

CHAPTER III

MONTALVO WINS A TRICK

Turning up the Bree Straat, then as now perhaps the finest in the town of Leyden, Montalvo halted his horse before a substantial house fronted with three round-headed gables, of which the largest--that over the entrance in the middle--was shaped into two windows with balconies. This was Lysbeth's house which had been left to her by her father, where, until such time as she should please to marry, she dwelt with her aunt, Clara van Ziel. The soldier whom he had summoned having run to the horse's head, Montalvo leapt from his driver's seat to assist the lady to alight. At the moment Lysbeth was occupied with wild ideas of swift escape, but even if she could make up her mind to try it there was an obstacle which her thoughtful cavalier had foreseen.

"Jufvrouw van Hout," he said as he pulled up, "do you remember that you are still wearing skates?"

It was true, though in her agitation she had forgotten all about them, and the fact put sudden flight out of the question. She could not struggle into her own house walking on the sides of her feet like the tame seal which old fisherman Hans had brought from northern seas. It would be too ridiculous, and the servants would certainly tell the story all about the town. Better for a while longer to put up with the company of this odious Spaniard than to become a laughing stock in an attempt to

fly. Besides, even if she found herself on the other side of it, could she shut the door in his face? Would her promise let her, and would he consent?

"Yes," she answered briefly, "I will call my servant."

Then for the first time the Count became complimentary in a dignified Spanish manner.

"Let no base-born menial hold the foot which it is an honour for an hidalgo of Spain to touch. I am your servant," he said, and resting one knee on the snow-covered step he waited.

Again there was nothing to be done, so Lysbeth must needs thrust out her foot from which very delicately and carefully he unstrapped the skate.

"What Jack can bear Jill must put up with," muttered Lysbeth to herself as she advanced the other foot. Just at that moment, however, the door behind them began to open.

"She who buys," murmured Montalvo as he commenced on the second set of straps. Then the door swung wide, and the voice of Dirk van Goorl was heard saying in a tone of relief:

"Yes, sure enough it is she, Tante Clara, and some one is taking off her boots."

"Skates, Senor, skates," interrupted Montalvo, glancing backward over his shoulder, then added in a whisper as he bent once more to his task, "ahem--pays. You will introduce me, is it not so? I think it will be less awkward for you."

So, as flight was impossible, for he held her by the foot, and an instinct told her that, especially to the man she loved, the only thing to do was to make light of the affair, Lysbeth said--

"Dirk, Cousin Dirk, I think you know--this is--the Honourable Captain the Count Juan de Montalvo."

"Ah! it is the Senor van Goorl," said Montalvo, pulling off the skate and rising from his knee, which, from his excess of courtesy, was now wet through. "Senor, allow me to return to you, safe and sound, the fair lady of whom I have robbed you for a while."

"For a while, captain," blurted Dirk; "why, from first to last, she has been gone nearly four hours, and a fine state we have been in about her."

"That will all be explained presently, Senor--at supper, to which the Jufvrouw has been so courteous as to ask me," then, aside and below his breath, again the ominous word of reminder--"pays." "Most happily, your cousin's presence was the means of saving a fellow-creature's life.

But, as I have said, the tale is long. Senor--permit," and in another second Lysbeth found herself walking down her own hall upon the arm of the Spaniard, while Dirk, her aunt, and some guests followed obediently behind.

Now Montalvo knew that his difficulties were over for that evening at any rate, since he had crossed the threshold and was a guest.

Half unconsciously Lysbeth guided him to the balconied sit-kamer on the first floor, which in our day would answer to the drawing-room. Here several other of her friends were gathered, for it had been arranged that the ice-festival should end with a supper as rich as the house could give. To these, too, she must introduce her cavalier, who bowed courteously to each in turn. Then she escaped, but, as she passed him, distinctly, she could swear, did she see his lips shape themselves to the hateful word--"pays."

When she reached her chamber, so great was Lysbeth's wrath and indignation that almost she choked with it, till again reason came to her aid, and with reason a desire to carry the thing off as well as might be. So she told her maid Greta to robe her in her best garment, and to hang about her neck the famous collar of pearls which her father had brought from the East, that was the talk and envy of half the women in Leyden. On her head, too, she placed the cap of lovely lace which had been a wedding gift to her mother by her grandmother, the old dame who wove it. Then she added such golden ornaments as it was customary for

women of her class of wear, and descended to the gathering room.

Meanwhile Montalvo had not been idle. Taking Dirk aside, and pleading his travel-worn condition, he had prayed him to lead him to some room where he might order his dress and person. Dirk complied, though with an ill grace, but so pleasant did Montalvo make himself during those few minutes, that before he ushered him back to the company in some way Dirk found himself convinced that this particular Spaniard was not, as the saying went, "as black as his mustachios." He felt almost sure too, although he had not yet found time to tell him the details of it, that there was some excellent reason to account for his having carried off the adorable Lysbeth during an entire afternoon and evening.

