

CHAPTER 46

THE CATASTROPHE



It was on Friday, the very Friday which brought Hubert Lossell the decisive letter from Dr. Pillenaar, — Ah, true, I have not told you yet about that letter. ‘Friday is always an unlucky day,’ said Hubert. ‘It is wonderful how these things come out, without any earthly reason why.’

He was sitting in the brothers’ private room at the Office, writing, alone. Hendrik had gone out, without saying whither or why. Hubert was not sorry to see him go. The hour was a quiet one, the period after lunch when lazy people do nothing, and busy people do less than usual.

There was a lull in the day’s work, and the lofty sun shone briskly through the Office windows. Hubert sat at his desk writing slowly, half his mind in his letter, half in his sombre thoughts. And the flowery Chinaman over the mantelpiece sat serenely watching him, and winking at his back from time to time.

Presently a visitor was announced, on business. The visitor, unconscious of his mistake, sat down in the chair from which the merchant had just risen, and faced round to the centre-desk with its vacant seat. Hubert found himself compelled to choose between his brother’s place of honour and one of the two low arm-chairs beside it, which were usually offered to strangers. He did not take his brother’s seat. To his visitor’s surprise he drew forward the fauteuil. ‘These lazy young men!’ thought the other, and shook his head, which was white. The conference was not a long one. After a few minutes the old gentleman rose to depart. He secretly regretted not having found Hendrik in, for, like most of his colleagues on ’Change, he regarded Hendrik as by far the better man of business. ‘We can settle the particulars later on,’ he said, ‘I am quite satisfied to have your word. It is always pleasant to find one’s self in commercial relations with your house,

Mynheer Lossell. I am one of the oldest merchants in Koopstad, and I have never heard anyone impugn the good faith and spotless integrity of Volderdoes Zonen.' He went his way, and Hubert closed the door upon him with a self-scorning smile. The Chinaman leered in placid intelligence. He knew that the words must be taken commercially, that is, with plenty of water – like the tea.

Hubert cast a glance through the great plate-glass partition at the outer office with its silent activity of numerous bent heads and restless pens, and at the noisy hurry and bustle on the quay beyond. What a mighty machine it was, quivering, throbbing, pulsing onward, with the hand of a thief at the guiding stop.

A young clerk was coming up through the Office with a note in his hand. And that note was Dr. Pillenaar's.

Hubert took it wearily. More business. More tea at so-much. Black or green or mixed. All the little accurate daily details, the little holes into which thoughts must mechanically fit, were inexpressibly revolting to him at this terrible crisis. His mind shuddered back from them, as the red-hot furnace recoils hissing from a splash of cold water. Another order. Two, two and three, two and nine. Mixed tea, and green, and black. And superfine pure Chinese.

Dr. Pillenaar's letter was very short:

'Wel Edel Geboren Heer : Come and see me at once.

J.C. PILLENAAR.'

Hubert sat down and wrote an answer, saying that, to his great regret, he must delay for an hour or two, as he was alone at the Office.

He folded it and put it into an envelope, and carefully addressed it. And then he tore it up and rang for a head clerk.

'I am compelled to go out for a few moments,' he said. 'I do not expect to be long.'

And he went to Dr. Pillenaar.

He found the old doctor seated, just as he had left him, when he had run away from his disclosures a few days ago. It seemed as if Death had forgotten this quiet man in his corner, among his flowers and his books and his thoughts of a long, long past. The doctor motioned his visitor to a seat. Then he sat silent for some minutes, as if he found it difficult to begin the conversation.

'You sent for me –' Hubert hazarded at last.

'Yes. I have something to tell you, Mynheer Lossell. It is not an easy thing to tell. Ah, that is not fair. I am keeping you in suspense. Well,

here goes. We spoke, when last you were here, of the South Sumatra Tobacco Company. Chance has put me into possession of strange information with regard to that company. I have sent for you to advise you to persuade your brother to sell out today.'

