

CHAPTER XXIV

MARTHA PREACHES A SERMON AND TELLS A SECRET

Two days after his reconciliation with his father, Adrian was admitted as a member of the Catholic Church. His preparation had been short; indeed, it consisted of three interviews with a priest who was brought to the house at night. The good man found in his pupil so excellent a disposition and a mind so open to his teaching that, acting on a hint given him by Ramiro, who, for reasons of his own not altogether connected with religion, was really anxious to see his son a member of the true and Catholic Church, he declared it unnecessary to prolong the period of probation. Therefore, on the third day, as the dusk of evening was closing, for in the present state of public feeling they dared not go out while it was light, Adrian was taken to the baptistry of the Groote Kerke. Here he made confession of his sins to a certain Abbe known as Father Dominic, a simple ceremony, for although the list of them which he had prepared was long, its hearing proved short. Thus all his offences against his family, such as his betrayal of his stepfather, were waived aside by the priest as matters of no account; indeed, crimes of this nature, he discovered, to the sacerdotal eye wore the face of virtue. Other misdoings also, such as a young man might have upon his mind, were not thought weighty. What really was considered important proved to be the earnestness of his recantation of heretical errors, and when once his confessor was satisfied upon that point, the penitent soul was relieved by absolution full and free.

After this came the service of his baptism, which, because Ramiro wished it, for a certain secret reason, was carried out with as much formal publicity as the circumstances would allow. Indeed, several priests officiated at the rite, Adrian's sponsors being his father and the estimable Hague Simon, who was paid a gold piece for his pains. While the sacrament was still in progress, an untoward incident occurred. From its commencement the trampling and voices of a mob had been heard in the open space in front of the church, and now they began to hammer on the great doors and to cast stones at the painted windows, breaking the beautiful and ancient glass. Presently a beadle hurried into the baptistery, and whispered something in the ear of the Abbe which caused that ecclesiastic to turn pale and to conclude the service in a somewhat hasty fashion.

"What is it?" asked Ramiro.

"Alas! my son," said the priest, "these heretic dogs saw you, or our new-found brother, I know not which--enter this holy place, and a great mob of them have surrounded it, ravening for our blood."

"Then we had best begone," said Ramiro.

"Senor, it is impossible," broke in the sacristan; "they watch every door. Hark! hark! hark!" and as he spoke there came the sound of battering on the oaken portals.

"Can your reverences make any suggestions?" asked Ramiro, "for if not--" and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Let us pray," said one of them in a trembling voice.

"By all means, but I should prefer to do so as I go. Fool, is there any hiding place in this church, or must we stop here to have our throats cut?"

Then the sacristan, with white lips and knocking knees, whispered:

"Follow me, all of you. Stay, blow out the lights."

So the candles were extinguished, and in the darkness they grasped each other's hands and were led by the verger whither they knew not. Across the wide spaces of the empty church they crawled, its echoing silence contrasting strangely with the muffled roar of angry voices without and the dull sound of battering on the doors. One of their number, the fat Abbe Dominic, became separated from them in the gloom, and wandered away

down an arm of the vast transept, whence they could hear him calling to them. The sacristan called back, but Ramiro fiercely bade him to be silent, adding:

"Are we all to be snared for the sake of one priest?"

So they went on, till presently in that great place his shouts grew fainter, and were lost in the roar of the multitude without.

"Here is the spot," muttered the sacristan, after feeling the floor with his hands, and by a dim ray of moonlight which just then pierced the windows of the choir, Adrian saw that there was a hole in the pavement before him.

"Descend, there are steps," said their guide. "I will shut the stone," and one by one they passed down six or seven narrow steps into some darksome place.

"Where are we?" asked a priest of the verger, when he had pulled the stone close and joined them.

"In the family vault of the noble Count van Valkenburg, whom your reverence buried three days ago. Fortunately the masons have not yet come to cement down the stone. If your Excellencies find it close, you can get air by standing upon the coffin of the noble Count."

Adrian did find it close, and took the hint, to discover that in a line with his head was some filigree stonework, pierced with small apertures, the front doubtless of the marble tomb in the church above, for through them he could see the pale moon rays wavering on the pavement of the choir. As he looked the priest at his side muttered:

"Hark! The doors are down. Aid us, St. Pancras!" and falling upon his knees he began to pray very earnestly.

