

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BRIDEGROOM AND THE BRIDE

The day passed, and through every hour of it the snow fell incessantly. Night came, and it was still falling in large, soft flakes that floated to the earth gently as thistledown, for now there was no wind. Adrian met his father at meals only; the rest of the day he preferred to spend out of doors in the snow, or hanging about the old sheds at the back of the mill, rather than endure the society of this terrible man; this man of mocking words and iron purpose, who was forcing him into the commission of a great crime.

It was at breakfast on the following morning that Ramiro inquired of Black Mag whether the Jufvrouw Brant had sufficiently recovered from the fatigues of her journey to honour them with her presence. The woman replied that she absolutely refused to leave her room, or even to speak more than was necessary.

"Then," said Ramiro, "as it is important that I should have a few words with her, be so good as to tell the young lady, with my homage, that I will do myself the honour of waiting on her in the course of the forenoon."

Meg departed on her errand, and Adrian looked up suspiciously.

"Calm yourself, young friend," said his father, "although the interview will be private, you have really no cause for jealousy. At present, remember, I am but the second string in the bow-case, the understudy who has learnt the part, a humble position, but one which may prove useful."

At all of which gibes Adrian winced. But he did not reply, for by now he had learned that he was no match for his father's bitter wit.

Elsa received the message as she received everything else, in silence.

Three days before, as after a fearful illness during which on several occasions she was at the very doors of death, Lysbeth van Goorl had been declared out of danger, Elsa, her nurse, ventured to leave her for a few hours. That evening the town seemed to stifle her and, feeling that she needed the air of the country, she passed the Morsch poort and walked a little way along the banks of the canal, never noticing, poor girl, that her footsteps were dogged. When it began to grow dusk, she halted and stood a while gazing towards the Haarlemer Meer, letting her heart go out to the lover who, as she thought and hoped, within a day or two would be at her side.

Then it was that something was thrown over her head, and for a while all was black. She awoke to find herself lying in a boat, and watching her, two wretches, whom she recognised as those who had assailed her when first she came to Leyden from The Hague.

"Why have you kidnapped me, and where am I going?" she asked.

"Because we are paid to do it, and you are going to Adrian van Goorl,"
was the answer.

Then she understood, and was silent.

Thus they brought her to this lonesome, murderous-looking place, where sure enough Adrian was waiting for her, waiting with a lie upon his lips. Now, doubtless, the end was at hand. She, who loved his brother with all her heart and soul, was to be given forcibly in marriage to a man whom she despised and loathed, the vain, furious-tempered traitor, who, for revenge, jealousy, or greed, she knew not which, had not hesitated to send his benefactor, and mother's husband, to perish in the fires of the Inquisition.

What was she to do? Escape seemed out of the question, imprisoned as she was on the third story of a lofty mill standing in a lonely, snow-shrouded wilderness, cut off from the sight of every friendly face, and spied on hour after hour by two fierce-eyed women. No, there was only one escape for her--through the gate of death. Even this would be difficult, for she had no weapon, and day and night the women kept guard over her, one standing sentinel, while the other slept. Moreover, she had no mind to die, being young and healthy, with a love to live for, and from her childhood up she had been taught that self-slaughter is a sin. No, she would trust in God, and overwhelming though it was, fight

her way through this trouble as best she might. The helpless find friends sometimes. Therefore, that her strength might be preserved, Elsa rested and ate of her food, and drank the wine which they brought to her, refusing to leave the room, or to speak more than she was obliged, but watching everything that passed.

On the second morning of her imprisonment Ramiro's message reached her, to which, as usual, she made no answer. In due course also Ramiro himself arrived, and stood bowing in the doorway.

"Have I your permission to enter, Jufvrouw?" he asked. Then Elsa, knowing that the moment of trial had come, steeled herself for the encounter.

"You are master here," she answered, in a voice cold as the falling snow without, "why then do you mock me?"

He motioned to the women to leave the room, and when they had gone, replied:

"I have little thought of such a thing, lady; the matter in hand is too serious for smart sayings," and with another bow he sat himself down on a chair near the hearth, where a fire was burning. Whereon Elsa rose and stood over against him, for upon her feet she seemed to feel stronger.

