"A GENTLEMAN OF HOLLAND"

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IT was very cold in the cellar despite the thick lining of asbestos sheeting which covered the walls, ceiling and floor. A powerful radio receiving set stood upon a massive table of dark walnut that, for three hundred years, had graced the house of Van Losen. In a high-backed chair a small boy of thirteen sat and shivered, and watched the second hand of a fine ship's chronometer; his fingers, numbed by the damp chill, touched the amplifier control. Peter Van Losen was ready on this the fifteen hundred and sixty-seventh day of his vigil.

Presently the broadcast (from the B.B.C.) commenced; ten minutes of intensive propaganda in Franch was followed by a pause and the same voice resumed "Pierre de l'Orange, Pierre de l'Orange—are you listening? Tonight at ten o'clock your father will speak to you—at ten o'clock tonight" another pause, "Here are your instructions—set in train Plan x one x —set in train plan x one x—this is a definite order from your father. Remember and obey. Plan x one x: your father will confirm at ten o'clock tonight": and immediately the broadcast resumed its fervent oratory.

The small boy sat humped in the big chair, only his dark intelligent eyes betraying the emotions that convulsed his slender body. When brain and courage seemed at their lowest ebb, had come this news of his father, leaving him weak and shaken but unbelievably happy. With a sigh that was almost a prayer, the boy rose unsteadily to his feet. He lifted the heavy candlestick of Dutch silver, carried it to the foot of a ladder nailed to one wall, and placed his burden upon an ancient wooden chest. With a small brass mallet he struck three clear blows upon a length of iron tubing and heard the windlass raise the stone above his head. Blowing out the candles, Peter Van Losen climbed the ladder to rejoin his companions in the vast emptiness of the room above.

The two men awaiting his coming might well have been ghosts from the past. One, a cripple, sat painfully in a tall chair of Spanish origin with leather back and seat; over sixty years of age, he was tall and thin, with fine cut features and a noble forehead and a pointed beard that was almost snow white. This was Master Paulus Helst, tutor, friend and guardian of the boy. The second man was older, but of a vigor astonishing in

one of his years; short, dumpy and very muscular with a shiny bald head, heavy jowls and a long viking-like moustache. This was Nicholas Cuyp, once the major domo of the great house of Van Losen and now its sole retainer. Bending over a windlass, cleverly hidden behind a fireplace, Nicholas cranked away as half a ton of stone rebedded itself into the foundations of the ancient floor. Useless for the Nazi Gestapo to tap and measure and search for this hidden entrance. It had been designed and built in an age of another gestapo, when the black heart of Spanish Alva sought to obliterate a nation—and failed.

When everything was shipshape, the cripple arose and Nicholas lifted his chair and set it down upon the movable stone. The boy stood by with shining eyes, eager to share the great news with his friends. The room was of noble and beautiful proportions, having a ceiling of deep squares, heavily recessed and painted. The walls were lined with dark wooden panelling and two immense mullioned windows extended from floor to ceiling, also two fireplaces, each with heavily carved stone and wooden overmantles; once they had been lined with delft tiles of the seventeenth century, but now the broken plaster showed torn and ugly where vandal hands had pried them from their setting.

This room had been furnished with equal magnificence. Buhl cabinets, heavy tables with great rounded legs, tapestried chairs and high back settees standing in stately splendour; monochrome rugs from the hand looms of China, and examples of delft of the earliest and most lovely period and beyond all price. Six great portraits had graced the walls: one by Van Dyck of an Antony Van Losen who had sailed with Drake; another of a Peter Van Losen; a boy's head painted by Rembrandt, which but for starvation of body and soul, might well have been that of the present bearer of the name. Two portraits of Frans Hals and a famous Rubens, pair to his *Castor and Pollux* at Munich. Even the beautiful stained glass of the tall windows was gone, for Reichminister Goering had passed this way and had taken with him everything but the room itself—and what that room stood for.

Pulling aside the heavy sacking that kept out the cold wet rain, one could see the low ridge of the dykes, some five miles distant; bastions holding in check the greedy and insatiable waves. In this wide plain, wrested by man from the cold North Sea, had lain something of the splendour of Holland.

Prosperous farms with herds of prize cattle that grazed upon lush meadows; here and there a windmill, and all about a busy and prosperous agriculture. Now it stood stricken and forlorn, a dying world wherein few livng things existed. Here and there a house or a cluster of buildings, many burnt and razed to the ground, served to mark the passage of the Hun.

