

SAINT NICHOLAS EVE

CAMILLE LEMONNIER

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SAINT NICHOLAS EVE

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BY

CAMILLE LEMONNIER

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SAINT NICHOLAS EVE

I.

"This is the finest day of the year, Nelle," exclaimed a big stalwart man of about sixty, with a bright smile, to a fresh clean-looking woman, who at that moment came down the ladder of the boat with shavings in her hand.

"Yes, Tobias," replied the woman, "it is indeed the day of days for boatmen."

"Do you remember the first feast of St. Nicholas, which we kept together, after we were married?"

"Yes, Tobias, it will soon be forty years ago."

"Hendrik Shippe, our master, came on to the boat and said to me: 'Tobias, my lad, you must keep the festival of our blessed saint in a proper way, now that you have brought a wife to your boat.' With that, he put a five-franc piece into my hand. 'Mynheer Shippe,' I replied, 'I am more pleased with your five-franc piece than if I had been crowned.' I went out without saying anything to my dear Nelle, crossed the plank, and ran into the village to buy cream, eggs, flour, apples, and coffee. Who was glad when I came back with all the good things and laid them side by side on the table, while the fire burned brightly in the stove? Who was glad? Tell me, my Nelle."

"Ah, Tobias! We sat hand in hand that evening till ten o'clock as we had sat together in the moonlight on the banks of the Scheldt before we were married. But we did other things, too, on that day, lots of other things. What did we do? Do you remember, Tobias?"

"Oh! oh! we made golden apple pancakes; I can smell them now. I wanted you to teach me how to toss them, but I tossed two into the fire, and the third fell into the cat's mouth. Yes, yes, Nelle, I remember."

"Now, my man, we must make apple pancakes again in memory of that happy evening; I have brought shavings to light the fire. One day, Riekje and Dolf will recall the good festival of Saint Nicholas as we now recall it."

It was thus that the boatman, Tobias Jeffers, spoke to his wife Nelle, on board the Guldenvisch.

The Guldenvisch, which had been thus named from the pretty gold-fish which shone afore and aft on her prows, was Hendrik Shippe's best boat, and he had entrusted it to the care of Tobias Jeffers, his ablest boatman. There was not a smarter looking craft in Termonde, nor one better fitted for hard work. It was a pleasure to watch her glide along, her waist well under water, laden with corn, wood, straw, or provisions; to see, too, her big brown hull set off with red and blue lines, her prows ornamented with the long smooth-scaled gold-fish, her shining bridge and her little cloud of smoke curling out of the black painted funnel.

That day, the Guldenvisch, like all the other boats on the Scheldt, had stopped work. She was anchored to a strong rope, and toward seven in the evening there was nothing to be seen but the light on the top of the funnel, and the port-holes, round and bright as cod's eyes.

Preparations for the feast of St. Nicholas were in full swing in the little room under the bridge; two candles burned in the brass candle-sticks, and the stove roared like water which rushes from a lock when the gates are opened.

The good Nelle pushed the door and Tobias went in quietly, thinking of the happy days which he had just recalled.

"Maman Nelle," said a young voice, "I can see the round windows lighting up everywhere one after the other on the dark water."

"Yes, Riekje," Nelle replied, "but it is not to see the windows lighted up on the water that you stay near the window, but to see if that fine lad, Dolf, is not coming back to the boat."

Riekje laughed.

"Maman Nelle sees straight into my heart," said she, sitting down near the fire, and stitching away at a baby's cap, which she held in her hand.

"Who could not see straight into the heart of a woman who is in love with her husband, Riekje?" asked old Nelle.

As she spoke she took off the top of the stove and put the pot on the fire, much to its delight, for it began to hiss like the rocket sent off from the market-place the day before in honor of the election of a new mayor. Then Nelle wetted her finger and snuffed the candles, and the flame which had been flickering unsteadily at the end of the black wick burned brightly again and lit up the little room with a beautiful quiet light.

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The room was very small and was something like a big cask cut in half, with its curved wooden ceiling, and its stave-like wooden panels. A coating of shiny, brown tar covered the walls; in places, especially over the stove, it was black as ebony. The furniture consisted of a table, two chairs, a chest which served as a bed, and near the chest a white wooden box with two shelves. On these two shelves lay linen, caps, handkerchiefs, women's dresses, and men's jackets, all smelling somewhat of fish. In one corner hung the nets, together with tarred capes, boots, oilskin hats, and enormous sheepskin gloves. Strings of onions encircled a picture of the Virgin, and some twenty dried herrings with shining bellies were strung by their gills on a thread under an enameled clock.

