

# A Revolver Shot

Modernized and with an afterword by Annelies Verbeke

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## An extract

**Original title** Een revolverschot  
**Publisher** De Geus, 2021

**Translation** Dutch into English  
**Translator** Lorraine T. Miller

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## 1

“Shall we?” he suggested, stepping with courtly grace between the two young ladies, offering them each an arm almost simultaneously.

“Oh my!” It was so dark in that orchard for people emerging from the light. They had just departed the home of the Wealthy Farmer of Crocke, there was no moon in sight, and nobody had thought of sending a servant with a lantern to accompany them beyond the grounds, or at least to the main gate.

Either way, they had had a splendid time, celebrating New Year’s Eve and eating scrumptious waffles. It was only eleven o’clock.

“Isn’t that too early to return home on such an occasion?”

“Yes, so true, but you see farm people have to get up early to feed their animals and I don’t know what else: to milk them, to churn the milk, perhaps.”

“Yet, not on New Year’s Day!”

Such were the comments the guests shared amongst themselves.

Slowly the darkness was lifting. One could already discern the looming shape of a barn and stables; one could distinguish tree trunks, avoid colliding with them.

Mayor Florisonne, who was in front with his wife, had opened the gate and together they waited for the stragglers, warning of a large mud puddle by the entranceway.

Joining the others, Hancq and his two female companions arrived in a pile of giggles.

The guard dog, recognizing his people, had growled as he came out of his pen, chains rattling behind him, but he did not bark. They were now on the alder side, where, along the entire length of the grounds, skinny shoots stood – a new stretch of trees. Sometimes a foot slipped into the wagon tracks; one heard a splash, the sucking of a sole pulled from the mud, followed by laughter, one or the other stumbled or slid a bit, but soon the party of five were safe on the slightly higher cobblestone road.

Mr. Hancq still had the two arms pressed against him, while all of them – having reached the point where their paths would part – paused and waited.

The Wealthy Farmer’s homestead was located on land that was part of Crocke, but far from the heart of the village. Adjacent to this town was Vroden, only a half hour away.

The mayor lived there on the so-called Town Square, which was considerably closer, provided he took a diagonal dirt road home.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

"No, no, certainly not," the three cheerfully echoed.

Handshakes were exchanged, the question on their smiling lips whether they might wish one another a Happy New Year at this point, was answered with a definitive "no".

"No cancellation of reciprocal visits."

*"Adieu, bonne nuit!"*

"Fare-well, fare-well!"

"Oe, là, là!" Hancq again playfully called, rather loudly from afar. This was no longer heard by those who had continued on their way, or at least no longer answered.

And now, as he and his female companions followed a cobblestone path through a barren field, their black silhouettes stood out, almost touchable against the night sky: he was of medium height, one young woman small, the other tall.

They walked quite quickly. It was far from warm.

The wind blew in their faces and rustled eerily through the few leaves of a tree stump they had just passed. It stood alone in forlorn desolation.

"We're at the Iron Oak," said Georgine, the youngest, the taller.

"On the Gallows Field," said Marie. "Please, let us move along, leave here as quickly as possible . . ."

Without even thinking both had quickened their steps, so their escort was now being dragged along.

"You're not actually afraid?" he teased.

"Oh, no, that would be childish," Marie replied, and, summoning her courage, she almost stopped walking.

It was the place where the gallows was erected in earlier days and the corpses of hanged men lay on the wheel as bait for predators; the villagers still remembered, and in the evenings by the fireplace the elderly told these stories, having heard them from their ancestors.

"It is curious, isn't it," Marie said, "how a place can retain, as it were, something grotesque, that something horrific remains from the brutal scenes that have taken place there?"

"Yes, or who knows, perhaps something fundamental," Hancq suggested, "for it is striking that ravens still come to perch here in greater numbers than elsewhere."

On more than one occasion, both girls had also seen many. And now the conversation turned to fright in general, and they seemed to be brave about everything supernatural, but, admittedly, extremely afraid of thieves and murderers.

"Yes, just think, at home, three women alone – us and the maid. What would we do if somebody broke in?"

It was Georgine who had said this.

