

Sample translation (pp. 36-59)

THE COFFEE THIEF
by Tom Hillenbrand

Historical Heist & Adventure Novel

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[...]

Amsterdam, two years later

He woke up when someone rattled his cell door. The first thing he noticed was the pain. With a groan Obadiah raised up on his elbows. His torso, with only a tattered shirt over it, was covered with red welts, which overnight had blossomed to their full splendor. He never would have believed that birch switches could cause such pain. They had worked him over for an eternity yesterday, or at least that's how it seemed. Bound tightly to a herring cask and unable to move, he had been repeatedly lashed on his back and legs. And yet he kept refusing to play by the rules of the Tuchthuis. It had been going on like this for days. The whippings were only the most recent in a long series of punishments.

He looked at the heavy oak door with iron fittings. When it swung open he found himself staring into the face of Ruud, the guard responsible for this section of the prison. The man, thin as a rake and completely bald, was no more than twenty-five. Obadiah guessed he suffered from syphilis. That would also explain why Ruud was so stupid. The guard smirked at him. "Ah, my little English boy. Finally ready to work?"

Obadiah coughed. The prison near the Koningsplein was drafty and damp. Even for a Londoner the climate took a serious toll on his health. Presumably a lung inflammation would carry him off long before the whippings did him in.

"I do not refuse to do work in accordance with my talents. But I will cut no Brazil wood."

The prison's banners proclaimed that it would lead criminals and vagabonds back to the path of righteousness through God's word and

strenuous physical labor. But in actuality no one cared about anyone's spiritual salvation. Instead the point was to transform as much of the rock-hard Brazil wood as possible into the expensive red powder that the dyers in Leiden and elsewhere valued so highly. In the Amsterdam vernacular this is why the Tuchhuis was also locally known as the Rasphuis, the saw house. The work was enormously strenuous and exhausting, granting the inmates no semblance of grace, only a rapid death. He would die here, that was almost inevitable. And as someone who had never done an hour's worth of physical work in his life, Obadiah Chalon knew that pulverizing the wood would bring about his demise faster than almost anything else they could do to him.

Hardly had he spoken when the guard slapped him in the face, not with his palm but with the back of his hand, so that his knuckles struck Obadiah's cheek. "Lazy scum! You Papists are all the same!"

Then Ruud dragged him to his feet and shoved him out the door. They walked down a long stone passageway to the yard. The prison was a big rectangular building consisting of four wings surrounding an inner courtyard. There about a hundred men were waiting in the morning cold, miserable figures dressed in sackcloth and shabby wool. They stood there freezing, not yet fully awake, in four rows that were paced off by two guards with bullwhips. While the inmates shivered, shifting their weight from one foot to the other, Piet Wagenaar, drummed the catechism into their heads: "Then the Israelites sighed from the hard labor and shrieked loudly, so that their cry for freedom from the labor urgently rose up to God."

Wagenaar was the Ziekentrooster, the prison chaplain. Rumor had it that he tormented the younger and more attractive inmates with more than just Bible verses and psalms. So far Obadiah had been spared these advances. He started to head toward the others to join

the group, but Ruud lashed him on the back with his bullwhip.

"Not you, boy. Right this way."

Fear welled up in Obadiah as the guard shoved him in the direction of the wing where the punishments were meted out. But instead they turned to the right, into the wing where Olfert van Domselaer, the warden of the prison, had his rooms. Sweat broke out on Obadiah's brow. What could Domselaer want with him? He ventured to ask the guard.

"Are you taking me to the warden?"

He felt the whip instantly. "Shut your trap."

Ruud enjoyed countermanding people, making it plain to them that they were wrong. It probably made him feel superior. Obadiah assumed that if the guard had simply answered "No," they wouldn't be going to see the warden. And it wouldn't have been worth Ruud's effort to wield the whip. So Obadiah was certain their goal was Domselaer's office. He ran through all the possibilities in his mind. Were they going to take him to court? Or hand him over to agents of the British Crown? Was this perhaps his long-awaited opportunity to show the warden he possessed talents that might prove useful to the prison?

They walked down a whitewashed corridor with tall glass windows and coarse carpets. Then Ruud stopped and knocked on a door of dark wood.

"Come in," said a deep voice.

The guard opened the door, shoved Obadiah inside, and bowed to an elderly man sitting in an easy chair before a cheerfully crackling fire. Ruud then left the room. Besides the fireplace and the comfortable chair, the room offered few amenities. It was a room for working, not relaxing, yet it was no doubt meant to impress visitors. Above the mantel a splendid marble frieze was set into

the wall, depicting a woman symbolizing Amsterdam. In her hand she held a fearsome cudgel studded with rivets, and she was flanked by writhing men in chains. Underneath, the inscription read: "Virtutis est domare quae cuncti pavent."

