

I. Haarlem

*When Amsterdam's gold cock shall sing,
Haarlem's gold hen shall lay her egg.*

The Centuries of Nostradamus.

Haarlem, that admirable genre painting that sums up the Flemish school of painters, the Haarlem painted by Jean Breughel, Peeter Neef, David Téniers and Paul Rembrandt.

And the canal where quivers the blue water, and the church where flames the stained-glass windows adorned with gold, and the *stoël*¹ where dries the linen in the sunlight, and the roofs, green with hops.

And the storks that beat their wings around the city clock, holding their necks high up in the air, and receiving in their beaks the drops of rain.

And the carefree burgomaster who caresses with his hand his double chin, and the enamoured floriculturist who wastes away, his eye fixed on one tulip.

And the gypsy girl who swoons over a mandolin, and the old man who plays a *Rummelpot*², and the child who puffs up a bladder. And the drinkers who are smoking in the dark tavern, and the serving woman at the inn who hangs upon a hook a dead pheasant at the window.

¹ Stone balcony. (*Note from the Author.*)

² Musical instrument. (*Note from the Author.*)

II. The Mason

The head mason: "Look at these bastions, these buttresses; one would think them built for eternity."

Schiller, *William Tell*.

The mason Abraham Knupfer sings, the trowel in his hand, inside the scaffolding up there with the winds, so far up that, reading the Gothic verses chiseled on the great bell in the steeple, he stands with his feet level with the highest point both of the church with its thirty flying buttresses, and of the town itself with its thirty churches.

He beholds the tarascos of stone spewing the water from off the slates of the main roof down into the kaleidoscopic abyss formed by the galleries, the windows, the pendentives, the bell-turrets, the roofs and the timber frameworks, that abyss against which the grey dot of the tercel hawk makes a spot as it glides on its notched and immobile wings.

He beholds the fortifications that stand out extended in a gigantic star-shape, the citadel that carries its head high like a hen in a mass of vegetation, the courtyards in the palaces where the sunlight parches the fountains, and the cloisters in the monasteries where the shadows revolve around the columns.

The imperial troops have been lodged in the city's outskirts. Behold the horseman down there who is beating a drum. Abraham Knupfer discerns his hat with three corners, his ornamental shoulder-knots of red linen, his cockade adorned with gold braid, and his ponytail tied with a ribbon.

What he further beholds are the mercenaries who, within the park plumed with gigantic green boughs, upon large emerald lawns riddle with shots from their arquebuses a bird made of wood fastened to the head of a maypole.

And in the evening when the well-proportioned nave in the cathedral falls asleep, lying with its great arms crossed, he perceives on the horizon, as he descends the ladder, a village set on fire by the men of war, a village that flared up like a comet against the dark blue of the heavens.

III. The Scholar from Leyden

One would not know how to take too many precautions nowadays, above all since the counterfeiters have established themselves in this country.

The Siege of Berg-Op-Zoom.

He sits himself down in his armchair upholstered in velvet from Utrecht, Messire Blasius, his chin ensconced in his ruff made from some fine lace, like a wild fowl that a chef serves up roasted on a platter of Delftware.

He sits himself down before his bank so that he can count out on that table the change for a demi-florin; as for me, poor scholar from Leyden with both cap and breeches threadbare, I stand on one leg like a crane perched on a post.

There is the set of scales for weighing coins that comes out of its lacquer box adorned with curious Chinese characters, like the spider that, folding up its long legs, takes refuge inside the cup of a tulip with a thousand colors.

Would not a person think, at seeing the elongated countenance of this money-changer, his thin trembling fingers disconnecting the pieces of gold one from the other, that he was a thief caught in the act and constrained, a pistol at his throat, to render unto God that which he has earned with the assistance of the Devil?

My florin that you weigh with mistrust, examining it with a jeweler's eyepiece, is less ambiguous and squint-eyed than your little dull eye that frets and fumes like a little lamp not quite extinguished.

