Noel! Christ has come!"

Wine was served in Mathilda's *grand salon* while Sylvain and Uncle Modeste, still blaring on his instrument, marched up and down the hallway with the three Teniers children, stamping their feet and banging and shouting. "Noel, Noel, Christ has come! Noel, Noel!"

Soon they were joined by Colas, who used an inverted pot as a drum, and by Hele, and then, of course, by the biggest child of all, the Heer of Moorkerken, who could never resist the temptation to make merry.

Guido had taken off his stiff collar, and the precious frock coat hung over the back of a chair in the dining room. He had brought out an armful of colored paper caps, Phrygian bonnets and harlequin and clown's hats, and now he put one on the head of each reveler. The gorgeous gilded crowns of pressed paper he reserved for Amorie, Mathilda and Esther. Theresa, who was forced to take part in the traditional joyous round, wore a green contraption with a peak as high as a tower.

Then the rollicking, roaring parade went through the hall, into the dining room, into the steaming kitchen and back to the salon to the tune of: "When the pig met the fox, the porker said grunt, grunt, grunt!"

Finally Colas' voice boomed above the din. "What are we waiting for? When do we eat? I'm starved!"

"We're waiting for Uncle Urbain," Mathilda called back. "He is to join us as soon as he can get here. But it's a good long way from Maere, as you ought to know."

"The roads are clear," Guido shouted. "I hear the dogs barking, that must be Urbain's carriage!"

And to be sure, when the door was thrown open, there stood the Vicar of Maere patting the gaily barking and tail-wagging dogs on the head. A moment later he led the way in to dinner, but not before Mathilda had made Guido put on his collar and his ceremonial coat.

Urbain Govaerts bore a striking resemblance to his cousin Guido. They had the same round, ruddy face, the same high forehead and the same gentle mouth, but Urbain was not so tall as the Heer of Moorkerken, and he was ten or twelve years older. His hair, white and glossy from the administration of comb and brush, he wore much longer than Guido. Old age had brought him one failing: his eyes were weak and he blinked continually, but he spurned the use of spectacles except for reading. He was one of those old-fashioned priests who still wore the snow-white bib which preceded the vogue of Roman collars. His black shoes were fastened with silver buckles and, under his cassock, shiny from brushing, he wore silken knee pants and black stockings. There was a look of simple goodness, serenity and almost childlike guilelessness about his face. Bowing towards the Lord God's corner, he smiled happily, showing sound teeth, somewhat yellowed, but even and regular. He praised Guido for having cleared the snow from the road to Maere and asked how the travelers had fared the other night.

Colas, who had been looking at the *Golden Legend* book which Sylvain had left lying on the mantelpiece, remarked: "Here it is! It's historical!"

"What?" Guido asked in surprise.

"Well, I see here that when the wild beasts chewed up the martyrs in the arena, the spectators could hear the cracking of the bones!"

"Did anyone ever doubt it?" Guido asked.

"I don't know," Colas said, "but I heard a professor in Paris say that when the lions ate the Christian virgins, they didn't touch the bones at all. . . . Not the bones, but . . ."

"Put the book down, my son," Uncle Urbain said, frowning. "We will discuss the matter some other time."

"Who is carving? Father can't carve, he hacks!" Rudolph said. "He hacks like a Cossack!"

"There are no more Cossacks," Hele put in.

"There are so," Colas corrected his friend, "only they call themselves Belgians now."

Everybody laughed.

"But the Cossacks didn't hack," Uncle Urbain said. "They stabbed and lunged. They had long lances and they rode small horses, the swiftest things you ever saw, and woe to the man who could not get out of their way quickly enough: they just simply speared him."

"Did you ever see any of them?" Sylvain asked.

The old priest nodded. “I should say I did. My mother held me by the hand that day when the Cossacks crossed the big square in Mechlin in front of the archbishop’s palace. They were very dirty. They seemed to have come through a sea of mud and not to have washed themselves for a month.”

“I could show you some Cossacks around here, in the neighborhood of Moorkerken,” Uncle Modeste said, with a significant nod in the direction of the Teniers children.

“I was terrified,” Uncle Urbain continued. “I trembled like a leaf at the sight of them. I was told that when Cossacks were hungry they didn’t hesitate to snatch up a little boy or two and eat them raw, just with a little salt. . . .”

“I thought they ate candles.” Colas said.

“That’s right,” the priest agreed. “They raided all the shops in Flanders for candles, and some of the churches, too, and they ate them with gin and pepper.”

“Pepper?” Guido asked, his carving knife poised in mid-air. “What did they put in pepper for?”

“Our gin wasn’t strong enough for their taste, you see, so they put in pepper. I thought you knew that, Guido.”

“I didn’t know.” Guido shook his head. “What were the Cossacks doing in Mechlin, anyhow?”

“They were chasing Napoleon,” Rudolph interjected, “more’s the pity!”

“Why a pity?” Colas asked, looking sideways at his brother.

“Well, things would have gone differently in Europe and here in Flanders, too, if Napoleon had continued to rule. Then there was order. Bridges and roads were built. The mail came on time. . . .”

“You wouldn’t say that,” Uncle Urbain said, “if you could have heard the shouts of joy and the sobs of relief when he was beaten at Waterloo. I well remember how the people flocked to the churches. All the bells rang out when the news came that he was in full flight after losing the battle. We thanked God for the Cossacks then, and for their Czar.”

“Was he here, too?” Jacques Bonnefous asked.

“Yes, Czar Alexander. He passed through Flanders.”

“That’s the one who disappeared, isn’t it?” Colas asked.

“What do you mean? Did someone do away with him here in Flanders?” Guido asked. “That’s a strange way to treat a visitor. Who did that?”

“No, you misunderstand, Guido,” Uncle Urbain said. “Czar Alexander was all his life conscience-stricken for not having prevented the murder of

his father. When he returned to Russia after the Napoleonic campaigns, it is said that he put the reins of government into his son's hands and went to Siberia, where he lived for many years as a hermit, or in a monastery, I don't remember. . . ."

"Was he a Catholic?" Guido asked in amazement.

"Father, do keep on hacking," Colas said, "we're starving."

"I thought the Russians were heathen," Guido said.

"They are not heathen, they are schismatics," Urbain replied.

"Not heretics like the Hollanders?" Guido asked.

"And the Swedes," Hele said.

"What? The Swedes? You, Hele? You are a heretic?" Guido asked.

"Yes." Hele nodded with mock solemnity. "Doomed to burn forever. There's no escape for us, none for Esther either. . . ."

"Not so, my son," Uncle Urbain said to Hele. "Not so. The Lord has His own amongst all peoples and religions. If a man does right in his life, he need have no fear. He will be judged according to the light he receives. But if he sins against the light, if he willingly prefers darkness to the light—yes, in that case, I am afraid . . ." The old priest shook his head in serious doubt.

"If he turns down the light, he is doomed like Judas Iscariot, who sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver," Hele said in French.

"Judas?" Uncle Urbain replied in the same language. "Let us not judge too hastily, my son. I do not like to believe that even Judas is lost forever. If Judas, in that terrible last moment when his life was snuffed out, if in that last moment of consciousness he felt remorse and, just with a dying whisper, invoked God's pardon—if that happened, I feel sure that he found full forgiveness and that the first drop of Jesus' blood was shed for the disciple who betrayed him. Yes, I think the love of Christ enveloped even Judas. I believe so fully. I believe even Judas is in Paradise."

"I'd like to meet him there," Colas said irreverently, attacking the leg of a goose. "I'd like to ask him a question or two. We might discover some extenuating circumstances. I'd like to ask him, for instance, if he acted purely on his own account, or whether there wasn't some woman involved in the bargain. *Cherchez la femme*, you know! I dare say some woman put him up to the whole thing. The poor fellow had to get the money for his lady friend somewhere. . . ."

"Thunders! Will you eat and keep your mouth shut?" Guido demanded. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. In front of these little children, too. You can talk that way in Paris, but not here."

“All right, Father,” Colas grinned. “But I simply can’t eat with my mouth shut. And in Paris I met a fellow who told me . . .”

“Heer Uncle Urbain,” Elise’s childish voice spoke up suddenly, “Heer Uncle Urbain, are there any pussycats in Paradise?”

“Certainly, my child,” the priest nodded gravely, putting down his fork, “most certainly. Pussycats and little dogs and lambs. Why do you ask?”

“We had a kitten that was killed last week,” Elise said. “It was so sweet . . . my mother cried and Aunt Denise and Uncle David, we all cried because the kitty was dead.”

“It’s with the angels now,” Uncle Urbain assured her. “They will look after it. They will feed it rice pudding from a silver dish.”

“On Christmas Day, too?”

“On Christmas, kittens get the finest cream there is in Paradise.”

“Now you are going too far, Uncle Urbain,” Colas broke in again. “Lambs I will admit into Paradise, and kittens too, for Elise’s sake, but dogs, no sir, that’s where I draw the line. In the first place they make such a hellish racket. . . .”

“Don’t you think Fido will be there?” Uncle Urbain asked, with a smile. “I expect to see him wagging his tail at you, Colas, my son, when you come marching in through the pearly gates. . . .”

“Who’s Fido?” Colas asked.

“Fido was our Lord’s dog,” Urbain said.

“Did our Lord have a dog?” Guido asked. “I never heard of it. . . .”

“Certainly,” Urbain said, “a shepherd dog like the black one I have at the house, a great big shaggy fellow. Some of the disciples didn’t like him, and kicked him away. Then he’d slink off a piece, but he’d follow our Lord just the same. He walked wherever Jesus went.

“He was on Calvary at the last agony, and the story is that he pulled with his teeth at the nails with which our Lord’s feet were fastened to the cross. The Roman soldiers beat him and drove him away, but he came back again and again. In the end that animal pulled out the nails which human hands had driven into Jesus’ feet.”

There was a short silence. At last, Guido held up the end of the goose on a fork. “Who gets the bishop’s nose?”

“Give it to Uncle Urbain,” Mathilda said. “Uncle Urbain is the nearest to a bishop we have around here.”

“No, no,” the Vicar protested, “let it go to Sylvain. It might be a good omen. My role is finished. Sylvain’s lies in the future.”

“Go on, Sylvanus!” Colas urged. “Remember we all want to visit Rome. Hele will do your portrait for the rogues’ gallery.”

“I’ll eat it myself,” Guido said. “You boys start an argument over everything.”

“You’ve just said your role is finished,” Rudolph said to the Vicar, “but you’re still capable of handling your man, I understand. I heard the other day that you administered a sound beating to a fellow who disturbed the service in the cathedral. The whole town was talking about it. I heard it from Notary Fabian at ‘The Ducal Court.’ Am I correct?”

“Not quite,” Uncle Urbain replied. “There was no disturbance at any service. I had a little trouble with one of my boys. It was that Jean Paul again, you know, Guido, the son of my sacristan. I had had trouble with the lad before. Recently he returned from doing his turn of military service in Liège, and he hasn’t found work yet. He’s twenty-one now, and he started hanging around the church, in everybody’s way, you understand. I told him several times to stay out, and not interfere with his father’s work and with the charwomen. Last Thursday, I walked into the sacristy about eleven in the morning, and there—would you believe it?—was this Jean Paul again. He had managed to get hold of a bottle of altar wine and was guzzling it down. . . .”

“Scandalous!” Jacques Bonnefous exclaimed. “So you let him have it. . . .”

“He’s just a boy. I didn’t want to call in the police,” the Vicar said. “I settle these matters my own way. I just put him over my knee and took his trousers down, and gave him three stinging slaps.”

“Three?” Colas laughed. “In the name of the Father . . . and the Son . . . and the Holy Ghost.”

Everyone rocked with laughter, Uncle Urbain not least.

“The upshot is that Jean Paul has gone to Bruges to look for work,” Uncle Urbain said. “It’s better so. Besides, his father told me he was going around in bad company.”

“Bad company in Maere?” Guido asked.

“You know what I mean, socialists and nationalists, with their politics and intrigue.”

“Was he?” Guido asked, with a full mouth. “Here, Urbain, let me give you some more of this white meat. Just one slice, and some sauce.”

“I don’t mind if I do.”

Colas filled Urbain’s wineglass along with the others.

“I thought you sympathized with the nationalist cause.” Rudolph said to the old priest.

“I do, I most certainly do. But I do not join in any of those fantastic conspiracies. You know, the idea of the Flemish people rising up and tearing themselves loose from the kingdom, and all that sort of noisy business. True, the Flemish people must secure their rights. They are a people without rights, at least that’s the way they are treated, alas, but . . .”

“It’s the fault of the Church,” Colas said. “The Church preaches resignation.”

“No, it’s not the fault of the Church,” Uncle Urbain retorted indignantly.

“It’s our own fault!” Guido said.

“Of course it’s our own fault,” Uncle Urbain agreed.

“We should break away, and rejoin the Hollanders. They’re our people,” Colas said, his face red as a beet.

“No,” the Vicar said firmly, “that could be accomplished only by war—by civil war, by revolution and bloodshed. Besides, the Hollanders don’t want to have anything to do with us. We should merely insist on our rights, and enforce our rights. We are in the majority in the kingdom. . . .”

“Yes, but an inarticulate majority,” Colas interrupted, “a majority of peasants that’s trodden underfoot and kicked around, a politically unschooled majority.”

“The mass of the people,” the Vicar went on, “the solid bloc of peasants, is still unspoiled, if that is what you mean when you say they’re politically unschooled. But the people are sound to the core. French ideas and the French language, those two disrupting and disintegrating influences, have not made much of an inroad. And that, you cannot deny, is due to the Church. Flanders remains loyal to the Church. And the Church is preserving and educating the people for the day of a great new renaissance of learning and art and well-being. That day is certainly coming.”

Colas put down his glass. “Pie in the sky! Have patience, brothers! Another thousand years won’t matter! When I see the condition of our people, a good people and a gifted people, when I see how they are steeped in ignorance and misery, how they are being brutalized, I burn up. I can’t bear it. The ashes beat on my heart.” He repeated the words in French for Hele: “*Les cendres battent sur mon cœur.*”

“I’ve heard you use that expression before, Bébé,” Hele said. “What do you really mean by it?”

“I don’t know what it means,” Colas said. “But I feel them beating, hammering, thundering on my heart.”

“It’s just an old saying,” Mathilda put in.

“It’s an old saying, to be sure,” Uncle Urbain nodded, “but it has a profound meaning. I respect Colas for saying it, and for feeling that way. For one thing, it shows his heart is still in the right place.”

“What *does* it mean?” Guido asked.

“You don’t know, Guido? I’m surprised,” Urbain said. “Don’t you know the story of Tyl Uilenspiegel?”

“I know about Tyl,” Guido replied, “but not about the ashes beating on one’s heart, although I’ve heard the expression many times.”

“Well, the story is this,” the Vicar said. “As you know, Tyl Uilenspiegel was born in the town of Damme, not far from here. It was in the days of the Spanish domination. Patriots were burnt at the stake and garrotted and buried alive by the thousands. It was a time of war and terror. One day they arrested Klaas, Tyl’s father. He had inherited a little money and had hidden it securely. A local town councillor wanted to get hold of that money, and the procedure he adopted was to denounce Klaas as a heretic. If Klaas were found guilty on that charge, you see, his money would go to the Spanish king, and the informer would receive twenty per cent. That was the system in vogue in those days.

“Klaas was tortured in the presence of his wife, Soetkin, and his son. He was subjected to the water test, and candles were lit under his bare feet while he hung suspended from a pulley. But they could not force the secret out of him. For his obstinacy he was condemned to death.

“He was burnt by slow fire on the first day of May in 1565 in the grand square of Damme before a huge crowd. The Spaniards had difficulty in holding back the people, who wanted to set Klaas free. He was a righteous man, although a humble charcoal burner, and was universally esteemed.

“During the night that followed—and this is really the story of the ashes—Soetkin took her young son to the deserted square where the charred body still hung. She asked the sergeant of the guard for permission to pray near the body, and such permission was granted. When they had prayed they approached the body. Then the mother took some ashes from the region of the heart where the flames had seared a deep hole.

“Coming home, Soetkin took a piece of red silk and a piece of black silk and she made a bag of them. She sewed two strings to the end and placed the ashes in the bag and fastened it around Tyl’s neck and she said: ‘My son, these ashes are the soul of Flanders. The red is my man’s blood and the

black is our mourning. I place these ashes on your heart and on the heart of every son of Flanders for all eternity. And whenever there is a wrong committed in this world, wherever it may be, or when an injustice is done, be it ever so near or so far away, these ashes will beat on your heart as a warning. And you will speak out without fear, even under danger of death, for all those who are reviled and oppressed for their conscience's sake.'

" 'I will it so!' Tyl answered his mother. And as he spoke the sun rose. . . .

"That's the story of the ashes of Klaas," the Vicar said. "And that is why I said that I respect Colas for remembering it, and that his heart is still in the right place. But the beating of the ashes is not confined to Flemings, fortunately," he added, laughingly. "There are individuals in all nations who have that divine sense of justice. There has never been an age so barbaric, nor a tyranny so systematic, but that there have been individuals, men and women, able and willing to evade and confound the ignominy that subjugates the majority, and to fight for the truth against the monomaniacs in power. . . . Esther, too, has that feeling for justice," he added suddenly. "I can see it in her eyes."

Esther blushed and smiled. "There's only one cure, short of violence, for the ills of Flanders, as I see it," she said.

"What is that?" everybody asked.

"Children!" she said. "Lots of children, and good schooling to overcome all enemies and frustrate all their tricks."

"Right!" Guido exclaimed. "Right. I have never heard such a true word in my life. But, ho! What's that I hear? The dogs are barking. Someone must be coming! I thought I heard a carriage just now!"

"I should say you did." Colas had run to the window. "Here come Caesar and Charlotte, and two other gentlemen. . . ."

"What!" Mathilda exclaimed, running to Colas' side.

"Open the door, Sylvain!" Guido began to give commands. "Esther, you take their wraps. Thunders! What a happy day! Urbain, here's your brother Caesar. . . ."

"I haven't seen Caesar in ten years," the old priest muttered, getting up and taking off his blue paper cap.

Voices were heard in the hallway, and everyone left the table and went out to greet the newcomers. "We're so hungry," Charlotte said. "That miserable train was two hours late. We thought we'd surprise you with a short visit on Christmas Day. Now we'll have to stay the night, I suppose. The train back is leaving in ten minutes."

“Thunders!” roared Guido. “Aunt Theresa, Maria, come and lay the table again! We have more guests! Sylvain! Take the tilbury and drive the Teniers children home! Tell Theresa to wrap up a good parcel, a goose, some bottles of wine, cake, something of everything. Be on your way, and don’t stay long! Remind them to come over on New Year’s Day, all of them. Let them bring the children. Ho! Dear Charlotte! Caesar! Welcome! A pleasant Noel to you, Councillor Lauwerse! And to you, Heer Ramaeker! It’s an honor to have you under my roof. We were just talking about the everlasting question at table, about Flanders, you know. . . .”

“And we on the train!” Caesar Govaerts laughed, as he put his arm around the shoulders of his brother Urbain. Esther and Ramaeker plunged at once into an animated conversation. Mathilda went off to the salon arm in arm with Charlotte, while Jacques Bonnefous and Guido stood talking with Councillor Lauwerse.