Hubert pulled out his watch. 'He can't,' he said. 'Exchange hours are over. But, Doctor, everyone says the company is flourishing. The annual meeting takes place to-morrow. An enormous dividend is predicted. And the shares, which went down last week, on account of malicious reports, have come up again recently to their former outrageous price.'

'I must tell you,' said the Doctor, 'come what may. The matter is briefly this. I hear that the Company is indeed as extravagantly prosperous as the price of the shares would give reason to suppose. A dividend of fifty-five per cent., will be announced to-morrow, and the shares which are at present at about 500 above par ought to go up, Hendrik Lossell thinks, two, three hundred more in consequence.'

'Yes,' said Hubert, 'and I fancy he is right.'

'He is wrong. They will be down to one hundred per cent., to-morrow evening.'

'Impossible,' said Hubert quietly, suppressing a smile.

'The matter is very simple, I believe. The Royal Sumatra Company, the sole rival of the South Sumatra, has been busy for a long time surreptitiously buying up the required majority of its shares. These are scattered, as you will understand, over the necessary number of agents. At to-morrow's meeting a proposal will be brought forward to liquidate the Company and to sell all its possessions to the Royal Sumatra, which has fortunately stepped in at this crisis and kindly offers a price which will guarantee to all shareholders the full amount of their shares. Cent. per cent., you see, and perhaps a slight surplus. The proposal will be put to the vote and carried.'

'Impossible,' repeated Hubert, though with less assurance. 'Utterly impossible. My dear Doctor, such an operation as that would be punishable by law.'

'Do you think so?' asked the Doctor. It was now his turn to suppress a smile. 'I do not fancy the conspirators are very afraid of legal proceedings. They have laid their plans carefully, and a conspiracy will be difficult to prove. There will be a large number of voters – comparatively – at to-morrow's meeting, but, in reality, I believe the great mass of the shares is in the hands of two owners only, the Royal Sumatra Company on the one side, and your brother on the other.'

‘Impossible again,’ cried Hubert; ‘their capital is far too large for that!’

‘One thing more. The Royal Sumatras, in their anxiety to be sure of their majority, have bought more shares than they require. That accounts for the great rise in prices, notwithstanding unsatisfactory reports. They are striving, with all their might and main, as you can believe, to get the superfluous shares off their hands. And I know that a large quantity have been offered en bloc to your brother at 50 per cent. under Exchange price. The affair is to be settled to-night, at a Notary’s.’

Hubert sat silent, thinking it out as best he could. Then he asked abruptly: ‘How do you know all this?’

‘You need hardly ask me,’ replied Dr. Pillenaar.

‘How many shares do you believe my brother to have?’

‘I cannot tell. I have heard speak of one hundred. In any case I know that the offer for this evening is of two hundred more.’

‘Three hundred shares at six hundred per cent.,’ cried Hubert. ‘Eighteen hundred thousand florins!’ Dr. Pillenaar!

‘It is a gigantic undertaking,’ said the Doctor. ‘None but the Royal Sumatra could have risked it. However, they were bent on buying up their rivals, and this transaction puts a couple of millions in their pockets. Clear gain.’

‘To my brother,’ said Hubert softly, ‘it would mean a loss of a million and a half, at one blow, independently of any losses he may previously have sustained.’

‘It is on that account I sent for you,’ said Dr. Pillenaar. ‘What is done can’t be mended, but you can still prevent the chief catastrophe. This new vast purchase must not take place. It is outrageous. It is scandalous,’ cried Dr. Pillenaar, waxing angry. ‘Are we to sit quietly by and see Elias reduced to beggary? You must go to your brother instantly, Mynheer Lossell. You may confide to him what I have told you. Let him keep silent about it, if he can. If he won’t, let him speak. I do not care. I have quarrelled – I fear almost irremediably – with my son-in-law about this business. I cannot help it. I must save Elias. And the honoured name of Volderdoes. I rejoice that God has spared me to work out my revenge upon the Lossells before I die.’

¹ For the benefit of the reader who considers the prices above given to be excessive the fact may be stated that to-day’s Stock Intelligence, as published by the Amsterdam Bourse, quotes Arendsburg Tobacco Shares at 900, and Deli ditto at 720 –
AUTHOR’S NOTE

'I am going,' said Hubert, stumbling to his feet.