The man in the easy chair saw that Obadiah was looking at the Latin motto and translated: "It is a virtue to submit to the one —"

". . . of whom all live in fear," Obadiah finished the proverb.

The warden seemed to be in his late forties. He was wearing black knee breeches and a black jerkin, with a white lace-trimmed shirt and a cap edged with sable. In his right hand he held a leather-bound book. He scrutinized his guest.

"I forgot that you have a good command of Latin."

"Of Latin, Seigneur, as well as several other languages."

Domselaer ignored his comment and motioned Obadiah to take a seat on a stool in the middle of the room.

"So you know our motto. But you don't seem to understand it. How long have you been here, Obadiah Chalon?"

"Eight and a half weeks."

"You follow the worship services by the chaplain quite zealously, I hear, despite your heretical Papist faith. The somber rationality of our worship service does not repel you?"

Obadiah had no idea what the warden's intent might be. Cautiously he said, "As an Englishman I am used to living among Protestants, Seigneur. Moreover, there is nothing reprehensible about the readings, even if one is a Catholic. The Bible, after all, remains the Bible."

"What a Calvinistic view. You must know that only a couple of hundred miles west of here people are being strung up for such common-sense statements."

Obadiah decided it was best to reply with a humble nod.

"While you at least do not reject the spiritual nourishment offered to you, you do refuse to work. Is that correct?"

"I am indeed ready to work, Seigneur. I have many talents that could be of use to the prison, if I may be so bold to mention them. In addition to my knowledge of languages, I understand metallurgy as well as other arts and could —"

Domselaer cut him off. "I know who you are and what you can do, Obadiah Chalon. You are one of those men called virtuosi. You collect treatises and wondrous toys; you fritter away your days in coffeehouses and rest in the shade of great natural philosophers." He spoke the term as if it were identical to plague and cholera. "But you are not one of them. Am I not right?"

Without waiting for Obadiah's reply, he continued. His deep voice grew louder, resounding like thunder from on high. "You do not seek wisdom, you simply want to show off. You pin your studied erudition to your hat like a dandy pins a feather. What you do possess in greater measure than anyone else is vanity! The Lord has obviously blessed you with reason, but you fail to use it."

"Seigneur, I —"

"And when you do use it, it's only to think up ways to cheat honest citizens. No, Obadiah Chalon, your talents may be remarkable, but I have no use for them!"

"Allow me to be your most devoted servant, Seigneur. I promise to work for you from sunrise till sunset."

Domselaer looked at him as he might an uncomprehending child. "It's not about what you want. Nor is it about what I want. It's about how you can find your way back to the light. And the path of reason, the path that you have followed until now, has not led you to salvation. It has led you here. Reason has plunged you into depravity, Obadiah Chalon, and it will do so again. Only hard work

can redeem your soul."

A fierce rage rose up in Obadiah, and he had to restrain himself. Otherwise he would have assaulted this smug Calvinistic slave-driver on the spot, no matter the consequences. In a strained voice he said, "You want me to saw Brazil wood? That's slave labor. I'm a nobleman."

Domselaer scrutinized him indignantly. "Here you're merely a lost soul. And if that's your last word, then you leave me no other choice."

"I would rather die!"

"And that you will, someday. But before that you're going to learn how to use your hands."

"You can hardly force me to do that. If you want to break my will, you'll have to break my body too. And what good would I be to you then?"

Instead of answering, the warden picked up a little bell from the table next to his chair and rang it. The door opened and the guard came in. Domselaer told him, "Nothing else will work on this one. Prepare the water chamber."

Obadiah saw a repulsive grin spread across Ruud's face. "As you command, Seigneur."

They took him to a room in the cellar. Ruud and another guard shoved him through a doorway and down a stone stairway. When they reached the bottom he looked around. The room was not what he'd expected. There was no fireplace with red-hot tongs or other torture implements, such as a rack or temple screws. There was only a large apparatus in the middle of the room. Made of wood and

metal, it was a cylindrical form about five feet high. A sort of seesaw with handles rested on top. Obadiah thought he'd once seen something similar in a treatise on irrigation systems.

"Is that a fountain?" he asked.

Instead of answering him, the guards just laughed. They pushed him toward the apparatus. On its base were two iron fittings with rings. Ruud now threaded a chain through them and attached shackles around Obadiah's ankles. The Englishman had a terrible sense of foreboding.

