

CHAPTER XXII

A MEETING AND A PARTING

Lysbeth did not sleep that night, for even if her misery would have let her sleep, she could not because of the physical fire that burnt in her veins, and the strange pangs of agony which pierced her head. At first she thought little of them, but when at last the cold light of the autumn morning dawned she went to a mirror and examined herself, and there upon her neck she found a hard red swelling of the size of a nut. Then Lysbeth knew that she had caught the plague from the Vrouw Jansen, and laughed aloud, a dreary little laugh, since if all she loved were to die, it seemed to her good that she should die also. Elsa was abed prostrated with grief, and, shutting herself in her room, Lysbeth suffered none to come near her except one woman who she knew had recovered from the plague in past years, but even to her she said nothing of her sickness.

About eleven o'clock in the morning this woman rushed into her chamber crying, "They have escaped! They have escaped!"

"Who?" gasped Lysbeth, springing from her chair.

"Your son Foy and Red Martin," and she told the tale of how the naked man with the naked sword, carrying the wounded Foy upon his back, burst his way roaring from the Gevangenhuis, and, protected by the people,

had run through the town and out of the Morsch poort, heading for the Haarlemer Meer.

As she listened Lysbeth's eyes flamed up with a fire of pride.

"Oh! good and faithful servant," she murmured, "you have saved my son, but alas! your master you could not save."

Another hour passed, and the woman appeared again bearing a letter.

"Who brought this?" she asked.

"A Spanish soldier, mistress."

Then she cut the silk and read it. It was unsigned, and ran:--

"One in authority sends greetings to the Vrouw van Goorl. If the Vrouw van Goorl would save the life of the man who is dearest to her, she is prayed to veil herself and follow the bearer of this letter. For her own safety she need have no fear; it is assured hereby."

Lysbeth thought awhile. This might be a trick; very probably it was a trick to take her. Well, if so, what did it matter since she would rather die with her husband than live on without him; moreover, why

should she turn aside from death, she in whose veins the plague was burning? But there was another thing worse than that. She could guess who had penned this letter; it even seemed to her, after all these many years, that she recognised the writing, disguised though it was. Could she face him! Well, why not--for Dirk's sake?

And if she refused and Dirk was done to death, would she not reproach herself, if she lived to remember it, because she had left a stone unturned?

"Give me my cloak and veil," she said to the woman, "and now go tell the man that I am coming."

At the door she found the soldier, who saluted her, and said respectfully, "Follow me, lady, but at a little distance."

So they started, and through side streets Lysbeth was led to a back entrance of the Gevangenhuis, which opened and closed behind her mysteriously, leaving her wondering whether she would ever pass that gate again. Within a man was waiting--she did not even notice what kind of man--who also said, "Follow me, lady," and led her through gloomy passages and various doors into a little empty chamber furnished with a table and two chairs. Presently the door opened and shut; then her whole being shrank and sickened as though beneath the breath of poison, for there before her, still the same, still handsome, although so marred by time and scars and evil, stood the man who had been her husband, Juan

de Montalvo. But whatever she felt Lysbeth showed nothing of it in her face, which remained white and stern; moreover, even before she looked at him she was aware that he feared her more than she feared him.

It was true, for from this woman's eyes went out a sword of terror that seemed to pierce Montalvo's heart. Back flew his mind to the scene of their betrothal, and the awful words that she had spoken then re-echoed in his ears. How strangely things had come round, for on that day, as on this, the stake at issue was the life of Dirk van Goorl. In the old times she had bought it, paying as its price herself, her fortune, and, worst of all, to a woman, her lover's scorn and wonder. What would she be prepared to pay now? Well, fortunately, he need ask but little of her. And yet his soul mistrusted him of these bargainings with Lysbeth van Hout for the life of Dirk van Goorl. The first had ended ill with a sentence of fourteen years in the galleys, most of which he had served. How would the second end?

By way of answer there seemed to rise before the eye of Montalvo's mind a measureless black gulf, and, falling, falling, falling through its infinite depths one miserable figure, a mere tiny point that served to show the vastness it explored. The point turned over, and he saw its face as in a crystal--it was his own.