"Will you be so good as to set out this matter, Senor Ramiro? Am I brought here to be tried for heresy?"

"Even so, for heresy against the god of love, and the sentence of the Court is that you must expiate your sin, not at the stake, but at the altar."

"I do not understand."

"Then I will explain. My son Adrian, a worthy young man on the whole--you know that he is my son, do you not?--has had the misfortune, or I should say the good fortune, to fall earnestly in love with you, whereas you have the bad taste--or, perhaps, the good taste--to give your affections elsewhere. Under the circumstances, Adrian, being a youth of spirit and resource, has fallen back upon primitive methods in order to bring his suit to a successful conclusion. He is here, you are here, and this evening I understand that the priest will be here. I need not dwell upon the obvious issue; indeed, it is a private matter upon which I have no right to intrude, except, of course, as a relative and a well-wisher."

Elsa made an impatient movement with her hand, as though to brush aside all this web of words.

"Why do you take so much trouble to force an unhappy girl into a hateful marriage?" she asked. "How can such a thing advantage you?"

"Ah!" answered Ramiro briskly, "I perceive I have to do with a woman of business, one who has that rarest of gifts--common sense. I will be frank. Your esteemed father died possessed of a very large fortune, which to-day is your property as his sole issue and heiress. Under the marriage laws, which I myself think unjust, that fortune will pass into the power of any husband whom you choose to take. Therefore, so soon as you are made his wife it will pass to Adrian. I am Adrian's father, and, as it happens, he is pecuniarily indebted to me to a considerable amount, so that, in the upshot, as he himself has pointed out more than once, this alliance will provide for both of us. But business details are wearisome, so I need not enlarge."

"The fortune you speak of, Senor Ramiro, is lost."

"It is lost, but I have reason to hope that it will be found."

"You mean that this is purely a matter of money?"

"So far as I am concerned, purely. For Adrian's feelings I cannot speak, since who knows the mystery of another's heart?"

"Then, if the money were forthcoming--or a clue to it--there need be no marriage?"

"So far as I am concerned, none at all."

"And if the money is not forthcoming, and I refuse to marry the Heer Adrian, or he to marry me--what then?"

"That is a riddle, but I think I see an answer at any rate to half of it. Then the marriage would still take place, but with another bridegroom."

"Another bridegroom! Who?"

"Your humble and devoted adorer."

Elsa shuddered and recoiled a step.

"Ah!" he said, "I should not have bowed, you saw my white hairs--to the young a hateful sight."

Elsa's indignation rose, and she answered:

"It is not your white hair that I shrink from, Senor, which in some would be a crown of honour, but----"

"In my case suggests to you other reflections. Be gentle and spare me them. In a world of rough actions, what need to emphasise them with rough words?"

For a few minutes there was silence, which Ramiro, glancing out of the lattice, broke by remarking that "The snowfall was extraordinarily heavy for the time of year." Then followed another silence.

"I understood you just now, dear lady, to make some sort of suggestion which might lead to an arrangement satisfactory to both of us. The exact locality of this wealth is at present obscure--you mentioned some clue. Are you in a position to furnish such a clue?"

"If I am in a position, what then?"

"Then, perhaps, after a few days visit to an interesting, but little explored part of Holland, you might return to your friends as you left them--in short as a single woman."

A struggle shook Elsa, and do what she would some trace of it appeared in her face.

"Do you swear that?" she whispered.

"Most certainly."

"Do you swear before God that if you have this clue you will not force me into a marriage with the Heer Adrian, or with yourself--that you will let me go, unharmed?"

"I swear it--before God."

"Knowing that God will be revenged upon you if you break the oath, you still swear?"

"I still swear. Why these needless repetitions?"

"Then--then," and she leant towards him, speaking in a hoarse whisper, "believing that you, even you, will not dare to be false to such an oath, for you, even you, must fear death, a miserable death, and vengeance, eternal vengeance, I give you the clue: It lies in the hilt of the sword Silence."