The two guards whispered to each other, then headed for the door. When they had left, the warden entered. From the top of the stairs he gazed down on Obadiah, who was now chained. Domselaer gave him a cold smile.

"Since you are interested in such things, you have probably already figured out how this apparatus works, am I right?"

"It's a bilge pump," Obadiah said tonelessly.

"Quite right. Running just south of here, as you know, is the Singel Canal. From there a pipe leads to here." He pointed to a fist-sized opening in the brick wall.

Then Domselaer reached up to grab the iron chain that hung from the ceiling next to the lintel over the door. Obadiah hadn't noticed it before. When the warden pulled on it he heard a metallic clank. Seconds later water gushed from the hole in the wall. It flowed over the concave stone floor and gathered around the bilge pump, which had several entrance holes around the base. After only a few seconds the water was up to Obadiah's ankles. He reached out his hands to the wooden handle of the pump but did not press it down.

"You have to pump," the warden shouted. The water flowing in was making a tremendous noise.

"This is murder, Seigneur!" Obadiah roared back.

"No, it's only a means of encouraging you finally to use the hands that the Lord gave you. And now pump! Pump to save your life."

By now the water had reached his knees. Obadiah pushed the pump handle down with all his might. There was a sucking sound as the underpressure pulled water into the openings of the cylinder and pumped it somewhere else. When he'd shouted to the warden that he considered this punishment to be murder, he had meant what he said. The room was almost square, the walls about fifteen feet long. That made an area of two hundred twenty-five square feet. The water was already up to his knees, about two feet deep. If he calculated correctly, ten seconds had passed since the water began pouring in. So two hundred eighty gallons were flooding into the small room per second. If he didn't pump, the water would be up to his nose in another twenty seconds.

But by now he was pumping with all the strength he had. Pulling up and pushing down on the lever was immensely exhausting. Of course he tried, as he struggled, to extrapolate further calculations, but the numbers and formulas scattered like a soaring flock of birds. Soon he could think of nothing but the pump. Up and down, up and down. Obadiah worked so hard that his muscles burned like fire, but the water kept rising. Two hundred eighty gallons per second, minus the plunger stroke. How many gallons could a hand pump like this remove in the same time interval? Was it even possible to produce an adequate suction? And did the filling curve and the pumping curve proceed linearly, or did the inflow and drainage change according to the depth of the water?

Black spots danced before Obadiah's eyes. His back was a mass of pain from working the pump, but also because of the brackish

water of the IJ, which burned in his still-fresh wounds. And yet he almost had to laugh at the situation because it was so grotesque. For a long time he had searched for a research subject that was unexplored and which would finally win him acclaim in the field of natural philosophy. The question of how the filling percentage affected the inflow and drainage of fluids in a closed container had never, to his knowledge, been studied by anyone, let alone definitively solved. A corresponding experimental setup would undoubtedly cause a sensation and might even create a new branch of physics: hydrometry. The results might be published in "Philosophical Transactions" of the Royal Society.

Unfortunately the experiment was already under way, with Obadiah as the guinea pig. He didn't believe he would ever have the chance to put his observations down on paper. In the meantime the cold water of the canal had reached his chest. The pumping was getting more difficult because with each stroke he now had to work against the water's resistance as soon as his hands and arms were immersed in the brownish brew. The water was now up to his neck. He could no longer hold on to the slippery pump levers. The iron chains tightened around his ankles as he flailed with his arms. Obadiah threw his head back to keep his nose above water, and glanced at the open door. At the top of the steps he saw the warden and another man who looked familiar. Like Domselaer he was dressed all in black, though he wore more ribbons and frills, which made Obadiah suspect he was a wealthy merchant. On Dam square, he thought. I saw you once on the Dam, by the stock exchange. Then the water submerged him.

He heard a rhythmic knocking and hammering that seemed to be coming from very far away. Then he realized that someone was pounding on his chest with his fists. Obadiah opened his eyes and spewed out a flood of water, then another. He doubled up and coughed, and even more water came up. Then he retched with nothing coming out. He lay on the floor of the chamber and could make out a blurry pair of feet in high-heel patent leather shoes with artistically worked silver buckles. He was fairly sure that neither the warden or the guards could afford shoes like that.

Obadiah managed to get to his knees and orient himself. He could hear the gurgling of a drain somewhere. The water had vanished, except for a few rivulets and puddles. In front of him stood the guard, the warden, and the merchant with the beautiful shoes.

"Now that we've finally convinced him of the usefulness of physical labor, you want to take this English tramp away from me?"

