

A striking historical novel for young readers

FLOORTJE ZWIGTMAN

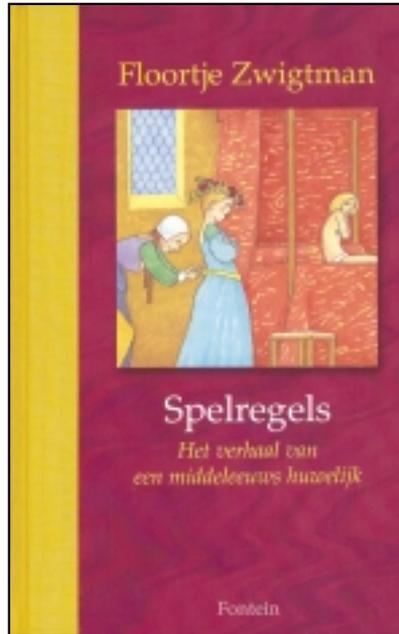
Spelregels

The Rules of the Game

Rules of the Game is a historical novel for young readers, set in the Middle Ages, about an arranged marriage between two noble teenagers, which proceeds according to strict, patriarchal rules. After all, in the fourteenth century marriage is not a question of love, but of convenience, and so as a child Marjorie van de Witborg is already destined for Allard van Goudheugel. We hear from both of them in turn, and they are quite candid about their feelings. When they get married, they hardly know each other. Allard does not think much of Marjorie's looks, and he soon begins to loathe her, in spite of Marjorie's attempts to make him happy. The young couple, the "knight" and the "maiden," avoid each other and go their separate ways. Allard goes off with his macho friends, and in her loneliness Marjorie retreats to the strange castle, where she has only one friend: the steward Gilbert, who can see that Marjorie wants to be more than *meek as a sheep, dumb as a cow and pretty as a mare*, as one of Allard's friends describes the ideal maiden. Allard abuses Marjorie, and his family is upset because is not yet pregnant. All this plays out against the overwhelming fear of the Plague, which claimed the life of Allard's older brother three years earlier, a brother who was dearer to him than Marjorie is now. Alchemists, quack doctors and soothsayers cash in on that fear and feed superstition. Nevertheless in the end Marjorie succeeds, at least in part, in breaking through the strict rules of the Medieval game of man-and-woman, creating a meaningful life for herself and becoming good friends with Allard.

The book is written in modern-day language, with our modern-day knowledge of psychology and male-female relationships, and that gives not only an outer sharpness and sparkle, but also an inner depth to our image of "the olden days". This shows the reader what Medieval knightly life was really like. It lets you see how unhappy both young people are in their conflict with the oppressive "rules" of adult life, which are imposed on them when they aren't yet ready for them. *Rules of the Game* is a striking historical novel for young readers, written in a sober, fluid style.

LIEKE VAN DUIN



Floortje Zwigtman is the pseudonym of Andrea Oostdijk (Terneuzen, 1974). She studied education, worked a few years as a teacher and then started her own copywriting business. She writes and edits textbook in addition to writing fiction for children. *Rules of the Games* is her well-received debut, and in May 2002 her second historical novel, *Pack of Wolves*, set in Romania on the border between Christian and Islamic culture, is scheduled to appear. She does extensive research for

her novels but manages to seamlessly incorporate those historical details into the story. She regards Emily Brontë (*Wuthering Heights*) and Melvin Burgess as literary models, admiring them for their honesty about human relationships. Another favorite is Astrid Lindgren, whom she respects for her imagination and versatility.

The appealing thing is the way in which children, despite all the rules, try to make the best of their lives. Today's children will recognise many things, although the rules are different now.

DE VOLKSKRANT

Spelregels is a promising debut, written in a language soft as satin and with a quite natural attention to even the smallest things, so that it feels you are there yourself.

PZC

With this book Floortje Zwigtman has burst from the starting blocks.

TROUW

PUBLISHING DETAILS

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RIGHTS

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An interview with Floortje Zwigtmán

FLOORTJE ZWIGTMAN MAKES HER DEBUT WITH SPELREGELS

by Ernst Jan Rozendaal (16 February 2001, ZC)

translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

She wrote her first novel to see if she could do it. Floortje Zwigtmán sent *Spelregels* (Rules of the Game), her juvenile novel, to a few publishers, and within three days De Fontein had responded. The Baarn publisher would be all too happy to publish her book. And that's not the only proof that she can write. Her debut novel *Spelregels* is due to be published next week, and the Middelburg writer has already completed her second book and is working on a third historical novel. "When you write, you meet people you would never otherwise meet, and see places you'd never otherwise see."

