

CHAPTER II

SHE WHO BUYS--PAYS

When Lysbeth's mind recovered from its confusion she found herself still in the sledge and beyond the borders of the crowd that was engaged in rapturously congratulating the winner. Drawn up alongside of the Wolf was another sleigh of plain make, and harnessed to it a heavy Flemish horse. This vehicle was driven by a Spanish soldier, with whom sat a second soldier apparently of the rank of sergeant. There was no one else near; already people in the Netherlands had learnt to keep their distance from Spanish soldiers.

"If your Excellency would come now," the sergeant was saying, "this little matter can be settled without any further trouble."

"Where is she?" asked Montalvo.

"Not more than a mile or so away, near the place called Steene Veld."

"Tie her up in the snow to wait till to-morrow morning. My horse is tired and it may save us trouble," he began, then added, after glancing back at the crowd behind him and next at Lysbeth, "no, I will come."

Perhaps the Count did not wish to listen to condolences on his defeat, or perhaps he desired to prolong the tete-a-tete with his fair

passenger. At any rate, without further hesitation, he struck his weary horse with the whip, causing it to amble forward somewhat stiffly but at a good pace.

"Where are we going, Senor?" asked Lysbeth anxiously. "The race is over and I must seek my friends."

"Your friends are engaged in congratulating the victor, lady," he answered in his suave and courteous voice, "and I cannot leave you alone upon the ice. Do not trouble; this is only a little matter of business which will scarcely take a quarter of an hour," and once more he struck the horse urging it to a better speed.

Lysbeth thought of remonstrating, she thought even of springing from the sledge, but in the end she did neither. To seem to continue the drive with her cavalier would, she determined, look more natural and less absurd than to attempt a violent escape from him. She was certain that he would not put her down merely at her request; something in his manner told her so, and though she had no longing for his company it was better than being made ridiculous before half the inhabitants of Leyden. Moreover, the position was no fault of hers; it was the fault of Dirk van Goorl, who should have been present to take her from the sledge.

As they drove along the frozen moat Montalvo leant forward and began to chat about the race, expressing regret at having lost it, but using no angry or bitter words. Could this be the man, wondered Lysbeth as

she listened, whom she had seen deliberately attempt to overthrow his adversary in a foul heedless of dishonour or of who might be killed by the shock? Could this be the man whose face just now had looked like the face of a devil? Had these things happened, indeed, or was it not possible that her fancy, confused with the excitement and the speed at which they were travelling, had deceived her? Certainly it seemed to have been overcome at last, for she could not remember the actual finish of the race, or how they got clear of the shouting crowd.

While she was still wondering thus, replying from time to time to Montalvo in monosyllables, the sledge in front of them turned the corner of one of the eastern bastions and came to a halt. The place where it stopped was desolate and lonely, for the town being in a state of peace no guard was mounted on the wall, nor could any living soul be found upon the snowy waste that lay beyond the moat. At first, indeed, Lysbeth was able to see nobody at all, for by now the sun had gone down and her eyes were not accustomed to the increasing light of the moon. Presently, however, she caught sight of a knot of people standing on the ice in a recess or little bay of the moat, and half hidden by a fringe of dead reeds.

Montalvo saw also, and halted his horse within three paces of them. The people were five in number, three Spanish soldiers and two women. Lysbeth looked, and with difficulty stifled a cry of surprise and fear, for she knew the women. The tall, dark person, with lowering eyes, was none other than the cap-seller and Spanish spy, Black Meg. And she who

crouched there upon the ice, her arms bound behind her, her grizzled locks, torn loose by some rough hand, trailing on the snow--surely it was the woman who called herself the Mare, and who that very afternoon spoke to her, saying that she had known her father, and cursing the Spaniards and their Inquisition. What were they doing here? Instantly an answer leapt into her mind, for she remembered Black Meg's words--that there was a price upon this heretic's head which before nightfall would be in her pocket. And why was there a square hole cut in the ice immediately in front of the captive? Could it be--no, that was too horrible.

