

CHAPTER XXVII

WHAT ELSA SAW IN THE MOONLIGHT

It will be remembered that some weeks before Elsa's forced marriage in the Red Mill, Foy, on their escape from the Gevangenhuis, had been carried upon the naked back of Martin to the shelter of Mother Martha's lair in the Haarlemer Meer. Here he lay sick many days, for the sword cut in his thigh festered so badly that at one time his life was threatened by gangrene, but, in the end, his own strength and healthy constitution, helped with Martha's simples, cured him. So soon as he was strong again, accompanied by Martin, he travelled into Leyden, which now it was safe enough for him to visit, since the Spaniards were driven from the town.

How his young heart swelled as, still limping a little and somewhat pale from recent illness, he approached the well-known house in the Bree Straat, the home that sheltered his mother and his love. Presently he would see them again, for the news had been brought to him that Lysbeth was out of danger and Elsa must still be nursing her.

Lysbeth he found indeed, turned into an old woman by grief and sore sickness, but Elsa he did not find. She had vanished. On the previous night she had gone out to take the air, and returned no more. What had become of her none could say. All the town talked of it, and his mother was half-crazed with anxiety and fear, fear of the worst.

Hither and thither they went inquiring, seeking, tracking, but no trace of Elsa could they discover. She had been seen to pass the Morsch poort; then she disappeared. For a while Foy was mad. At length he grew calmer and began to think. Drawing from his pocket the letter which Martha had brought to him on the night of the church-burning, he re-read it in the hope of finding a clue, since it was just possible that for private reasons Elsa might have set out on some journey of her own. It was a very sweet letter, telling him of her deep joy and gratitude at his escape; of the events that had happened in the town; of the death of his father in the Gevangenhuis, and ending thus:

"Dear Foy, my betrothed, I cannot come to you because of your mother's sickness, for I am sure that it would be your wish, as it is my desire and duty, that I should stay to nurse her. Soon, however, I hope that you will be able to come to her and me. Yet, in these dreadful times who can tell what may happen? Therefore, Foy, whatever chances, I am sure you will remember that in life or in death I am yours only--yes, to you, dead or living, you dead and I living, or you living and I dead, while or wherever I have sense or memory, I will be true; through life, through death, through whatever may lie beyond our deaths, I will be true as woman may be to man. So, dear Foy, for this present fare you well until we meet again in the days to come, or after all earthly days are done with for you and me. My love be with you, the blessing of God be with you, and when you lie down at night and when you wake at morn,

think of me and put up a prayer for me as your true lover Elsa does for you. Martha waits. Most loved, most dear, most desired, fare you well."

Here was no hint of any journey, so if such had been taken it must be without Elsa's own consent.

"Martin, what do you make of it?" asked Foy, staring at him with anxious, hollow eyes.

"Ramiro--Adrian--stolen away--" answered Martin.

"Why do you say that?"

"Hague Simon was seen hanging about outside the town yesterday, and there was a strange boat upon the river. Last night the Jufvrouw went through the Morsch poort. The rest you can guess."

"Why would they take her?" asked Foy hoarsely.

"Who can tell?" said Martin shrugging his great shoulders. "Yet I see two reasons. Hendrik Brant's wealth is supposed to be hers when it can be found; therefore, being a thief, Ramiro would want her. Adrian is in love with her; therefore, being a man, of course he would want her. These seem enough, the pair being what they are."

"When I find them I will kill them both," said Foy, grinding his teeth.

"Of course, so will I, but first we have got to find them--and her, which is the same thing."

"How, Martin, how?"

"I don't know."

"Can't you think, man?"

"I am trying to, master; it's you who don't think. You talk too much. Be silent a while."

"Well," asked Foy thirty seconds later, "have you finished thinking?"

"No, master, it's no use, there is nothing to think about. We must leave this and go back to Martha. If anyone can track her out she can. Here we can learn no more."

So they returned to the Haarlemer Meer and told Martha their sad tale.

"Bide here a day or two and be patient," she said; "I will go out and search."

"Never," answered Foy, "we will come with you."

"If you choose, but it will make matters more difficult. Martin, get ready the big boat."