Floortje Zwigtmán is a pseudonym for Andrea Oostdijk (26). She uses a pseudonym to keep her various activities apart. "I run a copywriting service, I study pedagogy and I write. I'd like to keep these three worlds separated."

She has been writing as long as she can remember. "As soon as I began talking I started telling stories. Later on my mother told me that I would stand with two dolls in my hands and have them tell stories. As soon as I could write I started putting the stories on paper. I illustrated them as well. For a long time writing was a private affair. I wrote down things that I wanted to remember, and I wrote for the fun of it. That's not the sort of thing you show to other people. I was writing about a part of my life that no one else knew about. That's why I'll be curious to see how people react to my first book. I can't keep anyone from reading it now."

The novel *Spelregels*, which will be available in the bookshops on February 23, is the story of a medieval marriage. The main characters are a young knight, Allard van Goudheuvel, and his fourteen-year-old bride Marjorie van de Witborg. Their marriage has been arranged by their families and as it happens they don't get along at all. In addition, they live at a time in which the plague is raging in Europe.

The publisher has placed the book in the 11+ age category, but Zwigtmán was aiming for a somewhat older audience. "It's a book for young adults. It fits in somewhere between a juvenile novel and the secondary school reading list. I didn't consciously write for young people above the age of fourteen or fifteen, of course. You have a style, and at a certain point you realize that your style is best suited for a particular age category."

The book was written at the urging of her Dutch teacher. "He said, 'Why don't you see if you can write a novel?' I thought that was a good idea. It was a

way to find out what I was able to do. If he thought the result was mediocre, then I'd stick to pleasure writing. But he thought it was good enough to send to a publisher. Within three days I had a response. So it's a chance you have to grab with both hands."

Zwightman prefers historical novels. Because of the extensive research required it took her four years to finish *Spelregels*. "History appeals to me. I think it's fun to play detective, to discover what the world was like five hundred years ago, to know what people used to do when they got out of bed in the morning, what they saw when they looked out the window."

Parallels

"I draw parallels between the past and the present. People back then were not essentially different from people today. *Spelregels* has to do with a conflict between a man and a woman. That's timeless. The idea that you've ended up in a life that doesn't suit you will also be familiar to many people. How do you change your situation? You might also end up in a school with classmates who have ideas very different from your own.

"In *Spelregels* I tried to put myself in the shoes of both parties. I describe the conflict from Allard's point of view as well as from Marjorie's. I want to show young people that the world isn't black and white. If a reader identifies with one person, he'll have to choose that person's side. In a conflict you have two ways of thinking, and both sides think they're right. I try to empathize with both sides. Maybe as a woman I identify with Marjorie more easily, but as a writer I also enjoy creating a plausible character for someone with whom you have little in common. That's the difficulty and the fun of writing, that you become another person, that you can live in other worlds and at other times."

Growth

Regardless of the extent of the preparations and the depth of the research, Zwightman's stories don't take shape until they're on the writing table. "Just compare it with a bush in the garden. It puts out more and more leaves, and sometimes a branch suddenly appears. If you don't like it you prune it off. If it's pretty you let it keep on growing. Stories grow, too, and I don't know exactly how."

Sample translation from

***Rules of the Game: The Story of a Medieval Marriage* by Floortje Zwigman
(Baarn: De Fontein, 2001)**

Translated by Lance Salway

Six

I no longer know exactly when I began to dislike Marjorie. I do not even know why.

Perhaps it began on that night in the house of Joris the farmer. We slept there in the terrible flea-ridden bed that I remembered from the nights Thomas and I spent there during our hunting parties.

That day there had been much talk of Thomas. In the morning I had told Marjorie about him, in the evening there were farmers who recalled their memories of him. Strangely enough, the cheerful stories of the morning sounded very different by the fireside. It was as if I were looking into the past through a distorting mirror. Each story, however amusing, summoned a memory of the days when Goudheugel was afflicted by the Plague. Images appeared in my head that I had tried so hard to forget.

I saw myself standing once again on the threshold of Thomas's chamber, where he lay completely alone. It was said that you might even catch the Plague, simply by looking at a sufferer, so that no one dared go near him. Nor did I. It was night, and I was scared of everything: ghosts, the Plague, Death.

From the chamber came a sharp odour of sweat and festering ulcers. In the darkness I could hear Thomas's laboured breathing as if he were close by me. Softly, I called his name. Answer came at once, but the voice I heard was not that

of Thomas. It was the voice of an old man jabbering nonsense. I had run away in horror.

