

Bitter Bonds

A Colonial Divorce Drama
of the Seventeenth Century



Leonard Blussé

Translated by Diane Webb

Book of the Year — *TLS*

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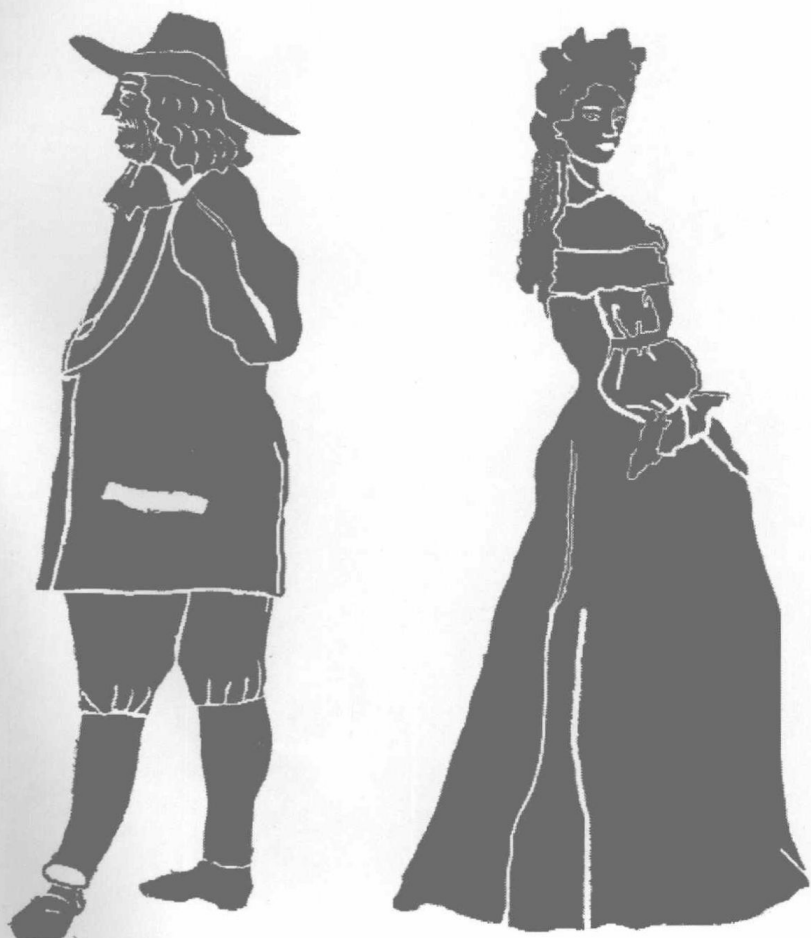
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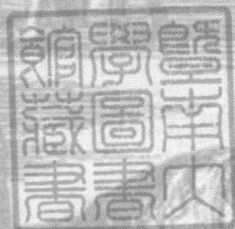
A Colonial Divorce Drama of the Seventeenth Century



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Preface to the American Edition

In most societies, including those of the Judeo-Christian tradition, women were relegated to the subservient roles of mother, wife, sister, or daughter. Only when they overstepped the bounds of family life and became actively involved in larger social or economic issues are we likely to meet them in the public arena.

In the following tale, which was gleaned from archives in both Asia and Europe, we meet an exceptional individual who refused to be submissive, a woman whose indignation and sense of justice impelled her to fight for her rights to the bitter end. Of mixed parentage, Cornelia van Nijenrode grew up in Japan and colonial Batavia as a ward of the Dutch East India Company. Happily married to a high-ranking Company official, she was left a widow in her forties, subsequently falling into the clutches of a lawyer with five children whose wife had died on the long voyage from Holland to Java. By the time his grasping nature had become apparent, there was practically nothing she could do to keep him from robbing her of her fortune. With no family to protect her and the power of her former husband's colleagues on the wane, she was left to her own devices.

