

## CHAPTER VI

### THE BETROTHAL OF LYSBETH

On the following morning when Montalvo entered his private room after breakfast, he found a lady awaiting him, in whom, notwithstanding the long cloak and veil she wore, he had little difficulty in recognising Black Meg. In fact Black Meg had been waiting some while, and being a person of industrious habits she had not neglected to use her time to the best advantage.

The reader may remember that when Meg visited the gallant Captain Montalvo upon a previous occasion, she had taken the liberty of helping herself to certain papers which she found lying just inside an unlocked desk. These papers on examination, as she feared might be the case, for the most part proved to be quite unimportant--unpaid accounts, military reports, a billet or two from ladies, and so forth. But in thinking the matter over Black Meg remembered that this desk had another part to it, which seemed to be locked, and, therefore, just in case they should prove useful, she took with her a few skeleton keys and one or two little instruments of steel and attended the pleasure of her noble patron at an hour when she believed that he would be at breakfast in another room. Things went well; he was at breakfast and she was left alone in the chamber with the desk. The rest may be guessed. Replacing the worthless bundle in the unlocked part, by the aid of her keys and instruments she opened the inner half. There sure enough were letters

hidden, and in a little drawer two miniatures framed in gold, one of a lady, young and pretty with dark eyes, and the other of two children, a boy and a girl of five or six years of age. Also there was a curling lock of hair labelled in Montalvo's writing--"Juanita's hair, which she gave me as a keepsake."

Here was treasure indeed whereof Black Meg did not fail to possess herself. Thrusting the letters and other articles into the bosom of her dress to be examined at leisure, she was clever enough, before closing and re-locking the desk, to replace them with a dummy bundle, hastily made up from some papers that lay about.

When everything had been satisfactorily arranged she went outside and chattered for a while with the soldier on guard, only re-entering the room by one door as Montalvo appeared in it through the other.

"Well, my friend," he said, "have you the evidence?"

"I have some evidence, Excellency," she answered. "I was present at the dinner that you ate last night, although none of it came my way, and--I was present afterwards."

"Indeed. I thought I saw you slip in, and allow me to congratulate you on that; it was very well thought out and done, just as folk were moving up and down the stairs. Also, when I went home, I believe that I recognised a gentleman in the street whom I have been given to

understand you honour with your friendship, a short, stout person with a bald head; let me see, he was called the Butcher at The Hague, was he not? No, do not pout, I have no wish to pry into the secrets of ladies, but still in my position here it is my business to know a thing or two. Well, what did you see?"

"Excellency, I saw the young man I was sent to watch and Hendrik Brant, the son of the rich goldsmith at The Hague, praying side by side upon their knees."

"That is bad, very bad," said Montalvo shaking his head, "but----"

"I saw," she went on in her hoarse voice, "the pair of them read the Bible."

"How shocking!" replied Montalvo with a simulated shudder. "Think of it, my orthodox friend, if you are to be believed, these two persons, hitherto supposed to be respectable, have been discovered in the crime of consulting that work upon which our Faith is founded. Well, those who could read anything so dull must, indeed, as the edicts tell us, be monsters unworthy to live. But, if you please, your proofs. Of course you have this book?"

Then Black Meg poured forth all her tale--how she had watched and seen something, how she had listened and heard little, how she had gone to the secret panel, bending over the sleeping man, and found--nothing.

"You are a poor sort of spy, mother," commented the captain when she had done, "and, upon my soul, I do not believe that even a Papal inquisitor could hang that young fellow on your evidence. You must go back and get some more."

"No," answered Black Meg with decision, "if you want to force your way into conventicles you had best do it yourself. As I wish to go on living here is no job for me. I have proved to you that this young man is a heretic, so now give me my reward."

"Your reward? Ah! your reward. No, I think not at present, for a reward presupposes services--and I see none."

Black Meg began to storm.

"Be silent," said Montalvo, dropping his bantering tone. "Look, I will be frank with you. I do not want to burn anybody. I am sick of all this nonsense about religion, and for aught I care every Netherlander in Leyden may read the Bible until he grows tired. I seek to marry that Jufvrouw Lysbeth van Hout, and to do this I desire to prove that the man whom she loves, Dirk van Goorl, is a heretic. What you have told me may or may not be sufficient for my purpose. If it is sufficient you shall be paid liberally after my marriage; if not--well, you have had enough. As for your evidence, for my part I may say that I do not believe a word of it, for were it true you would have brought the Bible."

