

CHAPTER XXV

THE RED MILL

After a week's experience of that delectable dwelling and its neighbourhood, Adrian began to grow weary of the Red Mill. Nine or ten Dutch miles to the nor'west of Haarlem is a place called Velsen, situated on the borders of the sand-dunes, to the south of what is known to-day as the North Sea Canal. In the times of which this page of history tells, however, the canal was represented by a great drainage dyke, and Velsen was but a deserted village. Indeed, hereabouts all the country was deserted, for some years before a Spanish force had passed through it, burning, slaying, laying waste, so that few were left to tend the windmills and repair the dyke. Holland is a country won from swamps and seas, and if the water is not pumped out of it, and the ditches are not cleaned, very quickly it relapses into primeval marsh; indeed, it is fortunate if the ocean, bursting through the feeble barriers reared by the industry of man, does not turn it into vast lagoons of salt water.

Once the Red Mill had been a pumping station, which, when the huge sails worked, delivered the water from the fertile meadows into the great dyke, whence it ran through sluice gates to the North Sea. Now, although the embankment of this dyke still held, the meadows had gone back into swamps. Rising out of these--for it was situated upon a low mound of earth, raised, doubtless, as a point of refuge by marsh-dwellers

who lived and died before history began, towered the wreck of a narrow-waisted windmill, built of brick below and wood above, of very lonesome and commanding appearance in its gaunt solitude. There were no houses near it, no cattle grazed about its foot; it was a dead thing in a dead landscape. To the left, but separated from it by a wide and slimy dyke, whence in times of flood the thick, brackish water trickled to the plain, stretched an arid area of sand-dunes, clothed with sparse grass, that grew like bristles upon the back of a wild hog. Beyond these dunes the ocean roared and moaned and whispered hungrily as the wind and weather stirred its depths. In front, not fifty paces away, ran the big dyke like a raised road, secured by embankments, and discharging day by day its millions of gallons of water into the sea. But these embankments were weakening now, and here and there could be seen a spot which looked as though a giant ploughshare had been drawn up them, for a groove of brown earth scarred the face of green, where in some winter flood the water had poured over to find its level, cutting them like cheese, but when its volume sank, leaving them still standing, and as yet sufficient for their purpose.

To the right again and behind, were more marshes, broken only in the distance by the towers of Haarlem and the spires of village churches, marshes where the snipe and bittern boomed, the herons fed, and in summer the frogs croaked all night long.

Such was the refuge to which Ramiro and his son, Adrian, had been led by Hague Simon and Black Meg, after they had escaped with their lives from

Leyden upon the night of the image-breaking in the church, that ominous night when the Abbe Dominic gave up the ghost on the arm of the lofty Rood, and Adrian had received absolution and baptism from his consecrated hand.

On the journey hither Adrian asked no questions as to their destination; he was too broken in heart and too shaken in body to be curious; life in those days was for him too much of a hideous phantasmagoria of waste and blackness out of which appeared vengeful, red-handed figures, out of which echoed dismal, despairing voices calling him to doom.

They came to the place and found its great basement and the floors above, or some of them, furnished after a fashion. The mill had been inhabited, and recently, as Adrian gathered, by smugglers, or thieves, with whom Meg and Simon were in alliance, or some such outcast evil-doers who knew that here the arm of the law could not reach them. Though, indeed, while Alva ruled in the Netherlands there was little law to be feared by those who were rich or who dared to worship God after their own manner.

"Why have we come here--father," Adrian was about to add, but the word stuck in his throat.

Ramiro shrugged his shoulders and looked round him with his one criticising eye.

"Because our guides and friends, the worthy Simon and his wife, assure me that in this spot alone our throats are for the present safe, and by St. Pancras, after what we saw in the church yonder I am inclined to agree with them. He looked a poor thing up under the roof there, the holy Father Dominic, didn't he, hanging up like a black spider from the end of his cord? Bah! my backbone aches when I think of him."

