



The Woman with Three Hundred and Sixty-Six Children

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Dutch

Intermediate
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Long, long ago, before the oldest stork was young and big deer and little fawns were very many in the Dutch forests, there was a pond, famous for its fish, which lay in the very heart of Holland, with woods near by. Hunters came with their bows and arrows to hunt the stags. Or, out of the bright waters, boys and men in the sunshine drew out the fish with shining scales, or lured the trout, with fly-bait, from their hiding places. In those days the fish-pond was called the Vijver, and the woods where the deer ran, Rensselaer, or the Deer's Lair.

So, because the forests of oak, and beech, and alder trees were so fine, and game on land and in water so plentiful, the lord of the country came here and built his castle. He made a hedge around his estate, so that the people called the place the Count's Hedge; or, as we say, The Hague.

Even to-day, within the beautiful city, the forests, with their grand old trees, still remain, and the fish-pond,

called the Vijver, is there yet, with its swans. On the little island, the fluffy, downy cygnets are born and grow to be big birds, with long necks, bent like an arch. In another part of the town, also, with their trees for nesting, and their pond for wading, are children of the same storks, whose fathers and mothers lived there before America was discovered.

By and by, many people of rank and fortune came to The Hague, for its society. They built their grand houses at the slope of the hill, not far away from the Vijver, and in time a city grew up.

It was a fine sight to see the lords and ladies riding out from the castle into the country. The cavalcade was very splendid, when they went hawking. There were pretty women on horseback, and gentlemen in velvet clothes, with feathers in their hats, and the horses seemed proud to bear them. The falconers followed on foot, with the hunting birds perched on a hoop, which the man inside the circle carried round him. Each falcon had on a little cap or hood, which was fastened over its head. When this was taken off, it flew high up into the air, on its hunt for the big and little birds, which it brought down for its masters. There were also men with dogs, to beat the reeds and bushes, and drive the smaller birds from shelter. The huntsmen were armed with spears, lest a wild boar, or bear, should rush out and attack them. It was always a merry day, when a hawking party, in their fine clothes and gay trappings, started out.

There were huts, as well as palaces, and poor people, also, at The Hague. Among these, was a widow, whose twin babies were left without anything to eat—for her husband and their father had been killed in the war. Having no money to buy a cradle, and her babies being too young to be left alone, she put the pair of little folks on her back and went out to beg.

Now there was a fine lady, a Countess, who lived with her husband, the Count, near the Vijver. She was childless and very jealous of other women who were mothers and had children playing around them. On this day, when the beggar woman, with her two babies on her back, came along, the grand lady was in an unusually bad temper. For all her pretty clothes, she was not a person of fine manners. Indeed, she often acted more like a snarling dog, ready to snap at any one who should speak to her. Although she had cradles and nurses and lovely baby clothes all ready, there was no baby. This spoiled her disposition, so that her husband and the servants could hardly live with her.

One day, after dinner, when there had been everything good to eat and drink on her table, and plenty of it, the

Countess went out to walk in front of her house. It was the third day of January, but the weather was mild. The beggar woman, with her two babies on her back and their arms round her neck, crying with hunger, came trudging along. She went into the garden and asked the Countess for food or an alms. She expected surely, at least a slice of bread, a cup of milk, or a small coin.

But the Countess was rude to her and denied her both food and money. She even burst into a bad temper, and reviled the woman for having two children, instead of one.

“Where did you get those brats? They are not yours. You just brought them here to play on my feelings and excite my jealousy. Begone!”

But the poor woman kept her temper. She begged piteously and said: “For the love of Heaven, feed my babies, even if you will not feed me.”

“No! they are not yours. You’re a cheat,” said the fine lady, nursing her rage.

“Indeed, Madame, they are both my children and born on one day. They have one father, but he is dead. He was killed in the war, while serving his grace, your husband.”

“Don’t tell me such a story,” snapped back the Countess, now in a fury. “I don’t believe that any one, man or woman, could have two children at once. Away with you,” and she seized a stick to drive off the poor woman.

Now, it was the turn of the beggar to answer back. Both had lost their temper, and the two angry women seemed more like she-bears robbed of their whelps.