This unpleasant nightmare of the imagination came in an instant, and in an instant passed. The next Montalvo, courteous and composed, was bowing before his visitor and praying her to be seated.

"It is most good of you, Vrouw van Goorl," he began, "to have responded so promptly to my invitation."

"Perhaps, Count de Montalvo," she replied, "you will do me the favour to set out your business in as few words as possible."

"Most certainly; that is my desire. Let me free your mind of apprehension. The past has mingled memories for both of us, some of them bitter, some, let me hope, sweet," and he laid his hand upon his heart and sighed. "But it is a dead past, so, dear lady, let us agree to bury it in a fitting silence."

Lysbeth made no answer, only her mouth grew a trifle more stern.

"Now, one word more, and I will come to the point. Let me congratulate you upon the gallant deeds of a gallant son. Of course his courage and dexterity, with that of the red giant, Martin, have told against myself, have, in short, lost me a trick in the game. But I am an old soldier, and I can assure you that the details of their fight yesterday at the factory, and of their marvellous escape from--from--well, painful surroundings this morning, have stirred my blood and made my heart beat fast."

"I have heard the tale; do not trouble to repeat it," said Lysbeth. "It is only what I expected of them, but I thank God that it has pleased Him

to let them live on so that in due course they may fearfully avenge a beloved father and master."

Montalvo coughed and turned his head with the idea of avoiding that ghastly nightmare of a pitiful little man falling down a fathomless gulf which had sprung up suddenly in his mind again.

"Well," he went on, "a truce to compliments. They escaped, and I am glad of it, whatever murders they may contemplate in the future. Yes, notwithstanding their great crimes and manslayings in the past I am glad that they escaped, although it was my duty to keep them while I could--and if I should catch them it will be my duty--but I needn't talk of that to you. Of course, however, you know, there is one gentleman who was not quite so fortunate."

"My husband?"

"Yes, your worthy husband, who, happily for my reputation as captain of one of His Majesty's prisons, occupies an upstairs room."

"What of him?" asked Lysbeth.

"Dear lady, don't be over anxious; there is nothing so wearing as anxiety. I was coming to the matter." Then, with a sudden change of manner, he added, "It is needful, Lysbeth, that I should set out the situation."

"What situation do you mean?"

"Well, principally that of the treasure."

"What treasure?"

"Oh! woman, do not waste time in trying to fool me. The treasure, the vast, the incalculable treasure of Hendrik Brant which Foy van Goorl and Martin, who have escaped"--and he ground his teeth together at the anguish of the thought--"disposed of somewhere in the Haarlemer Meer."

"Well, what about this treasure?"

"I want it, that is all."

"Then you had best go to seek it."

"That is my intention, and I shall begin the search--in the heart of Dirk van Goorl," he added, slowly crushing the handkerchief he held with his long fingers as though it were a living thing that could be choked to death.

Lysbeth never stirred, she had expected this.

"You will find it a poor mine to dig in," she said, "for he knows nothing of the whereabouts of this money. Nobody knows anything of it now. Martin hid it, as I understand, and lost the paper, so it will lie there till the Haarlemer Meer is drained."

"Dear me! Do you know I have heard that story before; yes, from the excellent Martin himself--and, do you know, I don't quite believe it."

"I cannot help what you believe or do not believe. You may remember that it was always my habit to speak the truth."

"Quite so, but others may be less conscientious. See here," and drawing a paper from his doublet, he held it before her. It was nothing less than the death-warrant of Dirk van Goorl, signed by the Inquisitor, duly authorised thereto.

Mechanically she read it and understood.

"You will observe," he went on, "that the method of the criminal's execution is left to the good wisdom of our well-beloved--etc., in plain language, to me. Now might I trouble you so far as to look out of this little window? What do you see in front of you? A kitchen? Quite so; always a homely and pleasant sight in the eyes of an excellent housewife like yourself. And--do you mind bending forward a little? What do you see up there? A small barred window? Well, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that a hungry man, a man who grows hungrier and hungrier,

sat behind that window watching the cooks at their work and seeing the meat carried into this kitchen, to come out an hour or two later as hot, steaming, savoury joints, while he wasted, wasted, wasted and starved, starved, starved. Don't you think, my dear lady, that this would be a very unpleasant experience for that man?"