'It is my son-in-law and Lankater who have arranged the matter between them. The offer is supposed to come from a speculator who cannot hold out.'

'But this story of the proposed liquidation,' said Hubert, with a last flicker of hope. 'It is outrageous. It is impossible. It is a crime.'

'I am not a man of business,' answered Dr. Pillenaar. 'Is it? I thought you were.'

Hubert went straight back to the Office, to the Office-door.

'Has Mynheer Hendrik returned?' he asked the old door-keeper.

'No, Mynheer.'

'If he does, tell him to wait for me here. Tell him that some important news has arrived.'

'Very well, Mynheer.'

Then he walked out to Hendrik's house and inquired for him there. That was useless, as he had expected it would be. Cornelia came into the hall at the sound of her brother-in-law's voice. She was dressed to go out.

'Can you tell me where Hendrik is, Hubert?' she asked. 'What! are you looking for him too? How provoking. He was to fetch me at half-past two to accompany me to the General's reception. Their daughter is going to be married next week, as you know. Are you going there also? Oh no, I wasn't thinking; you do not know them. It is extremely annoying! I should not wonder if he forgot altogether. And he has got the carriage. I am at a loss what to do. I can't stop away. And I can hardly arrive there in a cab.'

'No; hardly in a cab,' repeated Hubert. 'It is very annoying for you. I should not wonder if he forgot altogether, as you say. Good-bye. If he comes here, tell him to meet me at the Office at five. Or at eight.'

Cornelia remained alone with her annoyance, plus a large dose of indignant astonishment. 'It was almost as if he were laughing at me,' she said to herself. 'How rude Hubert can be, to be sure! I am afraid I shall have to go in a cab, after all.' She looked down at her new spring toilet and sighed. She wondered whether the dirty cab-cushions would soil it. 'Of course Margaret need not go,' she thought. 'How could I ask? She has got no friends, and no new dresses. She has got nothing but babies.'

Hubert went down the road again, back towards the centre of the town. What next? He did not know. He could have hardly told him-

self what he had done already since he left Dr. Pillenaar. One thought only stood out clearly in his mind. 'I must save Elias. And the honoured name of Volderdoes.' A stranger could say that. The man could say it whom the Lossells had done life-long wrong. And to attain his end that man could break away from the stay of his old age, casting from him, probably, even the material support of which he stood in need. It was thus that the upright did right. And he – Hubert?

As a child, he had taken his eldest brother's life, and left him only sentient death. It was but natural that, as a man, he should stand by and watch that same step-brother's spoliation of the means of existence. It was only rational that Hendrik should step forward and claim his turn.

And then, suddenly, he understood that it was impossible that this thing should happen, impossible, absurd. Such monstrosities did not take place. He laughed aloud to himself at the absurdity of the idea, the hideous absurdity.

Somebody looked round at him in passing, and said: 'Well, Lossell, what is it? Give us the benefit of the joke!' He awoke to the fact that he was standing, in the full daylight, on the busy market-place by the Great Church, and that an acquaintance had just gone by.

He shook himself together, and looked about him. And his eyes travelled slowly up the lofty tower of the sacred building, which rose calm and pure into the pale blue sky. It seemed as if the feeling it called up in him increased the discord of his thoughts, for he laughed again, only softly this time, under his breath.

'I must act,' he said. 'Act. Do something. That is why Pillenaar sent for me. I do not believe that Hendrik has taken Elias's money. There must be some mistake, or some other explanation. And I must find it. At once.'

Then he went back to the Office.

'Is Mynheer Hendrik come back?' he asked.

'No, Mynheer.'

'Has anybody any idea where he is?'

'No, Mynheer.'

'If he should come back, tell him to wait for me.'

'Yes, Mynheer.'

But as he walked away again, along the quay, heedless of lifted caps and grinning faces, he told himself that this primary search for Hendrik was useless. Hendrik would not explain. Hendrik would lie, as he had done before. When the brothers met, Hubert must *know*. He must be in possession of the facts of the case.

