

CHAPTER XVII

BETROTHED

At nightfall on the morrow Adrian returned as appointed, and was admitted into the same room, where he found Black Meg, who greeted him openly by name and handed to him a tiny phial containing a fluid clear as water. This, however, was scarcely to be wondered at, seeing that it was water and nothing else.

"Will it really work upon her heart?" asked Adrian, eyeing the stuff.

"Ay," answered the hag, "that's a wondrous medicine, and those who drink it go crazed with love for the giver. It is compounded according to the Master's own receipt, from very costly tasteless herbs that grow only in the deserts of Arabia."

Adrian understood, and fumbled in his pocket. Meg stretched out her hand to receive the honorarium. It was a long, skinny hand, with long, skinny fingers, but there was this peculiarity about it, that one of these fingers chanced to be missing. She saw his eyes fixed upon the gap, and rushed into an explanation.

"I have met with an accident," Meg explained. "In cutting up a pig the chopper caught this finger and severed it."

"Did you wear a ring on it?" asked Adrian.

"Yes," she replied, with sombre fury.

"How very strange!" ejaculated Adrian.

"Why?"

"Because I have seen a finger, a woman's long finger with a gold ring on it, that might have come off your hand. I suppose the pork-butcher picked it up for a keepsake."

"May be, Heer Adrian, but where is it now?"

"Oh! it is, or was, in a bottle of spirits tied by a thread to the cork."

Meg's evil face contorted itself. "Get me that bottle," she said hoarsely. "Look you, Heer Adrian, I am doing much for you, do this for me."

"What do you want it for?"

"To give it Christian burial," she replied sourly. "It is not fitting or lucky that a person's finger should stand about in a bottle like a caul or a lizard. Get it, I say get it--I ask no question where--or, young

man, you will have little help in your love affairs from me."

"Do you wish the dagger hilt also?" he asked mischievously.

She looked at him out of the corners of her black eyes. This Adrian knew too much.

"I want the finger and the ring on it which I lost in chopping up the pig."

"Perhaps, mother, you would like the pig, too. Are you not making a mistake? Weren't you trying to cut his throat, and didn't he bite off the finger?"

"If I want the pig, I'll search his sty. You bring that bottle, or----"

She did not finish her sentence, for the door opened, and through it came the sage.

"Quarrelling," he said in a tone of reproof. "What about? Let me guess," and he passed his hand over his shadowed brow. "Ah! I see, there is a finger in it, a finger of fate? No, not that," and, moved by a fresh inspiration, he grasped Meg's hand, and added, "Now I have it. Bring it back, friend Adrian, bring it back; a dead finger is most unlucky to all save its owner. As a favour to me."

"Very well," said Adrian.

"My gifts grow," mused the master. "I have a vision of this honest hand and of a great sword--but, there, it is not worth while, too small a matter. Leave us, mother. It shall be returned, my word on it. Yes, gold ring and all. And now, young friend, let us talk. You have the philtre? Well, I can promise you that it is a good one, it would almost bring Galatea from her marble. Pygmalion must have known that secret. But tell me something of your life, your daily thoughts and daily deeds, for when I give my friendship I love to live in the life of my friends."

Thus encouraged, Adrian told him a great deal, so much, indeed, that the Senor Ramiro, nodding in the shadow of his hood, began to wonder whether the spy behind the cupboard door, expert as he was, could possibly make his pen keep pace with these outpourings. Oh! it was a dreary task, but he kept to it, and by putting in a sentence here and there artfully turned the conversation to matters of faith.

"No need to fence with me," he said presently. "I know how you have been brought up, how through no fault of your own you have wandered out of the warm bosom of the true Church to sit at the clay feet of the conventicle. You doubt it? Well, let me look again, let me look. Yes, only last week you were seated in a whitewashed room overhanging the market-place. I see it all--an ugly little man with a harsh voice is preaching, preaching what I think blasphemy. Baskets--baskets? What have baskets to do with him?"

"I believe he used to make them," interrupted Adrian, taking the bait.

"That may be it, or perhaps he will be buried in one; at any rate he is strangely mixed up with baskets. Well, there are others with you, a middle-aged, heavy-faced man, is he not Dirk van Goorl, your stepfather? And--wait--a young fellow with rather a pleasant face, also a relation. I see his name, but I can't spell it. F--F--o--i, faith in the French tongue, odd name for a heretic."

"F-o-y--Foy," interrupted Adrian again.

"Indeed! Strange that I should have mistaken the last letter, but in the spirit sight and hearing these things chance: then there is a great man with a red beard."

"No, Master, you're wrong," said Adrian with emphasis; "Martin was not there; he stopped behind to watch the house."

