

Emma Orczy

Leatherface: A Tale of Old Flanders



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Содержание

PROLOGUE	5
BOOK ONE: BRUSSELS	8
CHAPTER I	8
CHAPTER II	21
CHAPTER III	29
CHAPTER IV	43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

Orczy Emmuska Orczy, Baroness Leatherface: A Tale of Old Flanders

PROLOGUE MONS, SEPTEMBER, 1572

It lacked two hours before the dawn on this sultry night early in September. The crescent moon had long ago sunk behind a bank of clouds in the west, and not a sound stirred the low-lying land around the besieged city.

To the south the bivouac fires of Alva's camp had died out one by one, and here the measured tread of the sentinels on their beat alone broke the silence of the night. To the north, where valorous Orange with a handful of men-undisciplined, unpaid and rebellious-vainly tried to provoke his powerful foe into a pitched battle, relying on God for the result, there was greater silence still. The sentinels-wearied and indifferent-had dropped to sleep at their post: the troops, already mutinous, only held to their duty by the powerful personality of the Prince, slept as soundly as total indifference to the cause for which they were paid to fight could possibly allow.

In his tent even Orange-tired out with ceaseless watching-had gone to rest. His guards were in a profound sleep.

Then it was that from the south there came a stir, and from Alva's entrenchments waves of something alive that breathed in the darkness of the night were set in motion, like when the sea rolls inwards to the shore.

Whispered words set this living mass on its way, and anon it was crawling along-swiftly and silently-more silently than incoming waves on a flat shore-on and on, always northwards in the direction of the Prince of Orange's camp, like some gigantic snake that creeps with belly close to the ground.

"Don Ramon," whispered a voice in the darkness, "let Captain Romero deal with the sentinels and lead the surprise attack, whilst you yourself make straight for the Prince's tent; overpower his guard first, then seize his person. Two hundred ducats will be your reward, remember, if you bring Orange back here-a prisoner-and a ducat for each of your men."

These were the orders and don Ramon de Linea sped forward with six hundred arquebusiers-all picked men-they wore their shirts over their armour, so that in the mêlée which was to come they might recognise one another in the gloom.

Less than a league of flat pasture land lay between Alva's entrenchments at St. Florian near the gates of beleaguered Mons, and Orange's camp at Hermigny. But at St. Florian men stirred and planned and threatened, whilst at Hermigny even the sentinels slept. Noble-hearted Orange had raised the standard of revolt against the most execrable oppression of an entire people which the world has ever known-and he could not get more than a handful of patriots to fight for their own freedom against the tyranny and the might of Spain, whilst mercenary troops were left to guard the precious life of the indomitable champion of religious and civil liberties.

The moving mass of de Linea's arquebusiers had covered half a league of the intervening ground; their white shirts only just distinguishable in the gloom made them look like ghosts; only another half-league-less perhaps-separated them from their goal, and still no one stirred in Orange's camp. Then it was that something roused the sentinels from their sleep. A rough hand shook first one then the others by the shoulder, and out of the gloom a peremptory voice whispered hurriedly:

"Quick! awake! sound the alarm! An *encamisada* is upon you. You will all be murdered in your sleep."

And even before the drowsy sentinels had time to rouse themselves or to rub their eyes, the same rough hand had shaken the Prince's guard, the same peremptory voice had called: "Awake! the Spaniards are upon you!"

In the Prince's tent a faint light was glimmering. He himself was lying fully dressed and armed upon a couch. At sound of the voice, of his guards stirring, of the noise and bustle of a waking camp, he sat up just in time to see a tall figure in the entrance of his tent.

The feeble light threw but into a dim relief this tall figure of a man, clad in dark, shapeless woollen clothes wearing a hood of the same dark stuff over his head and a leather mask over his face.

"Leatherface!" exclaimed the Prince as he jumped to his feet. "What is it?"

"A night attack," replied a muffled voice behind the mask. "Six hundred arquebusiers-they are but half a league away! – I would have been here sooner only the night is so infernally dark, I caught my foot in a rabbit-hole and nearly broke my ankle-I am as lame as a Jew's horse ... but still in time," he added as he hastily helped the Prince to adjust his armour and straighten out his clothes.

The camp was alive now with call to arms and rattle of steel, horses snorting and words of command flying to and fro. Don Ramon de Linea, a quarter of a league away, heard these signs of troops well on the alert and he knew that the surprise attack had failed. Six hundred arquebusiers-though they be picked men-were not sufficient for a formal attack on the Prince of Orange's entire cavalry. Even mercenary and undisciplined troops will fight valiantly when their lives depend upon their valour. De Linea thought it best to give the order to return to camp.

And the waves of living men which had been set in motion an hour ago, now swiftly and silently went back the way they came. Don Ramon when he came once more in the camp at St. Florian and in the presence of Alva's captain-in-chief, had to report the failure of the night attack which had been so admirably planned.

"The whole camp at Hermigny was astir," he said as he chawed the ends of his heavy moustache, for he was sorely disappointed. "I could not risk an attack under those conditions. Our only chance of winning was by surprise."

"Who gave the alarm?" queried don Frederic de Toledo, who took no pains to smother the curses that rose to his lips.

"The devil, I suppose," growled don Ramon de Linea savagely.

And out at Hermigny-in Orange's tent-the man who was called Leatherface was preparing to go as quietly and mysteriously as he had come.

"They won't be on you, Monseigneur," he said, "now that they know your troops are astir. But if I were you," he added grimly, "I would have every one of those sentinels shot at dawn. They were all of them fast asleep when I arrived."

He gave the military salute and would have turned to go without another word but that the Prince caught him peremptorily by the arm:

"In the meanwhile, Messire, how shall I thank you again?" he asked.

"By guarding your precious life, Monseigneur," replied the man simply. "The cause of freedom in the Low Countries would never survive your loss."

"Well!" retorted the Prince of Orange with a winning smile, "if that be so, then the cause of our freedom owes as much to you as it does to me. Is it the tenth time-or the twelfth-that you have saved my life?"

"Since you will not let me fight with you..."

"I'll let you do anything you wish, Messire, for you would be as fine a soldier as you are a loyal friend. But are you not content with the splendid services which you are rendering to us now? Putting aside mine own life-which mayhap is not worthless-how many times has your warning saved mine and my brother's troops from surprise attacks? How many times have Noircarmes' or don Frederic's urgent appeals for reinforcements failed, through your intervention, to reach the Duke of Alva until

our own troops were able to rally? Ah, Messire, believe me! God Himself has chosen you for this work!"

"The work of a spy, Monseigneur," said the other not without a touch of bitterness.

"Nay! if you call yourself a spy, Messire, then shall the name of 'spy' be henceforth a name of glory to its wearer, synonymous with the loftiest patriotism and noblest self-sacrifice."

He held out his hand to the man with the mask, who bent his tall figure over it in dutiful respect.