All this could be seen by the light of the two candles, whose flicker made the shadows dance on the ceiling; but the fairest thing to see was beautiful dark Riekje sitting near the fire. She had broad shoulders, a plump neck, and strong arms; her cheeks were round and sunburnt, her eyes of a dusky brown, her lips full and red; and as for her black hair, which was coiled six times round her head, the coils were heavy as the towing ropes used on the banks of the river. Though so gentle and quiet, she was often lost in sombre fancies; but when Dolf was near, her face lit up with smiles and her teeth were bright as a wet oar's blade shining in the sun. Then she no longer gloomed; the cloud which veiled sad memories was lifted, bright hopes irradiated her face, every line in which sparkled like whitebait in the meshes of a net. Then it was that she would turn to her "beau garçon" and clap her hands. The flame which escaped through the stove door caught her cheeks at that moment, and they were red as salmon; the dark eyes fixed on her work were bright as living coal. Yet two other things shone like her eyes; the pendant hanging to the gold ring in her ear, and the silver ring which she wore on her finger.

"Are you comfortable, Riekje?" asked Nelle, from time to time. "Do your straw-lined sabots keep your feet warm?"

"Yes, maman Nelle, I am as happy as a queen," she answered, smiling.

"As a queen, you say," replied Nelle. "You will be like a queen, soon, my girl, for you are going to eat some of my apple keikebakken. There comes Dolf over the planks, bringing us flour, eggs, and cream; you will have something to say about my pancakes, Riekje."

She opened the door, for a heavy step could be heard on the bridge of the boat.

II.

As a broad-shouldered man, with a frank, smiling face, stepped into the cheerful light of the room, his head almost touched the ceiling.

"There you are, mother!" he cried.

He threw his hat into a corner and began to empty his pockets with great care, placing the paper bags on the table.

"Dolf, I was sure you'd do it; you've forgotten the pint of milk," cried maman Nelle when everything was spread out.

Dolf drew back, and made a grimace as if he really would have to go back to the shop. But, at the same time, he winked to Riekje to let her know that it was a joke. Nelle, who had not seen this, struck the palm of her left hand with her right fist, complaining bitterly.

"What are we to do without milk, Dolf? I must go to town myself. These big lads think of nothing but their love, Tobias."

"If I produced the milk from under Riekje's chair, would you kiss me, mother?" Dolf broke in, heartily laughing, and throwing one arm round his mother's neck, while he held the other hidden behind his back.

"Be quiet, bad boy," said Nelle, half in anger, half jokingly; "how can there be any milk under Riekje's chair?"

"Will you kiss me?" he replied blithely. "Once—twice——"

Nelle turned quickly to Riekje:

"Get up, my girl, so that I may see whether I am to kiss your good—for— nothing husband."

Dolf bent over Riekje and looked under her chair, pretending not to find anything at first; finally he held the jug of milk triumphantly out at arm's length. He laughed gayly, his hand on his thigh:

"Ah! who'll be kissed now, mother? Who'll be kissed?"

They all roared with laughter at the good joke.

"Dolf, kiss Riekje; bees like honey," cried Nelle.

Her lover made a ceremonious bow to Riekje, placed one foot behind the other, pressed his hand to his heart, as the quality do, and, with a solemn air, exclaimed:

"Soul of my soul, may I embrace one so fair as you?"

Then, without waiting for a reply, Dolf threw his arm round Riekje's waist, raised her from her chair, and pressed his young lips upon her neck. But Riekje half turned her head, and they kissed one another warmly on the lips.

"Riekje," said Dolf, licking his lips in a greedy fashion, "a kiss like that is better than ryspap."

"Nelle, let us do the same thing," said Tobias. "I delight to see them so happy."

"Willingly," said Nelle. "Were we not the same in our own kissing days?"

"Ah! Nelle, they are always kissing days when there are two, and when there is some little spot on earth where they can make a peaceful home."

Tobias kissed his wife's cheeks; then, in her turn, Nelle gave him two big kisses which resounded like the snapping of dry firewood.