Only Rudolph remained behind. He stood by the window, his elbow resting easily on the high sill, smoking and watching the comely young maid, Maria, who was clearing and rearranging the table. She wore a close-fitting blue dress and a snow-white apron. Her face was flushed and contrasted strikingly with her pale blond hair which, glossy and glowing, was coiled in a stately crown of white gold. Feeling Rudolph’s eyes upon her, the girl swung her hips provocatively without once looking directly at the young Heer. And from a nook near the sideboard, the old superintendent watched the byplay.

“He’s getting over his nervousness of the last few days,” Modeste mumbled to himself. “Maria is his next victim. I can see it coming. But this one, at least, he won’t have to blackmail.”

Charlotte and Mathilda returned and sat down at table, and the others soon followed.

“Oh, Rudolph,” Charlotte exclaimed, in her gushing, seemingly heedless way, “you must tell me confidentially how you made all that money in Africa. We heard you have oodles of it. Where did you get it? How did you make it, I mean. Do you think Caesar could go over there, too, and pick up a little gold? Wouldn’t that be wonderful! I always liked gold. . . .”

Before he could answer, she suddenly fixed him with her lorgnette and said: “Do you know, Rudolph, you are very popular with the Portuguese? I can’t begin to tell you how many of them have been at my house in Antwerp to inquire if you lived with us. . . .”

“Really?” Rudolph asked, as casually as he could. “They are probably old business acquaintances from East Africa. I hope they didn’t trouble

you."

"Not at all," Charlotte said. "I didn't see them myself. It might well have been the same individual several times. Our valet merely told me. Mathilda," she went on, "did you know that I discharged our coachman, that tall young fellow who had such high recommendations? Yes, he turned out to be a thief. It was Caesar who first noticed it. We ordered all sorts of new things for the horses, new harnesses, you know, and things of that sort, but we never saw them on the horses. The coachman was selling everything behind our backs. What do you think of that? And Guido, did you hear . . ."

Modeste alone noticed that Rudolph had grown rigid, that his hand shook so violently the cigar dropped from his fingers. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the window sill in an effort to control his agitation, and in a few moments he walked quickly from the room. In passing the superintendent, his eyes met those of the old man and he knew that Modeste had noticed his discomfiture. He glared at him malevolently as he went to the door.

Guido began to carve a fresh goose, while Uncle Urbain sat down next to his brother and talked of family matters. Colas whispered loudly to Mathilda that although he still felt hungry, he and Hele would merely have some wine jelly and some more coffee and some pastry and some oranges and some liqueurs.

Hele was telling Ramaeker of some recent developments in the art circles of Montparnasse. Among other things, he said that a group of serious-minded and enterprising Scandinavian painters had decided to return to their respective native lands. They were through with Paris. "Our apprenticeship is over," Hele said. "We are grateful for what we have learned, but we are now going back to our own people."

"Why?" Ramaeker asked.

"No mission!" Hele laughed. "But life is sometimes a little monotonous in the smaller towns and villages of Sweden, too parochial, too isolated. We'd like to open a few windows and let in a breath of fresh air. . . ." He himself had been commissioned to do a mural in the old church of Visby on the island of Gotland; Larson, the most promising of the Swedish circle, was going to Lund; the government had elaborated a vast plan to beautify the city of Stockholm. . . .

"Are there many of you in Paris?" Ramaeker asked.

“Oh, no less than a million, I should say, judging by the amount of paint and brushes they spoil,” Colas put in. “You never saw such a mob. They clutter up the whole city: Anderson, Pederson, Larson, Helson, Olson, Mendelson, I don’t know what else. And they smear and daub wherever there’s a vacant spot to paint on. They’re simply inundating the place. . . .”

“What subjects do they paint?” Ramaeker asked.

“Oh, scenes from their dreams, or intimate glimpses of life on the other side of the grave. Realism, they call it! The Academy and other official idiots fall hard for that sort of thing.”

“And the women, I suppose,” Ramaeker suggested.

“Women don’t judge the Scandinavian school by what it produces. They go by the beards its members wear and by their blue eyes. The Vikings have all those silly French women positively on fire. When a Scandinavian asks for a model, he doesn’t get some poor little girl from the street—some professional, I mean, as we others do. No, he gets the cream of the *haute bourgeoisie*, the most sophisticated, the most beautiful, the daintiest, the wealthiest. They simply throw themselves at the artists’ feet. Sylvain, Uncle Urbain, close your ears, will you, while I supply the press with a few more minute details. . . .”

“Colas!” Guido thundered. “Don’t forget where you are! Put that bottle down!”

“Yes, Father,” Colas replied meekly, “in just a minute. I must have one more drink, though, maybe two. It will be a sad day indeed for the Parisiennes,” he went on, speaking to Ramaeker, “when the Gothic invasion is rolled back to the Jutland shores. I expect a vast crop of broken hearts, elopements, shattered homes, illegitimate children, cuckolds and suicides. . . .”

“I was always under the impression,” Ramaeker said to Hele, “that you Scandinavians were fierce individualists.”

“We were,” Hele replied, “but the era of individualism is drawing to a close. We realize we can no longer live and work unto ourselves alone. We are going to the people, and the people are coming to us. The people will give us our inspiration.”

“You see, I am right, as always,” Colas interrupted again. “They’re becoming missionaries. They’re going to the promised land. Sweden! My God, what a prospect! I can hardly wait to see the procession. But that’s the Flemish soul in me, you might say. We Flemings have a terrible weakness for processions. It helps us divert our thoughts from our bestial social conditions. *Panem et circenses*, bread and games, the Roman Emperors gave

the mob. Here in Flanders, we get processions! Our whole national history, you might say, is based on the expectation of one major procession to come —our golden age to which we look forward, our ultimate goal, our zenith."

"What is it?" Ramaeker and Hele asked at once.

"The show at Christopher Bay on the Day of Judgment!" Colas said.

"I don't understand," Hele said. "Isn't Christopher Bay a part of the shore hereabouts?"

"Precisely," Colas nodded. "You are in the right place to watch the parade and hear the bells. It'll be the procession to end all processions. All the cripples and starvelings and fools of Flanders are going to march right by this house. . . . The spectacle of the ages! The apotheosis of Flemish history. It's really a variation," he added, "of your own people's dream of eternal light. Only here in Flanders it's dressed up with banners and incense, and all kinds of churchly trappings. When will the show on the beach take place, Uncle Urbain? I'm getting tired of waiting."

"It will take place when man, instead of merely talking about brotherhood, begins to do God's will," the Vicar replied, "when he walks with his fellow as with a brother."

Colas leaned back in his chair with a deep sigh and stared out the window. All were silent until Ramaeker spoke. "The Academy was pretty hard on you Independents recently, wasn't it, Colas?"

"The Academy is made up of a group of bombastic hypocrites," Colas said emphatically, "and we have had an uphill fight to educate the public to realize the abysmal ignorance of that clique of old fossils. If the Academy had its way, the Independents would scarcely be allowed to show their work at all, but by fighting constantly we've not only held our own but have forged ahead. The day of the Academy is done."

"If I may be so bold," Guido said dryly, "may I ask when you manage to do a little painting?"

"Father," Colas laughed, "I swear, I promise, I will not leave Moorkerken till I have you on canvas in that solemnly ridiculous redingote of yours. Hele wants to paint Uncle Urbain. He says Uncle has the head of a Roman Senator and the twinkle of Voltaire. And the Lady Mathilda, of course, and Sylvanus. If Rudolph shaves his beard we'll do him too. We don't paint curtains such as that rich Amsterdammer wanted who came to see Rembrandt."

"What was that?" Guido asked.

"You know the story of Burgomaster Geldsack, or what was his name? He came to Rembrandt. 'Master van Ryn,' he said, 'I want you to paint me

in my happiest mood.'

" 'When are you in your happiest mood?' Rembrandt asked.

" 'When I'm in bed with my Meeke, of course,' said the Burgomaster, 'when else?'

" 'But I can't do that very well,' Rembrandt objected. 'I really don't paint that sort of thing.'

" 'I understand what you mean,' said Burgomaster Geldsack. 'I don't want you to show everything! God forbid! I don't want the whole world to see me. I want you to paint a pair of curtains in front of the bed, rich curtains, gold-stitched green cloth, brocade, *deftig*, very rich-looking. And then underneath you can paint the words: Behind these curtains lie Pieter Geldsack, Burgomaster and Merchant of Amsterdam, Knight of the Order of the Lion of Holland and Zeeland, and his spouse Meeke van der Zwam.' "

8

For several reasons, Modeste postponed his trip to Antwerp for a few days. First, there was the shock he had experienced that afternoon in the dining room, when Charlotte questioned Rudolph about the Portuguese men who had called at her house. As a rule, Rudolph paid little attention to his father's superintendent, and scarcely spoke a word to him from one week to another. Yet, when the young master left the room, he had stared so balefully at Modeste that the superintendent's heart shrank with fright. The concentrated ruthlessness in Rudolph's eyes threw him completely off balance. There could be no mistake, he thought—Rudolph knew something of what had passed between Colas and himself that night when the two had discussed Rudolph's liaison with Mathilda. A Portuguese merchant had been mentioned then. Had Rudolph overheard? Or had Colas broken a confidence by speaking to Rudolph? The superintendent felt a sickening, paralyzing fear. What was he to do?

Modeste sought out Colas at the first opportunity, but Colas could not enlighten him. He tried to laugh off Modeste's apprehensions. How in the world, Colas asked, could Rudolph have got wind of anything that was said between Modeste and himself in the privacy of the superintendent's cabin? Rudolph's ears might be keen and sharp, but they could not hear through a thick wall, could they?

"Nevertheless, I'm afraid," Modeste said. "He looked so fierce. His eyes were full of hatred. . . ."

"He certainly looks fierce," Colas said, "I'll grant you that. In fact, I sometimes think he resembles one of those Sicilian bandits whose pictures appear in the illustrated journals, and who will slit anyone's throat for the mere pleasure of it. It's that black beard of his which does it, Uncle Modeste. He wants to frighten people with it. But we know what's behind the beard. That beard is a mask. We knew Rudolph before he grew those whiskers. And we know why he grew them: to hide that ugly scar he got on his chin when he fell on the harrow wheel twenty years ago. I know his tricks. He's full of vanity. . . ."

“But, Colas, why did he stare at me? It wasn’t just a casual meeting of the eyes.”

“He stares and scowls at everybody,” Colas replied. “I’ve caught him once or twice lately looking at Mathilda in a way that didn’t indicate that there was much love lost between those two, either. You can never tell with Rudolph. Maybe Mathilda and he had a falling out. I wouldn’t be surprised in the least to learn that the affair was over. Perhaps she’s had enough of his browbeating, and has threatened to go to Father and tell him the whole dirty story. At any rate, don’t worry, Uncle Modeste. I’m sure Rudolph’s black looks were not intended for you. You’ll come to no harm. I’ll see to that, and Father will see to it also. Take a good rest, and play us something on the trombone tonight. Hele and I will come to your room and sing a few gay songs. Do you know that one about the twelve virgins who went to heaven and were turned back?” Colas laughed, and nudged the old man.

Modeste shook his head ruefully. For the moment he felt a little more tranquil. Colas’ reassuring words had calmed his fears. After all, Rudolph’s menacing glance might not have been intended for him. Perhaps it was only his imagination.

It was quite true, as Colas said, that Rudolph was growing more and more unapproachable of late, more irascible and ugly. The slightest incident made him fly off the handle. Everybody on the estate complained about him. He never had a good word for anyone. Everybody tried to avoid him.

The trip to Antwerp now seemed imperative. Modeste felt that he might arrive at a solution to his difficulties through what he learned in the big city. He might find the key to an honorable settlement. He would not be so presumptuous as to overstep the bounds of what was fair and good, but he would see what information he could gather, discuss it with Colas, and with Sylvain perhaps, and then act, or not act, accordingly. Things could not go on as they were at present, that was certain. Everybody’s nerves were getting on edge.

Mathilda was walking around like a ghost. There was no doubt in Modeste’s mind that she was suffering. Her face showed it. The Lady’s vitality and good humor seemed to be draining out of her as if she were being secretly visited by one of those ghoulish vampires about whom the old women told such weird stories. To one who had ears to hear, like Modeste, her voice had a subdued note of fear in it. Why was she afraid? That was what Modeste wanted to find out. The atmosphere in the house was growing more tense every day. Amorie’s visit was providing a temporary respite, but as soon as she left, and Esther left, the situation would grow worse. It might well grow unbearable. There might be a break. And what then? Then

Guido's life would be ruined. All their lives would be ruined. Modeste was determined to intervene before it was too late.

Amorie's baby was born on the twenty-eighth of December. It was a boy. Uncle Urbain came back to the manor to baptize him with the name Guido Jacques Bonnefous. For a day or two the child suffered spasms, and was in grave danger. It went blue in the face and seemed unable to get its breath. Guido was terribly upset most of the time. The sweat poured off his face as he ran up- and downstairs, giving orders in the kitchen, in the stable, in the coach house. Modeste and Sylvain must have driven back and forth between Maere and the manor no less than seven times to fetch the doctor, and to take him home again. In the end everything was all right. As Guido bent over the child on the third day, its wrinkled little face puckered up still more and it sneezed. "Thank God! *Gezondheid!*" Guido exclaimed. From that moment on, the baby improved. Amorie, too, recovered rapidly. When she was fully out of danger, the Heer of Moorkerken himself hoisted the flag on the roof. It was the first of January.

That was the day the peasants came to wish Guido a prosperous year, and to talk over matters affecting the farm and communal affairs in general. As a rule, the men, most of them accompanied by their wives and children, did not arrive till shortly before noon. Then, with the traditional drink of cherries and raspberries in brandywine, the Lady of Moorkerken served a collation of cold cuts and fowl and sausages and homemade cakes and puddings, spread out in rich array on the gigantic sideboard.

This year the peasants started to come much earlier. Ordinarily, the first arrivals departed after refreshing themselves, thus leaving room for others. This morning everybody lingered. There was tension in the air, a vague feeling of expectancy, as if the peasants felt that decisions affecting their future were about to be handed down.

By eleven o'clock the large dining room, the hallway, and even the broad staircase were filled with a milling crowd of talking, gesticulating, laughing, eating and drinking men and women. The alcohol had loosened their tongues, and had dissipated their usual shyness and reticence.

Guido himself was in high good humor. The birth of Amorie's son had put him in an expansive mood. He was clinking glasses right and left. Again and again he ordered the depleted sideboard restocked. "Help yourself, burghers!" he called out. "And don't stand on ceremony! Thunderation! *Honderd jaar na dezen!* . . . A hundred years from now!" He clinked glasses

with everybody. “Blessings upon you, Jerome, and upon you, Allain, and you, Martyn Kolders, my dear old friend.”

He was sitting, broad and mighty, in the straight, high-backed armchair at the head of the table, listening, between toasts and drinks, to an old peasant named Bemelmans who was trying to explain to him, with many interruptions and hesitations, that the use of modern machinery by the landlords must inevitably lead to general impoverishment, and ultimately to the ruination of the small individual cultivator. Fifteen or twenty of the elderly small freeholders sat around the table nodding their heads in silent approval. Packed around the elders stood the younger men. Bemelmans had difficulty in making himself heard above the babel of voices and the laughter. From time to time, he struck the table with the flat of his hand, ordering silence as if he were the presiding officer at a political meeting.

At Guido’s side sat Sylvain, the pallor of his face accentuated by his black cassock. On Guido’s other side was Rudolph. He was listening intently to Bemelmans’ words, a deep frown on his forehead. He, for one, did not need to express his disgust with the proceedings in words. His sardonic grin made words superfluous.

“Let them eat and drink all they want,” he whispered in French to his father, “and let them clear out. This has gone far enough. It is the most unseemly business I’ve ever seen. In a moment these fellows will serve you with an ultimatum. Why did you ever let it come to this? Why don’t you go upstairs, say that you are not feeling well, and let me handle the situation?”

Guido dismissed his son’s remarks with an impatient gesture. His face was red with excitement. Bemelmans was still talking. “Heer Guido, what are your intentions? Do you intend to enrich yourself further at our expense and, in the end, drive us off the land altogether? Let us know where we stand, what we can expect. . . .”

“You forget your position,” Rudolph suddenly interrupted the man. “You forget to whom you are talking! Who are you to propose terms to the Heer of Moorkerken? If I . . .” But he got no further. A low growl went through the room. The laughter of the women in the hallway stopped dead. Still more peasants crowded in.

“I’ll answer you, Hendrik Bemelmans,” Guido said quietly. “I know you didn’t mean to imply that I am robbing you. We are brothers after all, sons of Mother Flanders all of us. Why should I wish to cause you damage?”

There was a sneering snicker somewhere in the room. For an instant Guido’s chin trembled with anger, but he quickly controlled himself.

"You must understand," he said slowly, "that in order to compete with other landowners, or merely to hold my own, I was compelled to introduce some labor-saving devices, and that in days to come, I will be forced to introduce more and more machinery."

"In that case we are doomed, that's all there is to it," Bemelmans replied, looking at the faces of the men around him. "Our children, the young ones, will have to look for work in the factories and mines, or they will have to emigrate. There is no alternative. Brothers we are, as you say, Heer Guido, but Mother Flanders is treating some of us as if we were her stepchildren or worse—foundlings, riffraff.

"We have suffered, and our fathers have suffered, like the beasts of the field. We have never questioned our lot nor rebelled against it. But there comes a time when we can stand no more. There must be a change. . . ."

"Why did you have to bring in machinery in the first place?" a squeaky voice came from the back of the room. "Wasn't it all because of Heer Rudolph? Wasn't he the one who started all the trouble in the district?"

"Why d'you let him interfere?" someone shouted. "You always say you are the master. Why d'you let your son tell you what to do?"

Everybody began to shout and argue. The alcohol had made them reckless. The younger men, especially, were in an ugly mood. "We have our rights," one of them shouted, "and we will enforce them, come what may." The tumult increased, and threatened to degenerate into a brawl. Never before had the peasants appeared so quarrelsome, so keenly on their mettle. Rudolph had risen, in readiness for action.

"Why didn't you stay in Africa?" a tall young peasant with a rage-reddened face said to Rudolph. The man stood quite near Rudolph's chair, his voice bristling with hostility.

"Hold your tongue, imbecile," Rudolph replied. "You're drunk! You forget that you're not in 'The Black Knight.' You can't shout here."

"I say what I like, Bluebeard!"

"Silence! Thunders and sacraments! Silence!" Guido roared, pounding the table with his fist. "Not another word! We won't get anywhere by calling each other names."

"You won't get anywhere," Rudolph said to his father in a mocking tone, "unless you call the gendarmes."

Guido ignored him. "Burghers," he said, "I would have had to take in machinery sooner or later, with or without my son. I take the entire responsibility upon myself. It was only a question of time before somebody would start using machinery in the district. If, let us say for argument's sake,

I scrap the machinery today, if I throw it all out and revert to the old system, I would have to employ a good many more of you in order to keep on an equal footing with the other landowners; isn't that so?"

The elders nodded their heads, and a murmur of assent ran through the room. "Well, why don't you throw away the machines?" someone called out in the ensuing stillness.

"I can't, David Teniers," Guido said calmly. He had recognized David's voice despite the fact that the young man stood at the very rear, near the doorway leading into the hall.