"Are you a devil?" gasped Lysbeth, springing back.

"I have never regarded myself as such, but if you seek a definition, I should say that I am a hard-working, necessitous, and somewhat unfortunate gentleman who has been driven to rough methods in order to secure a comfortable old age. I can assure you that I do not wish to starve anybody; I wish only to find Hendrik Brant's treasure, and if your worthy husband won't tell me where it is, why I must make him, that is all. In six or eight days under my treatment I am convinced that he will become quite fluent on the subject, for there is nothing that should cause a fat burgher, accustomed to good living, to open his heart more than a total lack of the victuals which he can see and smell. Did you ever hear the story of an ancient gentleman called Tantalus? These old fables have a wonderful way of adapting themselves to the needs and circumstances of us moderns, haven't they?"

Then Lysbeth's pride broke down, and, in the abandonment of her despair, flinging herself upon her knees before this monster, she begged for her husband's life, begged, in the name of God, yes, and even in the name of Montalvo's son, Adrian. So low had her misery brought her that she

pleaded with the man by the son of shame whom she had borne to him.

He prayed her to rise. "I want to save your husband's life," he said. "I give you my word that if only he will tell me what I desire to know, I will save it; yes, although the risk is great, I will even manage his escape, and I shall ask you to go upstairs presently and explain my amiable intentions to him." Then he thought a moment and added, "But you mentioned one Adrian. Pray do you mean the gentleman whose signature appears here?" and he handed her another document, saying, "Read it quietly, there is no hurry. The good Dirk is not starving yet; I am informed, indeed, that he has just made an excellent breakfast--not his last by many thousands, let us hope."

Lysbeth took the sheets and glanced at them. Then her intelligence awoke, and she read on fiercely until her eye came to the well-known signature at the foot of the last page. She cast the roll down with a cry as though a serpent had sprung from its pages and bitten her.

"I fear that you are pained," said Montalvo sympathetically, "and no wonder, for myself I have gone through such disillusionments, and know how they wound a generous nature. That's why I showed you this document,

because I also am generous and wish to warn you against this young gentleman, who, I understand, you allege is my son. You see the person who would betray his brother might even go a step further and betray his mother, so, if you take my advice, you will keep an eye upon the young

man. Also I am bound to remind you that it is more or less your own fault. It is a most unlucky thing to curse a child before it is born--you remember the incident? That curse has come home to roost with a vengeance. What a warning against giving way to the passion of the moment!"

Lysbeth heeded him no longer; she was thinking as she had never thought before. At that moment, as though by an inspiration, there floated into her mind the words of the dead Vrouw Jansen: "The plague, I wish that I had caught it before, for then I would have taken it to him in prison, and they couldn't have treated him as they did." Dirk was in prison, and Dirk was to be starved to death, for, whatever Montalvo might think, he did not know the secret, and, therefore, could not tell it. And she--she had the plague on her; she knew its symptoms well, and its poison was burning in her every vein, although she still could think and speak and walk.

Well, why not? It would be no crime. Indeed, if it was a crime, she cared little; it would be better that he should die of the plague in five days, or perhaps in two, if it worked quickly, as it often did with the full-blooded, than that he should linger on starving for twelve or more, and perhaps be tormented besides.

Swiftly, very swiftly, Lysbeth came to her dreadful decision. Then she spoke in a hoarse voice.

"What do you wish me to do?"

"I wish you to reason with your husband, and to persuade him to cease from his obstinacy, and to surrender to me the secret of the hiding-place of Brant's hoard. In that event, so soon as I have proved the truth of what he tells me, I undertake that he shall be set at liberty unharmed, and that, meanwhile, he shall be well treated."

"And if I will not, or he will not, or cannot?"

"Then I have told you the alternative, and to show you that I am not joking, I will now write and sign the order. Then, if you decline this mission, or if it is fruitless, I will hand it to the officer before your eyes--and within the next ten days or so let you know the results, or witness them if you wish."