The cripple re-seated himself in his chair and the old man stood close while Peter poured forth his tidings. "Tonight at ten o'clock, my father will speak to us—oh Paulus!—father is going to speak to us." The tutor laid his good arm across the boy's shoulders and tenderly drew the eager brown head close. Nicholas also extended a huge hand, muttering "Courage, Mynheer, courage" as his old eyes met those of Paulus in a look of mutual understanding. It was significant that the boy was addressed as "Mynheer" and not as Master Peter, but so it had been from the moment when his father, Antony Van Losen, had left Holland with the Queen; four long years ago. Peter was never to forget those last precious moments alone with his father and the clasp of those comforting arms. Always he could see his father's strong brown face, so close to his own, and hear again the warm voice that he loved saying, "I leave you, Peter —Hold on. Care for your lady mother who is so dear to us both." Afterwards came words that had burnt deep into his childish brain "Paulus has my instructions; obey him as you would me—and Peter, my own Peter—one day I will come back or will speak to you. Remember, dear lad, to obey me then, unquestionably and blindly—no matter what I may tell you to do—obey as my son, as a gentleman of Holland—and now, farewell—" What followed had been sacred between them.

And the leaden years! The coming of the Nazi, not so hard at first. Later, much later, the death of his mother and finally, existence in the outraged house with Paulus and Nicholas, living as best they might on what could be nurtured from the soil. It was the loneliness of it all that had been the hardest to bear; not even permitted to share in the excitement of the underground, no member of which had ever communicated with that house. Waiting, always waiting and hoping and listening for a promised voice that never came.

Said Paulus, breaking the silence, "Plan x one x is hidden in the room below, but well I know it, word by word, as does Nicholas here." The old man drew himself to attention and the tutor went on: "Nicholas, since there is no one else, you

must tramp many miles this night carrying a message to every living soul upon the flats. It is this . . ." and Paulus drew a deep breath, hesitant to give life to words which, by their implication, harboured death. "To one and all this command, 'Leave at once, within an hour if possible, but by dawn and without fail, have sought the Uplands. Tarry not nor look back as did Lot's wife. Leave candles burning in the rooms and smoke in the chimney, that sharp eyes may not note the exodus. Obey in the name of the Queen'." He looked hard at Nicholas as he finished.

"The dykes—oh, not the dykes." It was Peter, his face suddenly blanched, who cried out the words "Oh, no! No!—Not the dykes—Father would never order that. Paulus, Nicholas, *think*—it's the end of everything." He looked about him like a wild bird snared in a trap. "Higher than the roof—and Mother's garden—the tulips—and Marta, our last old cow. No! my father never could have meant *the dykes*." His voice, grown shrill, trailed off into anguished silence and about them that noble room seemed to echo his words. He clutched at a straw, "Father is to speak to me at ten o'clock—wait—Nicholas, wait until then."

The old man nodded, saying gently, "Yes, Mynheer—but now I go to milk Marta." He edged away, *but* on passing the cripple read the truth in his eyes. Slowly he retraced his steps and took the boy's hands tenderly in his. For one brief second, his right knee touched the cold stone floor, and old Nicholas was gone.

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It was not an easy task to raise the stone door without the help of sturdy Nicholas, but Peter succeeded. They must, perforce, risk detection since Paulus was helpless to aid and could only sit in his chair and watch the boy descend the ladder. Anon and with startling clearness the radio announced in Dutch, "Here is Radio Orange—Her Majesty, the Queen of the Free Netherlands." Up from the dark cellar and into the gloom of the vast disfigured room there came the voice of a woman, strong and warm and speaking great words, ending thus "to each and every one of you—his and her duty—Obey and may God Almighty bless and save our dear land." The Queen's voice was followed by the quick terse tones of a man, "Peter, my son, it is I, your father speaking to you and this is the message for which you have waited so long. What I now order

you to do, must be done, swiftly, unhesitatingly and without pause or question. Listen carefully, Peter, and obey. Go—go now, at once to Jan Martins—*you know where.* Show to him the Queen's token which I placed around your neck on a certain day, known only to us both. You are to order him, in the name of his Queen *to loosen the waters.* He will understand, but you must force his obedience. Go now, my son, my little son, while we pray God to guide you. Blind obedience on the honour of a Gentleman of Holland." The voice faltered, "Go, my own Peter, and may God bring you safely to me." Clearly and with throbbing magnificence there followed the opening bars of the Dutch National Anthem, quickly muted into silence.