The original version of this tale was a ninety-page-long study on the legal status of women in colonial society, with the telling title *Butterfly or Mantis? The Life and Times of Cornelia van Nijenroode*. Because of its multicultural background, the essay was translated into three Asian languages. In Japanese it even appeared as a beautifully edited monograph. Nevertheless, these very literal translations—with excessively detailed footnotes referring to practically inaccessible sources and obscure academic issues—prompted me to rewrite the story for a much

wider readership. Upon its appearance in 1998, *Bitter's Bruid* (Mr. Bitters Bride) received mixed reviews. Although it was awarded the Golden Owl, a prestigious prize for Dutch non-fiction, it elicited differing responses from reviewers and readers alike. In some reviews the story was discussed as if it were a work of fiction: I was even criticized for not including more dialogue between the main characters. In answer to this I can only say that, as a historian, I did not feel free to fill the book with dialogue, however much the limited nature of the historical sources tempted me to pad them out.

Other readers blamed me for not siding more openly with the heroine against her overbearing husband. Some women even sent personal letters recounting lengthy court battles of their own, which had convinced them that divorce proceedings had not changed much over the past three hundred years. Indeed, the protracted legal battle between Cornelia and her husband prompted the German publisher to give the book the rather unoriginal but nonetheless revealing title *Der Rosenkrieg* (The War of the Roses). Japanese readers, for their part, read their own cultural values into the story, recognizing in Cornelia a "woman warrior" valiantly fighting for a lost cause. A documentary made for Japanese television even suggested that the heroine had committed ritual suicide to preserve her honor and save her inheritance for her grandchildren. The reactions I occasionally receive from Indonesian readers show that, while they feel less affinity with the main characters, they take the story to be a condemnation of the colonial past.

For a writer it is interesting to see how every reader interprets a historical tale within the context of his or her own culture. After I had pieced together the available evidence in Holland, Indonesia, and Japan, and had started to record this story of trench warfare between husband and wife, I became increasingly fascinated by the various ways in which the colonial community reacted to this public drama. To the reader who recognizes an element of classical tragedy in this struggle

between two strong characters I should like to point out the old adage "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

It was only recently, while writing *Retour Amoy*—the biography of an elderly Chinese Indonesian woman now living in China—that I discovered how exhilarating it is for the biographer of a contemporary person not only to enter into discussion with his subject but also to be reproached by her for misinterpreting the material. All this is impossible, however, when the person one is writing about lived more than three hundred years ago. In such a case the most one can do is empathize.

Long ago the townspeople of Hirado, Cornelia's birthplace in Japan, erected a small pagoda to her memory. Though I regret not having succeeded in tracking down her final resting place, I hope I have comforted her wandering soul by telling this tale of her tenacious quest for justice. She may not be the kind of role model the correspondents of the History World Web are looking for, but her vicissitudes certainly shed light on the position of women in the past.

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CHAPTER ONE

Otemba

Prologue

The spring of 1712 had been stormy and cold, with snow falling as late as April. But in spite of the unpredictable weather, nature seemed to take its course, for in May the orchards outside the town walls of Wijk bij Duurstede burst into blossom. As happened every spring, the local residents rediscovered the pleasures of an evening walk past the town gate and out into the surrounding countryside. Strolling along the dike, they could take in a lovely view of the Lower Rhine, studded with the sails of barges. The town in the background—embraced by its high, grassy ramparts—floated like a wreath on a sea of blossoms.

Johan Bitter, the elderly burgomaster of Wijk bij Duurstede, had retreated to his apple orchard in the polder behind the Bommel Dike outside the town gate. The past week had seen a great deal of commotion in his townhouse on Oeverstraat, with the servants busily preparing for the arrival from Batavia of his daughter Bartha, her husband, and her eldest son Constantijn. The news that the fleet had just arrived must have spread across the country like wildfire. Johan Bitter was expecting them to arrive at any moment.

To escape all the hustle and bustle, he had left the house after the midday meal and strolled over to his orchard. He was obviously quite tired, for instead of taking a catnap he fell into a deep sleep. The maid, worried because

her master had not come home for supper, walked over to the orchard with a pot of broth and found him asleep in his garden house, snoring away on the ebony sofa he had brought from Batavia. When he asked if there had been any news of the travelers, the maid shook her head and handed him a letter from his son Arnolt that had been delivered to the house that afternoon.

"Then they won't be arriving today," muttered the old man and decided to stay a while longer before returning to town.