Yielding at last to the blows of the battering-beam, the great portals had flown open with a crash, and now through them poured the mob. On they came with a rush and a roar, like that of the sea breaking through a dyke, carrying in their hands torches, lanterns hung on poles, axes, swords and staves, till at length they reached the screen of wonderful carved oak, on the top of which, rising to a height of sixty feet above the floor of the church, stood the great Rood, with the images of the Virgin and St. John on either side. Here, of a sudden, the vastness and the silence of the holy place which they had known, every one, from childhood, with its echoing aisles, the moonlit, pictured windows, its consecrated lamps twinkling here and there like fisher lights upon the darkling waters, seemed to take hold of them. As at the sound of the Voice Divine sweeping down the wild waves at night, the winds ceased their raving and the seas were still, so now, beneath the silent reproach of the effigy of the White Christ standing with uplifted hand above the altar, hanging thorn-crowned upon the Rood, kneeling agonised within the Garden, seated at the Holy Supper, on His lips the New Commandment, "As I have loved you, so ye also love one another," their passions flickered down and their wrath slept.

"They are not here, let us be going," said a voice.

"They are here," answered another voice, a woman's voice with a note of vengeance in it. "I tracked them to the doors, the Spanish murderer Ramiro, the spy Hague Simon, the traitor Adrian, called van Goorl, and the priests, the priests, the priests who butcher us."

"Let God deal with them," said the first voice, which to Adrian sounded familiar. "We have done enough. Go home in peace."

Now muttering, "The pastor is right. Obey the Pastor Arentz," the more orderly of the multitude turned to depart, when suddenly, from the far end of the transept, arose a cry.

"Here's one of them. Catch him! catch him!" A minute more and into the circle of the torchlight rushed the Abbe Dominic, his eyes starting from his head with terror, his rent robe flapping on the ground. Exhausted and bewildered he cast himself down, and grasping the pedestal of an image began to cry for mercy, till a dozen fierce hands dragged him to his feet again.

"Let him go," said the voice of the Pastor Arentz. "We fight the Church, not its ministers."

"Hear me first," she answered who had spoken before, and men turned to see standing above them in the great pulpit of the church, a fierce-eyed, yellow-toothed hag, grey-haired, skinny-armed, long-faced like a horse, and behind her two other women, each of whom held a torch

in her right hand.

"It is the Mare," roared the multitude. "It is Martha of the Mere.

Preach on, Martha. What's your text?"

"Whoso sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed," she answered in a ringing, solemn voice, and instantly a deep silence fell upon the place.

"You call me the Mare," she went on. "Do you know how I got that name? They gave it me after they had shrivelled up my lips and marred the beauty of my face with irons. And do you know what they made me do? They made me carry my husband to the stake upon my back because they said that a horse must be ridden. And do you know who said this? That priest who stands before you."

As the words left her lips a yell of rage beat against the roof. Martha held up her thin hand, and again there was silence.

"He said it--the holy Father Dominic; let him deny it if he can. What? He does not know me? Perchance not, for time and grief and madness and hot pincers have changed the face of Vrouw Martha van Muyden, who was called the Lily of Brussels. Ah! look at him now. He remembers the Lily of Brussels. He remembers her husband and her son also, for he burned them. O God, judge between us. O people, deal with that devil as God shall teach you.

"Who are the others? He who is called Ramiro, the Governor of the Gevangenhuis, the man who years ago would have thrust me beneath the ice to drown had not the Vrouw van Goorl bought my life; he who set her husband, Dirk van Goorl, the man you loved, to starve to death sniffing the steam of kitchens. O people, deal with that devil as God shall teach you.

"And the third, the half-Spaniard, the traitor Adrian called van Goorl, he who has come here to-night to be baptised anew into the bosom of the Holy Church; he who signed the evidence upon which Dirk was murdered"--here, again, the roar of hate and rage went up and beat along the roof--"upon which too his brother Foy was taken to the torture, whence Red Martin saved him. O people, do with that devil also as God shall teach you.

"And the fourth, Hague Simon the spy, the man whose hands for years have smoked with innocent blood; Simon the Butcher--Simon the false witness----"

"Enough, enough!" roared the crowd. "A rope, a rope; up with him to the arm of the Rood."

"My friends," cried Arentz, "let the man go. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and I will repay."

