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THE HAPPINESS OF BEING RICH.

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CHAPTER VI.
(Continued.)

Like a true miser—for such he had now become—he preferred digesting his bitter chagrin as best he could, to drawing universal attention toward himself, and perhaps having to answer the inquiries of the police concerning his treasure.

So he walked on, with beating heart, and shaking all over with pain and terror, through the city gate, and along the street towards his dwelling; and as he walked, melancholy musings on the immense advantages of being rich forced their way into his mind, and more than once he cursed the treasure which had occasioned him such continued grief, so much contention and vexation, so much soreness of heart, and such peril. He thought sadly of his former life, of his poverty, and of his happiness and his uninterrupted mirth; and sometimes he even asked himself whether it would not be better to divide the treasure among his needy neighbors. But all these speculations vanished at the touch of the demon of gold who held him captive in his grasp—and his heart clung with fiery eagerness to his beloved treasure.

Thus wavering between despair, terror, and covetousness, he reached his house, and sank into a chair with a heavy sigh. His wife and his son tended him with affectionate care, and listened with a shudder to the account he gave of his adventures. The schouwveger could not close his eyes all that night. No sooner did he begin to doze, than he dreamt of thieves and murderers; and, besides, he felt the smart of the blows which he had received on his head and shoulders, and elsewhere.

The next morning a rumor ran through the street that Dame Smet had not had any legacy, and had no chance of any. The lawyer who had been worried for years in searching out all her genealogy, had said that the Smets had no relatives in Holland, and consequently could receive no legacy.

The mysterious secrecy of the schouwveger gave credit to this rumor. The envy and bitterness of the neighbors, excited by Dame Smet's haughtiness, gladly seized it as a foundation and pretext for all kinds of conjectures and surmises as to the origin of the sudden wealth of the schouwveger.

Their suspicions were still further confirmed when they noticed that three or four police agents were wandering up and down the street without any apparent object; they noticed, too, that every now and then they looked askance at the schouwveger's house, like ravenous birds who have caught scent of their prey, without knowing precisely where to pounce upon it.

Then a story got abroad that just a week before—the very night before the news of the legacy reached them—there had been a robbery at a money-changer's in the city, and that the thieves had made off with a large quantity of silver and gold. Nobody ventured to say directly that the schouwveger was likely to rob any one of a stiver; but then, money couldn't drop from the cloud; and, anyhow, the Smets must know where they got it from.

Pauw was sitting in the shoemaker's house at Katie's side; she was working at her embroidery, and had great difficulty in restraining the tears which could trickle down upon her work in spite of her efforts. The young man's head hung down, and he was silent and moody; his countenance indicated violent and unwanted emotion; his forehead glowed at intervals with indignation and anger; then his features would relax into an expression of utter despondency, or a cold shudder would thrill through his whole frame. He could not help knowing what fearful suspicions were hinted in the neighborhood about his father; and he was evidently lost in melancholy musing, and trembled beneath the crushing blow of shame.

The maiden, compassionating his distress, made every effort to suppress her own sorrow, and tried to comfort him by saying, with a sigh—

'Pauw, don't give way to low spirits. Men have evil tongues. Don't fret about it. What matters the gossip of the neighbors if your parents can show where they got their money?'

'The money!' muttered the youth between his teeth. 'Ah, Katie dear, it is the money that makes us all so wretched. My father is growing as thin as a skeleton; he will fall ill and waste away. My mother, poor thing! I dare not say what I think about her. She has her five senses still; but what will come of her? There are times when I tremble for her reason. And your father is so cross to me! And I can't blame him, he has to submit to so much humiliation. Ah, Katie, Katie, what will happen now, when up and down the street they say things about my poor, innocent father which make my hair stand on end with terror and shame. Oh, Katie dear, I shake all over; I am full of fear.'

There is something that tells me we shall be separated; that there is nothing before either of us, all our life long, but misery and sorrow.'

The maiden hid her face in her hands. 'Katie,' continued Pauw, with a deeper emotion in his voice, 'this morning I went quietly to the church, and prayed more than an hour before the crucifix. I besought God, with tears, that He would be so merciful as to make us poor again.'

The girl raised her head, and said, with tears in her eyes—

'Pauw, you must not give way to all these gloomy fancies. There are so many rich people; do you think they are all miserable?'

'I don't know, Katie; but to us, at least, money is poison and gall. Since that wretched day we have had nothing but quarrelling, anger, terror, and suffering. My father was nearly murdered yesterday. Yesterday the knife of the murderer; to-day the knife of slander and calumny. Oh, it is dreadful! to hear that my father has been robbing—that he is a thief—and not to be able to find out the serpent who first cast this venom on my father's name.'

At this moment the shoemaker entered the house. His face was pale, and betokened great discomposure; he looked as if something had frightened him out of his senses.