"Riekje," Dolf whispered, "I shall always love you."

"Dolf," replied Riekje, "I shall love you till death."

"I am two years older than you are, Riekje. When you were ten I was twelve, and I think I loved you then, but not so much as now."

"No, dear, you have only known me since last May. All the rest is not true. Tell me, Dolf, that all the rest is not true. I must hear it, that I may love you without any feeling of shame." As Riekje leaned against her husband's breast, she threw herself back a little, and it was evident that she would soon be a mother.

"Come, children," cried maman Nelle, "it's time now to make the batter."

She reached down an iron pan, lined with shining white enamel, poured in the flour, the eggs, and the milk. After turning up her sleeves over her brown arms, she whipped all vigorously together. When she had beaten the batter well, she placed the pan on a chair near the fire and covered it with a cloth that it might rise. Tobias took

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down the frying-pan, greased it with a little lard, and put it on the stove for a moment to warm, so that the batter might brown all over equally.

Riekje and Dolf, sitting side by side on the same bench, took some apples from a basket, cored, and afterwards sliced them. Then Nelle went slyly to fetch a second saucepan from the cupboard and placed it on the fire; she poured in some warm water, adding flour, thyme, and laurel leaves. Dolf noticed that the saucepan contained something else, but Nelle covered it up so quickly that he could not tell whether it were meat or cabbage. He was puzzled and tried to guess.

Gradually the contents began to boil, and a thin, brown smoke escaped from the lid which bubbled up and down. Dolf stretched his nose towards the stove and opened his nostrils wide enough for a nut to rest in each, but still he could not define the smell.

When maman Nelle went to lift the lid to see if the contents were cooking properly, he stood on tip-toe behind her back, making himself, for the fun of the thing, first quite short, and then quite tall.

Riekje laughed quietly as she looked out of the corner of her eye. Suddenly Dolf gave a cry to surprise his mother, but Nelle had seen him come up, and just at the moment when he thought to look into the pot she put down the lid and nodded to him:

"Who's caught now, Dolf?" But he cried out, laughing; "I saw that time, mother. It's Slipper's old cat that you have put into the stew-pan, with some candle-grease."

"Yes," replied Nelle, "and next time I shall fry mice. Go and set the table, and leave me alone you bad fellow."

Dolf went quietly into the closet, leading from the cabin. Choosing a very white and well-starched shirt he put it on over his clothes and came back flapping the tails.

When Nelle saw him she put her hands to her hips and laughed till the tears streamed down her face; Riekje clapped her hands and laughed too. Tobias remained serious, and, while Dolf walked up and down the room, asking Nelle if she would not have him for a cook, he took the plates out of the cupboard and began to rub them on a corner of the shirt. Then the good Nelle fell into a chair and slapped her knee with her hand as she rocked herself backwards and forwards. At last the table was spread; the plates shone round and bright as the moon in water, while the pewter forks beside them were bright as silver.

Nelle opened the saucepan for the last time, tasted the gravy, and raising the big tin spoon, in command, cried: "Come to table. Now you can enjoy yourselves."

They moved the big chest up to the table, for there were two chairs only, and Dolf sat on it near Riekje. Tobias took a chair, placed another beside him for Nelle, stretched out his legs and crossed his hands over his stomach. Then a cloud of smoke rose up to the wooden roof and the saucepan appeared on the table, making a sound like the melting of snow in the sun.

"It's Slipper's cat, I knew it was," cried Dolf, when Nelle had taken off the lid.

Each held out his plate and Nelle, looking into the pot, produced some brown meat, cut into pieces, which she poured on to the plates with plenty of gravy. Dolf looked carefully at the pieces which Nelle gave him, smelt them, and after a moment's pause, brought his fist down on the table and cried:

"God forgive me, Riekje, it's scheisels."

It was indeed ox tripe prepared in the Flemish manner, with liver, heart and lungs. Dolf put his fork into the biggest pieces first, and as he swallowed them, rubbed his hands over his stomach to show his approval.

"Nelle is a capital cook," said Tobias. "I know King Leopold eats scheisels cooked in wine, but Nelle makes them just as good with water."

"This is indeed a fine Saint Nicholas we are keeping," said Dolf to his wife, smacking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "We shall always remember eating tripe on St. Nicholas day this year."

