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# THE GLASS OF DEATH

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WATFORD WRITERS – WRITER’S BLOCK 2021 - CRIME FICTION



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## THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS, MONDAY 15 NOVEMBER 1706

The last of the Dutch Golden Age painters, Godfriedus Schalcken<sup>1</sup> is lying on his death bed with a fever.

Conspiracies abound, his servant Marcus Van Berren and physician friend Tomas Stiegen rally to ensure their master is given a Calvinist ascent into the kingdom of heaven.

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'He still breathes, Marcus.'

'You are sure, Tomas? Your medicine still works?'

'The medicine went dry this afternoon. There is no more. It shall be God's will from here. Curiously though, Schalcken mumbles, 'Rosanna, no more wine.'

'I know of a woman he left behind in Rotterdam though her name was Maria. Wait! There was a maid in the Ruysch<sup>2</sup> household that used to, shall we say, tend to his every need. Yes! He called her Rosanna.'

'Marcus, I urge you to remove your friendship and loyalties from this association, for I believe our master to be poisoned. Look at the patches under his eyes; the blotches on his right hand. Does he owe a debt?'

'Our master owes much debt. He has refused to pay his taxes since his return from England.'

'And who shall pay me, Sir?'

'Our master has left adequate provision for his final care from the Van Diemen dowry.'

'But his wife died years ago.<sup>3</sup> They say she was the victim of a cruel joke. Our master has been uncouth and argued incessantly with any a person who has taken even the slightest interest in his wife's demise.'

'This is true, Physician.'

'Snow is falling. The Scandinavian scowl is early. I should have left for Amsterdam by now and I have a long journey ahead of me. I will summon the Minister to call on our master without delay. Hopefully Beelzebub isn't in the house! I will inform the Lord High Burgher<sup>4</sup> of his demise and certain

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<sup>1</sup> Godfriedus Schalcken, (anglicised as Godfrey or Godfried) was born in Made in 1643. He died on 16 November 1706 in The Hague.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Ruysch (1664 – 1750) was a pupil of Schalcken when he returned to Holland in 1703. Whilst there is no evidence of an affair between pupil and tutor, it likely that Schalcken may have bestowed favour upon his pupil.

<sup>3</sup> The wife of Schalcken was Francoise Van Diemen, believed to be a descendent of the wealthy Anthony Van Diemen (1593 – 1645). Not a great deal is known about her. Schalcken and Francoise were courting in the late 1660s as she appears in Schalcken's frivolity painting, *Lady Come Into The Garden* (The Royal Collection).

<sup>4</sup> Burghers were typically wealthy statesmen of towns and cities that acted in judicial roles and obtained Mayoral positions, as well as being aligned to the bourgeoisie.

death. Be sure to arrange my payment in the morning at my office and Marcus, you are a good man, but distance yourself from any hand of fate here. For if you do not, the same may strike you down.'

'I thank you for your words of wisdom, Tomas. Now, perhaps some Jenever<sup>5</sup> to warm you through before you set off?'

'Marcus, do not go looking for this poisoner. I fear there will be repercussions.'

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Schalcken did not see the sun rise. Word spread quickly that the cantankerous painter had succumb to heaven's calling; though quietly, those that trespassed or were owed money uttered the painter's death with hope his soul had been grabbed by the underworld.

As the muffled bells tolled from the Nieuwe Kerk<sup>6</sup> on the Spui, the city Burghers convened at the door of the deceased's house off Kranestraat<sup>7</sup> in search of their bounty in settlement of debts. With them, the city's bailiffs.

'Marcus Van Berren, we have come from the City Hall to lay claim on your late master's belongings in settlement of taxes and other debts. You are to allow us entry forthwith. I trust your late master's body has been removed?'

'Yes, Sir. He has been taken to Westduin<sup>8</sup> to lay in state and prepared for burial tomorrow. The expected mourners, few.'

'Stand aside. Malhaussen will lead the inventory. Malhaussen, start with the paintings and then search for any monies that may lay hidden. Van Berren, if you know of any riches of the deceased and do not declare them, you shall be brought before the High Burgher. Let that be a warning to you.'

'This way, gentlemen. My late master's studio is at the rear. The light is dim today, but I shall provide candles.'

The bailiffs wasted no time and turned the deceased's house into a scene of chaos. Bakers and butchers came calling, but remained outside by order of the bailiffs. All had left empty handed, except for the odd canvas declared as having potential value. Schalcken had not completed a canvas in over a month and certainly two patrons represented were now left wanting.

