

ELSJE VAN HOUWENING
BY
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Freeeditorial 

For two years she had lived within the walls of a grim fortress; a prison had been her home. Thirteen massive doors, secured by iron bolts and bars and huge locks, stood between her and the outer world; and yet this maiden of nineteen summers was no prisoner; she was here in this gloomy place of her own freewill.

And for what cause was she here? Was it to guard and tend one who was very near and dear to her,—a father, a mother, a brother? No; it was none of her own kindred who were thus shut up, but her master, Hugo de Groot, or Grotius, as he is more generally known to history.

With the causes for the unjust captivity of this great and learned man, we need not deal here. They belong to the page of history, where they can be read in full. Suffice it to say, that Grotius was condemned by the States-General of the Netherlands to a life-long captivity in the great fortress of Loevenstein, under the spiteful tyranny of its governor, Lieutenant Deventer, who had an especial grudge against him, and seemed resolved to make his captivity as bitter as it was possible to do.

The one grace allowed to the unhappy prisoner was that his wife and family might share his captivity; might live within the fortress in the quarters allotted to him, although not suffering all the rigours of imprisonment. And with Madame de Groot and her family of children had come Elsje van Houwening, their young maid-servant, who had stoutly refused to leave them in their hour of trial and trouble, and had already spent two years of her young life within the walls of the prison.

The tie that binds master and servant together was stronger in those days than it is now. The race of devoted servants seems well-nigh extinct in these degenerate days; our mothers and grandmothers had experience of a fidelity which is seldom met with now. But even in their times an instance of such courage and devotion must needs be rare. Yet to Elsje it seemed perfectly natural to cleave to the family that had befriended her in a lonely childhood, and she loved her master and mistress and their children with a love which only grew stronger and stronger during the long, monotonous days of this captivity. Small wonder was it that Madame de Groot should sit for hours over their scanty fire, her children asleep, her husband poring over the books which came to him from time to time in a great chest from friends in Gorcum, talking with Elsje as though to a friend, talking over the difficulties of keeping house upon the pittance allowed them from the Government after the sequestration of their family property; the mournful future that seemed to stretch indefinitely before them, and now and again of that ever recurrent dream of hapless prisoners—the chances of escape!

And yet what was the possibility of this? How could it be even dreamed of that a closely guarded prisoner should pass through those thirteen iron-bound doors which lay between him and liberty? And if the sad-eyed wife or eager maid looked down from their windows, what did they see, save the rushing, tumultuous flow of a deep turbid river?

Nature and art had combined, as it seemed, to make this fortress impregnable alike from without and within. It stood in the very narrow and acute angle, where the strong and turbid Waal joins its rushing waters with those of the Meuse; and on the land side immensely strong walls with a double moat guarded it from attack, and held in helpless captivity all those upon whom the great doors had closed.

True Madame de Groot with her children, or Elsje with her market basket, were permitted to sally forth at will by day, or, at least, under modified restrictions; to cross by the boat to Gorcum, which lay exactly opposite on the farther bank of the Waal. They made their purchases here, and saw their friends from time to time; but how did this help the prisoner?

Madame de Groot was very stout and somewhat short, whilst Grotius himself was tall and slight, possessed of singular personal beauty, and an air and bearing that would be most difficult to disguise. The idea of dressing him up in their clothes, and smuggling him out in that fashion, had been talked of a hundred times, but only in a sort of despair. Hugo himself had shaken his head over the plan. It was doomed to ignominious failure, as he saw from the first. No one was permitted to leave the prison save in broad daylight, and all had to pass innumerable guards and sentries on the way. If the prisoner were to be detected seeking to escape in such fashion, it would only lead to a more rigorous and harsh captivity, and, probably, to his entire separation from his family.

The wife had sorrowfully agreed that it was too great a risk to run; yet, nevertheless, she and Elsje were ceaselessly racking their brains to think out some plan whereby the prisoner might escape the dreadful doom of life-long captivity.

It was evening. Madame de Groot was bending over the stove, cooking her husband's frugal supper. Elsje went in search of the children, to put such of them to bed as were not already there.