"I cannot do it, for the simple reason that the other landowners would not follow suit. And we—all of you, and I—we would be ruined together. If machinery is to be discarded, it should be discarded by everybody. Individual action in this instance is meaningless. I am more distressed than I can say about the destructive influences of modern machinery on our communal life. I admit it is a great evil without any compensating qualities. I go further than all of you; I foresee the dreadful consequences of it. The process of mechanization is today only in its infancy. It will grow into a terrible force that will destroy our most cherished institutions. I have been thinking a great deal about it lately. . . ."

Some peasants stirred uneasily, shifting their weight from one foot to the other. All hung on Guido's words. "The machine has its own laws," he continued, after a while, "and will grind our old society to pieces. The machine becomes a god. Man takes second place. Man is just a cog, an accessory in the process that has begun to operate in our land. The slogan of the new times will not be love your neighbor, but strike your neighbor down before he strikes you, overtake him, do him in. . . . I'm sorry that it should have come to this. But as an individual I can do nothing about it. It's the march of history. It's fate. I am caught in the wheels as much as all of you. . . . I must conform to the new practices in order to live.

"In fact our country as a whole," he went on, looking sideways at Rudolph, "must take the new path in order to keep its head up in the international market. And so it is with every civilized country, and with every individual. As human beings we are being sucked into the maelstrom. We are dragged along helplessly. And, as I say, the end is not in sight. We stand only at the beginning of the new era. I sometimes think it's the Devil's reign that has come over the earth, the reign of selfishness and cutthroatism. It will be a struggle without mercy and pity. Competition will grow fiercer all the time among individuals, among classes and among nations. And yet, as I say again, I can't do anything about it. I have no solution. I am as helpless as you are. . . ."

There was deep silence in the room as Guido paused. All eyes were on the Heer of Moorkerken and his two sons. Rudolph, his elbows resting on the table, gazed intently at his father's face. He could not fathom the motives which made Guido speak as he did.

A child began to whimper in the hall. Some of the peasants looked at each other uneasily. What was Heer Guido driving at? They couldn't imagine. They would have understood him much better if he had told them that on the next occasion when any damage was done to the machinery, as had lately occurred in several instances, he would call in the police. That they would have understood, but not this solemn dissertation. The silence prolonged itself painfully. Nobody knew what to say. They had been caught off guard. The young men shuffled their feet and coughed to hide their embarrassment.

"I tell you frankly what I think of the situation," Guido went on. "I do not want to hide anything from you. I may be wrong, but I consider that we are in for a bad time. I'm sure I shall not see the end of the troubles myself, for they may last a hundred years. Some day—I'm sure of that, too—the world will return to sanity and common sense. Only it won't be very soon, I'm afraid. Man learns very slowly. Before human beings learn that the road to progress and happiness lies in coöperation and collaboration instead of competition and rivalry, before that idea dawns on us, we will have hated and murdered and massacred each other a dozen times.

"All I can do at the present moment," he said, "is to try to stay the disaster, perhaps for a few years. Perhaps, locally, I can somewhat mitigate the evil. I have been thinking of it. Hendrik," he turned to old Bemelmans, "Hendrik, what do you think of the moor?"

"The moor?" Bemelmans replied, taken by surprise. "Why, it's good land, Heer Guido—good land if properly drained and worked. It's not moor at all, in fact. It's good juicy clay, but there's a layer of sand and moss on it."

"There are sixty thousand acres of moorland back of this farm, twice as much as we have under cultivation now," Guido said. "When drained and plowed, it will make good soil. I wonder if we can go into partnership—I mean if I drain it and put up the buildings, the stables, dwelling houses and all the rest, and buy the machinery and the livestock, do you think, you men, that you can agree among yourselves to manage it, to make a go of it? You'll be the owners yourselves. I am willing to part with it. I make you an outright gift of it. What do you say?"

Nobody knew what to answer. Guido's proposition perplexed them. They looked at each other with blank, uncomprehending faces. Bemelmans'

jaw dropped. He looked at Guido as if he had been speaking a foreign language. At last one of the Teniers men called out: "You'll have to give us time, Heer Guido, to think it over. We'll have to form a committee."

"That's right," someone else said. "Give us time! When we start parceling out that land we'll need to act justly. We'll need an impartial committee. There are some here who would pick the best lots for themselves."

"As for me," a short man with a ruddy face spoke up, "if you give me a strip nearest to the sawmill, I'll be satisfied. I don't want anything else."

"We'll draw lots," several men roared at the same time.

"Heer Guido will have to do the dividing himself. We'll never agree among ourselves," Hendrik Bemelmans affirmed solemnly.

"There'll be no parceling or dividing at all—that's not what Heer Guido means," shouted a young peasant who held a baby on his arm. "It will be one farm, one estate, a coöperative. . . ."

"What? One farm with a hundred owners? Did you ever hear such nonsense? And the horses and the cattle, who'll own them?"

"All of us! We'll own the cattle jointly," the man said.

"Which end of a cow do you prefer, Karel?" one man said, turning to his neighbor. There was a burst of laughter at this sally.

"We could never agree as to whether to put the land under flax or under beets, or what not," one man argued with his neighbor. No one seemed to have enough authority to put himself at their head, but they were less tense, less hostile.

"Heer Guido's plan calls for another drink," bellowed a tall, sickly-looking man, who had brought in his wife from the hallway. "*Honderd jaar na dezen!* A hundred years from now! Hurrah, long live Heer Guido and the Lady!" he shouted, and in a more serious tone he added: "We can't decide on a course of action immediately on so important a matter. . . ."

They were all crowding up to the sideboard, arguing, shouting, calling. Some began to sing. All at once Rudolph said to his father, "You seem to forget that it was I who proposed to drain the moor. If I had known that I was working for this pack of louts and yokels, I'd rather have cut off my right hand. You must be out of your mind. . . ."

He rose from his chair and, angrily pushing his way through the crowd, left the room. Sylvain followed him. Guido sat still amid all the din and clatter, staring in front of him.

Rudolph and Sylvain walked down the hallway together, Sylvain calmly enough, Rudolph deep in black and furious thought. That speech of Guido's was the final blow—the culmination of a long series of bumbling, sentimental, soft-willed acts. To Rudolph's hot impatience, it seemed as though the process might be endless, stopping only when there was nothing left of the estate.

He would know how to hold the estate together, all right—how to make it grow in wealth and power. He would teach the peasants the respect they forgot so quickly; the only thing they understood was authority backed by the threat of force—and a show of force was a good thing, now and then.

But his father was deliberately breaking up the estate. Far from preserving the family heritage, he was bent on dissipating it. It was madness. Guido must be stopped.

The two ideas—madness, and the restraint of Guido—boiled in Rudolph's mind, and out of the haze of anger a plan suddenly emerged.

"The old man is out of his head," he said to Sylvain. "I've never heard such senseless talk. I'm afraid we will have to place him under observation, or lock him up in the madhouse at Bruges. . . ."

"I think Father dealt very fairly with the men," Sylvain replied.

"Do you?" Rudolph said with contempt. "I thought you would approve. I thought so. Such insanity is right in your line. The only thing lacking in his foolish speech was that his conscience was hurting him. But you, Sylvain, you haven't the faintest idea of what the man's doing. He is signing away your birthright and mine."

"I don't want any land," Sylvain said.

"Of course not! You're satisfied to be a parasite. But I don't want to be a parasite, or a pauper, either. And what about the others? I'm going to find Bonnefous and Amorie and Colas now. I'm sure they'll be terribly happy to hear that they'll be paupers on the old man's death."

"It isn't as bad as all that," Sylvain answered.

"You seem to know, reverend sir," said Rudolph caustically. "I'll see you later when I need your signature on the commitment papers. We'll make it unanimous."

"What?"

"Commitment papers, that's what. To put Father in a place where he can't hurt himself nor anyone else. I meant what I said about the madhouse at Bruges!"

Dozens of peasants stood in the courtyard talking excitedly of the *patroon's* proposal. Modeste was near the stable door, talking to David Teniers and some others. "No, you can't sell the land again, I am sure of that. If you do not work the land, it will revert to Heer Guido. That will be one of the provisions. . . ."

"Just wait till I get my hands on a parcel of land, and I won't easily let go again," David said.

Rudolph, who overheard the remark as he was passing the group, turned half-around towards the speaker. His eyes were like burning coals. The frown on his forehead had deepened till it looked like a bluish scar.

"You will keep your hands off, you lump of dreck!" he snarled at David.

The peasants were struck dumb by Rudolph's show of malice. Instinctively they stepped back from David's side, but the young man stood his ground, his hands in his pockets. "I wasn't talking to you, Heer Rudolph!" he said calmly.

"But I am talking to you!" Rudolph cried savagely. "I talk when I want, and you can keep your insolent mouth shut on this property. It isn't yours, yet!"

He advanced menacingly on the young farmer and, before David could get out of the way, struck him a staggering blow in the face. Sylvain ran to his brother and tried to pull him away. But Rudolph roughly threw off his restraining hand. He was in a towering rage—completely beside himself.

"Have you anything further to say?" he said hoarsely to David, who was wiping the blood from his mouth. Rudolph's fist was poised to strike again. David did not answer. His breath came in quick gasps, and he had grown sickly pale.

Several of the peasants now moved nearer to David, shielding him with their bodies. Attracted by the shouting, men and women came running into the courtyard from all directions. One young man by the name of Mathieu Kerkhoven, who had a reputation for common sense and exemplary behavior, stepped squarely between Rudolph and David.

"What do you want?" Rudolph asked him contemptuously. "Do you think I am afraid of you, or any of you?"

"I want you to calm down, Heer Rudolph," Mathieu said. "Behave like a Christian; think of your father."

For answer Rudolph swung at him, but Mathieu side-stepped and the blow went wild. Frustrated and angered by the laughter that went up, Rudolph whipped a pistol from the pocket of his jacket.

“Out of the way!” he screamed. “Out of my way, if you don’t want to get hurt!”

The crowd backed away in terror. Modeste was running back to the house as fast as his old legs could carry him. With one hand Rudolph flung Mathieu aside and thus uncovered David. In the same instant a shot rang out. But it wasn’t David who was hit. In a flash Sylvain had thrown himself between David and his attacker. He had received the bullet, and now sank slowly to his knees.

Rudolph, the smoking revolver in his hand, looked down at his brother in horrified fascination. Several men bent over the wounded man, who was on his hands and knees, trying to rise. Nobody spoke. Consternation was written on every face, when suddenly Guido’s voice was heard from the direction of the house. He came running into the courtyard, followed by several of the elders. The bystanders made way for the Heer of Moorkerken, whose eyes were dilated with fear. Guido was breathing heavily as he came to a stop. With fists clenched, and trembling in every limb, he took in the situation at a glance.

“Father!” Sylvain said weakly, looking up at Guido. “He didn’t know what he was doing. He didn’t intend to hurt me. . . . It was an accident.” Then his strength failed and he slipped forward to the ground.

Without a word Guido lifted the unconscious boy in his arms and ran back to the house. At the door, where Mathilda and Esther met him, he stumbled and would have fallen had not some peasants held him up and taken his wounded son from his arms. Guido stared dully after them, as they carried Sylvain into the house. On his sleeve was a glistening dark patch of fresh blood. He put his hand on his chest and when it came away, his fingers were stained red. The sight of the blood brought him to his senses.

“Colas!” he roared, “Colas! Away to Maere! Ride for all you’re worth! Don’t spare the horse! The doctor! Bring Uncle Urbain, also!” He turned to Esther and Mathilda and said bitterly, “If that boy dies, there is no God!”

Sylvain’s wound did not prove serious, although there was considerable loss of blood. In penetrating his left arm at the shoulder, the bullet had shattered the bone and severed an artery. Guido stopped the flow of blood with the aid of a bag of flour. In the afternoon the lead pellet was extracted. The operation was extremely painful, but by nightfall Sylvain was sleeping peacefully, with his father sitting by his side, holding his hand.

Guido had scarcely uttered a word since the incident in the courtyard. He refused food and drink. He shook his head obstinately to Mathilda’s pleas

that he come away and rest. His cheeks had fallen in, his eyes were clouded; his high spirits and good nature, his friendly deep voice and pleasant smile —all had vanished. He was a broken old man as he sat huddled in an armchair, his mouth slightly agape, by the side of Sylvain's bed. Later, overcome by exhaustion, his head sank slowly to his breast and he slept.

He was awakened shortly before midnight by Modeste, who tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the window. In the distance a ruddy glare was visible. The new stable which Rudolph had been building on the edge of the moorland was aflame. Modeste held the curtains aside, for Guido's hand was still clasped in that of his son and he could not rise.

"It will burn to the ground," Guido whispered. "Nothing can save it. We should have dug a well first. I suppose that's some more of my son's work." Modeste nodded in silence.

"Better have the boys watch the sparks and the moss," Guido said. "With this wind the dry heather might catch fire. . . . Where is Rudolph?" he asked, as Modeste started to leave the room.

"He has taken the big bay, but he can't be far off. He sent a messenger an hour ago to inquire about Sylvain's condition."

Guido's face brightened a little. "First thing in the morning," he said, "go and see what's left of that stable, you and Colas. If there are any traces of incendiarism, wipe them out. This fire is an accident, you understand. I suppose there will be an inquiry if it's suspected that the fire was set. But I'll take care of that. Only don't let the investigators stumble on any evidence. We can't have that. Somebody would have to go to jail. A man can't burn property, not even his own, without being punished for it."

He gently disentangled his hand from Sylvain's, and tiptoed out of the room. "Sit there beside him, Uncle Modeste," he said. "On second thought I'll go and have a look myself, right now. Where is Colas?"

"He's out at the fire."

Guido nodded and went downstairs.

It was not until the end of January that Uncle Modeste was able to make his long-planned trip to Antwerp. By that time Rudolph had returned to the manor, and a sort of halfhearted but prolonged reconciliation had taken place between the eldest son and his father. On the surface it seemed that peace had returned to Moorkerken. Everybody and everything appeared to have

gone back to the normal, busy routine of the farm, where there were no less than three hundred head of cattle in the stable that winter.

Uncle Modeste alone, sensitive observer of all the vibrating threads that wound and unwound themselves around the person of Guido, was under no illusions. He felt that the hidden tension, instead of having been dissipated, was growing sharper with every passing day. Rudolph had spoken casually of making a trip abroad. He had been to Brussels, ostensibly to confer with agents of the royal house which, at that time, owned the entire Congo and its unlimited forests and fields. He had no intention, Rudolph said, of taking up permanent residence in the King's private colony—he merely wanted to carry out an investigation, see the rubber plantations with his own eyes, before investing any capital in the vast undertaking.

Rudolph was making his plans slowly. But he had already consulted Colas and Uncle Urbain on the possibility of obtaining an official restraining order to prevent Guido from handing over the moorland for eventual coöperative exploitation by the peasants. Uncle Urbain and Colas had indignantly rejected Rudolph's proposal; in Brussels, however, among politicians and lawyers, he had gained a more sympathetic hearing. In the neighboring manor houses, too, especially in the home of François van Abeele, where the rumor of Guido's New Year's announcement was first received with ridicule and disbelief, Rudolph had managed to rouse a determined opposition to Guido's plan.

To everyone who would listen, François van Abeele now openly denounced Guido's intentions as revolutionary and dangerous. There was no telling, he held, where a movement of that sort might lead once it got under way. The landowners would have to look to their interests, take a stand and, if need be, call in the authorities to nip the conspiracy in the bud. If they were to forestall in Flanders a movement which in France almost a century earlier had led to the wild excesses of the Revolution, it was essential to prepare for action at once, although with forethought and caution.

Van Abeele was more than grateful to Rudolph for having taken him into his confidence. He agreed with "the black Afrikander," as he jocularly called Rudolph, that they must proceed carefully. Undue haste or violent measures might spoil everything. For instance, to oppose Guido openly, by initiating an organized movement against him on the part of the united landowners, or by having recourse to the law, might easily precipitate a troublesome time with the peasants, perhaps a first-rate *Jacquerie*.

In that case all the peasants, not only those on the Govaerts estate, would inevitably take Heer Guido's side, and then no one could foresee the consequences. Granges would probably burn mysteriously, wells might be

poisoned, horses crippled in the night, and worse. Once they were in a fighting mood, the peasants could not easily be brought back to reason. Of course the landowners could count on the sympathy and support of the authorities, as was natural, and as it should be. For what other purpose did the authorities exist if it wasn't to protect property, and enforce law and order? But the damage might have been done. Prevention was better than cure.

Van Abeele argued that it was essential to remember that the peasants had always taken the initiative in actively opposing foreign invaders. They would fight again if aroused. It was they who applied a match to the powder keg when the upper classes would have made a compromise with usurping Burgundians or Austrians and French. No, the peasant mentality was a dangerous toy to play with. All things considered, it would be best if Guido's family, as Rudolph proposed, should unobtrusively take measures to declare the Heer of Moorkerken incapable of administering his large properties profitably and sanely. Guido should be put behind a strong barrier, in a place where he could no longer harm himself and others.

Through friends among the employees on the other estates, Uncle Modeste got wind of what was being plotted. If he could put the fear of God into Rudolph, and force him to take that trip to the Congo, the situation, he felt, would clear up by itself. As it was, every move that Guido made in planning the transfer of the moorland was almost instantly known on the Abeele farm and in the other country houses. It was Rudolph, obviously, who was playing the informer.

In the case of Sylvain, there was no longer any cause for anxiety. There had been several sinking spells, with the doctor taking the boy's pulse and telling Guido to pour cordial down his son's throat, but the danger was past. Sylvain had lost much weight, and his arm still caused him acute pain, especially at night. Otherwise his youthful constitution was rapidly repairing the damage.

Guido, on the other hand, had not by any means recovered his good spirits. He was waited on by Mathilda, and he received her attentions with a gratitude which was partly affectionate, partly matter-of-course. His face betrayed the fact that he had been cruelly tried; like Abraham after the near-sacrifice of his son Isaac, Guido seemed to have lost his capacity to smile. Frequently he sat silently by the hearth wondering what evil might have been done. At such times, his own thoughts frightened him and his eyes assumed the horrified look which old peasants remembered in the eyes of his mother, the Mad Lady.

Mathilda had gone back to her housewifely cares and duties. To Hele's invitation to pose for a portrait she had returned a polite refusal. The truth was that she was sick with apprehension. She had persuaded Esther to remain at the manor till springtime. She used Esther—at least so it seemed to Rudolph—as a shield against his importunities. But secretly Mathilda, too, like Modeste, foresaw further trouble. She did not know whence the blow would come, but she felt its imminence almost like a physical presence. All the members of the family, it seemed, felt the nearness of some crisis, some new disaster.

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Modeste arrived in Antwerp on a raw day. Instead of going straight to Charlotte's house on the Keyzerlei, as he had first planned, he sought out the offices of the Portuguese East African Steamship Company. He was now more concerned, he told himself, with Rudolph than with Mathilda. But the mysterious person who had made inquiries about Rudolph at the home of Caesar Govaerts and again at Robert Brero's forge was not easily located.

At the steamship office, a dilapidated, rat-infested hole in the wall between two gigantic warehouses in the neighborhood of the Plantin dockyards, the old superintendent was subjected to an inordinately long delay. He was aware of being observed with suspicion as he sat, hat in hand, by the small coal stove in the office. The man in charge told him he would have to go out and look for the individual Modeste had described. He did not return for an hour.

