

Chapter Twenty-Three

How the campaign began and proceeded

Now after I had seen much more prettily than in a painting in what measure everyone must needs yield and subject himself to soldier's bravery, I no longer hesitated to choose what trade I wished to follow and pursue in the future, especially since I was young, strong, straight and healthy, and was not only enveloped in skin hard as iron, like that of Horny-Hided Siegfried, but also was able to penetrate the skin of others who were similarly equipped, was able in extreme dangers to make myself invisible and, on the other hand, was able, when it was necessary, to make several bands of riders appear on the battlefield. What else? I knew how to conjure others' musket barrels shut so that no one might shoot at me if I did not wish it; and on the other hand, I was assured that no one was able to do anything to me; and moreover, all my musket balls were obliged to strike home and draw blood. Equipped with these arts in battle I should be second to no one, but much rather should surpass Hector and Achilles, yea Hercules himself, and thus make myself equal to the famous heathen demigods of old. I was already permitting myself to dream about how every week the extra- and regular newspapers would spread my praise, and how people near and far would be able to tell and boast of naught else but my deeds of heroism. In two weeks at the most I felt certain that because of my incomparable bravery, I should be a captain, a month later a colonel, and, even before a quarter of a year was past, a great general who with his own company would humiliate the king of France and all his brave generals, thereby earn for the United Netherlands the name of the most

unconquerable of all peoples, and for myself would conquer and effect untold booty and riches and, beyond that, also such honor that they would erect enormous triumphal arches and columns in my honor at all crossroads in the countryside and at all corner-houses and populous squares in the cities and would leave behind for dear posterity for eternal remembrance my great deeds hewn in rock and marble.

And because at that very time the Most Christian King, with the assistance of the king of England was attacking the forsaken Hollanders by land and by sea and by moving precipitately and taking them unawares were making excellent progress, it seemed to me, to be the proper time for me with my bravery to come to the aid of that hard-pressed people (as I called them, because I was very highly flattering myself) and to make them recognize my valor to be far greater than that of a second Martin Schenk.

I did not wish to go into battle mounted, because I was not able to make a horse invisible along with myself, and also particularly because I ventured to think I should otherwise do better on foot; and because I did not wish either to straightway tie myself down as a common foot-soldier, who is not promoted every time he deserves to be, I joined a unit of freebooters who knew as much about war as I did, although they were not as ingenious as I. Among them I stuck out like chaff in a barrel and wished for nothing more than for a sharp engagement; and since there were some skirmishes here and there, I displayed naught but courage and almost more courage than a lion. I jested of musket balls as if they were spitballs being shot from a blowpipe, and for my part laid many a man low with my own musket balls; and even though well nigh every time we were compelled to flee, I was always the last to yield and each time brought home with me, as token and proof of my stouthearted soldierly spirit, some

booty, which I was quite easily able to do by means of my invisibility without anyone, friend or foe, being able to perceive it.

I often went out alone marauding betwixt the enemy's camps, and wherever I knew or suspected that some of them would pass by, I lay in ambush for them, and even if three, four or even five came ambling up, I nevertheless fired on them; if one of them then fell, which generally happened, and the others decided to screw around to help him out or to see what else was to be done there, I quickly re-loaded and laid another one low; and if the rest did not soon ride off on their way, I did no better by the third and fourth, either. If some of them then tried to look for me and to show the one who attacked them that they were soldiers, then I vexed them much worse, because they were not able to see me; and so many times I, all by myself, killed several of them.

This is the life I led, and I added well nigh every day to the money I had with both lawful and unlawful booty, till there was between the two armies more a major engagement than ordinary fight, wherein the victory and the field of battle went to the French. I was equipped with a long flintlock, a cartridge pouch, loaded with five dozen cartridges, and a sharp boar's tusk (I meant to say saber) at my side which was sharp as a razor and split iron wheel-tires in two as if they were turnips, and also opened everything locked up. Thus equipped I thought myself to be the best-protected and bravest hero on either side of the battlefield. I felled as many men as I fired shots before the battle proper began, and because in this action I took up a position by myself (which was permitted me since I was a freebooter) so that the miracles which I performed might be seen all the more clearly by both sides, look you, I withstood well nigh total salvos and caught with my body, frozen as hard as steel, nearly as many musket balls as I had cartridges in my cartridge pouch. Indeed, I actually was so daring as to run into the midst of a brigade of the enemy standing

opposite us in order to color my saber with French blood; but because I well knew that many hounds mean death for the hare, and especially since musket stocks are so immodest as not to respect one who is invulnerable, I was obliged to let it be and make do with the wish to see them dispersed, so that I might split the enemies' skulls not only during the attack, but also in the *mêlée* and when they took flight.