It is true that there still remained the strange circumstance of the attempted foul of his cousin Van de Werff's sledge in the great race, but, after all, why should there not be some explanation of this also? It had happened, if it did happen, at quite a distance from the winning post, when there were few people to see what passed. Indeed, now that he came to think of it, the only real evidence on the matter was that of his cousin, the little girl passenger, since Van de Werff himself had brought no actual accusation against his opponent.

Shortly after they returned to the company it was announced that supper had been served, whereon ensued a pause. It was broken by Montalvo, who, stepping forward, offered his hand to Lysbeth, saying in a voice that all could hear:

"Lady, my companion of the race, permit the humblest representative of the greatest monarch in the world to have an honour which doubtless that monarch would be glad to claim."

That settled the matter, for as the acting commandant of the Spanish garrison of Leyden had chosen to refer to his official position, it was impossible to question his right of precedence over a number of folk, who, although prominent in their way, were but unennobled Netherlander burghers.

Lysbeth, indeed, did find courage to point to a rather flurried and spasmodic lady with grey hair who was fanning herself as though the season were July, and wondering whether the cook would come up to the grand Spaniard's expectations, and to murmur "My aunt." But she got no further, for the Count instantly added in a low voice--

"Doubtless comes next in the direct line, but unless my education has been neglected, the heiress of the house who is of age goes before the collateral--however aged."

By this time they were through the door, so it was useless to argue the point further, and again Lysbeth felt herself overmatched and submitted. In another minute they had passed down the stairs, entered the dining hall, and were seated side by side at the head of the long table, of which the foot was occupied presently by Dirk van Goorl and her aunt,

who was also his cousin, the widow Clara van Ziel.

There was a silence while the domestics began their service, of which Montalvo took opportunity to study the room, the table and the guests. It was a fine room panelled with German oak, and lighted sufficiently, if not brilliantly, by two hanging brass chandeliers of the famous Flemish workmanship, in each of which were fixed eighteen of the best candles, while on the sideboards were branch candlesticks, also of worked brass. The light thus provided was supplemented by that from the great fire of peat and old ships' timber which burned in a wide blue-tiled fire-place, half way down the chamber, throwing its reflections upon many a flagon and bowl of cunningly hammered silver that adorned the table and the sideboards.

The company was of the same character as the furniture, handsome and solid; people of means, every man and woman of them, accumulated by themselves or their fathers, in the exercise of the honest and profitable trade whereof at this time the Netherlands had a practical monopoly.

"I have made no mistake," thought Montalvo to himself, as he surveyed the room and its occupants. "My little neighbour's necklace alone is worth more cash than ever I had the handling of, and the plate would add up handsomely. Well, before very long I hope to be in a position to make its inventory." Then, having first crossed himself devoutly, he fell to upon a supper that was well worth his attention, even in a land noted

for the luxury of its food and wines and the superb appetites of those who consumed them.

It must not be supposed, however, that the gallant captain allowed eating to strangle conversation. On the contrary, finding that his hostess was in no talkative mood, he addressed himself to his fellow guests, chatting with them pleasantly upon every convenient subject. Among these guests was none other than Pieter van de Werff, his conqueror in that afternoon's conquest, upon whose watchful and suspicious reserve he brought all his batteries to bear.

First he congratulated Pieter and lamented his own ill-luck, and this with great earnestness, for as a matter of fact he had lost much more money on the event than he could afford to pay. Then he praised the grey horse and asked if he was for sale, offering his own black in part exchange.

"A good nag," he said, "but one that I do not wish to conceal has his faults, which must be taken into consideration if it comes to the point of putting a price upon him. For instance, Mynheer van de Werff, you may have noticed the dreadful position in which the brute put me towards the end of the race. There are certain things that this horse always shies at, and one of them is a red cloak. Now I don't know if you saw that a girl in a red cloak suddenly appeared on the bank. In an instant the beast was round and you may imagine what my feelings were, being in charge of your fair kinswoman, for I thought to a certainty that we

should be over. What is more, it quite spoilt my chance of the race, for after he has shied like that, the black turns sulky, and won't let himself go."

When Lysbeth heard this amazing explanation, remembering the facts, she gasped. And yet now that she came to think of it, a girl in a red cloak did appear near them at the moment, and the horse did whip round as though it had shied violently. Was it possible, she wondered, that the captain had not really intended to foul the Badger sledge?