"Oh, you'd get the better of those thieves," he suggested, as a compliment to her strong physique, but immediately realizing that a young lady seldom lays claim to bravery, he stopped joking and dropped his flippant tone to inquire with sincerity, "You do own a gun?"

"No, of course not, nothing, no weapons," both replied.

"Would you dare to shoot in the event of an emergency?"

"Maybe," Marie replied.

"Yes, I would dare!" said Georgine and a spark of courage flashed in her eyes.

He seemed to be hinting at something. "You should definitely have a revolver. "May I provide one?" he asked, turning from one to the other, which had the effect of making neither of them eager to accept responsibility, and he could take their silence as consent.

They had arrived at the first houses scattered on the outskirts of Vroden. A tear had ripped open the canopy of clouds, between which a shining disk peeked out like a prying face.

"Evening in the moonlight," he sang, still in a cheerful voice, making a sort of leaping dance.

"Good evening," sounded close by.

They were startled like little children caught doing something naughty.

"Ah, Stasius, is it you?" asked Georgine, now recognizing him in the shadow of a house.

"Yes, Miss," and with his large stride he was already past them.

The Constable, making his nightly rounds.

They entered the sleeping village with its deserted streets – no lanterns lit thanks to the full moon – and its houses shuttered.

Hancq rang his companions' bell, a large house close to the cemetery, with a front door and carriage porch.

The door was opened almost instantly by the maid waiting behind it.

He bid them all a brief, but enthusiastic and friendly goodnight.

His house was directly opposite; one could see the stepped gable, above which a globe, which also had a weathervane, stood out clearly against the night sky.

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When Marie, before seating herself at the table, went to the kitchen with another request, their maid Trinette beckoned her closer with a finger: "Miss Marie, I wasn't born yesterday," she said, eager to announce that she had been initiated into the secrets they were keeping from her.

"What do you mean, Trinette?"

"I know what I see."

"What then?" surprised.

"There's something in the air."

Marie's eyes widened.

"Our Georgine – our miss Georgine is about to fly the coop" the maid informed Marie, whispering in a serious tone.

"Oh, please," Marie responded, suddenly cheerful, thinking of Mussche, who had dropped by twice that day with some excuse, "the Notary, do you think?"

"No, no," said Trinette, still whispering, feigning ignorance, "not the Notary, not by a long shot, but . . . Mr. Hancq," her forefinger raised.

"Mr. Hancq?!" Marie repeated, stunned.

"Yes, Mr. Hancq, haven't you noticed how kind and considerate he is around her?"

"Around me, as well," Marie uttered ashamed, her voice catching in her throat, unconsciously making a final attempt to cast herself as the obvious candidate, at the same time regretting her self-centered assessment of her personal relationship with a visitor to their house.

"Still, he is much different around our Miss Georgine, much different," Trinette insisted, like someone blind turning a knife in Marie's heart. But to grant her mistress some kindness or not to be so contrary, she elaborated: "You know when a gentleman comes courting, he is also friendly to the dog of the house. You are that dog, and thus . . ."

Marie had already left the kitchen, was back in the dining room, and in her new wounded state silently seated herself at the table, opposite the favored, waiting Georgine.

She was the dog of the house, nothing more, and thus . . . Trinette had explained. She was a nobody, so falling in love with her, wishing to be his wife, was an impossibility. Even if

age and all the inherent similarities of character and position indicated that she was the rightful candidate, none of it mattered at all!

Whatever Trinette suspected, Trinette must have heard from others.

She was too ignorant to notice anything herself. No, Stasius or the neighbors must have told her. Thus, was the truth so surprising that she could not accept it? And who had made-up this, that he would choose Georgine, a mere child in comparison to him? Marie stayed awake in her bedroom, late into the night, tormenting her heart about this.

It was extremely dark by the church, barely visible to her. She knew all its outbuildings and every nook and cranny; black clouds drifted across the heavens, not a single cross could be seen protruding from the ground, the leaves of the poplars whispered mysteriously. And even if she was used to the tales told, from as far back as her childhood, they sometimes made her nervous, evoking the fear that an untimely death and the grave bring. They were like the lamenting voices of invisible, tortured spirits drifting under the trees . . .