"Are you sure?" asked the seer doubtfully. "I look and I seem to see him," and he stared blankly at the wall.

"So you might see him often enough, but not at last week's meeting."

It is needless to follow the conversation further. The seer, by aid of a ball of crystal that he produced from the folds of his cloak, described

his spirit visions, and the pupil corrected them from his intimate knowledge of the facts, until the Senor Ramiro and his confederates in the cupboard had enough evidence, as evidence was understood in those days, to burn Dirk, Foy, and Martin three times over, and, if it should suit him, Adrian also. Then for that night they parted.

Next evening Adrian was back again with the finger in the bottle, which Meg grabbed as a pike snatches at a frog, and further fascinating conversation ensued. Indeed, Adrian found this well of mystic lore tempered with shrewd advice upon love affairs and other worldly matters, and with flattery of his own person and gifts, singularly attractive.

Several times did he return thus, for as it chanced Elsa had been unwell and kept her room, so that he discovered no opportunity of administering the magic philtre that was to cause her heart to burn with love for him.

At length, when even the patient Ramiro was almost worn out by the young gentleman's lengthy visits, the luck changed. Elsa appeared one day at dinner, and with great adroitness Adrian, quite unseen of anyone, contrived to empty the phial into her goblet of water, which, as he rejoiced to see, she drank to the last drop.

But no opportunity such as he sought ensued, for Elsa, overcome, doubtless, by an unwonted rush of emotion, retired to battle it in her own chamber. Since it was impossible to follow and propose to her there, Adrian, possessing his soul in such patience as he could command, sat

in the sitting-room to await her return, for he knew that it was not her habit to go out until five o'clock. As it happened, however, Elsa had other arrangements for the afternoon, since she had promised to accompany Lysbeth upon several visits to the wives of neighbours, and then to meet her cousin Foy at the factory and walk with him in the meadows beyond the town.

So while Adrian, lost in dreams, waited in the sitting-room Elsa and Lysbeth left the house by the side door.

They had paid three of their visits when their path chanced to lead them past the old town prison which was called the Gevangenhuis. This place formed one of the gateways of the city, for it was built in the walls and opened on to the moat, water surrounding it on all sides. In front of its massive door, that was guarded by two soldiers, a small crowd had gathered on the drawbridge and in the street beyond, apparently in expectation of somebody or something. Lysbeth looked at the three-storied frowning building and shuddered, for it was here that heretics were put upon their trial, and here, too, many of them were done to death after the dreadful fashion of the day.

"Hasten," she said to Elsa, as she pushed through the crowd, "for doubtless some horror passes here."

"Have no fear," answered an elderly and good-natured woman who overheard

her, "we are only waiting to hear the new governor of the prison read his deed of appointment."

As she spoke the doors were thrown open and a man--he was a well-known executioner named Baptiste--came out carrying a sword in one hand and a bunch of keys on a salver in the other. After him followed the governor gallantly dressed and escorted by a company of soldiers and the officials of the prison. Drawing a scroll from beneath his cloak he began to read it rapidly and in an almost inaudible voice.

It was his commission as governor of the prison signed by Alva himself, and set out in full his powers, which were considerable, his responsibilities which were small, and other matters, excepting only the sum of money that he had paid for the office, that, given certain conditions, was, as a matter of fact, sold to the highest bidder. As may be guessed, this post of governor of a gaol in one of the large Netherland cities was lucrative enough to those who did not object to such a fashion of growing rich. So lucrative was it, indeed, that the salary supposed to attach to the office was never paid; at least its occupant was expected to help himself to it out of heretical pockets.

As he finished reading through the paper the new governor looked up, to see, perhaps, what impression he had produced upon his audience. Now Elsa saw his face for the first time and gripped Lysbeth's arm.

"It is Ramiro," she whispered, "Ramiro the spy, the man who dogged my

father at The Hague."

As well might she have spoken to a statue. Indeed, of a sudden Lysbeth seemed to be smitten into stone, for there she stood staring with a blanched and meaningless face at the face of the man opposite to her. Well might she stare, for she also knew him. Across the gulf of years, one-eyed, bearded, withered, scarred as he was by suffering, passion and evil thoughts, she knew him, for there before her stood one whom she deemed dead, the wretch whom she had believed to be her husband, Juan de

Montalvo. Some magnetism drew his gaze to her; out of all the faces of that crowd it was hers that leapt to his eye. He trembled and grew white; he turned away, and swiftly was gone back into the hell of the Gevangenhuis. Like a demon he had come out of it to survey the human world beyond, and search for victims there; like a demon he went back into his own place. So at least it seemed to Lysbeth.