Nelle now got up and pushed the frying-pan on the fire. She took care first to rake out the ashes and to put some fagots of wood on the flames. When the stove began to roar again Nelle became serious and uncovered her batter.

It had risen to the top of the pan, and was rich, thick, and fragrant, with here and there little bubbles on its surface. Nelle plunged a big spoon into the beautiful, deep mass, and when she drew it out long threads hung from it on all sides. The frying-pan hissed and bubbled as the batter was poured on to the brown butter around the slices of apple which Nelle had carefully laid in first. When the pancake began to brown at the edges it was tossed into the air by a clever twist of the arm. Dolf and Tobias clapped their hands and Riekje admired Nelle's dexterity.

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"A plate, quick!" The first koekebakke was spread out, golden and juicy, the color of a fried sole. Who would have this first one? It should be for Tobias; Tobias passed it on to Riekje, and the young girl cut it in pieces and shared it with Dolf.

Tobias watched them both eat it with pleasure, then said to Nelle: "Ah! my wife, I see that the koekebakken are as good as when you made them for me the first time."

In gratitude for these kindly words a big juicy pancake, round as a quoit, fell on to his plate. "The sun shines on my plate just as I see it shine on the water from the bridge," he cried out.

More batter was quickly poured into the frying-pan, the butter bubbled, the fire roared, and round pancakes fell on the table as tench.

"Now it's my turn, mother," cried Dolf, when the bowl was almost empty.

Nelle sat down near Tobias and ate the two pancakes which she had kept for herself, because they were not quite so perfect as the others. Dolf poured the batter into the frying-pan, but not in a ring, as Nelle did, for his idea was to make a mannikin such as are to be seen in the bakers' shop windows on the eve of St. Nicholas. The body and head were soon visible; then came the arms and legs. Dolf, leaning over his work, carefully guided the spoon, for fear of pouring the mixture too quickly or too slowly. Suddenly he uttered a proud cry and slid the absurd figure on to Riekje's plate, but no sooner did it touch the earthenware than it broke in two, and ran into an indistinguishable mass. He tried again and again, until the mannikin could stand on its legs. Then he gave him a slice of apple for a head, to make him look more natural.

"My lad," Tobias said to his son, "in the corner among the shavings you will find an old bottle of schiedam which I brought from Holland, along with three others; they have been drunk, there is only this one left. Bring it here."

Dolf obeyed, and Nelle took out some small glasses. Tobias uncorked the bottle, and filled two of them, one for himself and one for Dolf. Anyone could see that it was good old schiedam, for Tobias and his son nodded their heads and smacked their lips with pleasure.

"Ah! my daughter," said Nelle, "it will be a happy day for us all in two years' time, when a little sabot stands in the hearth filled with carrots and turnips."

"Yes, Riekje, it will be a happy day for us all," said Dolf, closing his big hands over hers.

Riekje raised her eyes, in which stood a tear, and said softly:

"Dolf, it's a good heart you have."

He sat down beside her and threw his arm round her waist:

"I am neither good nor bad, my Riekje, but I love you with all my heart."

Riekje kissed him.

"Dolf dear, when I think of the past I hardly know how I can still care for life."

"The past is past, my beloved Riekje," replied Dolf.

"Ah! Dolf, dear Dolf, there are times when I think it would almost be better to be up there now, so that I might tell the good Virgin all you have done for me."

"Riekje, I am sad when you are sad: you do not wish to make me unhappy about you this evening?"

"No, Dolf dear, I would give my life to save you one moment's pain."

"Then show me your beautiful white teeth, Riekje, and turn round and smile at me."

"As you will, my Dolf, for all my joys and sorrows are yours. I have only you in the world."

"Since that is so, Riekje, I wish to be everything to you; your father, your husband, and your child. Tell me, Riekje, I am your baby, am I not? There will be two of us to love our mother."

Riekje took Dolf's head in her hands, and kissed his cheeks; she paused from time to time as one pauses when drinking sweet liqueur to enjoy the flavor, and then drinks again. Then she put her lips to his ear and whispered:

"Dolf, my darling Dolf, will you love it?"

Dolf raised his hand solemnly.

"I call God to witness, Riekje, I shall love it as if it were my own flesh and blood."