The following morning Gilbert discovered that Thomas had died. Father Eucharistus had prepared him for the grave. He wore a long black cloak and a cowl over his head. He looked like Death himself. When he laid his gloved hand on my forehead, because I was crying, I was scared that I would be the next one to die.

The funeral was horrible in a different way.

It was the first time that I had ever seen my father cry. He stood by the tomb at the foot of the altar with his hands over his eyes. When Gilbert, Johannes and I lowered the coffin into the tomb, I could see that his face was red and contorted. I asked myself if he would have cried like that if I had been the one who was dead. Father had always been prouder of Thomas than of me. Thomas was the eldest, the first son of my father and mother, and therefore special. They had been pleased with me too, but I had always taken second place to my elder brother. Thomas had been stronger and more handsome than I was, more skilled with the sword and more popular with the girls. He was to have been Lord of Goudheuvell.

At his funeral I realised that I would now have to take his place. All that the family had expected of Thomas would now be expected of me. I was scared that I would be unable to fulfil these expectations.

After the funeral my life had changed completely. The hunting parties and jaunts to the city were replaced by gruelling military exercises in the courtyard of Sir Albert's castle and, once back at the castle of Grondheuvell, interminable lessons from my father on the management of the estates. Only on the jousting ground did I feel as free as I had done before. But now there was that girl.

I was still not accustomed to Marjorie, although we ate from the same plate and slept in the same bed, just as Thomas and I used to do.

I wondered constantly what she might be thinking. Did she find me pleasant or tiresome, handsome or plain? I didn't dare to ask because I was scared that the answer would be discouraging. I suspected that Marjorie disliked me, though she took care not to show it. She did try to look after me well. When I came into our chamber in the evening, cushions would be lying on the chair and a fire burning in the hearth. But even her attentiveness began to get on my nerves.

Ever since my wedding day I had thought about which girl I would rather have married, and had reached the conclusion that she would have been completely unlike Marjorie. I did not want a maidservant to sit silently at my feet but a friend with whom I could laugh and talk. Someone to take the place of Thomas just a little.

But father had said that men and women could never be friends. Women had been created to follow their husbands, not to stand beside them. Perhaps I had taken such a dislike to Marjorie because I knew that we could never be friends.

That night in Wildbeek, for the first time I struck her. Why, I no longer know. She simply annoyed me. Her stringy hair, her skin that smelt salty and dirty, her long bony fingers, her voice, everything about her irritated me. I wished that she would disappear, that I would wake the next morning and she would no longer be there. I turned over and pulled the blankets over my head so that I could no longer hear her breathing.

The following morning, as always Marjorie was lying beside me in bed. She had rolled herself in the blankets and looked uglier and more commonplace than ever. I stood up, wrapped my cloak around me, and went outside.

It was a grey, misty morning. I could smell autumn in the air. To my surprise I saw that Gilbert and Joris the farmer were already up. They were standing in the yard, talking, but fell silent when they saw me, as if I had caught them red-handed. I greeted them and went back inside. It was chilly and I thought that if something important were afoot I would hear about it soon enough from Gilbert.

On the way back to the castle, he told me that the farmers had seen a strange

old tramp in the woods. Because they thought that he might be planning to steal chickens, they had chased him away. I listened, and then forgot all about it. Only much later would I recall the incident, when the Plague seemed about to prowl around our castle once again.

Back at the castle, something seemed to have changed between Marjorie and me.

Although we had tried to please each other at first, now we didn't even take the trouble. We kept out of each other's way as much as possible, and this actually suited us well. Uncle Hendrik had given me a beautiful falcon and I could now devote myself to training the creature.

The training of a young falcon is a task that must be undertaken with great love and patience. Konstanz and I had a heavy task on our hands, but Isabella (as I had named the falcon) rewarded us by being a quick, intelligent pupil. She was a strong peregrine falcon with powerful talons and fierce, dark eyes. To get her accustomed to me, I carried her with me all day long on the glove, stroked her feathers, and spoke to her.

Marjorie would not look at the falcon. She seemed to ignore the bird on purpose, simply because I was so besotted with her.

After a few weeks, Isabella trusted me so completely that I decided to try and teach her to hunt.

Konstanz and I took her with us to the greensward that lay just beyond the castle walls. Konstanz brought the lure: two pigeon wings tied to a leather bag, to which was tied a piece of meat. A long line was fastened to the lure. Isabella sat on my glove with the hood over her head. She was tied to my wrist with a leash.