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For the first lonely mile the stumbling boy looked back across the dreary, sodden terrain; somewhere, in the foggy night, he pictured the old house as he had left it. Paulus would be sitting in that Spanish chair and tending the candles placed at his elbows, painfully rising now and then to cast wood into the open stove. Though Peter knew it not, his tutor waited, with full understanding, for the inevitable visit of the Gestapo. That double broadcast would be broken down by Nazi Intelligence and their first act would be the silencing of every living soul within ten miles of the sea wall. Paulus smiled gently as he poured out the last few drops from a much treasured bottle of Schnapps. Let them come. They would not find an empty house from which to fling a dragnet. His mind turned to the boy whom he had loved as a son. Peter would never forget Paulus or the great years they had passed together, and the splendid truths he had been taught. Not too bad an end for a man who had nothing but a brain as a weapon. He finished the glass slowly and set it empty upon the table.

Outside the mists swirled and enveloped the boy as might a nightmare. Peter, avoiding the paved highway, found the going rough. He had a prismatic compass, and the courage bequeathed by his fighting forebears. The one pointed direction and the other helped him wade deep in clinging ditches. By dawn he was almost spent but had won across the marshes. Blackness turned to pearly grey and a gentle breeze blew in from the sea, as he climbed upwards; Peter sat down upon a flat stone to rest, looking down with lack lustre eyes upon the flatness he had traversed.

Suddenly, he was awake, startlingly, staringly awake. As each scarf of mist was torn apart by the light gusts of air, he saw that long protracted plain completely filled, so far as the eye could reach; guns, tanks, trucks, a panzer division and another; everywhere soldiers, armour and anti-aircraft batteries taking up prepared positions. Part of this vast host was yet on the move and the vanguard had already covered the ground Peter had traversed with such difficulty. Well might he rub his eyes in bewilderment, for Peter was looking down upon two entire German armies, safely hidden behind the Allied flank and effectively camouflaged from the air. With commendable caution Peter edged away and once clear, broke into a trot, for now he understood only too clearly what must be done; he jogged on steadily until at last the houses of Vaadam came into view. Beyond and before the town stretched sentry posts guarding the dykes, concrete forts bristling with guns and pointing inland, daring anyone to approach the sea wall. Vaadam, a long straggling town, was crowded by the enemy; on the sea side lay a harbour filled with fishing craft and manned by old men and boys, and any women able to perform a man's work at sea. Peter merged into this bustling scene, dodging round houses and under nets, his brain aflame but his body well in check.

Above a weather-beaten door hung the faded name of "Jan Martins" and inside the long store could be bought anything from a sea anchor to a glass of grog. Here flourished a "Black Market" where the Nazis, swollen with banknotes hot from the press, might secure desirable luxuries smuggled in from the high seas. Here also the inhabitants might buy necessities of life at honest prices. The ceiling of this long room was low and was composed of blackened beams; at one end was a huge zinc bar, where Schnapps could be bought by the glass, and behind this sat Jan Martins, the centre and pivot of Vaadam. Patiently the boy waited until it was safe to whisper into the hairy ear. There followed a rain of questions and answers, after which the old man rapped with his stick on the dark oak floor; clearly an urgent signal because his granddaughter, as Peter learnt afterward, ran hurriedly in through a back door, her strong arms still glistening with soapsuds from the washtub. The "Keeper of the Sea Wall" issued curt orders and such was the discipline he maintained that the buxom wench set off at high speed without a single comment.

She was back in ten minutes with four men; a father and son, sea giants in long boots and woollen jerseys, followed by two elderly men, small and wiry with sharp features and weather toughened skins. The granddaughter did not enter but leaned carelessly in the open doorway, a formidable barrier to the council of war within. It was a picture such as Jan Steen loved to paint, a dark recess of life, often sordid but always human: sailors or peasants, mug in hand, against a background of a small drinking parlour.

After a maddening period of doubt Peter Van Losen was able to establish his identity. Again and again they fingered the gold token slung on its platinum chain and each in turn repeated the fell message, striving to avoid its command. Any one of those present would have died for the Netherlands, they would even have clamored for that honour if, by so doing, it might prevent the very catastrophe that now they were ordered to loose. To destroy the Dykes; the absolute and complete obliteration of the entire sea wall beyond all hope of repair and which would, sparing Vaadam itself, leave the town as an island, ten miles or more from the mainland.

Peter argued and stormed and finally issued an ultimatum; drawing himself erect he said, in a voice edged with iron as cold as that about a tomb, "I, myself, will pull the levers, thus it seems can I be certain that that which must be done, has been accomplished—Show me the way, Jan Martins—this I command in the name of our Queen, whose token I have shown you for the last time."

Over the old man's face spread a deep flush and into his voice crept a strange strength, "Nay, Mynheer," he spoke in trembling earnestness, "never may that be. Four hundred years a Jan Martins has been keeper of the sea wall and has awaited such a command—a Jan Martins will obey," and a low growl of approval filled the room.