"Come, come," she muttered and, drawing the girl with her, passed out of the crowd.

Elsa began to talk in a strained voice that from time to time broke into a sob.

"That is the man," she said. "He hounded down my father; it was his wealth he wanted, but my father swore that he would die before he should win it, and he is dead--dead in the Inquisition, and that man is his

murderer."

Lysbeth made no answer, never a word she uttered, till presently they halted at a mean and humble door. Then she spoke for the first time in cold and constrained accents.

"I am going in here to visit the Vrouw Jansen; you have heard of her, the wife of him whom they burned. She sent to me to say that she is sick, I know not of what, but there is smallpox about; I have heard of four cases of it in the city, so, cousin, it is wisest that you should not enter here. Give me the basket with the food and wine. Look, yonder is the factory, quite close at hand, and there you will find Foy. Oh! never mind Ramiro. What is done is done. Go and walk with Foy, and for a while forget--Ramiro."

At the door of the factory Elsa found Foy awaiting her, and they walked together through one of the gates of the city into the pleasant meadows that lay beyond. At first they did not speak much, for each of them was occupied with thoughts which pressed their tongues to silence. When they were clear of the town, however, Elsa could contain herself no more; indeed, the anguish awakened in her mind by the sight of Ramiro working upon nerves already overstrung had made her half-hysterical. She began to speak; the words broke from her like water from a dam which it has breached. She told Foy that she had seen the man, and more--much more. All the misery which she had suffered, all the love for the father who was lost to her.

At last Elsa ceased outworn, and, standing still there upon the river bank she wrung her hands and wept. Till now Foy had said nothing, for his good spirits and cheerful readiness seemed to have forsaken him. Even now he said nothing. All he did was to put his arms about this sweet maid's waist, and, drawing her to him, to kiss her upon brow and eyes and lips. She did not resist; it never seemed to occur to her to show resentment; indeed, she let her head sink upon his shoulder like the head of a little child, and there sobbed herself to silence. At last she lifted her face and asked very simply:

"What do you want with me, Foy van Goorl?"

"What?" he repeated; "why I want to be your husband."

"Is this a time for marrying and giving in marriage?" she asked again, but almost as though she were speaking to herself.

"I don't know that it is," he replied, "but it seems the only thing to do, and in such days two are better than one."

She drew away and looked at him, shaking her head sadly. "My father," she began----

"Yes," he interrupted brightening, "thank you for mentioning him, that reminds me. He wished this, so I hope now that he is gone you will take

the same view."

"It is rather late to talk about that, isn't it, Foy?" she stammered, looking at his shoulder and smoothing her ruffled hair with her small white hand. "But what do you mean?"

So word for word, as nearly as he could remember it, he told her all that Hendrik Brant had said to him in the cellar at The Hague before they had entered upon the desperate adventure of their flight to the Haarlemer Meer. "He wished it, you see," he ended.

"My thought was always his thought, and--Foy--I wish it also."

"Priceless things are not lightly won," said he, quoting Brant's words as though by some afterthought.

"There he must have been talking of the treasure, Foy," she answered, her face lightening to a smile.

"Ay, of the treasure, sweet, the treasure of your dear heart."

"A poor thing, Foy, but I think that--it rings true."

"It had need, Elsa, yet the best of coin may crack with rough usage."

"Mine will wear till death, Foy."

"I ask no more, Elsa. When I am dead, spend it elsewhere; I shall find it again above where there is no marrying or giving in marriage."

"There would be but small change left to spend, Foy, so look to your own gold and--see that you do not alter its image and superscription, for metal will melt in the furnace, and each queen has her stamp."

"Enough," he broke in impatiently. "Why do you talk of such things, and in these riddles which puzzle me?"

"Because, because, we are not married yet, and--the words are not mine--precious things are dearly won. Perfect love and perfect peace cannot be bought with a few sweet words and kisses; they must be earned in trial and tribulation."

"Of which I have no doubt we shall find plenty," Foy replied cheerfully.

"Meanwhile, the kisses make a good road to travel on."

After this Elsa did not argue any more.

At length they turned and walked homeward through the quiet evening twilight, hand clasped in hand, and were happy in their way. It was not a very demonstrative way, for the Dutch have never been excitable, or at least they do not show their excitement. Moreover, the conditions of this betrothal were peculiar; it was as though their hands had been

joined from a deathbed, the deathbed of Hendrik Brant, the martyr of The Hague, whose new-shed blood cried out to Heaven for vengeance. This sense pressing on both of them did not tend towards rapturous outbursts of youthful passion, and even if they could have shaken it off and let their young blood have rein, there remained another sense--that of dangers ahead of them.