I was tense, but tried not to let her see it. Much could go wrong at this stage of the training. The falcon might obstinately refuse to take the bait or be driven into a panic by the leash on her foot. Carefully, I removed the hood, while Konstanz held up the bait. I made the same encouraging noises that I always made when I fed her. She twisted this way and that trying to reach the delicious morsel. Konstanz gave me a wink and started to walk off with it. At a fair distance away,

he put the lure down. I observed that Isabella kept her eyes on him and knew exactly what she had to do. I slackened the leash. The falcon took to the air, and, moments later, she landed on the meat. Konstanz and I felt like cheering, but we contained ourselves, so as not to frighten Isabella. Instead we walked carefully towards her and took her on our wrists, each in turn to stroke her.

‘This must be the cleverest falcon ever to crawl from an egg,’ Konstanz declared.

After that we took Isabella with us to the greensward every day. We taught her to snatch her prey in mid-air, by swinging the lure above our heads, and eventually allowed her to practice on live prey, by releasing pigeons. Isabella killed quickly and ruthlessly. She had grown into a beautiful, powerful bird, with a shining coat of feathers. I never tired of admiring her.

She was so beautiful. And so obedient.

Very different from Marjorie.

I often took her from the weathering, a small wooden structure that stood in the courtyard, and allowed her to sit on the arm of my chair during the meal. I fed her bits of meat and bread from my plate. Sometimes mother and father would give me strange looks when I gave the falcon a piece of bread that had been intended for Marjorie, but they said nothing about it.

By Christmas, Marjorie and I had grown accustomed to our new way of living together.

By day we each had our own occupations: Marjorie helped mother with the housekeeping and I took lessons from father or was busy with Isabella. In the evening we weren’t together anymore, either. I spent my time with Konstanz. We played chess, or sat by the hearth in the great hall, where there was always a roaring fire in winter. Marjorie had found a place for herself in the circle of women, alongside my mother and sisters, Catharina and Mechtild, and she did embroidery.

The only time when I could no longer ignore Marjorie was when we went to bed at night. Sometimes, as we stood beside the bed in our night attire, I had the same feeling of nervousness and excitement as on that first evening. At those moments I simply wanted a girl to kiss and to hold.

But Marjorie did not want me.

She lay very quietly, as if she weren't there, and her skin was as cold as a snakes. This was weird and horrible to the touch, and whenever we were together, I felt guilty that I didn't like her more.

Perhaps it was for this reason that Marjorie's belly remained empty. It mattered little to me if a child was born or not, but it did matter to my mother and father. There had to be a young Lord of Grondheugel to rule over the estate after me. And that is why Father decided, one morning to have a talk with me.

We were sitting and poring over a code of law, and I was just about to start reading a passage about the prosecution of cattle theft, when he suddenly asked, 'So tell me, Allard, are you pleased with your wife?'

I had to laugh, because it sounded as though he were talking about a horse he had given me as a present.

'What do you mean?'

He snapped the book shut and I knew that it was going to be a very serious conversation. 'What I mean is this: is she obedient? Are you content with her? That sort of thing.'

'She is obedient,' I answered.

'Yes?'

'And I am content with her,' I added dutifully.

Father frowned. 'It seems to me that you would rather be with your hawks.'

'That's not true,' I said, but at the same time I knew that it was.

'Nonsense!' he sniffed. 'You're busy with that damned falcon all day long. If it should come down to it, you would give your last crust of bread to her, and not to Marjorie. True or false?' I said nothing. I was ashamed of the answer that I would have to give.

‘Well?’

‘Perhaps so,’ I muttered.

Father rose angrily from his chair. I was afraid that he was going to strike me, as he had done before when I was insolent.

‘Marjorie is your wife!’ he roared. ‘You should be content with her!’

I knew that this was true, and it was this that made me so angry.

I was to be saddled for the rest of my life with that cold, ugly girl!

Instead of climbing down, I gave my father as good as I got. ‘But she’s ugly!’ I shouted. ‘She has a pimply face, she looks like a horse! And she hates me, that’s why she never opens her mouth, not because she’s so obedient. She’s boring and I hate her! I’d rather be married to any other girl but her!’

I fell silent, gasping with indignation. I was fully expecting a blow to the ears, but nothing happened. Instead my father laid his hand on my shoulder. ‘Marjorie is your wife,’ he repeated, but much more calmly than before. ‘What I really mean to say is this. Your mother and I have not always loved each other either... and in one of the villages there lived a country girl, whom I truly did love. I went to her whenever I felt like it. But I also made certain that your mother had Thomas and then you. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

I nodded hesitantly.