"And how long are we to stop here?"

"Till--till Don Frederic has taken Haarlem and these fat Hollanders, or those who are left of them, lick our boots for mercy," and he ground his teeth, then added: "Son, do you play cards? Good, well let us have a game. Here are dice; it will serve to turn our thoughts. Now then, a hundred guilders on it."

So they played and Adrian won, whereon, to his amazement, his father paid him the money.

"What is the use of that?" asked Adrian.

"Gentlemen should always pay their debts at cards."

"And if they cannot?"

"Then they must keep score of the amount and discharge it when they are able. Look you, young man, everything else you may forget, but what you

lose over the dice is a debt of honour. There lives no man who can say that I cheated him of a guilder at cards, though I fear some others have my name standing in their books."

When they rose from their game that night Adrian had won between three and four hundred florins. Next day his winnings amounted to a thousand florins, for which his father gave him a carefully-executed note of hand; but at the third sitting the luck changed or perhaps skill began to tell, and he lost two thousand florins. These he paid up by returning his father's note, his own winnings, and all the balance of the purse of gold which his mother had given to him when he was driven from the house, so that now he was practically penniless.

The rest of the history may be guessed. At every game the stakes were increased, for since Adrian could not pay, it was a matter of indifference to him how much he wagered. Moreover, he found a kind of mild excitement in playing at the handling of such great sums of money. By the end of a week he had lost a queen's dowry. As they rose from the table that night his father filled in the usual form, requested him to be so good as to sign it, and a sour-faced woman who had arrived at the mill, Adrian knew not whence, to do the household work, to put her name as witness.

"What is the use of this farce?" asked Adrian. "Brant's treasure would scarcely pay that bill."

His father pricked his ears.

"Indeed? I lay it at as much again. What is the use? Who knows--one day you might become rich, for, as the great Emperor said, 'Fortune is a woman who reserves her favours for the young,' and then, doubtless, being the man of honour that you are, you would wish to pay your old gambling debts."

"Oh! yes, I should pay if I could," answered Adrian with a yawn. "But it seems hardly worthy while talking about, does it?" and he sauntered out of the place into the open air.

His father rose, and, standing by the great peat fire, watched him depart thoughtfully.

"Let me take stock of the position," he said to himself. "The dear child hasn't a farthing left; therefore, although he is getting bored, he can't run away. Moreover, he owes me more money than I ever saw; therefore, if he should chance to become the husband of the Jufvrouw Brant, and the legal owner of her parent's wealth, whatever disagreements may ensue between him and me I shall have earned my share of it in a clean and gentlemanly fashion. If, on the other hand, it should become necessary for me to marry the young lady, which God forbid, at least no harm is done, and he will have had the advantage of some valuable lessons from the most accomplished card-player in Spain."

"And now what we need to enliven this detestable place is the presence of Beauty herself. Our worthy friends should be back soon--bringing their sheaves with them, let us hope, for otherwise matters will be complicated. Let me see: have I thought of everything, for in such affairs one oversight--He is a Catholic, therefore can contract a legal marriage under the Proclamations--it was lucky I remembered that point of law, though it nearly cost us all our lives--and the priest, I can lay my hands on him, a discreet man, who won't hear if the lady says No, but filled beyond a question with the power and virtue of his holy office. No, I have nothing to reproach myself with in the way of precaution, nothing at all. I have sown the seed well and truly, it remains only for Providence to give the increase, or shall I say--no, I think not, for between the general and the private familiarity is always odious. Well, it is time that you met with a little success and settled down, for you have worked hard, Juan, my friend, and you are getting old--yes, Juan, you are getting old. Bah! what a hole and what weather!" and Montalvo established himself by the fireside to doze away his ennui.