In the interval of waiting, several unprepossessing faces looked in on him. One burly individual with a sinister scowl walked into the office, carefully scrutinized him, and went out again without having spoken a word. Finally the first man returned and told Modeste that the person he was seeking lived in an entirely different part of the city. He gave him an address in the neighborhood of the central railway station. Modeste went there by way of the horse tram.

It was growing dark when he rang the bell of a respectable bourgeois house on the Avenue Quentin Matsys. The woman who opened the door told him that Mr. Rodriguez did indeed lodge there, but that he was absent for the moment. Expressing a desire to wait, Modeste was invited into the parlor. When the woman asked his name, Modeste said, "Just tell Mr. Rodriguez that I have come from Heer Govaerts." She had hardly left the room when the door swung open abruptly, and a man stood before him.

“I am Rodriguez,” he said, in heavily accented French. “What do you want of me?”

Modeste was somewhat taken aback, but in equally bad French he said that his name was Verhagen and that he was the friend of a certain Guido Govaerts. The man started violently. “Govaerts? Which Govaerts? Rudolph Govaerts?”

Modeste shook his head. “Not Rudolph—Guido Govaerts!” he said, emphasizing the Christian name.

“Then what are you doing here? I do not want anything from Guido Govaerts. Rudolph, the man with the black beard, is the one I want to see. Do you know him?” His eyes smoldered menacingly.

“I know Rudolph Govaerts, too,” Modeste said. “He is Guido Govaerts’ son. But I do not know where he is at the present moment. I want to find him. For reasons of my own, I did not want to ask his father where he was.”

“What do you want of him? Why did you come to see me?” the man asked suspiciously.

“I know that you have been looking for him. I thought perhaps you had found him. I want to speak to him. He has wronged me. He has taken my daughter, my youngest child, monsieur. You can imagine the rest. I want him to tell me what he has done with my daughter. She cannot be found anywhere. I cannot seem to interest the police in helping me search for her. Rudolph Govaerts is a very rich man and I am a poor farmer. What am I to do? I want help. . . .”

The man laughed cruelly. “Your daughter has disappeared, eh? Francisco disappeared, too. Do you know about Dar-es-Salaam?”

“No, Monsieur Rodriguez, I do not know him. Who is he?”

“Who is he?” He laughed. “I see now. I can see you are a Flemish peasant. You are as ignorant as a pig. You want your daughter back, eh? But I want to find Rudolph Govaerts. Dar-es-Salaam is a city, you understand, a city in Africa, the city where Rudolph Govaerts is wanted for murder. . . .”

“For murder?” Modeste gasped in horror. “Are you a gendarme, Monsieur Rodriguez?” he asked, after regaining his composure.

“No, I am not a gendarme,” Rodriguez laughed. “What makes you think so?”

“Didn’t you say you had come to fetch Rudolph Govaerts back to Africa because he is accused of murder?”

“He’s a murderer and a thief and a trafficker in white slaves and everything else on the calendar. How else do you think he got all that

money, the damned crook?"

"I cannot believe it," Modeste said, shaking his head. "I know his family. His father is a prominent citizen, a good man. . . ."

"I am telling you, Monsieur Verhagen, I know he is a murderer."

"Whom did he kill?"

"He murdered my brother Francisco."

Modeste's jaw dropped. He was silent for a moment. He felt numb, sick. Then he asked, "Why did he murder him?"

"He murdered my brother to get his hands on our business and on my brother's wife."

"I don't understand at all," Modeste said. "I am all mixed up. But let me ask you one more question. How do you know Rudolph Govaerts murdered your brother?"

"We know it from my brother's wife. She was a witness."

"But why didn't you or she go to the police and lay a charge against Rudolph Govaerts?" Modeste asked.

The man laughed. "That's not the way things are done in Dar-es-Salaam, Monsieur Verhagen. In Dar-es-Salaam we take the law in our own hands. Dar-es-Salaam is in Africa. In German East Africa we do not bother the police if the police don't bother us."

"But in the case of Rudolph Govaerts you apparently did not take the law into your own hands, or, at any rate, you haven't yet done so."

"We nearly got him once," Rodriguez said. "But he got away. He's always got away with everything, right from the start."

"From what start?" Modeste asked.

"Sit down," Rodriguez ordered gruffly, "and I'll tell you what kind of man he is, that black-bearded son of a dog. You'll soon know in what kind of hands your daughter has fallen.

"The long and short of it is that Rudolph Govaerts came to Dar-es-Salaam from South Africa in the company of a German partner called Otto Peltzer. They had made some money in the gold mines. In Dar-es-Salaam they opened a saloon on the waterfront—a saloon and, about a month later, a gambling casino. When they had been in business for about six months, they bought some land on the coast. They were probably tipped off that certain steamship companies intended to acquire that land for wharves and quays. Anyway, they bought all the waterfront property to the north of the city for a song. They owned a whole mile of it, just steaming swamps and jungle it was then, you understand. Dar-es-Salaam itself was a sweat hole, too, a

native quarter and some shacks, no more. Soon it began to boom. Streets were laid out. Buildings went up. Ships were coming in and going out. Settlers were arriving by the hundreds. The ivory trade picked up enormously. Govaerts and Peltzer sold their landholdings piece by piece, but not for money. They took shares in the shipping companies and in the counting houses that were being built on the land acquired from the partners. The two got rich. Soon they were the richest men on the east coast. Their saloon was the busiest place in Africa. All kinds of deals were transacted there. But they never got enough. They wanted still more money. . . .

"They cast their eyes on the ivory trade. That was our business—my brother Francisco's and mine. We were the first ivory traders in Dar-es-Salaam. Rudolph Govaerts began to organize safaris of his own. He paid his hunters and carriers double the wages we paid them. He went after elephants for all he was worth. It was a massacre. He went inland farther than anyone had gone before, and he took whole armies of hunters with him. He would bring back as much as thirty or forty tons of ivory from those expeditions. The money he made that way was incalculable.

"The German partner, another devil's spawn, ran the saloon and the office when Govaerts was away. That business, too, prospered. They built a hotel next to the saloon and they imported a boatload of women from France. The girls had contracts to play in vaudeville in Dar-es-Salaam. They never saw the inside of a theater, once they landed. From time to time fresh batches of girls were brought in. It was the biggest brothel north of Johannesburg and south of Cairo, a roaring hell, twenty-four hours of the day.

"My brother and I were ruined by Govaerts. He undersold and undercut us, he corrupted our native boys and carriers, and soon was on the point of having us on the rocks when he offered us a partnership. My brother was a fool to accept, for it turned out that Govaerts did not want us to share in his profits. Why should he? He didn't love us that much. No; but he had his eye on my brother's wife, on Sapia. She was the daughter of a Chinese opium importer and an Egyptian woman from Cairo. In a way she was a good-looking girl. Her eyes were slightly oblique but blue, with burning irises. Her brown skin was drawn tightly over high cheekbones. There was something a little savage in her smile, maybe, but for the rest she was not bad. She had breasts that stood out like that." Rodriguez held his hands to his chest and pointed his index fingers upwards.

"Yes, Monsieur Verhagen," he went on, "that was the girl Rudolph Govaerts wanted. But how could he get her? He got her by taking my brother into partnership. My brother was in the habit of taking his wife with

him when he went hunting. After he went into partnership with Govaerts, he led the expeditions, but Govaerts came along, too, you understand. It was on one of those trips that my brother was murdered. . . ."

"You saw it happen?" Modeste asked.

"No, but Sapia did. We had to force it out of her, though. When they came back from the expedition without my brother and said that Francisco had been trampled by an elephant, I doubted their story immediately. Francisco was an experienced hunter. He had been in the bush twelve years. I have another brother, Pedro, who is here in Antwerp with me now. He and I kidnapped Sapia and put her to the torture. She had gone to live with Govaerts at that brothel on Gordon Street. We got her into our own house one night and tickled her a little with a razor, you know, right on her breasts. She soon broke down.

"She said Govaerts and Francisco were leaving camp one morning along a narrow trail when Rudolph, who walked behind, struck my brother with his whip. He knocked my brother's rifle from his hand and kept on beating him till he was almost senseless. Sapia saw it all. Then Govaerts dragged my brother to a tree and tied him up. Next he kicked up an ant heap and let the ants go to work on Francisco. Govaerts sat there for an hour watching the ants swarm over his body, until he was entirely covered and lost consciousness. All that remained of Francisco the next morning was the skeleton."

"Had no one else seen this crime?" Modeste asked.

"Apparently not," Rodriguez said. "You see, that's why Govaerts attacked my brother with his whip. He could have shot him much more easily. He was walking behind. But he did not want to attract the hunters and beaters to the scene by the sound of a shot."

"What became of your brother's wife?"

"As I told you, she lived with Govaerts until we kidnapped her that night. Then, *phuit*." Rodriguez passed his hand rapidly across his neck. "We slit her throat for her. It was a pity, I admit, for it was a beautiful little throat. But she was an accessory to the murder and she deserved what she got.

"We did it with this thing here, Monsieur Verhagen, look." Rodriguez produced a short dagger from his breast pocket. "This will do the same thing for Govaerts. My brother Pedro and I have been looking for an opportune time ever since we came to Belgium. We, too, cleared out of Dar-es-Salaam, because we had neglected to dispose properly of Sapia's body. And then, of course, we went after Govaerts. We tried to kidnap him, too, but he was too swift for us. He's a fast shot. But he got so scared of us that he sold his share

in the business to Peltzer and cleared out. We had been ruined by Govaerts, not only my brother and I, but a dozen other Portuguese settlers. We left Dar-es-Salaam to work here in Antwerp, since we knew he came from somewhere around here. We handle trade with Tanganyika and the Portuguese east coast. But my brother and I are on the lookout for Rudolph Govaerts all the time. We know he is at his father's manor house most of the time. We cannot touch him there. But sooner or later, we shall find a way.

"You are going to help us find him, Monsieur Verhagen," the man said, looking down at Modeste. "You will probably find your daughter with him —that is, if she is still alive."

"He is away from home now, but if I can locate him, I shall notify you immediately, Monsieur Rodriguez," Modeste said.

"You had better, Monsieur Verhagen," Rodriguez said slowly, stepping quite close to Modeste and drawing out the dagger again. "If there is any double-crossing, you will feel this between your ribs."

Modeste walked through the streets in a daze. Rodriguez' story had shaken him. Clearly, Rudolph was in immediate danger. This man and his brother were in deadly earnest. Sooner or later they would strike. Should he go to the police and tell them? No doubt the police would start a hunt for the Portuguese conspirators, especially if Heer Guido made the request. The police would also provide protection for Rudolph. But in that case, if Modeste revealed the threats to Rudolph's life, he would also have to speak of the strangers' motive for tracking Rudolph.

And what then? Rudolph would be exposed as a murderer. Would he then be extradited and brought to trial in that strange country of which Rodriguez had spoken? Perhaps, Modeste told himself, he should first consult a lawyer. Before telling Guido? Or should he now go to Charlotte's house and take that lady and Heer Caesar into his confidence?

He went to the house, but at the door his courage failed him. It would be better to return to Moorkerken immediately and find Rudolph first of all, talk with him, tell him everything he knew. Then, at least, his conscience would be clear. Let Rudolph consult a lawyer if he chose to do so, or notify the police that his life was in danger. Perhaps Rudolph could bribe Rodriguez and his brother—buy them off, as it were, give them a sum of money and let them go away. That was an idea! That was the course of action he would propose to Heer Rudolph the moment he saw him.

Rain had turned to snow as the old man tramped about from one street to another. His head was in a whirl. If Rudolph should manage to buy off the men who were seeking his life, Modeste reasoned, the young master would

still remain in Moorkerken. He would still have the Lady Mathilda in his power. No, he wouldn't. That's where he, Modeste, would intervene. He could make it a condition of silence on his own part that Rudolph let Mathilda alone. He would say to Rudolph: "I will never speak a word of what happened in Africa, but you must stop persecuting your father's wife."

Ah, that wouldn't do, either. That would amount to blackmail. Rudolph was not the sort to agree to an arrangement which might keep him permanently at the mercy of the Rodriguez brothers.

In paying them a sum of money, he would, by implication, admit his guilt. Then they could really do as they liked with him. Moreover, it was extremely doubtful, it was taking too much for granted, to assume that the Portuguese were going to allow themselves to be bought off in the first place. Those men were not after money—they were out to kill.

From whatever angle Modeste looked at the situation he could think of no loophole or contrivance that offered the least chance of escape for Rudolph. It was too much for the old superintendent. He could not solve the problem alone. Besides, he was physically sick and exhausted from the long day's pondering and scheming and walking. His wisest course, he thought, still lay in not talking to anyone for the time being, and in returning to Moorkerken at once.

An icy wind blew in Modeste's face as he crossed the majestic Place du Meir. There were few pedestrians. Extra horses had been hitched to the tramcars, which went by at a snail's pace. Here and there, at the main intersections, workers were busy in the glare of torches clearing the rails and switches of snow.

Modeste saw none of this. He walked on and on. He had not eaten since early morning. His legs were weak as he turned in the direction of the ferry at the Tête de Flandres. When he had gone about a mile, it dawned on him that even if the ferries were running, there would be no train on the other side of the Scheldt to carry him to Maere at this time of night. He would have to wait till noon of the following day.

He turned, and started to wade through the snow in the direction from which he had come. In spite of the fact that the snow had soaked his clothes and that he shivered with cold, he was obliged to wipe drops of sweat from his face.

If he was forced to wait until morning, he decided, he might as well spend the night in the hotel which formerly had been owned by Mathilda's parents. He could then, perhaps, make those inquiries he had so long intended to make. Not that it mattered now, one way or the other, what

indiscretions or irregularities, if any, Mathilda had committed in the past. Mathilda's case was of small account in the light of this new knowledge. Everything now centered on Rudolph. The threat to Rudolph's life, the acute and constant danger he was in, overshadowed everything else in the superintendent's mind. If Rudolph, for instance, could be persuaded to leave, if he could be made to see that his salvation, if only temporarily, lay in his quitting the country and covering up his tracks, why then the troubles with Mathilda might be at an end, too.

Dragging his weary, wet feet through the mounting snow, Modeste finally located the hotel in a narrow street running off the Kattendyk, in the immediate vicinity of the great dockyards of that name. A policeman who stood on the corner under the street lamp, beating his arms against his body in an effort to keep warm, pointed out the building to the cold and bedraggled Modeste.

"Better get indoors, father," he said kindly, "this is no time for you to be out."

A glance at the façade of the hostelry showed Modeste a shabby, three-story building that hung, as it were, on the shoulders of two packinghouses on either side. The façade had sagged with age. Dirt and grease lay thick as a curtain on the downstairs windows. The glass of the center door was cracked and patched with strips of newspaper.

When Modeste pushed the door open, a bell rang out, and he found himself standing in a barroom. A few sailors were playing cards near the red-hot stove halfway down the room. Modeste could not understand the language they were speaking. With a sigh he sat down on a chair near the door. Presently a man who had been watching the sailors play turned and came over. He was enormous and waddled rather than walked. A broad leather belt supported his hanging belly. Modeste saw that he had little, shifty, beadlike eyes. Asked what his pleasure might be, Modeste replied that he would like lodging for the night.

"Go upstairs," the man said, pointing with his thumb to a door behind the bar, "first door to your left. Tell the woman Cyriel sent you up."

"Cyriel? Is that you?"

"Go upstairs if you want a bed," the man said roughly, "and don't ask so many questions, or I'll throw you out in the street."

As Modeste stumbled up the poorly lit stairway he wondered if this could indeed be the place from which the Lady Mathilda had come. Did Guido know? Had Guido ever gone to the trouble of investigating the circumstances in which Mathilda had lived before he married her? The hotel

was worse than Modeste had expected. In his imagination he had conjured up a gaudy, roaring dance hall with mirrors on the walls and cheap paintings of nude women in all the attitudes of seduction and lewdness, an organ of Barbary thumping away and crowds of dancing, drinking men and women, and Mathilda presiding somewhere behind the money till, or walking around giving orders here and there.

How had that idea ever entered his head? This place could never have been anything like that, at least not in living man's memory. The hotel was dank and cold and moldy. The plaster had fallen off the walls, the stairway was rickety. He thought he smelled mice and rats.

Modeste felt a wave of pity in his heart for Mathilda. No wonder she had seized upon Guido's proposal of marriage so eagerly. He could understand her actions and motives now. He was glad he had come.

An elderly woman rose from a couch behind the counter where she had obviously been sleeping. Modeste said he wanted a room for the night and something to eat if that were possible.

"I can give you some bread and cheese and coffee," the woman answered, "and perhaps I can warm up some soup for you. You're cold. I see that you are shivering. Better sit near the stove here." She indicated a small coal stove behind the counter. "Sit here and dry your clothes."

When she returned with the food and a steaming pot of coffee, Modeste asked her if she would not drink with him. The woman nodded in a friendly way. "I don't mind if I do," she said, and then added, dropping her voice to a whisper, "It's so seldom that we get an honest Flemish countryman in this place. All foreigners, you know, sailors and stevedores and such-like."

"It is a long time since I was here last," Modeste said.

"It must be a long time," the woman replied, "for I have been here eighteen years and I don't seem to be able to place you at all. And still I never forget a face."

"I remember the young lady that was here," Modeste said. "What was her name again?"

"Perhaps you mean Mathilda?"

"Yes, that was her name! A great beauty, if I remember correctly. What became of her?"

"She married a rich country squire. She lives somewhere in the neighborhood of Maere, I believe."

"Good for her!" Modeste exclaimed. "How did she manage that? Did the squire meet her here?"

“Heavens, no! He had relatives here in Antwerp. Mathilda met him at their home. The squire never set foot in this place. Mathilda was clever enough to see to that.”

“She was beautiful,” Modeste said again, to stimulate conversation. “Red hair, a striking appearance, as I recall.”

“Beautiful she was,” the woman admitted, “and a good heart, too. Do you know she never forgets my birthday? I was here, in this hotel, when she was a mere tot. I saw her grow up. She was away a long time with the Sisters at Brussels, learned French and needlework and how to play the piano. That was the only good time the poor lamb ever had in her life—that is, before she met the squire, of course.”

“Why had her life been so unhappy?” Modeste asked.

“Well, when she came back from school, this place had gone to pot. Her father drank and lost his money. Once this was a respectable businessmen’s hotel. Then he, Mijnheer de Ruyter, I mean, Mathilda’s father, let the bars down. It went from bad to worse. The clientele came from the docks after that, mostly English sailors. Mijnheer de Ruyter closed an eye, and sometimes both eyes. The things that went on in this place then, I can’t begin to tell you.”

“Women, I suppose?” Modeste asked.

“Women, yes, and fights, and all kinds of trouble.”

“Was Mathilda here at the time?”

“Indeed she was,” the woman said.

“But Mathilda herself was not mixed up in any . . . uh . . . irregularities?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, you said the sailors had their women here. Was Mathilda . . . ?”

“Good God, how can you ask such a question? I see what you mean. No, of course not, the dear child. She tried to change things after Mijnheer de Ruyter’s death, but she could not bring back what was gone, you might say.”

“What was gone, then?”

“The respectability. The good name of the place was gone. No decent burgher would come in after what had taken place here.”

“I see,” Modeste said, “but this Mathilda had nothing to do with the things that gave the place such a bad name?”