"The sword Silence? What sword is that?"

"The great sword of Red Martin."

Stirred out of his self-control, Ramiro struck his hand upon his knee.

"And to think," he said, "that for over twelve hours I had it hanging on the wall of the Gevangenhuis! Well, I fear that I must ask you to be more explicit. Where is this sword?"

"Wherever Red Martin is, that is all I know. I can tell you no more; the plan of the hiding-place is there."

"Or was there. Well, I believe you, but to win a secret from the hilt of the sword of the man who broke his way out of the torture-chamber of the Gevangenhuis, is a labour that would have been not unworthy of Hercules. First, Red Martin must be found, then his sword must be taken, which, I think, will cost men their lives. Dear lady, I am obliged for your information, but I fear that the marriage must still go through."

"You swore, you swore," she gasped, "you swore before God!"

"Quite so, and I shall leave--the Power you refer to--to manage the matter. Doubtless He can attend to His own affairs--I must attend to mine. I hope that about seven o'clock this evening will suit you, by which time the priest and--a bridegroom will be ready."

Then Elsa broke down.

"Devil!" she cried in the torment of her despair. "To save my honour I have betrayed my father's trust; I have betrayed the secret for which Martin was ready to die by torment, and given him over to be hunted like a wild beast. Oh! God forgive me, and God help me!"

"Doubtless, dear young lady, He will do the first, for your temptations were really considerable; I, who have more experience, outwitted you, that was all. Possibly, also, He may do the second, though many have uttered that cry unheard. For my own sake, I trust that He was sleeping when you uttered yours. But it is your affair and His; I leave it to be

arranged between you. Till this evening, Jufvrouw," and he bowed himself from the room.

But Elsa, shamed and broken-hearted, threw herself upon the bed and wept.

At mid-day she arose, hearing upon the stair the step of the woman who brought her food, and to hide her tear-stained face went to the barred lattice and looked out. The scene was dismal indeed, for the wind had veered suddenly, the snow had ceased, and in place of it rain was falling with a steady persistence. When the woman had gone, Elsa washed her face, and although her appetite turned from it, ate of the food, knowing how necessary it was that she should keep her strength.

Another hour passed, and there came a knock on the door. Elsa shuddered, for she thought that Ramiro had returned to torment her. Indeed it was almost a relief when, instead of him, appeared his son. Once glance at Adrian's nervous, shaken face, yes, and even the sound of his uncertain step brought hope to her heart. Her woman's instinct told her that now she had no longer to do with the merciless and terrible Ramiro, to whose eyes she was but a pretty pawn in a game that he must win, but with a young man who loved her, and whom she held, therefore, at a disadvantage--with one, moreover, who was harassed and ashamed, and upon whose conscience, therefore, she might work. She turned upon him, drawing herself up, and although she was short and Adrian was tall, of a sudden he felt as though she towered over him.

"Your pleasure?" asked Elsa.

In the old days Adrian would have answered with some magnificent compliment, or far-fetched simile lifted from the pages of romancers. In truth he had thought of several such while, like a half-starved dog seeking a home, he wandered round and round the mill-house in the snow. But he was now far beyond all rhetoric or gallantries.

"My father wished," he began humbly--"I mean that I have come to speak to you about--our marriage."

Of a sudden Elsa's delicate features seemed to turn to ice, while, to his fancy at any rate, her brown eyes became fire.

"Marriage," she said in a strange voice. "Oh! what an unutterable coward you must be to speak that word. Call what is proposed by any foul title which you will, but at least leave the holy name of marriage undefiled."

"It is not my fault," he answered sullenly, but shrinking beneath her words. "You know, Elsa, that I wished to wed you honourably enough."

"Yes," she broke in, "and because I would not listen, because you do not please me, and you could not win me as a man wins a maid, you--you laid a trap and kidnapped me, thinking to get by brute force that which my heart withheld. Oh! in all the Netherlands lives there another such

an abject as Adrian called van Goorl, the base-born son of Ramiro the galley slave?"