When Adrian shut the door behind him the late November day was drawing to its close, and between the rifts in the sullen snow clouds now and again an arrow from the westering sun struck upon the tall, skeleton-like sails of the mill, through which the wind rushed with a screaming noise. Adrian had intended to walk on the marsh, but finding it too sodden, he crossed the western dyke by means of a board laid from bank to bank, and struck into the sand-dunes beyond. Even in the summer,

when the air was still and flowers bloomed and larks sang, these dunes were fantastic and almost unnatural in appearance, with their deep, wind-scooped hollows of pallid sand, their sharp angles, miniature cliffs, and their crests crowned with coarse grasses. But now, beneath the dull pall of the winter sky, no spot in the world could have been more lonesome or more desolate, for never a sign of man was to be seen upon them and save for a solitary curlew, whose sad note reached Adrian's ears as it beat up wind from the sea, even the beasts and birds that dwelt there had hidden themselves away. Only the voices of Nature remained in all their majesty, the drear screams and moan of the rushing wind, and above it, now low and now voluminous as the gale veered, the deep and constant roar of the ocean.

Adrian reached the highest crest of the ridge, whence the sea, hidden hitherto, became suddenly visible, a vast, slate-coloured expanse, twisted here and there into heaps, hollowed here and there into valleys, and broken everywhere with angry lines and areas of white. In such trouble, for, after its own fashion, his heart was troubled, some temperaments might have found a kind of consolation in this sight, for while we witness them, at any rate, the throes and moods of Nature in their greatness declare a mastery of our senses, and stun or hush to silence the petty turmoil of our souls. This, at least, is so with those who have eyes to read the lesson written on Nature's face, and ears to hear the message which day by day she delivers with her lips; gifts given only to such as hold the cypher-key of imagination, and pray for grace to use it.

In Adrian's case, however, the weirdness of the sand-hills and the grandeur of the seascape with the bitter wind that blew between and the solitude which brooded over all, served only to exasperate nerves that already were strained well nigh to breaking.

Why had his father brought him to this hideous swamp bordered by a sailless sea? To save their lives from the fury of the mob? This he understood, but there was more in it than that, some plot which he did not understand, and which the ruffian, Hague Simon, and that she-fiend, his companion, had gone away to execute. Meanwhile he must sit here day after day playing cards with the wretch Ramiro, whom, for no fault of his own, God had chosen out to be his parent. By the way, why was the man so fond of playing cards? And what was the meaning of all that nonsense about notes of hand? Yes, here he must sit, and for company he had the sense of his unalterable shame, the memory of his mother's face as she spurned and rejected him, the vision of the woman whom he loved and had lost, and--the ghost of Dirk van Goorl.

He shivered as he thought of it; yes, his hair lifted and his lip twitched involuntarily, for to Adrian's racked nerves and distorted vision this ghost of the good man whom he had betrayed was no child of phantasy. He had woken in the night and seen it standing at his bedside, plague-defiled and hunger-wasted, and because of it he dreaded to sleep alone, especially in that creaking, rat-haunted mill, whose very board seemed charged with some tale of death and blood. Heavens! At this very

moment he thought he could hear that dead voice calling down the gale. No, it must be the curlew, but at least he would be going home. Home--that place home--with not even a priest near to confess to and be comforted!

Thanks be to the Saints! the wind had dropped a little, but now in place of it came the snow, dense, whirling, white; so dense indeed that he could scarcely see his path. What an end that would be, to be frozen to death in the snow on these sand-hills while the spirit of Dirk van Goorl sat near and watched him die with those hollow, hungry eyes. The sweat came upon Adrian's forehead at the thought, and he broke into a run, heading for the bank of the great dyke that pierced the dunes half a mile or so away, which bank must, he knew, lead him to the mill. He reached it and trudged along what had been the towpath, though now it was overgrown with weeds and rushes. It was not a pleasant journey, for the twilight had closed in with speed and the thick flakes, that seemed to heap into his face and sting him, turned it into a darkness mottled with faint white. Still he stumbled forward with bent head and close-wrapped cloak till he judged that he must be near to the mill, and halted staring through the gloom.