"Two are better than one," Foy had said, and for her own reasons she had not wished to argue the point, still Elsa felt that to it there was another side. If two could comfort each other, could help each other, could love each other, could they not also suffer for each other? In short, by doubling their lives, did they not also double their anxieties, or if children should come, treble and quadruple them? This is true of all marriage, but how much more was it true in such days and in such a case as that of Foy and Elsa, both of them heretics, both of them rich, and, therefore, both liable at a moment's notice to be haled to the torment and the stake? Knowing these things, and having but just seen the hated face of Ramiro, it is not wonderful that although she rejoiced as any woman must that the man to whom her soul turned had declared himself her lover, Elsa could only drink of this joyful cup with a chastened and a fearful spirit. Nor is it wonderful that even in the hour of his triumph Foy's buoyant and hopeful nature was chilled by the shadow of her fears and the forebodings of his own heart.

When Lysbeth parted from Elsa that afternoon she went straight to the chamber of the Vrouw Jansen. It was a poor place, for after the execution of her husband his wretched widow had been robbed of all her property and now existed upon the charity of her co-religionists. Lysbeth found her in bed, an old woman nursing her, who said that she thought the patient was suffering from a fever. Lysbeth leant over the bed and kissed the sick woman, but started back when she saw that the glands of her neck were swollen into great lumps, while the face was flushed and the eyes so bloodshot as to be almost red. Still she knew her visitor, for she whispered:

"What is the matter with me, Vrouw van Goorl? Is it the smallpox coming on? Tell me, friend, the doctor would not speak."

"I fear that it is worse; it is the plague," said Lysbeth, startled into candour.

The poor girl laughed hoarsely. "Oh! I hoped it," she said. "I am glad, I am glad, for now I shall die and go to join him. But I wish that I had caught it before," she rambled on to herself, "for then I would have taken it to him in prison and they couldn't have treated him as they did." Suddenly she seemed to come to herself, for she added, "Go away, Vrouw van Goorl, go quickly or you may catch my sickness."

"If so, I am afraid that the mischief is done, for I have kissed you," answered Lysbeth. "But I do not fear such things, though perhaps if I

took it, this would save me many a trouble. Still, there are others to think of, and I will go." So, having knelt down to pray awhile by the patient, and given the old nurse the basket of soup and food, Lysbeth went.

Next morning she heard that the Vrouw Jansen was dead, the pest that struck her being of the most fatal sort.

Lysbeth knew that she had run great risk, for there is no disease more infectious than the plague. She determined, therefore, that so soon as she reached home she would burn her dress and other articles of clothing and purify herself with the fumes of herbs. Then she dismissed the matter from her mind, which was already filled with another thought, a dominant, soul-possessing thought.

Oh God, Montalvo had returned to Leyden! Out of the blackness of the past, out of the gloom of the galleys, had arisen this evil genius of her life; yes, and, by a strange fatality, of the life of Elsa Brant also, since it was her, she swore, who had dragged down her father.

Lysbeth was a brave woman, one who had passed through many dangers, but

her whole heart turned sick with terror at the sight of this man, and sick it must remain till she, or he, were dead. She could well guess what he had come to seek. It was that cursed treasure of Hendrik Brant's which had drawn him. She knew from Elsa that for a year at least the man Ramiro had been plotting to steal this money at The Hague. He had failed

there, failed with overwhelming and shameful loss through the bravery and resource of her son Foy and their henchman, Red Martin. Now he had discovered their identity; he was aware that they held the secret of the hiding-place of that accursed hoard, they and no others, and he had established himself in Leyden to wring it out of them. It was clear, clear as the setting orb of the red sun before her. She knew the man--had she not lived with him?--and there could be no doubt about it, and--he was the new governor of the Gevangenhuis. Doubtless he has purchased that post for his own dark purposes and--to be near them.

Sick and half blind with the intensity of her dread, Lysbeth staggered home. She must tell Dirk, that was her one thought; but no, she had been in contact with the plague, first she must purify herself. So she went to her room, and although it was summer, lit a great fire on the hearth, and in it burned her garments. Then she bathed and fumigated her hair and body over a brazier of strong herbs, such as in those days of frequent and virulent sickness housewives kept at hand, after which she dressed herself afresh and went to seek her husband. She found him at a desk in his private room reading some paper, which at her approach he shuffled into a drawer.

"What is that, Dirk?" she asked with sudden suspicion.

He pretended not to hear, and she repeated the query.

"Well, wife, if you wish to know," he answered in his blunt fashion, "it

is my will."

