

CHAPTER XXI

HOW MARTIN TURNED COWARD

The sergeant left the room and presently returned, followed by the Professor, a tall hang-dog looking rogue, clad in rusty black, with broad, horny hands, and nails bitten down to the quick.

"Good morning to you, Professor," said Ramiro. "Here are two subjects for your gentle art. You will begin upon the big one, and from time to time report progress, and be sure, if he becomes willing to reveal what I want to know--never mind what it is, that is my affair--come to summon me at once."

"What methods does your Excellency wish employed?"

"Man, I leave that to you. Am I a master of your filthy trade? Any method, provided it is effective."

"I don't like the look of him," grumbled the Professor, gnawing at his short nails. "I have heard about this mad brute; he is capable of anything."

"Then take the whole guard with you; one naked wretch can't do much against eight armed men. And, listen; take the young gentleman also, and let him see what goes on; the experience may modify his views, but don't

touch him without telling me. I have reports to write, and shall stop here."

"I don't like the look of him," repeated the Professor. "I say that he makes me feel cold down the back--he has the evil eye; I'd rather begin with the young one."

"Begone and do what I tell you," said Ramiro, glaring at him fiercely. "Guard, attend upon the executioner Baptiste."

"Bring them along," grumbled the Professor.

"No need for violence, worthy sir," muttered Martin; "show the way and we follow," and stooping down he lifted Foy from his chair.

Then the procession started. First went Baptiste and four soldiers, next came Martin bearing Foy, and after them four more soldiers. They passed out of the courtroom into the passage beneath the archway. Martin, shuffling along slowly, glanced down it and saw that on the wall, among some other weapons, hung his own sword, Silence. The big doors were locked and barred, but at the wicket by the side of them stood a sentry, whose office it was to let people in and out upon their lawful business. Making pretence to shift Foy in his arms, Martin scanned this wicket as narrowly as time would allow, and observed that it seemed to be secured by means of iron bolts at the top and the bottom, but that it was not locked, since the socket into which the tongue went was empty.

Doubtless, while he was on guard there, the porter did not think it necessary to go to the pains of using the great key that hung at his girdle.

The sergeant in charge of the victims opened a low and massive door, which was almost exactly opposite to that of the court-room, by shooting back a bolt and pushing it ajar. Evidently the place beyond at some time or other had been used as a prison, which accounted for the bolt on the outside. A few seconds later and they were locked into the torture-chamber of the Gevangenhuis, which was nothing more than a good-sized vault like that of a cellar, lit with lamps, for no light of day was suffered to enter here, and by a horrid little fire that flickered on the floor. The furnitures of the place may be guessed at; those that are curious about such things can satisfy themselves by examining the mediaeval prisons at The Hague and elsewhere. Let us pass them over as unfit even for description, although these terrors, of which we scarcely like to speak to-day, were very familiar to the sight of our ancestors of but three centuries ago.

Martin sat Foy down upon some terrible engine that roughly resembled a chair, and once more let his blue eyes wander about him. Amongst the various implements was one leaning against the wall, not very far from the door, which excited his especial interest. It was made for a dreadful purpose, but Martin reflected only that it seemed to be a stout bar of iron exactly suited to the breaking of anybody's head.

"Come," sneered the Professor, "undress that big gentleman while I make ready his little bed."

So the soldiers stripped Martin, nor did they assault him with sneers and insults, for they remembered the man's deeds of yesterday, and admired his strength and endurance, and the huge, muscular frame beneath their hands.

"Now he is ready if you are," said the sergeant.

The Professor rubbed his hands.

"Come on, my little man," he said.

Then Martin's nerve gave way, and he began to shiver and to shake.

"Oho!" laughed the Professor, "even in this stuffy place he is cold without his clothes; well we must warm him--we must warm him."

"Who would have thought that a big fellow, who can fight well, too, was such a coward at heart," said the sergeant of the guard to his companions. "After all, he will give no more play than a Rhine salmon."

Martin heard the words, and was seized with such an intense access of fear that he burst into a sweat all over his body.

"I can't bear it," he said, covering his eyes--which, however, he did not shut--with his fingers. "The rack was always my nightmare, and now I see why. I'll tell all I know."

"Oh! Martin, Martin," broke out Foy in a kind of wail, "I was doing my best to keep my own courage; I never dreamt that you would turn coward."

"Every well has a bottom, master," whined Martin, "and mine is the rack. Forgive me, but I can't abide the sight of it."