"Our lad has been lucky," said Nelle to her husband. "Riekje is a dear lass. She brought joy with her when she entered our house, Tobias."

"We are very poor, Nelle," he replied, "but old parents like ourselves can have no greater happiness than to see their children sitting round their fire in love with one another."

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"They love one another as we loved, Tobias."

"You were then a pretty, fresh girl from Deurne, Nelle, with cheeks as red as a cherry and a nose like a pretty little seashell. When you went to church on Sunday with your fine winged cape and your big metal star, which all young girls wear, every man turned to look at you."

"But I did not look at them, for Tobias was my sweetheart; a fine lad he was, with black hair and a pointed beard, a green velvet jacket, bright eyes and big brown cheeks."

"Ah! Nelle, how happy we were in those days when we could clasp hands behind a hedge, and sometimes, too, I stole a kiss when your head was turned away."

"That's true, Tobias, but afterwards, I did not turn my head away and you kissed me all the same."

"There is no greater happiness on earth, my Dolf," said Riekje, "than to grow old loving one another; the years don't then gloom as life lengthens, and when one dies, the other soon follows."

"It is so, Riekje. If my old father dies first, I shall say to the gravedigger, 'Dig a big hole, sexton, for my mother will lie there too.'"

"Ah! heart of me!" cried Riekje, clasping her husband in her arms, "I shall say the same thing to the sexton if you die first, my Dolf."

The fire roared in the stove, and the candles, which were nearly burned down, gave a flickering light. Nelle had forgotten to snuff the wicks and the thieves which fell into the tallow made it drop in big yellow tears. In the ruddy light, which widened in circles like water where a stone has fallen, the little narrow cabin seemed a paradise because of the happy hearts which were in it.

The rough head of the old man, with his prominent cheek-bones, his gray beard, his shaven lips, and ears pierced with gold rings, stood out the color of smoked salmon, against the brown wall. Near him sat Nelle. Her back was turned to the candles, and now and again, when she moved her head, a bright light caught her brow, the gold rings sparkled in her ears, the tip of her nose shone, and the wings of her cap stood out in the shadow like the wings of a bird. She wore a coarse woollen skirt, over which hung the full basque of her flowered jacket, but as Tobias' arm was round her waist the stiff pleats were not in such perfect order as usual.

Riekje and Dolf sat hand in hand on the other side of the room; they had drawn as idea little that they might look at one another unbeknown to the others, and their faces were close together. When they moved, the candlelight struck Dolf's shaven chin, Riekje's red lips, their necks or their pierced ears, as the sun strikes the belly of a fish below the water. Kettles, saucepans, and pots shone on the shelves and the shadows in the corners were soft as velvet.

"What is the matter, Riekje?" cried Dolf suddenly, "you are as white as those plates in the cupboard, and your eyes are closed. My Riekje, what is the matter with you?"

"Ah! Dolf," replied Riekje, "if it were to happen to-day! I have been in pain all the afternoon, and now I feel worse. My child! If I die, you will love it, Dolf, dear?"

"Mother! Mother!" cried Dolf, "I am sick at heart."

Then he hid his face in his big hands and began to sob, without knowing the reason.

"Come, Dolf, be brave," said Tobias, tapping him on the shoulder. "We have all gone through this!"

"Riekje, Riekje, my heart!" said Nelle in tears, "no greater happiness could come to us on Saint Nicholas day. Poor folk rejoice more over a child that is born to them, than over all the treasures in the world, but the child whom God sends on Easter Day or St. Nicholas day is above all welcome."

"Dolf, you can run better than I can," said Tobias. "Run and fetch Madame Puzzel; we will look after Riekje."

Then Dolf pressed Riekje once more to his heart, and ran up the ladder. The plank which connected the boat with the shore shook as he crossed it.

"He is already a long way off," said Tobias.

III.

The night hung over the town like a great bird, but it had snowed on the preceding days, and through the darkness Dolf could see the blanched face of the earth, white as the face of the dead. He ran full speed along the river bank as one pursued by the tide, though, even then, his footfall was not so rapid as the beating of his heart. The distant lights through the fog seemed to him like a procession of taper-bearers at a funeral; he did not know how this idea arose, but it terrified him, for behind it again he saw death. Then he came upon silent figures hastening mysteriously along.