“Heaven punish you, you wicked, cruel, cold-hearted woman,” cried the mother. Her two babies were almost choking her in their eagerness for food. Yet their cries never moved the rich lady, who had bread and good things to spare, while their poor parent had not a drop of milk to give them. The Countess now called her men-servants to drive the beggar away. This they did, most brutally. They pushed the poor woman outside the garden gate and closed it behind her. As she turned away, the poor mother, taking each of her children by its back, one in each hand, held them up before the grand lady and cried out loudly, so that all heard her:

“May you have as many children as there are days in the year.”

Now with all her wrath burning in her breast, what the beggar woman really meant was this: It was the third of January, and so there were but three days in the year, so far. She intended to say that, instead of having to care for two children, the Countess might have the trouble of rearing three, and all born on the same day.

But the fine lady, in her mansion, cared nothing for the beggar woman's words. Why should she? She had her lordly husband, who was a count, and he owned thousands of acres. Besides, she possessed vast riches. In her great house, were ten men-servants and thirty-one maid-servants, together with her rich furniture, and fine clothes and jewels. The lofty brick church, to which she went on Sundays, was hung with the coats of arms of her famous ancestors. The stone floor, with its great slabs, was so grandly carved with the crests and heraldry of her family, that to walk over these was like climbing a mountain, or tramping across a ploughed field. Common folks had to be careful, lest they should stumble over the bosses and knobs of the carved tombs. A long train of her servants, and tenants on the farms followed her, when she went to worship. Inside the church, the lord and lady sat, in high seats, on velvet cushions and under a canopy.

By the time summer had come, according to the fashion in all good Dutch families, all sorts of pretty baby clothes were made ready. There were soft, warm, swaddling bands, tiny socks, and long white linen dresses. A baptismal blanket, covered with silk, was made for the christening, and daintily embroidered. Plenty of lace, and pink and blue ribbons—pink for a girl and blue for a boy—were kept at hand. And, because there might be twins, a double set of garments was provided, besides baby bathtubs and all sorts of nice things for the little stranger or strangers—whether one or two—to come. Even the names were chosen—one for a boy and the other for a girl. Would it be Wilhelm or Wilhelmina?

It was real fun to think over the names, but it was hard to choose out of so many. At last, the Countess crossed off all but forty-six; or the following; nearly every girl's name ending in je, as in our "Polly," "Sallie."

Girls Boys

Magtel Catharyna Gerrit Gysbert

Nelletje Alida Cornelis Jausze

Zelia Annatje Volkert Myndert

Jannetje Christina Kilian Adrian

Zara Katrina Johannes Joachim

Marytje Bethje Petrus Arendt

Willemtje Eva Barent Dirck

Geertruy Dirkje Wessel Nikolaas

Petronella Mayken Hendrik Staats

Margrieta Hilleke Teunis Gozen

Josina Bethy Wouter Willemtje

Japik Evert

But before the sun set on the expected day, it was neither one boy nor one girl, nor both; nor were all the forty-six names chosen sufficient; for the beggar woman's wish had come true, in a way not expected. There were as many as, and no fewer children than, there were days in the year; and, since this was leap year, there were three hundred and sixty-six little folks in the house; so that other names, besides the forty-six, had to be used.

Yet none of these wee creatures was bigger than a mouse. Beginning at daylight, one after another appeared—first a girl and then a boy; so that after the forty-eighth, the nurse was at her wit's end, to give them names. It was not possible to keep the little babies apart. The thirty-one servant maids of the mansion were all called in to help in sorting out the girls from the boys; but soon it seemed hopeless to try to pick out Peter from Henry, or Catalina from Annetje. After an hour or two spent at the task, and others coming along, the women found that it was useless to try any longer. It was found that little Piet, Jan and Klaas, Hank, Douw and Japik, among the boys; and Molly, Mayka, Lena, Elsje, Annatje and Marie were getting all mixed up. So they gave up the attempt in despair. Besides, the supply of pink and blue ribbons had given out long before, after the first dozen or so were born. As for the, baby clothes made ready, they were of no use, for all the garments were too big. In one of the long dresses, tied up like a bag, one might possibly, with stuffing, have put the whole family of three hundred and sixty-six brothers and sisters.

It was not likely such small fry of human beings could live long. So, the good Bishop Guy, of Utrecht, when he heard that the beggar woman's curse had come true, in so unexpected a manner, ordered that the babies should be all baptized at once. The Count, who was strict in his ideas of both custom and church law, insisted on it too.