Foy stared at him open-mouthed. Could he believe his ears? And if Martin was so horribly scared, why did his eye glint in that peculiar way between his fingers? He had seen this light in it before, no later indeed than the last afternoon just as the soldiers tried to rush the stair. He gave up the problem as insoluble, but from that moment he watched very narrowly.

"Do you hear what this young lady says, Professor Baptiste?" said the sergeant. "She says" (imitating Martin's whine) "that she'll tell all she knows."

"Then the great cur might have saved me this trouble. Stop here with him. I must go and inform the Governor; those are my orders. No, no, you needn't give him clothes yet--that cloth is enough--one can never be sure."

Then he walked to the door and began to unlock it, as he went striking Martin in the face with the back of his hand, and saying,

"Take that, cur." Whereat, as Foy observed, the cowed prisoner perspired more profusely than before, and shrank away towards the wall.

God in Heaven! What had happened? The door of the torture den was opened, and suddenly, uttering the words, "To me, Foy!" Martin made a movement more quick than he could follow. Something flew up and fell with a fearful thud upon the executioner in the doorway. The guard sprang forward, and a great bar of iron, hurled with awful force into their faces, swept two of them broken to the ground. Another instant, and one arm was about his middle, the next they were outside the door, Martin standing straddle-legged over the body of the dead Professor Baptiste.

They were outside the door, but it was not shut, for now, on the other side of it six men were pushing with all their might and main. Martin dropped Foy. "Take his dagger and look out for the porter," he gasped as he hurled himself against the door.

In a second Foy had drawn the weapon out of the belt of the dead man, and wheeled round. The porter from the wicket was running on them sword in hand. Foy forgot that he was wounded--for the moment his leg seemed sound again. He doubled himself up and sprang at the man like

a wild-cat, as one springs who has the rack behind him. There was no fight, yet in that thrust the skill which Martin had taught him so patiently served him well, for the sword of the Spaniard passed over his head, whereas Foy's long dagger went through the porter's throat. A glance showed Foy that from him there was nothing more to fear, so he turned.

"Help if you can," groaned Martin, as well he might, for with his naked shoulder wedged against one of the cross pieces of the door he was striving to press it to so that the bolt could be shot into its socket.

Heavens! what a struggle was that. Martin's blue eyes seemed to be starting from his head, his tongue lolled out and the muscles of his body rose in great knots. Foy hopped to him and pushed as well as he was able. It was little that he could do standing upon one leg only, for now the sinews of the other had given way again; still that little made the difference, for let the soldiers on the further side strive as they might, slowly, very slowly, the thick door quivered to its frame. Martin glanced at the bolt, for he could not speak, and with his left hand Foy slowly worked it forward. It was stiff with disuse, it caught upon the edge of the socket.

"Closer," he gasped.

Martin made an effort so fierce that it was hideous to behold, for beneath the pressure the blood trickled from his nostrils, but the door

went in the sixteenth of an inch and the rusty bolt creaked home into its stone notch.

Martin stepped back, and for a moment stood swaying like a man about to fall. Then, recovering himself, he leapt at the sword Silence which hung upon the wall and passed its thong over his right wrist. Next he turned towards the door of the court-room.

"Where are you going?" asked Foy.

"To bid him farewell," hissed Martin.

"You're mad," said Foy; "let's fly while we can. That door may give--they are shouting."

"Perhaps you are right," answered Martin doubtfully. "Come. On to my back with you."

A few seconds later the two soldiers on guard outside the Gevangenhuis were amazed to see a huge, red-bearded man, naked save for a loin-cloth, and waving a great bare sword, who carried upon his back another man, rush straight at them with a roar. They never waited his onset; they were terrified and thought that he was a devil. This way and that they sprang, and the man with his burden passed between them over the little drawbridge down the street of the city, heading for the Morsch poort.

Finding their wits again the guards started in pursuit, but a voice from among the passers-by cried out:

"It is Martin, Red Martin, and Foy van Goorl, who escape from the Gevangenhuis," and instantly a stone flew towards the soldiers.

Then, bearing in mind the fate of their comrades on the yesterday, those men scuttled back to the friendly shelter of the prison gate. When at length Ramiro, growing weary of waiting, came out from an inner chamber beyond the court-room, where he had been writing, to find the Professor and the porter dead in the passage, and the yelling guard locked in his own torture-chamber, why, then those sentries declared that they had seen nothing at all of prisoners clothed or naked.