"I have told you that it is false," he replied furiously. "I had nothing to do with your capture. I knew nothing of it till I saw you here."

Elsa laughed a very bitter laugh. "Spare your breath," she said, "for if you swore it before the face of the recording Angel I would not believe you. Remember that you are the man who betrayed your brother and your benefactor, and then guess, if you can, what worth I put upon your words."

In the bitterness of his heart Adrian groaned aloud, and from that groan Elsa, listening eagerly, gathered some kind of hope.

"Surely," she went on, with a changed and softened manner, "surely you will not do this wickedness. The blood of Dirk van Goorl lies on your head; will you add mine to his? For be sure of this, I swear it by my Maker, that before I am indeed a wife to you I shall be dead--or mayhap you will be dead, or both of us. Do you understand?"

"I understand, but----"

"But what? Where is the use of this wickedness? For your soul's sake, refuse to have aught to do with such a sin."

"But if so, my father will marry you."

It was a chance arrow, but it went home, for of a sudden Elsa's strength and eloquence seemed to leave her. She ran to him with her hands clasped, she flung herself upon her knees.

"Oh! help me to escape," she moaned, "and I will bless you all my life."

"It is impossible," he answered. "Escape from this guarded place, through those leagues of melting snow? I tell you that it is impossible."

"Then," and her eyes grew wild, "then kill him and free me. He is a devil, he is your evil genius; it would be a righteous deed. Kill him and free me."

"I should like to," answered Adrian; "I nearly did once, but, for my soul's sake, I can't put a sword through my own father; it is the most horrible of crimes. When I confessed----"

"Then," she broke in, "if this farce, this infamy must be gone through, swear at least that you will treat it as such, that you will respect me."

"It is a hard thing to ask of a husband who loves you more than any woman in the world," he answered turning aside his head.

"Remember," she went on, with another flash of defiant spirit, "that if you do not, you will soon love me better than any woman out of the world, or perhaps we shall both settle what lies between us before the Judgment Seat of God. Will you swear?"

He hesitated.

Oh! she reflected, what if he should answer--"Rather than this I hand you over to Ramiro"? What if he should think of that argument? Happily for her, at the moment he did not.

"Swear," she implored, "swear," clinging with her hands to the lappet of his coat and lifting to him her white and piteous face.

"I make it an offering in expiation of my sins," he groaned, "you shall go free of me."

Elsa uttered a sigh of relief. She put no faith whatever in Adrian's promises, but at the worst it would give her time.

"I thought that I should not appeal in vain----"

"To so amusing and egregious a donkey," said Ramiro's mocking voice speaking from the gloom of the doorway, which now Elsa observed for the first time had swung open mysteriously.

"My dear son and daughter-in-law, how can I thank you sufficiently for the entertainment with which you have enlivened one of the most dreary afternoons I remember. Don't look dangerous, my boy; recall what you have just told this young lady, that the crime of removing a parent is one which, though agreeable, is not lightly to be indulged. Then, as to your future arrangements, how touching! The soul of a Diana, I declare, and the self-sacrifice of a--no, I fear that the heroes of antiquity can furnish no suitable example. And now, adieu, I go to welcome the gentleman you both of you so eagerly expect."

He went, and a minute later without speaking, for the situation seemed beyond words, Adrian crept down the stairs after him, more miserable and crushed even than he had crept up them half an hour before.

Another two hours went by. Elsa was in her apartment with Black Meg for company, who watched her as a cat watches a mouse in a trap. Adrian had taken refuge in the place where he slept above. It was a dreary, vacuous chamber, that once had held stones and other machinery of the mill now removed, the home of spiders and half-starved rats, that a lean black cat hunted continually. Across its ceiling ran great beams, whereof the interlacing ends, among which sharp draughts whistled, lost themselves in gloom, while, with an endless and exasperating sound, as of a knuckle upon a board, the water dripped from the leaky roof.

In the round living-chamber below Ramiro was alone. No lamp had been lit, but the glow from the great turf fire played upon his face as he sat there, watching, waiting, and scheming in the chair of black oak. Presently a noise from without caught his quick ear, and calling to the serving woman to light the lamp, he went to the door, opened it, and saw a lantern floating towards him through the thick steam of falling rain. Another minute and the bearer of the lantern, Hague Simon, arrived, followed by two other men.