"I will go," she said, "but I must see him alone."

"It is unusual," he answered, "but provided you satisfy me that you carry no weapon, I do not know that I need object."

So, when Montalvo had written his order and scattered dust on it from the pounce-box, for he was a man of neat and methodical habits, he himself with every possible courtesy conducted Lysbeth to her husband's prison. Having ushered her into it, with a cheerful "Friend van Goorl, I bring you a visitor," he locked the door upon them, and patiently waited

outside.

It matters not what passed within. Whether Lysbeth told her husband of her dread yet sacred purpose, or did not tell him; whether he ever learned of the perfidy of Adrian, or did not learn it; what were their parting words--their parting prayers, all these things matter not; indeed, the last are too holy to be written. Let us bow our heads and pass them by in silence, and let the reader imagine them as he will.

Growing impatient at length, Montalvo unlocked the prison door and opened it, to discover Lysbeth and her husband kneeling side by side in the centre of the room like the figures on some ancient marble monument. They heard him and rose. Then Dirk folded his wife in his arms in a long, last embrace, and, loosing her, held one hand above her head in blessing, as with the other he pointed to the door.

So infinitely pathetic was this dumb show of farewell, for no word passed between them while he was present, that not only his barbed gibes, but the questions that he meant to ask, died upon the lips of Montalvo. Try as he might he could not speak them here.

"Come," he said, and Lysbeth passed out.

At the door she turned to look, and there, in the centre of the room,

still stood her husband, tears streaming from his eyes, down a face radiant with an unearthly smile, and his right hand lifted towards the heavens. And so she left him.

Presently Montalvo and Lysbeth were together again in the little room.

"I fear," he said, "from what I saw just now, that your mission has failed."

"It has failed," she answered in such a voice as might be dragged by an evil magic from the lips of a corpse. "He does not know the secret you seek, and, therefore, he cannot tell it."

"I am sorry that I cannot believe you," said Montalvo, "so"--and he stretched out his hand towards a bell upon the table.

"Stop," she said; "for your own sake stop. Man, will you really commit this awful, this useless crime? Think of the reckoning that must be paid here and hereafter; think of me, the woman you dishonoured, standing before the Judgment Seat of God, and bearing witness against your naked, shivering soul. Think of him, the good and harmless man whom you are about cruelly to butcher, crying in the ear of Christ, 'Look upon Juan de Montalvo, my pitiless murderer----'"

"Silence," shouted Montalvo, yet shrinking back against the wall as though to avoid a sword-thrust. "Silence, you ill-omened witch, with your talk of God and judgment. It is too late, I tell you, it is too late; my hands are too red with blood, my heart is too black with sin, upon the tablets of my mind is written too long a record. What more can this one crime matter, and--do you understand?--I must have money, money to buy my pleasures, money to make my last years happy, and my deathbed soft. I have suffered enough, I have toiled enough, and I will win wealth and peace who am now once more a beggar. Yes, had you twenty husbands, I would crush the life out of all of them inch by inch to win the gold that I desire."

As he spoke and the passions in him broke through their crust of cunning and reserve, his face changed. Now Lysbeth, watching for some sign of pity, knew that hope was dead, for his countenance was as it had been on that day six-and-twenty years ago, when she sat at his side while the great race was run. There was the same starting eyeball, the same shining fangs appeared between the curled lips, and above them the moustachios, now grown grey, touched the high cheekbones. It was as in the fable of the weremen, who, at a magic sign or word, put off their human aspect and become beasts. So it had chanced to the spirit of Montalvo, shining through his flesh like some baleful marsh-light through the mist. It was a thing which God had forgotten, a thing that had burst the kindly mould of its humanity, and wrapt itself in the robe and mask of such a wolf as might raven about the cliffs of hell. Only

there was fear on the face of the wolf, that inhuman face which, this side of the grave, she was yet destined to see once more.

The fit passed, and Montalvo sank down gasping, while even in her woe and agony Lysbeth shuddered at this naked vision of a Satan-haunted soul.