“That girl was mortified to the depth of her soul by all the filth and rowdyism. But what would you? A chimney sweep cannot very well keep his hands clean, and a woman serving in the bar of a sailors’ hangout must suffer in reputation. Mathilda was obliged to listen to a good many things

she should never have heard. The customers flocked around her like flies around a pot of honey. There was one Englishman, he was the captain of the packet to Harwich, a man by the name of Cavelaer, I think, who was particularly annoying. He swore one day that he would possess Mathilda if he should have to take her by force."

"Did he succeed?"

"She slapped his face for him the moment she heard of his boast. She would have nothing to do with riffraff of that kind, not she. The barroom was crowded at the time. Some men had just been paid off. They were drinking heavily. A Swedish mate took up the cudgels for Mathilda, and called the Englishman to account. Then there was a fight. Everybody pitched in. The barroom was wrecked. You never saw such a shambles. There simply wasn't a glass or a bottle or a chair or a window that wasn't smashed. Of course, the police came in, their station is just around the corner, and we were all taken to the guardhouse."

"Mathilda, too?"

"Yes, everybody had to go along. The inspector in charge would not make a single exception. Mathilda and I spent the night in the women's lockup, and if it hadn't been for Heer Caesar Govaerts, the town councillor, we would probably have gone to jail. At least Mathilda would have, for she was the proprietress. The charge against her was running a disorderly house. Heer Caesar had the charge dropped, though. That's where Mathilda had a stroke of luck. She became very friendly with Councillor Govaerts. She was even invited to his house."

"I see now," Modeste said. "And it was at the home of Caesar Govaerts that Mathilda met her future husband? She certainly did well."

"I should say she did," the woman assented, "although I was told that the squire she married is a little too old for her. Still, he is said to be pretty gay. And rich? Heavens! If you could have seen the gown that girl wore when she was married, and the gold bracelets and earrings—like a queen, I tell you.

"Once Mathilda came back here after her marriage—and loaded with presents, for me, mind you. She told me never to mention her name to anybody in connection with this hotel. I expect the squire, her husband, doesn't know that she ever lived here. Well, what a person doesn't know won't hurt him, don't you agree? And I've kept my mouth closed. Of course, I did speak to you about her, but that's because you asked about her by name, and used to know her."

Modeste returned to Maere by the next afternoon's train. He had not slept a wink. He could hardly stand when he hired the carriage at the railroad station to drive back to Moorkerken. Guido had promised to send someone down to pick him up, but that was for the next day. Modeste had originally planned to stay in Antwerp at least a day longer.

When he rode past "The Ducal Court" he saw Rudolph standing at the big window in the company of Notary Fabian and the three retired functionaries. For a moment he felt like stopping the driver, going into the hostelry and taking Rudolph aside to give him a word of warning and to tell him, then and there, all he had heard. But his courage failed him. It would be easier, after all, to begin with Master Colas—tell him the story and consult with him. Then, together they could, perhaps, go to Rudolph. He dismissed the carriage when he saw the lights of the manor house twinkling through the naked branches of the apple trees, and walked the rest of the way to his cabin, staggering with fatigue, and the moment he was inside he undressed and fell into bed. Sleep overcame him at once.

Shortly after midnight Modeste was awakened by the rumble of the stable door opening and closing and the sound of a horse's hoofs on the wooden floor. He got up and peered through the window. Someone was passing his door. He opened it and looked out. Rudolph turned his head and glanced back at the superintendent, without saying a word.

"Heer Rudolph," Modeste called softly, shaking in every limb, "may I speak to you a moment?"

"What is it?" Rudolph asked gruffly.

"Something of importance, Heer Rudolph, please step in here a minute."

Rudolph came in and Modeste closed the door behind him.

"Be quick, I'm tired," Rudolph said, "what is it you want?"

Modeste was undecided whether to put on his trousers first or light the lamp. Rudolph's command made him forget both.

"You're in danger, Heer Rudolph," he blurted. "I was in Antwerp. I saw Rodriguez. He and his brother . . ."

"Don't talk so loud," Rudolph whispered, his voice betraying alarm. They stood facing each other in the dark, within two feet of each other. Both were breathing heavily.

After an instant of silence, Rudolph asked, "Did you meet these people by accident?"

“No, Heer Rudolph,” Modeste whispered. “I went to look for him. I found him.”

“Why?” Rudolph snarled. “What business had you with Rodriguez?”

“I wanted to speak to him.”

“You were out snooping, weren’t you, you old toad? You wanted to get something on me.”

“No, Heer Rudolph, that wasn’t my intention. I wanted to protect you. You are in danger.”

“What did you find out? Speak up, man, quick, I won’t hurt you.”

Modeste trembled so violently that he could not say another word. Everything was jumbled in his head: Rodriguez, Mathilda, the dagger, Charlotte Govaerts, the ride on the ferry. . . .

“Let me drink some water, please,” he said.

“You’ll talk first, *salaud*,” Rudolph said, stepping quite close to Modeste. “Why did you look for Rodriguez in the first place? Answer me!”

“Heer Rudolph, he has a dagger.”

“That’s no answer to my question. What was your purpose in going to Antwerp?”

“Heer Rudolph, you must stop forcing your attentions on your father’s wife. You must flee as quickly as you can. They will not rest till they find you.”

Rudolph took hold of Modeste’s arm with an iron grip. “You scoundrel. How dare you interfere in my affairs?”

“I’m not interfering in your affairs. I am protecting your father.”

“What did Rodriguez tell you?”

“He told me you murdered his brother,” Modeste said.

Rudolph gasped. “And now you are going to tell my father, I suppose, if I don’t clear out. You want to drive me out, do you? You connived with Rodriguez, you blackmailer. . . .”

“I swear I did not,” Modeste said, and then was silent.

“Talk,” Rudolph ordered. “Tell me everything. But talk softly or I’ll squeeze the life out of you.” He seized Modeste by the throat.

Modeste felt the momentary courage of desperation. “I’ll talk,” he said, “but not to you. I have told you all I need to. I’ll talk to the Heer of Moorkerken. I owe you nothing—no explanation, nothing.” His words broke off as he felt Rudolph’s grip tighten on his throat.

“I’ll call for help if you don’t leave me alone!” he managed to say. “They will hear me in the stable. Some of the boys are playing cards tonight.”

Rudolph shook him and flung his body against the wall.

“Stop, you murderer!” Modeste shrieked. “Murderer! Murderer!” His voice died away.

Rudolph held him by the throat, pinned against the wall, until he felt the man’s body grow limp and then sag downward. He pushed Modeste from him. There was a crash as Modeste’s head struck the table, and some dishes clattered to the floor.

Rudolph struck a match and examined his victim’s face. He extinguished the match and opened the door. He looked around carefully. No one seemed to be about. The lights were out in the manor house. Rudolph crept silently around the stable.

9

Early the following morning Guido drove to Maere to meet with Notary Fabian and officials of the land registry bureau, in order to determine the validity of the title deeds to the moorland which he intended to turn over to the peasants. The Government, while not disputing his claim to ownership of Vampire's Pit, Christopher Bay, and adjacent territories, nevertheless evinced a rather sudden and extraordinary interest in the ultimate disposal to be made of these properties. The suspicion never entered Guido's mind that official attention might have been drawn to the matter by interested persons anxious to delay and, if possible, prevent the execution of his plans. He was still unaware of the campaign of opposition carried on by Rudolph with the aid of François van Abeele.

While chafing under the delaying tactics of the Crown's agents, Guido accepted their official explanations in good faith. It seemed to him quite legitimate and wise that exhaustive inquiries should be made, inasmuch as the area under discussion, barren and unproductive though it was at present, lay in that coastal region which under certain circumstances, such as an attempted invasion of Flanders from the sea, might assume major importance. From the point of view of national security there was certainly something to be said for unusual caution.

First, the government agents wanted to know whether the buildings Guido intended to put up would not constitute too inviting a target for an enemy fleet at sea, and whether, in the event of an emergency, they could be quickly dismantled again. For strategic reasons they also demanded a voice in the planning of roads for the project. In fact, scarcely was one question settled when another, even more vexatious, came up. Seemingly inconsequential details had to be referred to the national archives, to the district council, to the department of defense in the capital, and to even higher authority. A man less patient and determined than Guido would have grown weary and exasperated with all the dallying, procrastination and subtle obstructionism, but he had set his heart on completing the project; the

more difficulties he encountered, the more determined he became to carry his ideas through.

Esther, Colas and Hele accompanied him in the carriage that morning. They were going to inspect the cathedral of Maere, “that crumbling fortress of metaphysics,” as Colas called it. Hele, especially, was interested in the wooden sculptures of the choir stalls, dating from the twelfth century, which are still considered among the finest specimens of the craft in all Europe. Except for some scenes of unmentionable obscenity and sacrilege, Maere’s mediaeval craftsmen depicted the history of the human race in terms of its principal female representatives from Eve, Sarah, Miriam and Deborah down to the Great Harlot of the Book of Revelations.

The three sightseers were to meet Guido at Uncle Urbain’s presbytery for dinner, and then return to Moorkerken with him.

Thus it happened that the death of Uncle Modeste went undiscovered until nearly noon. At that time Rudolph—unable to bear the suspense any longer—sent Floris, the stableboy, to look for the superintendent with a message to prepare for a large shipment of potatoes to the military barracks in Antwerp. It did not occur to Floris to look for the superintendent in his quarters until he had searched for him all over the estate. At last, when he learned that nobody remembered having seen Modeste around that morning, Floris knocked on the door of his cabin at the rear of the stable. Receiving no reply, he entered, stood horrified and speechless for a moment, and then ran screaming to the manor house.

Rudolph came out at once. Some farm hands, attracted by the lad’s cries, were already standing in the cabin doorway looking down at Modeste’s body. He lay grotesquely sprawled against the legs of the table, his head half-lifted, his hands pointing upwards, his fingers twisted like outspread claws. Rigor mortis had fixed his face in a horrible leer. His eyes and mouth were wide open. The color of his skin was a deep purple.

“Has he fainted?” Rudolph asked, stepping into the cabin.

“He’s dead,” one of the peasants replied. “He must have suffered a stroke—see how red and swollen his face is.”

Rudolph dropped to one knee at Modeste’s side. “Yes, as you say, most likely a stroke. He must have fallen, and couldn’t get up. But it must have happened some time ago. Feel how cold he is.”

“Cold as ice,” said an elderly peasant, putting his hand to Modeste’s cheek.

Rudolph ordered the body lifted to the bed. The room was now full of men. One farmer came running in with a lighted taper in his hand, and tried

to force it into the dead man's hand.

"It's no use, Hippolyte," another said. "He's gone. God rest his soul!" They all uncovered their heads.

"My father should be notified at once," Rudolph said.

"Modeste hadn't intended to return till this afternoon," an elderly peasant said, "how is it that he is here now, and dead?"

"He must have returned earlier," Rudolph answered somewhat testily. "That seems clear enough."

"If he was in Antwerp," the peasant said, "he must have come back yesterday. There's only one train a day. And he slept here—see, he's undressed. Didn't anybody see him last night or this morning?"

"He came from Maere in a hired carriage," said Floris, the stableboy. "I saw him drive in after dark last night."

"Where were you?" asked the peasant who had first spoken.

"I was on the road, taking a stroll," Floris replied.

"Alone?"

"No," Floris hesitated. "Maria was with me. . . ."

"Let's clear the room," said Rudolph, glancing malevolently at Floris. "I'm going to Maere myself."

Rudolph arrived at the presbytery while Guido and the rest were still at table. He had ridden hard.

Guido was staggered by the news. "Modeste is dead," he said, "and here I sit, waiting for the train to bring him in. I had decided to meet him myself. I can't understand it. He must have come in yesterday. It is strange, though, isn't it, that he didn't come to see me for a moment last night? He never failed to do that when he had been away. What time do you think he returned?"

"I can't guess," Rudolph replied. "Floris and Maria saw him drive by on the road. It was dark then, they said."

"We can ask the coachman about the time," Colas said. "He will probably remember, too, whether Modeste complained of illness. If he suffered a stroke when he got home, he might have been feeling ill previously. That might explain his return a day early, and his not coming to speak to you, Father. . . ."

"You had better send a telegram to his son and daughter while you're here in Maere," Uncle Urbain suggested. "They ought to be notified. I will

send the messages myself if you'll give me the addresses. And, Colas, you might also call Dr. Lammers. We will need the doctor's certificate for the burial permit. I will come with you to Moorkerken for the absolution."

"Was Sylvain at home when Floris made the discovery?" Guido was now striding up and down the dining room in agitation.

"I haven't seen Sylvain since yesterday," Rudolph replied.

"I saw him early this morning," Esther said. "He left the house shortly before five o'clock. . . ."

"To go to Mass at Moorkerken," Guido nodded. "He'll probably be home by now."

Colas went to get Dr. Lammers, and when he returned, they all drove back to the manor house.

On their arrival, Guido and the doctor, followed by Uncle Urbain, Rudolph and Colas, went straight to Uncle Modeste's quarters. The doctor ordered the lamp lit, and looked at the dead man's face. It had turned almost black. He examined Modeste's eyes and then, baring the throat, felt the stiffened muscles and the Adam's apple.

The doctor straightened up with a start. "Look," he said to Guido in an undertone, "the pupils are dilated with terror. Do you see these marks on his throat? They were made by human fingers. This man was choked to death. His neck is fractured. There's no question of apoplexy here. . . ."

Guido gasped. "Choked to death? My God! You can't mean that he was murdered?"

"That's precisely what I do mean," the doctor said gravely. "I won't be able to give you the burial certificate. You will have to call the police. An abominable crime has been committed in this room."

Guido bowed his head. "Who could have wanted to kill Modeste? He hadn't an enemy in the world. . . ."

The Vicar of Maere put his stole around his shoulders, and opened his breviary. Quietly he walked over to the bed and closed the dead man's eyes. Noticing that they slowly opened again, he took some coins from his pocket and placed one on each eyelid.

That evening the gendarmes came to the manor house, but they did not question anybody. They merely put a guard outside Uncle Modeste's cabin and stationed another man in the stable. They asked Guido for a list of all persons living on the estate, and forbade anyone to leave.

Later, when the family was sitting at the table after a simple supper, Sylvain suddenly asked who had made the discovery of Uncle Modeste's

death.

"I did," Rudolph replied, "that is, I sent Floris to look for Modeste, and Floris was the first to see him dead. I was the first to go into his cabin. I didn't believe Floris. I thought the old fellow had only fainted. But there he was dead and stiff. And he had been dead for quite some time. He felt cold as a stone. Still, I don't believe that he was murdered. That's just a surmise on Dr. Lammers' part. Doctors are not infallible, you know. There was no blood, nor any sign of struggle or disorder in the room."

"But his throat was injured," Guido said.

"Couldn't he have injured himself in falling against the table?" Rudolph asked.

"Why should he fall?" Colas said. "He was pretty steady on his legs, for all his great age."

"He was felled by a stroke," Rudolph said. "That was the first impression of the men who came into his room with me. They ought to know. They must have seen cases of stroke before. . . ."

"Modeste was not the man to suffer a stroke," Guido said, shaking his head. "His kind don't die that way. He was too lean for that, his blood was too thin. And he was tough. . . ."

"Rudolph," Sylvain said suddenly, "why did you send a message to Uncle Modeste? You haven't had any dealings with him, directly or indirectly, for a long time. You never even deigned to speak to him. . . ."

Rudolph angrily turned on him. "What's come over you? What are you insinuating? . . ."

"Nothing! Nothing!" Sylvain whispered. He had become white as a sheet. His head bent forward until it rested on his arms on the table, and his whole body shook with sobs.

Esther rose and placed her hand on his shoulder. Guido, trembling, looked alternately from his weeping son to Rudolph. Unable to bear his father's disconcerting stare, Rudolph averted his face. To Mathilda he made a sign, pointing first to his forehead and then to Sylvain. But Uncle Urbain, who saw the gesture, shook his head in vigorous disapproval, and then looked at Rudolph so sternly that he lost countenance, and in his embarrassment rose from the table.

The stillness in the room was broken only by Sylvain's sobs. The boy's tears disturbed Guido more than they surprised him. He sat down next to his youngest son, and put his hand on the boy's bent shoulder. Perhaps the shock of Uncle Modeste's death had been too much for his sensitive nature. He patted his son's back reassuringly. The others had risen now, and were

standing about the room talking in whispers. Everybody was too upset to go to bed. Esther had covered her face with her hands.

Guido was silent. From the moment he had learned of the tragedy, there had been a burning sensation in his heart. Instead of abating, that feeling grew sharper with the passage of the hours. At first he had felt numbed. That was in Maere, when Rudolph brought the news, and later on the road during the drive to Moorkerken. Nearing the manor a haunting uneasiness had gradually taken possession of him. Vague misgivings, unaccountable and disturbing, preyed on his mind. He had a presentiment of evil. Then, to substantiate his gloomy anticipations, the doctor had announced that Modeste had been murdered. And now Sylvain's amazing question!

What was happening? Guido suddenly felt like running to Modeste's cabin and asking him what terrible secret he had carried with him to his death. He looked from Uncle Urbain's serene face to Colas and Hele, and then to Rudolph, who stood in a corner by the window where he had drawn Mathilda into a whispered conversation. He would have liked to question Rudolph, and learn the cause of Sylvain's sudden distress. But he dared not, he could not speak. A suffocating burden seemed to weigh on his heart, and clutch at his throat. He felt faint and his chin trembled as it always did when he was deeply disturbed.

He went out to Modeste's cabin, nevertheless. A woman from Moorkerken village, Helena Magnin, and her two helpers had just washed Modeste's body, and dressed it in his best suit. They had hung a towel over the tiny mirror above the washstand so that the soul of the deceased, in flying off to other realms, would not recognize itself in the glass and, unable to tear itself away from its own likeness, remain to haunt the living. The body lay under a white sheet. On the shelf, just above the bed, Guido saw the old man's trombone.

The Heer of Moorkerken started to raise the sheet for a last look at the man who had been his daily companion all his life, but Helena stepped forward and stopped him. "He's not good to look at, Heer Guido," she said. "He's black as the night. It's worse than an hour ago. . . ."

The woman was lighting the tapers on the table near Modeste's head when Sylvain tiptoed into the room. He knelt by the bedside and began reciting the prayers for the dead. The women knelt, too, but Guido stood with his head bowed, sighing deeply.

The next morning, peasants began to arrive at the house at an early hour. They stood around the yard and in the stables discussing the murder, for news of the violent nature of Modeste's death had spread far and wide over the district during the night. The officers of the law came in two carriages shortly after nine o'clock. Guido received them in front of the house, and led them into the large room in the east wing where a black cover had been laid over the table. They were hardly seated when Rudolph, who, like his father, was dressed in black for the occasion, ushered in François van Abeele, the Heer of Appelkerken, and two other landowners.

Dr. Lammers submitted a report on the condition in which he had found Modeste's body, and on the nature of the injuries that had caused death. Then Rudolph and Floris and some peasants testified to the circumstances of the discovery, whereupon the gentlemen solemnly filed out in a group to view the body, and to examine the premises.

When they were back in the dining room and seated around the table once more, François van Abeele launched into a long discourse on the killing of Simon Potter, the man who had served as superintendent on the Abeele estate until the day when the infuriated peasants threw him into the threshing machine.