Later that evening, Van Berren privately mourned the loss of Schalcken at the Inn on Bierkade.<sup>9</sup> As he sat in a nook, his head lowered as he contemplated his future, a stranger approached out of the shadows; a man of no apparent importance, but nonetheless well spoken with a southern accent more aligned with Rotterdam.

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<sup>5</sup> Jenever is a Dutch Gin; often termed 'Dutch Courage' although this saying was first used by English sailors.

<sup>6</sup> Nieuwe Kerk (The New Church) in The Hague on a street known as the Spui, was completed in 1656.

<sup>7</sup> This location for Schalcken's house is fictitious. His actual abode at the time of his death remains unknown.

<sup>8</sup> Westduin Cemetery.

<sup>9</sup> Bierkade is a canal-side street adjacent to Kranestraat.

'May I join you?'

Van Berren looked up. 'Do I know you, Sir?'

'I am Hoogstratten.<sup>10</sup> I was a friend of your late master. You are Van Berren?'

Marcus gestured to Hoogstratten and he took a seat directly opposite. 'How can I be of service?'

'The city says your master met his end rather unkindly? Murder is on the lips of some folk. Is this true?'

'What is your connection with Schalcken?'

'I knew him. Years before he left for England. We were friends and artistic contemporaries you might say,' said Hoogstratten. 'We attended Master Dou's drawing class in Leiden. Schalcken took a shine to Dou's daughter, but that was not his downfall. He challenged Master Dou took often and was banished and with that, any hopes of marrying Dou's daughter. Schalcken was known for his, shall we say, illicit liaisons.'

'How do you know all this intimate story?'

Hoogstratten placed his hand into a small leather case that had been concealed under his thick black coat and pulled out a notebook tied with lace. 'This notebook contains the true story of your late master. It will be unwise to open here, but let us meet tomorrow at my house close to Westduin after the funeral mass and I shall tell you everything. I am guessing you will want to know more?'

A shocked Van Berren slammed his tankard hard on the table. Some ale escaped and trailed across the wooden table. 'Leave me be, stranger.'

Hoogstratten got up from the table. 'I must go. I have said too much. The snow lays heavy. Be sure to tell no one of our forthcoming meeting. In the meantime, remove any canvases, unfinished or otherwise, that shall remain in the house and place them in safe storage. I doubt the bungling bailiffs would have removed anything of real value? Art is not always what it seems my friend. They treated Rembrandt just the same way. Tomorrow then.'

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The following afternoon, as Van Berren had predicted, Schalcken's funeral attracted few mourners. At the back in the corner of the small vaulted chapel sat Hoogstratten. No emotion was felt or shown by any attendee. Van Berren was through with his mourning at the Inn. The snow had been replaced with a harsh whining wind that echoed and slammed its way within the cloisters. There was a putrid smell in the air, almost a sanitary offering that could only rejoice in the Burghers wish for the deceased to rot in hell. Schalcken's remains laying in a wicker basket and masked only by greying sheets, was taken out by the cemetery wardens to a burial plot close to a border of elms. The plot,

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel Dirksz van Hoogstraten (1629 – 1678) was an artist, poet and biographer. He befriended the young Schalcken and wrote an early life of Schalcken; but, had died 28 years before Schalcken. I have adapted his name to suit the story and have extended the biographical journey though fictitiously.

untended but re-dug over the years, was Schalcken's final resting place - his torso dumped unceremoniously into the pauper's grave.

As daylight gave way to a menacing darkening cloak of mist, Van Berren walked several yards behind Hoogstratten up a rotted path toward a lone cottage on the edge of a thicket. Van Berren entered by a side door into a room with a hidden parlour behind wood panelling. Hoogstratten's notebook had been placed on a table and two chairs beckoned them both to warm by a roaring fire. Hoogstratten handed a glass of wine to Van Berren and formally toasted the passing of Schalcken.

'Schalcken,' said Hoogstratten, 'is likely to have gone to visit the devil my friend. I doubt he would mind given all his sins whilst under the watchful eye of the almighty. There was no chance of his renaissance. But you have come here out of curiosity as to whom may have poisoned him?'

'How do you know he was poisoned?' asked Van Berren.