"Well, officer," broke in Montalvo, addressing the sergeant in a quiet, wearied voice, "what is all this about? Set out your case."

"Excellency," replied the man, "it is a very simple matter. This creature here, so that woman is ready to take oath," and he pointed to Black Meg, "is a notorious heretic who has already been condemned to death by the Holy Office, and whose husband, a learned man who painted pictures and studied the stars, was burnt on a charge of witchcraft and heresy, two years ago at Brussels. But she managed to escape the stake, and since then has lived as a vagrant, hiding in the islands of the Haarlemer Meer, and, it is suspected, working murder and robbery on any of Spanish blood whom she can catch. Now she has been caught herself and identified, and, of course, the sentence being in full force against her, can be dealt with at once on your Excellency's command. Indeed, it would not have been necessary that you should be troubled about

the thing at all had it not been that this worthy woman," and again he pointed to Black Meg, "who was the one who waylaid her, pulled her down and held her till we came, requires your certificate in order that she may claim the reward from the Treasurer of the Holy Inquisition. Therefore, you will be asked to certify that this is, indeed, the notorious heretic commonly known as Martha the Mare, but whose other name I forget, after which, if you will please to withdraw, we will see to the rest."

"You mean that she will be taken to the prison to be dealt with by the Holy Office?" queried Montalvo.

"Not exactly, Excellency," answered the sergeant with a discreet smile and a cough. "The prison, I am told, is quite full, but she may start for the prison and--there seems to be a hole in the ice into which, since Satan leads the footsteps of such people astray, this heretic might chance to fall--or throw herself."

"What is the evidence?" asked Montalvo.

Then Black Meg stood forward, and, with the rapidity and unction of a spy, poured out her tale. She identified the woman with one whom she had known who was sentenced to death by the Inquisition and escaped, and, after giving other evidence, ended by repeating the conversation which she had overheard between the accused and Lysbeth that afternoon.

"You accompanied me in a fortunate hour, Senora van Hout," said the captain gaily, "for now, to satisfy myself, as I wish to be just, and do not trust these paid hags," and he nodded towards Black Meg, "I must ask you upon your oath before God whether or no you confirm that woman's tale, and whether or no this very ugly person named the Mare called down curses upon my people and the Holy Office? Answer, and quickly, if you please, Senora, for it grows cold here and my horse is beginning to shiver."

Then, for the first time, the Mare raised her head, dragging at her hair, which had become frozen to the ice, until she tore it free.

"Lysbeth van Hout," she cried in shrill, piercing tones, "would you, to please your Spanish lover, bring your father's playmate to her death? The Spanish horse is cold and cannot stay, but the poor Netherland Mare--ah! she may be thrust beneath the blue ice and bide there till her bones rot at the bottom of the moat. You have sought the Spaniards, you, whose blood should have warned you against them, and I tell you that it shall cost you dear; but if you say this word they seek, then it shall cost you everything, not only the body, but the spirit also. Woe to you, Lysbeth van Hout, if you cut me off before my work is done. I fear not death, nay I welcome it, but I tell you I have work to do before I die."

Now, in an agony of mind, Lysbeth turned and looked at Montalvo.

The Count was a man of keen perceptions, and understood it all. Leaning

forward, his arm resting on the back of the sledge, as though to contemplate the prisoner, he whispered into Lysbeth's ear, so low that no one else could hear his words.

"Senora," he said, "I have no wishes in this matter. I do not desire to drown that poor mad woman, but if you confirm the spy's story, drown she must. At present I am not satisfied, so everything turns upon your evidence. I do not know what passed between you this afternoon, and personally I do not care, only, if you should chance to have no clear recollection of the matter alleged, I must make one or two little stipulations--very little ones. Let me see, they are--that you will spend the rest of this evening's fete in my company. Further, that whenever I choose to call upon you, your door will be open to me, though I must remind you that, on three occasions already, when I have wished to pay my respects, it has been shut."