As he spoke he rang a bell which stood upon a table, and before Meg could answer the soldier appeared.

"Show this good woman out," he said, adding, in a loud voice, "Mother, I will do my best for you and forward your petition to the proper quarter. Meanwhile, take this trifle in charity," and he pressed a florin into her hand. "Now, guard, the prisoners, the prisoners. I have no time to waste--and listen--let me be troubled with no more beggars, or you will hear of it."

That afternoon Dirk, filled with a solemn purpose, and dressed in his best suit, called at the house in the Bree Straat, where the door was again opened by Greta, who looked at him expectantly.

"Is your mistress in?" he stammered. "I have come to see your mistress."

"Alas! Mynheer," answered the young woman, "you are just too late. My mistress and her aunt, the Vrouw Clara, have gone away to stay for a week or ten days as the Vrouw Clara's health required a change."

"Indeed," said Dirk aghast, "and where have they gone?"

"Oh! Mynheer, I do not know that, they did not tell me," and no other

answer could he extract from her.

So Dirk went away discomfited and pondering. An hour later the Captain Montalvo called, and strange to say proved more fortunate. By hook or by crook he obtained the address of the ladies, who were visiting, it appeared, at a seaside village within the limits of a ride. By a curious coincidence that very afternoon Montalvo, also seeking rest and change of air, appeared at the inn of this village, giving it out that he proposed to lodge there for a while.

As he walked upon the beach next day, whom should he chance to meet but the Vrouw Clara van Ziel, and never did the worthy Clara spend a more pleasant morning. So at least she declared to Lysbeth when she brought her cavalier back to dinner.

The reader may guess the rest. Montalvo paid his court, and in due course Montalvo was refused. He bore the blow with a tender resignation.

"Confess, dear lady," he said, "that there is some other man more fortunate."

Lysbeth did not confess, but, on the other hand, neither did she deny.

"If he makes you happy I shall be more than satisfied," the Count murmured, "but, lady, loving you as I do, I do not wish to see you married to a heretic."

"What do you mean, Senor?" asked Lysbeth, bridling.

"Alas!" he answered, "I mean that, as I fear, the worthy Heer Dirk van Goorl, a friend of mine for whom I have every respect, although he has outstripped me in your regard, has fallen into that evil net."

"Such accusations should not be made," said Lysbeth sternly, "unless they can be proved. Even then----" and she stopped.

"I will inquire further," replied the swain. "For myself I accept the position, that is until you learn to love me, if such should be my fortune. Meanwhile I beg of you at least to look upon me as a friend, a true friend who would lay down his life to serve you."

Then, with many a sigh, Montalvo departed home to Leyden upon his beautiful black horse, but not before he had enjoyed a few minutes' earnest conversation with the worthy Tante Clara.

"Now, if only this old lady were concerned," he reflected as he rode away, "the matter might be easy enough, and the Saints know it would be one to me, but unhappily that obstinate pig of a Hollander girl has all the money in her own right. In what labours do not the necessities of rank and station involve a man who by disposition requires only ease and quiet! Well, my young friend Lysbeth, if I do not make you pay for these exertions before you are two months older, my name is not Juan de

Montalvo."

Three days later the ladies returned to Leyden. Within an hour of their arrival the Count called, and was admitted.

"Stay with me," said Lysbeth to her Aunt Clara as the visitor was announced, and for a while she stayed. Then, making an excuse, she vanished from the room, and Lysbeth was left face to face with her tormentor.

"Why do you come here?" she asked; "I have given you my answer."

"I come for your own sake," he replied, "to give you my reasons for conduct which you may think strange. You remember a certain conversation?"

"Perfectly," broke in Lysbeth.

"A slight mistake, I think, Jufvrouw, I mean a conversation about an excellent friend of yours, whose spiritual affairs seem to interest you."

"What of it, Senor?"



"Only this; I have made inquiries and----"

Lysbeth looked up unable to conceal her anxiety.