Two nights had gone by, and it was an hour or more past noon on the third day, the day of Elsa's forced marriage. The snow had ceased falling and the rain had come instead, rain, pitiless, bitter and continual. Hidden in a nook at the north end of the Haarlemer Meer and almost buried beneath bundles of reeds, partly as a protection from the weather and partly to escape the eyes of Spaniards, of whom companies were gathering from every direction to besiege Haarlem, lay the big boat. In it were Red Martin and Foy van Goorl. Mother Martha was not there for she had gone alone to an inn at a distance, to gather information if she could. To hundreds of the boers in these parts she was a known and trusted friend, although many of them might not choose to recognise her openly, and from among them, unless, indeed, she had been taken right away to Flanders, or even to Spain, she hoped to gather tidings of Elsa's whereabouts.

For two weary nights and days the Mare had been employed thus, but as yet without a shadow of success. Foy and Martin sat in the boat staring at each other gloomily; indeed Foy's face was piteous to see.

"What are you thinking of, master?" asked Martin presently.

"I am thinking," he answered, "that even if we find her now it will be too late; whatever was to be done, murder or marriage, will be done."

"Time to trouble about that when we have found her," said Martin, for he knew not what else to say, and added, "listen, I hear footsteps."

Foy drew apart two of the bundles of reeds and looked out into the driving rain.

"All right," he said, "it is Martha and a man."

Martin let his hand fall from the hilt of the sword Silence, for in those days hand and sword must be near together. Another minute and Martha and her companion were in the boat.

"Who is this man?" asked Foy.

"He is a friend of mine named Marsh Jan."

"Have you news?"

"Yes, at least Marsh Jan has."

"Speak, and be swift," said Foy, turning on the man fiercely.

"Am I safe from vengeance?" asked Marsh Jan, who was a good fellow enough although he had drifted into evil company, looking doubtfully at Foy and Martin.

"Have I not said so," answered Martha, "and does the Mare break her word?"

Then Marsh Jan told his tale: How he was one of the party that two nights before had rowed Elsa, or at least a young woman who answered to her description, to the Red Mill, not far from Velzen, and how she was in the immediate charge of a man and a woman who could be no other than Hague Simon and Black Meg. Also he told of her piteous appeal to the boatmen in the names of their wives and daughters, and at the telling of it Foy wept with fear and rage, and even Martha gnashed her teeth. Only Martin cast off the boat and began to punt her out into deep water.

"Is that all?" asked Foy.

"That is all, Mynheer, I know nothing more, but I can explain to you where the place is."

"You can show us, you mean," said Foy.

The man expostulated. The weather was bad, there would be a flood, his wife was ill and expected him, and so forth. Then he tried to get out of the boat, whereon, catching hold of him suddenly, Martin threw him into

the stern-sheets, saying:

"You could travel to this mill once taking with you a girl whom you knew to be kidnapped, now you can travel there again to get her out. Sit still and steer straight, or I will make you food for fishes."

Then Marsh Jan professed himself quite willing to sail to the Red Mill, which he said they ought to reach by nightfall.

All that afternoon they sailed and rowed, till, with the darkness, before ever the mill was in sight, the great flood came down upon them and drove them hither and thither, such a flood as had not been seen in those districts for a dozen years. But Marsh Jan knew his bearings well; he had the instinct of locality that is bred in those whose forefathers for generations have won a living from the fens, and through it all he held upon a straight course.

Once Foy thought that he heard a voice calling for help in the darkness, but it was not repeated and they went forward. At last the sky cleared and the moon shone out upon such a waste of waters as Noah might have beheld from the ark. Only there were things floating in them that Noah would scarcely have seen; hayricks, dead and drowning cattle, household furniture, and once even a coffin washed from some graveyard, while beyond stretched the dreary outline of the sand dunes.

"The mill should be near," said Marsh Jan, "let us put about." So they

turned, rowing with weary arms, for the wind had fallen.