Just then the snow ceased for a while and light crept back to the cold face of the earth, showing Adrian that he had done well to halt. In front of where he stood, within a few paces of his feet indeed, for a distance of quite twenty yards the lower part of the bank had slipped away, washed from the stone core with which it was faced at this

point, by a slow and neglected percolation of water. Had he walked on therefore, he would have fallen his own height or more into a slough of mud, whence he might, or might not have been able to extricate himself. As it was, however, by such light as remained he could crawl upon the coping of the stonework which was still held in place with old struts of timber that, until they had been denuded by the slow and constant leakage, were buried and supported in the vanished earthwork. It was not a pleasant bridge, for to the right lay the mud-bottomed gulf, and to the left, almost level with his feet, were the black and peaty waters of the rain-fed dyke pouring onwards to the sea.

"Next flood this will go," thought Adrian to himself, "and then the marsh must become a mere which will be bad for whomever happens to be living in the Red Mill." He was on firm ground again now, and there, looming tall and spectral against the gloom, not five hundred yards away, rose the gaunt sails of the mill. To reach it he walked on six score paces or more to the little landing-quay, where a raised path ran to the building. As he drew near to it he was astonished to hear the rattle of oars working in rollocks and a man's voice say:

"Steady, here is the place, praise the Saints! Now, then, out passengers and let us be gone."

Adrian, whom events had made timid, drew beneath the shadow of the bank and watched, while from the dim outline of the boat arose three figures, or rather two figures arose, dragging the third between them.

"Hold her," said a voice that seemed familiar, "while I give these men their hire," and there followed a noise of clinking coin, mingled with some oaths and grumbling about the weather and the distance, which were abated with more coin. Then again the oars rattled and the boat was pushed off, whereon a sweet voice cried in agonised tones:

"Sirs, you who have wives and daughters, will you leave me in the hands of these wretches? In the name of God take pity upon my helplessness."

"It is a shame, and she so fair a maid," grumbled another thick and raucous voice, but the steersman cried, "Mind your business, Marsh Jan. We have done our job and got our pay, so leave the gentry to settle their own love affairs. Good night to you, passengers; give way, give way," and the boat swung round and vanished into the gloom.

For a moment Adrian's heart stood still; then he sprang forward to see before him Hague Simon, the Butcher, Black Meg his wife, and between them a bundle wrapped in shawls.

"What is this?" he asked.

"You ought to know, Heer Adrian," answered Black Meg with a chuckle, "seeing that this charming piece of goods has been brought all the way from Leyden, regardless of expense, for your especial benefit."

The bundle lifted its head, and the faint light shone upon the white and terrified face of--Elsa Brant.

"May God reward you for this evil deed, Adrian, called van Goorl," said the pitiful voice.

"This deed! What deed?" he stammered in answer. "I know nothing of it, Elsa Brant."

"You know nothing of it? Yet it was done in your name, and you are here to receive me, who was kidnapped as I walked outside Leyden to be dragged hither with force by these monsters. Oh! have you no heart and no fear of judgment that you can speak thus?"

"Free her," roared Adrian, rushing at the Butcher to see a knife gleaming in his hand and another in that of Black Meg.

"Stop your nonsense, Master Adrian, and stand back. If you have anything to say, say it to your father, the Count. Come, let us pass, for we are cold and weary," and taking Elsa by the elbows they brushed past him, nor, indeed, even had he not been too bewildered to interfere, could Adrian have stayed them, for he was unarmed. Besides, where would be the use, seeing that the boat had gone and that they were alone on a winter's night in the wind-swept wilderness, with no refuge for miles save such as the mill house could afford. So Adrian bent his head, for the snow had begun to fall again, and, sick at heart, followed them

along the path. Now he understood at length why they had come to the Red Mill.

Simon opened the door and entered, but Elsa hung back at its ill-omened threshold. She even tried to struggle a little, poor girl, whereon the ruffian in front jerked her towards him with an oath, so that she caught her foot and fell upon her face. This was too much for Adrian. Springing forward he struck the Butcher full in the mouth with his fist, and next moment they were rolling over and over each other upon the floor, struggling fiercely for the knife which Simon held.

