

CHAPTER VIII

THE MARE'S STABLE

When Lysbeth's reason returned to her in that empty room, her first sense was one of wild exultation. She was free, she was not Montalvo's wife, never again could she be obliged to see him, never again could she be forced to endure the contamination of his touch--that was her thought. She was sure that the story was true; were it not true who could have moved the authorities to take action against him? Moreover, now that she had the key, a thousand things were explained, trivial enough in themselves, each of them, but in their sum amounting to proof positive of his guilt. Had he not spoken of some entanglement in Spain and of children? Had he not in his sleep--but it was needless to remember all these things. She was free! She was free! and there on the table still lay the symbol of her bondage, the emerald ring that was to give him the means of flight, a flight from this charge which he knew was hanging over him. She took it up, dashed it to the ground and stamped upon it. Next she fell upon her knees, praising and blessing God, and then, worn out, crept away to rest.

The morning came, the still and beautiful autumn morning, but now all her exultation had left her, and Lysbeth was depressed and heavy hearted. She rose and assisted the one servant who remained in the house to prepare their breakfast, taking no heed of the sidelong glances that the woman cast at her. Afterwards she went to the market to spend some

of her last florins in necessaries. Here and in the streets she became aware that she was the object of remark, for people nudged each other and stared at her. Moreover, as she hurried home appalled, her quick ear caught the conversation of two coarse women while they walked behind her.

"She's got it now," said one.

"Serve her right, too," answered the other, "for running after and marrying a Spanish don."

"Marrying?" broke in the first, "it was the best that she could do. She couldn't stop to ask questions. Some corpses must be buried quickly."

Glancing behind her, Lysbeth saw the creature nip her nostrils with her fingers, as though to shut out an evil smell.

Then she could bear it no longer, and turned upon them.

"You are evil slanderers," she said, and walked away swiftly, pursued by the sound of their loud, insulting laughter.

At the house she was told that two men were waiting to see her. They proved to be creditors clamouring for large sums of money, which she could not pay. Lysbeth told them that she knew nothing of the matter. Thereupon they showed her her own writing at the foot of deeds, and she

remembered that she had signed more things than she chose to keep count of, everything indeed that the man who called himself her husband put before her, if only to win an hour of blessed freedom from his presence. At length the duns went away vowing that they would have their money if they dragged the bed from under her.

After that came loneliness and silence. No friend appeared to cheer her. Indeed, she had no friends left, for by her husband's command she had broken off her acquaintance with all who after the strange circumstances connected with her marriage were still inclined to know her. He said that he would have no chattering Dutch vrouws about the house, and they said and believed that the Countess de Montalvo had become too proud to associate with those of her own class and people.

Midday came and she could eat no food; indeed, she had touched none for twenty-four hours; her gorge rose against it, although in her state she needed food. Now the shame of her position began to come home to Lysbeth. She was a wife and no wife; soon she must bear the burden of motherhood, and oh! what would that child be? And what should she be, its mother? What, too, would Dirk think of her? Dirk, for whom she had done and suffered all these things. Through the long afternoon hours she lay upon her bed thinking such thoughts as these till at length her mind gave and Lysbeth grew light-headed. Her brain became a chaos, a perfect hell of distorted imaginations.

Then out of its turmoil and confusion rose a vision and a desire; a

vision of peace and a desire for rest. But what rest was there for her except the rest of death? Well, why not die? God would forgive her, the Mother of God would plead for her who was shamed and broken-hearted and unfit to live. Even Dirk would think kindly of her when she was dead, though, doubtless, now if he met her he would cover his eyes with his hand. She was burning hot and she was thirsty. How cool the water would be on this fevered night. What could be better than to slip into it and slowly let it close above her poor aching head? She would go out and look at the water; in that, at any rate, there could be no harm.

She wrapped herself in a long cloak and drew its hood over her head. Then she slipped from the house and stole like a ghost through the darkling streets and out of the Maren or Sea Poort, where the guard let her pass thinking that she was a country woman returning to her village. Now the moon was rising, and by the light of it Lysbeth recognised the place. Here was the spot where she had stood on the day of the ice carnival, when that woman who was called Martha the Mare, and who said that she had known her father, had spoken to her. On that water she had galloped in Montalvo's sledge, and up yonder canal the race was run. She followed along its banks, remembering the reedy mere some miles away spotted with islets that were only visited from time to time by fishermen and wild-fowlers; the great Haarlemer Meer which covered many thousands of acres of ground. That mere she felt must look very cool and beautiful on such a night as this, and the wind would whisper sweetly among the tall bulrushes which fringed its banks.