"Doubtless, they have been suddenly called to the bedside of the dying," he muttered.

It was now he remembered that it is customary in Flanders on that night to replace the hay, carrots, and turnips which the little ones put on the hearth to feed Saint Nicholas' ass, by big dolls, wooden horses, musical instruments, violins, or simply by mannikins in spikelaus, according as each can afford.

"Ah," he said to himself, comforted, "they are fathers and mothers going to the shops." But now the gloomy lights which resembled the taper-bearers seemed to be chasing one another along the quays; their little flames ran in every direction, crossed one another, and looked like big fireflies. "I must see double," he said, "the fireflies can be in my brain only."

Suddenly he heard voices, calling, crying out, lamenting.

Torches moved to and fro on the river bank, their red tongues of flame blown by the wind amid clouds of smoke. In the uncertain light he could at last distinguish figures rushing about, others leaning over the river, black as well. This explained everything: the lamps had not moved, but he had been misled by the flitting torches.

"Let us fetch Dolf Jeffers," cried two men. "No one else will be able to do it."

"Here is Dolf Jeffers," cried the good fellow at that moment, "what do you want?"

He recognized the men; they were his friends, his fellow-workers, boatmen, like himself. All surrounded him, gesticulating. An old man, wizened as a dried plaice, tapped him on the shoulder, and said:

"Dolf, for God's sake! A fellow-creature is being drowned. Help! Perhaps it's already too late. Strip off your clothes, Dolf."

Dolf looked at the water, the lanterns, the night above him, and the men who urged him on.

"Comrades," he cried, "before God, I cannot. Riekje is in labor and my life is not my own."

"Dolf! Help!" cried the old man again, as with trembling hands he pointed to his dripping clothes. "I have three children, Dolf, yet I have been in twice. I have no strength left."

Dolf turned to the pale faces which stood in a circle round him.

"Cowards," he cried. "Is there not one among you who will save a drowning man?"

The greater number bent their heads and shrugged their shoulders, feeling that they had deserved the reproach.

"Dolf," the old man cried, "as sure's death's death, I shall try again, if you do not go."

"God! God! There he is!" cried the men at that moment, who were moving the torches over the water. "We saw his head and feet. Help!"

Dolf threw off his coat and said to the boatmen coldly: "I will go."

Then he spoke again: "One of you run to Madame Puzzel and take her back to the Guldenvisch at once."

He made the sign of the cross and muttered between his teeth: "Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to save sinners, have mercy on me."

He went down the bank, with bared breast, and the crowd who followed him trembled for his life. He looked for a moment at the traitorous river, on which the torches dripped tears of blood, as if he saw death before him. The flood gurgled, as when a great fish strikes the water with its tail.

"There he is," the same voices cried.

Then the abyss was opened.

"Riekje!" cried Dolf.

The cold river closed about him like a prison. Increasing circles were all that ruffled that black surface, which seemed blacker than ever by the light of the torches.

Absolute silence reigned among the men who looked on from the bank. Some stood up to their waist in water,

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feeling about with long poles; others unfastened ropes, which they sent adrift; three men slipped into a boat and rowed noiselessly, moving their lanterns carefully over the surface of the water. Beneath all was the gentle murmur of the cruel Scheldt as, lapping the banks, it flowed eternally onward.

Twice Dolf came to the surface and twice he disappeared again. They could see his arms move and his face seemed paler in the darkness. Once more he clove the icy gulf and plunged still deeper. Suddenly his legs became motionless, as if entangled in the treacherous sea-weed by the spiteful water-spirits. The drowning man had seized him, and Dolf realized that if he could not get free, both would be lost. His limbs were more tightly pressed than in a vice. Then there was a terrible struggle, and the men both sank to the mud of the river-bed. In the drowning darkness they fought, bit, tore one another, like mortal enemies. Dolf at last gained the upper hand; the paralyzing arms ceased to strangle him, and he felt an inert mass floating upon him. A terrible lassitude as of a sleep overcame him, his head fell forward, the water entered his mouth. But the light of the torches penetrated the dark water; he gathered up his strength and dragged after him the prey which he had robbed from the hungry eels. Then at last he breathed pure air again.

With that there was a great outburst from the bank.

"Courage, Dolf," cried the breathless crowd, stretching out over the river. One or two boat-men had piled some wood and set light to it. The flames rose spirally and lit up the sky for some distance.