"That case has the Crown's undivided attention," the Procurator, Maître Jules du Mont, interrupted pompously. "But I think it must be viewed quite independently from the lamentable incident which has brought us together here this morning."

Jules du Mont's real name was Jan van Bergen. He was one of those Flemings who, for reasons of civic and social advancement, had given his patronymic a French turn. The Procurator was inordinately thin, a mere spindle of a man. On the end of his peaked nose trembled a tiny pince-nez through which he never looked. It gave his face the comical appearance of a fish looking over the edge of a bowl. With the landowners, he had a reputation for keen intellect and affable manners, but the peasants, with whom he habitually dealt in a condescending manner, considered him a turncoat, one who had disavowed his nation. Monsieur du Mont was married to a widow of means, and had three grown stepdaughters whom he sought to introduce into society. Evidently he was more than pleased that morning to find himself in the company of some of the richest landowners of the county.

"*Maître*," said François van Abeele, leaning across the table, and addressing the Procurator in French, "you will forgive me if I beg to differ with you on your interpretation of the murder of Modeste Verhagen. In my opinion there is clearly a connection here with the brutal slaying of my own superintendent, Simon Potter . . . I think the two murders are links in an

anarchistic plot on the part of the peasants—yes, Monsieur, please do not contradict me, nothing less than an anarchistic plot. There's more behind these murders than meets the eye. These two deaths are warnings, I believe, warnings addressed to the landowners. There are more dreadful things to come. This is the reason the Heer of Appelkerken and myself have come here this morning. To be frank, Monsieur du Mont, we entertain the gravest apprehensions for the future."

"If that is your view," said Maître du Mont, when he was sure that François had stopped speaking, "this case, and the case of Potter, assume a far wider significance than I thought. If this man—what is his name?—this Modeste Verhagen was killed for the motives the Heer van Abeele surmises, he fell in the performance of duty, in the defense of law and order. You have thrown a revealing light on this dark question," he said, bowing in François' direction.

"*Ach*, what!" Guido exploded. He had listened with amazement. "Now you're entirely off the track. Modeste was a good man, true enough, but there was never any animosity between him and the peasants;—certainly nothing that would lead to a tragedy like this. Modeste hadn't an enemy in the world. . . ."

"I wouldn't say that, Father," Rudolph interrupted. "There wasn't much love lost between him and the men of the Teniers family, for instance, and there may have been others. He detested them and, I think, those sentiments were fully reciprocated. David Teniers hated him like poison. I once heard him call Modeste an old toad whom he'd like to crush. . . ."

"Just talk!" Guido said, shaking his head impatiently. "That's nothing serious. . . ."

"On the contrary, Heer Guido," put in the Procurator, "that's very serious, very serious indeed. We may very well have a clue there to the murderer's identity. That's a threat of death, nothing less. . . . I must make note of that statement as deserving the closest attention." The scribe at the Procurator's side was writing for all he was worth.

"David Teniers did not kill Uncle Modeste, if that's what you mean to imply," Sylvain said suddenly. "He may use rough language occasionally; he's not a murderer."

"I don't think so either," Colas agreed. "I saw him only this morning, and he talked quite calmly and rationally of Modeste's death. If he had been guilty, he would have been nervous and would have tangled himself up. He would probably have run away by now."

“Ah, *les paysans*, those peasants!” sighed Maître du Mont, shaking his head hopelessly, “dissimulation and slyness seem the chief traits of their character. . . .”

“They’re the biggest liars on earth,” François van Abeele added bluntly, running his fingers through his red, curly hair.

Maître du Mont gravely nodded agreement. “Do you know,” he asked, “what a Pope once said of our peasants? The Holy Father said: ‘God’s mercy may be infinite, but the wily shrewdness of the Flemish peasant is still greater.’ . . .”

“You ought to know,” Guido said icily, looking straight at the Procurator. “Your own father, Piet van Bergen, was a peasant. Your uncles and nephews still are.”

“We’ll get nowhere if we engage in personal recriminations,” Maître du Mont replied, with a visible effort at self-control, although the trembling of his pince-nez showed that Guido’s dart had gone home. “Our task, the task of the judiciary, is to ferret out the murderer. Nothing else matters. Any clue we receive, no matter how feeble, must be followed.”

“What about those Gypsies camped near my village?” the Heer of Appelkerken asked the Procurator. “Why don’t you send the police to investigate? This murder gives you a perfect excuse. I want to see them expelled from the district, anyway. . . .”

The Heer of Appelkerken was short in stature and given to *embonpoint*. His face and nose were disfigured by a myriad of tiny purple veins. He was a nobleman of the old school, dissipating an enormous fortune, a goodhearted man, honest after his own fashion, but utterly without any comprehension of the needs of modern days. When he talked of anything connected with the peasants, he grew angry and even more red in the face, if that were possible.

“I want the Gypsies expelled from the district at once,” he said again.

“Of course, of course, the Gypsies will be driven out of the district,” the Procurator said hastily. “They’re a positive nuisance. We wanted to push them out long ago, but we thought they’d leave on their own account.”

“They’ve been in my pine forest for three weeks now,” said the Heer of Appelkerken, “I want them out.”

“What harm do they do?” asked Sylvain.

“What harm?” the Procurator replied. “Well, you really can’t say they do any harm. You can’t say that. The peasants rather like them, as a matter of fact. They mend pots and pans. The men are horse traders and horse doctors. The women go around the countryside telling fortunes. . . .”

“Is that all they do?” Colas asked.

All the men laughed, except Sylvain, who blushed violently.

“Well,” said the Heer of Appelkerken, “I had some of their women up to the house the other night. For a little show and entertainment, you understand. Man alive, how they can dance! There were two or three beauties that would have given you ideas, François. God, what eyes! What luscious mouths! But their men are so insanely jealous, it’s a crime. . . .”

“Why did you let the men come along?” François van Abeele asked.

“They insisted. I mean the women did. ‘We don’t come without our men,’ they said. Besides, the men brought their violins for the dancing.”

“Did you count the spoons and forks after they left?” Rudolph asked.

“Yes; believe it or not, nothing was missing.”

“Then in what way do the Gypsies make a nuisance of themselves?” Sylvain asked again, turning to Maître du Mont. “Where will they go if you drive them from the district?”

“They’ll move to the next, into Zoute, I suppose,” said the Procurator.

“May they stay there?”

“Of course not, Zoute will expel them in turn, and so on, and so on. . . .”

“But don’t drive them out until you’ve investigated,” Rudolph told the Procurator. “We want to find the murderer, you know.”

“That’s all that matters,” agreed the Heer of Appelkerken. “Apprehend the murderer, one way or another.”

“If the Gypsies murdered Modeste,” Colas said, “they would probably have robbed him. There’s no evidence of that.”

“Not necessarily,” returned the Procurator sententiously. “They might have been frightened away by someone approaching the cabin door. They might have resorted to murder to prevent their victim from making an outcry.”

“What’s there to steal in Modeste’s cabin?” Guido asked. “The trombone?”

Finding himself thwarted by the absence of the slightest genuine clue, yet anxious to impress François van Abeele and the other landlords with his zeal and vigor in handling the case, Procurator du Mont resorted to the well-worn but contemptible method of making a number of indiscriminate arrests

in the weeks that followed. Tramps, beggars, peddlers, and other humble persons with little knowledge of the law, and of their own rights under the law, were picked up all over the district, taken to the lockup at Moorkerken, and there subjected to questioning by the gendarmes.

In several instances the Procurator took personal charge in the examination of prisoners. He was in a desperate hurry. He realized that his reputation and position, as well as the future of his three unmarried stepdaughters, were at stake. In his bungling haste he lost all sense of proportion, arresting so many people that the jail at Moorkerken soon became too small to hold the batches of suspects arriving at every hour of the day and night. Monsieur du Mont had conceived the notion that if he could not at once lay hands on the actual culprit, he might, temporarily at least, pin suspicion on some scapegoat or other, and hold that person for trial before the Assizes in the following autumn. In this way he would not only satisfy the landlords that justice was being done, but he would also gain time and opportunity to pursue his investigations at leisure.

He found it no easy matter, however, to select a suitable victim. The peasants said little and maintained an air of grave watchfulness in his presence. He suddenly discovered that he was faced with a resistance which, though unorganized, proved unyielding even under pressure. Besides, his trick and catch questions were too transparent to trap them. The peasants had an elusive slyness of their own. It was as if he dealt with handfuls of wet sand which, as fast as he grasped them, were sucked through his fingers by the action of some mysterious undertow.

Floris and Maria were grilled together and separately in the presence of Rudolph and François, but nothing more could be learned than that they were making love by the roadside when Uncle Modeste passed. The Procurator's blunt suggestion that Floris had gone to Modeste's cabin and choked him to death to prevent the superintendent from telling Guido about his relationship with the girl, fell flat on Floris' declaration that Maria and he were to be married, and that they had properly asked the consent of both Modeste and Guido.

Some prisoners were deprived of food and drink for days and nights on end, and were subjected to all sorts of badgering and indignities in the expectation of inducing a state of exhaustion wherein a more or less damaging admission could be extracted. It was all in vain! The Gypsy camp was invaded at dawn one day and the men dragged off to jail. This mass arrest caused a commotion in Moorkerken that was not soon forgotten: the Gypsy women promptly broke up camp and, with their horses and wagons,

moved into the village and pitched their tents in the small square in front of the town hall.

When their pleas to the authorities to release their men went unheeded, they circulated a rumor that they were about to cast a spell on the crops and the cattle. At night the square was filled with their shrieks and lamentations and the wailing of the children. In the end Moorkerken's citizenry took the Gypsies' side, and compelled the Burgomaster to order the men set free. The Gypsies thereupon promptly left the district.

Except for the Heer of Appelkerken, who had insistently demanded their expulsion, nobody seemed pleased with the departure of those gay and picturesque strangers. As for the Procurator, the incident served to fortify the general opinion that he was making a first-class fool of himself. He had been unable to sustain a single one of the many arrests he made.

Monsieur du Mont had no more luck with a certain foreign merchant by the name of Pedro Rodriguez who was found wandering in the vicinity of the Tower of Terzel on Heer Guido's estate. After holding Rodriguez on suspicion for three days, and counting on the public apathy toward the rights of aliens to make it possible to hold the man at least until the Fall Assizes, the Procurator was forced to release him just as he was about to announce the arrest of the "real" murderer. Relatives of Rodriguez had come from Antwerp accompanied by legal experts who testified, passport and trade permits in hand, that the man was on legitimate business in Flanders, and that in traveling along the coast, he had merely mistaken his direction at one point.

Rudolph heaved a sigh of relief when the man was released, and told not to return to the district. But the liberation of the Portuguese brought the Procurator to his wits' end. He was panic-stricken—at a total loss how to proceed. He was groping in a void and quarreling with everybody.

In that tumultuous and frustrated state of mind, he suddenly ordered the apprehension of David Teniers, and the lodging of a formal charge of murder against the young peasant.

Rudolph brought word of the latest development to the supper table at the manor one evening.

"At last the murderer has been caught," he announced. "As I thought right along, it's that scoundrel of a Teniers, who has made so much trouble in the district."

"Has he confessed?" Guido asked in amazement.

"Not yet, but the gendarmes are working on him now," Rudolph replied with a bitter laugh, "and it won't be long, Monsieur the Procurator told me.

He has already begun to weaken. They picked him up early this morning. The police have been hammering away at him in relays, and they expect to have a confession before tomorrow morning. Jules said he will keep at it till dawn if necessary, and the whole day tomorrow. They're determined to break him down."

"But if he isn't guilty!" Sylvain exclaimed.

"He *is* guilty," Rudolph said savagely. "The Procurator feels certain of it and so does François. It was brought out this morning that the Teniers lad had a violent row with Modeste only a few days before the murder."

"How do you know?" Guido asked. "I don't recall any quarrel at all. I never heard about a row between Modeste and David Teniers at any time. Modeste would have told me about it. . . ."

"I dropped in at the jail this morning with François. We heard Teniers' admission. They had that big bruiser Louis Timmers working on him. You know that six-foot-six gendarme."

"Do you mean that Timmers was—eh—maltreating or beating David to force a confession from him?" Sylvain asked, aghast.

"No, he didn't beat him," said Rudolph. "Of course not. They never do that; a beating leaves marks. This morning they made David take off his shoes and his socks and then they marched him around the room. Once in a while a policeman would accidentally step on his toes." Rudolph laughed as if he were telling a joke. "When I was there, Timmers had David on a chair, and had a wet rag tied around the boy's head. Every time Timmers twisted the rag another turn, David's eyes seemed about to pop out of his head. That's the old Spanish trick to make prisoners talk. It certainly works wonders."

"Christ! Thunders!" Guido exploded. "Is that the way it's done? That's torture! It's against the law. Torture was abolished a hundred years ago."

"How else do you think you can make those stubborn fools talk?" Rudolph asked. "Surely, you don't think the police would get anywhere with your methods of sweet reasonableness and polite coaxing, do you? Peasants should be handled with a strong and steady hand. No squeamishness! David Teniers will confess before morning, take it from me. Timmers will stay with him until he does. And the Procurator insists on a swift trial. He will hang before winter."

"But what if it's found that he didn't commit the murder?" Sylvain asked. "Suppose someone comes forward and confesses the crime voluntarily, what then?"

“What are you worried about?” Rudolph sneered. “Anyone hearing you would think you wanted to save him! If that stinking lout is hanged, it will be good riddance anyway, guilty or not guilty. He’s a rotten nuisance and a rebel. He is more responsible than anyone else for the unrest among the peasants.”

“But he didn’t kill Modeste,” Esther said quietly. “I know this Teniers lad. I saw him here on New Year’s morning. I also saw a man leave Uncle Modeste’s cabin the night before he was found dead. That man was not David Teniers.”

“Who was it?” Colas and Guido asked together.

“I can’t say with certainty,” Esther replied, “but I know it wasn’t David Teniers.”

“Yet they’re torturing him,” Sylvain cried. “It’s outrageous! It’s horrible! It’s a crime!”

“The authorities don’t commit crimes,” Rudolph said. “They are trying to arrive at the truth. What will you think up next? You’ll be telling us next that the Procurator and the gendarmes murdered Modeste.”

He looked searchingly at Esther for a moment, but she had lowered her eyes and no longer seemed interested in the conversation.

Upstairs in their room Colas faced Esther. “What did you see, Queen?”

“I saw a man in riding breeches leave Uncle Modeste’s cabin about midnight,” she whispered. “But I didn’t see his face.”

“My God! Was it Rudolph?”

“I can’t say,” Esther replied. “I wouldn’t swear to it.”

There was a knock at the door and Sylvain came in. He seemed terribly excited, his face was flushed and he spoke with difficulty. “You must not, on any account, leave your door unlocked tonight,” he said to Esther. His teeth chattered and he seemed on the verge of collapse. “Nor any other night,” he added, “until this crime is solved.”

Colas wanted to push him down into a chair and question him, but Sylvain turned abruptly and went out.

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Dawn found Sylvain sitting on a bench near his mother’s grave in the small churchyard of Moorkerken. He often sat there at that hour waiting for the priest and the sacristan to arrive for the early service, listening meanwhile to the awakening birds. This morning he had neither eyes nor

ears for anything that went on around him. His chin rested on his breast and he stared at his hands lying in his lap. His face was haggard with sleeplessness and fatigue. He had wandered about all night, the prey of uncertainty and anguish. He felt more and more that he must break the deadlock in the search for Modeste's murderer, and thus end the infliction of needless suffering on innocent people. "The truth must come out," he said to himself, for perhaps the hundredth time that night. "It must come soon. But how can the truth emerge if someone doesn't come forward to tell it?"

From the moment he had learned of Modeste's death. Sylvain was convinced that Rudolph knew the full secret of the tragedy. He had no positive information, no facts nor clues to go on, but intuition urged the knowledge on him. And when he was in Rudolph's presence, his forebodings grew more agonizing—but so did his feeling of helplessness. He felt like crying out an accusation, but he could not utter a word. A storm had been unleashed in his mind, a storm of contradictions that hammered at his brain. It rendered him speechless and powerless.

Now, sitting on the bench, his white hands moving agitatedly before him, he shook his head like an angry blood hound, the way his father did in moments of intense anxiety, as if to drive away the tangle of whirling thoughts. Why couldn't he go home and sleep, and forget about the miserable affair for one day at least? Why must he alone be plagued with it?

He felt like blaming God, but thinking of God, he fell at once to beseeching Him to forgive him and have mercy. "Let me alone; leave me in peace," he whispered fiercely. In the next instant he reproached himself for callousness. "I want to be let alone and David Teniers is being tortured, perhaps at this very moment." He sat up with a start and grew rigid. "I feel the ashes beating on my heart," he said. "I must go to David at once. He is in grave danger. A great injustice is being done to him. I feel it. I would not feel this way if it weren't so. . . .

"I cannot escape," he murmured, his face tense with horror. "It is a question of holy truth. I cannot compromise any longer. I must sacrifice myself. To follow Christ is to sacrifice oneself, to take up one's cross after Him, to assume the sins of others as if they were our very own. That is what He did for us." He grew calmer as the priest and his assistant went by and wished him a good morning.

After attending Mass, Sylvain walked to the town hall, and asked to see David Teniers. The request was granted, but when he came into the cell where David sat, he could not give utterance to his sense of grief. The young prisoner's face was swollen and blackened with bruises. One eye was half-

closed, his clothing was torn and disheveled. Sylvain knelt by David's side. "Can you ever forgive me?" he asked.

David smiled. "You've done me no harm, little brother Sylvain." At the word "brother," Sylvain felt a wave of unutterable happiness well up in his heart. He took David's hand and sat silently by his side.

"I'm glad you came, Sylvain," David said after a long silence. "I thought everybody had forgotten me. It has been very hard. I didn't think I could stand it. But at nine o'clock they're coming back . . . I'm afraid."

"They won't come back," Sylvain said. "I am going to speak to the Procurator."

He rushed into Maître du Mont's office the moment the Procurator arrived. "It is I who killed Modeste Verhagen," he shouted. "I give myself up. I cannot stand the suspense any longer. . . ." He spoke rapidly and tried to smile, but suddenly his face was drawn and tense again, and he blurted: "I am the one who had a quarrel with Modeste, not David, not Rudolph, not the Gypsies—I! I pushed him from me, and he fell. He was dead. I'm glad I've told you at last. Now it's off my conscience. I alone am responsible." He sank on a chair and buried his face in his hands.

The Procurator stared at Sylvain. His tongue seemed paralyzed. When he recovered his composure somewhat, he said: "But those finger marks on the dead man's neck? Surely something more must have happened than what you just told me? What did you quarrel about?"

"Don't ask me," Sylvain shouted. "I can't say any more today. I don't remember. Everything connected with that night is blurred in my mind. I'll go mad if you don't believe me."

"You can't go mad," the Procurator thought, "you are mad already." To Sylvain he said, not unkindly, "You had better rest a while. Drink some water and rest. I shall be back in a little while."

A gendarme came in to sit with Sylvain. The boy's eyelids fluttered and his head began to nod. In five minutes he was fast asleep.

David was set free shortly before noon, when Guido arrived at the town hall, accompanied by the Vicar of Maere.

"I'm afraid," Urbain said to Guido, looking at the sleeping Sylvain, "that it is the sickness of your mother. He's overwrought, he must go to a sanatorium. This is a case for the physician, not for the police."