"Here he is," said Simon, nodding at the figure behind him, a short round figure wrapped in a thick frieze cloak, from which water ran. "The other is the head boatman."

"Good," said Ramiro. "Tell him and his companions to wait in the shed without, where liquor will be sent to them; they may be wanted later on."

Then followed talk and oaths, and at length the man retreated grumbling.

"Enter, Father Thomas," said Ramiro; "you have had a wet journey, I fear. Enter and give us your blessing."

Before he answered the priest threw off his dripping, hooded cape of Frisian cloth, revealing a coarse, wicked face, red and blear-eyed from intemperance.

"My blessing?" he said in a raucous voice. "Here it is, Senor Ramiro, or whatever you call yourself now. Curse you all for bringing out a holy priest upon one of your devil's errands in weather which is only fit for a bald-headed coot to travel through. There is going to be a flood; already the water is running over the banks of the dam, and it gathers every moment as the snow melts. I tell you there is going to be such a flood as we have not seen for years."

"The more reason, Father, for getting through this little business quickly; but first you will wish for something to drink."

Father Thomas nodded, and Ramiro filling a small mug with brandy, gave it to him. He gulped it off.

"Another," he said. "Don't be afraid. A chosen vessel should also be a seasoned vessel; at any rate this one is. Ah! that's better. Now then, what's the exact job?"

Ramiro took him apart and they talked together for a while.

"Very good," said the priest at length, "I will take the risk and do it, for where heretics are concerned such things are not too closely inquired into nowadays. But first down with the money; no paper or promises, if you please."

"Ah! you churchmen," said Ramiro, with a faint smile, "in things spiritual or temporal how much have we poor laity to learn of you!" With a sigh he produced the required sum, then paused and added, "No; with your leave we will see the papers first. You have them with you?"

"Here they are," answered the priest, drawing some documents from his pocket. "But they haven't been married yet; the rule is, marry first, then certify. Until the ceremony is actually performed, anything might happen, you know."

"Quite so, Father. Anything might happen either before or after; but still, with your leave, I think that in this case we may as well certify first; you might want to be getting away, and it will save so much trouble later. Will you be so kind as to write your certificate?"

Father Thomas hesitated, while Ramiro gently clinked the gold coins in his hand and murmured,

"I should be sorry to think, Father, that you had taken such a rough journey for nothing."

"What trick are you at now?" growled the priest. "Well, after all it is a mere form. Give me the names."

Ramiro gave them; Father Thomas scrawled them down, adding some words and his own signature, then said, "There you are, that will hold good

against anyone except the Pope."

"A mere form," repeated Ramiro, "of course. But the world attaches so much importance to forms, so I think that we will have this one witnessed--No, not by myself, who am an interested party--by someone independent," and calling Hague Simon and the waiting-woman he bade them

set their names at the foot of the documents.

"Papers signed in advance--fees paid in advance!" he went on, handing over the money, "and now, just one more glass to drink the health of the bride and bridegroom, also in advance. You will not refuse, nor you, worthy Simon, nor you, most excellent Abigail. Ah! I thought not, the night is cold."

"And the brandy strong," muttered the priest thickly, as this third dose of raw spirit took effect upon him. "Now get on with the business, for I want to be out of this hole before the flood comes."

"Quite so. Friends, will you be so good as to summon my son and the lady? The lady first, I think--and all three of you might go to escort her. Brides sometimes consider it right to fain a slight reluctance--you understand? On second thoughts, you need not trouble the Senor Adrian. I have a new words of ante-nuptial advice to offer, so I will go to him."

A minute later father and son stood face to face. Adrian leaped up; he

shook his fist, he raved and stormed at the cold, impassive man before him.

"You fool, you contemptible fool!" said Ramiro when he had done.