"You see how well I keep to my share of the compact, Messire. Never once-even whilst we were alone-hath your name escaped my lips."

"For which act of graciousness, Monseigneur, I do offer you my humble thanks. May God guard your Highness through every peril! The cause of justice and of liberty rests in your hands."

After another deeply respectful bow he finally turned to go. He had reached the entrance of the tent when once more the Prince spoke to him.

"When shall I see you again-Leatherface?" he asked cheerily.

"When your Highness' precious life or the safety of your army are in danger," replied the man.

"God reward you!" murmured Orange fervently as the man with the mask disappeared into the night.

BOOK ONE: BRUSSELS

CHAPTER I THE BLOOD COUNCIL

I

Less than a month later, and tyranny is once more triumphant. Mons has capitulated, Orange has withdrawn his handful of mutinous troops into Holland, Valenciennes has been destroyed and Mechlin-beautiful, gracious, august Mechlin-with her cathedrals and her trade-halls, her ancient monuments of art and civilisation has been given over for three days to the lust and rapine of Spanish soldiery!

Three whole days! E'en now we think on those days and shudder-shudder at what we know, at what the chroniclers have told us, the sacking of churches, the pillaging of monasteries, the massacre of peaceful, harmless citizens!

Three whole days during which the worst demons that infest hell itself, the worst demons that inspire the hideous passions of men-greed, revenge and cruelty-were let loose upon the stately city whose sole offence had been that she had for twenty-four hours harboured Orange and his troops within her gates and closed them against the tyrant's soldiery!

Less than a month and Orange is a fugitive, and all the bright hopes for the cause of religious and civil freedom are once more dashed to the ground. It seems as if God Himself hath set His face against the holy cause! Mons has fallen and Mechlin is reduced to ashes, and over across the borders the King of France has caused ten thousand of his subjects to be massacred-one holy day, the feast of St. Bartholomew-ten thousand of them! – just because their religious beliefs did not coincide with his own. The appalling news drove Orange and his small army to flight-he had reckoned on help from the King of France-instead of that promised help the news of the massacre of ten thousand Protestants! Catholic Europe was horror-stricken at the crime committed in the name of religion; but in the Low Countries, Spanish tyranny had scored a victory-the ignoble Duke of Alva triumphed and the cause of freedom in Flanders and Hainault and Brabant received a blow from which it did not again recover for over three hundred years!

II

Outwardly the house where the Duke of Alva lodged in Brussels was not different to many of the same size in the city. It was built of red brick with stone base and finely-carved cornice, and had a high slate roof with picturesque dormer windows therein. The windows on the street level were solidly grilled and were ornamented with richly-carved pediments, as was the massive doorway too. The door itself was of heavy oak, and above it there was a beautifully wrought niche which held a statue of the Virgin.

On the whole it looked a well-constructed, solid and roomy house, and Mme. de Jassy, its owner, had placed it at the disposal of the Lieutenant-Governor when first he arrived in Brussels, and he had occupied it ever since. The idler as he strolled past the house would hardly pause to look at it, if he did not happen to know that behind those brick walls and grilled windows a work of oppression more heinous than this world had ever known before, was being planned and carried on by a set of cruel and execrable tyrants against an independent country and a freedom-loving people.

Here in the dining-hall the Duke of Alva would preside at the meetings of the Grand Council-the Council of Blood-sitting in a high-backed chair which had the arms of Spain emblazoned upon it. Juan de Vargas and Alberic del Rio usually sat to right and left of him. Del Rio-indolent and yielding-a mere tool for the carrying out of every outrage, every infamy which the fiendish brain of those tyrants could devise wherewith to crush the indomitable spirit of a proud nation jealous of its honour and of its liberties: and de Vargas-Alva's double and worthy lieutenant-no tool he, but a terrible reality, active and resourceful in the invention of new forms of tyranny, new fetters for the curbing of stiff-necked Flemish and Dutch burghers, new methods for wringing rivers of gold out of a living stream of tears and blood.

De Vargas! – the very name stinks in the nostrils of honest men even after the lapse of centuries! – It conjures up the hideous image of a human bloodhound-lean and sallow of visage, with drooping, heavy-lidded eyes and flaccid mouth, a mouth that sneered and jested when men, women and children were tortured and butchered, eyes that gloated at sight of stake and scaffold and gibbet-and within the inner man, a mind intent on the science of murder and rapine and bloodshed.

Alva the will that commanded! Vargas the brain that devised! Del Rio the hand that accomplished!

Men sent by Philip II. of Spain, the most fanatical tyrant the world has ever known, to establish the abhorrent methods of the Spanish Inquisition in the Low Countries in order to consolidate Spanish rule there and wrest from prosperous Flanders and Brabant and Hainault, from Holland and the Dutch provinces enough gold to irrigate the thirsty soil of Spain. "The river of gold which will flow from the Netherlands to Madrid shall be a yard deep!" so had Alva boasted when his infamous master sent him to quell the revolt which had noble-hearted Orange for its leader-a revolt born of righteous indignation and an unconquerable love of freedom and of justice.

To mould the Netherlands into abject vassals of Spain, to break their independence of spirit by terrorism and by outrage, to force Spanish ideas, Spanish culture, Spanish manners, Spanish religion upon these people of the North who loathed tyranny and worshipped their ancient charters and privileges, that was the task which the Duke of Alva set himself to do-a task for which he needed the help of men as tyrannical and unscrupulous as himself.

Granvelle had begun the work, Alva was completing it! The stake, the scaffold, the gibbet for all who had one thought of justice, one desire for freedom. Mons razed to the ground, Valenciennes a heap of ruins and ashes, Mechlin a hecatomb. Men, women and children outraged and murdered! Whole families put to the torture to wring gold from unwilling givers! churches destroyed! monasteries ransacked!

That was the work of the Grand Council-the odious Council of Blood, the members of which have put to shame the very name of religion, for they dared to pretend that they acted in its name.

Alva! de Vargas! del Rio! A trinity of fiends whose deeds would shame the demons in hell! But there were others too, and, O ye gods! were they not infinitely more vile, since their hands reeked with the blood of their own kith and kin? Alva and his two bloodhounds were strangers in a strange land, owing allegiance to Spain alone-but Councillor Hessels sat on this same infamous board, and he was a patrician of Brabant. And there was Pierre Arsens, president of Artois, there was de Berlaymont and Viglius and Hopper-gentlemen (save the mark!) and burghers of Flanders or Hainault or the Dutch provinces! – and who can name such creatures without a shudder of loathing?