'Katie,' said he, speaking very fast, 'go up into your room; leave me alone with Pauw; but first bolt the street door.'

The girl uttered a shriek of anguish, and raised her hands imploringly to her father, as if to deprecate some cruel sentence; but an imperative glance of his eye and the repetition of his command compelled her to obey. She left the room, covering her eyes with her hands.

The shoemaker placed himself in front of Pauw, and asked, with a voice of emotion—

'Pauw, where did your father get the money that your mother is spending by handfulls?'

The young schouwveger looked at him in amazement, but did not answer quickly enough to please the shoemaker.

'Speak! speak! where does the money come from? It is for your own good I ask.'

'My mother got it as a legacy,' stammered Pauw.

'Has the legacy come already?'

'No, not.'

'Where does the money come from, then?'

'They have got some in advance, I suppose.'

'From what? From where?'

'I don't know anything about it.'

'You do not know anything about it, poor fellow! My poor friend Smet, what will come to him next? Oh, mercy!'

'But what is the matter?' cried Pauw, in evident terror. 'You are quite ruffled. What has happened? I am shaking like a reed. You are killing me with agony!'

The shoemaker took him by the hand, led him away from the window, and said, in a mysterious and melancholy tone—

'Pauw, I was sent for just now to measure one of the servants of the Commissary of Police for a pair of shoes. It was only a trick; the Commissary himself wanted to speak to me. He asked me a great many questions about your father, about the legacy, about the explanations your mother has given the neighbors as to the source of the money she displays everywhere in such abundance. I cannot tell you what the Commissary said to me confidentially; but I am very sorry for your father, who was always my dear friend; and if he has done wrong, I shall always lament his unhappy fate.'

Pauw stood looking into the shoemaker's eye with a vacant stare, and shivering as if he had the ague.

'I pity you, Pauw, and my poor Katie, too; for she is not to blame—nor you either, Pauw.'

'For mercy sake speak! What has happened?' sobbed the youth, quite beside himself.

'Pauw,' said the shoemaker, lowering his voice to a whisper, 'tell your father to be off out of the way as fast as he can; for the officers are coming to apprehend him!'

'To apprehend him?' exclaimed Pauw, with an expression of indignation and pride on his face; 'to apprehend my father? Ha! ha! how absurd!'

'Believe me, Pauw,' repeated the shoemaker, in a tone of entreaty, 'take my advice, or your father is a lost man!'

Then, putting his mouth close to Pauw's ear, he whispered almost inaudibly—

'A large sum of money has been stolen from a money-changer's; they suspect your father of being at least an accomplice.'

Pauw shuddered violently, and stared at the shoemaker with fixed and glassy eyes.

'What!' he exclaimed, 'can you believe such a slander? Do you think it possible that my father is a thief?'

'No, no; but if he cannot show how he came by the money, how can he exculpate himself?'

'He will show all about it. How can you doubt it?'

'So much the better. I have asked him several times, but there was always something about him that was not clear and straightforward. Do just as you like, Pauw: but you see, until the thing is sifted to the bottom you must keep away from here. Katie has nothing but her good name. You must not rob her of this, her only riches.'

A shriek of despair and of agony broke from the young man's heart. He sprang up, and exclaimed—

'Ha! I'll know all about it; I will know all about it!'

And with these words, he ran out of the room into the street.

When he entered his own dwelling, he found his father alone, sitting on a chair.

He locked the door and bolted it, and said with eager haste—

'Father, father dear, don't be angry with me; but I can't keep it any longer; I must know all about it.'

The schouwveger gazed at him in astonishment.

'Father, tell me—oh, tell me now—where does the money come from that mother is showing to everybody?'

'We have received it as a legacy,' was the reply.

'No, no, the legacy hasn't come yet; you have got it in advance, haven't you? You have borrowed it here in the city upon the legacy you are going to receive?'

'Well, yes. Why do you trouble yourself about it?'

'Where have you borrowed it, where?' repeated the young man, with feverish impatience.

'But, Pauw, what has come to you?' cried the schouwveger, in a severe tone of voice, 'you impudent fellow! to cross-examine your father as if you were his judge!'

This word affected the youth deeply. 'I will, I must, I am determined to know!' he screamed.

Master Smet shook his head sadly, and said, in a desponding tone:

'Pauw, you are asking me something that I cannot tell you now.'

'That you cannot tell me?' said the trembling youth, with a deep sigh. 'Oh, mercy!'

'What is the matter with you, Pauw?'

'Father, father, exclaimed he, 'a large sum of money has been stolen from a money-changer's; people suspect you of being an accomplice in the robbery.'

The schouwveger was struck with dismay, but he exerted himself to hide his discomposure.

'It is only a slander of some envious people,' stammered he; 'don't disturb yourself about them.'