On Lysbeth went and on; it was a long, long walk, but at last she came there, and, oh! the place was sweet and vast and lonely. For so far as her eye could reach in the light of the low moon there was nothing but glimmering water broken here and there by the reed-wreathed islands. Hark! how the frogs croaked and the bitterns boomed among the rushes. Look where the wild ducks swam leaving behind them broad trails of silver as their breasts broke the surface of the great mere into rippling lines.

There, on an island, not a bowshot from her, grew tufts of a daisy-like marsh bloom, white flowers such as she remembered gathering when she was a child. A desire came upon her to pluck some of these flowers, and the water was shallow; surely she could wade to the island, or if not what did it matter? Then she could turn to the bank again, or she might stay to sleep a while in the water; what did it matter? She stepped from the bank--how sweet and cool it felt to her feet! Now it was up to her knees, now it reached her middle, and now the little wavelets beat against her breast. But she would not go back, for there ahead of her was the island, and the white flowers were so close that she could count them, eight upon one bunch and twelve upon the next. Another step and the water struck her in the face, one more and it closed above her head. She rose, and a low cry broke from her lips.

Then, as in a dream, Lysbeth saw a skiff glide out from among the rushes

before her. She saw also a strange mutilated face, which she remembered dimly, bending over the edge of the boat, and a long, brown hand stretched out to clasp her, while a hoarse voice bade her keep still and fear nothing.

After this came a sound of singing in her ears and--darkness.

When Lysbeth woke again she found herself lying upon the ground, or rather upon a soft mattress of dry reeds and aromatic grasses. Looking round her she saw that she was in a hut, reed-roofed and plastered with thick mud. In one corner of this hut stood a fireplace with a chimney artfully built of clay, and on the fire of turfs boiled an earthen pot. Hanging from the roof by a string of twisted grass was a fish, fresh caught, a splendid pike, and near to it a bunch of smoked eels. Over her also was thrown a magnificent rug of otter skins. Noting these things, she gathered that she must be in the hovel of some fisherman.

Now by degrees the past came back to Lysbeth, and she remembered her parting with the man who called himself her husband; remembered also her moonlight flight and how she had waded out into the waters of the great mere to pluck the white flowers, and how, as they closed above her head a hand had been stretched out to save her. Lysbeth remembered, and remembering, she sighed aloud. The sound of her sighing seemed to attract the attention of some one who was listening outside the hut; at

any rate a rough door was opened or pushed aside and a figure entered.

"Are you awake, lady?" asked a hoarse voice.

"Yes," answered Lysbeth, "but tell me, how did I come here, and who are you?"

The figure stepped back so that the light from the open door fell full upon it. "Look, Carolus van Hout's daughter and Juan Montalvo's wife; those who have seen me once do not forget me."

Lysbeth sat up on the bed and stared at the gaunt, powerful form, the deep-set grey eyes, the wide-spread nostrils, the scarred, high cheek-bones, the teeth made prominent by some devil's work upon the lips, and the grizzled lock of hair that hung across the forehead. In an instant she knew her.

"You are Martha the Mare," she said.

"Yes, I am the Mare, none other, and you are in the Mare's stable. What has he been doing to you, that Spanish dog, that you came last night to ask the Great Water to hide you and your shame?"

Lysbeth made no answer; the story seemed hard to begin with this strange woman. Then Martha went on:

"What did I tell you, Lysbeth van Hout? Did I not say that your blood should warn you against the Spaniards? Well, well, you saved me from the ice and I have saved you from the water. Ah! who was it that led me to row round by that outer isle last night because I could not sleep? But what does it matter; God willed it so, and here you lie in the Mare's stable. Nay, do not answer me, first you must eat."

Then, going to the pot, she took it from the fire, pouring its contents into an earthen basin, and, at the smell of them, for the first time for days Lysbeth felt hungry. Of what that stew was compounded she never learned, but she ate it to the last spoonful and was thankful, while Martha, seated on the ground beside her, watched her with delight, from time to time stretching out a long, thin hand to touch the brown hair that hung about her shoulders.

"Come out and look," said Martha when her guest had done eating. And she led her through the doorway of the hut.

Lysbeth gazed round her, but in truth there was not much to see. The hut itself was hidden away in a little clump of swamp willows that grew upon a mound in the midst of a marshy plain, broken here and there by patches of reed and bulrushes. Walking across this plain for a hundred yards or so, they came to more reeds, and in them a boat hidden cunningly, for here was the water of the lake, and, not fifty paces away, what seemed to be the shore of an island. The Mare bade her get into the boat and rowed her across to this island, then round it to another, and thence to

another and yet another.

"Now tell me," she said, "upon which of them is my stable built?"

Lysbeth shook her head helplessly.

"You cannot tell, no, nor any living man; I say that no man lives who could find it, save I myself, who know the path there by night or by day. Look," and she pointed to the vast surface of the mere, "on this great sea are thousands of such islets, and before they find me the Spaniards must search them all, for here upon the lonely waters no spies or hound will help them." Then she began to row again without even looking round, and presently they were in the clump of reeds from which they had started.