III

As for don Ramon de Linea, he was just the usual type of Spanish soldier-a grandee of Spain, direct descendant of the Cid, so he averred, yet disdained to prove it. For in him there was no sense of chivalry-just personal bravery and no more-the same kind of bravery you would meet in a tiger or a jaguar. In truth there was much in common between don Ramon and the wild feline tribes that

devastate the deserts: he had the sinuous movements, the languorous gestures of those creatures, and his eyes-dark and velvety at times, at others almost of an orange tint-had all the cruel glitter which comes into the eyes of the leopard when he is out to kill. Otherwise don Ramon was a fine-looking man, dark-skinned and dark-eyed, a son of the South, with all those cajoling ways about him which please and so often deceive the women.

He it was who had been in command at Mechlin-entrusted by General de Noircarmes with the hideous task of destroying the stately city-and he had done it with a will. Overproud of his achievements he had obtained leave to make personal report of them to the Lieutenant-Governor, and thus it was that on this 2nd day of October, 1572, he was present at the council board, talking with easy grace and no little satisfaction of all that he had done: of the churches which he had razed to the ground, the houses which he had sacked, of the men, women and children whom he had turned out naked and starving into the streets.

"We laboured hard for three days," he said, "and the troops worked with a will, for there were heavy arrears of pay due to them and we told them to make up those arrears in Mechlin, since they wouldn't get any money from headquarters. Oh! Mechlin got all that she deserved! Her accursed citizens can now repent at leisure of their haste in harbouring Orange and his rebel troops!"

His voice was deep and mellow and even the guttural Spanish consonants sounded quite soft when he spoke them. Through half-closed lids his glance swept from time to time over the eager faces around the board, and his slender hands emphasised the hideous narrative with a few graceful gestures. He looked just the true type of grand seigneur telling a tale of mild adventure and of sport, and now and then he laughed displaying his teeth, sharp and white like the fangs of a leopard's cub.

No one interrupted him, and Councillor Hessels fell gradually-as was his wont-into a gentle doze from which he roused himself now and again in order to murmur drowsily: "To the gallows with them all!"

Viglius and Hopper and de Berlaymont tried hard to repress a shudder. They were slaves of Spain, these gentlemen of the Low Countries, but not Spanish born, and were not accustomed from earliest childhood to listen-not only unmoved but with a certain measure of delight-to these tales of horror. But there was nothing in what don Ramon said of which they disapproved. They were-all of them-loyal subjects of the King, and the very thought of rebellion was abhorrent to them.

But it was passing strange that the Duke of Alva made no comment on the young captain's report. There he sat, at the head of the table, silent and moody, with one bony fist clenched above a letter which lay open beneath his hand, and which bore a large red seal with the royal arms of Spain impressed upon it. Not a word of praise or blame did he speak. His heavy brows were contracted in a sullen frown, and his protruding eyes were veiled beneath the drooping lids.

De Vargas, too, was silent-de Vargas who loved to gloat over such tales as don Ramon had to tell, de Vargas who believed that these rebellious Low Countries could only be brought into subjection by such acts of demoniacal outrage as the Spanish soldiery had just perpetrated in Mons and in Mechlin. He, too, appeared moody to-day, and the story of sick women and young children being dragged out of their beds and driven out to perish in the streets while their homes were being pillaged and devastated, left him taciturn and unmoved.

Don Ramon made vain pretence not to notice the Lieutenant-Governor's moodiness, nor yet de Vargas' silence, but those who knew him best-and de Vargas was among these-plainly saw that irritation had seized upon his nerves. He was talking more volubly, and his voice had lost its smoothness, whilst the languor of his gestures had given place to sharp, febrile movements of hands and shoulders which he tried vainly to disguise.

"Our soldiers," he was saying loudly, "did not leave a loaf of bread in the bakeries, or a bushel of wheat in the stores of Mechlin. The rich citizens we hanged at the rate of twenty a day, and I drew orders for the confiscation of their estates to the benefit of our Most Gracious King and suzerain Lord. I tell you we made quick work of all the rebels: stone no longer stands on stone in Mechlin to-

day: its patricians are beggars, its citizens are scattered. We have put to the torture and burned at the stake those who refused to give us their all. A month ago Mechlin was a prosperous city: she gave of her wealth and of her hospitality to the rebel troops of Orange. To-day she and her children have ceased to be. Are you not satisfied?"

He brought his clenched fist crashing down upon the table: surely a very unusual loss of restraint in a grandee of Spain: but obviously he found it more and more difficult to keep his temper under control, and those dark eyes of his were now fixed with a kind of fierce resentment upon the impassive face of the Duke.

Councillor Hessels, only half awake, reiterated with drowsy emphasis: "To the gallows with them! Send them all to the gallows!"

Still the Duke of Alva was silent and de Vargas did not speak. Yet it was the Duke himself who had given the order for the destruction of Mechlin: "as a warning to other cities," he had said. And now he sat at the head of the table sullen, moody and frowning, and don Ramon felt an icy pang of fear gripping him by the throat: the thought that censure of his conduct was brewing in the Lieutenant-Governor's mind caused him to lose the last vestige of self-control, for he knew that censure could have but one sequel-quick judgment and the headman's axe.

"Are you not satisfied?" he cried hoarsely. "What more did you expect? What more ought we to have done? What other proof of zeal does King Philip ask of me?"

Thus directly challenged the Duke raised his head and looked the young man sternly in the face.

"What you have done, Messire," he said slowly-and the cold glitter in his steely eyes held in it more real and calculating cruelty than the feline savagery of the other man, "what you have done is good, but it is not enough. What use is there in laying low an entire city, when the one man whose personality holds the whole of this abominable rebellion together still remains unscathed? You hanged twenty noted citizens a day in Mechlin, you say," he added with a cynical shrug of the shoulders, "I would gladly see every one of them spared, so long as Orange's head fell on the scaffold."

"Orange has disbanded his army and has fled almost alone into Holland," said don Ramon sullenly. "My orders were to punish Mechlin and not to run after the Prince of Orange."

"The order to bring the Prince of Orange alive or dead to Brussels and to me takes precedence of every other order, as you well know, Messire," retorted Alva roughly. "We decided on that unanimously at the meeting of the Grand Council on the day that I sent Egmont and Horn to the scaffold and Orange refused to walk into the trap which I had set for him."

"He always escapes from the traps which are set for him," now broke in de Vargas in his calm, even, expressionless voice. "During the siege of Mons, according to don Frederic's report, no fewer than six surprise night-attacks-all admirably planned-failed, because Orange appeared to have received timely warning."

"Who should know that better than I, señor?" queried don Ramon hotly, "seeing that I led most of those attacks myself-they were splendidly planned, our men as silent as ghosts, the night darker than hell. Not a word of the plan was breathed until I gave the order to start. Yet someone gave the alarm. We found Orange's camp astir-every time we had to retire. Who but the devil could have given the warning?"

"A spy more astute than yourselves," quoth Alva dryly.

"Nay!" here interposed del Rio blandly, "I am of the same opinion as don Ramon de Linea; there is a subtle agency at work which appears to guard the life of the Prince of Orange. I myself was foiled many a time when I was on his track-with Ribeiras who wields a dagger in the dark more deftly than any man I know. I also employed Loronzo, who graduated in Venice in the art of poisons, but invariably the Prince slipped through our fingers just as if he had been put on his guard by some mysterious emissary."