But when the enemy made serious preparations to come toward us and to launch an attack (for which reason I again betook myself to our fighting formation), look you, there came, by chance, pounding into my left thigh a single musket ball, which penetrated not only my thief's skin (I rightly call it a thief's skin, for anyone wearing such skin as I did then is stealing from other honest soldiers their lives like not only a thief, but like an assassin and a sorcerer), but also my flesh, bone, and veins. There lay high and mighty foolish and felt in the very greatest need which he had ever suffered in all his days that there are folks on the other side of the mountain too, and that every man meets his match, even if he were the son of the goddess Thetis and were armed with the best weapons that Vulcan ever forged.

I say yet again: there lay high and mighty foolish, the insolent braggart to whom it made no more difference if musket balls struck him like hailstones than if they were gently snowflakes wafting down before he considered that there were some who were as easily able to undo his imperviousness to shot as he was able to undo theirs, ere he remembered that he would no more be able to conjure shut others' musket barrels than others were able to do it and to choke off his shots.

But this was not the only bad thing which befell me; but, further, my magic spells did not help still the bleeding, as a result of which I, in such dire need, in which no army surgeon was immediately at hand, tore up my handkerchief and stuffed it into the wounds.

Moreover, I was in danger of receiving more such slaps from the salvo which was fired at us, and perchance one which might even blow out my life; and when our side was able to withstand neither the large numbers nor the hot attack of the foe, but rather dispersed (as they are wont to say of them), ran away, and, showing the enemy their backs, left the place where they had fought unhappily and which they had strewn, as proof of their misfortune, with dead and injured; look you, then my terror, fear and anxiety began in earnest, namely when I saw how the victors not only pursued those taking flight but also even killed the wounded lying on the battle field and plundered the dead. In this dire need, when without doubt my time was about to come too, I finally took refuge in my invisibility, so that I disappeared out of the hands of these merciless men, but straightway paid most dearly for this manner of escaping. For when straightway thereafter several large squadrons of horse passed over the battlefield just like thick clouds and thus over me in full gallop, I received from the horses, who no more saw me than human beings did, so many terrible jabs in the ribs that I thought my bones must needs be crushed and ground in my own hide as in a mortar.

When this cruel thunderstorm was past, I lay there quite unconscious and powerless, like one who has been broken on the wheel, and in fact not unfairly, because since the weapons of war had fallen into my hands, I had ungently laid to eternal rest so many an honest mother's son with the aid of my infernal arts. I was able to move neither arms nor legs, and it seemed to me that all my members were broken in two, save my tongue; it still worked, and with it I cursed and consigned to the devil that was in me, all those who had taught me my arts and had thereby caused me and made me so bold as to go to war. I was well able to imagine that if I were to continue to lie there invisible in this way, I really must needs in the end perish and die quite without aid, help, and consolation; therefore I let myself be

seen again, having made up my mind completely to die willingly. I also tossed away from me what had hitherto made me invulnerable, so that whoever might see me and wish to put me out of my misery might exercise his will on me all the more easily and unimpeded.

And since up till now, without doubt by the grace of God, my head had remained whole and intact, I still had enough of my senses left to consider how I had been living since the hurdy-gurdy girl stole my money. Thereupon there ensued heartfelt remorse and inward sight to the boundless mercifulness of the Almighty at Whose patient benevolence I had not been afflicted sooner by His just and more than well deserved punishment I myself was amazed, together with the firm resolve, should I escape with my life this time (which I really did doubt), to mend my ways and to so arrange and constantly conduct my life to God's honor and to the edification of other people that naught should be reflected by it save a heartfelt love for God and for my fellow man, a profound remorse at the sins I had committed and that I had so often made Him wroth, and lastly an unending expression of gratitude that His goodness had brought back the prodigal son and in the end given him hope that he might be taken into His kingdom.