"I have one more thing to ask," she said. "Since my husband must die, suffer that I die with him. Will you refuse this also, and cause the cup of your crimes to flow over, and the last angel of God's mercy to flee away?"

"Yes," he answered. "You, woman with the evil eye, do you suppose that I wish you here to bring all the ills you prate of upon my head? I say that I am afraid of you. Why, for your sake, once, years ago, I made a vow to the Blessed Virgin that, whatever I worked on men, I would never again lift a hand against a woman. To that oath I look to help me at the last, for I have kept it sacredly, and am keeping it now, else by this time both you and the girl, Elsa, might have been stretched upon the rack. No, Lysbeth, get you gone, and take your curses with you," and he snatched and rang the bell.

A soldier entered the room, saluted, and asked his commands.

"Take this order," he said, "to the officer in charge of the heretic, Dirk van Goorl; it details the method of his execution. Let it be

strictly adhered to, and report made to me each morning of the condition of the prisoner. Stay, show this lady from the prison."

The man saluted again and went out of the door. After him followed Lysbeth. She spoke no more, but as she passed she looked at Montalvo, and he knew well that though she might be gone, yet her curse remained behind.

The plague was on her, the plague was on her, her head and bones were racked with pain, and the swords of sorrow pierced her poor heart. But Lysbeth's mind was still clear, and her limbs still supported her. She reached her home and walked upstairs to the sitting room, commanding the servant to find the Heer Adrian and bid him join her there.

In the room was Elsa, who ran to her crying,

"Is it true? Is it true?"

"It is true, daughter, that Foy and Martin have escaped----"

"Oh! God is good!" wept the girl.

"And that my husband is a prisoner and condemned to death."

"Ah!" gasped Elsa, "I am selfish."

"It is natural that a woman should think first of the man she loves. No, do not come near me; I fear that I am stricken with the pest."

"I am not afraid of that," answered Elsa. "Did I never tell you? As a child I had it in The Hague."

"That, at least, is good news among much that is very ill; but be silent, here comes Adrian, to whom I wish to speak. Nay, you need not leave us; it is best that you should learn the truth."

Presently Adrian entered, and Elsa, watching everything, noticed that he looked sadly changed and ill.

"You sent for me, mother," he began, with some attempt at his old pompous air. Then he caught sight of her face and was silent.

"I have been to the Gevangenhuis, Adrian," she said, "and I have news to tell you. As you may have heard, your brother Foy and our servant Martin have escaped, I know not whither. They escaped out of the very jaws of worse than death, out of the torture-chamber, indeed, by killing that wretch who was known as the Professor, and the warden of the gate, Martin carrying Foy, who is wounded, upon his back."

"I am indeed rejoiced," cried Adrian excitedly.

"Hypocrite, be silent," hissed his mother, and he knew that the worst

had overtaken him.

"My husband, your stepfather, has not escaped; he is in the prison still, for there I have just bidden him farewell, and the sentence upon him is that he shall be starved to death in a cell overlooking the kitchen."

"Oh! oh!" cried Elsa, and Adrian groaned.

"It was my good, or my evil, fortune," went on Lysbeth, in a voice of ice, "to see the written evidence upon which my husband, your brother Foy, and Martin were condemned to death, on the grounds of heresy, rebellion, and the killing of the king's servants. At the foot of it, duly witnessed, stands the signature of--Adrian van Goorl."

Elsa's jaw fell. She stared at the traitor like one paralysed, while Adrian, seizing the back of a chair, rested upon it, and rocked his body to and fro.

"Have you anything to say?" asked Lysbeth.

There was still one chance for the wretched man--had he been more dishonest than he was. He might have denied all knowledge of the signature. But to do this never occurred to him. Instead, he plunged into a wandering, scarcely intelligible, explanation, for even in his dreadful plight his vanity would not permit him to tell all the truth

before Elsa. Moreover, in that fearful silence, soon he became utterly bewildered, till at length he hardly knew what he was saying, and in the end came to a full stop.

"I understand you to admit that you signed this paper in the house of Hague Simon, and in the presence of a man called Ramiro, who is Governor of the prison, and who showed it to me," said Lysbeth, lifting her head which had sunk upon her breast.