Her favourite out of all the little ones was Cornelia, a lovely little girl of nine years, wonderfully like her father, and perfectly devoted to him. She and her brother Hugo were often to be found in the room in which he studied and wrote from morning to night, only varying his sedentary pursuits by the spinning of a huge top that had been made for him by friends in Gorcum, that he might not suffer too greatly from lack of accustomed exercise.

Elsje stole softly into the room, so as not to disturb her master, and glanced round the bare place again and again. Where could the children be? She had looked everywhere else in their limited quarters; there was no other room except this one that had not been searched through and through. She would not disturb her master by a question, and continued softly moving and looking about, till the sound of a suppressed child's laugh, close beside her, made her almost jump; for there was nothing to be seen, save—ah! yes; she saw it all now—there was the great empty chest that had brought the last load of books from Gorcum. She raised the lid, and a simultaneous shriek of laughter arose from two pairs of rosy child-lips. There were little Cornelia and Hugo, curled up like dormice in the chest, peeping at Elsje, with eyes brimming with laughter.

She carried them off, laughing herself, and asking them how they managed to breathe with the heavy lid closed fast down.

"Oh, there is a long crack just under the top of the lid, it doesn't show from outside; but we could see light, and your shadow came right over us, and then Hugo laughed, and you heard. We sat there a long time this afternoon and told ghost stories. It was such fun!"

Elsje put the children to bed, and went thither shortly herself, but all the night long she was dreaming, dreaming, dreaming. She saw the chest with the two children inside; and then she saw it again, and instead of two small figures there was one large one—a tall man's figure crushed together in the chest, and when he turned his face towards her it was the face of her master!

The girl was up and about with the dawn; and her mistress coming to help her, she told her in whispers of the incident of the previous night and of her dream, and the two women stood staring at each other, with white faces and glowing eyes, as the idea slowly formulated itself and took shape.

"It might be done! It might be done!" whispered Madame de Groot at last; "if he could get in, it might perchance be done. Oh! if heaven should open us such a way as that!"

That day passed like a dream to all. They waited till dark; till all the children were sound asleep, and no one from without would trouble them again, before they even dared to make the experiment. Grotius was a tall man, as has been said, though he was slender in his proportions. At another time he would have pronounced it impossible that he should so fold himself up as to get inside that chest, and let the lid be fastened down upon him. But when a man sees life-long captivity before him on the one side, and the hope of escape and freedom on the other, he can sometimes achieve the impossible. And, at last, after many efforts, the thing was done; the lid was closed, and the man found that he could breathe and endure the pressure even for a considerable period.

Day by day, or, rather, night by night, he made these trials till his limbs in some sort grew accustomed to the strange constriction, and he was able to bear the cramped posture for a more prolonged time. Madame de Groot, upon her next journey into Gorcum, spoke jestingly with a friend as to how her husband would be received were he to turn-up some day, and Madame Daatselaer answered, in the same jesting spirit, that he would have a warm and hearty welcome; for the Daatselaers were old and tried friends, though only of the rank of merchants. They owned a large warehouse of great repute, and their dwelling-house was at the rear of the shop, where ribbons and other merchandise were vended to all comers.

It was through the immediate agency of these friends that the books lent to Grotius by Professor Erpenius were consigned to him in his prison. The Professor sent them to the Daatselaers, who dispatched the chest by the boat which plied between Gorcum and the fortress opposite. It was returned in the same manner to them when the books were done with, for transmission back to the Professor. Therefore, if Grotius could conceal himself in the chest for the journey over the water, he would be consigned to the safe-keeping of friends, who might be trusted to do everything in their power to facilitate his escape to Antwerp, and so to France, where he would be safe from the malice of his enemies.

Days flew by, and the plan seemed more and more feasible, albeit fraught with no small danger of discovery. Madame de Groot's anxiety was almost greater than that of her husband, and perhaps it was her visible agitation, occasionally manifesting itself in spite of her great courage and self-control, which led the prisoner to speak as follows to Elsje, when he and she were alone one day, his wife having gone once more to Gorcum, prepared to drop a faint hint to Madame Daatselaer, without, however, really arousing her suspicions of what was in the wind; for all knew how much the success of such a scheme depended upon the maintenance of absolute secrecy.