‘I shall go to Amsterdam,’ he decided. ‘I should have done it sooner. When I first thought of that way.’

By ‘that way’ he meant an inquiry at headquarters, whether the great sums invested in Elias’s name in Government securities – ‘inscribed in the Great Book of the National Debt’, as they call it – were still intact. Almost all Elias’s property was thus ‘inscribed’, and it is difficult to get at money so entrusted to the State. Hubert would have sooner investigated the actual condition of his step-brother’s fortune, had he not shrunk from the possible scandal which any steps on his part might call forth. Besides, he had not till now believed the danger to be so imminent. Granted that Hendrik had used a certain sum as security to help him in the speculative purchase of stock (and probably the amount was much exaggerated by report), yet such malversations, though they might lead to a deficit, did not mean ruin. The newly acquired funds would always furnish a relative guarantee, and Hendrik would be compelled in a day or two to wind up his Stock Exchange transactions and give an account of his administration. He would doubtless be able to do so, Hubert had thought, for Hubert, although he disapproved of the South Sumatra speculation, could not deny that it had bidden fair to become a financial success. He had waited, therefore, with a certain amount of confidence. At the bottom of his heart he had felt that the discovery of a slight deficit would not be altogether unpalatable to him, as it would doubtless enable him to get himself appointed curator. He was surprised to discover, on looking back, how small the danger now seemed which he had thought so terrible a few hours ago.

The time was gone by for nice distinction and delicate reticence. It is true that a breath of distrust on the clear surface of a merchant’s commercial credit may bring ruin, but what matters that consideration when a storm is already shaking the foundations of his house? Hubert looked at his watch again. He had constantly done so, often without noticing what it was intended to tell him. He now saw that he could hurry across to Amsterdam, immediately. He had just time to catch a train. He forgot all about his wife, who would be expecting him in vain. He reached the station at the last moment and jumped into an empty compartment, non-smoking, so as to escape the companionship of other business men. But, just as the train was preparing to depart and his solitude seemed pretty well assured, the door was again thrown open, and a lady was hurried in. He knew her, and she was a very voluble lady. She told him all about her nearly missing the train, and the annoyance it would have caused her, and the reception at the

General's, to which she had been. 'I saw your sister-in-law there,' she said. 'One is really surprised to discover into what a handsome woman she has developed. But, then, she dresses so exquisitely, and that is a great thing. Her dresses are costly, as if she did not care what she pays for them, and tasteful, as if she reckoned out every item herself. Do you not think so?'

Hubert, though he answered her in monosyllables, yet had to pay some attention to what she was saying, for she was one of those provoking rattles, who, while they never allow you to make a remark of your own, yet insure your listening to their monotonous clatter by pausing from time to time with a sudden question or appeal. After Hubert had answered 'Yes' to her inquiry about the number of his children, he felt that he must listen with one ear, if he could. All the time, however, he was uninterruptedly thinking: 'It is impossible. It is too utterly absurd. Such things are not. I shall find out in Amsterdam that it is not true.'

Upon reaching the metropolis, he drove straight to the insignificant building which is set apart as a Temple of National Thriftlessness. The complicated nineteenth-century State has at least a proper sense of its dignity. To beg it is ashamed. It only borrows.

The streets were noisy with constant traffic, bright with reflections from the westering sun. Hubert pulled down the blinds of his cab impatiently. And then he remembered that their clear green in the brilliant light would attract general attention, and he hastily pushed them up again.

The Bureaux were closed for the day. That Hubert had already foreseen. He had intended from the first to address himself directly to a high functionary, connected with the administration, whom he happened slightly to know. The man was a connection of his mother's. To avoid personalities, he must be alluded to in these pages as Mynheer B.

'But is Mynheer B. perhaps still in the building?' queried Hubert.

No; Mynheer B. had left half an hour ago. He had probably gone home.

Hubert bade the cabman drive to the official's private address.

'Not at home,' said the servant there.