The merchant shook his head. He was in his mid-twenties, pale from working indoors and already astoundingly fat, even for a Dutchman. He looked like a maggot swaddled in black damask.

"How could I take anything away from you, Seigneur? You are your own lord. But we could use this man, perhaps even for the good of the republic."

"How would that work, if I may ask?"

"I can't say precisely. All I can promise you is that we intend to employ him in one of the efforts on behalf of the welfare of the Generalstaaten, the parliament of Holland, which in the future should prove extremely pleasing in the sight of God. We might even succeed in making him into a useful member of society."

In disgust Domselaer looked down at Obadiah, still on his knees. "I doubt that. This man belongs in a mine or on a sugar cane

plantation. He needs to slave like an ox in the yoke. Otherwise he will always remain a sinner and a swindler."

"You may be right. In that case, would you put him at our disposal? The prison would of course receive suitable compensation."

Domselaer gave a shrug of resignation. "Take him. But don't bring him back."

Then the warden turned away and climbed the stairs. Obadiah would have liked to say something, but he was still having coughing fits. Before he knew it Ruud had lifted him to his feet and pushed him up the stairs. Black spots again danced before his eyes, and he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he felt much better. It could be because they had dressed him in dry clothes and set him in an easy chair by the fireplace – the warden's chair. He recognized the room, but Domselaer was nowhere to be seen. Instead the fat merchant was studying him. He stood several feet away, leaning against a wall and smoking a pipe.

"How are you feeling?" asked the merchant.

"Under the circumstances, fairly good, Seigneur. May I inquire with whom I have the honor of speaking?"

"Piet Conradszoon de Grebber. I'll take you to my father."

De Grebber. Conrad de Grebber. The name was familiar, but his head was still full of brackish water. For the life of him he couldn't remember who the man was.

"Could you tell me why your father wishes to speak with me?"

De Grebber slowly shook his head.

"I see. I presume we're leaving at once."

"If it's convenient, Mijnheer. I assume nothing is keeping you here."

Obadiah stood up and looked over at the marble statue of Amsterdam staring sternly down at him from the mantel, clutching the cudgel.

"No, nothing."

They left Domselaer's office and went outside to the inner courtyard. A black-lacquered coach waited there, a four-wheeled calèche with two horses, the type that only well-to-do Amsterdammers could afford. The coachman hurried to pull open the door. As they climbed in, Obadiah saw that a small golden emblem was painted on the otherwise unadorned calèche. It was an O and a C, over which a larger V was painted, the two straight lines of which bisected the O and the C. Above this group hovered a small A. He recognized the emblem; everyone did. The calèche belonged to the VOC – Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (the United East India Company) – more precisely its Amsterdam office, indicated by the small A. What could the most powerful trade organization in the world want with him?

During the ride no one said a word. Piet de Grebber resembled someone whose position and wealth provided him with a certain self-confidence, but who in his heart was a coward and unable to make decisions. He was clearly someone's lackey, probably his father's. And since the latter had obviously given his son strict instructions not to reveal anything about the nature of the business for which he needed Obadiah, it seemed pointless to inquire further. Instead he spent the duration of the ride pondering what awaited him.

When he'd been forced to flee from London, Amsterdam had seemed the most logical destination. Here he had a small network of his own virtuosi with whom he'd corresponded for years. And more importantly: No one here knew about his dealings with counterfeit

financial papers. In London, after the botched affair with the cloves, he'd had to reckon he would be persona non grata in the coffeehouses on Exchange Alley. Even worse was his fear of Doyle's rage. If Obadiah had remained in England, the fencing master would no doubt have set a bounty hunter on his trail sooner or later. Or Doyle would have taken advantage of his contacts with the Duke of Monmouth to have him thrown into the Fleet debtors' prison or even into the infamous Marshalsea. Almost no one ever came out of there alive. But he could start all over on the floor of the stock exchange at the Dam. It soon became clear to Obadiah that Amsterdam offered more extensive opportunities to cunning speculators than London. The Dam was the center of the financial world, where dozens of stocks were traded, and cashless transactions in the form of bills of exchange or offset accounts were accepted by everyone. For a couple of months Obadiah had made use of these advantageous terms for himself and had succeeded in achieving modest prosperity. Maybe I should have left it at that, he thought. But I wanted to make one more deal, just one more. And just as in London, the last deal had ruined him. This time he did not succeed in fleeing.