'Alas, alas! the gendarmes are coming, father, to apprehend you!'

A death-like paleness overspread the schouwveger's face; he uttered a low moan, and began to tremble on his chair.

The sudden emotion of his father filled Pauw with alarm. He clasped his hands in an attitude of supplication, and implored his father:

'For mercy's sake, father, speak! Where—from whom—did you or mother get this money?'

The schouwveger continued silent.

'Alas!' said Pauw, mournfully, 'can it be true? Can it be that my father dares not declare where the money came from! Alas! I shall die of shame!'

At this imputation, made by his own son, the schouwveger covered his eyes with his hands, and began to weep bitterly. The tears which escaped from between his fingers and fell to the ground, so affected the poor young man that he uttered a cry of anguish and sorrow.

He threw his arm round his father's neck, kissed him tenderly on the forehead, and said, with tears—

'Oh, forgive me, father; I am so miserable!'

'Accused by my own son!' sobbed the schouwveger. 'Oh, how have I deserved this?'

'No, no,' said Pauw, beseechingly; 'but I am compelled to hear you accused, and I cannot vindicate you. People ask me where you got the money. Oh, father dear, do tell me.'

'I cannot—I must not,' repeated Master Smet.

And observing that these words drove the color again from his son's cheeks, he added—

'But be sure of one thing, your father is an honest man.'

'And the gendarmes, father? will you not tell them?' cried Pauw, trembling violently.

The schouwveger rose up, as though he wished to avoid further questioning; and pointing with his finger to the door, he said in a tone of command—

'Pauw, go away; leave me alone, I command you.'

'Oh, father, father!' cried the youth, wringing his hands in despair.

'Obey me at once—go away!' repeated the schouwveger, with evident irritation.

Pauw raised his hands above his head, and fled from his home with a shriek of terror and suspicion.

For about half an hour the schouwveger was all alone. His eyes were fixed and still, but he saw nothing; he was pondering on all the vexation and misery the treasure had brought with it, and now his house was changed into a hell of unrest and of suffering. During this gloomy reverie there arose and grew in his heart a feeling of bitter hatred towards the fatal money which had robbed him of the peace and of the happiness of his life. The demon of avarice tried, indeed, to crush the insurrection of his soul; but the thought that his own son believed him guilty, and the indescribable terror which the approaching visit of the gendarmes excited in him, lent him sufficient strength to resist his fascinations.

He resolved, at length, when the officers of justice entered his house, to explain everything frankly; and even if they took away the treasure with them, then, he would be a schouwveger again, as he had been before.

This resolution made him feel lighter at heart, and even cheered him so much that he felt he should again be merry and open-hearted, as Jan Garp had been in days past.

When Dame Smet returned from her morning promenade, her husband repeated what Pauw said; and he added that he had made a firm and unchangeable resolve to declare everything openly, and even to surrender the treasure into the hands of justice, if it were demanded.

His wife knew much better than he did what rumors were in circulation about them, and what they had to fear. She first of all poured a torrent of abuse on the poor shoemaker, who, she said, had gone to the commissary, and out of sheer envy, had set all this mischief afloat. Then she made her husband repeat again what Pauw had said, and answered with a scornful laugh:

'But, Smet, what a blockhead you have grown! The word gendarme makes your heart shrink within you. Have you committed theft or robbery? What can they do to you?'

'Tis all the same; I won't tell a lie before the judge.'

'No—tell it all right out, you booby! You know well enough that when justice lays its hand on anything, there is no getting it out again. The lawyers and the men from Brussels would make fine fun with your money. They would have a good laugh at the stupid bird that let itself be plucked so easily.'

'Say what you like, I will conceal nothing—and, secondly, this money, d'ye see, begins to choke me terribly; I wish it were now in the mountain where they say all this cursed gold grows.'

Dame Smet flew into a violent rage, stuck her hands in her sides, and snarled—

'Ha! that's the tune you're going to sing, is it? Well, we'll see! 'Tis my money; your forefathers never had a stiver more than enough to keep them from dying of starvation day by day. What! you will give up the inheritance of my father to the lawyers? Quick—speak out! do you abide by this stupid resolution?'

Her husband, disconcerted by the fierce glare of her eyes, and by the fear that matters would not end with words only, did not dare to say 'yes'; but still he nodded his head affirmatively.

'You thief!' cried she, 'you will rob me of my gold, and give it away to strange people, who have nothing to do with it, will you? Well, then, I will not remain a moment more the wife of such a simple fool. I'll be off at once to an advocate. I'll be divorced from you—the law allows it—and then you may be poor, if you like, and sweep chimneys; for ineanness runs in your blood—low rascal that you are!'

'But, wife dear,' sobbed the affrighted schouwveger, pale as death, 'only listen to sound reason.'