"My good girl, is it true what thy mistress says of thee, that this whole plan is one of thine own making?"

"Not of my making, master, but rather as a thing revealed to me in a dream. I seemed to see the chest, and when it was opened there was my master within. I told the dream to my mistress, and the rest seemed to follow of itself."

"And if the plan be carried out when next that chest is returned, who will accompany it across the water?"

Elsje paused in thought. Sometimes she had gone with it on former occasions, sometimes her mistress. There had been no peril in the transit then. It had mattered nothing who went; but now things would be quite different. She looked her master questioningly in the face. He returned her glance.

"I have been thinking much on that point," he said; "it will be a memorable journey for those concerned. There be moments when I misdoubt me if my wife hath the needful

firmness. It is not courage that she lacks, nor firmness of purpose; but can she pass the many barriers, the many posts of peril, the many prying eyes within and without, and so command her face that her anxiety be not seen? The sorrows and anxieties of these last years have told upon her. And if she betray too great solicitude for this chest of books, why in a moment we may be undone!"

Elsje stood looking very thoughtful. She saw at once the danger of self-betrayal; the danger that would be far more quickly noted in the prisoner's wife than in his servant. Her gaze was lifted to her master's face.

"Shall I be the one to go?" she asked.

"Wouldst thou not be afraid, my child?"

"What punishment could they give to me were the plot to be discovered?" she asked.

"Legally none," answered Grotius, whose training in the law gave him full knowledge on all such subjects; "but, my girl, I myself am guilty of no crime—yet see what has befallen me. I cannot tell what might be thy fate were this thing discovered during the perilous transit."

For a moment Elsje stood motionless, thinking deeply. Then she lifted her head, and her eyes shone brightly.

"No matter for that," she said, "whatever comes of it I will be the one to go. If they must punish another innocent person, let the victim be me rather than my dear mistress!"

Grotius took her hand, and the tears stood in his eyes. Elsje rattled on as though to hinder him from speaking the words that for the moment stuck in his throat.

"It will be better so every way," she said, "for see—the men must come in hither to get the chest, and so it must seem that you, master, are sick and in bed, else would they look to see you here at work. We must draw the curtains close; but leave your clothes visible by the bedside, and my mistress must seem to be attending upon you. So it will be best every way for me to go with the box; and the soldiers all know me, and we have our quips and jests together. I will talk to them all the while, as my mistress could scarce do without rousing suspicion, so they will not note if the weight of the chest be something greater than usual."

"Thou art a brave girl; thou hast a great heart and a ready wit," said the prisoner with emotion in his voice, "may God reward thee for thy devotion to a family in distress; for we may never be able to do so."

"I want no reward," answered Elsje stoutly, "save to know that I have helped those I love, and who once befriended me."

The next day was Sunday, and a wild March gale was raging round the castle, lashing the waves of the river into foam. The rain dashed against the windows as they sat with their books of devotion, as usual, through the earlier hours of the day. Grotius had read and offered prayer as was his wont, when suddenly little Cornelia turned her face towards the barred window, and her eyes seemed full of a strange light.

"To-morrow, Papa must be off to Gorcum, whatever the weather may be," she said; and then, slipping off her chair, took the little ones away with her for the usual midday repast.

Husband and wife looked at each other aghast. The strangeness of the coincidence seemed to them most remarkable.

"Let us take it for a direction from heaven," said Grotius. "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings—the child knew nothing, yet something was revealed to her spirit."

Later in the day Elsje came breathless with the news that the Commandant of the fortress was just leaving it for a few days' absence. He had received his captaincy, and was to go to Heusden to receive his company. All things seemed pointing in one direction; and early on

Monday morning, Madame de Groot asked leave of Madame Deventer to send back the chest of books to Gorcum.

"My husband is not well; he is wearing himself out with so much study. If the books are sent away I can persuade him to remain in bed and take some needful repose. I got him to pack them up last night; but if they stay in his sight, he will assuredly remember something more he wants to study, and nothing I can say will then persuade him to keep in bed."

