

CHAPTER VII

HENDRIK BRANT HAS A VISITOR

Nine months had gone by, and for more than eight of them Lysbeth had been known as the Countess Juan de Montalvo. Indeed of this there could be no doubt, since she was married with some ceremony by the Bishop in the Groote Kerk before the eyes of all men. Folk had wondered much at these hurried nuptials, though some of the more ill-natured shrugged their shoulders and said that when a young woman had compromised herself by long and lonely drives with a Spanish cavalier, and was in consequence dropped by her own admirer, why the best thing she could do was to marry as soon as possible.

So the pair, who looked handsome enough before the altar, were wed, and went to taste of such nuptial bliss as was reserved for them in Lysbeth's comfortable house in the Bree Straat. Here they lived almost alone, for Lysbeth's countrymen and women showed their disapproval of her conduct by avoiding her company, and, for reasons of his own, Montalvo did not encourage the visiting of Spaniards at his house. Moreover, the servants were changed, while Tante Clara and the girl Greta had also disappeared. Indeed, Lysbeth, finding out the false part which they had played towards her, dismissed them both before her marriage.

It will be guessed that after the events that led to their union Lysbeth

took little pleasure in her husband's society. She was not one of those women who can acquiesce in marriage by fraud or capture, and even learn to love the hand which snared them. So it came about that to Montalvo she spoke very seldom; indeed after the first week of marriage she only saw him on rare occasions. Very soon he found out that his presence was hateful to her, and turned her detestation to account with his usual cleverness. In other words, Lysbeth bought freedom by parting with her property--in fact, a regular tariff was established, so many guilders for a week's liberty, so many for a month's.

This was an arrangement that suited Montalvo well enough, for in his heart he was terrified of this woman, whose beautiful face had frozen into a perpetual mask of watchful hatred. He could not forget that frightful curse which had taken deep root in his superstitious mind, and already seemed to flourish there, for it was true that since she spoke it he had never known a quiet hour. How could he when he was haunted night and day by the fear lest his wife should murder him?

Surely, if ever Death looked out of a woman's eyes it looked out of hers, and it seemed to him that such a deed might trouble her conscience little; that she might consider it in the light of an execution, and not as a murder. Bah! he could not bear to think of it. What would it be to drink his wine one day and then feel a hand of fire gripping at his vitals because poison had been set within the cup; or, worse still, if anything could be worse, to wake at night and find a stiletto point grating against his backbone? Little wonder that Montalvo slept alone

and was always careful to lock his door.

He need not have taken such precautions; whatever her eyes might say, Lysbeth had no intention of killing this man. In that prayer of hers she had, as it were, placed the matter in the hand of a higher Power, and there she meant to leave it, feeling quite convinced that although vengeance might tarry it would fall at last. As for her money, he could have it. From the beginning her instinct told her that her husband's object was not amorous, but purely monetary, a fact of which she soon had plentiful proof, and her great, indeed her only hope was that when the wealth was gone he would go too. An otter, says the Dutch proverb, does not nest in a dry dyke.

But oh! what months those were, what dreadful months! From time to time she saw her husband--when he wanted cash--and every night she heard him returning home, often with unsteady steps. Twice or thrice a week also she was commanded to prepare a luxurious meal for himself and some six or eight companions, to be followed by a gambling party at which the stakes ruled high. Then in the morning, before he was up, strange people would arrive, Jews some of them, and wait till they could see him, or catch him as he slipped from the house by a back way. These men, Lysbeth discovered, were duns seeking payment of old debts. Under such constant calls her fortune, which if substantial was not great, melted rapidly. Soon the ready money was gone, then the shares in certain ships were sold, then the land and the house itself were mortgaged.

So the time went on.

Almost immediately after his refusal by Lysbeth, Dirk van Goorl had left Leyden, and returned to Alkmaar, where his father lived. His cousin and friend, however, Hendrik Brant, remained there studying the jeweller's art under the great master of filigree work, who was known as Petrus. One morning, as Hendrik was sitting at breakfast in his lodging, it was announced that a woman who would not give her name, wished to see him. Moved more by curiosity than by any other reason, he ordered her to be admitted. When she entered he was sorry, for in the gaunt person and dark-eyed face he recognised one against whom he had been warned by the elders of his church as a spy, a creature who was employed by the papal inquisitors to get up cases against heretics, and who was known as Black Meg.

"What is your business with me?" Brant asked sternly.

"Nothing to your hurt, worthy Heer, believe me, nothing to your hurt. Oh! yes, I know that tales are told against me, who only earn an honest living in an honest way, to keep my poor husband, who is an imbecile. Once alas! he followed that mad Anabaptist fool, John of Leyden, the fellow who set up as a king, and said that men might have as many wives as they wished. That was what sent my husband silly, but, thanks be

to the Saints, he has repented of his errors and is reconciled to the Church and Christian marriage, and now, I, who have a forgiving nature, am obliged to support him."

"Your business?" said Brant.

"Mynheer," she answered, dropping her husky voice, "you are a friend of the Countess Montalvo, she who was Lysbeth van Hout?"