Let us go back a little. Elsa, on escaping from the scene of her mock marriage, fled to her room and bolted its door. A few seconds later she heard hands hammering at it, and the voices of Hague Simon and Black Meg calling to her to open. She took no note, the hammering ceased, and then it was that for the first time she became aware of a dreadful, roaring noise, a noise of many waters. Time passed as it passes in a nightmare, till suddenly, above the dull roar, came sharp sounds as of wood cracking and splitting, and Elsa felt that the whole fabric of the mill had tilted. Beneath the pressure of the flood it had given where it was weakest, at its narrow waist, and now its red cap hung over like a wind-laid tree.

Terror took hold of Elsa, and running to the door she opened it hoping to escape down the stairs. Behold! water was creeping up them, she could see it by the lantern in her hand--her retreat was cut off. But there were other stairs leading to the top storey of the mill that now lay at a steep angle, and along these she climbed, since the water was pouring through her doorway and there was nowhere else to go. In the very roof of the place was a manhole with a rotten hatch. She passed through this, to find herself upon the top of the mill just where one of the great naked arms of the sails projected from it. Her lantern was blown out by

now, but she clung to the arm, and became aware that the wooden cap of the structure, still anchored to its brick foundation, lay upon its side rocking to and fro like a boat upon an angry sea. The water was near her; that she knew by its seethe and rush, although she could not see it, but as yet it did not even wet her feet.

The hours went by, how many, she never learned, till at length the clouds cleared; the moon became visible, and by its light she saw an awful scene. Everywhere around was water; it lapped within a yard, and it was rising still. Now Elsa saw that in the great beam she clasped were placed short spokes for the use of those who set the sails above. Up these she climbed as best she might, till she was able to pass her body between two of the vanes and support her breast upon the flat surface of one of them, as a person does who leans out of a window. From her window there was something to see. Quite near to her, but separated by fifteen or twenty feet of yellow frothing water, a little portion of the swelling shape of the mill stood clear of the flood. To this foam-lapped island clung two human beings--Hague Simon and Black Meg. They saw her also and screamed for help, but she had none to give. Surely it was a dream--nothing so awful could happen outside a dream.

The fabric of the mill tilted more and more; the space to which the two vile creatures hung grew less and less. There was no longer room for both of them. They began to quarrel, to curse and jibber at each other, their fierce, bestial faces not an inch apart as they crouched there on hands and knees. The water rose a little, they were kneeling in it now,

and the man, putting down his bald head, butted at the woman, almost thrusting her from her perch. But she was strong and active, she struggled back again; she did more, with an eel-like wriggle she climbed upon his back, weighing him down. He strove to shake her off but could not, for on that heaving, rolling surface he dared not loose his hand-grip, so he turned his flat and florid face, and, seizing her leg between his teeth, bit and worried at it. In her pain and rage Meg screeched aloud--that was the cry which Foy had heard. Then suddenly she drew a knife from her bosom--Elsa saw it flash in the moonlight--and stabbed downwards once, twice, thrice.

Elsa shut her eyes. When she opened them again the woman was alone upon the little patch of red boarding, her body splayed out over it like that of a dead frog. So she lay a while till suddenly the cap of the Red Mill dipped slowly like a lady who makes a Court curtsey, and she vanished. It rose again and Meg was still there, moaning in her terror and water running from her dress. Then again it dipped, this time more deeply, and when the patch of rusty boarding slowly reappeared, it was empty. No, not quite, for clinging to it, yowling and spitting, was the half-wild black cat which Elsa had seen wandering about the mill. But of Black Meg there was no trace.

It was dreadfully cold up there hanging to the sail-bar, for now that the rain had finished, it began to freeze. Indeed, had it not chanced that Elsa was dressed in her warm winter gown with fur upon it, and dry