Out the window of the calèche he could see that they were traveling along the Kloofgracht, where the façades of three-story merchant residences gleamed in the morning sun. They seemed to be making only slow progress. Several times he heard the coachman shout wild oaths. Once more he glanced out the window. Something was going on, that much was certain. The women who hawked newspapers stood on the street corners, calling excitedly to passersby in their singsong, though Obadiah could not understand. More barges than normal glided along the canal in the direction of the IJ, more people than usual were walking along the Kloveniersburgwal Canal. Yes, they were all heading north toward

the harbor. No one seemed to be going in the other direction, toward the Dam or the Amstel, where at this time of day businesses would be in full swing.

The farther they progressed, the denser the traffic became. Obadiah could hear musket fire, followed by the deep rumble of artillery. He looked at de Grebber, who sat across from him with his hands clasped over his paunch. The merchant raised his eyebrows as if wanting to encourage him to ask his question.

"What's going on, Seigneur? Is it war?"

De Grebber tittered with amusement, which made his layers of fat jiggle.

"You haven't been here for long, have you? It's our ships."

"The returning fleet?"

"Yes. A hundred ships. The whole IJsselmeer is full of them, all the way to the horizon. Laden with pepper from Malacca, porcelain from Jingdezhen, sapan wood, indigo, Ceylonese sugar. A truly sublime sight. Under different conditions I would take a look at the spectacle, but we have better things to do."

Obadiah only nodded. As he'd expected, the coach turned onto Oude Hogstraat at the Bushuissluis. This was where the East India House was located, the headquarters of the Company. A few minutes later the calèche came to a stop, and the coachman opened the door. De Grebber climbed out, followed by Obadiah. The East India House was a two-story brick building with tall barred windows and a portal flanked by two white pillars in the Tuscan style. From the outside the building did not look very imposing, but Obadiah knew that the façade concealed one of the most luxurious edifices in all Amsterdam. They walked through the portal and found themselves in an inner courtyard that was at least five times the size of the Tuchthuis. There was a great hustle and bustle. Messengers and

administrators rushed back and forth from one wing to another with serious expressions on their faces, no doubt calculating the profits of the trading fleet that had just arrived. De Grebber led him into a section of the building that served, if Obadiah was not mistaken, as the seat of the Company's directorate. At least the furnishings and decorations hinted at that, since they were spread everywhere as if it were the most natural thing in the world. All the floors were marble, the ceilings were embellished with Italian frescos and Dutch oil paintings depicting ships and renowned merchants. As they ascended a curving staircase to the second floor, Obadiah spied a gigantic portrait of Willem III that hung at the top of the stairs. The Dutch governor looked down at him with a solemn expression, a rapier in his right hand. The prince of Orange-Nassau lent the whitewashed wall behind him a little color, but that was all he was good for. Because real power, as even a confidence man like Obadiah knew, resided not with the governor, not with the county or municipal authorities, but with those who brought their immense wealth to the Republic. Power belonged to the men whose ships were being welcomed only a couple of hundred yards north by jubilant throngs of Amsterdamers.

Suddenly Obadiah Chalon knew where he had heard the name Conrad de Grebber once before. His fat companion turned in front of the portrait of Willem with a snort and gazed down at Obadiah, who had stopped as if rooted to the spot in the middle of the stairs.

"Please hurry, Mijnheer. My father is not a man to be kept waiting."

"Your father. Your father is one of the Lords Seventeen."

"Indeed he is. What of it?"

Obadiah nodded and continued up the stairs. De Heeren XVII. The Lords Seventeen. Le Conseil des Dix-Sept. No matter what the

language, it had an almost mystical sound. The seventeen gentlemen who made up the directorate of the Company were the most powerful men in all of Holland. They had almost limitless resources at their disposal. And it was not only tradesmen and merchants who rose and fell at their command, but princes and kings as well.

The upper floor of the East India House seemed, if possible, even more sumptuously appointed than the ground floor. They walked past all sorts of treasures from overseas: Indian furniture with gold marquetry, gigantic Chinese vases, Persian tapestries. De Grebber headed toward a door at the end of the corridor. It was made of ebony, and the inscription "XVII" was emblazoned in gold. The merchant entered without knocking. They were now in a large room that was certainly imposing compared with the rest of VOC headquarters, yet almost somberly furnished. Hanging on the white walls were framed maps of Batavia and Japan, and in front of a green marble fireplace stood a long table covered by a green cloth, with seventeen chairs around it.

De Grebber said, "Wait here. He'll be with you in a moment."

Then he turned on his heel and left the room. Obadiah stood quite still. Nobody else was in the room. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to escape the building, but he did nothing of the sort. Instead he went over to one of the framed maps and studied it. The map showed all of the Netherlands: in the north the seven provinces of the republic's parliament, called the General State, as well as the affiliated lands in the south that belonged to the Spanish Crown. Above them all loomed the painted shape of a lion, the Lion of Belgium.