Lysbeth heard and understood. If she would save this woman's life she must expose herself to the attentions of the Spaniard, which she desired least of anything in the world. More, speaking upon her oath in the presence of God, she must utter a dreadful lie, she who as yet had never lied. For thirty seconds or more she thought, staring round her with anguished eyes, while the scene they fell on sank into her soul in such fashion that never till her death's day did she forget its aspect.

The Mare spoke no more, she only knelt searching her face with a stern and wondering glance. A little to the right stood Black Meg, glaring

at her sullenly, for the blood-money was in danger. Behind the prisoner were two of the soldiers, one patting his hand to his face to hide a yawn, while the other beat his breast to warm himself. The third soldier, who was placed somewhat in front, stirred the surface of the hole with the shaft of his halbert to break up the thin film of ice which was forming over it, while Montalvo himself, still leaning sideways and forwards, watched her eyes with an amused and cynical expression. And over all, over the desolate snows and gabled roofs of the town behind; over the smooth blue ice, the martyr and the murderers; over the gay sledge and the fur-wrapped girl who sat within it, fell the calm light of the moon through a silence broken only by the beating of her heart, and now and again by the sigh of a frost-wind breathing among the rushes.

"Well, Senora," asked Montalvo, "if you have sufficiently reflected shall I administer the oath in the form provided?"

"Administer it," she said hoarsely.

So, descending from the sledge, he stood in front of Lysbeth, and, lifting his cap, repeated the oath to her, an oath strong enough to blast her soul if she swore to it with false intent.

"In the name of God the Son and of His Blessed Mother, you swear?" he asked.

"I swear," she answered.

"Good, Senora. Now listen to me. Did you meet that woman this afternoon?"

"Yes, I met her on the ice."

"And did she in your hearing utter curses upon the Government and the Holy Church, and call upon you to assist in driving the Spaniards from the land, as this spy, whom I believe is called Black Meg, has borne witness?"

"No," said Lysbeth.

"I am afraid that is not quite enough, Senora; I may have misquoted the exact words. Did the woman say anything of the sort?"

For one second Lysbeth hesitated. Then she caught sight of the victim's watching, speculative eyes, and remembered that this crazed and broken creature once had been a child whom her father had kissed and played with, and that the crime of which she was accused was that she had escaped from death at the stake.

"The water is cold to die in!" the Mare said, in a meditative voice, as though she were thinking aloud.

"Then why did you run away from the warm fire, heretic witch?" jeered Black Meg.

Now Lysbeth hesitated no longer, but again answered in a monosyllable, "No."

"Then what did she do or say, Senora?"

"She said she had known my father who used to play with her when she was a child, and begged for alms, that is all. Then that woman came up, and she ran away, whereon the woman said there was a price upon her head, and that she meant to have the money."

"It is a lie," screamed Black Meg in fierce, strident tones.

"If that person will not be silent, silence her," said Montalvo, addressing the sergeant. "I am satisfied," he went on, "that there is no evidence at all against the prisoner except the story of a spy, who says she believes her to be a vagrant heretic of bad character who escaped from the stake several years ago in the neighbourhood of Brussels, whither it is scarcely worth while to send to inquire about the matter. So that charge may drop. There remains the question as to whether or no the prisoner uttered certain words this afternoon, which, if she did utter them, are undoubtedly worthy of the death that, under my authority as acting commandant of this town, I have power to inflict. This question I foresaw, and that is why I asked the Senora, to whom the

woman is alleged to have spoken the words, to accompany me here to give evidence. She has done so, and her evidence on oath as against the statement of a spy woman not on oath, is that no such words were spoken. This being so, as the Senora is a good Catholic whom I have no reason to disbelieve, I order the release of the prisoner, whom for my part I take for nothing more than a crazy and harmless wanderer."

"At least you will detain her till I can prove that she is the heretic who escaped from the stake near Brussels," shouted Black Meg.