"Why are you reading your will?" she asked again, beginning to tremble, for her nerves were afire, and this simple accident struck her as something awful and ominous.

"For no particular reason, wife," he replied quietly, "only that we all must die, early or late. There is no escape from that, and in these times it is more often early than late, so it is as well to be sure that everything is in order for those who come after us. Now, since we are on the subject, which I have never cared to speak about, listen to me."

"What about, husband?"

"Why, about my will. Look you, Hendrik Brant and his treasure have taught me a lesson. I am not a man of his substance, or a tenth of it, but in some countries I should be called rich, for I have worked hard and God has prospered me. Well, of late I have been realising where I could, also the bulk of my savings is in cash. But the cash is not here, not in this country at all. You know my correspondents, Munt and Brown, of Norwich, in England, to whom we ship our goods for the English market. They are honest folk, and Munt owes me everything, almost to his life. Well, they have the money, it has reached them safely, thanks be to God, and with it a counterpart of this my will duly attested, and here is their letter of acknowledgment stating that they have laid it out carefully at interest upon mortgage on great estates in Norfolk

where it lies to my order, or that of my heirs, and that a duplicate acknowledgment has been filed in their English registries in case this should go astray. Little remains here except this house and the factory, and even on those I have raised money. Meanwhile the business is left to live on, and beyond it the rents which will come from England, so that whether I be living or dead you need fear no want. But what is the matter with you, Lysbeth? You look strange."

"Oh! husband, husband," she gasped, "Juan de Montalvo is here again. He has appeared as the new governor of the gaol. I saw him this afternoon, I cannot be mistaken, although he has lost an eye and is much changed."

Dirk's jaw dropped and his florid face whitened. "Juan de Montalvo!" he said. "I heard that he was dead long ago."

"You are mistaken, husband, a devil never dies. He is seeking Brant's treasure, and he knows that we have its secret. You can guess the rest. More, now that I think of it, I have heard that a strange Spaniard is lodging with Hague Simon, he whom they call the Butcher, and Black Meg, of whom we have cause to know. Doubtless it is he, and--Dirk, death overshadows us."

"Why should he know of Brant's treasure, wife?"

"Because he is Ramiro, the man who dogged him down, the man who followed the ship Swallow to the Haarlemer Meer. Elsa was with me this

afternoon, she knew him again."

Dirk thought a while, resting his head upon his hand. Then he lifted it and said:

"I am very glad that I sent the money to Munt and Brown, Heaven gave me that thought. Well, wife, what is your counsel now?"

"My counsel is that we should fly from Leyden--all of us, yes, this very night before worse happens."

He smiled. "That cannot be; there are no means of flight, and under the new laws we could not pass the gates; that trick has been played too often. Still, in a day or two, when I have had time to arrange, we might escape if you still wish to go."

"To-night, to-night," she urged, "or some of us stay for ever."

"I tell you, wife, it is not possible. Am I a rat that I should be bolted from my hole thus by this ferret of a Montalvo? I am a man of peace and no longer young, but let him beware lest I stop here long enough to pass a sword through him."

"So be it, husband," she replied, "but I think it is through my heart that the sword will pass," and she burst out weeping.

Supper that night was a somewhat melancholy meal. Dirk and Lysbeth sat at the ends of the table in silence. On one side of it were placed Foy and Elsa, who were also silent for a very different reason, while opposite to them was Adrian, who watched Elsa with an anxious and inquiring eye.

That the love potion worked he was certain, for she looked confused and a little flushed; also, as would be natural under the circumstances, she avoided his glance and made pretence to be interested in Foy, who seemed rather more stupid than usual. Well, so soon as he could find his chance all this would be cleared up, but meanwhile the general gloom and silence were affecting his nerves.

"What have you been doing this afternoon, mother?" Adrian asked presently.

"I, son?" she replied with a start, "I have been visiting the unhappy Vrouw Jansen, whom I found very sick."

"What is the matter with her, mother?"

Lysbeth's mind, which had wandered away, again returned to the subject at hand with an effort.

"The matter? Oh! she has the plague."

"The plague!" exclaimed Adrian, springing to his feet, "do you mean to say you have been consorting with a woman who has the plague?"

"I fear so," she answered with a smile, "but do not be frightened, Adrian, I have burnt my clothes and fumigated myself."

Still Adrian was frightened. His recent experience of sickness had been ample, and although he was no coward he had a special dislike of infectious diseases, which at the time were many.

"It is horrible," he said, "horrible. I only hope that we--I mean you--may escape. The house is unbearably close. I am going to walk in the courtyard," and away he went, for the moment, at any rate, forgetting all about Elsa and the love potion.