"Yes, but we will give him something on account," shouted a voice in bitter blasphemy. "Well climbed, Jan, well climbed," and they looked up to see, sixty feet above their heads, seated upon the arm of the lofty Rood, a man with a candle bound upon his brow and a coil of rope upon his back.

"He'll fall," said one.

"Pish!" answered another, "it is steeplejack Jan, who can hang on a wall like a fly."

"Look out for the ends of the rope," cried the thin voice above, and down they came.

"Spare me," screamed the wretched priest, as his executioners caught hold of him.

"Yes, yes, as you spared the Heer Jansen a few months ago."

"It was to save his soul," groaned Dominic.

"Quite so, and now we are going to save yours; your own medicine, father, your own medicine."

"Spare me, and I will tell you where the others are."

"Well, where are they?" asked the ringleader, pushing his companions away.

"Hidden in the church, hidden in the church."

"We knew that, you traitorous dog. Now then for the soul-saving. Catch hold there and run away with it. A horse should be ridden, father--your own saying--and an angel must learn to fly."

Thus ended the life of the Abbe Dominic at the hands of avenging men. Without a doubt they were fierce and bloody-minded, for the reader must not suppose that all the wickedness of those days lies on the heads of the Inquisition and the Spaniards. The adherents of the New Religion did evil things also, things that sound dreadful in our ears. In excuse of them, however, this can be urged, that, compared to those of their oppressors, they were as single trees to a forest full; also that they who worked them had been maddened by their sufferings. If our fathers, husbands and brothers had been burned at the stake, or done to death under the name of Jesus in the dens of the Inquisition, or slaughtered by thousands in the sack of towns; if our wives and daughters had been shamed, if our houses had been burned, our goods taken, our liberties trampled upon, and our homes made a desolation, then, my reader, is it not possible that even in these different days you and I might have been cruel when our hour came? God knows alone, and God be thanked that so far as we can foresee, except under the pressure, perhaps, of invasion by semi-barbarian hordes, or of dreadful and sudden social revolutions,

civilized human nature will never be put to such a test again.

Far aloft in the gloom there, swinging from the arm of the Cross, whose teachings his life had mocked, like some mutinous sailor at the yard of the vessel he had striven to betray, the priest hung dead, but his life did not appease the fury of the triumphant mob.

"The others," they cried, "find the others," and with torches and lanterns they hunted round the great church. They ascended the belfry, they rummaged the chapels, they explored the crypt; then, baffled, drew together in a countless crowd in the nave, shouting, gesticulating, suggesting.

"Get dogs," cried a voice; "dogs will smell them out;" and dogs were brought, which yapped and ran to and fro, but, confused by the multitude, and not knowing what to seek, found nothing. Then some one threw an image from a niche, and next minute, with a cry of "Down with the idols," the work of destruction began.

Fanatics sprang at the screens and the altars, "all the carved work thereof they break down with hatchet and hammer," they tore the hangings from the shrines, they found the sacred cups, and filling them with sacramental wine, drank with gusts of ribald laughter. In the centre of the choir they built a bonfire, and fed it with pictures, carvings, and oaken benches, so that it blazed and roared furiously. On to it--for this mob did not come to steal but to work vengeance--they threw

utensils of gold and silver, the priceless jewelled offerings of generations, and danced around its flames in triumph, while from every side came the crash of falling statues and the tinkling of shattered glass.

The light of that furnace shone through the lattice stonework of the tomb, and in its lurid and ominous glare Adrian beheld the faces of those who refuged with him. What a picture it was; the niches filled with mouldering boxes, the white gleam of human bones that here and there had fallen from them, the bright furnishings and velvet pall of the coffin of the newcomer on which he stood--and then those faces. The priests, still crouched in corners, rolling on the ground, their white lips muttering who knows what; the sacristan in a swoon, Hague Simon hugging a coffin in a niche, as a drowning man hugs a plank, and, standing in the midst of them, calm, sardonic and watchful, a drawn rapier in his hand, his father Ramiro.

"We are lost," moaned a priest, losing control of himself. "We are lost. They will kill us as they have killed the holy Abbe."

"We are not lost," hissed Ramiro, "we are quite safe, but, friend, if you open that cursed mouth of yours again it shall be for the last time," and he lifted his sword, adding, "Silence; he who speaks, dies."

How long did it last? Was it one hour, or two or three? None of them knew, but at length the image-breaking was done, and it came to an end.