"I will have to hold him, nevertheless, for the Fall Assizes, I'm afraid," the Procurator said gingerly. "After all, he's a self-confessed—uh—uh—murderer. I can't do otherwise. The law must follow its course."

"You can remand him in my custody, can you not?" asked the Vicar.

"That can be done, perhaps," the Procurator agreed. "In your custody, as the *doyen* of the clergy, as Vicar of Maere. Yes, that can be done. But that means you will be responsible for him, and will have to produce him whenever necessary. He must be considered under arrest, you understand. I think I can get the commitment papers signed this morning."

"My son will not escape," Guido said. "But he's no more guilty of Modeste's death than you are, or Urbain here. . . ."

Sylvain awoke at the sound of his father's voice. He smiled at Guido and his face was as radiant and serene as a child's. The drawn tenseness of the last week had vanished. The nightmare was over.

When Guido asked how he felt, Sylvain said, "Father, I feel as if the mists that shrouded my soul have parted forever." Indeed he appeared to be in a state of exaltation.

"David Teniers was sent home," Guido said. "He will start to work for me next week. He's to be our new superintendent."

"Father," Sylvain gasped, "how good of you!"

"I deserve no praise," Guido said. "David is an excellent worker, and intelligent, too. Come," he added, "you are going to stay at Uncle Urbain's for a week or so. I'm going to drive you to Maere."

There was a small concourse of people outside the town hall when Sylvain walked down the steps with his father and the Vicar. News of his confession had been circulated in the town by the police. The people looked at Sylvain curiously as he climbed into the carriage. He walked with a light step. He even smiled. He had been delivered from his dreamy listlessness. It was as if he said, "I have been living hitherto as though half-asleep, but I have been aroused at last."

"It's the Mad Lady of Moorkerken who's come back to life in him," said someone in the crowd. But most of them shook their heads in pity and disbelief. Sylvain's confession was as unexpected and inexplicable to them as it had been to his father.

That evening Sylvain slept at the presbytery in Maere. His father sat downstairs in the study telling Urbain of his son's singular experience with the heretical assembly across the Dutch border.

"That time, too, Sylvain tried to take the blame upon himself in order to spare others from suffering."

Urbain nodded. "I remember."

“It’s clear,” Guido continued, “that he merely confessed to shield David Teniers.”

“I hope so, I profoundly hope so,” Urbain sighed. “I only hope he did not do it to shield someone else besides.”

Before Guido drove back to Moorkerken, the two men went upstairs to look at the sleeping Sylvain. Guido walked to the bed and held the light above his son’s face. He gazed at him a long while.

“A God-seeker,” Urbain whispered. “Only, the means he used are not quite compatible with the goal, I’m afraid. He has told a lie. But he is so young, so innocent. Still, he will surely find God. That is,” he added, “if he hasn’t found Him already.”

Guido nodded silently. He could not keep back the tears of tenderness.

10

What passes in the mind of a man for whose crime another freely pays the penalty? Can the love which takes upon itself the sins of others sensitize the evil-doer's conscience to the extent of leading him into the path of contrition and repentance? Rudolph was shaken to the depths of his being by Sylvain's confession. His arrogant self-confidence was shattered at one blow and he began to examine himself seriously for the first time in many years. What an abysmally base scoundrel he had been! How selfishly and ruthlessly he had ridden over other people's sensibilities! Twice a murderer, thief of his father's wife, tyrannical despot in his dealings with the peasants; his life passed before him with stark and accusing vividness. Now that he was being honest with himself, he could discover no redeeming qualities in the long record of his callous, selfish life. There was not a single bright spot nor generous action on which he could dwell with loving remembrance or warm satisfaction—nothing to counterbalance or mitigate the cold sullen stream of evil. Worst of all, he was now letting his youngest brother, a lovable, innocent boy, go to jail and perhaps to the gallows for him! For the first time in his life Rudolph despised himself.

Of all those concerned with the crime in one way or another, Rudolph alone understood the full significance of Sylvain's act. By his confession Sylvain had not only set David free. He had also served notice on his brother that he knew the murderer's identity. He was giving Rudolph time to reflect, to reconsider, to find a way out of his horrible dilemma, perhaps an opportunity to save himself. It was an act of supreme goodness.

On the spur of the moment, under the spell of Sylvain's self-denying example, Rudolph felt like making a clean breast of his crime. He was on the verge of going to the authorities and making a statement of his own. Come what might, he would end the vexing uncertainty and the torment to which his long silence had subjected others and himself.

But to whom should he go—to his father, to Maître Jules du Mont, or to Sylvain himself? When he considered the practical steps to be taken he found himself in a quandary. What difference did it really make to whom he

confessed? Once he owned up to the murder, he would have to surrender to the police. The thought of spending long years of confinement in a penitentiary made him break out in a cold sweat. Where was the way out? He was stricken with fear, now that he looked soberly ahead. Where could he turn? Commit suicide? For that he did not have the courage. Thinking of the shame and humiliation his incarceration would bring to his father, he wondered if it would be better to write out a confession, mentioning as an extenuating circumstance that he had lived, and still lived, in perpetual dread of revenge since the incident in the African bush; and then, after having his signature on the document witnessed by two reputable citizens, simply disappear from the scene, go back to Africa, to the Congo—or elsewhere, to Australia or Brazil. As his fear of the consequences mounted and he searched for a way out of his predicament, his decision to give himself up began to weaken.

After all, there was still plenty of time to think matters over. He must remain calm. There was no need to hurry or to force events. Sylvain wasn't in immediate danger. He wasn't undergoing any hardship. The Fall Assizes were still six months away.

He needed time to think, to plan. The first beneficent, soul-cleansing effect brought about by Sylvain's confession was fast evaporating. Soon Rudolph's high resolves gave way to irritation, to a secret, unavowed envy, and then to hatred for his brother. It gnawed its way into his soul like a gangrenous sore. He began to depreciate Sylvain's sincerity and to despise his brother's spirit of self-denial. Sylvain had acted for selfish reasons—to magnify himself in the eyes of others, to make a hero, a saint of himself. In Rudolph's poisoned mind, the boy who was his benefactor turned into a schemer, an enemy. He decided to keep silent about the whole affair. He would not speak of the case to anyone, any more. He would not think of it. It was beneath his dignity to mention the whole sordid business. What had he to do with it? Wasn't it all settled?

But his mind was too restless, too profoundly disquieted; he must talk, he was driven to talk, he could not remain silent. It was he who in day-to-day conversations repeatedly drew attention to the disturbed state of his own conscience. By conducting himself with arrogant dignity one moment, and changing in the next to ostentatious nonchalance and indifference, he created a tense atmosphere around himself. He expressed himself to all and sundry with pompous self-assertion on the crime, and his affected unconcern and indifference were generally felt to be false.

"That charming boy," he said to himself, thinking of Sylvain as he sat drinking at "The Ducal Court," "that charming boy is to all intents and

purposes maneuvering to put me behind the bars. That's the real truth of the situation. That piety and pretended high sense of justice are the basest kind of trickery. In reality Sylvain is as sly and crafty as the peasants he likes so much. They, too, go about their scheming and plotting in a roundabout, devious manner. Like as not, he will repudiate his confession at the trial in the autumn. Then the Verhagen Case will stand where it stood before. The search for the murderer will start anew, and that Jew-woman my brother Colas brought into the house is bound to tell her story to the authorities. She's itching to do so now. I can tell by the way she looks at me.

"She saw somebody leave Modeste's cabin that night, and that person was not David Teniers. Who was it? Does she know? Of course she knows. She knows as well as I know myself. . . . And yet," he went on, shaking his head, "suppose she is not certain. Suppose she's only throwing out feelers and making guesses? She may only be planning to take revenge for that rub I gave her at table the first evening she was at Moorkerken. What was she doing outside the house at midnight, anyway? Snooping around, spying on me, plotting? Obviously! That's the whole secret. They are weaving a plot to do me in—Esther and dear little Sylvain and Colas, and Father is egging them on unwittingly. They're all in it. Everybody is against me. How easy and quiet things would be if they had simply left Teniers in jail! The police would have taken care of him. They almost had him where they wanted him. He was on the verge of confessing. He would have gone to the gallows without any fuss. Who would have defended him? Who would have cared a damn what became of him?"

Thinking of Esther turned his mind back to Africa. In the bush he had not been able to resist the terrible temptation which power over black human beings exercises on the white man's mind. The environment had enervated and demoralized him, as it had so many before him. Under the influence of solitude, boredom, alcohol, and abnormal social and sexual conditions, he had become, he realized without alarm or contrition, a heartless brute. What of it? He chuckled as he recalled a missionary's warning that he would find it difficult to live in civilized society again. Whatever women he had known in Africa were delivered up to him like so much merchandise. He had dealt ruthlessly with them, almost ferociously. The little slave girls he purchased for his pleasure. . . . He had ruled them with a whip of elephant's hide.

If he could get Esther alone for a moment, in some out-of-the-way corner, in the Tower of Terzel, for instance, it wouldn't take him long to tame her either. Africa had taught him how to deal with recalcitrant women. He would have her on her knees, groveling at his feet, kissing his hands, offering herself, more than willing to tell everything.

But would that silence her? Rudolph's thoughts were turning in a vicious circle. He pulled at his beard in exasperation. No, he thought, it wasn't Esther after all who was most dangerous.

Sylvain was the one. Beyond doubt Sylvain knew the truth. Sylvain was a permanent menace. Nobody believed he had committed the murder. Nobody would believe it at the trial. Unless, of course, unless he could be declared insane in the meantime. Suppose it could be shown that he was mentally unbalanced, that he had choked Modeste to death in a fit of madness? That would be the surest way to settle matters, to put an end to the Verhagen case once and for all. If Sylvain could now, or soon, be adjudged mad, the whole matter would be dropped. It wouldn't even come before the Fall Assizes. Sylvain would be locked up in an asylum. Uncle Urbain would not be allowed to keep a lunatic in his house. Sylvain's secret would be locked up with him. There, in one of those institutions, in a padded cell, he could confess and repudiate his confession and accuse others as often as he liked. Nobody would pay any further attention. Moreover, in such a place, he would be so distraught and harassed that his mind would soon be completely deranged. Keepers and wardens might be induced to goad him into real madness. Rudolph had heard of such cases. Those people, he thought, will no doubt do a lot for a little money.

Thus Rudolph fretted and schemed. His own mind was sick. His apprehensions multiplied with every day that passed. He could not help noticing that people talked in whispers whenever he came near, or that they averted their faces when they encountered him in a public place. He knew that injurious rumors were circulating about him. The peasants detested him, loathed the sight of him. But they venerated Sylvain as a saint. Sylvain was one of them. He had shown by deeds that he was on their side. Rudolph heard it said many times that if his brother had suffered real incarceration, instead of merely being confined to the Vicar's presbytery, there would have been trouble.

Some of Rudolph's best friends began to shun him. His constant berating of Sylvain, his contemptuous references and gibes, produced an altogether different effect than he intended. One would have thought people were rising to Sylvain's defense. Even François van Abeele admitted that he had conceived a deep respect for Sylvain as a rare person, as an exceptionally lovable and noblehearted human being. The Heer of Appelkerken said one day to Rudolph, "This is a really nasty business. It isn't so simple as it looks." And Maître du Mont remarked, "Your brother Sylvain is a generous, but morbidly sensitive boy. His confession is assuming the character of an indignant cry of anger against our whole social system. The case is causing a

lot of talk in high quarters. Ramaeker and the nationalists are making an issue of it in the newspapers. But the strangest part of it all is that nobody, literally nobody, believes Sylvain is guilty."

"We have Sylvain's own word for it just the same," Rudolph replied. "The whole trouble is that you, Monsieur the Procurator, you were too lenient. You allowed him to go scot-free. Confinement in Uncle Urbain's home isn't incarceration. For Sylvain that is a pleasant vacation. He should have been locked up. With your coddling you showed that you yourself doubted his guilt. I'm sure you would have acted otherwise in the case of almost any other person."

"I bore in mind his tainted heredity," Maître du Mont said coldly. "Your Uncle Urbain drew my attention to the case of the Mad Lady. I knew nothing about her until His Reverence told me her story. Then I could see very well that her illness, your grandmother's mental aberrations, might have been inherited by Sylvain. A mental disease like that sometimes jumps a generation. It reappears sporadically. The Department has appointed a committee of medical experts to study the case."

"If he's mad, it's another matter entirely," Rudolph said, taking his cue from the Procurator's remarks. "If he's mad, he's dangerous. Why don't you commit him to an institution as a measure of public safety? This coddling of a dangerous lunatic seems most irresponsible. It's neglect of duty, nothing less. Who knows when he will strike again, and who his next victim will be?"

The Procurator's eyes widened with surprise as he listened to the note of hate in Rudolph's denunciation of his brother. He did not want to argue with Rudolph.

"I shall have to take a chance," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Public opinion would turn against me if I carried out your suggestion. I must leave him in the care of the Vicar and your father for the time being. They are responsible citizens. I have assured myself that Sylvain sees no one else."

Indeed, Guido now spent most of his time at the presbytery in Maere. He told Mathilda that he could not find rest at the manor house. Only when he was near Sylvain, under the same roof with his son, did he seem less troubled. "I don't know what has come over me," he said to his wife. "Somehow I feel I am needed there. If anything should happen to Sylvain I would never forgive myself. Day and night I am plagued with somber presentiments of still more evil. I am afraid that our troubles will not soon come to an end."

During Guido's long absences from Moorkerken, Rudolph took little interest in work on the estate, especially since David Teniers was now in charge. In fact, he considered it a deliberate insult on his father's part to have appointed as superintendent the person he had time and again denounced as the most obstreperous malcontent in the district. But he would not now quarrel with his father on that or on any other subject. There would be time for that later. Rudolph had more pressing business to think of.

Sometimes he saw his father in the morning when he came home from Maere. Other days he rode off before Guido arrived. He went calling at the Abeele estate, or hunting with the Heer of Appelkerken, stopping for his noonday meal at one of the rural taverns or at "The Ducal Court." Taking care not to meet Guido on the road driving back to Maere, Rudolph would return to the manor house in the afternoon to be alone with Mathilda.

Colas, Esther and Hele had returned to Paris; Jacques and Amorie were visiting the Caesar Govaerts in Antwerp. Mathilda and Rudolph were often alone together. But he wasn't always in the mood for talk and pleasure. Sometimes he sat with her in the salon for hours without saying a word, answering her questions and gossip with monosyllables, and staring moodily in front of him. She knew what disturbed him, but she was resolved not to speak of Sylvain. She wanted to distract him, cheer him. Rudolph had lately intimated he might clear out of Moorkerken without saying where he intended to go. She wondered if he would take her along. Life had been dismal for months. She had had enough of Guido, who thought of everything but his wife. All of Guido's ardor went into his concern for that plodding religious crank of a Sylvain. Mathilda had come to hate Sylvain, she was glad he was gone.

They still visited the Tower of Terzel occasionally. Rudolph had introduced some thoughtful improvements. He had ordered some comfortable furniture moved into the apartment. Locks and doors had been repaired, oil lamps hung in the large room, and the kitchen had been equipped with a small stove, as well as with utensils for eating and drinking.

They had a pleasant outing there one afternoon in May in the company of François van Abeele and one of his friends from Brussels. The girl's name was Odette. She worked as a *chansonnière* in a cabaret in the capital, but was temporarily unemployed. She was spending a short vacation, at François' expense, in the country and was living at "The Ducal Court." After lunching from their hampers, they had gone to Christopher Beach to

lie in the sun, the water still being too cold for bathing at that time of the year.

It was there that Mathilda, resting on her elbows and facing landward, suddenly noticed a man moving through the shrubbery on top of the dune just above her head. She sat up with a start and, in alarm, called to Rudolph.

He and François raced to the top of the hill to investigate. They found no one there, but a few minutes later they saw a man running along the beach in a northerly direction.

"We probably disturbed a poacher or a smuggler," François said, when the two men returned to the beach. "They have their hiding places hereabouts."

"What do they smuggle?" Odette asked.

"They carry lace into Holland, and bring back tobacco," François said. "It's an old game, but not so profitable as it used to be. One of my grandfathers made a fortune in smuggling. He had five daughters. Every once in a while the girls wrapped their bodies in the finest *pour-point*, and took a stroll or a ride with their papa across the border. Each trip netted some five or six thousand francs. But the Govaerts clan, I think, had an even more ingenious method. Rudolph, tell us how your grandfather carried on the smuggling business. . . ."

But Rudolph wasn't listening. He had grown pensive. Possibly he had seen more of the fugitive on the beach than he cared to admit. At any rate, he pulled his revolver from his hip pocket, and fired a few shots in the air. "Let all Peeping Toms take notice," he laughed. "We won't stand for any interference!"

For two or three weeks thereafter, Mathilda and Rudolph did not return to the tower. Rudolph was absent from Moorkerken most of the time. He had business to transact in the capital and in Antwerp. To prepare for all eventualities, he was distributing his fortune over several foreign financial houses. When he had taken these precautionary measures, he returned home one morning, shortly before noon, in a state of high exaltation.

"We're safe now, Tilly," he shouted, as he entered the living room and passionately embraced Mathilda. "Wherever we go, we won't starve to death!"

"Are we going, then?" she asked eagerly. "Have you made up your mind?"

"Yes, I'm leaving. I want to be away when Sylvain's trial opens. I can't stand any more of that palaver of lawyers and doctors. And all of it for that miserable snooper Modeste. I don't think it's worth all the trouble. I'm glad

he's gone. But they will have to start looking for another murderer. Sylvain will be acquitted, I feel sure of it. Nobody believes he's guilty."

Mathilda wanted to have lunch, but Rudolph insisted that they take a hamper to the tower and spend the afternoon there. Mathilda clapped her hands for joy. She hadn't seen Rudolph so carefree for a long time. Only that morning she had been thinking how indifferent to her he had been of late. She had half-dreaded his return and the prospect of spending long weary hours in his company while he brooded and sulked.

But now all was well. He had spoken tender, endearing words to her for the first time in his life. He promised that he would take her with him when the time came to leave Moorkerken. She did not care where they went, so long as she would not have to see Guido and Sylvain and the rest of them any more.

On the way to the tower they saw David Teniers riding in the dogcart. From a great distance across the fields, the new superintendent swept off his hat to them. The weather was exceedingly hot. It was summer; the grain was ripening fast. Heat waves danced and shimmered before their eyes. The horses' hoofs threw up clouds of yellow dust.

They rode to the beach and bathed in the sea before mounting the spiral staircase to their apartment. Rudolph carried the basket of provisions. They could feel the air grow cooler as they climbed. A fresh sea breeze, skirting the top of the dunes, blew into the open windows of the clock chamber on the top floor and sighed down the stairway.

Mathilda sniffed the air. "I seem to smell kerosene. . . ."

"Some poacher or tramp has probably been camping nearby and used it to start his fire," Rudolph said.

When they had eaten, Rudolph pulled the door shut and bolted it. The room was filled with salty sea air. The rhythmic roll of waves on the sandy beach came to their ears like the sound of muffled thunder. Mathilda had drunk so much wine that she laughed and giggled like a schoolgirl. "I am so happy when I am with you, Rudolph, that I could die." Rudolph held her on his lap and pressed another glass to her lips.

