

A TRICK FOR A TRICK.

By MARIA A. HOYER.

CHAPTER I.



LITTLE thud against the window, a soft fluttering and beating as of some living creature urgent for admittance.

With an exclamation of joy, a girl who sat within rose and ran to the lattice where the fading October twilight came filtering through the thick, small panes of glass. Quickly she unfastened the hasp with quivering fingers, which stumbled a little in their eagerness, and then, as she opened the casement, a bird fluttered in and nestled against her shoulder.

"Sweet little one, my pet, my dove," she murmured, fondling the pretty creature which craned its sheening neck to her caressing hand, "what brings you to me?"

She searched for the string, and there, under the strong yet tender wing, was the little billet she so much desired. With a last caress she put the pigeon on a perch where a little corn and water were ready prepared, and then, kneeling by the fire burning on the hearth, for the daylight was almost gone, she read the missive.

But as she did so her cheek flushed and then paled, and she dropped her hands by her side with a little cry while her breath came quickly. Then she re-read the tiny letter, but now there was doubt in her face. She held the paper to the fire as if expecting further characters to appear; but when nothing responded to the test, a flash of anger came into her eyes.

"It is a trick," she murmured, "a trick to get into the town. Oh, I guess who has done this, but I will meet him on his own ground!"

She sprang to her feet, and fetching a mantle and hood wrapped it round her, and ran down the street. It was nearly dark now, and a grey mist hung like a pall over the little city. The narrow street was almost deserted, save for one or two prowling figures seeking in the gutter for some chance morsel of food, for the siege had lasted some months now and rations were growing very short. The little dark shops were closed, for no business was doing, and people kept indoors for warmth's sake. The air was raw and keen; now and then the heavy boom of a cannon came from the beleaguering lines drawn close round the little Flemish city which had dared to oppose itself to the Majesty of Spain!

The girl hurried along till she reached one of the most imposing houses on the oblong "Place," which occupied the centre of the town. It was built of brick with high stepped roof and much ornament. Here she mounted to the door and asked to see the Burgomaster.

"What is your business, mistress?" said the servant superciliously; "his worship is much engaged. I suppose you have come but

to ask for larger rations, but 'tis no use, there are none to have!"

The girl looked at him haughtily.

"Do your business, sir," she said coldly; "Go, tell the Burgomaster that Jacqueline Grootehuis would speak with him on important business!"

The man hesitated; he looked half insolently at her, but something in her manner quelled him. He went away, and after an absence of a few minutes returned, saying sulkily that the Burgomaster would see her.

She followed the lackey into a long, low room, the walls hung with gilded Cordovan leather, and here and there the portrait of some resolute-looking old citizen. The Burgomaster, a tall thin old man, wrapped in a fur-lined robe, sat at a table covered with papers. He glanced up as the girl entered, and signed to her to sit down while he finished the writing he was engaged upon. Then when he had concluded, he regarded her with his keen grey eyes, deep sunk under heavy eyebrows.

"Well, maiden," he said, "you have a matter you would speak of?"

In reply the girl handed him the tiny missive she had taken from beneath the pigeon's wing. He drew a lighted candle nearer to him and read it aloud.

"I weary to see you," it ran, "and there is a chance. One whom I know will get me through the Spanish lines, and if you will be on the bastion to the right of the Gate of St. Andreas, where the guard is badly kept, and bring a rope with you, I can scale the wall. Send back the bird with time and exact place so that there may be no mistake.

"Ever your loving heart, QUENTIN."

"Who is this 'Quentin'?" inquired the Burgomaster, after a pause.

"He is my lover; he will be my husband if we live through these dark times. He is the son of Master Alost, of the Guild of Weavers at Ghent, he who died last March."

"And you—are you not the daughter of the minister Grootehuis, who had the Church of St. John? You live with your widowed mother? Surely I have seen and spoken with you before this?"

"Yes; but now my mother is sick—she is paralysed. We live in the Ostenstade."

"And how got you this letter—and why bring it to me?"

"My pigeon brought it; Quentin is at Herremonde, and the bird has been between us once or twice. But that is not from him," she went on, and as she spoke her eyes began to sparkle angrily. "That is a trick. Some one has stolen the bird—that is a trick!"

"How do you know?"

"It is not Quentin's writing; besides, he is loyal and true. He would not dare to propose such a thing. Think of the danger if anyone had caught the bird! And, again, he always puts a word in ink that shows not unless it be warmed; on that we agreed so as to be certain that all was safe. It is not there!"

She paused as the Burgomaster held the paper again to the fire, but nothing appeared, and she continued.

"Some one has gained possession of the bird and is using it. They think I will go to the ramparts and let down a rope, and lo, a dozen Walloon soldiers will be up in a trice and the city betrayed!"

"But if you think all this, why bring the letter to me? Why not burn it and take no heed?"

"Because"—she leant forward in her excitement and put out her hands, and the Burgomaster noticed with a curious pang how thin

they were; the hunger was beginning to tell then, even among the better class!—"because I would give them trick for trick. I will send back word, and I will be on the wall with a rope, but you shall be there also with your guards, and as they come up you shall seize them; and if you do not catch a prisoner worth having I shall be much surprised!"

The old man's eyes glittered as he began to understand. He looked keenly at the girl, interested, almost amused. He pulled his long grey beard slowly through his wrinkled hand, on which a diamond ring caught the light and flashed back crimson and sapphire rays. Jacqueline sat back half in the shadow, only her white face was clearly to be seen set in the frame of her dark hood.

"Then you guess," he went on slowly, looking at her with those keen and half-amused eyes, "you guess who is trying to play you this trick? Someone you know—someone who knows about you and your sweetheart, and perhaps is a little jealous?"

A wave of crimson passed over the girl's face.

"Yes," she answered shortly—"yes, I do guess, though I may be wrong. I will not tell you who it is—let us wait and see; that is, if you will come with me and bring the guard?"

The Burgomaster sat silent for a while weighing the matter in his mind. Then he looked up and spoke.

"Yes, I agree. Let us now think how best it can be managed!"

CHAPTER II.

"Is this the place, captain?"

The soldier whispered the question hoarsely to his leader, a handsome young nobleman, as they reached the foot of the city wall after having groped their way across the bit of spongy soil which just there intervened between the moat and the fortifications. They had managed to wade across the water, which was somewhat choked by water-plants and decaying vegetation, and now the rampart rose dark and frowning over their heads. Just where they stood a deep shadow was cast by the moonlight from the angle of the bastion and the tower above it; but elsewhere all was full of silvery misty light, almost more baffling than the darkness.

"Yes, this is the place. Crouch down, men, and be silent as death. Then, when I am on the wall, swarm up quickly. I will gag the girl, but mind, no one is to hurt her. Then follow me and we will seize the gate and let the others in. Hush, while I give the signal."

The young man gazed up at the lofty wall. All was perfectly silent; evidently the sentries had not detected their approach; probably they were asleep not dreaming even of danger of attack. Then he began to whistle softly a tune well known to those days.

As he gazed he saw a dark form appear, bending over the parapet.

"Is it you, Quentin?"

"Yes," he replied, in the same low voice.

"Jacqueline, my dearest, is all ready?"

Something struck his cap. It was the rope—a rope ladder for greater convenience—and he caught it joyfully. Two of his men held it firmly, and the young Walloon captain climbed it, active as a cat. Near the top a woman's hand was held out to aid him, and in a moment he was over the coping and disappeared from the sight of those below.

But they had no doubts, and one by one they swarmed up. A hand—but now it was