'Schalcken was a fine man, but, sadly for him his past would always catch up and his wicked deeds would present themselves. You see, Schalcken preferred to be a ravish tormentor of women rather than achieve a fine artistic mantle. He delivered few quality works of art to wealthy patrons. He was poisoned for sure. One minute, your late master is fine in rue health and spending more than his income; the next, he is struck down. I saw him, the night before his death. He was drunken at the Inn and demanding more credit. But my dear friend Van Berren, you must not assume the poisoner is a person of his recent times.'

'His enemies were many,' confirmed Van Berren. 'I cannot say with certain the amount of his debts, but I counted nine bailiffs and at least three traders yesterday, not to mention the Burghers themselves in attendance.'

'Don't forget England. Schalcken owed debts to bankers and of course, to his own family. But, where does one start to find the answer to the ultimate question? Who poisoned him? Any ideas, Van Berren?'

'My late master would not allow me to see his accounts. They were always locked away in his bed chamber. Besides, the bailiffs have now removed his papers.'

'You would be looking in the wrong place. Have you ever thought that the clues to Schalcken's demise may lay within his paintings?'

'But he painted so many and I only have a selection. I can't possibly track down all his works to decipher clues.'

'The clues will be in one, possibly two canvases in your possession. Do you have one that shows a man handing gold coins to a woman?<sup>11</sup> Another one that shows a woman of virtue and riches?'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Godfried Schalcken, *A Man offering Gold and Coins to a Girl*, c1665-70. The National Gallery, London.

<sup>12</sup> Godfried Schalcken, *Allegory of Virtue and Riches*, c1667. The National Gallery, London.

Van Berren rested his right index finger on his top lip and stared into the fire. 'I have the one of a man and a woman. The other one you refer to was removed by the bailiff. My late master always said these paintings were not for sale.'

'The bailiff has removed the wrong painting.'

There was a momentary silence between the two men. Hoogstratten then got up from his chair and opened his notebook. He turned to a page and handed the notebook to Van Berren enticing Van Berren to read.

Van Berren read slowly in order to understand the context of what had been written.

'This entry refers to a brothel in Rotterdam and you date this, 14 April 1667. My late master was in England at this time.'

'Was he? You will recall how your master did not attain a Royal appointment? What happened then?'

Van Berren was confused. 'We travelled to Leamington Spa, to a generous patron. I cannot recall the patron's name but he was wealthy.'

'No, you went ahead of Schalcken. He went to Rotterdam to seek finance. That wealthy patron you refer to was also the owner of brothels in Rotterdam, in Paris, and in London. Travelling back from his Grand Tour of Italy, this patron just happened to be in Rotterdam. By day, the perfect landed gentry; by night, he was master of a seedier vocation. It was a web and Schalcken was caught in the centre of it. The ransom to free Schalcken of the burden of his sins was never paid and, in the end, he had to paint himself onto many a canvas as if to self-condemn and accept his life sentence.'

'So, the poisoner was his patron?'

'No, no,' exclaimed Hoogstratten. 'The clue is the woman receiving the coins.'

'Ah, so, she is the poisoner?'

'My dear Van Berren, this woman is not the poisoner. However, the woman's sister offered her services to Schalcken for *Allegory of Virtue and Riches*. It is here, I believe lurks the next clue.'

'But the bailiffs have this painting.'

'The woman appeared in two paintings I said. Turn to page thirty-one of the notebook.'

Van Berren carefully turned the parchment and there at the top of page thirty-one, the title of *Lady Come Into The Garden*<sup>13</sup> was written.

'Do you remember this painting?'

Van Berren reached for his wine and drank the whole glassful without stopping. Looking up, for the first time, his eyes were watering. A stern expression scored his face.

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<sup>13</sup> Godfried Schalcken, *Lady Come Into The Garden*, c1679. The Royal Collection.

'I do because I was there! I was there in the very room when that game was played. It was just a game. No harm done.'

'It was more than a game, my friend. Schalcken was courting Françoise Van Diemen who is depicted in the painting on the far left. But Schalcken had secretly been betrothed to another other woman in the picture. This other woman is the same woman of *Allegory of Virtue and Riches* is she not? Her own sister shows up in his painting of a man offering gold coins to a woman – the same woman can also be seen speaking to Françoise? Schalcken's own sister who is also in the painting immediately behind him, knew everything but said nothing. Schalcken was ambitious. He wanted fame. He wanted money. Only one woman shown in his famous painting was wealthy enough to ensure they were comfortable in England.

'Yes.'

'And you are also in the painting?'

'Yes!'

'The key to who poisoned Schalcken is painted on this canvas.'

Words: 2498 (not including titles and references)