"Oh! Jufvrouw, let me beg of you to learn to control your expression; the open face of childhood is so dangerous in these days."

"He is my cousin."

"I know; were he anything more, I should be so grieved, but we can most of us spare a cousin or two."

"If you would cease amusing yourself, Senor----"

"And come to the point? Of course I will. Well, the result of my inquiries has been to find out that this worthy person is a heretic of the most pernicious sort. I said inquiries, but there was no need for me to make any. He has been----"

"Not denounced," broke in Lysbeth.

"Oh! my dear lady, again that tell-tale emotion from which all sorts of things might be concluded. Yes--denounced--but fortunately to myself as a person appointed under the Edict. It will, I fear, be my duty to have him arrested this evening--you wish to sit down, allow me to hand you a chair--but I shall not deal with the case myself. Indeed, I propose

to pass him over to the worthy Ruard Tapper, the Papal Inquisitor, you know--every one has heard of the unpleasant Tapper--who is to visit Leyden next week, and who, no doubt, will make short work of him."

"What has he done?" asked Lysbeth in a low voice, and bending down her head to hide the working of her features.

"Done? My dear lady, it is almost too dreadful to tell you. This misguided and unfortunate young man, with another person whom the witnesses have not been able to identify, was seen at midnight reading the Bible."

"The Bible! Why should that be wrong?"

"Hush! Are you also a heretic? Do you not know that all this heresy springs from the reading of the Bible? You see, the Bible is a very strange book. It seems that there are many things in it which, when read by an ordinary layman, appear to mean this or that. When read by a consecrated priest, however, they mean something quite different. In the same way, there are many doctrines which the layman cannot find in the Bible that to the consecrated eye are plain as the sun and the moon. The difference between heresy and orthodoxy is, in short, the difference between what can actually be found in the letter of this remarkable work, and what is really there--according to their holinesses."

"Almost thou persuadest me----" began Lysbeth bitterly.

"Hush! lady--to be, what you are, an angel."

There came a pause.

"What will happen to him?" asked Lysbeth.

"After--after the usual painful preliminaries to discover accomplices, I presume the stake, but possibly, as he has the freedom of Leyden, he might get off with hanging."

"Is there no escape?"

Montalvo walked to the window, and looking out of it remarked that he thought it was going to snow. Then suddenly he wheeled round, and staring hard at Lysbeth asked,

"Are you really interested in this heretic, and do you desire to save him?"

Lysbeth heard and knew at once that the buttons were off the foils. The bantering, whimsical tone was gone. Now her tormentor's voice was stern and cold, the voice of a man who was playing for great stakes and meant to win them.

She also gave up fencing.

"I am and I do," she answered.

"Then it can be done--at a price."

"What price?"

"Yourself in marriage within three weeks."

Lysbeth quivered slightly, then sat still.

"Would not my fortune do instead?" she asked.

"Oh! what a poor substitute you offer me," Montalvo said, with a return to his hateful banter. Then he added, "That offer might be considered were it not for the abominable laws which you have here. In practice it would be almost impossible for you to hand over any large sum, much of which is represented by real estate, to a man who is not your husband. Therefore I am afraid I must stipulate that you and your possessions shall not be separated."

Again Lysbeth sat silent. Montalvo, watching her with genuine interest, saw signs of rebellion, perchance of despair. He saw the woman's mental and physical loathing of himself conquering her fears for Dirk. Unless he was much mistaken she was about to defy him, which, as a matter of fact, would have proved exceedingly awkward, as his pecuniary resources

were exhausted. Also on the very insufficient evidence which he possessed he would not have dared to touch Dirk, and thus to make himself a thousand powerful enemies.

"It is strange," he said, "that the irony of circumstances should reduce me to pleading for a rival. But, Lysbeth van Hout, before you answer I beg you to think. Upon the next movements of your lips it depends whether that body you love shall be stretched upon the rack, whether those eyes which you find pleasant shall grow blind with agony in the darkness of a dungeon, and whether that flesh which you think desirable shall scorch and wither in the furnace. Or, on the other hand, whether none of these things shall happen, whether this young man shall go free, to be for a month or two a little piqued--a little bitter--about the inconstancy of women, and then to marry some opulent and respected heretic. Surely you could scarcely hesitate. Oh! where is the self-sacrificing spirit of the sex of which we hear so much? Choose."