For a while he believed them, and mighty was the hunt from the clock-tower of the Gevangenhuis down to the lowest stone of its cellars, yes, and even in the waters of the moat. But when the Governor found out the truth it went very ill with those soldiers, and still worse with the guard from whom Martin had escaped in the torture-room like an eel out of the hand of a fish-wife. For by this time Ramiro's temper was roused, and he began to think that he had done ill to return to Leyden.

But he had still a card to play. In a certain room in the Gevangenhuis sat another victim. Compared to the dreadful dens where Foy and Martin had been confined this was quite a pleasant chamber upon the first floor, being reserved, indeed, for political prisoners of rank, or

officers captured upon the field who were held to ransom. Thus it had a real window, secured, however, by a double set of iron bars, which overlooked the little inner courtyard and the gaol kitchen. Also it was furnished after a fashion, and was more or less clean. This prisoner was none other than Dirk van Goorl, who had been neatly captured as he returned towards his house after making certain arrangements for the flight of his family, and hurried away to the gaol. On that morning Dirk also had been put upon his trial before the squeaky-voiced and agitated ex-tailor. He also had been condemned to death, the method of his end, as in the case of Foy and Martin, being left in the hands of the Governor. Then they led him back to his room, and shot the bolts upon him there.

Some hours later a man entered his cell, to the door of which he was escorted by soldiers, bringing him food and drink. He was one of the cooks and, as it chanced, a talkative fellow.

"What passes in this prison, friend?" asked Dirk looking up, "that I see people running to and fro across the courtyard, and hear trampling and shouts in the passages? Is the Prince of Orange coming, perchance, to set all of us poor prisoners free?" and he smiled sadly.

"Umph!" grunted the man, "we have prisoners here who set themselves free without waiting for any Prince of Orange. Magicians they must be--magicians and nothing less."

Dirk's interest was excited. Putting his hand into his pocket he drew out a gold piece, which he gave to the man.

"Friend," he said, "you cook my food, do you not, and look after me? Well, I have a few of these about me, and if you prove kind they may as well find their way into your pocket as into those of your betters. Do you understand?"

The man nodded, took the money, and thanked him.

"Now," went on Dirk, "while you clean the room, tell me about this escape, for small things amuse those who hear no tidings."

"Well, Mynheer," answered the man, "this is the tale of it so far as I can gather. Yesterday they captured two fellows, heretics I suppose, who made a good fight and did them much damage in a warehouse. I don't know their names, for I am a stranger to this town, but I saw them brought in; a young fellow, who seemed to be wounded in the leg and neck, and a great red-bearded giant of a man. They were put upon their trial this morning, and afterwards sent across, the two of them together, with eight men to guard them, to call upon the Professor--you understand?"

Dirk nodded, for this Professor was well known in Leyden. "And then?" he asked.

"And then? Why, Mother in Heaven! they came out, that's all--the big

man stripped and carrying the other on his back. Yes, they killed the Professor with the branding iron, and out they came--like ripe peas from a pod."

"Impossible!" said Dirk.

"Very well, perhaps you know better than I do; perhaps it is impossible also that they should have pushed the door to, let all those Spanish cocks inside do what they might, and bolted them in; perhaps it is impossible that they should have spitted the porter and got clean away through the outside guards, the big one still carrying the other upon his back. Perhaps all these things are impossible, but they're true nevertheless, and if you don't believe me, after they get away from the whipping-post, just ask the bridge guard why they ran so fast when they saw that great, naked, blue-eyed fellow come at them roaring like a lion, with his big sword flashing above his head. Oh! there's a pretty to-do, I can tell you, a pretty to-do, and in meal or malt we shall all pay the price of it, from the Governor down. Indeed, some backs are paying it now."

"But, friend, were they not taken outside the gaol?"

"Taken? Who was to take them when the rascally mob made them an escort five hundred strong as they went down the street? No, they are far away from Leyden now, you may swear to that. I must be going, but if there is anything you'd like while you're here just tell me, and as you are so

liberal I'll try and see that you get what you want."

As the bolts were shot home behind the man Dirk clasped his hands and almost laughed aloud with joy. So Martin was free and Foy was free, and until they could be taken again the secret of the treasure remained safe. Montalvo would never have it, of that he was sure. And as for his own fate? Well, he cared little about it, especially as the Inquisitor had decreed that, being a man of so much importance, he was not to be put to the "question." This order, however, was prompted, not by mercy, but by discretion, since the fellow knew that, like other of the Holland towns, Leyden was on the verge of open revolt, and feared lest, should it leak out that one of the wealthiest and most respected of its burghers was actually being tormented for his faith's sake, the populace might step over the boundary line.