"The loyalists in Flanders," quoth President Viglius under his breath, "declare that the agency which works for the safety of the Prince of Orange is a supernatural one. They speak of a tall, manlike

figure whose face is hidden by a mask, and who invariably appears whenever the Prince of Orange's life is in danger. Some people call this mysterious being 'Leatherface,' but no one seems actually to have seen him. It sounds as if he were truly an emissary of the devil."

And as the President spoke, a strange silence fell around the council board: every cheek had become pale, every lip quivered. De Vargas made a quick sign of the Cross over his chest: Alva drew a small medal from the inside of his doublet and kissed it devoutly. These men who talked airily of rapine and of violence perpetrated against innocent people, who gloated over torture and misery which they loved to inflict, were held in the cold grip of superstitious fear, and their trembling lips uttered abject prayers for mercy to the God whom they outraged by every act of their infamous lives.

IV

When the Duke of Alva spoke again, his voice was still unsteady: "Devil or no devil," he said with an attempt at dignified composure, "His majesty's latest orders are quite peremptory. He desires the death of Orange. He will have no more cities destroyed, no more wholesale massacres until that great object is attained. Pressure has been brought to bear upon him: the Emperor, it seems, has spoken authoritatively, and with no uncertain voice. It seems that the destruction of Flemish cities is abhorrent to the rest of Europe."

"Rebel cities!" ejaculated de Berlaymont hotly.

"Aye! we know well enough that they are rebel cities," quoth Alva fiercely, "but what can we do, when a milk-livered weakling wears the Imperial crown? Our gracious King himself dares not disregard the Emperor's protests-and in his last letter to me he commands that we should hold our hand and neither massacre a population nor destroy a town unless we have proof positive that both are seething with rebellion."

"Seething with rebellion!" exclaimed don Ramon, "then what of Ghent-which is a very nest of rebels?"

"Ah!" retorted Alva, "Ghent by the Mass! Seigniors, all of you who know that accursed city, bring me proof that she harbours Orange or his troops! Bring me proof that she gives him money! Bring me proof that plots against our Government are hatched within her walls! I have moral proofs that Orange has been in Ghent lately, that he is levying troops within her very walls-I know that he has received promises of support from some of her most influential citizens..."

"Nay, then, let your Highness but give the order," broke in don Ramon once more, "my soldiers would spend three fruitful days in Ghent."

"As I pointed out to His Highness yesterday," rejoined de Vargas in mellifluous tones, "we should reduce Ghent to ashes before she hatches further mischief against us. Once a city hath ceased to be, it can no longer be a source of danger to the State ... and," he added blandly, "there is more money in Ghent than in any other city of Flanders."

"And more rebellion in one family there than in the whole of the population of Brabant," assented Councillor Arsens. "I have lived in that accursed city all my life," he continued savagely, "and I say that Ghent ought not to be allowed to exist a day longer than is necessary for massing together two or three regiments of unpaid soldiery and turning them loose into the town-just as we did in Mechlin!"

The others nodded approval

"And by the Mass..." resumed don Ramon.

"Enough, Messire," broke in the Duke peremptorily, "who are you, I pray, who are you all to be thus discussing the orders of His Majesty the King? I have transmitted to you His Majesty's orders just as I received them from Madrid yesterday. It is for you-for us all-to show our zeal and devotion at this critical moment in our nation's history, by obeying blindly, whole-heartedly, those gracious commands. Do we want our King to be further embarrassed by a quarrel with the Emperor? And

what are those orders, I ask you? Wise and Christianlike as usual. His Majesty doth not forbid the punishment of rebel cities-No! – all that he asks is that we deliver Orange unto him-Orange, the arch-traitor-and that in future we prove conclusively to Europe and to Maximilian that when we punish a Flemish city we do so with unquestioned justice."

He paused, and his prominent, heavy-lidded eyes wandered somewhat contemptuously on the sullen faces around the board.

"Proofs, seigniors," he said with a light shrug of the shoulders, "proofs are not difficult to obtain. All you want is a good friend inside a city to keep you well informed. The paid spy is not sufficient-oft-times he is clumsy and himself an object of suspicion. Orange has been in Ghent, seigniors; he will go again! He has disbanded his army, but at his call another will spring up ... in Ghent mayhap ... where he has so many friends ... where money is plentiful and rebellion rife... We must strike at Ghent before she becomes an open menace..."

"You'll never strike at Orange," broke in Councillor Arsens obstinately, "while that creature Leatherface is at large."

"He is said to hail from Ghent," added Viglius with conviction.

"Then by the Mass, seigniors," interposed Alva fiercely, "the matter is even more simple than I had supposed, and all this talk and these murmurings savour of treason, meseems. Are you fools and dolts to imagine that when His Majesty's orders were known to me, I did not at once set to work to fulfil them? We want to strike at Ghent, seigniors, and want proofs of her rebellion-His Majesty wants those proofs and he wants the death of Orange. We all desire to raze Ghent to the ground! Then will you give me your close attention, and I will e'en tell you my plans for attaining all these objects and earning the approval of our gracious King and recognition from the rest of Europe."

"Then should not don Ramon de Linea retire?" queried President Viglius, "surely His Highness's decision can only be disclosed to members of his council."

"Let don Ramon stay," interposed de Vargas with unanswerable authority, even as the young man was preparing to take his leave. "The matter is one that in a measure will concern him, seeing that it involves the destinies of the city of Ghent and that His Highness is pleased to give him the command of our troops stationed in that city."

V

Don Ramon de Linea glanced up at de Vargas with a look of agreeable surprise. The command of the troops in Ghent! Of a truth this was news to him, and happy news indeed. Rumour was current that the Duke of Alva-Lieutenant-Governor of the Low Countries and Captain-General of the forces-was about to visit Ghent, and the captain in command there would thus be in a position of doing useful work, mayhap of rendering valuable services, and in any case, of being well before the eyes of the Captain-General.

All the young man's elegant, languid manner had come back to him. He had had a fright, but nothing more, and commendation-in the shape of this important promotion-had allayed all his fears: his being allowed to be present at a deliberation of the Grand Council was also a signal mark of favour granted to him, no doubt in recognition of his zeal and loyalty whilst destroying the noble city of Mechlin for the glory of King Philip of Spain.

He now resumed his seat at the board, selecting with becoming modesty a place at the bottom of the table and feeling not the least disconcerted by the wrathful, envious looks which President Viglius and one or two other Netherlanders directed against him.