Still there was no answer. Montalvo, playing his trump card, drew from his vest an official-looking document, sealed and signed.

"This," he said, "is the information to be given to the incorruptible Ruard Trapper. Look, here written on it is your cousin's name. My servant waits for me in your kitchen. If you hesitate any longer, I call him and in your presence charge him to hand that paper to the messenger who starts this afternoon for Brussels. Once given it cannot be recalled and the pious Dirk's doom is sealed."

Lysbeth's spirit began to break. "How can I?" she asked. "It is true that we are not affianced; perhaps for this very reason which I now learn. But he cares for me and knows that I care for him. Must I then, in addition to the loss of him, be remembered all his life as little better than a light-of-love caught by the tricks and glitter of such a man as you? I tell you that first I will kill myself."

Again Montalvo went to the window, for this hint of suicide was most disconcerting. No one can marry a dead woman, and Lysbeth was scarcely likely to leave a will in his favour. It seemed that what troubled her particularly was the fear lest the young man should think her conduct light. Well, why should she not give him a reason which he would be the first to acknowledge as excellent for breaking with him? Could she, a Catholic, be expected to wed a heretic, and could he not be made to tell her that he was a heretic?

Behold an answer to his question! The Saints themselves, desiring that this pearl of price should continue to rest in the bosom of the true Church, had interfered in his behalf, for there in the street below was Dirk van Goorl approaching Lysbeth's door. Yes, there he was dressed in his best burgher's suit, his brow knit with thought, his step hesitating; a very picture of the timid, doubtful lover.

"Lysbeth van Hout," said the Count, turning to her, "as it chances the Heer Dirk van Goorl is at your door. You will admit him, and this matter

can be settled one way or the other. I wish to point out to you how needless it is that the young man should be left believing that you have treated him ill. All which is necessary is that you should ask whether or no he is of your faith. If I know him, he will not lie to you. Then it remains only for you to say--for doubtless the man comes here to seek your hand--that however much it may grieve you to give such an answer, you can take no heretic to husband. Do you understand?"

Lysbeth bowed her head.

"Then listen. You will admit your suitor; you will allow him to make his offer to you now--if he is so inclined; you will, before giving any answer, ask him of his faith. If he replies that he is a heretic, you will dismiss him as kindly as you wish. If he replies that he is a true servant of the Church, you will say that you have heard a different tale and must have time to make inquiries. Remember also that if by one jot you do otherwise than I have bid you, when Dirk van Goorl leaves the room you see him for the last time, unless it pleases you--to attend his execution. Whereas if you obey and dismiss him finally, as the door shuts behind him I put this Information in the fire and satisfy you that the evidence upon which it is based is for ever deprived of weight and done with."

Lysbeth looked a question.

"I see you are wondering how I should know what you do or do not do.

It is simple. I shall be the harmless but observant witness of your interview. Over this doorway hangs a tapestry; you will grant me the privilege--not a great one for a future husband--of stepping behind it."

"Never, never," said Lysbeth, "I cannot be put to such a shame. I defy you."

As she spoke came the sound of knocking at the street door. Glancing up at Montalvo, for the second time she saw that look which he had worn at the crisis of the sledge race. All its urbanity, its careless bonhomie, had vanished. Instead of these appeared a reflection of the last and innermost nature of the man, the rock foundation, as it were, upon which was built the false and decorated superstructure that he showed to the world. There were the glaring eyes, there the grinning teeth of the Spanish wolf; a ravening brute ready to rend and tear, if so he might satisfy himself with the meat his soul desired.

"Don't play tricks with me," he muttered, "and don't argue, for there is no time. Do as I bid you, girl, or on your head will be this psalm-singing fellow's blood. And, look you, don't try setting him on me, for I have my sword and he is unarmed. If need be a heretic may be killed at sight, you know, that is by one clothed with authority. When the servant announces him go to the door and order that he is to be admitted," and picking up his plumed hat, which might have betrayed him, Montalvo stepped behind the arras.