"No, I am acquainted with her, that is all."

"At least you are a friend of the Heer Dirk van Goorl who has left this town for Alkmaar; he who was her lover?"

"Yes, I am his cousin, but he is not the lover of any married woman."

"No, no, of course not; love cannot look through a bridal veil, can it? Still, you are his friend, and, therefore, perhaps, her friend, and--she isn't happy."

"Indeed? I know nothing of her present life: she must reap the field which she has sown. That door is shut."

"Not altogether perhaps. I thought it might interest Dirk van Goorl to learn that it is still ajar."

"I don't see why it should. Fish merchants are not interested in rotten herrings; they write off the loss and send out the smack for a fresh cargo."

"The first fish we catch is ever the finest, Mynheer, and if we haven't quite caught it, oh! what a fine fish is that."

"I have no time to waste in chopping riddles. What is your errand? Tell it, or leave it untold, but be quick."

Black Meg leant forward, and the hoarse voice sank to a cavernous whisper.

"What will you give me," she asked, "if I prove to you that the Captain Montalvo is not married at all to Lysbeth van Hout?"

"It does not much matter what I would give you, for I saw the thing done in the Groote Kerk yonder."

"Things are not always done that seem to be done."

"Look here, woman, I have had enough of this," and Brant pointed to the door.

Black Meg did not stir, only she produced a packet from the bosom of her dress and laid it on the table.

"A man can't have two wives living at once, can he?"

"No, I suppose not--that is, legally."

"Well, if I show you that Montalvo has two wives, how much?"

Brant became interested. He hated Montalvo; he guessed, indeed he knew something of the part which the man had played in this infamous affair, and knew also that it would be a true kindness to Lysbeth to rid her of him.

"If you proved it," he said, "let us say two hundred florins."

"It is not enough, Mynheer."

"It is all I have to offer, and, mind you, what I promise to pay."

"Ah! yes, the other promises and doesn't pay--the rogue, the rogue," she added, striking a bony fist upon the table. "Well, I agree, and I ask no bond, for you merchant folk are not like cavaliers, your word is as good as your paper. Now read these," and she opened the packet and pushed its contents towards him.

With the exception of two miniatures, which he placed upon one side, they were letters written in Spanish and in a very delicate hand. Brant

knew Spanish well, and in twenty minutes he had read them all. They proved to be epistles from a lady who signed herself Juanita de Montalvo, written to the Count Juan de Montalvo, whom she addressed as her husband. Very piteous documents they were also, telling a tale that need not be set out here of heartless desertion; pleading for the writer's sake and for the sake of certain children, that the husband and father would return to them, or at least remit them means to live, for they, his wife and family, were sunk in great poverty.

"All this is sad enough," said Brant with a gesture of disgust as he glanced at the miniature of the lady and her children, "but it proves nothing. How are we to know that she is the man's wife?"

Black Meg put her hand into the bosom of her dress and produced another letter dated not more than three months ago. It was, or purported to be, written by the priest of the village where the lady lived, and was addressed to the Captain the Count Juan de Montalvo at Leyden. In substance this epistle was an earnest appeal to the noble count from one who had a right to speak, as the man who had christened him, taught him, and married him to his wife, either to return to her or to forward her the means to join him. "A dreadful rumour," the letter ended, "has reached us here in Spain that you have taken to wife a Dutch lady at Leyden named Van Hout, but this I do not believe, since never could you have committed such a crime before God and man. Write, write at once, my son, and disperse this black cloud of scandal which is gathering on your honoured and ancient name."

"How did you come by these, woman?" asked Brant.

"The last I had from a priest who brought it from Spain. I met him at The Hague, and offered to deliver the letter, as he had no safe means of sending it to Leyden. The others and the pictures I stole out of Montalvo's room."

"Indeed, most honest merchant, and what might you have been doing in his Excellency's room?"

"I will tell you," she answered, "for, as he never gave me my pay, my tongue is loosed. He wished for evidence that the Heer Dirk van Goorl was a heretic, and employed me to find it."

Brant's face hardened, and he became more watchful.

"Why did he wish such evidence?"

"To use it to prevent the marriage of Jufvrouw Lysbeth with the Heer Dirk van Goorl."

"How?"

Meg shrugged her shoulders. "By telling his secret to her so that she might dismiss him, I suppose, or more likely by threatening that, if she

did not, he would hand her lover over to the Inquisitors."

"I see. And did you get the evidence?"

"Well, I hid in the Heer Dirk's bedroom one night, and looking through a door saw him and another young man, whom I do not know, reading the Bible, and praying together."

"Indeed; what a terrible risk you must have run, for had those young men, or either of them, chanced to catch you, it is quite certain that you would not have left that room alive. You know these heretics think that they are justified in killing a spy at sight, and, upon my word, I do not blame them. In fact, my good woman," and he leaned forward and looked her straight in the eyes, "were I in the same position I would have knocked you on the head as readily as though you had been a rat."

Black Meg shrank back, and turned a little blue about the lips.