‘So there is nothing wrong in finding a little pleasure, Allard. But make sure that a child is born, because you are all we have now.’

A shadow of sadness crossed his face and I realised that I was not the only one who feared the return of the Plague.

‘Marcus van Zwanenborg says that the Plague is coming back,’ I said quietly.

‘Perhaps so,’ Father said, even more quietly.

‘What will we do then?’ I asked.

My father shrugged.

‘Pray, I think.’

‘But it hasn’t come to that yet, has it?’

I needed reassurance from my father to ward off my fear.

Much to my relief he only laughed at my concern. 'No, it certainly hasn't come to that yet. And who knows, Marcus may have changed his mind by now. You will soon be able to find out for yourself, because I have invited him to celebrate Christmas with us.'

The thought of Christmas cheered me up. There would be twelve days of celebrations, lasting until Epiphany. Father would invite a great many knights from the surrounding villages and I would see my friends again. The great hall would be decorated with holly, so that everyone would forget that it was winter outside. Perhaps it was because of Marjorie's chilliness that I looked forward to the festivities more than ever, to the warmth and bustle of people. The excitement and pleasure of all of this would banish any thoughts of the Plague and Death from my head. But it was all to turn out very differently than I had hoped.

Seven

Advent was almost past. The great hall of Grondheuvel had been decorated with evergreens and the wild boar that had been brought in by the hunters were turning on the spit. The guests were arriving. The courtyard was filling with horses and wagons, and Marjorie and I bustled about, greeting everyone.

Marcus van Zwanenborg was there too. Much to our surprise, he had brought along his astrologer. As well as being a man of learning, he was also a magician and would entertain the party with his tricks.

Marcus himself looked anything but cheerful. He drifted like a shadow among the gaily dressed revellers but would not say what it was that ailed him.

On Christmas Eve we rode to the monastery that lay on the edge of our estates. Midnight Mass was to be celebrated there. On the way, it began to snow – wet, stinging snow that made the road muddy. Marjorie and I rode at the head of the procession, huddled under our cloaks.

Every now and then we would pass groups of farmers with flickering

torches. They were on their way to the monastery, singing. There were also beggars alongside the road. Because it was Christmas Eve, we dismounted and gave them some money. Close by the gates of the monastery, a beggar was standing alone. He must have been very poor because, despite the cold, he had hardly any clothes to keep him warm. He was wearing a frayed shirt and an old blanket round his shoulders. He was extremely old. His wrinkled face nodded on a thin neck, and he was using a staff to stay upright. His eyes and mouth were like dark holes in his skull. Anyone who saw him was bound to feel pity for him but, to be honest, he also looked repulsive. When Marjorie rode past him, he raised his begging bowl. She reined in her horse and was about to give him a few coins when she suddenly thought better of it, and rode on past.

‘Why did you do that?’ I asked.

Marjorie shrugged.

‘He stank.’

‘They all stink.’

She clicked her tongue impatiently.

‘Let’s get inside, shall we? It’s cold.’

I wondered if it was really just because of the cold that Marjorie wanted to be behind the monastery walls as soon as possible. There was something threatening in the outside world that I, too, could also feel, thanks to her fear. Just as on the night when I stood on the threshold of Thomas’s room, I wanted to run and hide in a place that was warm and safe.

I quickly followed Marjorie through the monastery gates. The monks were standing there with their lanterns. They were singing a hymn with deep voices about the Christ Child. I was no longer frightened. The gate was locked behind me, and there before me lay the abbey, lit by hundreds of candles.

When we came inside, there were already many people in the abbey. All the Goudhevel farmers had come. They were standing behind the monks, a warm steaming mass of humanity. The nobles were sitting in a gallery above them. All around us, candles burned. The tiny lights danced across the faces of the statues,

so that they seemed to come alive. From down below rose the odour of incense and people. I felt calm and safe, as if the walls around me were warm blankets. God had enfolded the world in his arms. There was nothing to be afraid of. Even Death and the Plague knelt before the Christ Child of whom the monks sang.

Next day the festivities began in the castle of Goudheugel. The hall was filled with people who laughed, exchanged gifts and wished each other well.

At the front of the hall, a tall candle of coloured wax was burning. This was the Christmas candle that, for twelve days and nights, would spread the light of Christmas. I stood under the mistletoe to collect kisses from beautiful girls and received two dozen more than all my friends.

During the meal, all the food and drink of the season came to the table: wild boar, ginger cakes and elderberry wine. It made you feel wonderfully warm. Wolf, Johan, Albert and I held a contest to see who could drink the most. Albert, who already saw himself as the winner, kept our mugs filled to the brim.