For a moment Lysbeth stood thinking. Alas! she could see no possible escape, she was in the toils, the rope was about her throat. Either she must obey or, so she thought, she must give the man she loved to a dreadful death. For his sake she would do it, for his sake and might God forgive her! Might God avenge her and him!

Another instant and there came a knock upon the door. She opened it.

"The Heer van Goorl stands below," said the voice of Greta, "wishing to see you, madam."

"Admit him," answered Lysbeth, and going to a chair almost in the centre of the room, she seated herself.

Presently Dirk's step sounded on the stair, that known, beloved step for which so often she had listened eagerly. Again the door opened and Greta announced the Heer van Goorl. That she could not see the Captain Montalvo evidently surprised the woman, for her eyes roamed round the room wonderingly, but she was too well trained, or too well bribed, to show her astonishment. Gentlemen of this kidney, as Greta had from time to time remarked, have a faculty for vanishing upon occasion.

So Dirk walked into the fateful chamber as some innocent and unsuspecting creature walks into a bitter snare, little knowing that the lady whom he loved and whom he came to win was set as a bait to ruin him.

"Be seated, cousin," said Lysbeth, in a voice so forced and strained that it caused him to look up. But he saw nothing, for her head was turned away from him, and for the rest his mind was too preoccupied to be observant. By nature simple and open, it would have taken much to wake Dirk into suspicion in the home and presence of his love and cousin, Lysbeth.

"Good day to you, Lysbeth," he said awkwardly; "why, how cold your hand is! I have been trying to find you for some time, but you have always been out or away, leaving no address."

"I have been to the sea with my Aunt Clara," she answered.

Then for a while--five minutes or more--there followed a strained and stilted conversation.

"Will the booby never come to the point?" reflected Montalvo, surveying him through a join in the tapestry. "By the Saints, what a fool he looks!"

"Lysbeth," said Dirk at last, "I want to speak to you."

"Speak on, cousin," she answered.

"Lysbeth, I--I--have loved you for a long while, and I--have come to ask

you to marry me. I have put it off for a year or more for reasons which I hope to tell you some day, but I can keep silent no longer, especially now when I see that a much finer gentleman is trying to win you--I mean the Spanish Count, Montalvo," he added with a jerk.

She said nothing in reply. So Dirk went on pouring out all his honest passion in words that momentarily gathered weight and strength, till at length they were eloquent enough. He told her how since first they met he had loved her and only her, and how his one desire in life was to make her happy and be happy with her. Pausing at length he began to speak of his prospects--then she stopped him.

"Your pardon, Dirk," she said, "but I have a question to ask of you," and her voice died away in a kind of sob. "I have heard rumours about you," she went on presently, "which must be cleared up. I have heard, Dirk, that by faith you are what is called a heretic. Is it true?"

He hesitated before answering, feeling that much depended on that answer. But it was only for an instant, since Dirk was far too honest a man to lie.

"Lysbeth," he said, "I will tell to you what I would not tell to any other living creature, not being one of my own brotherhood, for whether you accept me or reject me, I know well that I am as safe in speaking to you as when upon my knees I speak to the God I serve. I am what you call a heretic. I am a member of that true faith to which I hope to draw

you, but which if you do not wish it I should never press upon you. It is chiefly because I am what I am that for so long I have hung back from speaking to you, since I did not know whether it would be right--things being thus--to ask you to mix your lot with mine, or whether I ought to marry you, if you would marry me, keeping this secret from you. Only the other night I sought counsel of--well, never mind of whom--and we prayed together, and together searched the Word of God. And there, Lysbeth, by some wonderful mercy, I found my prayer answered and my doubts solved, for the great St. Paul had foreseen this case, as in that Book all cases are foreseen, and I read how the unbelieving wife may be sanctified by the husband, and the unbelieving husband by the wife. Then everything grew clear to me, and I determined to speak. And now, dear, I have spoken, and it is for you to answer."

"Dirk, dear Dirk," she replied almost with a cry, "alas! for the answer which I must give you. Renounce the error of your ways, make confession, and be reconciled to the Church and--I will marry you. Otherwise I cannot, no, and although I love you, you and no other man"--here she put an energy into her voice that was almost dreadful--"with all my heart and soul and body; I cannot, I cannot, I cannot!"