The set of scales is returned into its lacquer box with its glittering Chinese characters, Messire Blasius has half arisen out of his armchair upholstered in velvet from Utrecht, and as for me, bowing down to the floor, I take my leave, moving backwards, the poor scholar from Leyden with both cap and breeches threadbare.

IV. The Pointed Beard

*If one has not his head erect,
The hair in his beard nicely curled
And his mustachios neatly twirled,
That one by ladies is despised.*

The Poetical Works of d' Assoucy.

On this occasion a festival was happening at the synagogue, tenebrously starred with silver lamps, and the rabbis in robes and with spectacles were kissing their Talmuds, were murmuring, were speaking in quiet nasal tones, were spitting or blowing their noses, some of them seated, and others not.

And behold in what manner, all at once, among so many beards whether round, oval or square that float or curl in the air, that breathe forth amber and balsam, a beard shaped into a point made itself noticed.

A savant by name of Elébotham, his head covered with a flannel cap that sparkled with little gems, stood up and said: "Sacrilège! there is a pointed beard here!"

"A Lutheran beard!" "A short mantle!" "Kill the Philistine." And the throng stamped their feet in a rage as they sat on their benches in an uproar, all the while that the high priest shouted: "Samson, give me that donkey's jawbone of yours!"

But the cavalier Melchior had unfurled a parchment authenticated with the armorial emblems of the Holy Roman Empire: "A warrant," he read, "to arrest the butcher Isaac van Heck, and to hang him as a murderer, him, the swine of Israel, between two swine of Flanders."

Thirty halberdiers emerged with heavy and clanking tread from the darkness in the corridor. "Wrack and ruin on your halberds!" the butcher Isaac jeered at them. And he hurled himself out through the nearest window into the Rhine.

V. The Tulip Merchant

The tulip is among flowers that which the peacock is among birds. The one has no perfume, the other has no voice: the one prides itself on its petals, the other on its tail.

The Garden of Rare and Curious Flowers.

No sound but the handling of the sheets of vellum under the fingers of the doctor Huylten, who did not remove his eyes from his Bible, strewn with Gothic illuminations, except to admire the gold and the purple of two fish captive inside the watery womb of a glass jar.

The clappers of the bell for the front door tolled: A merchant floriculturist who, his arms loaded with several pots of tulips, excused himself at having interrupted the reading of such a scholarly personage.

“My lord,” he said, “here is the treasure of treasures, the marvel of marvels, a bulb such as does not ever blossom except once every hundred years in the harem of the Emperors at Constantinople!”

“A tulip!” cried out the old man provoked to anger, “a tulip, that emblem of pride and of sensual vice that brought forth in the ill-starred town of Wittemberg the detestable heresy of Luther and of Melanchton!”

Master Huylten fastened the clasp on his Bible, arranged his spectacles inside their case and opened the curtain at the window, which allowed a passionflower to be viewed in the sunlight, its crown of thorns, its sponge, its nails and the five wounds of Our Lord.

The tulip merchant nodded his head respectfully and in silence, disconcerted by the inquisitorial gaze from the Duke of Alba, whose portrait, a masterpiece by Holbein, had been hung on the high wall.

VI. The Five Digits of the Hand

An honest family in which there has never happened any bankruptcy, and in which no one has ever been hanged.

The Family Background of Jean de Nivelles

The thumb is this corpulent Flemish tavern-keeper, bantering and obscene, who smokes at his door, under the sign of the double beer of March.

The index is his wife, a virago withered as a dried cod, who has insulted, since morning, her maidservant of whom she is jealous; the wife now caresses her bottle of which she is quite fond.

The middle finger is their son, rough-hewn as though from an ax, who would be a soldier if he were not a brewer, and who would be a horse if he were not a man.

The ring or fourth finger is their daughter, a brisk and provocative Zerbina who sells pieces of lace to the ladies, and who does not sell her smiles to cavaliers.

The little finger is the youngest and favorite child in the family, a whimpering brat who is always toted about at the waist of his mother like a little child hung on the tusk of an ogress.

The five digits of the hand make up the most prodigious wallflower with five petals that has ever embellished the flowerbeds in the noble town of Haarlem.