The interior of the church, with all its wealth and adornments, was utterly destroyed, but happily the flames did not reach the roof, and the walls could not catch fire.

By degrees the iconoclasts wearied; there seemed to be nothing more to break, and the smoke choked them. Two or three at a time they left the ravaged place, and once more it became solemn and empty; a symbol of Eternity mocking Time, of Peace conquering Tumult, of the Patience and Purpose of God triumphant over the passions and ravings of Man. Little curls of smoke went up from the smouldering fire; now and again a fragment of shattered stonework fell with an echoing crash, and the cold wind of the coming winter sighed through the gaping windows. The deed was done, the revenge of a tortured multitude had set its seal upon the ancient fane in which their forefathers worshipped for a score of generations, and once more quiet brooded upon the place, and the shafts of the sweet moonlight pierced its desecrated solitudes.

One by one, like ghosts arising at a summons of the Spirit, the fugitives crept from the shelter of the tomb, crept across the transepts to the little door of the baptistery, and with infinite peeping and precaution, out into the night, to vanish this way and that, hugging their hearts as though to feel whether they still beat safely in their bosoms.

As he passed the Rood Adrian looked up, and there, above the broken carvings and the shattered statue of the Virgin, hung the calm face of

the Saviour crowned with thorns. There, too, not far from it, looking small and infinitely piteous at that great height, and revolving slowly in the sharp draught from the broken windows, hung another dead face, the horrid face of the Abbe Dominic, lately the envied, prosperous dignitary and pluralist, who not four hours since had baptised him into the bosom of the Church, and who now himself had been born again into the bosom of whatever world awaited him beyond the Gates. It terrified Adrian; no ghost could have frightened him more, but he set his teeth and staggered on, guided by the light gleaming faintly on the sword of Ramiro--to whatever haven that sword should lead him.

Before dawn broke it had led him out of Leyden.

It was after ten o'clock that night when a woman, wrapped in a rough frieze coat, knocked at the door of the house in the Bree Straat and asked for the Vrouw van Goorl.

"My mistress lies between life and death with the plague," answered the servant. "Get you gone from this pest-house, whoever you are."

"I do not fear the plague," said the visitor. "Is the Jufvrouw Elsa Brant still up? Then tell her that Martha, called the Mare, would speak with her."

"She can see none at such an hour," answered the servant.

"Tell her I come from Foy van Goorl."

"Enter," said the servant wondering, and shut the door behind her.

A minute later Elsa, pale-faced, worn, but still beautiful, rushed into the room, gasping, "What news? Does he live? Is he well?"

"He lives, lady, but he is not well, for the wound in his thigh has festered and he cannot walk, or even stand. Nay, have no fear, time and clean dressing will heal him, and he lies in a safe place."

In the rapture of her relief Elsa seized the woman's hand, and would have kissed it.

"Touch it not, it is bloodstained," said Martha, drawing her hand away.

"Blood? Whose blood is on it?" asked Elsa, shrinking back.

"Whose blood?" answered Martha with a hollow laugh; "why that of many a Spanish man. Where, think you, lady, that the Mare gallops of nights? Ask it of the Spaniards who travel by the Haarlemer Meer. Aye, and now Red Martin is with me and we run together, taking our tithe where we can gather it."

"Oh! tell me no more," said Elsa. "From day to day it is ever the same tale, a tale of death. Nay, I know your wrongs have driven you mad, but that a woman should slay----"

"A woman! I am no woman; my womanhood died with my husband and my son. Girl, I tell you that I am no woman; I am a Sword of God myself appointed to the sword. And so to the end I kill, and kill and kill till the hour when I am killed. Go, look in the church yonder, and see who hangs to the high arm of the Rood--the fat Abbe Dominic. Well, I sent him there to-night; to-morrow you will hear how I turned parson and preached a sermon--aye, and Ramiro and Adrian called van Goorl, and Simon the spy, should have joined him there, only I could not find them because their hour has not come. But the idols are down and the paintings burnt, and the gold and silver and jewels are cast upon the dung-heap. Swept and garnished is the temple, made clean and fit for the Lord to dwell in."

"Made clean with the blood of murdered priests, and fit by the smoke of sacrilege?" broke in Elsa. "Oh! woman, how can you do such wicked things and not be afraid?"