The door opened and Obadiah turned to see a man enter. Conrad de Grebber was in his mid-fifties and far slimmer than his son, who was only half his age. He dressed like most rich Dutchmen, and

although Obadiah had been in Amsterdam for a while, he still had to repress a grin. De Grebber's attempt to look like a Calvinist church mouse was a spectacular failure. His white shirt and the plainly tailored black garments were intended to show his humility. Yet his jacket and hose were of the best velvet from Lyon, and the shirt had countless ruffles of lace. Presumably his clothing cost more than the entire wardrobe that Obadiah had possessed in his better days. Still, among Amsterdammers De Grebber's attire probably represented a paragon of Protestant restraint. But woe to anyone who wore silver rings or an ostentatious wig – then the street urchins would hurl jeers at such foppish display.

All this went through Obadiah's head as he gave a deep bow and said, "Your most humble servant, Seigneur."

De Grebber replied with a kindly nod and said, "Thank you for coming so promptly."

"Thank you for making my arrival possible, Seigneur."

"Very good, very good. Come, please take a seat. Let's have a drink and discuss a matter which may benefit from your assistance."

De Grebber sat down at the head of the long table, and Obadiah took a seat next to him. Hardly were they seated when the door opened and two footmen came in. Both carried large trays that they set down in front of the two men: a silver coffeepot, a crystal carafe of port with goblets, and two bowls. In one were candied oranges and peaches, in the other pound cake and lord's bread.

"Help yourself to much as you like. I gather that your morning was far from pleasant. Would you care for coffee, my lord?"

"Gladly."

While one of the servants filled a china bowl with steaming coffee, Obadiah quietly said, "It's been a very long time since anyone called me 'my lord,' Seigneur."

"But you are of noble blood, are you not? Your father was the baronet of Northwick."

"You are well-informed. My family held properties in Suffolk since the time of Edward IV. But the civil war . . ."

"Cromwell confiscated them from you, I presume. Because of your faith?"

"Besides Papism, they accused my father of various other offenses before they executed him. But you're right, his faith was the actual problem."

"Perhaps you will regain your land someday."

Obadiah felt rage rise up in him. It was the same everywhere: the wealthy had no idea how the world of ordinary citizens functioned. But of all the people he knew, the Dutch were the least aware. Considering the worldwide reach of their empire, there was a certain irony in that. The reason for this ignorance was that they lived here on this tiny island of bliss where you could be Huguenot or Catholic, where you could criticize kings and princes without being drawn and quartered for it. In England things were different. No one would ever feel obliged to return any property to a member of the lower nobility, if the property had been taken from him thirty years before. He made an effort to remain calm when he answered.

"I consider that improbable, Seigneur."

He saw from de Grebber's expression that he thought he knew something Obadiah did not.

"I would like to propose a transaction to you, or more precisely commission you to carry it out. The matter would be extremely lucrative. Not only for the Company, but also for yourself."

"And what's the hook?"

"If the deal fails, you will die, presumably in a highly unpleasant manner."

Obadiah gave a shrug. "That is the nature of extremely lucrative deals. They are always associated with high risks."

"Indeed, and probably no one knows that better than you. How much have you made at the Dam with your speculating?"

"Over nine hundred gold ducats."

The VOC director looked impressed. "For an individual businessman that is quite a considerable sum."

"Possibly. But I don't regret having tried my luck."

"I don't know whether to believe you on that score. On the other hand, if I've been correctly informed, you did not suffer very great losses, since the lion's share of your capital consisted of counterfeit banknotes."

"Seigneur, this may seem to you to be fraud. But please keep in mind that for me it was not merely about the money."

"No? What then?"

"About natural philosophy."

De Grebber cocked his head. "In my profession I hear plenty of absurd excuses, but this one at least promises to be original. Do go on."

"I have studied the fluctuations of the stock exchange for a long time. And I'm convinced that the value of stocks and other financial instruments follows hidden laws."

Obadiah squared his shoulders. "Kepler and others have demonstrated that the stars do not move randomly around the sun, but follow fixed paths, obeying the laws of gravitation. These can be calculated and predicted by using the principles of mathematics."

"Yes, I've heard of that theory recently at a salon. And you think that the stock exchange works the same way? In this system, what would represent the sun?"

"At the Dam that would probably be the VOC stock. I admit that

so far it's only a theory, but one for which I've been meticulously collecting evidence."

"There remains the fact that you are a counterfeiter."