‘You need to get more practice,’ he said as he did so. ‘You’ve only just come off the breast.’

After a great many mugs of wine, though just how many it was impossible to tell, I started to see strange things. A figure appeared by the open fire. A tall man standing among the flames. At first I thought of the Devil, but after blinking my eyes once or twice I saw that it was the astrologer. Before him stood a table bearing balls, veils and magical boxes.

‘Magic from distant lands!’ he called out in a loud voice. ‘Wonders that you have never seen before! The secrets of the Moorish sorcerers! Before your very eyes...’

A flash and a bang.

From the magician’s cloak there appeared two gaily coloured birds. They flew, screeching, round the hall, and came to rest on one of the chandeliers. For a minute everyone was still, as if struck dumb, and then they began to clap enthusiastically.

More tricks followed, perhaps not quite as clever as the first, but the magician presented his performance with such flair that we were willing to forget that the Magic Apple was moved by the beetle concealed within it, and that the Floating Dog was fastened to the beams by very thin cords. Besides, we were all too drunk to see clearly.

When the last of the birds had appeared and all the magic boxes had been opened, the astrologer asked if his audience would like to know what the future held in store.

‘Yes, tell me if there’s going to be any fighting next spring!’ someone shouted. ‘My sword is getting rusty!’

‘Will there be enough rain next year?’ another wanted to know.

‘Will we have a good harvest?’

‘Will my children stay healthy?’

‘Will I be lucky in love?’

‘Will my crippled horse be cured?’

The astrologer smiled round the room like someone well pleased with his audience. Then, with a solemn gesture, he laid a roll of parchment on the table.

‘Herein lie the answers to all your questions. The stars hold no secrets from me. I have written down for you all that they have told me. Listen!’

He spread the parchment across the table. I could see that it was covered with long words and strange symbols, as mysterious as the future itself.

‘As regards the rain, I can offer you reassurance,’ he said, with a nod to the questioner. ‘The rain will be sufficient, in spring and in summer, but it will also be very warm. Malignant vapours may rise from the earth.’

A worried whispering ran round the hall. Vapours from the earth could cause sickness. Even the Plague!

At one of the tables a knight got to his feet. ‘I take it that this will mainly be the case in those places where the ground and air are already poor,’ he declared. ‘In the marshlands by the coast, for instance.’

The astrologer gazed at him earnestly. In his eyes we could already read the

answer.

‘That is not necessarily the case. If the stars are in an unfavourable position, they have the power to draw poisonous vapours from the ground anywhere in the world, and these vapours will then be spread by the wind.’

‘And who can escape the stars, or the wind?’ came a sudden loud voice.

It was Marcus van Zwanenborg.

The guests gaped at him, as though seeing him for the first time. He no longer seemed like a shadow; he now looked more like John the Baptist in the desert, dishevelled and grim-faced.

‘Listen to him!’ he cried, pointing to the astrologer. ‘He’ll tell you. We have shown no repentance for our sins. Next year God will strike us with the Plague yet again!’

At that moment, the table before me began to wobble, and with it, all the cups of wine and gnawed bones. In a daze, I clutched the bench so as not to fall over. Everything around me grew hazy, as if the entire hall were suddenly going up in smoke. I sat, abandoned, in the mist, with a burning terror in my stomach. A wave of bitter fluid rose to my throat and I began to cough.

This brought me back to my senses. The entire hall was in an uproar. Everyone was talking and shouting at each other. The first voice I could distinguish was that of Albert.

‘But surely we all know that anyone who has survived the Plague cannot get the sickness a second time?’ he roared.

But no one was listening.

Only a cheeky servant, who hissed, ‘And you? Have you had the Plague then?’

The lords and knights crowded round the astrologer, who, with much self-importance, attempted to allay their fears.

‘I have heard that the Plague is spread by the Jews,’ one of them declared.

‘No, no,’ said another, who knew about such things. ‘Have you already forgotten how the previous epidemic began? Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.’

‘What are we to do?’ asked a third, with a practical turn of mind. ‘What do

the stars advise? Should we flee?’

The astrologer stood triumphantly in their midst.

He distributed nuggets of advice as though they were Christmas gifts. ‘Flee, did you say? Yes, if the Plague threatens in the spring, then the stars advise you to flee. If you are unable to do so, then you can still protect yourselves.’