"The plan, seigniors, which I have in my mind," resumed the Duke after a slight pause, "could never have come to maturity but for the loyal co-operation of señor Juan de Vargas and of his equally loyal daughter. Let me explain," he continued, seeing the look of astonishment which spread over most of the faces around the board. "It is necessary, in view of all that we said just now, that I should

have a means—a tool I might say—for the working out of a project which has both the death of Orange and the punishment of Ghent for its aim. I have told you that I am morally certain that Orange is operating in Ghent at the present moment. Is it likely that he would leave such a storehouse of wealth and rebellion untouched? — heresy is rampant in Ghent and treachery goes hand in hand with it. Our spies unfortunately have been unable to obtain very reliable information: the inhabitants are astute and wary—they hatch their plots with devilish cunning and secrecy. Obviously, therefore, what we want is a loyal worker, an efficient and devoted servant of the King in the very heart of the civic life of the town: if only we can get to know what goes on in the intimate family circles of those townfolk, I feel sure that we shall get all the proofs that the King desires of the treachery of Ghent."

He paused a moment in order to draw breath; absolute silence—the silence of tense expectation—hung around the council-board. The Netherlanders hung obsequiously on the tyrant's lips, del Rio leaned back in his chair—seemingly indifferent—and de Vargas was closely watching don Ramon de Linea; the young man was trying to appear calmly interested, but the restless look in his eyes and a slight tremor of his hand betrayed inward agitation.

"Some of you reverend seigniors," continued the Duke of Alva after awhile, in powerful, compelling tones, "will perhaps have guessed by now, what connection there is in my mind between that vast project which I have just put before you and the daughter of my loyal coadjutor don Juan de Vargas. I have arranged that she shall marry a man of influence and position in Ghent, so that she can not only keep me informed of all the intrigues which are brewing in that city against the Government of our gracious King, but also become the means whereby we can lure Orange to his doom, capture that mysterious Leatherface, and then deliver Ghent over to don Ramon's soldiery."

He struck the table repeatedly with his fist as he spoke: there was no doubting the power of the man to accomplish what he wanted, as well as the cruelty and vindictiveness wherewith he would pursue anyone who dared to attempt to thwart him in his projects. No one thought of interrupting him. Don Ramon kept his agitation under control as best he could, for he felt that de Vargas's eyes still watched him closely.

"A very admirable idea," now murmured Viglius obsequiously.

As usual on these occasions, it was obvious that he and the other Netherlanders were mere figureheads at the council-board. Alva was directing, planning, commanding, de Vargas had been the confidant, and del Rio would always be the ready tool when needed: but Viglius, de Berlaymont, Hessels, and the others, were mere servile listeners, ready to give the approbation which was expected of them and withholding every word of criticism.

VI

"And doth donna Lenora de Vargas enter into all these far-reaching schemes?" now asked don Ramon coldly. "Meseems, they are above a woman's comprehension."

De Vargas' persistent glance was irritating his nerves; he threw a challenging look—wholly defiant—across the table at the older man.

"My daughter, Messire," said the latter loftily, "is above all a true Spaniard. She has been brought up to obey and not to discuss. She is old enough now to forget all past youthful follies," he added, answering don Ramon's defiant glance with one that conveyed a threat. "Her devotion to her Church, her King and her country, and her hatred of Orange and all rebels will influence her actions in the way the Lieutenant-Governor desires."

Don Ramon was silent. He had understood the threat which de Vargas' glance had expressed, and he knew what the other meant when he spoke of "past youthful follies" — it meant the breaking off of a pleasing romance, a farewell to many an ambitious dream. Don Ramon suppressed a sigh of anger and of disappointment: donna Lenora de Vargas was beautiful and wealthy, but it were not wise to let her father see how hard he—Ramon—had been hit. He took no further part in the discussion,

and after awhile he succeeded in appearing wholly indifferent to its sentimental side; but he listened attentively to all that was said, and when he met de Vargas' glance, which now and then was fixed mockingly upon him, he answered it with a careless shrug of the shoulders.

"And," now rejoined Pierre Arsens, who was president of Artois and a patrician of Hainault, "may we ask if His Highness has already chosen the happy man who is to become the husband of such a pattern of womanhood?"

"My choice has naturally fallen on the son of Mynheer Charles van Rycke, the High-Bailiff of Ghent," replied Alva curtly.

"A family of traitors if ever there was one," growled Alberic del Rio savagely. "I know them. The father is all right, so is the younger son Mark-younger, I believe, by only a couple of hours-a wastrel and something of a drunkard, so I understand; but the mother and the other son are impudent adherents of Orange: they have more than once drawn the attention of the Chief Inquisitor on themselves, and if I had my way with such cattle, I would have had the men hanged and the woman burned long before this."

"Van Rycke," said Alva coldly, "is High-Bailiff of Ghent. He is a good Catholic and so is his wife: he is a man of great consideration in the city and his sons are popular. It has not been thought expedient to interfere with them up to now. But-bearing my schemes in mind-I have caused the man to be severely warned once or twice. These warnings have reduced him to a state of panic, and lately when my scheme had matured I told him that my desire was that one of his sons should wed don Juan de Vargas' daughter. He had no thought of refusal. In fact his acceptance was positively object."

"And on what grounds was the marriage suggested to him?" questioned President Arsens.

"Grounds, Messire?" retorted the Duke; "we give no grounds or reasons for our commands to our Flemish subjects. We give an order and they obey. I told Mynheer van Rycke that I desired the marriage and that was enough."

"Then," interposed President Viglius with an attempt at jocularly, "we shall soon be able to congratulate two young people on a happy event!"

"You will be able to do that to-morrow, Messire," quoth the Duke. "Señor de Vargas goes to Ghent for the purpose of affiancing the two young people together; the marriage ceremony will take place within the week. His Majesty hath approved of my scheme: he desires that we should expedite the marriage. Señor de Vargas is willing, Messire van Rycke would not think of objecting, donna Lenora is heart free. Why should we delay?"

"Why, indeed?" murmured don Ramon under his breath.

"Donna Lenora," resumed Alva sententiously, "is indeed lucky in that-unlike most women-she will be able to work personally for the glory of her King and country. If through her instrumentality we can bring Orange to the block and Ghent to her knees, there is no favour which her father could not ask of us."

As he said this, he turned to de Vargas and stretched out his hand to him. De Vargas took the hand respectfully and bent over it in dutiful obedience.

