

第三章

Chapter 3



镇长和顾问从二点四十五分开始商量，到六点钟时做出决定，就是现在不做决定，到事情有眉目时再说，于是他们又沉默起来。

快八点时，洛谢拿来了一盏灯，镇长说起了城门上快要倒的塔楼，并说要在事故发生前做出决定；又说到了皮货市场失火的问题，到现在市场已经燃烧了三个星期了；他们又提到了圣·雅克底端漏水的问题，感叹如果要是水漏到皮货市场该多好。最后顾问又说起牛博士用氢氧气发电的方案已在实施中，是不是决定有点仓促；镇长也感到有点仓促；但主要是因为资金由牛博士出，不用镇上花钱。

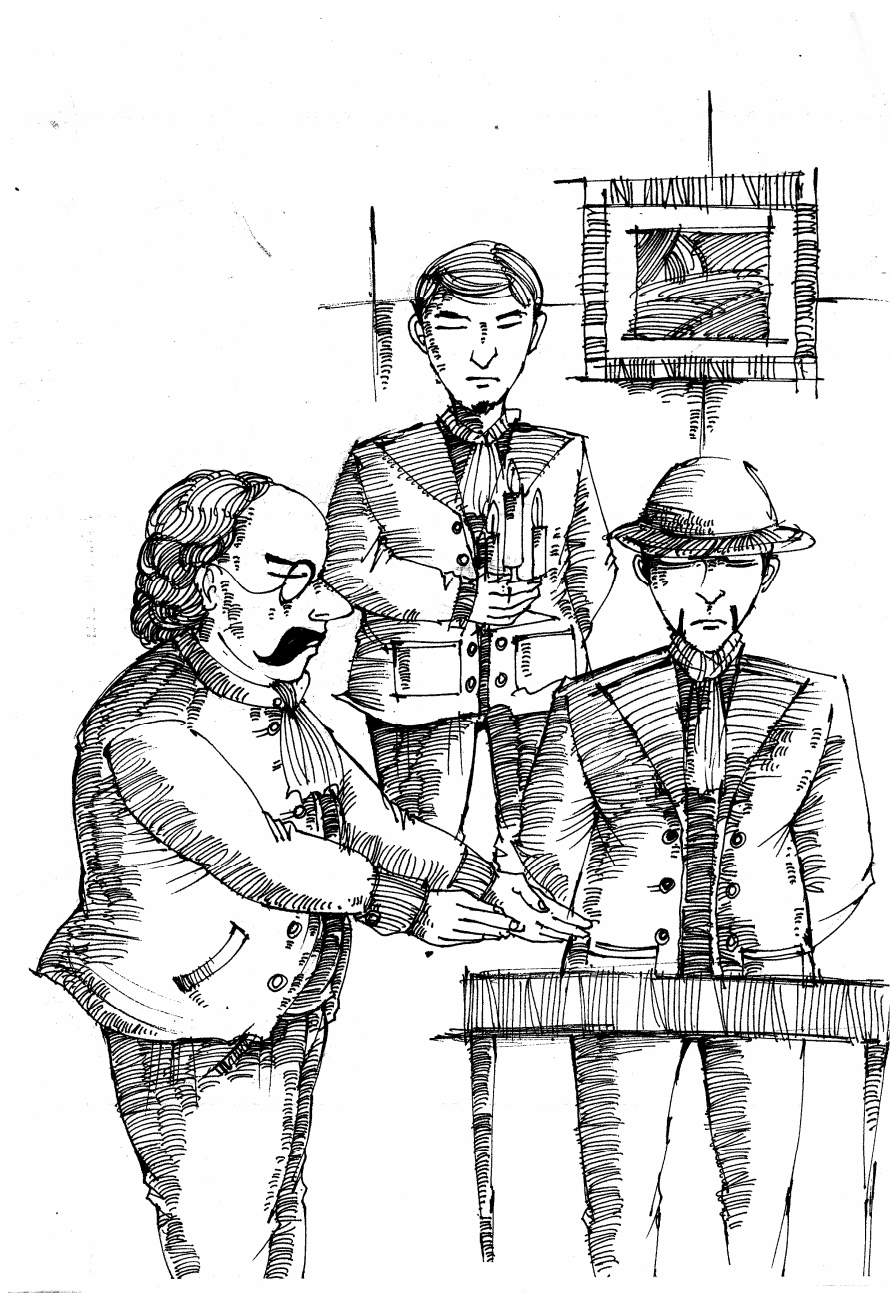
这时，洛谢进来说饭已做好，顾问起身告辞，他们已讨论了好多事情了。十五分钟后，顾问收拾停当，当洛谢正准备开门时，外面传来了重重的敲门声，这扇门自从安上还没有被这样对待过。