There then appeared the powders, ointments and amulets that I remembered from three years earlier. Nothing had helped in the slightest then, but now, once again, they were all sold within minutes. Everyone wanted to have something that offered a glimmer of security. The astrologer had clearly anticipated his audience’s demands. He had brought along a boxful of remedies with him.

‘If you scatter this powder in the fire, the air will be cleansed of vapours from the Plague.’

‘You must blend these herbs with your food, and, then you will remain healthy.’

‘Theriac, the strongest remedy against the Plague. Snake meat, poppy, and ground toad. A little ball, each day, the size of a hazel-nut.’

Very soon his chest was empty and his money-bag was full.

Meanwhile, the women were crowding round Marcus van Zwanenborg. He had little good advice to give, but, at least he wasn’t asking for any money in return.

‘These are the plagues at the end of the world!’ he boomed. ‘The signs are everywhere: look at the sky and see the stars! And was there not a comet last year? It is now clear what this portended: the famine in the north, the return of the Plague. And war, war will also come. Do you remember how it was during the last epidemic? How the youth in the cities squandered all they had inherited from their dead parents and roamed through the land in robber bands? How the sick were robbed on their deathbeds? How no one dared leave his house for fear of the sickness and the robbers? Do you know how many died? Alone, starving, without a priest, without confession! How can such an evil generation bring forth anything other than strife? Has our Lord any other choice but to afflict them with plagues?’

‘What are we to do?’ I heard my mother ask.

Her voice was shrill with fear.

‘I understand that God sent the last Plague because he wanted to punish us. But ever since then I have tried to lead an exemplary life. What more can I do?’

‘Live a devout life, Lady Gertrude, as you already do,’ Marcus answered. ‘I know that you are a good woman. But always bear in mind that the end is nigh. Make your confession while you still have your health. Give your money to the Church. Do all in your power to ensure that you will stand before your Lord with a pure heart, for no one, not even you, can predict how many days he may add to your life...’

He turned now to a group of girls standing nervously behind him. Marjorie was among them.

‘And you too, girls, do not think to yourselves: I am young and healthy, the Plague will pass me by. We know that the sickness fells the young and healthy first of all. Death may take you too, by the hand. Remember that! And live accordingly!’

And so it went on, Marcus with his fire and brimstone and the astrologer with his words of advice. I sat and watched as though none of it were really happening. As if in a nightmare, this evening of merrymaking had suddenly changed into darkest night. I wondered if anyone still remembered that it was Christmas, the feast of Hope.

For my own part, I felt paralysed and powerless, just as I had that night at the door of Thomas’s room.

My sense of reason told me that Marcus van Zwanenburg had gone mad, and that his astrologer was nothing more than a common charlatan, but a fearful little voice in my heart whispered, ‘Suppose it’s true?’

I was frightened.

If everyone believed that the Plague was coming, then it probably was true. I wished there was someone else there who shared my doubts, but I could detect no deliverer among all these panic-stricken people. And so I got to my feet and went away. No one even noticed.

I had been sitting by the fire in our chamber for quite some time, when the door opened. Marjorie slipped inside like a timid little mouse, without even noticing that I was there. It was dark in the room. No candles were burning and the fire in the hearth was almost out. ‘Hullo, Marjorie,’ I said.

She gave a start. ‘I didn’t know you were here.’

‘I’d had enough of that nonsense down there. You’d think that the Plague had already broken out. Pah!’

With great bravado, I spat into the fire.

Marjorie sat down on the floor, her arms around her knees. She looked thoughtful.

‘Everyone is buying magic charms from the astrologer. Will they help, do you think?’

‘No, they won’t help. Nothing can help against the Plague. If you get it, you die.’

She nodded.

‘I guessed that he was really a fraud. He earns money by frightening other people.’

I was surprised that Marjorie hadn’t been taken in. Perhaps she could help me to conquer my own fear. If this was so, then I would kiss her as if she were the most beautiful girl in the world.

‘Do you think that he was just making it all up? That the Plague isn’t coming?’

Marjorie shivered and moved closer to the fire. She said nothing.

‘Well, do you think it will come?’

I needed to know.

She laid her bony hand with its cold fingers on my foot.

‘Yes.’

‘Yes?’

Once again, I felt fear in my stomach and throat: thick, burning gobbets of slime. The Plague was coming and I was going to die!

I stared at Marjorie's large frightened eyes. She looked as if she were already ill. The flames conjured a feverish glow on her cheeks and I imagined I could see blotches on her neck. I quickly pulled my foot away from her hand.

'I know it for certain, Allard,' she said tearfully, 'because I have already seen Death. He is roaming the woods. With his scythe.'