"Heavens! to think that such a creature should have sprung from me, a human jackass only fit to bear the blows and burdens of others, to fill the field with empty brayings, and wear himself out by kicking at the air. Oh! don't twist up your face at me, for I am your master as well as your father, however much you may hate me. You are mine, body and soul, don't you understand; a bond-slave, nothing more. You lost the only chance you ever had in the game when you got me down at Leyden. You daren't draw a sword on me again for your soul's sake, dear Adrian, for your soul's sake; and if you dared, I would run you through. Now, are you coming?"

"No," answered Adrian.

"Think a minute. If you don't marry her I shall, and before she is half an hour older; also--" and he leant forward and whispered into his son's ear.

"Oh! you devil, you devil!" Adrian gasped; then he moved towards the door.

"What? Changed your mind, have you, Mr. Weathercock? Well, it is the prerogative of all feminine natures--but, your doublet is awry, and

allow me to suggest that you should brush your hair. There, that's better; now, come on. No, you go first, if you please, I'd rather have you in front of me."

When they reached the room below the bride was already there. Gripped on either side by Black Meg and the other woman, white as death and trembling, but still defiant, stood Elsa.

"Let's get through with this," growled the half-drunken, ruffian priest. "I take the willingness of the parties for granted."

"I am not willing," cried Elsa. "I have been brought here by force. I call everyone present to witness that whatever is done is against my will. I appeal to God to help me."

The priest turned upon Ramiro.

"How am I to marry them in the face of this?" he asked. "If only she were silent it might be done----"

"The difficulty has occurred to me," answered Ramiro. He made a sign, whereon Simon seized Elsa's wrists, and Black Meg, slipping behind her, deftly fastened a handkerchief over her mouth in such fashion that she was gagged, but could still breathe through the nostrils.

Elsa struggled a little, then was quiet, and turned her piteous eyes on

Adrian, who stepped forward and opened his lips.

"You remember the alternative," said his father in a low voice, and he stopped.

"I suppose," broke in Father Thomas, "that we may at any rate reckon upon the consent, or at least upon the silence of the Heer bridegroom."

"You may reckon on his silence, Father Thomas," replied Ramiro.

Then the ceremony began. They dragged Elsa to the table. Thrice she flung herself to the ground, and thrice they lifted her to her feet, but at length, weary of the weight of her body, suffered her to rest upon her knees, where she remained as though in prayer, gagged like some victim on the scaffold. It was a strange and brutal scene, and every detail of it burned itself into Adrian's mind. The round, rude room, with its glowing fire of turfs and its rough, oaken furniture, half in light and half in dense shadow, as the lamp-rays chanced to fall; the death-like, kneeling bride, with a white cloth across her tortured face; the red-chopped, hanging-lipped hedge priest gabbling from a book, his back almost turned that he might not see her attitude and struggles; the horrible, unsexed women; the flat-faced villain, Simon, grinning by the hearth; Ramiro, cynical, mocking, triumphant, and yet somewhat anxious, his one bright eye fixed in mingled contempt and amusement upon him, Adrian--those were its outlines. There was something else also that caught and oppressed his sense, a sound which at the time Adrian thought

he heard in his head alone, a soft, heavy sound with a moan in it, not unlike that of the wind, which grew gradually to a dull roar.

It was over. A ring had been forced on to Elsa's unwilling hand, and, until the thing was undone by some competent and authorised Court, she was in name the wife of Adrian. The handkerchief was unbound, her hands were loosed, physically, Elsa was free again, but, in that day and land of outrage, tied, as the poor girl knew well, by a chain more terrible than any that hemp or steel could fashion.

"Congratulations! Senora," muttered Father Thomas, eyeing her nervously. "I fear you felt a little faint during the service, but a sacrament----"

"Cease your mockings, you false priest," cried Elsa. "Oh! let the swift vengeance of God fall upon every one of you, and first of all upon you, false priest."

Drawing the ring from her finger, as she spoke she cast it down upon the oaken table, whence it sprang up to drop again and rattle itself to silence. Then with one tragic motion of despair, Elsa turned and fled back to her chamber.

The red face of Father Thomas went white, and his yellow teeth chattered. "A virgin's curse," he muttered, crossing himself.