Meanwhile Van de Werff was answering in his slow voice. Apparently he accepted Montalvo's explanation; at least he said that he, too, saw the red-cloaked girl, and was glad that nothing serious had come of the mischance. As regarded the proposed deal, he should be most happy to go into it upon the lines mentioned, as the grey, although a very good horse, was aged, and he thought the barb one of the most beautiful animals that he had ever seen. At this point, as he had not the slightest intention of parting with his valuable charger, at any rate on such terms, Montalvo changed the subject.

At length, when men, and, for the matter of that, women, too, had well eaten, and the beautiful tall Flemish glasses not for the first time were replenished with the best Rhenish or Spanish wines, Montalvo, taking advantage of a pause in the conversation, rose and said that he wished to claim the privilege of a stranger among them and propose a toast, namely, the health of his late adversary, Pieter van de Werff.

At this the audience applauded, for they were all very proud of the young man's success, and some of them had won money over him. Still more did they applaud, being great judges of culinary matters, when the Spaniard began his speech by an elegant tribute to the surpassing excellence of the supper. Rarely, he assured them, and especially did he assure the honourable widow Van Ziel (who blushed all over with pleasure at his compliments, and fanned herself with such vigour that she upset Dirk's wine over his new tunic, cut in the Brussels style), the fame of whose skill in such matters had travelled so far as The Hague, for he had heard of it there himself--rarely even in the Courts of Kings and Emperors, or at the tables of Popes and Archbishops, had he eaten food so exquisitely cooked, or drunk wines of a better vintage.

Then, passing on to the subject of his speech, Van de Werff, he toasted him and his horse and his little sister and his sledge, in really well-chosen and appropriate terms, not by any means overdoing it, for he confessed frankly that his defeat was a bitter disappointment to him, especially as every soldier in the camp had expected him to win and--he was afraid--backed him for more than they could afford. Also, incidentally, so that every one might be well acquainted with it, he retold the story of the girl with the red cloak. Next, suddenly dropping his voice and adopting a quieter manner, he addressed himself to the Aunt Clara and the "well-beloved Heer Dirk," saying that he owed them both an apology, which he must take this opportunity to make, for having detained the lady at his right during so unreasonable a time that

afternoon. When, however, they had heard the facts they would, he was sure, blame him no longer, especially if he told them that this breach of good manners had been the means of saving a human life.

Immediately after the race, he explained, one of his sergeants had found him out to tell him that a woman, suspected of certain crimes against life and property and believed to be a notorious escaped witch or heretic, had been captured, asking for reasons which he need not trouble them with, that he would deal with the case at once. This woman also, so said the man, had been heard that every afternoon to make use of the most horrible, the most traitorous and blaspheming language to a lady of Leyden, the Jufvrouw Lysbeth van Hout, indeed; as was deposed by a certain spy named Black Meg, who had overheard the conversation.

Now, went on Montalvo, as he knew well, every man and woman in that room

would share his horror of traitorous and blasphemous heretics--here most of the company crossed themselves, especially those who were already secret adherents of the New Religion. Still, even heretics had a right to a fair trial; at least he, who although a soldier by profession, was a man who honestly detested unnecessary bloodshed, held that opinion. Also long experience taught him great mistrust of the evidence of informers, who had a money interest in the conviction of the accused. Lastly, it did not seem well to him that the name of a young and noble lady should be mixed up in such a business. As they knew under the recent edicts, his powers in these cases were absolute; indeed, in his

official capacity he was ordered at once to consign any suspected of Anabaptism or other forms of heresy to be dealt with by the appointed courts, and in the case of people who had escaped, to cause them, on satisfactory proof of their identity, to be executed instantly without further trial. Under these circumstances, fearing that did the lady knew his purpose she might take fright, he had, he confessed, resorted to artifice, as he was very anxious both for her sake and in the interest of justice that she should bear testimony in the matter. So he asked her to accompany him on a short drive while he attended to a business affair; a request to which she had graciously assented.

"Friends," he went on in a still more solemn voice, "the rest of my story is short. Indeed I do congratulate myself on the decision that I took, for when confronted with the prisoner our young and honourable hostess was able upon oath to refute the story of the spy with the result that I in my turn was to save an unfortunate, and, as I believe, a half-crazed creature from an immediate and a cruel death. Is it not so, lady?" and helpless in the net of circumstance, not knowing indeed what else to do, Lysbeth bowed her head in assent.