"This way, Dolf! Courage, Dolf! A brave heart, courage!" yelled the crowd.

Dolf was just about to reach the bank: he parted the water with all his remaining strength and pushed the limp body before him. The red light from the wood-fire spread over his hands and face like burning oil, and suddenly it caught the face of the drowning man, by his side.

No sooner did he see that pale face than, uttering a cry of rage, he pushed it to the bottom of the water. He had recognized the man who had dishonored Riekje. Dolf, a right loyal fellow, had had pity on the poor lonely fisher lass and had made her his wife before God and man. He pushed him from him, but the drowning man, who felt the water close once more about him, clung to his saviour with an iron grasp. Then both disappeared in the darkness of death.

Dolf heard a voice say within himself:

"Die, Jacques Karnavash; there is not room in the world for you and Riekje's child."

To this another voice replied:

"Live, Jacques Karnavash, for it would be better to strike your mother dead."

IV.

"There's Dolf bringing Madame Puzzel back with him," said Nelle, after about an hour.

The gangway swung under the weight of two people and sabots sounded on the bridge, while a voice cried:

"Tobias! Tobias! get the lantern and light Madame Puzzel."

Tobias took one of the candles and carefully sheltered it with his hand as he opened the door.

"This way," he cried, holding it ajar. "This way!"

The midwife stepped down the ladder, and a man followed her.

"Ah! Madame Puzzel, Riekje will be pleased to see you. Come in," said Tobias. "Good-evening, lad. Oh! it's Lucas."

"Good evening, Tobias," said the young man. "Dolf has stayed behind with his comrades, so I brought Madame Puzzel."

"Come and have a drink, my son, then you can go back to Dolf."

Nelle now came forward.

"Good-evening, Madame Puzzel, how are you? Here is a chair. Sit down and warm yourself."

"Good-evening to you all," replied the fat little old woman. "So we are going to have christening sugar on board the Guldenvisch this evening. It's your first, is it not, Riekje? Come, Nelle, make me some coffee and give me some supper."

"Riekje," said the young boatman, "I brought Madame Puzzel because Dolf was dragged off by his comrades. He must not see you suffer. It is better not, so the others have carried him off to have a drink to give him courage."

"I shall be braver, too, if he is not here," replied Riekje, raising her eyes full of tears.

"Yes," said Nelle, in her turn, "it's better for every one that Dolf should not be here."

Tobias then poured out a glass of gin and gave it to the man, saying:

"There's something for your trouble, Lucas. When you have drunk that, your legs will lengthen like a pair of oars, and you'll get back to your friends in no time."

Lucas drank it off at two gulps. As he drank the first he said to the company:

"Here's to every one's health."

He drank the second, saying to himself:

"To Dolf's health, if he is still alive."

Then he said good-evening. As the lad left the cabin, the kettle was singing on the fire and there was a good smell of coffee in the room, for Nelle with the mill on her lap was crushing the black berries, which snapped cheerily.

Madame Puzzel had unfastened the metal clasp of her big black-hooded cloak and taken her spectacle case and knitting from her basket. She put on her spectacles, took up her knitting, sat down by the fire and began to knit. She wore a woollen flowered jacket under a black shawl, and a skirt of linsey-woolsey. From time to time she looked over her spectacles without raising her head and glanced at Riekje walking up and down the room groaning. When the pain became worse, Madame Puzzel tapped her on the cheek, and said:

"Be brave, Riekje. You cannot think what a joy it is to hear the little one cry for the first time. It is like eating vanilla cream in Paradise listening to beautiful violin music."

Tobias, having put back the big chest which served as a bed against the wall, went to fetch two sea-weed mattresses from his own bed, and, as he laid them on the chest, there was a healthy salt smell in the room. Then Nelle covered the mattresses with spotless coarse linen sheets, and smoothed them with the palm of her hand to take out the creases and make it as soft as a feather-bed. Towards midnight, Madame Puzzel folded up her knitting, placed her spectacles on the table, crossed her arms and looked into the fire; then she began to prepare the linen, made a hole in the pillows and looked at the time by the big silver watch which she wore under her jacket. Finally, she yawned six consecutive times and went to sleep with one eye open.