"Afraid?" she answered. "Those who have passed through hell have no more fear; death I seek, and when judgment comes I will say to the Lord: What have I done that the Voice which speaks to me at night did not tell me to do? Look down, the blood of my husband and my son still smokes upon the ground. Hearken, Lord God, it cries to Thee for vengeance!" and as

she spoke she lifted her blackened hands and shook them. Then she went on.

"They murdered your father, why do you not kill them also? You are small and weak and timid, and could not run by night and use the knife as I do, but there is poison. I can brew it and bring it to you, made from marsh herbs, white as water and deadly as Death itself. What! You shrink from such things? Well, girl, once I was beautiful as you and as loving and beloved, and I can do them for my love's sake--for my love's sake. Nay, I do not do them, they are done through me. The Sword am I, the Sword! And you too are a sword, though you know it not, though you see it not, you, maiden, so soft and white and sweet, are a Sword of Vengeance working the death of men; I, in my way, you in yours, paying back, back, back, full measure pressed down and running over to those appointed to die. The treasure of Hendrik Brant, your treasure, it is red with blood, every piece of it. I tell you that the deaths that I have done are but as a grain of sand to a bowlful compared to those which your treasure shall do. There, maid, I fright you. Have no fear, it is but Mad Martha, who, when she sees, must speak, and through the flames in the kirk to-night I saw visions such as I have not seen for years."

"Tell me more of Foy and Martin," said Elsa, who was frightened and bewildered.

At her words a change seemed to come over this woman, at once an object

of pity and of terror, for the scream went out of her voice and she answered quietly,

"They reached me safe enough five days ago, Red Martin carrying Foy upon his back. From afar I saw him, a naked man with a named sword, and knew him by his size and beard. And oh! when I heard his tale I laughed as I have not laughed since I was young."

"Tell it me," said Elsa.

And she told it while the girl listened with clasped hands.

"Oh! it was brave, brave," she murmured. "Red Martin forcing to the door and Foy, weak and wounded, slaying the warder. Was there ever such a story?"

"Men are brave and desperate with the torture pit behind them," answered Martha grimly; "but they did well, and now they are safe with me where no Spaniard can find them unless they hunt in great companies after the ice forms and the reeds are dead."

"Would that I could be there also," said Elsa, "but I tend his mother who is very sick, so sick that I do not know whether she will live or die."

"Nay, you are best here among your people," answered Martha. "And now

that the Spaniards are driven out, here Foy shall return also so soon as it is safe for him to travel; but as yet he cannot stir, and Red Martin stays to watch him. Before long, however, he must move, for I have tidings that the Spaniards are about to besiege Haarlem with a great army, and then the Mere will be no longer safe for us, and I shall leave it to fight with the Haarlem folk."

"And Foy and Martin will return?"

"I think so, if they are not stopped."

"Stopped?"--and she put her hand upon her heart.

"The times are rough, Jufvrouw Elsa. Who that breathes the air one morning can know what breath will pass his nostrils at the nightfall? The times are rough, and Death is king of them. The hoard of Hendrik Brant is not forgotten, nor those who have its key. Ramiro slipped through my hands to-night, and doubtless by now is far away from Leyden seeking the treasure."

"The treasure! Oh! that thrice accursed treasure!" broke in Elsa, shivering as though beneath an icy wind; "would that we were rid of it."

"That you cannot be until it is appointed, for is this not the heritage which your father died to save? Listen. Do you know, lady, where it lies hid?" and she dropped her voice to a whisper.

Elsa shook her head, saying:

"I neither know nor wish to know."

"Still it is best that you should be told, for we three who have the secret may be killed, every one of us--no, not the place, but where to seek a clue to the place."

Elsa looked at her questioningly, and Martha, leaning forward, whispered in her ear:

"It lies in the hilt of the Sword Silence. If Red Martin should be taken or killed, seek out his sword and open the hilt. Do you understand?"

Elsa nodded and answered, "But if aught happens to Martin the sword may be lost."

Martha shrugged her shoulders. "Then the treasure will be lost also, that is if I am gone. It is as God wills; but at least in name you are the heiress, and you should know where to find its secret, which may serve you or your country in good stead in time to come. I give you no paper, I tell you only where to seek a paper, and now I must be gone to reach the borders of the Mere by daybreak. Have you any message for your love, lady?"

"I would write a word, if you can wait. They will bring you food."

"Good; write on and I will eat. Love for the young and meat for the old,
and for both let God be thanked."