Madame Deventer was a kind-hearted woman, and sorry for the prisoner's wife. She gave ready consent to the request, and said she would send some soldiers shortly to take the chest away.

The crucial moment had come. Grotius, dressed in the thinnest linen under-garments—for there was not space for much clothing—took his place in the chest. A book, padded with a cloth, served as a sort of pillow, a few books and papers were placed in such interstices as were left by the curves of his body; and his wife took a solemn farewell of him before she shut down the lid and snapped the key in the lock, giving it in deep silence to Elsje.

Outside the storm still raged and howled, but the tumult of their souls seemed greater; yet Elsje stood with a careless smile on her face as the soldiers entered the room, and Madame de Groot bent over the fire, stirring something in a saucepan, and telling her husband that she would soon have his soup ready, and she hoped he would enjoy it more than his breakfast. The curtains of the alcove bed were drawn, and the ordinary clothes of the prisoner lay upon a chair near it.

"My word, but it is a heavy boxful this time!" exclaimed the men, as they laid hold of the chest.

"To be sure," cried Elsje; "what would you have? They are Arminian books, and those are mighty solid, I can tell you. You had best have a care how you treat them when you get to the water. Arminian books have sunk many a good bark ere now, before it has got into harbour!"

The men laughed at the innuendo of the girl's words. It was in truth their adherence to the Arminian side of the great Arminian and Calvinist controversy which had shipwrecked the lives of Grotius and so many others. Elsje chattered gaily to them as they dragged and lifted the heavy chest down the stairs and through the thirteen ponderous doors. She kept them laughing by her droll remarks, and the little anecdotes she retailed for them whenever a halt was called. At last it stood without the last of the doors, and the soldiers paused and wiped their brows.

"Is the chest to be examined before it goes on board?"

Elsje's heart thumped against her ribs. This was the crucial moment. At first when the box had gone in and out its contents had been carefully examined; but as nothing save the books had ever been found there the practice had been given up latterly. But there was never any actual certainty.

Elsje dangled the key from her girdle, and swung it carelessly round and round.

"It always used to be done," she said, "but methinks my lord Commandant love not the smell of Arminian books; perchance it smacks too much of brimstone to please him! For of late he has not troubled. But I care not, only pray you make haste. I have marketing to do in Gorcum, and what if all the best things are sold ere I get there, and my poor master lying sick?"

"Ask the will of madame," said somebody; and the messenger went and returned, whilst Elsje stood almost sick with apprehension, though she never ceased laughing and talking the while.

"Madame says it may pass," came the answer back, "since her lord troubles not now, she will not delay the transit."

"Perhaps she fears lest some little Arminian imp should spring out upon her!" quoth Elsje merrily; and away they went with their load towards the boat.

It was indeed a rough passage that lay before them; and the girl's heart was in her mouth many times ere she got her precious chest safe on board, and securely lashed to keep it from slipping overboard. They laughed at her solicitude; but she always had a ready retort; and a young officer of the garrison, crossing at the same time, was so taken by her rosy face and bright eyes that he sat himself down upon the chest and drummed upon it with his feet, as he chatted with the little servant girl.

"Why do you wave your kerchief?" he asked, as the boat began her rough voyage across the tumbling waters.

"To tell yon children at that window that I am safe afloat. They feared the boat might not go in such a storm. And, fair sir, be pleased to leave kicking of that box, and come away to this better seat; for there is some precious porcelain inside, and if it be broken, I shall get the blame, for I packed it."

But Elsje's signal was for the straining eyes of her mistress far more than for those of the children. All was well thus far, and the worst of the peril was over; but—but there was still the landing on the other side.

"Take my box first," she pleaded, as they approached the wharf.

"That lumbering thing?—that can wait till the last," answered the skipper, rather surlily; "'tis as heavy as if it held a man."

"I have heard tell how a criminal was once carried from prison in a box," remarked a soldier's wife laughingly, "and, methinks, if one has so escaped another might. Let us peep inside, maiden!"

Elsje laughed, bending to tie her shoe-string.

"What, and let the Professor's books be all scattered this way and that, and perhaps fall into the water! He would never send my master another chest; and, methinks, without books he would die."