"Now, seigniors," resumed the Duke more gaily, and once more addressing the full council-board, "you know the full reason of my projected journey to Ghent. I go ostensibly in order to inaugurate the statue of our Sovereign King erected by my orders in the market place, but also in order to ascertain how our loyal worker will have progressed in the time. Donna Lenora de Vargas will have been the wife of Messire van Rycke for over a sennight by then: she will-and I mistake not-have much to tell us. In the meanwhile señor de Vargas will take up his residence in the city as *vicarius criminalis*: he will begin his functions to-morrow by presiding over the engagement of his daughter to the son of the High-Bailiff: there will be much public rejoicing and many entertainments during the week and on the day of the wedding ceremony: to these, seigniors, ye are graciously bidden. I pray you go and mingle as far as you can with that crowd of uncouth and vulgar burghers whose treachery seems to pierce even through their ill-fitting doublets. I pray you also to keep your eyes and ears

open ... an my conjectures are correct, much goes on in Ghent of which the Holy Inquisition should have cognisance. We are out on a special campaign against cunning traitors, and Ghent is our first objective. When we turn our soldiery loose into the city, yours, signiors, will be the first spoils... Ghent is rich in treasure and money ... those first spoils will be worth the winning. Until that happy day, I bid you *au revoir*, gentle Sirs, and let your toast be at every banquet: "To the destruction of Ghent, and to the death of Orange!"

After which long peroration the Lieutenant-Governor intimated with a casual wave of his be-ringed hand that the sitting of the Grand Council was at an end. The illustrious councillors rose with alacrity: they were now in rare good humour. The parting speech of His Highness tickled their cupidity. The first spoils at the sacking of Ghent should mean a fortune for every member of the board. General de Noircarmes had made a huge one at the sacking of Mons, and even younger officers like don Ramon de Linea had vastly enriched themselves when Mechlin was given over to the soldiers.

One by one now the grave signiors withdrew, having taken respectful leave of His Highness. To the salute of the Netherlanders-of Viglius and Hessels, of Berlaymont and the others, the Duke responded with a curt bow-to de Vargas and del Rio, and also to don Ramon, he nodded with easy familiarity. However obsequious the Netherlanders might be-however proven their zeal, their Spanish masters never allowed them to forget that there was a world of social distinction between a grandee of Spain and the uncouth burghers and even patricians of this semi-civilised land.

VII

Having made his last obeisance before the Duke of Alva and taken leave of the grave signiors of the Grand Council, don Ramon de Linea bowed himself out of the room with all the ceremony which Spanish etiquette prescribed. As he did so he noticed that at a significant sign from Alva, de Vargas and Alberic del Rio remained behind in the council-chamber, even while all the Netherlanders were being dismissed. He watched these latter gentlemen as one by one they filed quickly out of the house-loath even to exchange a few friendly words with one another on the doorstep in this place where every wall had ears and every nook and cranny concealed a spy. He watched them with an air of supercilious contempt, oblivious of the fact that he himself had been not a little scared by the black looks cast on him by the all-powerful tyrant and merciless autocrat.

The scare had been unpleasant, but it was all over now: Fate-that ever fickle jade-seemed inclined to smile on him. The penniless scion of a noble race, he seemed at last on the high road to fortune-the command of the troops in Ghent was an unexpected gift of the goddess, whilst the sacking and looting of Mechlin had amply filled his pockets.

But it was a pity about donna Lenora!

Don Ramon paused in the vast panelled hall and instinctively his eyes wandered to the mirror, framed in rich Flemish carved wood, which hung upon the wall. By our Lady! he had well-nigh lost his self-control just now under de Vargas' mocking gaze, and also that air of high-breeding and sang-froid which became him so well: the thought of donna Lenora even in connection with her approaching marriage caused him to readjust the set of his doublet and the stiff folds of his ruffle, and his well-shaped hand wandered lovingly up to his silky moustache.

A sound immediately behind him caused him to start and to turn. An elderly woman wrapped in a dark shawl and wearing a black veil right over her face and head was standing close to his elbow.

"Inez?" he exclaimed, "what is it?"

"Hist! I beg of you, señor," whispered the woman, "I am well-nigh dead with terror at thought that I might be seen. The señorita knew that you would be here to-day: she saw you from the gallery above, and sent me down to ask you to come to her at once."

"The señorita?" broke in don Ramon impatiently, and with a puzzled frown, "is she here?"

"Señor de Vargas won't let her out of his sight now. When he hath audience of the Lieutenant-Governor or business with the council he makes the señorita come with him. The Duke of Alva hath given her a room in this house, where she can sit while her father is at the Council."

"But Heavens above, why all this mystery?"

"The señorita will tell your Graciousness," said the woman, "I beg of you to come at once. If I stay longer down here I shall die of fright."

And like a scared hen, old Inez trotted across the hall, without waiting to see if don Ramon followed her. The young man seemed to hesitate for a moment: the call was a peremptory one, coming as it did from a beautiful woman whom he loved: at the same time all that he had heard in the council-chamber was a warning to him to keep out of de Vargas' way; the latter-if Inez spoke the truth-was keeping his daughter almost a prisoner, and it was never good at any time to run counter to señor de Vargas.

The house was very still. The Netherlanders had all gone: two serving men appeared to be asleep in the porch, otherwise there came no sign of life from any part of the building: the heavy oak doors which gave on the anteroom of the council-chamber effectually deadened every sound which might have come from there.

Don Ramon smiled to himself and shrugged his shoulders. After all he was a fool to be so easily scared: a beautiful woman beckoned, and he had not been forbidden to see her-so-after that one brief moment of hesitation he turned to follow Inez up the stairs.

The woman led the way round the gallery, then up another flight of stairs and along a narrow corridor, till she came to a low door, beside which she stopped.

"Go in, I pray you, señor," she said, "the señorita expects you."

The young man walked unannounced into the small room beyond.

There came a little cry of happy surprise out of the recess of a wide dormer window, and the next moment don Ramon held Lenora de Vargas in his arms.

VIII

Lenora with the golden hair and the dark velvety eyes! Thus do the chroniclers of the time speak of her (notably the Sieur de Vaernewyck who knew her intimately), thus too did Velasquez paint her, a few years after these notable events-all in white, for she seldom wore coloured gowns-very stately, with the small head slightly thrown back, the fringe of dark lashes veiling the lustre of her luminous eyes.

But just at this moment there was no stateliness about donna Lenora: she clung to don Ramon, just like a loving child that has been rather scared and knows where to find protection; and he accepted her caress with an easy, somewhat supercilious air of condescension-the child was so pretty and so very much in love! He patted her hair with gentle, soothing gesture and thanked kind Fate for this pleasing gift of a beautiful woman's love.

"I did not know that you were in Brussels," he said after awhile, and when he had led her to a seat in the window, and sat down beside her. "All this while I thought you still in Segovia."

His glance was searching hers and his vanity was pleasantly stirred by the fact that she was pale and thin, and that those wonderful, luminous eyes of hers looked as if they had shed many tears of late.

"Ramon," she whispered, "you know?"

"The Duke of Alva," he replied dryly, "gave me official information."

Then seeing that she remained silent and dejected he added peremptorily: "Lenora! how long is it since you have known of this proposed marriage?"

"Only three days," she replied tonelessly. "My father sent for me about a month ago. The Duchess of Medina Coeli was coming over to the Netherlands on a visit to her lord, and I was told that I must accompany her. We started from Laredo in the *Esperansa* on the 10th of last month and

we landed at Flushing a week ago. Oh! at first I was so happy to come ... it is nine months and more since you left Spain and my heart was aching for a sight of you."