"Yes, mother, I signed something, but----"

"I wish to hear no more," interrupted Lysbeth. "Whether your motive was jealousy, or greed, or wickedness of heart, or fear, you signed that which, had you been a man, you would not have yourself to be torn to pieces with redhot pincers you put a pen to it. Moreover, you gave your evidence fully and freely, for I have read it, and supported it with the severed finger of the woman Meg which you stole from Foy's room. You are the murderer of your benefactor and of your mother's heart, and the would-be murderer of your brother and of Martin Roos. When you were born, the mad wife, Martha, who nursed me, counselled that you should be put to death, lest you should live to bring evil upon me and mine. I refused, and you have brought the evil upon us all, but most, I think, upon your own soul. I do not curse you, I call down no ill upon you; Adrian, I give you over into the hands of God to deal with as He sees fit. Here is money"--and, going to her desk, she took from it a heavy purse of gold which had been prepared for their flight, and thrust it

into the pocket of his doublet, wiping her fingers upon her kerchief after she had touched him. "Go hence and never let me see your face again. You were born of my body, you are my flesh and blood, but for this world and the next I renounce you, Adrian. Bastard, I know you not. Murderer, get you gone."

Adrian fell upon the ground; he grovelled before his mother trying to kiss the hem of her dress, while Elsa sobbed aloud hysterically. But Lysbeth spurned him in the face with her foot, saying,

"Get you gone before I call up such servants as are left to me to thrust you to the street."

Then Adrian rose and with great gasps of agony, like some sore-wounded thing, crept from that awful and majestic presence of outraged motherhood, crept down the stairs and away into the city.

When he had gone Lysbeth took pen and paper and wrote in large letters these words:--

"Notice to all the good citizens of Leyden. Adrian, called van Goorl, upon whose written evidence his stepfather, Dirk van Goorl, his half-brother, Foy van Goorl, and the serving-man, Martin Roos, have been condemned to death in the Gevangenhuis by torment, starvation, water, fire, and sword, is known here no longer. Lysbeth van Goorl."

Then she called a servant and gave orders that this paper should be nailed upon the front door of the house where every passer-by might read it.

"It is done," she said. "Cease weeping, Elsa, and lead me to my bed, whence I pray God that I may never rise again."

Two days went by, and a fugitive rode into the city, a worn and wounded man of Leyden, with horror stamped upon his face.

"What news?" cried the people in the market-place, recognising him.

"Mechlin! Mechlin!" he gasped. "I come from Mechlin."

"What of Mechlin and its citizens?" asked Pieter van de Werff, stepping forward.

"Don Frederic has taken it; the Spaniards have butchered them; everyone, old and young, men, women, and children, they are all butchered.

I escaped, but for two leagues and more I heard the sound of the death-wail of Mechlin. Give me wine."

They gave him wine, and by slow degrees, in broken sentences, he told the tale of one of the most awful crimes ever committed in the name of Christ by cruel man against God and his own fellows. It was written large in history: we need not repeat it here.

Then, when they knew the truth, up from that multitude of the men of Leyden went a roar of wrath, and a cry to vengeance for their slaughtered kin. They took arms, each what he had, the burgher his sword, the fisherman his fish-spear, the boor his ox-goad or his pick; leaders sprang up to command them, and there arose a shout of "To the gates! To the Gevangenhuis! Free the prisoners!"

They surged round the hateful place, thousands of them. The drawbridge was up, but they bridged the moat. Some shots were fired at them, then the defence ceased. They battered in the massive doors, and, when these fell, rushed to the dens and loosed those who remained alive within them.

But they found no Spaniards, for by now Ramiro and his garrison had vanished away, whither they knew not. A voice cried, "Dirk van Goorl, seek for Dirk van Goorl," and they came to the chamber overlooking the courtyard, shouting, "Van Goorl, we are here!"

They broke in the door, and there they found him, lying upon his pallet, his hands clasped, his face upturned, smitten suddenly dead, not by man, but by the poison of the plague.

Unfed and untended, the end had overtaken him very swiftly.