At that precise moment the granddaughter came to life—one swift glance down the long sea front and she slipped through the door, slamming it violently. "Quick, Jan Martins, motor-cycles—and behind them a car with soldiers," her deep voice was vibrant with alarm.

The keeper of the sea wall showed no hesitation now, his reaction was swift and sure as he took command of the situation.

"Into the boat, Hendrik, you and your son and Mynheer," he shouted. "Dirk, Jugen and I—*to the switches*. Lively all—

the pasasge—quick, Hendrik." Even before he had finished speaking the two giants were fumbling below the zinc bar. Like men acting a long rehearsed scene, they heaved violently and swung the entire structure at an angle of thirty degrees, revealing a round manhole in the floor. Without further word, Jan and the two elderly men vanished like three eels. Sweat, running down their faces, father and son twisted the bar back and the girl set glasses and a bottle onto its shining surface. Hendrik swept Peter unceremoniously into a corner, picking up and throwing at him an armful of nets and indicating a wicker basket filled with fisherman's tools. "Onto that stool, Mynheer—swiftly, for all our lives—you are mending our nets."

There came a popping of exhaust valves and a shrieking of brakes. The big man leapt to the bar, seized a glass from the girl and ranged himself by his son as the heavy door crashed open and a number of men, in the black and silver of S.S. Guards piled through.

"Jan Martins, Jan Martins, Jan Martins—where is Jan Martins?" Questions, more questions and yet more questions, followed by a brutal search. Peter was thrust this way and that until he became completely entangled in the nets. Presently two sullen men of Vaadam were thrust into the room to identify Jan Martins but only succeeded in establishing the identity of Hendrik and his son Paul, whereupon the sea giant, bawling like a maddened bull, protested roundly at the delay to his sailing. Since he stood in good repute and his usefulness to the Nazi Governor was known, he and his son and "the ship's boy" were permitted to leave. Four S.S. troopers escorted them to the dockside where they carried out a thorough search of the fishing boat, afterwards sternly bidding him sail and to lose no time in so doing. Peter almost precipitated a crisis by refusing to leave until he had seen Jan Martins perform his dread office. Hendrik, wiser than he, clapped a huge hand over the boy's mouth and threatened to lace him in a sheet of tarpaulin, whereupon Peter gave a reluctant promise to be good.

Slowly the two-masted "scow" put to sea, a powerful Diesel engine propelling her clear of the harbour. With burning eyes and flushed cheeks, Peter hung over the stern sheets as the long line of houses faded into the mist. As if in answer to his prayers there came a sudden series of violent explosions, each of which bellowed out the great sails hanging limp in the wet fog, so that even the deep set masts felt the strain.

Anon a light breeze took the ship in hand and for some three hours they sailed into the North Sea, setting a course east nor'east, for England, and leaving the fog far astern. Came a small flight of Spitfires loafing high in the air, and Hendrik shouted and pointed to a flying boat, almost touching the blue waters, which, on sighting them, dropped into the sea full in their course. Above, their heads the fighters darted about like swallows and from the telescopic mast of the seaplane broke the Royal Flag of the Netherlands.

A young lieutenant clambered out upon one uneasy wing and when they were within hailing distance called out in Dutch, asking, "Is Peter Van Losen with you?" Peter scrambled forward, dodging the mainsail as it came tumbling to the deck. Hendrik handled the "scow" as easily as if she had been a yacht, setting her nose alongside the wing of the flying boat. Holding to a cleat the lieutenant extended a full arm to the little figure perhed upon the forepeak and, with a strong pull, heaved Peter aboard, pushing hm unceremoniously through a narrow hatchway; shouting thanks to the crew of the fishing boat, he hurriedly followed and clamped fast the bolts.

Before Peter could get his breath, they were under weigh, the white foam darkening the portholes, and as quickly were airborne. When the seaplane gained sufficient height, the four fighters took position far above.

"Where are we going?" asked the boy, recovering his voice —then, eagerly, "To my father?"

The young lieutenant smiled at his co-pilot and there was a twinkle in his eyes as he answered—"Certainly to your father, but first, young man, you have an appointment with a lady."

"A lady," Peter's voice expressed acute disappointment. "What lady?"

"A very important lady," was the reply. "Someone who has commanded your immediate presence so that, in person, she may express her Royal thanks to a Gentleman of Holland." The lieutenant looked into the fine-drawn face and saw bewilderment still struggling manfully with fatigue.

"You silly lad," he explained in friendly warmth. "I thought that you had guessed ere this. Don't you understand? It is Her Majesty, Wilhelmina of the Free Netherlands—your Queen and mine."