'What nonsense are you talking now?'

I was angry because she could not give me reassurance. I no longer had any desire to kiss her, I felt like kicking her into the fire.

'It's true, Allard. I saw him in the woods when we went to Wildbeek to spend the night, and now I've seen him again, on the way to Midnight Mass. It was that old tramp with his begging bowl, and his skull, and his empty eyes. Did you not see him too?'

I had forgotten all about the tramp, but now I could see him before me once more, although he seemed different than he had been in reality. I saw a skeleton in a ragged cloak, grinning at us from the darkness.

'That isn't true!' I shouted. 'You're lying! It was just an old man!'

Marjorie leaped to her feet. 'I am not lying. It was Death, Allard! And he looked at us. At you, at me, at all of us!'

'Hold your tongue!'

I had also jumped to my feet, and I grasped her by the arm. Before she could pull away, I had given her a hard blow in the face. My hand hurt and blood was coming from her nose. We stood looking at each other for a moment, in fright, then something flashed in the darkness, a ring with a sharply cut jewel. The point caught me on the temple. She had given me a vicious blow in return.

'God in Heaven!'

Surely it wasn't possible for a woman to strike her husband? I had to do something to put her in her place.

But what?

But I didn't even have to think about it. The hitting and kicking followed as a matter of course. After a while she no longer fought back. She just wept. She lay with her head against the chair and I punched her in the belly. If there was a child

in there, then it must die too, I thought, dead, just like Thomas and just like Father and Mother and Mechtild and Catherina would soon. Dead like everyone else. From the Plague!

In a strange way it was good to hit Marjorie. I was fighting not just her, but the Plague, too, and my fear and my grief over Thomas. I no longer felt powerless.

Gradually I grew calmer. I stood up, feeling strangely relieved.

Marjorie brushed a strand of hair from her face.

‘Get up!’ I commanded.

She did so obediently and stumbled to our bed. I couldn’t see if she was still crying.

I sat down in my chair once again. It was then that I realised how quiet the castle had become. Was everyone already asleep? I found this hard to believe. The silence made me feel alone and less pleased with myself. I decided to go and fetch Isabella.

I met no one in the dark passages. Only in the kitchens were there lights still burning, and the sound of voices. The servants were talking quietly among themselves.

Their conversation was all about the Plague, of course.

In the weathering, the falcons were sitting on their perches, as still as statues.

Isabella made a small, frightened noise when I picked her up.

‘It’s only me,’ I said, stroking her feathers. She felt soft and sleek. I took the falcon carefully between my hands. For such a big bird, she felt very light, almost fragile.

I knew that I could never treat Isabella as roughly as I had Marjorie.

I loved Isabella. I was so scared that something might happen to her, too. She could become ill or break a wing . . . or starve, if there was no one left to take care of her after the Plague.

In the darkness of the weathering I began to worry again. There was no light there,

not even a small fire. Would death too, be as dark as this?

I realised that I was more scared of dying than of death itself: the fever, the delirium, being fearful and alone, everything that Thomas had endured. I tried to imagine what it would be like if the light disappeared. How I would reach out in the darkness for something that might bring me back to life.

I laid my cheek against the leather hood over Isabella's head. The falcon could have pecked me with her sharp beak, but she didn't.

'You're a darling,' I whispered, as if she were a girl. If only she had been a girl, a girl who would set my mind at rest with words or kisses, whom I could cling to as if she were life itself.

I was with such a girl once, in the city. She had a bed in the corner, screened by curtains. On the beams above that bed, white doves cooed, sometimes dirtying the sheets. She had taken me there because Thomas had paid her for it, but she had been so sweet to me that I had fallen head over heels in love with her. She smelled of honey, and of something to do with love. Everything about her was soft and sweet and warm. I felt wonderful, and very safe.

But that was before the Plague. Perhaps she was still alive, perhaps not, my first girl. In the meantime I had learned that life was not wonderful and that the world was not safe.

I was married to a girl I wanted only to strike, Thomas was dead, and before long we might all be dead, too. No, life was not beautiful. It was grim, sometimes even a nightmare.

That night I stayed with Isabella. It was cold in the weathering, but I didn't want to go back to Marjorie. With her beside me, I would have felt even more alone than I did here with the birds.

I lay on my back on the ground and looked up at the falcons. Huddled on their perches, they looked as if they were conducting a mysterious wordless conversation. Sleepy as I was, I imagined that I could understand them. The falcons were talking about the future, about the Plague,

'We shall eat our fill of the flesh of the people,' they whispered maliciously.

Only Isabella was silent.