During all her life Elsa never forgot that scene. Behind her the howling blackness of the night and the open door, through which flake by flake the snow leapt into the light. In front the large round room, fashioned from the basement of the mill, lit only by the great fire of turfs and a single horn lantern, hung from the ceiling that was ribbed with beams of black and massive oak. And there, in this forbidding, naked-looking place, that rocked and quivered as the gale caught the tall arms of the mill above, seated by the hearth in a rude chair of wood and sleeping, one man, Ramiro, the Spanish sleuth-hound, who had hunted down her father, he whom above every other she held in horror and in hate; and two, Adrian and the spy, at death-grips on the floor, between them the sheen of a naked knife.

Such was the picture.

Ramiro awoke at the noise, and there was fear on his face as though some ill dream lingered in his brain. Next instant he saw and understood.

"I will run the man through who strikes another blow," he said, in a cold clear voice as he drew his sword. "Stand up, you fools, and tell me what this means."

"It means that this brute beast but now threw Elsa Brant upon her face," gasped Adrian as he rose, "and I punished him."

"It is a lie," hissed the other; "I pulled the minx on, that is all, and so would you have done, if you had been cursed with such a wild-cat for four-and-twenty hours. Why, when we took her she was more trouble to hold than any man."

"Oh! I understand," interrupted Ramiro, who had recovered his composure; "a little maidenly reluctance, that is all, my worthy Simon, and as for this young gentleman, a little lover-like anxiety--doubtless in bygone years you have felt the same," and he glanced mockingly at Black Meg. "So do not be too ready to take offence, good Simon. Youth will be youth."

"And Youth will get a knife between its ribs if it is not careful," grumbled Hague Simon, as he spat out a piece of broken tooth.

"Why am I brought here, Senor," broke in Elsa, "in defiance of laws and

justice?"

"Laws! Mejufvrouw, I did not know that there were any left in the Netherlands; justice! well, all is fair in love and war, as any lady will admit. And the reason why--I think you must ask Adrian, he knows more about it than I do."

"He says that he knows nothing, Senor."

"Does he, the rogue? Does he indeed? Well, it would be rude to contradict him, wouldn't it, so I for one unreservedly accept his statement that he knows nothing, and I advise you to do the same. No, no, my boy, do not trouble to explain, we all quite understand. Now, my good dame," he went on addressing the serving-woman who had entered the place, "take this young lady to the best room you have above. And, listen, both of you, she is to be treated with all kindness, do you hear, for if any harm comes to her, either at your hands or her own, by Heaven! you shall pay for it to the last drop of your blood. Now, no excuses and--no mistakes."

The two women, Meg and the other, nodded and motioned to Elsa to accompany them. She considered a moment, looking first at Ramiro and next at Adrian. Then her head dropped upon her breast, and turning without a word she followed them up the creaking oaken stair that rose from a niche near the wall of the ingle-nook.

"Father," said Adrian when the massive door had closed behind her and they were left alone--"father--for I suppose that I must call you so."

"There is not the slightest necessity," broke in Ramiro; "facts, my dear son, need not always be paraded in the cold light of day--fortunately. But, proceed."

"What does all this mean?"

"I wish I could tell you. It appears to mean, however, that without any effort upon your part, for you seem to me a young man singularly devoid of resource, your love affairs are prospering beyond expectation."

"I have had nothing to do with the business; I wash my hands of it."

"That is as well. Some sensitive people might think they need a deal of washing. You young fool," he went on, dropping his mocking manner, "listen to me. You are in love with this pink and white piece of goods, and I have brought her here for you to marry."

"And I refuse to marry her against her will."

"As to that you can please yourself. But somebody has got to marry her--you, or I."

"You--you!" gasped Adrian.