"Of course, Mynheer, of course, it is a rough game, and the poor agents of God must take their risks. Not that the other young man had any cause to fear. I wasn't paid to watch him, and--as I have said--I neither know nor care who he is."

"Well, who can say, that may be fortunate for you, especially if he should ever come to know or to care who you are. But it is no affair of ours, is it? Now, give me those letters. What, do you want your money

first? Very well," and, rising, Brant went to a cupboard and produced a small steel box, which he unlocked; and, having taken from it the appointed sum, locked it again. "There you are," he said; "oh, you needn't stare at the cupboard; the box won't live there after to-day, or anywhere in this house. By the way, I understand that Montalvo never paid you."

"Not a stiver," she answered with a sudden access of rage; "the low thief, he promised to pay me after his marriage, but instead of rewarding her who put him in that warm nest, I tell you that already he has squandered every florin of the noble lady's money in gambling and satisfying such debts as he was obliged to, so that to-day I believe that she is almost a beggar."

"I see," said Brant, "and now good morning, and look you, if we should chance to meet in the town, you will understand that I do not know you."

"I understand, Mynheer," said Black Meg with a grin and vanished.

When she had gone Brant rose and opened the window. "Bah!" he said, "the air is poisoned. But I think I frightened her, I think that I have nothing to fear. Yet who can tell? My God! she saw me reading the Bible, and Montalvo knows it! Well, it is some time ago now, and I must take my chance."

Ah! who could tell indeed?

Then, taking the miniatures and documents with him, Brant started to call upon his friend and co-religionist, the Heer Pieter van de Werff, Dirk van Goorl's friend, and Lysbeth's cousin, a young man for whose judgment and abilities he had a great respect. As a result of this visit, these two gentlemen left that afternoon for Brussels, the seat of Government, where they had very influential friends.

It will be sufficient to tell the upshot of their visit. Just at that time the Government of the Netherlands wished for its own reasons to stand well with the citizen class, and when those in authority learned of the dreadful fraud that had been played off upon a lady of note who was known to be a good Catholic, for the sole object of robbing her of her fortune, there was indignation in high places. Indeed, an order was issued, signed by a hand which could not be resisted--so deeply was one woman moved by the tale of another's wrong--that the Count Montalvo should be seized and put upon his trial, just as though he were any common Netherland malefactor. Moreover, since he was a man with many enemies, no one was found to stand between him and the Royal decree.

Three days later Montalvo made an announcement to Lysbeth. For a wonder he was supping at home alone with his wife, whose presence he had commanded. She obeyed and attended, sitting at the further end of the table, whence she rose from time to time to wait upon him with her own

hands. Watching him the while with her quiet eyes, she noticed that he was ill at ease.

"Cannot you speak?" he asked at last and savagely. "Do you think it is pleasant for a man to sit opposite a woman who looks like a corpse in her coffin till he wishes she were one?"

"So do I," answered Lysbeth, and again there was silence.

Presently she broke it. "What do you want?" she asked. "More money?"

"Of course I want money," he answered furiously.

"Then there is none; everything has gone, and the notary tells me that no one will advance another stiver on the house. All my jewellery is sold also."

He glanced at her hand. "You have still that ring," he said.

She looked at it. It was a hoop of gold set with emeralds of considerable value which her husband had given her before marriage and always insisted upon her wearing. In fact, it had been bought with the money which he borrowed from Dirk van Goorl.

"Take it," she said, smiling for the first time, and drawing off the ring she passed it over to him. He turned his head aside as he stretched

his hand towards the trinket lest his face should betray the shame which even he must feel.

"If your child should be a son," he muttered, "tell him that his father had nothing but a piece of advice to leave him; that he should never touch a dice-box."

"Are you going away then?" she asked.

"For a week or two I must. I have been warned that a difficulty has arisen, about which I need not trouble you. Doubtless you will hear of it soon enough, and though it is not true, I must leave Leyden until the thing blows over. In fact I am going now."

"You are about to desert me," she answered; "having got all my money, I say that you are going to desert me who am--thus! I see it in your face."

Montalvo turned away and pretended not to hear.

"Well, thank God for it," Lysbeth added, "only I wish that you could take your memory and everything else of yours with you."

As these bitter words passed her lips the door opened, and there entered one of his own subalterns, followed by four soldiers and a man in a lawyer's robe.

"What is this?" asked Montalvo furiously.

The subaltern saluted as he entered:

"My captain, forgive me, but I act under orders, and they are to arrest you alive, or," he added significantly, "dead."

"Upon what charge?" asked Montalvo.

"Here, notary, you had best read the charge," said the subaltern, "but perhaps the lady would like to retire first," he added awkwardly.

"No," answered Lysbeth, "it might concern me."

"Alas! Senora, I fear it does," put in the notary. Then he began to read the document, which was long and legal. But she was quick to understand. Before ever it was done Lysbeth knew that she was not the lawful wife of Count Juan de Montalvo, and that he was to be put upon his trial for his betrayal of her and the trick he had played the Church. So she was free--free, and overcome by that thought she staggered, fell, and swooned away.

When her eyes opened again, Montalvo, officer, notary, and soldiers, all had vanished.