from her head to her feet, it is probable that she would have fallen off and perished in the water. As it was gradually her body became numb and her senses faded. She seemed to know that all this matter of her forced marriage, of the flood, and of the end of Simon and Meg, was nothing but a dream, a very evil nightmare from which she would awake presently to find herself snug and warm in her own bed in the Bree Straat. Of course it must be a nightmare, for look, there, on the bare patch of boarding beneath, the hideous struggle repeated itself. There lay Hague Simon gnawing at his wife's foot, only his fat, white face was gone, and in place of it he wore the head of a cat, for she, the watcher, could see its glowing eyes fixed upon her. And Meg--look how her lean limbs gripped him round the body. Listen to the thudding noise as the great knife fell between his shoulders. And now, see--she was growing tall, she had become a giantess, her face shot across the gulf of water and swam upwards through the shadows till it was within a foot of her. Oh! she must fall, but first she would scream for help--surely the dead themselves could hear that cry. Better not have uttered it, it might bring Ramiro back; better go to join the dead. What did the voice say, Meg's voice, but how changed? That she was not to be afraid? That the thudding was the sound of oars not of knife thrusts? This would be Ramiro's boat coming to seize her. Of him and Adrian she could bear no more; she would throw herself into the water and trust to God. One, two, three--then utter darkness.

Elsa became aware that light was shining about her, also that somebody was kissing her upon the face and lips. A horrible doubt struck her that

it might be Adrian, and she opened her eyes ever so little to look. No, no, how very strange, it was not Adrian, it was Foy! Well, doubtless this must be all part of her vision, and as in dream or out of it Foy had a perfect right to kiss her if he chose, she saw no reason to interfere. Now she seemed to hear a familiar voice, that of Red Martin, asking someone how long it would take them to make Haarlem with this wind, to which another voice answered, "About three-quarters of an hour."

It was very odd, and why did he say Haarlem and not Leyden? Next the second voice, which also seemed familiar, said:

"Look out, Foy, she's coming to herself." Then someone poured wine down her throat, whereupon, unable to bear this bewilderment any longer, Elsa sat up and opened her eyes wide, to see before her Foy, and none other than Foy in the flesh.

She gasped, and began to sink back again with joy and weakness, whereon he cast his arms about her and drew her to his breast. Then she remembered everything.

"Oh! Foy, Foy," she cried, "you must not kiss me."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because--because I am married."

Of a sudden his happy face became ghastly. "Married!" he stammered. "Who to?"

"To--your brother, Adrian."

He stared at her in amazement, then asked slowly:

"Did you run away from Leyden to marry him?"

"How dare you ask such a question?" replied Elsa with a flash of spirit.

"Perhaps, then, you would explain?"

"What is there to explain? I thought that you knew. They dragged me away, and last night, just before the flood burst, I was gagged and married by force."

"Oh! Adrian, my friend," groaned Foy, "wait till I catch you, my friend Adrian."

"To be just," explained Elsa, "I don't think Adrian wanted to marry me much, but he had to choose between marrying me himself or seeing his father Ramiro marry me."

"So he sacrificed himself--the good, kind-hearted man," interrupted Foy,

grinding his teeth.

"Yes," said Elsa.

"And where is your self-denying--oh! I can't say the word."

"I don't know. I suppose that he and Ramiro escaped in the boat, or perhaps he was drowned."

"In which case you are a widow sooner than you could have expected," said Foy more cheerfully, edging himself towards her.

But Elsa moved a little away and Foy saw with a sinking of the heart that, however distasteful it might be to her, clearly she attached some weight to this marriage.

"I do not know," she answered, "how can I tell? I suppose that we shall hear sometime, and then, if he is still alive, I must set to work to get free of him. But, till then, Foy," she added, warningly, "I suppose that I am his wife in law, although I will never speak to him again. Where are we going?"

"To Haarlem. The Spaniards are closing in upon the city, and we dare not try to break through their lines. Those are Spanish boats behind us. But eat and drink a little, Elsa, then tell us your story."

"One question first, Foy. How did you find me?"

"We heard a woman scream twice, once far away and once near at hand, and rowing to the sound, saw someone hanging to the arm of an overturned windmill only three or four feet above the water. Of course we knew that you had been taken to the mill; that man there told us. Do you remember him? But at first we could not find it in the darkness and the flood."