"I think," concluded Montalvo, "that after this explanation, what may have appeared to be a breach of manners will be forgiven. I have only one other word to add. My position is peculiar; I am an official here, and I speak boldly among friends taking the risk that any of you present will use what I say against me, which for my part I do not believe. Although there is no better Catholic and no truer Spaniard in the

Netherlands, I have been accused of showing too great a sympathy with your people, and of dealing too leniently with those who have incurred the displeasure of our Holy Church. In the cause of right and justice I am willing to bear such aspersions; still this is a slanderous world, a world in which truth does not always prevail. Therefore, although I have told you nothing but the bare facts, I do suggest in the interests of your hostess--in my own humble interest who might be misrepresented, and I may add in the interest of every one present at this board--that it will perhaps be well that the details of the story which I have had the honour of telling you should not be spread about--that they should in fact find a grave within these walls? Friends, do you agree?"

Then moved by a common impulse, and by a common if a secret fear, with the single exception of Lysbeth, every person present, yes, even the cautious and far-seeing young Van de Werff, echoed "We agree."

"Friends," said Montalvo, "those simple words carry to my mind conviction deep as any vow however solemn; deep, if that were possible, as did the oath of your hostess, upon the faith of which I felt myself justified in acquitting the poor creature who was alleged to be an escaped heretic." Then with a courteous and all-embracing bow Montalvo sat down.

"What a good man! What a delightful man!" murmured Aunt Clara to Dirk in the buzz of conversation which ensued.

"Yes, yes, cousin, but----"

"And what discrimination he has, what taste! Did you notice what he said about the cooking?"

"I heard something, but----"

"It is true that folk have told me that my capon stewed in milk, such as we had to-night--Why, lad, what is the matter with your doublet? You fidget me by continually rubbing at it."

"You have upset the red wine over it, that is all," answered Dirk, sulkily. "It is spoiled."

"And little loss either; to tell you the truth, Dirk, I never saw a coat worse cut. You young men should learn in the matter of clothes from the Spanish gentlemen. Look at his Excellency, the Count Montalvo, for instance----"

"See here, aunt," broke in Dirk with suppressed fury, "I think I have heard enough about Spaniards and the Captain Montalvo for one night. First of all he spirits off Lysbeth and is absent with her for four hours; then he invites himself to supper and places himself at the head of the table with her, setting me down to the dullest meal I ever ate at the other end----"

"Cousin Dirk," said Aunt Clara with dignity, "your temper has got the better of your manners. Certainly you might learn courtesy as well as dress, even from so humble a person as a Spanish hidalgo and commander." Then she rose from the table, adding--"Come, Lysbeth, if you are ready, let us leave these gentlemen to their wine."

After the ladies had gone the supper went on merrily. In those days, nearly everybody drank too much liquor, at any rate at feasts, and this company was no exception. Even Montalvo, his game being won and the strain on his nerves relaxed, partook pretty freely, and began to talk in proportion to his potations. Still, so clever was the man that in his cups he yet showed a method, for his conversation revealed a sympathy with Netherlander grievances and a tolerance of view in religious matters rarely displayed by a Spaniard.

From such questions they drifted into a military discussion, and Montalvo, challenged by Van de Werff, who, as it happened, had not drunk too much wine, explained how, were he officer in command, he would defend Leyden from attack by an overwhelming force. Very soon Van de Werff saw that he was a capable soldier who had studied his profession, and being himself a capable civilian with a thirst for knowledge pressed the argument from point to point.

"And suppose," he asked at length, "that the city were starving and still untaken, so that its inhabitants must either fall into the hands of the enemy or burn the place over their heads, what would you do

then?"

"Then, Mynheer, if I were a small man I should yield to the clamour of the starving folk and surrender----"

"And if you were a big man, captain?"

"If I were a big man--ah! if I were a big man, why then--I should cut the dykes and let the sea beat once more against the walls of Leyden. An army cannot live in salt water, Mynheer."

"That would drown out the farmers and ruin the land for twenty years."

"Quite so, Mynheer, but when the corn has to be saved, who thinks of spoiling the straw?"

"I follow you, Senor, your proverb is good, although I have never heard it."

"Many good things come from Spain, Mynheer, including this red wine. One more glass with you, for, if you will allow me to say it, you are a man worth meeting over a beaker--or a blade."

"I hope that you will always retain the same opinion of me," answered Van de Werff as he drank, "at the trencher or in the trenches."

Then Pieter went home, and before he slept that night made careful notes of all the Spaniard's suggested military dispositions, both of attackers and attacked, writing underneath them the proverb about the corn and the straw. There existed no real reason why he should have done so, as he was only a civilian engaged in business, but Pieter van de Werff chanced to be a provident young man who knew many things might happen which could not precisely be foreseen. As it fell out in after years, a time came when he was able to put Montalvo's advice to good use. All readers of the history of the Netherlands know how the Burgomaster Pieter van de Werff saved Leyden from the Spanish.

As for Dirk van Goorl, he sought his lodging rather tipsy, and arm-in-arm with none other than Captain the Count Don Juan de Montalvo.