'But where,' cried Hubert from the cab-window, 'do you think Mynheer can be?'

The servant – a fat, untidy female – stood in the door and grinned.

'Would you ask your mistress, perhaps,' suggested Hubert mildly; 'I have come up to town on purpose to see him. I cannot stay –'

Nor, apparently, could the maid, for at the first mention of her mistress she retreated down the passage as rapidly as if she feared that Hubert in his cab might be mistaken for a follower. Half-way down she stopped suddenly, remembered something, came back again, and carefully closed the door.

'It is fate,' said Hubert, and sank back in the musty, velvet-cushioned cab.

If it was fate, then the untidy servant must have been Atropos – wasn't it Atropos who cut the string?

'Back to the station,' said Hubert. And the cabman, who cared for nothing as long as he was paid by the hour, clambered up slowly on to his box again and lumbered away.

The principal streets of all Dutch towns are so narrow that foot-passengers, even when they keep close to the houses (there are practically no pavements), unavoidably stare into the windows of every carriage that squeezes by. Solitary progress through these streets in a vehicle with many windows is, therefore, a trying ordeal for a modest man. Hubert was not immodest, as a rule, but at this moment he was also desperate. And there is nothing which makes us shrink from the company of our fellow-creatures so much as our desperation among their indifference.

He lay in a corner of the roomy four-wheeler and stared out into the street with hot, uninterested eyes. And at the slow and shaky turning of a corner, the face he had been in search of looked straight through the square of glass into his obscurity, and recognised him, – hesitated, – then smiled, an uncertain smile of 'It is surely he.'

The sudden blow of Hubert's umbrella broke the pane of glass behind the coachman. He was out in the street in another moment.

'Ah, my dear Lossell, I fancied it was you,' said the man of finance, turning around. 'And what brings you to Amsterdam? Out for a lark, I suppose, away from your wife and the babies?'

Mynheer B. was a man of middle age, middle height, and medium abilities. His whole life remained naturally restricted to remembering the names of the people who had lent their money to the State. It does not sound attractive on paper, but it is really a far pleasanter occupation than remembering the names of your own creditors, as most of us are obliged to do. However, Mynheer B. knew that a man must expand his intellect, if he can. And so he made up for whatever monotony there may have been in his calling, by the play of a pleasant humour outside of office-hours. Nobody would have dreamed, to see his parchmenty face and orange eye-balls in his own Department, that the man could laugh after four.

'I came on purpose to see you,' cried Hubert.

'To see me? That is unusually kind. I did not know there was so much to see in my humble person. I must tell my wife. It will please her.'

'I came for nobody's pleasure,' retorted Hubert sternly. 'I have just a few minutes before my train leaves again. I can't speak in the street. Will you do me the favour of coming into my cab for a moment?'

'If you don't drive off with me,' answered the irrepressible functionary. 'Why such haste? Let us take a glass of bitters at the café over yonder.'

He dared not proffer an invitation to dinner, for, although he might be head of his own Department, yet his wife was head of her own house.

'I have no time. I shall miss my train as it is,' said Hubert hurriedly. And he led the way. So the cab was drawn into a side-street, and there it stood, an encumbrance to traffic, and a source of much vexation to an idle policeman. 'There could be no better place for the most secret conference,' thought Hubert, as they got in.

But, momentous though its outcome might prove, the conversation in itself could be confined to a few simple questions and answers.

'I merely wanted to ask you,' began Hubert abruptly, 'whether my step-brother Elias's property, as inscribed in your registers, has been augmented or diminished of late.'

Whilst driving to the Bureaux of the 'Great Book', he had thought over several methods of indirectly extracting the information he wanted. He had abandoned them all, and now ultimately put his question straight out.

'Do you ask me that?' said Mynheer B., suddenly sobered, for this was 'business'.

'Yes,' replied Hubert, colouring to the roots of his hair.

'And yet your brother —'

'I ask you,' repeated Hubert vehemently. He caught his breath. 'Answer me. Quick!'