When Adrian had seen the wounded Spanish soldiers and their bearers torn to pieces by the rabble, and had heard the great door of the Gevangenhuis close upon Foy and Martin, he turned to go home with his evil news. But for a long while the mob would not go home, and had it not been that the drawbridge over the moat in front of the prison was up, and that they had no means of crossing it, probably they would have attacked the building then and there. Presently, however, rain began to fall and they melted away, wondering, not too happily, whether, in that time of daily slaughter, the Duke of Alva would think a few common

soldiers worth while making a stir about.

Adrian entered the upper room to tell his tidings, since they must be told, and found it occupied by his mother alone. She was sitting straight upright in her chair, her hands resting upon her knees, staring out of the window with a face like marble.

"I cannot find him," he began, "but Foy and Martin are taken after a great fight in which Foy was wounded. They are in the Gevangenhuis."

"I know all," interrupted Lysbeth in a cold, heavy voice. "My husband is taken also. Someone must have betrayed them. May God reward him! Leave me, Adrian."

Then Adrian turned and crept away to his own chamber, his heart so full of remorse and shame that at times he thought that it must burst. Weak as he was, wicked as he was, he had never intended this, but now, oh Heaven! his brother Foy and the man who had been his benefactor, whom his mother loved more than her life, were through him given over to a death worse than the mind could conceive. Somehow that night wore away, and of this we may be sure, that it did not go half as heavily with the victims in their dungeon as with the betrayer in his free comfort. Thrice during its dark hours, indeed, Adrian was on the point of destroying himself; once even he set the hilt of his sword upon the floor and its edge against his breast, and then at the prick of steel shrank back.

Better would it have been for him, perhaps, could he have kept his courage; at least he would have been spared much added shame and misery.

So soon as Adrian had left her Lysbeth rose, robed herself, and took her way to the house of her cousin, van de Werff, now a successful citizen of middle age and the burgomaster-elect of Leyden.

"You have heard the news?" she said.

"Alas! cousin, I have," he answered, "and it is very terrible. Is it true that this treasure of Hendrik Brant's is at the bottom of it all?"

She nodded, and answered, "I believe so."

"Then could they not bargain for their lives by surrendering its secret?"

"Perhaps. That is, Foy and Martin might--Dirk does not know its whereabouts--he refused to know, but they have sworn that they will die first."

"Why, cousin?"

"Because they promised as much to Hendrik Brant, who believed that if his gold could be kept from the Spaniards it would do some mighty service to his country in time to come, and who has persuaded them all that is so."

"Then God grant it may be true," said van de Werff with a sigh, "for otherwise it is sad to think that more lives should be sacrificed for the sake of a heap of pelf."

"I know it, cousin, but I come to you to save those lives."

"How?"

"How?" she answered fiercely. "Why, by raising the town; by attacking the Gevangenhuis and rescuing them, by driving the Spaniards out of Leyden----"

"And thereby bringing upon ourselves the fate of Mons. Would you see this place also given over to sack by the soldiers of Noircarnes and Don Frederic?"

"I care not what I see so long as I save my son and my husband," she answered desperately.

"There speaks the woman, not the patriot. It is better that three men

should die than a whole city full."

"That is a strange argument to find in your mouth, cousin, the argument of Caiaphas the Jew."

"Nay, Lysbeth, be not wroth with me, for what can I say? The Spanish troops in Leyden are not many, it is true, but more have been sent for from Haarlem and elsewhere after the troubles of yesterday arising out of the capture of Foy and Martin, and in forty-eight hours at the longest they will be here. This town is not provisioned for a siege, its citizens are not trained to arms, and we have little powder stored. Moreover, the city council is divided. For the killing of the Spanish soldiers we may compound, but if we attack the Gevangenhuis, that is open rebellion, and we shall bring the army of Don Frederic down upon us."

"What matter, cousin? It will come sooner or later."

"Then let it come later, when we are more prepared to beat it off. Oh! do not reproach me, for I can bear it ill, I who am working day and night to make ready for the hour of trial. I love your husband and your son, my heart bleeds for your sorrow and their doom, but at present I can do nothing, nothing. You must bear your burden, they must bear theirs, I must bear mine; we must all wander through the night not knowing where we wander till God causes the dawn to break, the dawn of freedom and retribution."

Lysbeth made no answer, only she rose and stumbled from the house, while van de Werff sat down groaning bitterly and praying for help and light.