"I am burning up," she cried out. "I want to take off my clothes." She stood up and ran to the window. Her hair had fallen loose. The wind blew it into a fluffy golden aureole around her head.

Rudolph walked unsteadily to her side. She fled to the middle of the room, throwing her gown into his outstretched arms.

"You're beautiful. I want you. We'll be married in some faraway place, Tilly!" he said hoarsely as he staggered towards her, his hands reaching out.

She eluded his grasp. Again and again she danced and tripped out of his reach. He ran after her, his black eyes narrowing. His breath came in quick gasps. She whirled and spun like a top, her hands aflutter, shrieking, "I'm drunk. The room is a merry-go-round. Look, the couch is dancing. I'm so happy. Save me, Rudolph, I'm going to fall."

He caught her in his arms and held her. They were both silent as they stood looking into each other's eyes. He kissed her long and tenderly. Suddenly they straightened, and looked at the door. A grating noise was heard outside.

"There's someone out there," she whispered. "Did you lock the door?"

Rudolph grew rigid and, taking Mathilda's arms from around his neck, he walked to the door. He withdrew the heavy new bolt and tried to push the door open in order to look out, but the door did not budge.

"Somebody has locked it from the outside." Mathilda had come to Rudolph's side.

"It has no outside lock." Rudolph shook his head. "Something has been put against it to prevent us from opening it."

He threw his shoulder against the door with all his might. "There must be something wedged tightly between the door and the opposite wall in the corridor," he said. "It doesn't give an inch. Put your gown on, Mathilda."

"Rudolph," she said, "I smell something burning."

"Put your clothes on," he ordered gruffly. "There's something sinister about this."

He walked to the window, leaned over the sill and looked out. At once a shot rang out, and a bullet splintered the half-rotted woodwork of the window frame beside his head. He drew back, almost colliding with Mathilda, who had come up behind him.

"Rudolph," she said, "that man there, look, on the pile of rubble, that's the same man I saw on the beach that afternoon when we were with François. . . ."

Rudolph had whipped out his pistol. Dropping to his knees, he fired at the figure running over the top of the pile of broken masonry.

"There's another man," Mathilda called out. "Who are they? They're taking our horses!"

"They're Portuguese, from Africa. They've soaked the lower story with kerosene. They must have used barrels of it. The fumes are enough to choke you. . . ."

Rudolph fired a few more shots after the two men who were riding off. He leaned out the window. Smoke was coming up past his face.

"The place is on fire," he said. "We're trapped!"

"Rudolph, how are we to get out?" Mathilda cried.

"We'll have to try the window. There is no other way. We'll never be able to smash this door. Even if we could, we would not be able to get through the lower corridor. I can hear the flames crackling below. Now, don't get excited, Mathilda," he added quickly. "We will get out. Just don't lose your head. We'll tear the blankets to strips and make a ladder to slide down. I think there is enough material."

The room was filling with thick heavy smoke.

"Lie on the floor," Rudolph said. He wet the pillows of the couch with a jug of water and placed them along the crack at the bottom of the door. But the smoke came pouring in from the pantry.

He tore the blankets into strips, tied them together, and hung them out of the window to measure the distance to the ground.

"It doesn't even reach halfway," he said. He took off his jacket and ripped it in two. "Another four feet," he panted. "Mathilda, take off your gown. I need it."

She struggled out of her gown and he tore it into strips.

When he had fastened the fragments together, he lifted Mathilda to her feet and carried her to the window.

"It won't hold both of us at the same time," he said. "You'll have to go first. It will hold you. Don't be afraid. Don't look down. Slide slowly, hand after hand. If you slide too fast it's apt to break."

"Rudolph," she said, looking out of the window, "I can't. I dare not. I can't help looking down. Hold me, Rudolph, let's go together."

"It won't hold if we go together, I told you that," he said. "I'll be holding the end and can pull you back if anything should go wrong. Don't be afraid."

She allowed herself to be lifted into the window niche, and looked down. Opaque smoke pillared upward around her. She let her legs dangle on the ledge.

"Dear Rudolph," she whispered, "I dare not."

"You must, sweetheart, you must save your life, for me. . . ."

"Am I your sweetheart?" she whispered, as she threw her arms around his neck. "Forever?"

"Forever, dearest," he said. "But go now, go, before it is too late."

She took courage, grabbed hold of the ladder and slipped off the ledge.

"Oooh!" she cried, "I am going to fall!"

Rudolph held the ladder with one hand. "No, you won't fall. Hold tight, hold tight!" he shouted.

Mathilda began to slide; slowly her head disappeared. She had not gone ten feet when the cloth ripped apart. Rudolph heard a scream and the thud of her body on the masonry below. Her weight gone, he fell backward to the floor.

He was up in an instant and looked out of the window. The smoke prevented him from seeing Mathilda. Moaning, he threw himself flat on the floor. Smoke was pouring into the room from all sides. The blood hammered and thundered in his head. Then he lost consciousness.

Rudolph came to when someone poured water on his face. It was David Teniers, who had been attracted by the firing of the shots and who had also seen the two men galloping off on the Govaerts horses.

Mathilda did not recover consciousness. She died in the cart on the way to the manor house while Rudolph held her head in his lap.

That night, when Guido and Uncle Urbain and Sylvain had been brought in from Maere, Rudolph was closeted with his father for the better part of three hours. What happened between the two men was never revealed. When they emerged from the anteroom next to Guido's bedroom, where Mathilda's body lay, the son had written out a confession of Modeste's murder. His signature was witnessed by the Vicar and David Teniers. In a few hours they planned to go to the authorities, when Rudolph was to surrender. But at nine o'clock the next morning, when Guido knocked at his son's door, there was no answer. The room was empty. A week later they learned from the station master at Veldkerk, the next station up the line from Maere, that a man resembling Rudolph, but beardless, had taken the early morning express for Paris on the day following Mathilda's death.

11

It was the fifteenth day of April, about six o'clock in the morning, almost four years after the Lady Mathilda's death. It had rained the evening before, but during the night a strong wind had quickly dried the roads. Now the sun rose bright and warm, the sky had cleared, and no trace remained of the long spell of foul weather, save for some pools of stagnant water in the freshly plowed fields. Slowly the sun overcame the bluish haze of night and spread over the patches of early marsh marigolds and pilewort by the river's edge. As if it were already May, the banks of the Meye were covered with daisies and dandelions, with here and there thickets of juniper and thorn in early bloom. Petals and buds opened at the beneficent touch of the sun. The light gently brushed the silver bark of the birch trees and the morning breeze set them quivering in pure white splendor. Stronger now, the sun illuminated the pastures of brilliant green where the cattle stood in the waving grass. Then, rapidly, the last mists of night vanished, and the whole land was lit by a mystic glow that silenced even the chirping birds for an instant, as though all nature were in a state of grace and adoration.

This was the day set aside for Guido Govaerts to throw the first seed into the miry furrows of the reclaimed moorland back of the old manor house. Ordinarily, sowing is not done in Flanders in the morning, but in the evening by the last mysterious light of the dying day, and preferably when a warm, fructifying drizzle is falling. An exception is made, however, in the case of virgin soil. Then a tradition, probably linked with some ancient pagan rite, has it that sowing be done "with" the rising sun, as the saying goes, or at least in the course of the morning, while "the tranquil eye that knows no envy" climbs towards its noon-hour zenith.

The Heer of Moorkerken would be out in a few minutes. He was getting dressed, as was also Uncle Urbain, now well past the allotted span of the very strong, who had come over for the occasion and who had spent the night at the old manor. David Teniers was out in the fields looking for a dry path along which Guido and the procession behind him could walk without muddying their boots. David tested the wind by moistening his fingers in his

mouth and then holding them up in the air as a man does who swears an oath in a court of law. For the seed must be thrown with the wind, not against it, as is customary in certain other countries. He also looked in at the Chapel of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows to see that the candles were lit on the altar, for Mass was to be celebrated by the Vicar of Maere before the sowing started.

The chapel stood across the road from the manor house, facing the driveway of poplar trees. It had been built simultaneously with the erection of the sixty-odd cottages which ranged in a vast semi-circle behind the manor. Beyond them stretched the immense expanse of grain land now at last ready for cultivation. The meadows were full of cattle and much other livestock besides.

Since the previous December the peasants had lived on their land. They had moved into the new cottages just before Christmas when Guido, returning from Sylvain's ordination in Bruges, had added nearly the whole of his estate to the new co-operative venture. The years following Mathilda's death had been filled with work for him as never before. Like the best of fathers, Guido had spent most of his time silencing the peasants' brawls, settling disputes, giving good advice and buying equipment.

He lived upstairs now in the old manor, the ground floor having temporarily been fitted out as a schoolhouse. Honoré Ramaeker, who had been brought from Antwerp to be in charge of the education of the more than one hundred children, lived with him. When the new school building was put up the following autumn, two assistant teachers would come to help the overtaxed headmaster.

This morning all the cottages were decorated with pine boughs and other greenery. From the roof of the manor floated the majestic yellow, white and black of the Belgian standard. Women were dressing their children in the doorways of the cottages, keeping an eye on the highway where carts and carriages and wagons were arriving in almost unbroken chains from both directions. A great scurry and commotion prevailed on the driveway in front of the big old house. Everybody from near and far was coming to witness the event: servants and farmers, landowners, government officials, young men and old, a host of women and children, all dressed in their Sunday best, and all decorated with ribbons or sashes of the national colors.

The peasants were gathering outside the chapel, for the pews and aisles were already filled. Behind them stood the carts and carriages; their unharnessed horses snorted and stamped in the fresh morning air, adding to the general turmoil. The brass band had come from Moorkerken, and from Maere the Society of Choristers of Saint Cecilia as well as the Sodality of

the Daughters of Mary. These girls in spotless white, as their maidenly estate demanded, had been the first to arrive and had therefore found a place close to the sanctuary rail in the chapel, next to the overseers and the officials.

Children were everywhere, urging each other to greater haste and uttering piercing cries of joy. Some small boys had formed a troop and were marching to and fro making a deafening noise with rattles and beating on pots and pans, unwittingly following another old pagan custom, that of driving the evil spirits from the newly reclaimed area.

At last a hush fell over the throng. The men took off their hats while the women once more felt to see if the kerchiefs were securely tied on their heads. The front door of the manor house opened. Heer Urbain Govaerts, wearing his surplice and stole, appeared on the threshold closely followed by Guido, Colas and Esther, and their two small children.

The old priest walked slowly down the driveway, crossed the road and entered the chapel. A few moments later, in the unbroken stillness, his voice could be heard intoning the first words of the sacred office.

Inside and out, everyone, from the oldest peasant to the smallest child, knelt down. The massed response to the priest's words came suddenly like a strong gust of wind. The prayers grew more fervent. Heads bent lower, voices became more ardent. There were sobs and sighs and exclamations wrung from the heart. Some of the worshipers threw themselves prostrate on the ground. Others rose from their knees and stretched out their hands towards the statue of the Mother of Sorrows which could be dimly seen through the open chapel doors, enveloped in a cloud of incense and a blaze of candles.

When the service was over, the procession formed in the driveway. First came Robert Brero, the smith, who carried the huge silver cross. Then came Uncle Urbain under the scarlet and gold canopy which was supported by four estate workers dressed in black and wearing white gloves. Behind Urbain came Guido and the choristers and several officials, among whom could be seen Notary Célestin Fabian of Maere. The festively decorated flags and the banners of the sodalities and the corporations followed the guests of honor.

On one of the banners, of blue silk with silver fringe, there was a large picture of the risen Lord showing the Christ with bare limbs and the five wounds He had suffered for man's redemption. The border of the picture was in gold. The painting was the work of Master Colas and his gift to the new co-operative society. Few of those present had the critical insight to notice that the composition was done in the purest Rubenesque style. Two

strong peasants were required to carry the stout poles between which the painting was unfurled.

Next came the Daughters of Mary, all in white, and the heads of households of the new co-operative farm, and then an endless stream of women and children, their bright dresses set off by the surrounding green. Many carried tapers which were to be lit when the procession arrived at the edge of the former moorland.

The band began to play a slow march, and the huge concourse of people, reaching back, a half-mile or more, got under way.

Hendrik Bemelmans, the old peasant, walked by the side of the Heer of Moorkerken. On Guido's right was David Teniers, the managing director, stepping carefully and with dignity in his new frock coat, as befitted the administrator of the new venture.

"Were it not for your wise head and kind heart," Bemelmans said to Guido, "I do not know what would have become of us. This is the greatest festival ever held in East Flanders, I dare say. I am so happy that my old eyes are seeing the fulfillment of this dream. . . ."

"It's God's good providence," Guido replied. "I count for nothing in the matter. The land belongs to all. You know my ideas on the subject, Hendrik. It was my son Sylvain who opened my eyes to the truth. . . ."

"We've been waiting so long for this," spoke up Antoine Teniers, who walked in the ranks behind Guido. "Now that it has come to pass I feel stunned. I cannot believe it yet. It is a dream." He wiped the tears from his eyes.

Thus they came to the landmark where the former moorland began. It was a small mound overgrown with blackthorns just coming into white bloom. A halt was made and Notary Fabian stepped to the fore to read the formal, legally attested transfer of the immense property from Heer Guido Govaerts to the Christian people of Moorkerken. The Notary read in a droning voice, glancing significantly over his pince-nez at each new paragraph. He was just turning over a page when the attention of the people was diverted by the rattle of a carriage on the highway. It was coming at full speed, the horses galloping. In the stillness of morning the noise of the wheels and the thunder of the horses' hoofs sounded like gunfire. Although the Notary was still reading, even Uncle Urbain turned his back and looked in the direction of the road.

"Who can it be?" the old priest muttered, peering toward the manor. "Whoever it is, he must be in a terrible hurry. . . ."

“Like as not,” answered Brero, who stood close by the Vicar, “it’s a messenger from the Government coming to tell us that the transfer is not allowed, and that it’s all off with our co-operative farm. What will you bet?”

“I never bet,” Uncle Urbain said dryly. “If I did, you’d be a heavy loser this morning. What will you bet on that?”

The carriage had stopped in the driveway. The old manor prevented the people from seeing it, but presently a cassocked figure appeared around the corner, and a shout went up from all sides.

“It’s Father Sylvain! Sylvain! Our Sylvain!”

Sylvain lifted the skirts of his gown and ran towards them through the apple orchard. Many of those in the procession broke ranks and rushed forward to meet him. At the same time a mottled calf broke through the fence in the adjoining pasture and came bounding in awkward leaps towards the young priest. For a while Sylvain and the calf ran side by side, the crowd roaring with laughter.

An old man stepped forward and kneeled at Sylvain’s feet. Many others followed his example. “The Lord has visited us,” said the old peasant. “It’s your work, Father Sylvain. . . .” Others re-echoed his words of gratitude. Several women, overcome with emotion, ran up to Sylvain, seized the end of his cassock and pressed it to their lips. Some children took him by the hand.

Guido stepped out of the ranks and rescued his son, but the calf would not leave the young man. Sylvain gave it his thumb to suck as he took his place with Uncle Urbain under the canopy.

Notary Fabian, who had never stopped reading, now finished at last, and Uncle Urbain took off his biretta. Brero raised the cross aloft, the Daughters of Mary lit their tapers, the banners dipped. The people knelt around Uncle Urbain, who, standing in the circle of flickering lights, raised his right arm to bless the land to the north, south, east and west. Then he sprinkled holy water to the four cardinal points, over the trees, the earth, the water and the kneeling peasants.

The choristers sang the Nineteenth Psalm: “Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations . . .” But no sooner had they finished the chant than a murmur arose from all sides. It became a storm of shouts and demands.

“Let Father Sylvain bless us too!”

The people crowded around him, pressing upon him from all sides, until Uncle Urbain handed him the aspergillum and Sylvain, too, pronounced the blessing.

Now it was Guido's turn. Someone hung a sack of seed around his neck and he walked forward alone. An immense silence fell on the crowd. All eyes were on the Heer of Moorkerken. Guido walked a few dozen paces scattering the seed in handfuls. Then he retraced his steps through the muddy furrow. When he returned to the canopy he began to sing. The song was immediately taken up by the band and the people: "Oh, holy soil of Flanders, my native soil, so holy! . . ."

As the procession came to take Uncle Urbain back to the house, the old Vicar turned to Guido and said, "I forgot to tell you, Guido, I received a draft for a large sum of money last week. . . ."

"From whom?" asked Guido.

"From him," said Urbain.

"Can it be true?" Guido asked, bending his head close to Urbain.

"Yes. The money is for the new schoolhouse."

"Where did it come from?"

"There is no name signed to the draft," Urbain said. "It has been deposited in a place called Sydney which I think is in Australia."

Guido nodded his head pensively. A smile played around his lips.

When Uncle Urbain had gone into the house, the crowd moved back to the rear of the mansion, where long tables had been set out for the communal breakfast. In the middle of each white-decked board stood a small flag with the black Flemish lion rampant on a field of gold. The flags were surrounded by jugs and vases full of buttercups and daisies. The Daughters of Mary were already distributing the plates and the eating utensils, while young peasants carried steaming jugs of coffee from the kitchen, whence emanated the savory odor of frying bacon and sausages and eggs and ham. Some of the men rolled casks of beer from the storehouse into the fields where the games were to be held later in the day. The band, seated apart, struck up the gay song of that Pier-la-la the Plowman who, although condemned a thousand times, steadfastly refused to die. The countryside was filled with joyous shouts. Some of the boys and girls started to dance on the greensward.

Suddenly there was an interruption. A bell had begun to ring in the distance. A moment later a carillon started to play.

"That's Moorkerken saluting us," said Sylvain, who had taken a seat at one of the tables beside his little nephews, the sons of Colas and Esther.

"Either the *carilloneur* is a little late, or we are ahead of schedule," he said laughingly to Brero who sat across from him.

“And that’s the cracked bell of Abeele village,” spoke up Bemelmans, when the sound of ringing came also from the other direction.

The peasants stopped eating and talking. Every table was on the alert. As one village bell after the other chimed in, the people called out its name in unison.

“That’s Appelkerken! That’s Zoute! That’s Woodbrook! That’s Noordhoeve! That’s Tersteen!” Soon the sky was full of the song of the singing towers.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Bemelmans said, leaning over to Sylvain, “if we should presently hear the great carillons of Antwerp or Bruges, the air is so still and clear. That’s Donderbeeke! That’s Overlee! That’s Oudekerk! God, what fine voices those bells have! Pure silver, you’d say! . . .”

“I thought that was the Bell of Christopher, on the beach,” Antoine Teniers said. “I mean the bell in the sunken cathedral. It’s on just such a day of days as this that it is supposed to ring out, isn’t it?”

“Do you still believe in that fairy tale?” Brero asked sarcastically. “Will you never learn? Don’t you know that there never will be a day of days? The new era comes in patches, now here something, now there, then something else, maybe in ten years something in some other place. It comes by fits and starts. The new era is like the Kingdom of God. No man can say *Here it is, or lo, there*. For the Kingdom of God is within you.”

“Now what do you mean by that?” Antoine asked, looking up questioningly.

“It means that it lies within man’s own power to bring about a better world if he wills it so.”

Sylvain began to shake his head.

“Don’t shake your head now, Father Sylvain,” said Brero. “Who is responsible for this patch of Paradise around us but your father and yourself?”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Tower of Terzel* by Pierre van Paassen]