Dirk heard, and his ruddy face turned ashen grey.

"Cousin," he replied, "you seek of me the one thing which I must not give. Even for your sake I may not renounce my vows and my God as I behold Him. Though it break my heart to bid you farewell and live

without you, here I pay you back in your own words--I cannot, I cannot, I cannot!"

Lysbeth looked at him, and lo! his short, massive form and his square-cut, honest countenance in that ardour of renunciation had suffered a change to things almost divine. At that moment--to her sight at least--this homely Hollander wore the aspect of an angel. She ground her teeth and pressed her hands upon her heart. "For his sake--to save him," she muttered to herself--then she spoke.

"I respect you for it, I love you for it more than ever; but, Dirk, it is over between us. One day, here or hereafter, you will understand and you will forgive."

"So be it," said Dirk hastily, stretching out his hand to find his hat, for he was too blind to see. "It is a strange answer to my prayer, a very strange answer; but doubtless you are right to follow your lights as I am sure that I am right to follow mine. We must carry our cross, dear Lysbeth, each of us; you see that we must carry our cross. Only I beg of you--I don't speak as a jealous man, because the thing has gone further than jealousy--I speak as a friend, and come what may while I live you will always find me that--I beg of you, beware of the Spaniard, Montalvo. I know that he followed you to the coast; I have heard too he boasts that he will marry you. The man is wicked, although he took me in at first. I feel it--his presence seems to poison the air, yes, this very air I breathe. But oh! and I should like him to hear me say it,

because I am sure that he is at the bottom of all this, his hour will come. For whatever he does he will be paid back; he will be paid back here and hereafter. And now, good-bye. God bless you and protect you, dear Lysbeth. If you think it wrong you are quite right not to marry me, and I know that you will keep my secret. Good-bye, again," and lifting her hand Dirk kissed it. Then he stumbled from the room.

As for Lysbeth she cast herself at full length, and in the bitterness of her heart beat her brow upon the boards.

When the front door had shut behind Dirk, but not before, Montalvo emerged from his hiding place and stood over the prostrate Lysbeth. He tried to adopt his airy and sarcastic manner, but he was shaken by the scene which he had overheard, shaken and somewhat frightened also, for he felt that he had called into being passions of which the force and fruits could not be calculated.

"Bravo! my little actress," he began, then gave it up and added in his natural voice, "you had best rise and see me burn this paper."

Lysbeth struggled to her knees and watched him thrust the document between two glowing peats.

"I have fulfilled my promise," he said, "and that evidence is done with,

but in case you should think of playing any tricks and not fulfilling yours, please remember that I have fresh evidence infinitely more valuable and convincing, to gain which, indeed, I condescended to a stratagem not quite in keeping with my traditions. With my own ears I heard this worthy gentleman, who is pleased to think so poorly of me, admit that he is a heretic. That is enough to burn him any day, and I swear that if within three weeks we are not man and wife, burn he shall."

While he was speaking Lysbeth had risen slowly to her feet. Now she confronted him, no longer the Lysbeth whom he had known, but a new being filled like a cup with fury that was the more awful because it was so quiet.

"Juan de Montalvo," she said in a low voice, "your wickedness has won and for Dirk's sake my person and my goods must pay its price. So be it since so it must be, but listen. I make no prophecies about you; I do not say that this or that shall happen to you, but I call down upon you the curse of God and the execration of men."

Then she threw up her hands and began to pray. "God, Whom it has pleased that I should be given to a fate far worse than death; O God, blast the mind and the soul of this monster. Let him henceforth never know a peaceful hour; let misfortune come upon him through me and mine; let fears haunt his sleep. Let him live in heavy labour and die in blood and

misery, and through me; and if I bear children to him, let the evil be upon them also."

She ceased. Montalvo looked at her and tried to speak. Again he looked and again he tried to speak, but no words would come.

Then the fear of Lysbeth van Hout fell upon him, that fear which was to haunt him all his life. He turned and crept from the room, and his face was like the face of an old man, nor, notwithstanding the height of his immediate success, could his heart have been more heavy if Lysbeth had been an angel sent straight from Heaven to proclaim to him the unalterable doom of God.