"I'll get a gimlet and bore a hole in the Arminian!" laughed the soldier, whose wife had first spoken.

"Ay do!" cried Elsje; "get a gimlet long enough to reach the top of the castle. I will stand by and watch you as you bore!"

"Out of the way there!" cried the skipper and his son, as the boat swung towards the wharf; and in a moment all was bustle and confusion. The soldier helped his wife ashore, the young officer made a bow to Elsje and sprung over the side; there was hurry and bustle, and a welcome confusion; and the girl stood beside her precious chest, and at last, by the promise of an exorbitant fee, got the skipper and his son to transport the chest at once to the Daatselaers' house, on a barrow.

She walked a little ahead in her excitement; but was recalled by a surly question from the old man.

"Do you hear that, girl—do you hear what my son says? You have got something alive in that box!"

"Ah, to be sure, to be sure," she cried, laughing, "it is the Arminian books; they are often like that, because they say the devil helped to write them. Why, when I was a little girl I knew an old woman who lived all by herself in a wood; and she had a big book, and they said the devil had given it to her; and if she wanted a ride, she just got astride of it and it flew with her wherever she wanted to go! That's what my mistress says about some of these big books. There's magic in them, and she wants to be rid of them."

The men looked awed; but superstition was rife in those days, and their one aim now was to be rid of the uncanny load. It was wheeled, and then lifted into the back room of the house, and Elsje paid and dismissed the bearers with perfect calmness.

The next minute she had glided into the shop where Madame Daatselaer was serving customers, and whispered something in her ear.

Leaving everything, but with a face as white as paper, the worthy woman hastened after Elsje, who rapped on the lid, but got no reply; for a moment her fortitude gave way, and she cried aloud in her anguish:

"My master!—my poor master—he is dead—stifled!"

"Ah!" cried Madame Daatselaer in bewildered dismay, "better a live husband in a prison than a dead one at liberty; my poor friend, my poor friend!"

But a sharp rap on the trunk from the inside reassured them.

"I am not dead," gasped Grotius, "but I was not sure of your voices. Open and let me have some air!"

Elsje unlocked the chest, whilst her friend locked the door of the room, and Grotius raised himself slowly as from a coffin.

"Praised be God for this deliverance!" he cried, as Elsje brought a cloak in which to wrap him, for he was cramped and numbed by cold, and the constraint of his posture. "God be praised for His mercy; and how can I thank you enough, good friend, for receiving me thus into your house!"

"If only it bring not my husband to prison in your place," cried Madame Daatselaer, whose face was deadly pale.

"Nay, nay, sooner than that I will return to my prison in yon chest as I came forth!" answered Grotius.

But Madame Daatselaer rallied her courage and spoke quickly.

"Nay, nay, that shall never be since thou art here. But thou art no common person, and all the world talks of thee, and will soon be talking of thy escape. But before that we will have you safe from pursuit. My husband will see to that. And now I must hide you in the attics till dark, when we can make farther plans."

Elsje's work was done. Her master took her hands in his, and kissed her on the brow.

"Farewell, my brave maiden. May God reward you and keep you always safe from harm. There will be many heartfelt prayers offered that no ill shall befall you through your devotion to me and mine. And now go—tell the story to my dear wife; and so soon as I be safe in France she and the children shall join me, and in our home there will always be a place for thee; if thou dost not find another and a better home for thyself."

Elsje's tears fell as she said farewell to her master; but her heart was full of joy as she returned to the castle with the story for her mistress. And soon they knew that Grotius had effected his escape to France, and that all peril was at an end.

The Commandant, it is true, raged at the women when he found how his prisoner had escaped him; but nothing was done to them, and they were shortly released.

They joined their lord and master in his new home, and from thence one day, not so long after, Elsje van Houwening was married to a faithful servant of the family, who had also shared their captivity in the fortress of Loevenstein; and had been so well taught by his master the rudiments of law and of Latin, that he rose in time to be a thriving advocate.

But of nothing was he ever so proud as of the bravery and address of his wife in her girlhood, when she had been the instrument by which the celebrated escape of Grotius had been effected from the grim fortress of Loevenstein.

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