"Then ... when did you first hear?"

"Three days since, when we arrived in Brussels. The Duchess herself took me to my father's house, and then he told me ... that he had bade me come because the Lieutenant-Governor had arranged a marriage for me ... with a Netherlander."

Don Ramon muttered an angry oath.

"Did he-your father I mean-never hint at it before?" he asked.

"Never. A month ago he still spoke of you in his letters to me. Had you no suspicions, Ramon?"

"None," he replied.

"It was he of course who obtained for you that command under don Frederic, which took you out of Spain."

"It was a fine position and I accepted it gladly ... and unsuspectingly."

"It must have been the beginning: he wanted you out of my way already then, though he went on pretending all this while that he favoured your attentions to me. He thought that I would soon forget you. How little he knows me! And now he has forbidden me to think of you again. Since I am in Brussels he hardly lets me out of his sight. He only leaves the house in order to attend on the Duke, and when he does, he brings me here with him. Inez and I are sent up to this room and I am virtually a prisoner."

"It all seems like an ugly dream, Lenora," he murmured sullenly.

"Aye! an ugly dream," she sighed. "Ofttimes, since my father told me this awful thing, I have thought that it could not be true. God could not allow anything so monstrous and so wicked. I thought that I must be dreaming and must presently wake up and find myself in the dear old convent at Segovia with your farewell letter to me under my pillow."

She was gazing straight out before her-not at him, for she felt that if she looked on him, all her fortitude would give way and she would cry like a child. This she would not do, for her woman's instinct had already told her that all the courage in this terrible emergency must come from her.

He sat there, moody and taciturn, all the while that she longed for him to take her in his arms and to swear to her that never would he give her up, never would he allow reasons of State to come between him and his love.

"There are political reasons it seems," she continued, and the utter wretchedness and hopelessness with which she spoke were a pathetic contrast to his own mere sullen resentment. "My father has not condescended to say much. He sent for me and I came. As soon as I arrived in Brussels he told me that I must no longer think of you: that childish folly, he said, must now come to an end. Then he advised me that the Lieutenant-Governor had arranged a marriage for me with the son of Messire van Rycke, High-Bailiff of Ghent ... that we are to be affianced to-morrow and married within the week. I cried-I implored-I knelt to my father and begged him not to break my heart, my life... I told him that to part me from you was to condemn me to worse than death..."

"Well? and-?" he queried.

"You know my father, Ramon," she said with a slight shudder, "almost as well as I do. Do you believe that any tears would move him?"

He made no reply. Indeed, what could he say? He did know Juan de Vargas, knew that such a man would sacrifice without pity or remorse everything that stood in the way of his schemes or of his ambition.

"I was not even told that you would be in Brussels to-day-Inez only heard of it through the Duke of Alva's serving man-then she and I watched for you, because I felt that I must at least be the first to tell you the awful-awful news! Oh!" she exclaimed with sudden vehemence, "the misery of it all! ... Ramon, cannot you think of something? – cannot you think? Are we going to be parted like this?"

as if our love had never been, as if our love were not sweet and sacred and holy, the blessing of God which no man should have the power to take away from us!"

She was on the point of breaking down, and don Ramon with one ear alert to every sound outside had much ado to soothe and calm her. This he tried to do, for selfish as he was, he loved this beautiful woman with that passionate if shallow ardour which is characteristic in men of his temperament.

"Lenora," he said after awhile, "it is impossible for me to say anything for the moment. Fate and your father's cruelty have dealt me a blow which has half-stunned me. As you say, I must think-I am not going to give up hope quite as readily as your father seems to think. By our Lady! I am not just an old glove that can so lightly be cast aside. I must think ... I must devise... But in the meanwhile..."

He paused and something of that same look of fear came into his eyes which had been there when in the Council Chamber he had dreaded the Duke of Alva's censure.

"In the meanwhile, my sweet," he added hastily, "you must pretend to obey. You cannot openly defy your father! ... nor yet the Duke of Alva. You know them both! They are men who know neither pity nor mercy! Your father would punish you if you disobeyed him ... he has the means of compelling you to obey. But the Duke's wrath would fall with deathly violence upon me. You know as well as I do that he would sacrifice me ruthlessly if he felt that I was likely to interfere with any of his projects: and your marriage with the Netherlander is part of one of his vast schemes."

The look of terror became more marked upon his face, his dark skin had become almost livid in hue: and Lenora clung to him, trembling, for she knew that everything he said was true. They were like two birds caught in the net of a remorseless fowler: to struggle for freedom were worse than useless. De Vargas was a man who had attained supreme power beside the most absolute tyrant the world had ever known. Every human being around him-even his only child-was a mere pawn in his hands for the great political game in which the Duke of Alva was the chief player-a mere tool for the fashioning of that monstrous chain which was destined to bind the Low Countries to the chariot-wheels of Spain. A useless tool, a superfluous pawn he would throw away without a pang of remorse: this don Ramon knew and so did Lenora-but in Ramon that knowledge reigned supreme and went hand in hand with terror, whilst in the young girl there was all the desire to defy that knowledge and to make a supreme fight for love and happiness.

"I must not stay any longer now, my sweet," he said after awhile, "if your father has so absolutely forbidden you to see me, then I have tarried here too long already."

He rose and gently disengaged himself from the tender hands which clung so pathetically to him.

"I can't let you go, Ramon," she implored, "it seems as if you were going right out of my life-and that my life would go with you if you went."

"Sweetheart," he said a little impatiently, "it is dangerous for me to stay a moment longer. Try and be brave-I'll not say farewell-We'll meet again..."

"How?"

"Let Inez be at the corner of the Broodhuis this evening. I'll give her a letter for you. In the meanwhile I shall have seen your father. Who knows his decision may not be irrevocable-after all you are the one being in the world he has to love and to care for; he cannot wilfully break your heart and destroy your happiness."

She shook her head dejectedly. But the next moment she looked up trying to seem hopeful. She believed that he suffered just as acutely as she did, and, womanlike, did not want to add to his sorrow by letting him guess too much of her own. She contrived to keep back her tears; she had shed so many of late that their well-spring had mayhap run dry: he folded her in his arms, for she was exquisitely beautiful and he really loved her. Marriage with her would have been both blissful and advantageous, and his pride was sorely wounded at the casual treatment meted out to him by de Vargas: at the same time the thought of defiance never once entered his head-for defiance could only

end in death, and don Ramon felt quite sure that even if he lost his beautiful fiancée, life still held many compensations for him in the future.

Therefore he was able to part from Lenora with a light heart, whilst hers was overweighted with sorrow. He kissed her eyes, her hair, her lips, and murmured protestations of deathless love which only enhanced her grief and enflamed all that selfless ardour of which her passionate nature was capable. Never had she loved don Ramon de Linea as she loved him at this hour of parting-never perhaps would she love as fondly again.