洛谢问道：“谁呀？”外面的人答话了，原来是讨论了十年要取消其职务的帕索夫高级警官，洛谢将门打开，问警官有什么事。

警官告诉大家，牛博士在开记者会谈论政治，这是魁宽东近百年来没有过的事情。安德烈·舒特律师与多米尼克·屈斯托医生马上就要吵起来，医生指责律师太离谱了。

镇长认为医生的话太激烈了，他一定是个危险分子。

*I*n Which The Commissary Passauf Enters As Noisily As He Is



从天亮讨论到天黑

Unexpected

When the interesting conversation just narrated began, it was a quarter to three in the afternoon. It was at a quarter past four that Van Tricasse lighted his enormous pipe, which could hold a quart of tobacco, and it was at five thirty-five that he finished smoking it.

All this time the two comrades did not exchange a single word.

About six o'clock the counsellor, who always spoke rather briefly, continued:

'So we decide—'

'Not to decide anything' replied the burgomaster.

'I think, on the whole, that you're right, Van Tricasse.'

'I think so too, Niklausse. We shall discuss the civil commissary when we have more light on the subject—later. We needn't begin for another month.'

'Nor even for a year,' replied Niklausse, unfolding his handkerchief and calmly applying it to his nose.

Another silence followed of nearly a quarter of an hour. Nothing disturbed this fresh pause in the conversation; not even the appearance of the house-dog Lento, who, no less phlegmatic than his master, came to pay his respects in the parlour. Noble dog!—a model for his race. Had he been made of pasteboard, with wheels on his paws, he would not have made less noise during his stay.

Towards eight, after Lotchè had brought the antique lamp of polished glass, the burgomaster addressed the counsellor—'We have no other urgent business to discuss?'

'No, Van Tricasse; none that I know of.'

'Haven't I been told, though,' asked the burgomaster, 'that the tower of the Oudenarde gate is likely to fall?'

'Ah!' replied the counsellor; 'really, I shouldn't be surprised if any day now it were to fall on some passer-by.'

'Oh! Before such an accident happens I hope we shall have come to a decision regarding this tower.'

'I hope so, Van Tricasse.'

'There are more urgent matters to decide.'

'No doubt; the question of the leather-market, for instance.'

‘What, is it still burning?’

‘Still burning! It’s been burning for the last three weeks.’

‘Didn’t we decide in council to let it burn?’

‘Yes, Van Tricasse on your motion.’

‘Wasn’t that the surest and simplest way to deal with it?’

‘Without doubt.’

‘Well, we’ll wait. Is that all?’

‘All,’ replied the counsellor, scratching his head, as if to assure himself that he had not forgotten anything important.

‘Ah!’ exclaimed the burgomaster, ‘haven’t you heard something of a leak of water ‘which threatens to flood the lower quarter of Saint Jacques?’

‘I have. It’s very unlucky that this leak didn’t take place above the leather-market! It would have checked the fire, and would thus have saved us a good deal of discussion.’

‘What can you expect, Niklausse? There is nothing as illogical as accidents. They’re bound by no rules, and we can’t take advantage of one, as we might wish, to remedy another.’

It took Van Tricasse’s companion some time to digest this apt observation.

‘Well, but,’ the Counsellor Niklausse continued some moments later, ‘We haven’t mentioned the vital question.’

‘What vital question? We’ve got a vital question?’ asked the burgomaster.

‘No doubt. About lighting the town.’

‘O yes. If my memory serves me, you’re referring to Dr. Ox’s scheme for lighting it.’

‘Precisely.’

‘Well, it’s going on, Niklausse, replied the burgomaster. ‘They’re already laying the pipes, and the gas works are complete.’

Perhaps we’ve been a little too hasty about this?’ the counsellor shook his head.

‘Perhaps. But our excuse is that Doctor Ox is bearing the whole cost of his experiment. It won’t cost us anything.’