Riekje wrung her hands and cried out:

"Mamae Puzzel! Mamae Puzzel!"

SAINT NICHOLAS EVE

"Mama Puzzel can do nothing for you, Riekje," replied the midwife. "You must be patient."

Within the room, the kettle sang on the fire; without, the water lapped against the boat. Voices died away along the banks, and doors were shut.

"It is midnight," said Tobias, "those are the people leaving the inn."

"Ah! Dolf! dear Dolf!" cried Riekje, each time. "Why does he not come back?"

"I see the lamps in the houses and boats being put out one by one. Dolf will be in directly," said Nelle to quiet her. But Dolf did not return.

Two hours after midnight Riekje was in such pain that she had to go to bed. Madame Puzzel sat beside her and Nelle told her beads. Two hours passed thus.

"Dolf! Dolf!" Riekje cried incessantly. "Why does he stay away so long when his Riekje is dying?"

Tobias went up the ladder now and again to see if Dolf were not coming back. The little port-hole of the Guldenvisch reflected its red light on the dark water; there was no other window alight in the town. In the distance a church clock rang out the quarters, the chimes falling through the night like a flight of birds escaped from a cage. Tobias listened to the notes of the music which spoke of the son whom he awaited. Gradually the lights were relit one after another in the houses, and lamps twinkled like stars along the water's edge. A fresh cold dawn broke over the town. Then a little child began to cry in the boat, and it seemed to those who heard it sweet as the bleating of a lambkin.

"Riekje! Riekje!"

A distant voice called Riekje. It was Dolf who sprang over the bridge and rushed into the room. Riekje, who was asleep, opened her eyes and saw her loving lad kneeling beside her. Tobias threw his cap up in the air, and Nelle, laughing, pinched the face of the new-born babe whom Madame Puzzel swaddled on her knee. When the baby was well wrapped up, Madame Puzzel placed it in Dolf's arms and he kissed it cautiously with little smacks.

Riekje called Dolf to her side, took his head in her hand, and fell asleep until morning. Dolf put his head beside her on the pillow, and their breath and their hearts were as one during that sleep.

V.

Dolf went off into the town one morning.

Funeral bells were tolling, and their knell echoed through the air like the hoarse cry of gulls and petrels above the shipwrecked.

A long procession disappeared through the church porch, and the altar draped in black shone with its many wax lights, which glistened as the tears in a widow's eyes.

"Who has died in the town?" Dolf asked of an old beggar sitting at the threshold of the church, his chin on his knees. "The son of a rich family, a man of property, Jacques Karnavash. Give a trifle for the repose of his soul."

Dolf took off his hat and entered the church.

He hid himself behind a pillar and saw the silver-nailed coffin disappear beneath the black catafalque.

"Lord God," he said, "may Thy will be done. Forgive him as I have forgiven him."

When the crowd made their taper-offering, he took a wax light from the chorister and followed those who walked round the branch candlesticks mighty as trees, which burned at the four corners of the pall.

Then he knelt down in the dark corner, far from the men and women who had come out of respect for the dead, and these words were mingled with his prayer:

"God, Father of men, forgive me also; I saved this man from drowning, but my courage failed when I first saw that it was my Riekje's seducer, and I desired vengeance. Then I pushed from me the man who had a mother, and whom I was to restore to that mother; I thrust him back under the water, before I saved him. Forgive me, O Lord, and if I must be punished for this, punish me only."

Then he left the church and thought deep down in his heart:

"Now there is no one living who can say that Riekje's child is not my child."

"Hey! Dolf," voices called to him from the quay.

He recognized those who had seen him bring Jacques Karnavash to the bank.

Their rude hearts had trembled for him like women's hearts; they had clung to him and said:

"Dolf, you are worth all of us put together."

Suddenly he had fallen on the pavement, but they had carried him near the kitchen fire of an inn, had revived him with gin and looked after him until he felt strong enough to run back to his beloved Riekje.

"Dolf," they now cried.

And when Dolf turned, the old boatman clasped him in his arms and said:

"My dear son, I love you as if you were my own flesh and blood."

The others pressed his hand heartily, saying:

"Dolf, we shall at least have known one really brave fellow before we die."

"As for me, comrades," said Dolf, laughing, "I shall not die before I drink a glass with you to the health of the fine little chap Riekje gave me the other night."