On this night Marie gave it no heed, nor did she retreat in panic as a bat silently flew around outside. It had come very close several times and was now inside the room, delineating a semicircle above her with an alarming hissing sound, like the swinging of a scythe in the air.

However, Marie had heard this story since she was a child, the folktale describing the feared nocturnal vagrant that likes nothing better than a girl's head as a resting place, and that no power on earth has yet discovered the secret of getting the hooks of its membranous wings out of braids, that there is no other means except to cut off all the hair . . .

All the same, she involuntarily stretched her elbows above her head relieved.

She would show Trinette and everybody else, what the dog of the house was made of!

Why should she even have to conceal her relationship to Luc Hancq? What dishonor was there in it? On the contrary, she would have been proud to appear in public as his fiancée, but how could she do so when he was so discrete? She worried about this. For, although night and darkness favor pessimistic thoughts, this was not the case here: her lonely, at first confused, yet painful considerations, had gradually given way to conflicting ones: for what did she actually blame him?

That he had not stayed with her . . .

A dreadful betrayal indeed! Now she laughed about it; what could he say to her in such a short time? Besides, she knew: "Where there is shame, there is love," as the proverb goes.

He, so self-possessed, acts embarrassed in her presence . . .

Everything was fine as is, and a satisfied Marie finally lay down to rest.

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When Trinette returned a while later and found the two sisters sitting side by side, seemingly calm and silent, hands folded in their laps, as if idle with no appetite for work, she could never have imagined what a terrible scene had just transpired, nor the heartbreaking disclosures the one had made to the other.

Indeed, the maid did not receive much of a response to the most recent village gossip she related. In the end she must have noticed something unusual, for she said that she could see the sisters were "out-of-sorts", that it did not surprise her, after the anxiety endured in the morning with that fall, that she also felt something was "amiss" and would go to bed early, which she suggested to her mistresses as well, who also seemed in favor of this idea.

Trinette slept on the side facing the church cemetery, and above the study used by notary Mussche. And having gone off to the kitchen and later to her room, the conversation resumed, the disturbing revelations continued. It seemed as if the two were now competing to expose their indiscretions with the same gentleman.

In continuous amazement, they listened to each others' stories. The images, the events taking on dramatic proportions in Marie's distraught mind; exaggeration upon exaggeration on her lips. Georgine only needed the truth, the naked truth, to create dismay.

"So much dishonesty!" they muttered at the same time, "so much dishonesty" their hearts bursting with resentment.

Was something like this possible, had such a despicable fellow taken advantage of their good faith?

And in all their sorrow and the cries of their bloodied, wounded spirits, in the upending of their entire future, in the excruciating humiliation of this double deception, there was unexpected solace: this loss had suddenly reconciled them, brought them together again, one being upset by the suffering caused the other. The motherly love for her sister – who was much like a daughter to her – had been rekindled in Marie. The childlike, trusting surrender of her whole being, the paralysis of her will, had taken place in Georgine, and Marie's eyes flamed with all-pervading hatred, and vengeance burned in her veins, indomitable, unaware of its ancient origin, the cascading of a mountain stream that does not know its sources, but tumbles over distant horizons, storm swept, boiling and foaming into a fateful abyss . . .

It had been Marie's last chance at happiness; Georgine had seen her first love shattered. One sister, already more than thirty years old and with enough life experience, sat defeated and confused under the vague yet daunting knowledge of lies and a disgrace willingly suffered, her offerings of heart and her devotion rejected. The other sister heard with raging anger the exaggerated story of loving caresses shared between the two of them and perceived as sincere. And that seemed to her, being ignorant of life's ways and the dubious morality of gallant men, a reprehensible crime.

And now Georgine took out all the scraps and tightly folded strips of paper that he had dropped in her lap, that she had covertly snatched from his hand and hidden away. She kept them in her father's bureau to which she had the key, and she had brought the drawer where they lay along with a piece of shellac, a seal, and a revolver that had not been used for the longest time.

"Look," she said to Marie, deeming any other credible evidence of her allegations unnecessary.

And Marie took hold of the slivers of paper, barely touching them with her fingers, as if they had been soiled by disgust or imbued with venom.

And she read aloud, "Once again, not a single word! When will this obsession end?"