"I must be going home," faltered Lysbeth.

"No," answered Martha, "it is too late, you have slept long. Look, the sun is westering fast, this night you must stop with me. Oh! do not be afraid, my fare is rough, but it is sweet and fresh and plenty; fish from the mere as much as you will, for who can catch them better than I? And water-fowl that I snare, yes, and their eggs; moreover, dried flesh and bacon which I get from the mainland, for there I have friends whom sometimes I meet at night."

So Lysbeth yielded, for the great peace of this lake pleased her. Oh!

after all that she had gone through it was like heaven to watch the sun sinking towards the quiet water, to hear the wild-fowl call, to see the fish leap and the halcyons flash by, and above all to be sure that by nothing short of a miracle could this divine silence, broken only by Nature's voices, be defiled with the sound of the hated accents of the man who had ruined and betrayed her. Yes, she was weary, and a strange unaccustomed langour crept over her; she would rest there this night also.

So they went back to the hut, and made ready their evening meal, and as she fried the fish over the fire of peats, verily Lysbeth found herself laughing like a girl again. Then they ate it with appetite, and after it was done, Mother Martha prayed aloud; yes, and without fear, although she knew Lysbeth to be a Catholic, read from her one treasure, a Testament, crouching there in the light of the fire and saying:

"See, lady, what a place this is for a heretic to hide in. Where else may a woman read from the Bible and fear no spy or priest?" Remembering a certain story, Lysbeth shivered at her words.

"Now," said the Mare, when she had finished reading, "tell me before you sleep, what it was that brought you into the waters of the Haarlemer Meer, and what that Spanish man has done to you. Do not be afraid, for though I am mad, or so they say, I can keep counsel, and between you and me are many bonds, Carolus van Hout's daughter, some of which you know and see, and some that you can neither know nor see, but which God will

weave in His own season."

Lysbeth looked at the weird countenance, distorted and made unhuman by long torment of body and mind, and found in it something to trust; yes, even signs of that sympathy which she so sorely needed. So she told her all the tale from the first word of it to the last.

The Mare listened in silence, for no story of evil perpetrated by a Spaniard seemed to move or astonish her, only when Lysbeth had done, she said:

"Ah! child, had you but known of me, and where to find me, you should have asked my aid."

"Why, mother, what could you have done?" answered Lysbeth.

"Done? I would have followed him by night until I found my chance in some lonely place, and there I would have----" Then she stretched out her bony hand to the red light of the fire, and Lysbeth saw that in it was a knife.

She sank back aghast.

"Why are you frightened, my pretty lady?" asked the Mare. "I tell you that I live on for only one thing--to kill Spaniards, yes, priests first and then the others. Oh! I have a long count to pay; for every time that

he was tortured a life, for every groan he uttered at the stake a life; yes, so many for the father and half as many for the son. Well, I shall live to be old, I know that I shall live to be old, and the count will be discharged, ay, to the last stiver."

As she spoke, the outlawed Water Wife had risen, and the flare of the fire struck full upon her. It was an awful face that Lysbeth beheld by the light of it, full of fierceness and energy, the face of an inspired avenger, dread and unnatural, yet not altogether repulsive. Indeed, that countenance was such as an imaginative artist might give to one of the beasts in the Book of Revelation. Amazed and terrified, Lysbeth said nothing.

"I frighten you, gentle one," went on the Mare, "you who, although you have suffered, are still full of the milk of human kindness. Wait, woman, wait till they have murdered the man you love, till your heart is like my heart, and you also live on, not for love's sake, not for life's sake, but to be a Sword, a Sword, a Sword in the hand of God!"

"Cease, I pray you," said Lysbeth in a low voice; "I am faint, I am ill."

Ill she was indeed, and before morning there, in that lonely hovel on the island of the mere, a son was born to her.

When she was strong enough her nurse spoke:

"Will you keep the brat, or shall I kill it?" she asked.

"How can I kill my child?" said Lysbeth.

"It is the Spaniard's child also, and remember the curse you told me of, your own curse uttered on this thing before ever you were married? If it lives that curse shall cling to it, and through it you, too, shall be accursed. Best let me kill it and have done."

"How can I kill my own child? Touch it not," answered Lysbeth sullenly.

So the black-eyed boy lived and throve.