"Quite so. The adventure is not one, to be frank, that attracts me. At my age memories are sufficient. But material interests must be attended to, so if you decline--well, I am still eligible and hearty. Do you see the point?"

"No, what is it?"

"It is a sound title to the inheritance of the departed Hendrik Brant. That wealth we might, it is true, obtain by artifice or by arms; but how much better that it should come into the family in a regular fashion, thereby ousting the claim of the Crown. Things in this country are disturbed at present, but they will not always be disturbed, for in the end somebody must give way and order will prevail. Then questions might be asked, for persons in possession of great riches are always the mark of envy. But if the heiress is married to a good Catholic and loyal subject of the king, who can cavil at rights sanctified by the laws of God and man? Think it over, my dear Adrian, think it over. Step-mother or wife--you can take your choice."

With impotent rage, with turmoil of heart and torment of conscience, Adrian did think it over. All that night he thought, tossing on his rat-haunted pallet, while without the snow whirled and the wind beat. If he did not marry Elsa, his father would, and there could be no doubt as to which of these alternatives would be best and happiest for her. Elsa married to that wicked, cynical, devil-possessed, battered,

fortune-hunting adventurer with a nameless past! This must be prevented at any cost. With his father her lot must be a hell; with himself--after a period of storm and doubt perhaps--it could scarcely be other than happy, for was he not young, handsome, sympathetic, and--devoted? Ah! there was the real point. He loved this lady with all the earnestness of which his nature was capable, and the thought of her passing into the possession of another man gave him the acutest anguish. That the man should be Foy, his half-brother, was bad enough; that it should be Ramiro, his father, was insupportable.

At breakfast the following morning, when Elsa did not appear, the pair met.

"You look pale, Adrian," said his father presently. "I fear that this wild weather kept you awake last night, as it did me, although at your age I have slept through the roar of a battle. Well, have you thought over our conversation? I do not wish to trouble you with these incessant family matters, but times presses, and it is necessary to decide."

Adrian looked out of the lattice at the snow, which fell and fell without pause. Then he turned and said:

"Yes. Of the two it is best that she should marry me, though I think that such a crime will bring its own reward."

"Wise young man," answered his father. "Under all your cloakings of

vagary I observe that you have a foundation of common-sense, just as the giddiest weathercock is bedded on a stone. As for the reward, considered properly it seems to be one upon which I can heartily congratulate you."

"Peace to that talk," said Adrian, angrily; "you forget that there are two parties to such a contract; her consent must be gained, and I will not ask it."

"No? Then I will; a few arguments occur to me. Now look here, friend, we have struck a bargain, and you will be so good as to keep it or to take the consequences--oh! never mind what they are. I will bring this lady to the altar--or, rather, to that table, and you will marry her, after which you can settle matters just exactly as you please; live with her as your wife, or make your bow and walk away, which, I care nothing so long as you are married. Now I am weary of all this talk, so be so good as to leave me in peace on the subject."

Adrian looked at him, opened his lips to speak, then changed his mind and marched out of the house into the blinding snow.

"Thank Heaven he is gone at last!" reflected his father, and called for Hague Simon, with whom he held a long and careful interview.

"You understand?" he ended.

"I understand," answered Simon, sulkily. "I am to find this priest,

who should be waiting at the place you name, and to bring him here by nightfall to-morrow, which is a rough job for a Christian man in such weather as this."

"The pay, friend Simon, remember the pay."

"Oh! yes, it all sounds well enough, but I should like something on account."

"You shall have it--is not such a labourer worthy of his hire?" replied his employer with enthusiasm, and producing from his pocket the purse which Lysbeth had given Adrian, with a smile of peculiar satisfaction, for really the thing had a comic side, he counted a handsome sum into the hand of this emissary of Venus.

Simon looked at the money, concluded, after some reflection, that it would scarcely do to stand out for more at present, pouched it, and having wrapped himself in a thick frieze coat, opened the door and vanished into the falling snow.