‘That, true enough, is our excuse. Then we’ve got to move with the times.

If the experiment succeeds, Quiquendone will be the first town in Flanders to be lighted with the oxyWhat's the gas called?'

'Oxy-hydrogen gas.'

'Well, oxy-hydrogen gas then.'

At this moment the door opened, and Lotchè came in to tell the burgomaster that his supper was ready.

Counsellor Niklausse rose to take leave of Van Tricasse, to whom so many affairs discussed and decisions taken had given a good appetite; and it was agreed that the council of notables should be convened after a reasonably long delay, to determine whether a decision should be provisionally arrived at with reference to the really urgent matter of the Oudenarde gate.

The two worthy administrators then made their way towards the street door, the one leading the other. The counsellor, having reached the last step, lit a small lantern to guide him through the obscure streets of Quiquendone, which Doctor Ox had not yet lighted. It was a dark October night, and a thin fog was overshadowing the town.

Niklausse's preparations for departure consumed at least a quarter of an hour; for, after having lighted his lantern, he had to put on his big cow-skin socks and his sheepskin gloves; then he pulled up the furred collar of his overcoat, turned the brim of his felt hat down over his eyes, grasped his heavy crow-beaked umbrella, and got ready to start.

But when Lotchè, who was lighting her master, was going to draw the bars of the door, an unexpected noise arose outside.

Yes! Strange as the thing seems, a noise—a real noise, such as the town had certainly not heard since the donjon had been taken by the Spaniards in 1513—a terrible noise, awoke the long-dormant echoes of the venerable Van Tricasse mansion.

Somebody was knocking heavily upon this door, hitherto unblemished by brutal touch! Redoubled knocks were given with some blunt instrument, probably a knobbed stick, wielded by a vigorous arm. With the strokes were mingled cries and shout, and some words were distinctly heard:-

Monsieur Van Tricasse! Monsieur the burgomaster! Open the door, open it at once!'

The burgomaster and the counsellor., completely astounded, looked speechlessly at one another.

This passed their comprehension. If the old culverin at the castle, which had not been used since 1385, had been let off in the parlour, the people in the Van Trieasse mansion could not have been more dumbfounded.

But the blows and cries redoubled. Lotchè, recovering her coolness had plucked up courage to ask ‘Who’s there?’

‘It’s me! me ! me!’

‘And who are you?’

‘Commissary Passauf!’

Commissary Passauf! The very man whose office it had been intended to suppress for the last ten years. Then what had happened? Could the Burgundians have invaded Quiquendone, as in the fourteenth century? Nothing less important could have so deeply moved Commissary Passauf, who was in no degree less noteworthy than the burgomaster himself for calmness and phlegm.

On a sign from Van Tricasse—for the worthy man could not have said a word—the bar was thrust back and the door opened.

Commissary Passauf flung himself into the antechamber like a hurricane.

‘What’s the matter, commissary?’ asked Lotchè, a brave woman, who never lost her head under; the most trying circumstances.

‘What’s the matter!’ replied Passauf, his big round eyes expressing a genuine agitation. ‘The matter is that I’ve just come from Doctor Ox’s, who’s been holding a reception, and there—’

‘There?’

‘There I’ve witnessed such an argument as—Mijnheer the Burgomaster, they’ve been talking politics!’

‘Politics!’ repeated Van Tricasse, running his fingers through his wig.

‘Politics!’ resumed Commissary Passauf, ‘that hasn’t happened for nearly a hundred years at Quiquendone. At last the argument got heated, and Andre Schut the lawyer and Dr. Dominique Custos, got so violent that maybe they’ll call each other out.’

‘Call each other out!’ exclaimed the counsellor. ‘A duel! A duel at

Quiquendone! And what did Schut the lawyer and Dr. Custos say?’

‘Just this: “Now, lawyer,” the doctor told his adversary, “you’re going too far, it seems to me, and you’re not taking enough care to control your words.”’

The Burgomaster Van Tricasse clasped his hands- the counsellor turned pale and let his lantern fall—the commissary shook his head. That a phrase so obviously provocative should be pronounced by two of the leading men in the country !

‘This Doctor Custos,’ muttered Van Tricasse, ‘is certainly a dangerous fellow, with his head in the clouds. Come on, gentlemen!’

And Counsellor Niklausse and the commissary accompanied the burgomaster into the parlout.