Johan Bitter went outside to sit on a bench and sip his broth in the late afternoon sun. After filling his pipe he turned to Arnolt's letter. He broke the seal on the envelope and unfolded the letter, his eyes falling on the familiar handwriting of his only son. The salutation—"My dear father"—was followed by a list of all the letters Arnolt had received from him since the previous year. There had been five altogether. "Let me think. Five? Yes, that's right," mumbled Bitter to himself. "What else does he have to say? Just the usual news about people coming and going." Bitter skimmed the letter quickly. "Is cousin Van Wiert in Cochin ever going to amount to anything? And how are things with cousin Van Meekeren? Oh, here Arnolt writes about him":

I am pleased to see that cousin Van Meekeren is now behaving better than he used to. I feel there is hope for him, though it will be a long time before he is in a position to help his mother. The Indies are not the land of plenty that one imagines. Promotion is a slow process, and the less fortunate never see any profits whatsoever.

"This letter is all about the things I sent. I'll look at it more closely at home," mumbled Johan Bitter as he glanced at the list of goods that followed. "Wait a minute, here he talks about the foolish plans of his sister Eva and her husband Hendrick, who are thinking of going to the Indies to marry off their daughters. I forgot I'd written to him about that." Bitter put his glasses more firmly on his nose and resumed his reading.

To tell the truth, if my necessary expenses did not exceed my usual income, and if I were lucky enough to have such an important position as brother Both [a burgomaster], I would never think of leaving my fatherland, especially if I weighed 220 pounds and my wife 180. Such fat people are not fit for the Indies; I feel this myself, I who have never even weighed 180. To undertake the voyage for the good of their daughters is also foolish, because here they are just as much a source of embarrassment as in Holland. Everyone must do as he sees fit, though. As the saying goes, the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.¹

"My feelings exactly," grumbled Bitter, "but it's a shame you had to put it so bluntly, son, because now I can't let Eva and Hendrick read your letter." Stopping for a minute to think about what he had just read, he laid the epistle on his knees and looked around vacantly. His attention was soon drawn to the couples walking arm in arm, surrounded by their romping children. The large windmills on the ramparts in the background, which seemed to guard the town like mighty watchmen, reminded him of the two gigantic statues of fierce-looking generals that flanked the entrance to the klenteng, the Chinese temple just outside the town walls of his beloved Batavia.

The memories prompted by Arnolt's letter, the paragons of conjugal bliss parading past—it all set him thinking. He, too, had once had a taste of wedded bliss, but it had not been granted him a second time. On the contrary, his second marriage had been a disaster. But had that been his fault? At least one good thing had come of it: Arnolt, who had been in the East for ten years now, seemed to have learned from his father's mistakes. The old man picked up the letter and started to read again:

I would like to move back to Holland in about three years, by which time I should be in a position to live in Amsterdam in style. Last September I entered the forty-eighth year of my life, so that I shall be about fifty-one at the time of my repatriation.

After careful consideration, I now see that it would be inadvis-

able to tie myself down to a wife here, risking my peace of mind by putting myself at the mercy of a woman's fickle moods. Marriage would throw me into life's maelstrom again, especially if I were to marry a woman of child-bearing age, as I certainly would if I decided to marry at all.

Then, however, I might never decide to undertake the journey to my beloved fatherland, and I would be in danger of having to spend the rest of my life here, slaving away till the end of my days. It is no longer possible to marry for money in Batavia. A man must be prudent and contribute everything he can to the support of his family.²

"Good lad," mumbled the old man. "I understand. In the East children are a millstone around your neck. That's why my dear Bartha sent her two boys to live with me." But what had Arnolt said at the end of his letter? Were there no more rich matches to be made in Batavia? And that remark about being prudent and supporting one's family: had he meant that as a sly dig?

"Marriage—what was it Hugo Grotius said about it?" he wondered, continuing to mull over the problem. "Lawful marriage is the union of a man and a woman to a common life, bringing with it the lawful use of each other's body."

Use of each other's body? Yes, the Romans called marriage *matrimonium* and with good reason. You marry a woman to make her a *mater*, a mother. Marriage therefore exists for the purpose of procreation. "*Nubilis and nubilus*," he murmured softly. "Strange how those words are so similar. One means marriageable, the other overcast or melancholy. Is that a coincidence? Perhaps not. After all, brides traditionally wear veils during the wedding ceremony."

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and looked around with obvious pleasure at the beautiful blossoms in his apple orchard before reading on . . .