"I will do nothing of the sort; the prison here is over-full already. Untie her arms and let her go."

The soldiers obeyed, wondering somewhat, and the Mare scrambled to her feet. For a moment she stood looking at her deliverer. Then crying, "We shall meet again, Lysbeth van Hout!" suddenly she turned and sped up a dyke at extraordinary speed. In a few seconds there was nothing to be seen of her but a black spot upon the white landscape, and presently she had vanished altogether.

"Gallop as you will, Mare, I shall catch you yet," screamed Black Meg after her. "And you too, my pretty little liar, who have cheated me out of a dozen florins. Wait till you are up before the Inquisition as a heretic--for that's where you'll end. No fine Spanish lover will save you then. So you have gone to the Spanish, have you, and thrown over your fat-faced burgher; well, you will have enough of Spaniards before

you have done with them, I can tell you."

Twice had Montalvo tried to stop this flood of furious eloquence, which had become personal and might prove prejudicial to his interests, but without avail. Now he adopted other measures.

"Seize her," he shouted to two of the soldiers; "that's it; now hold her under water in that hole till I tell you to let her up again."

They obeyed, but it took all three of them to carry out the order, for Black Meg fought and bit like a wild cat, until at last she was thrust into the icy moat head downwards. When at length she was released, soaked and shivering, she crept off silently enough, but the look of fury which she cast at Montalvo and Lysbeth drew from the captain a remark that perhaps it would have been as well to have kept her under water two minutes longer.

"Now, sergeant," he added, in a genial voice, "it is a cold night, and this has been a troublesome business for a feast-day, so here's something for you and your watch to warm yourselves with when you go off duty," and he handed him what in those days was a very handsome present. "By the way," he said, as the men saluted him gratefully, "perhaps you will do me a favour. It is only to take this black horse of mine to his stable and harness that grey trooper nag to the sledge instead, as I wish to go the round of the moat, and my beast is tired."

Again the men saluted and set to work to change the horses, whereon Lysbeth, guessing her cavalier's purpose, turned as though to fly away, for her skates were still upon her feet. But he was watching.

"Senora," he said in a quiet voice, "I think that you gave me the promise of your company for the rest of this evening, and I am certain," he added with a slight bow, "that you are a lady whom nothing would induce to tell an untruth. Had I not been sure of that I should scarcely have accepted your evidence so readily just now."

Lysbeth winced visibly. "I thought, Senor, that you were going to return to the fete."

"I do not remember saying so, Senora, and as a matter of fact I have pickets to visit. Do not be afraid, the drive is charming in this moonlight, and afterwards perhaps you will extend your hospitality so far as to ask me to supper at your house."

Still she hesitated, dismay written on her face.

"Jufvrouw Lysbeth," he said in an altered voice, "in my country we have a homely proverb which says, 'she who buys, pays.' You have bought and--the goods have been delivered. Do you understand? Ah! allow me to have the pleasure of arranging those furs. I knew that you were the soul of honour, and were but--shall we say teasing me? Otherwise, had you really wished to go, of course you would have skated away just now

while you had the opportunity. That is why I gave it you, as naturally I should not desire to detain you against your will."

Lysbeth heard and was aghast, for this man's cleverness overwhelmed her. At every step he contrived to put her in the wrong; moreover she was crushed by the sense that he had justice on his side. She had bought and she must pay. Why had she bought? Not for any advantage of her own, but from an impulse of human pity--to save a fellow creature's life. And why should she have perjured herself so deeply in order to save that life? She was a Catholic and had no sympathy with such people. Probably this person was an Anabaptist, one of that dreadful sect which practised nameless immoralities, and ran stripped through the streets crying that they were "the naked Truth." Was it then because the creature had declared that she had known her father in her childhood? To some extent yes, but was not there more behind? Had she not been influenced by the woman's invocation about the Spaniards, of which the true meaning came home to her during that dreadful sledge race; at the moment, indeed, when she saw the Satanic look upon the face of Montalvo? It seemed to her that this was so, though at the time she had not understood it; it seemed to her that she was not a free agent; that some force pushed her forward which she could neither control nor understand.