"Why do you refuse me a meeting? Surely we have so much to arrange for our marriage."

"Write me a letter, I give you my word that I will destroy it without delay; set a place and an hour, where and when I can speak with you."

The last note, which Georgine had received that very day, read: "Tonight, will you? Sneak out of the house as soon as *she* is asleep and come to mine, no one will disturb us, the gate and the back door will be unlatched. Come, beloved, come, you who I worship, I swear to thee I will respect thee, and not even take thy hand; but come, o come, thou torturest me to the utmost."

"Respect," grunted Marie, with her teeth clenched, "seems has respected both of us beautifully!"

She had thought she would be struck dead, when she saw what she had seen that night in the fading light, but now she felt that even more hellish torment awaited those damned by fate. The seemingly unemotional tone of his letters, short and restrained at first, without tenderness, without salutation, without signature, and yet full of passion in their insistence, devotion, almost irrational, increasing desire: to see Georgine alone, speak to Georgine alone, to rid himself of Marie, of her, the interfering, loathsome one, while he made her believe in reciprocal love. She could not control her anger.

She threw the bits into the hearth and lit a fire: they were many. One sticking to the other, first the flame went out, then it whirled around, very blue, the paper turned brown and curled, the letters appeared dark and enlarged, and then the yellow blaze swept over them as they watched – the young and the old maid – the flickering fire destroy both their illusions, crush the faith they had in human sincerity to ashes and dust . . .

“That bastard,” said Marie, as her eye fell on the revolver, “I don’t know what keeps me from shooting him down like a dog!”

“Shall I do it?” asked Georgine, with wary calmness that revealed inner excitement, and she laughed cynically, “After all, he expects me, he wants to speak to me alone. I look rather gorgeous, too!”

She reluctantly glanced in the mirror, and not only was she pale and her eyes puffy: the bump was bigger, swollen blue-red, and now a bloody diagonal scrape on her bruised cheek had become visible.

“If you desire him, you may have him,” she continued mockingly to Marie.

“No, you marry him, and he will never lie, his whole life long, never.” Marie replied with a laugh that sounded more like a shriek.

Now something quivered in their veins: they despised him, they hated him, in their minds they hurled him from their house with scorn and disgrace . . . But how could they live on with him so close by, breathing the same air, seeing him go out, seeing him return home? How would they bear their blood always boiling with rage and powerless resentment?

And in the magnifying glass of their burdened psyches, they saw the crime of this man, whom they had loved so passionately, take on monstrous proportions; he was a monstrosity, such as never had lived on earth, unworthy of reproach, oh yes . . . yet an object for whatever vengeance that also might come.

And his image danced before their eyes: happy and excited, with a smile on his lips, his curled moustache, teeth flashing a quick farewell, with his outstretched hand – the hypocrite! And behind him in the haziness of the future, unclear and yet already assuming an undefined changing form and features, another girl, a third, was emerging from the tangle of hurt and jealousy that had turned their lives into a hell. A happy young woman, a stranger, who would come once they had been forgotten, one ignorant of all that had transpired, harvesting lucky ears of corn to foretell the future on the stubble fields of both their ruined dreams.

And following the same train of thought towards its logical, fateful conclusion: “Here’s to death!” they somberly said.

His sentence had been passed, but who would carry it out?

Georgine was already holding the weapon. Marie wanted to take it away from her, and now it became a contest of assertions as to who he had wronged the most. The battle was short, however: chance would decide.

Marie tore two strips of paper into unequal lengths, crumpled one in each hand. switched them behind her back, and then Georgine had to choose between the fists Marie presented. This is what they always did whenever a point of contention arose about how different things should be settled.

They both stood in the glow of the lamp: one tall and young, the other small and already aging, but with the same angry revenge in their souls, breathless, eagerly desiring to become the instrument of execution appointed by fate.

“Choose!” Marie said to Georgine.

A moment of solemn delay and then: “This one,” she said confidently.

The fingers opened: it was the longest strip.

The longest strip was granted the task.

And Georgine set off with the weapon, hidden in the folds of her clothing, ushered by Marie to the door. It was quietly unlocked, so Trinette would be none the wiser.

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