Colonial Customs and Japanese Traditions

In the early colonial period of the Dutch East Indies, nearly four hundred years ago—the period in which this story takes place—European men who pursued a career in the service of the Dutch East India Company often elected not to marry, owing to the difficulties frequently encountered by those who did. Company men went overseas at an early age to make money, lots of it, and they sought consolation in liquor and the caresses of a native housekeeper. If they survived their stint in the tropics, where life was twice as grueling but also twice as lucrative as life in Holland, without ruining their health (the liver in particular), they often returned home—still only middle-aged—and retired to a life of leisure.

Sometimes they even tried to make up for lost time by marrying a



View of Hirado, looking out to sea. The Dutch trade factory was situated on the left-hand side of the entrance to the harbor. (Shiba Kokan, Sayu Nikki, 1788)

much younger woman. This remained the normal state of affairs until the end of the nineteenth century, when colonial life was completely changed by the opening of the Suez Canal and the resulting influx of great numbers of white women.

The situation was somewhat different for the merchants of the remotest settlement of them all, the Dutch trade factory on Hirado, a picturesque island in the south of Japan. Between 1609 and 1860 the average Company employee—referred to as “John Company”—lived and worked under quite exceptional circumstances in the Empire of the Rising Sun. Initially, Dutch merchants were free to conduct trade on Hirado. The daily life of the Dutch in those parts largely followed the pattern set by the Chinese sailors who had been coming there for years. If a junk or an East Indiaman put in at the bay of Hirado, dropping anchor in the midst of the southern monsoon, then the crew knew that a hot summer was in store. The sailors could do nothing but bide their time until the monsoon season was over and they could once again set sail with a northern breeze. If they had enough money in their pockets (and they usually did on this leg of their journey), the men inevitably sought female companionship. When a sailor climbed on board again in the autumn, seen off by his girlfriend of three months, the sadness of parting quickly gave way to a feeling of excitement at the thought of all the females waiting for him at the next port: the Siamese girls of Patani, the jet-black women of Coromandel, and the slave girls of Bali who were sold for a song in Batavia. Life also returned to normal for the Japanese lovelies who stayed behind in Hirado. The girls went back to their parents’ homes, where they probably spent the winter looking forward to the arrival of the ships the following spring. One or two trading seasons were enough to provide them with the dowries they needed to secure respectable Japanese husbands. The path taken by these women, whom the Japanese called *karayuki-san*—meaning those who go abroad, or in this case, fraternize with foreigners—was not unacceptable in old Japan.

Four hundred years ago, some of the Dutchmen stationed in Hirado enjoyed life there so much that they stayed behind to move in with a Japanese woman and start a family. In 1640, however, this option came to an abrupt end. Several years previously, the supreme ruler of Japan, the shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu, had issued a series of decrees—the so-called *kaikin*, or “maritime prohibition laws”—forbidding his subjects to go abroad. Foreigners were henceforth refused entry into Japanese harbors: only the Dutch and the Chinese were still welcome, and then only under the observance of strict conditions. The Company warehouses in Hirado were subsequently razed to the ground by order of the shogunate, and the Dutch merchants were forced to relocate to the fan-shaped island of Deshima in the bay of Nagasaki, where a completely new life was in store for them.

The dozen or so Dutch merchants who spent the winter on Deshima were housed in Japanese-style wooden houses, together with their Asian slave-servants. A sentry posted on the only bridge connecting the island of Deshima with the city of Nagasaki monitored all in- and outgoing traffic. *Metsuke*, or Japanese spies, kept tabs on what happened on the island itself. Only the Dutch head merchant (*oranda kapitan*) and a few members of his staff were allowed to leave Deshima every spring to undertake the long journey to the shogun’s palace in Edo (present-day Tokyo), where they paid tribute, on behalf of the Dutch East India Company, to the secular ruler of Japan.

When the ships from Batavia appeared in the bay of Nagasaki in August, all hands gathered on Deshima to watch them unload their precious cargo: spices from Banda and Ternate, silk and cotton from India, pewter and sugar from Batavia, worsted from Holland, as well as such exotic animals as ostriches, Persian horses, and greyhounds. The merchandise was inspected and then stored in warehouses or put in stables on the island until the viewing days and auctions in September. Over the course of several weeks everything was sold, at which time the