So nothing would do but to carry the tiny infants to church. How to get them there, was a question. The whole

house had been rummaged to provide things to carry the little folks in: but the supply of trays, and mince pie dishes, and crocks, was exhausted at the three hundred and sixtieth baby. So there was left only a Turk's Head, or round glazed earthen dish, fluted and curved, which looked like the turban of a Turk. Hence its name. Into this, the last batch of babies, or extra six girls, were stowed. Curiously enough, number 366 was an inch taller than the others. To thirty house maids was given a tray, for each was to carry twelve mannikins, and one the last six, in the Turk's Head. Instead of rich silk blankets a wooden tray, and no clothes on, must suffice.

In the Groote Kerk, or Great Church, the Bishop was waiting, with his assistants, holding brass basins full of holy water, for the christening. All the town, including the dogs, were out to see what was going on. Many boys and girls climbed up on the roofs of the one-story houses, or in the trees to get a better view of the curious procession—the like of which had never been seen in The Hague before. Neither has anything like it ever been seen since.

So the parade began. First went the Count, with his captains and the trumpeters, blowing their trumpets. These were followed by the men-servants, all dressed in their best Sunday clothes, who had the crest and arms of their master, the Count, on their backs and breasts. Then came on the company of thirty-one maids, each one carrying a tray, on which were twelve mannikins, or minikins. Twenty of these trays were round and made of wood, lined with velvet, smooth and soft; but ten were of earthenware, oblong in shape, like a manger. In these, every year, were baked the Christmas pies.

At first, all went on finely, for the outdoor air seemed to put the babies asleep and there was no crying. But no sooner were they inside the church, than about two hundred of the brats began wailing and whimpering. Pretty soon, they set up such a squall that the Count felt ashamed of his progeny and the Bishop looked very unhappy.

To make matters worse, one of the maids, although warned of the danger, stumbled over the helmet of an old crusader, carved in stone, that rose some six inches or so above the floor. In a moment, she fell and lay sprawling, spilling out at least a dozen babies. "Heilige Mayke" (Holy Mary!), she cried, as she rolled over. "Have I killed them?"

Happily the wee ones were thrown against the long-trained gown of an old lady walking directly in front of her, so that they were unhurt. They were easily picked up and laid on the tray again, and once more the line started.

Happily the Bishop had been notified that he would not have to call out the names of all the infants, that is, three hundred and sixty-six; for this would have kept him at the solemn business all day long. It had been arranged that, instead of any on the list of the chosen forty-six, to be so named, all the boys should be called John, and all the girls Elizabeth; or, in Dutch, Jan and Lisbet, or Lizbethje. Yet even to say "John" one hundred and eighty times, and "Lisbet" one hundred and eighty-six times, nearly tired the old gentleman to death, for he was fat and slow.

So, after the first six trays full of wee folks had been sprinkled, one at a time, the Bishop decided to "asperse" them, that is, shake, from a mop or brush, the holy water, on a tray full of babies at one time. So he called for the "aspersorium." Then, clipping this in the basin of holy water, he scattered the drops over the wee folk, until all, even the six extra girl babies in the Turk's Head, were sprinkled. Probably, because the Bishop thought a Turk was next door to a heathen, he dropped more water than usual on these last six, until the young ones squealed lustily with the cold. It was noted, on the contrary, that the little folks in the mince pie dishes were gently handled, as if the good man had visions of Christmas coming and the good things on the table.

Yet it was evident that such tiny people could not bear what healthy babies of full size would think nothing of. Whether it was because of the damp weather, or the cold air in the brick church, or too much excitement, or because there were not three hundred and sixty-six nurses, or milk bottles ready, it came to pass that every one of the wee creatures died when the sun went down.

Just where they were buried is not told, but, for hundreds of years, there was, in one of The Hague churches, a monument in honor of these little folks, who lived but a day. It was graven with portraits in stone of the Count and Countess and told of their children, as many as the days of the year. Near by, were hung up the two basins, in which the holy water, used by the Bishop, in sprinkling the babies, was held. The year, month and day of the wonderful event were also engraved. Many and many people from various lands came to visit the tomb. The guide books spoke of it, and tender women wept, as they thought how three hundred and sixty-six little cradles, in the Count's castle, would have looked, had each baby lived.

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