'What sound reason? You have never had a grain of sound reason in all your family.—Speak, I tell you—will you behave as I wish, or not?'

Her husband remaining silent.

'Well, growled she, 'I'll make very short work of it. I'll be off with my money, and you shall never set eyes on me more.'

And as the schouwveger remained silent and with his head hung dejectedly down, she flamed forth into more violent anger. She rushed to the chest, and began in good earnest to fill her pockets with money, and packed up a great deal more in a table cloth, shaking all the time with passion, and muttering—

'Well—you shall see. Stay you here, Jan-noodle—and let the gendarmes sit a halter to your neck at their ease. Fare you well—au revoir! I'm off for America in the first ship—ay, farther than that too—so that I may never hear of you again.'

The schouwveger knew well enough that his wife had not the slightest intention of putting these formidable threats into execution. Still, he shuddered at the thought that she would be running round the neighborhood with all this

money about her, and making herself a laughing stock to everybody; so he made a spring at the door, drew the bolt, and put the key in his pocket.

His wife, finding herself thus a prisoner, burst out into wild invectives, and used every exertion to take the key from her husband by main force. And this domestic conflict raged on until the schouwveger lost courage and gave way, promising faithfully to do just what his wife wished him to do.

It was then resolved that, in case the officers of justice made their appearance, they should affirm that the money came to them from the father of Dame, and that they had kept it secret thus long. It would not do to speak of any advance upon the expected legacy, because they could not say who made the advance. The rest of the money they would hide again in the beam where they had found it, and they would place the little plank which covered the opening in its former position.

Dame Smet overwhelmed her hapless husband with threats of what she would do to him if he should betray, by word or look where the money lay hidden.

When the treasure had been carried into the attic, to the very last piece of gold, Dame Smet tried to raise her husband's spirits and to rekindle in him the love of riches; but the schouwveger was like a man stunned at the thoughts of appearing in a court of justice. This seemed to him a disgraceful, a punishable matter; and now he trembled, in all sincerity, like a thief who is caught in the fact. He heard nothing of his wife's glowing descriptions; but the slightest sound in the street affected his nerves so much that he seemed at each moment to hear the awful voice of the gendarmes or the police.

And in the intervals of his paroxysms of terror, he muttered, in a tone of the deepest anguish—

'Cursed treasure! devilish money.'

CHAPTER VII.

An hour later the little narrow street was full of groups of people, who were discussing in amazement some unusual occurrence.

While they were chatting, every one's eyes were anxiously fixed on the house of the schouwveger, at the door of which a gendarme kept guard.

Katie was leaning against the wall of her house, with her apron at her eyes, and weeping bitterly. Some girls who stood round her seemed to participate in her grief; and Anneke, especially, made many attempts to console her;—but she herself could hardly restrain the tears which stood glistening in her eyes.

The largest group was posted immediately opposite the schouwveger's door, and there were exchanged all kinds of edifying reflections and observations on this strange event.

'Serves her right,' muttered a fish-wife;— 'this will teach her to my lady herself—the upstart minx, with her silk bonnet and her satin gown. Now she can tell all the honest folk in the house of correction what a good family she comes of. And if she wants to show herself off, the scaffold is quite large enough.'

'Yes, she comes of a great family—doesn't she?' said another, with a sneer; 'at Vilvoorden she'll find six or seven hundred of her cousins.'

'But how is it possible?' said the old chair-mender, with a sigh. 'I would have trusted Jan-Grap with my last stiver.'

'Such good, upright people, who never did anybody an injury,' added another.

'Who cared so little for money that they were always giving alms, though they were not over well off themselves.'

'The most amiable, the best lad on the face of the earth!'

'So merry and so clever, and they to rob like this—to break into a house in the night.'

'Yes,' remarked the tailor's wife, 'after this nobody will be able to trust his own brother;—everything that goes on two legs is a thief. So much the worse for them that let themselves be caught.'

'Come, come, Betty,' said a mason, laughing. 'tisn't quite so bad as that comes to, either. Because your husband cabbages a bit of cloth now and then, you think there are no honest people left.'

'Ha! you've cheated the gallows,' snarled the tailor's wife. 'You've got the mark of 'em on you, you rogue.'

'Thank you very much, Betty darling,' said the mason, with a smile and a bow.

'Serves her right,' interposed the fish-wife. 'I don't like looking at other people's troubles; but if my lady the schouwveger's wife is to figure on the scaffold, I'd be off to the great market if I was on my death-bed.'

'Pie, you shrew,' exclaimed one of the girls. 'I can't think how you can take pleasure in the misfortunes of your neighbors. What good will it do you, now, if the Smets are sent to prison?'

'You simpleton,' said the fish-wife, with a smile of contempt; 'you would rather see thieves running around at large, I suppose?'