'Half a million of your brother's money was drawn out a few days ago. That is to say, speaking incorrectly, I am giving you the real value. The nominal value, at seventy-nine and five-eighths —'

'Never mind about the nominal value,' cried Hubert. 'Half a million, you say? Is that all? Is that all?'

'My dear Lossell,' exclaimed B., as much alarmed as his questioner, 'I do hope there has been no fraud! It is almost impossible, with the precautions so wisely demanded! You frighten me! Is there money miss-

ing? Have you any suspicions? Who is this Alers? I thought he was your brother Hendrik's wife's brother?'

'Alers!' cried Hubert, casting reticence to the winds. 'Yes, that is it. Has Alers fetched money of Elias's?'

'Of course,' said the sub-keeper of the National Purse. 'It was he who came for the half-million. He had a perfectly legal authority and Power of Attorney. This is terrible. You alarm me more than I can possibly express. I am very glad now that we hesitated this morning.'

'How "hesitated"?' asked Hubert quickly.

'A fresh application was made this very morning for the transfer of another million. One of the officials noticed some slight inaccuracy in the deed which had escaped his observation before – hardly an inaccuracy; some insignificant word was illegible, I believe. Payment was postponed till to-morrow. But, I entreat of you, explain to me what has happened.'

'That million, then,' stammered Hubert, 'is safe?'

'Yes, or there would not have been much left, as you know. But, once more, what is wrong? I assure you the Power of Attorney was perfectly correct, but for that slip of the pen, and all the required formalities had been complied with.'

'Thank God,' said Hubert softly, 'for that slip of the pen.'

'But do you mean to tell me,' cried B., literally dancing up and down with excitement on the cab-cushions, 'that the other half-million has gone astray?'

'No,' said Hubert, somewhat recollecting himself, though too tardily. 'But I do not trust Alers, and regret that Hendrik should have chosen him to act as proxy for either of us. It is all right, of course: but I regret the choice.'

'Still, my dear Lossell, I do not understand –'

'I must be off immediately, if I am to catch my train. I am much obliged to you for your information. It all comes out just as I thought.'

'You are too late for your train in any case,' expostulated B. 'There is another which will bring you in at eight. You had much better take that. And I think you owe me a few words of explanation.'

'Nevertheless I must try to catch this one.' Hubert called to the coachman and opened the cab-door. Mynheer B. most unwillingly got out.

'But,' he said, with his hand on the ledge, 'what am I to think? Or to do? If the application be renewed tomorrow –'

'Refuse it,' interrupted Hubert vehemently.

'How can we unless some reason for so doing be forthcoming –'

‘Refuse it,’ repeated Hubert. ‘Refuse it I tell you, there is a mistake.’ The horse slowly set itself in motion. ‘Drive faster!’ he shouted to the coachman; – and then to the perplexed gentleman, left standing in the middle of the narrow street: ‘Refuse it,’ he cried. ‘Mind this, you will hear of trouble in a day or two, and Alers will be at the bottom of it. He has been up to some mischief, believe my word!’

He once more sank back into his corner, as the cab dashed off towards the railway-station, with the irregular swing of a broken gallop, kept up by continued lashes of the whip. He knew all, then, now, all. One great part of Elias’s fortune had already disappeared in the vortex of speculation. The rest had been saved, for the moment, by the merest accident. Doubtless, the purchase of the fresh shares had been resolved on. It would take place that evening. And to-morrow, an hour or two before the annual meeting, the money from the ‘Great Book’ would have to be provided as payment. The Power of Attorney was in the hands of – Alers. Within twenty-four hours the news would be all over Holland that the shares of the South Sumatra Company had sunk to one hundred per cent. The great venture in petroleum had also come to Hubert’s knowledge by the merest chance. In all probability it was by no means the only one. He stared wildly at his watch lying open in his palm, and bit his lips till they bled. If he missed the train, he would not be back before nightfall. If he missed the train! Only twenty-four hours longer, and Elias was reduced to hopeless poverty, and the great house of Volderdoes Zonen stood bankrupt – fraudulently bankrupt – before the world!