"To this day nothing has been proven in that regard. It was merely alleged that while in prison I —"

"Don't worry, my lord, I did not invite you here in order to accuse you of such things," De Grebber said with a smile. "I invited you here because I'd like to avail myself of your not insignificant talents."

"Which ones, exactly?"

"I'm not sure yet — all those that might be necessary. If my information is correct, you are a collector of mechanical marvels and are also conversant with Natural Philosophy," he said, smiling again. "Metallurgy in particular. Furthermore, you are familiar, as just mentioned, with the mechanisms of the stock exchange and banks, and you're a member of the République des Lettres. You have an extensive network of correspondents all over the world. Have I forgotten anything?"

"Only that I play the chalumeau quite passably."

"A pleasing instrument. Be that as it may: I would like you to acquire something for me."

"Seigneur, in the eyes of many I may be a cheat, but I am no thief."

"I suppose it could be called theft, yet it would harm no good Christian folk. Actually, nothing would be taken from anyone. It's a little like swiping a spoonful from the IJsselmeer. Besides it's an enormous intellectual challenge."

Obadiah took a piece of candied orange peel. Instead of biting into it, he ran his finger over the rough surface and said, "You're speaking in riddles. Stated more precisely, you're beating around

the bush."

Obadiah expected that de Grebber would first demand his word of honor as a gentleman or an oath on the Blessed Virgin before he continued. But he simply went on: "I would like you to procure coffee for me."

Obadiah glanced at the silver coffeepot standing on the table. "You're getting more and more mysterious. You have coffee. It's right in front of your nose. And in Amsterdam there are surely enough places where for one or two pence you could acquire a lot more."

De Grebber made a dismissive gesture. "And if I need raw coffee beans, all I have to do is snap my fingers, and some dealer over in Haarlem would be happy to sell me a whole wagonload, of course. But have you ever asked yourself where the coffee comes from?"

"From the Turks, naturally."

"And where do the Turks get it from?"

"To my knowledge, from Arabia."

"Quite right. The main trading center for coffee is the harbor of Mocha. The beans are cultivated somewhere in the mountains in the interior. The Ottomans control the coffee trade – a very lucrative business, since we have all become addicted to this drink, and your England probably more so than any other nation."

The conversation was beginning to fascinate Obadiah. "Do go on, Seigneur."

"Many of our merchants have tried to buy coffee directly in Mocha, because there it is cheapest, but the Turk keep his Argus eye on the trade."

"Then buy the coffee in Alexandria."

"That too is difficult. Alexandria is merely a way station. Almost all the trade in Levantine specialties, especially coffee, is

conducted through Marseille."

"I see. A trade monopoly that the Grand-Seigneur and Louis XIV control together."

"Precisely. The Sublime Porte in Constantinople has exempted the French from the Jizya, did you know that?"

"And what is that?"

"A per capita tax that all non-Muslim traders must pay to the Grand-Seigneur. Except for the French. In addition, French traders are allowed to sell goods from their king's factories throughout the Ottoman Empire duty-free. It's an unholy alliance, and the Company believes it would be lucrative to purchase the coffee directly, without the profiteering that these heathens impose."

Obadiah wasn't sure whether he meant the Turks or the French.

"So why don't you do that?" he asked. "Don't these coffee plants grow anywhere else?"

"Not to our knowledge," replied the Dutchman.

"I'm afraid I still don't understand what your plan is."

De Grebber stood up. "I'd like to explain it by an example. Tell me, my lord, do you smoke?"

Obadiah was somewhat amazed at the sudden change of topic. "I wouldn't refuse a good pipe, and after a morning like this it would be most welcome."

De Grebber shouted something in Dutch. Seconds later a servant appeared carrying a walnut box decorated with mother-of-pearl flowers. He set it down and took out two pipes, bowing slightly in Obadiah's direction. "What flavor tobacco may I offer you, Seigneur?"

"Plum, please."

The lackey stuffed a pipe with the aromatic tobacco, then filled the other one at de Grebber's command with fennel-laced tobacco. He

brought them a glowing pine taper and then left the room. As they smoked, de Grebber asked softly, "Do you know where this tobacco is from, my lord Chalon?"

Obadiah exhaled a little cloud. "From Maryland or Virginia, I would venture."

De Grebber's water-blue eyes flashed with amusement. "Wrong. This excellent tobacco that you're now smoking comes from Amersfoort."

"In the province of Utrecht?"

"That's correct. As you know, we Hollanders are not only the most successful traders in the world, but also the best gardeners. Just look at what we made of the tulip. Decades ago we brought in tobacco from the New World and experimented with it. Since then tobacco has been cultivated on a large scale in Amersfoort and all over Veluwe. We're exporting it worldwide, and last year alone we had sales of more than fifty thousand guilders."