Somewhat slowly, lying there in the island hut, Lysbeth won back her strength. The Mare, or Mother Martha, as Lysbeth had now learned to call her, tended her as few midwives would have done. Food, too, she had in plenty, for Martha snared the fowl and caught the fish, or she made visits to the mainland, and thence brought eggs and milk and flesh, which, so she said, the boors of that country gave her as much as she wanted of them. Also, to while away the hours, she would read to her out of the Testament, and from that reading Lysbeth learnt many things which

until then she had not known. Indeed, before it was done with--Catholic though she was--she began to wonder in what lay the wickedness of these heretics, and how it came about that they were worthy of death and torment, since, sooth to say, in this Book she could find no law to which their lives and doctrine seemed to give offence.

Thus it happened that Martha, the fierce, half-crazy water-dweller, sowed the seed in Lysbeth's heart that was to bear fruit in due season.

When three weeks had gone by and Lysbeth was on her feet again, though as yet scarcely strong enough to travel, Martha told her that she had business which would keep her from home a night, but what the business was she refused to say. Accordingly on a certain afternoon, having left good store of all things to Lysbeth's hand, the Mare departed in her skiff, nor did she return till after midday on the morrow. Now Lysbeth talked of leaving the island, but Martha would not suffer it, saying that if she desired to go she must swim, and indeed when Lysbeth went to look she found that the boat had been hidden elsewhere. So, nothing loth, she stayed on, and in the crisp autumn air her health and beauty came back to her, till she was once more much as she had been before the day when she went sledging with Juan de Montalvo.

On a November morning, leaving her infant in the hut with Martha, who had sworn to her on the Bible that she would not harm it, Lysbeth walked to the extremity of the island. During the night the first sharp frost of late autumn had fallen, making a thin film of ice upon the surface

of the lake, which melted rapidly as the sun grew high. The air too was very clear and calm, and among the reeds, now turning golden at their tips, the finches flew and chirped, forgetful that winter was at hand. So sweet and peaceful was the scene that Lysbeth, also forgetful of many things, surveyed it with a kind of rapture. She knew not why, but her heart was happy that morning; it was as though a dark cloud had passed from her life; as though the blue skies of peace and joy were spread about her. Doubtless other clouds might appear upon the horizon; doubtless in their season they would appear, but she felt that this horizon was as yet a long way off, and meanwhile above her bent the tender sky, serene and sweet and happy.

Upon the crisp grass behind her suddenly she heard a footfall, a new footfall, not that of the long, stealthy stride of Martha, who was called the Mare, and swung round upon her heel to meet it.

Oh, God! Who was this? Oh, God! there before her stood Dirk van Goorl. Dirk, and no other than Dirk, unless she dreamed, Dirk with his kind face wreathed in a happy smile, Dirk with his arms outstretched towards her. Lysbeth said nothing, she could not speak, only she stood still gazing, gazing, gazing, and always he came on, till now his arms were round her. Then she sprang back.

"Do not touch me," she cried, "remember what I am and why I stay here."

"I know well what you are, Lysbeth," he answered slowly; "you are the

holiest and purest woman who ever walked this earth; you are an angel upon this earth; you are the woman who gave her honour to save the man she loved. Oh! be silent, be silent, I have heard the story; I know it every word, and here I kneel before you, and, next to my God, I worship you, Lysbeth, I worship you."

"But the child," she murmured, "it lives, and it is mine and the man's."

Dirk's face hardened a little, but he only answered:

"We must bear our burdens; you have borne yours, I must bear mine," and he seized her hands and kissed them, yes, and the hem of her garment and kissed it also.

So these two plighted their troth.

Afterwards Lysbeth heard all the story. Montalvo had been put upon his trial, and, as it chanced, things went hard with him. Among his judges one was a great Netherlander lord, who desired to uphold the rights of his countrymen; one was a high ecclesiastic, who was furious because of the fraud that had been played upon the Church, which had been trapped into celebrating a bigamous marriage; and a third was a Spanish grandee, who, as it happened, knew the family of the first wife who had been deserted.

Therefore, for the luckless Montalvo, when the case had been proved

to the hilt against him by the evidence of the priest who brought the letter, of the wife's letters, and of the truculent Black Meg, who now found an opportunity of paying back "hot water for cold," there was little mercy. His character was bad, and it was said, moreover, that because of his cruelties and the shame she had suffered at his hands, Lysbeth van Hout had committed suicide. At least, this was certain, that she was seen running at night towards the Haarlemer Meer, and that after this, search as her friends would, nothing more could be heard of her.

So, that an example might be made, although he writhed and fenced his best, the noble captain, Count Juan de Montalvo, was sent to serve for fourteen years in the galleys as a common slave. And there, for the while, was an end of him.

There also was an end of the strange and tragic courtship of Dirk van Goorl and Lysbeth van Hout.

Six months afterwards they were married, and by Dirk's wish took the child, who was christened Adrian, to live with them. A few months later Lysbeth entered the community of the New Religion, and less than two years after her marriage a son was born to her, the hero of this story, who was named Foy.

As it happened, she bore no other children.