Moreover--and this was the worst of it--she felt that little good could come of her sacrifice, or that if good came, at least it would not be to her or hers. Now she was as a fish in a net, though why it was worth this brilliant Spaniard's while to snare her she could not understand,

for she forgot that she was beautiful and a woman of property. Well, to save the blood of another she had bought, and in her own blood and happiness, or in that of those dear to her, assuredly she must pay, however cruel and unjust might be the price.

Such were the thoughts that passed through Lysbeth's mind as the strong Flemish gelding lumbered forward, dragging the sledge at the same steady pace over rough ice and smooth. And all the while Montalvo behind her was chatting pleasantly about this matter and that; telling her of the orange groves in Spain, of the Court of the Emperor Charles, of adventures in the French wars, and many other things, to which conversation she made such answer as courtesy demanded and no more. What would Dirk think, she was wondering, and her cousin, Pieter van de Werff, whose good opinion she valued, and all the gossips of Leyden? She only prayed that they might not have missed her, or at least that they took it for granted that she had gone home.

On this point, however, she was soon destined to be undeceived, for presently, trudging over the snow-covered ice and carrying his useless skates in his hand, they met a young man whom she knew as Dirk's fellow apprentice. On seeing them he stopped in front of the sledge in such a position that the horse, a steady and a patient animal, pulled up of its own accord.

"Is the Jufvrouw Lysbeth van Hout there?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," she replied, but before she could say more Montalvo broke in, inquiring what might be the matter.

"Nothing," he answered, "except that she was lost and Dirk van Goorl, my friend, send me to look for her this way while he took the other."

"Indeed. Then, noble sir, perhaps you will find the Heer Dirk van Goorl and tell him that the Senora, his cousin, is merely enjoying an evening drive, and that if he comes to her house in an hour's time he will find her safe and sound, and with her myself, the Count Juan de Montalvo, whom she has honoured with an invitation to supper."

Then, before the astonished messenger could answer; before, indeed, Lysbeth could offer any explanation of his words, Montalvo lashed up the horse and left him standing on the moat bewildered, his cap off and scratching his head.

After this they proceeded on a journey which seemed to Lysbeth almost interminable. When the circuit of the walls was finished, Montalvo halted at one of the shut gates, and, calling to the guard within, summoned them to open. This caused delay and investigation, for at first the sergeant of the guard would not believe that it was his acting commandant who spoke without.

"Pardon, Excellency," he said when he had inspected him with a lantern, "but I did not think that you would be going the rounds with a lady

in your sledge," and holding up the light the man took a long look at Lysbeth, grinning visibly as he recognised her.

"Ah, he is a gay bird, the captain, a very gay bird, and it's a pretty Dutch dickey he is teaching to pipe now," she heard him call to a comrade as he closed the heavy gates behind their sleigh.

Then followed more visits to other military posts in the town, and with each visit a further explanation. All this while the Count Montalvo uttered no word beyond those of ordinary compliment, and ventured on no act of familiarity; his conversation and demeanour indeed remaining perfectly courteous and respectful. So far as it went this was satisfactory, but at length there came a moment when Lysbeth felt that she could bear the position no longer.

"Senor," she said briefly, "take me home; I grow faint."

"With hunger doubtless," he interrupted; "well, by heaven! so do I. But, my dear lady, as you are aware, duty must be attended to, and, after all, you may have found some interest in accompanying me on a tour of the pickets at night. I know your people speak roughly of us Spanish soldiers, but I hope that after this you will be able to bear testimony to their discipline. Although it is a fete day you will be my witness that we have not found a man off duty or the worse for drink. Here, you," he called to a soldier who stood up to salute him, "follow me to the house of the Jufvrouw Lysbeth van Hout, where I sup, and lead this

sledge back to my quarters."