Obadiah put down his pipe. "You want to plant coffee! You want to rob the Turks and break the sultan's monopoly."

"Quite correct, my lord. But to do that we first need seeds or, more precisely, seedlings in sufficient quantity."

"Aren't the beans good enough? Aren't they the seeds?"

"Our gardeners at the Hortus Botanicus in the Middenlaan Plantation have already tested that possibility. I don't know the details, but it didn't seem to work."

"I admit that this matter fascinates me."

"An interesting conundrum, wouldn't you say? We would like to outfit an expedition, a group of brave men, to purloin their drink from the Turks. The leader of this expedition must possess a razor-sharp mind, relationships with individuals of many talents, and knowledge of the latest achievements in natural philosophy. You are

the perfect man for the job."

"You think so?"

"I need a master brain, my lord. And I also need someone who has nothing to lose."

"You're intimating that you would send me back to prison if I refuse?"

"I'm afraid you wouldn't get away with prison if you decline. Do you recall a gentleman by the name of Doyle? A little fop in the service of the Duke of Monmouth?"

Obadiah's fingers tightened around the clay pipe. "What about him?"

"You palmed off on him a great deal of counterfeit paper from the Exchange Bank."

"That was long ago."

De Grebber smiled triumphantly. "Stated more plainly, you did not palm it off on him."

Obadiah nodded silently. He had long suspected that Sebastian Doyle was only a straw man, because how could a fencing master possess such a large fortune? Doyle had stood in for the royal bastard James Scott, the Duke of Monmouth. A highborn person such as Scott could not lower himself to handle money in the Exchange Alley like a common speculator. That was why he had hired someone to do it for him. And that someone was Doyle.

"As you surely know, Monmouth was very popular among the English people."

In actuality the duke was a sort of folk hero. The fact that he was so handsome certainly helped matters – but the fact that he was of the correct faith outweighed even that. He was a Protestant, like his father Charles II – whose brother James was the designated heir to the throne. To the horror of the entire country, James had

converted to Catholicism. If he became king, England would suddenly be Catholic again. For this reason the people preferred Monmouth – he might be a bastard, but he was a Protestant bastard.

"Your fraudulent undertakings with the exchanges would likely never have been discovered if they had taken place in England," said de Grebber.

"Did Monmouth attempt to change the documents into cash?" Obadiah asked in disbelief.

"Since your precipitate departure from London much has happened. A large number of people shared the opinion that after Charles's passing they would rather set Monmouth on the English throne than the Papist James. As everyone knows, he is tied to the apron strings of the Sun King. The Duke of Monmouth himself was afraid he would be assassinated by the supporters of the legitimate heir apparent. And so he fled to a safe harbor."

"To Amsterdam."

"To Amsterdam, where else? As you can imagine, Monmouth was close to financial ruin when he arrived here, at least by the standards of the nobility. Then he recalled that he had your letters of exchange in his possession, and he attempted to cash them in – by contacting their issuer."

"Good Lord."

"Your counterfeits were quite convincing, we have to admit. Even many bankers would have been fooled, but when the duke tried to cash them in at the Central Exchange Bank, the fraud was noticed at once. It would have caused a huge scandal."

Something dawned on Obadiah. "But a friendly businessman in the Company purchased the papers from the duke, didn't he?"

"Indeed he did. Shortly before Monmouth departed to return to England." De Grebber reached under his jerkin and pulled out a

bundle of papers. "The exchange documents now belong to me. And I can easily prove that they originated from you. So now you have not only defrauded some English bastard who fled Amsterdam, but also one of the Lords Seventeen. If I should be forced to bring this matter to court, a mere prison sentence would not suffice."

"I understand. Seeing as things have now come to this, it seems I am your man."

"Excellent. You won't regret it. Draw up a plan and tell me what you'll need. Your resources are almost unlimited. Recruit the men you require. Furthermore, I will provide you with a contact to one of our most prominent designers and natural philosophers, in case you should require apparatus for your mission or unusual equipment. Above all, though: Be discreet, my lord. The French have eyes and ears everywhere."

Obadiah nodded, "Am I then free to go wherever I like?"

"Insofar as it serves the implementation of your task, of course. You will doubtless have to travel to the Levant and other remote regions. Do whatever you have to do."

"The first thing will be to speak with one of my correspondents," said Obadiah.

"And where does this gentleman reside?"

"Everywhere."

[END OF SAMPLE]