Then, after she had swallowed something, Elsa told her story, while the three of them clustered round her forward of the sail, and Marsh Jan managed the helm. When she had finished it, Martin whispered to Foy, and as though by a common impulse all four of them kneeled down upon the

boards in the bottom of the boat, and returned thanks to the Almighty that this maiden, quite unharmed, had been delivered out of such manifold and terrible dangers, and this by the hands of her own friends and of the man to whom she was affianced. When they had finished their service of thanksgiving, which was as simple as it was solemn and heartfelt, they rose, and now Elsa did not forbid that Foy should hold her hand.

"Say, sweetheart," he asked, "is it true that you think anything of this forced marriage?"

"Hear me before you answer," broke in Martha. "It is no marriage at all, for none can be wed without the consent of their own will, and you gave

no such consent."

"It is no marriage," echoed Martin, "and if it be, and I live, then the sword shall cut its knot."

"It is no marriage," said Foy, "for although we have not stood together before the altar, yet our hearts are wed, so how can you be made the wife of another man?"

"Dearest," replied Elsa, when they had all spoken, "I too am sure that it is no marriage, yet a priest spoke the marriage words over me, and a ring was thrust upon my hand, so, to the law, if there be any law left in the Netherlands, I am perhaps in some sort a wife. Therefore, before I can become wife to you these facts must be made public, and I must appeal to the law to free me, lest in days to come others should be troubled."

"And if the law cannot, or will not, Elsa, what then?"

"Then, dear, our consciences being clean, we will be a law to ourselves. But first we must wait a while. Are you satisfied now, Foy?"

"No," answered Foy sulkily, "for it is monstrous that such devil's work should keep us apart even for an hour. Yet in this, as in all, I will obey you, dear."

"Marrying and giving in marriage!" broke in Martha in a shrill voice.

"Talk no more of such things, for there is other work before us. Look yonder, girl, what do you see?" and she pointed to the dry land. "The hosts of the Amalekites marching in their thousands to slaughter us and our brethren, the children of the Lord. Look behind you, what do you see? The ships of the tyrant sailing up to encompass the city of the children of the Lord. It is the day of death and desolation, the day of Armageddon, and ere the sun sets red upon it many a thousand must pass through the gates of doom, we, mayhap, among them. Then up with the flag of freedom; out with the steel of truth, gird on the buckler of righteousness, and snatch the shield of hope. Fight, fight for the liberty of the land that bore you, for the memory of Christ, the King who died for you, for the faith to which you are born; fight, fight, and when the fray is done, then, and not before, think of peace and love.

"Nay, children, look not so fearful, for I, the mad mere-wife, tell you, by the Grace of God, that you have naught to fear. Who preserved you in the torture den, Foy van Goorl? What hand was it that held your life and honour safe when you sojourned among devils in the Red Mill yonder and kept your head above the waters of the flood, Elsa Brant? You know well, and I, Martha, tell you that this same hand shall hold you safe until the end. Yes, I know it, I know it; thousands shall fall upon your right hand and tens of thousands upon your left, but you shall live through the hunger; the arrows of pestilence shall pass you by, the sword of the wicked shall not harm you. For me it is otherwise, at length my doom draws near and I am well content; but for you twain, Foy and Elsa, I

foretell many years of earthly joy."

Thus spoke Martha, and it seemed to those who watched her that her wild, disfigured face shone with a light of inspiration, nor did they who knew her story, and still believed that the spirit of prophecy could open the eyes of chosen seers, deem it strange that vision of the things to be should visit her. At the least they took comfort from her words, and for a while were no more afraid.

Yet they had much to fear. By a fateful accident they had been delivered from great dangers only to fall into dangers greater still, for as it chanced, on this tenth of December, 1572, they sailed straight into the grasp of the thousands of the Spanish armies which had been drawn like a net round the doomed city of Haarlem. There was no escape for them; nothing that had not wings could pass those lines of ships and soldiers. Their only refuge was the city, and in that city they must bide till the struggle, one of the most fearful of all that hideous war, was ended. But at least they had this comfort, they would face the foe together, and with them were two who loved them, Martha, the "Spanish Scourge," and Red Martin, the free Frisian, the mighty man of war whom God had appointed to them as a shield of defence.

So they smiled on each other, these two lovers of long ago, and sailed bravely on to the closing gates of Haarlem.