"Misfortune always follows, and it is sometimes death--yes, by St. Thomas, death. And you, you brought me here to do this wickedness, you

dog, you galley slave!"

"Father," broke in Ramiro, "you know I have warned you against it before at The Hague; sooner or later it always breaks up the nerves," and he nodded towards the flagon of spirits. "Bread and water, Father, bread and water for forty days, that is what I prescribe, and----"

As he spoke the door was burst open, and two men rushed in, their eyes starting, their very beards bristling with terror.

"Come forth!" they cried.

"What has chanced?" screamed the priest.

"The great dyke has burst--hark, hark, hark! The floods are upon you, the mill will be swept away."

God in Heaven--it was true! Now through the open doorway they heard the roar of waters, whose note Adrian had caught before, yes, and in the gloom appeared their foaming crest as they rushed through the great and ever-widening breach in the lofty dyke down upon the flooded lowland.

Father Thomas bounded through the door yelling, "The boat, the boat!" For a moment Ramiro thought, considering the situation, then he said:

"Fetch the Jufvrouw. No, not you, Adrian; she would die rather than come

with you. You, Simon, and you, Meg. Swift, obey."

They departed on their errand.

"Men," went on Ramiro, "take this gentleman and lead him to the boat. Hold him if he tries to escape. I will follow with the lady. Go, you fool, go, there is not a second to be lost," and Adrian, hanging back and protesting, was dragged away by the boatmen.

Now Ramiro was alone, and though, as he had said, there was little time to spare, again for a few moments he thought deeply. His face flushed and went pale; then entered into it a great resolve. "I don't like doing it, for it is against my vow, but the chance is good. She is safely married, and at best she would be very troublesome hereafter, and might bring us to justice or to the galleys since others seek her wealth," he muttered with a shiver, adding, "as for the spies, we are well rid of them and their evidence." Then, with swift resolution, stepping to the door at the foot of the stairs, Ramiro shut it and shot the great iron bolt!

He ran from the mill; the raised path was already three feet deep in water; he could scarcely make his way along it. Ah! there lay the boat. Now he was in it, and now they were flying before the crest of a huge wave. The dam of the cutting had given altogether, and fed from sea and land at once, by snow, by rain, and by the inrush of the high tide, its waters were pouring in a measureless volume over the doomed marshes.

"Where is Elsa?" screamed Adrian.

"I don't know. I couldn't find her," answered Ramiro. "Row, row for your lives! We can take her off in the morning, and the priest too, if he won back."

At length the cold winter sun rose over the watery waste, calm enough now, for the floods were out, in places ten and fifteen feet deep. Through the mists that brooded on the face of them Ramiro and his crew groped their way back to where the Red Mill should be. It was gone!

There stood the brick walls of the bottom story rising above the flood level, but the wooden upper part had snapped before the first great wave when the bank went bodily, and afterwards been swept away by the rushing current, swept away with those within.

"What is that?" said one of the boatmen, pointing to a dark object which floated among the tangled debris of sere weeds and woodwork collected against the base of the mill.

They rowed to the thing. It was the body of Father Thomas, who must have missed his footing as he ran along the pathway, and fallen into deep water.

"Um!" said Ramiro, "'a virgin's curse.' Observe, friends, how the merest coincidences may give rise to superstition. Allow me," and, holding the dead man by one hand, he felt in his pockets with the other, till, with a smile of satisfaction, he found the purse containing the gold which he had paid him on the previous evening.

"Oh! Elsa, Elsa," moaned Adrian.

"Comfort yourself, my son," said Ramiro as the boat put about, leaving the dead Father Thomas bobbing up and down in the ripple; "you have indeed lost a wife whose temper gave you little prospect of happiness, but at least I have your marriage papers duly signed and witnessed, and--you are her heir."

He did not add that he in turn was Adrian's. But Adrian thought of it, and even in the midst of his shame and misery wondered with a shiver how long he who was Ramiro's next of kin was likely to adorn this world.

Till he had something that was worth inheriting, perhaps.