And he with a last, tender kiss, airily bade her to be brave and trustful, and finally waved her a cheery farewell.

CHAPTER II

THE SUBJECT RACE

I

"I cannot do it, mother, I cannot! The very shame of it would kill me!"

Laurence van Rycke sat on a low chair in front of the fire, his elbow propped on his knee, his chin buried in his hand. His mother gave a little shiver, and drew her woollen shawl closer round her shoulders.

"You cannot go against your father's will," she said tonelessly, like one who has even lost the power to suffer acutely. "God alone knows what would become of us all if you did."

"He can only kill me," retorted Laurence, with fierce, passionate resentment.

"And how should I survive if he did?"

"Would you not rather see me dead, mother dear, than wedded to a woman whose every thought, every aspiration must tend toward the further destruction of our country-she the daughter of the most hideous tyrant that has ever defamed this earth-more hideous even than that execrable Alva himself..."

He paused abruptly in the midst of this passionate outburst, for the old house-which had been so solemn and silent awhile ago, suddenly echoed from end to end with loud and hilarious sounds, laughter and shouts, heavy footsteps, jingle of spurs and snatches of song, immediately followed by one or two piteous cries uttered in a woman's piercing voice. Laurence van Rycke jumped to his feet.

"What was that?" he cried, and made a dash for the door. His mother's imploring cry called him back.

"No, no, Laurence! don't go!" she begged. "It is only the soldiers! They tease Jeanne, and she gets very cross! ... We have six men and a sergeant quartered here now, besides the commandant..."

"Eight Spanish soldiers in the house of the High-Bailiff of Ghent!" exclaimed Laurence, and a prolonged laugh of intense bitterness came from his overburdened heart. "Oh God!" he added, as he stretched out his arms with a gesture of miserable longing and impotence, "to endure all this outrage and all this infamy! – to know as we do, what has happened in Mons and Mechlin and to be powerless to do anything-anything against such hideous, appalling, detestable tyranny-to feel every wrong and every injustice against the country one loves, against one's own kith and kin, eating like the plague into one's very bones and to remain powerless, inert, an insentient log in the face of it all. And all the while to be fawning-always fawning and cringing, kissing the master's hand that wields the flail... Ugh! And now this new tyranny, this abominable marriage... Ye Heavens above me! but mine own cowardice in accepting it would fill me with unspeakable loathing!"

"Laurence, for pity's sake!" implored the mother.

At her call he ran to her and knelt at her feet: then burying his head in his hands he sobbed like a child.

"I cannot do it, mother!" he reiterated piteously, "I cannot do it. I would far rather die!"

With gentle, mechanical touch she stroked his unruly fair hair, and heavy tears rolled down her wan cheeks upon her thin, white hands.

"Just think of it, mother dear," resumed Laurence a little more calmly after a while, "would it not be introducing a spy into our very home? ... and just now ... at the time when we all have so much at stake ... the Prince..."

"Hush, Laurence!" implored the mother; and this time she placed an authoritative hand upon his arm and gave it a warning pressure; but her wan cheeks had become a shade paler than before, and the look of terror became more marked in her sunken eyes.

"Even these walls have ears these days," she added feebly.

"There is no danger here, mother darling ... nobody can hear," he said reassuringly. But nevertheless he, too, cast a quick look of terror into the remote corners of the room and dropped his voice to a whisper when he spoke again.

"Juan de Vargas' daughter," he said with passionate earnestness, "what hath she in common with us? She hates every Netherlander; she despises us all, as every Spaniard does: she would wish to see our beautiful country devastated, our cities destroyed, our liberties and ancient privileges wrested from us, and every one of us made into an abject vassal of her beloved Spain. Every moment of my life I should feel that she was watching me, spying on me, making plans for the undoing of our cause, and betraying our secrets to her abominable father. Mother dear, such a life would be hell upon earth. I could not do it. I would far rather die."

"But what can you do, Laurence?" asked Clémence van Rycke, with a sigh of infinite misery.

Laurence rose and dried his tears. He felt that they had been unmanly, and was half ashamed of them. Fortunately it was only his mother who had seen them, and ... how well she understood!

"I must think it all over, mother dear," he said calmly. "It is early yet. Father will not want me to be at the Town-house before eight o'clock. Oh! how could he ever have been so mean, so obsequious as to agree to this selling of his son in such a shameful market."

"How could he help it?" retorted the mother with a fretful little sigh. "The Duke of Alva commanded in the name of the King, and threatened us all with the Inquisition if we disobeyed. You know what that means," she added, whilst that pitiable look of horror and fear once more crept into her eyes.

"Sometimes I think," said Laurence sombrely—he was standing in front of the fire and staring into the crackling logs with a deep frown right across his brow—"sometimes I think that the worst tortures which those devils could inflict on us would be more endurable than this life of constant misery and humiliation."

The mother made no reply. Her wan cheeks had become the colour of ashes, her thin hands which were resting in her lap were seized with a nervous tremour. From below came still the sound of loud laughter intermixed now with a bibulous song. A smothered cry of rage escaped Laurence's lips: it seemed as if he could not stay still, as if he must run and stop this insult in his mother's house, silence those brawling soldiers, force their own obscene songs down their throats, regardless of the terrible reprisals which might ensue. Only his mother's thin, trembling hand upon his arm forced him to remain, and to swallow his resentment as best he could.

"It is no use, Laurence," she murmured, "and I would be the first to suffer."

This argument had the effect of forcing Laurence van Rycke to control his raging temper. Common sense came momentarily to the rescue and told him that his mother was right. He started pacing up and down the narrow room with a view to calming his nerves.

II

"Have you seen Mark this morning?" asked Clémence van Rycke suddenly.

"No," he replied, "have you?"

"Only for a moment."

"What had he to say?"

"Oh! you know Mark's way," she replied evasively. "It seems that he caught sight of donna Lenora de Vargas when she passed through the Waalpoort yesterday. He made a flippant joke or two about your good luck and the girl's beauty."

Laurence suppressed an angry oath.

"Don't blame Mark," interposed Clémence van Rycke gently, "he is as God made him-shallow, careless..."

"Not careless where his own pleasures are concerned," said Laurence, with a laugh of bitter contempt. "Last night at the 'Three Weavers' a lot of Spanish officers held carouse. Mark was with them till far into the night. There was heavy drinking and high play, and Mark..."

"I know, I know," broke in the mother fretfully, "do not let us speak of Mark. He is his father's son ... and you are mine," she added, as with a wistful little gesture she stretched out her arms to the son whom she loved. Once more he was at her feet kissing her hands.

"Do not fret, mother dear," he said, "I'll think things out quietly, and then do what I think is right."

"You'll do nothing rash, Laurence," she pleaded, "nothing without consulting me?"

"I must consult my conscience first, dear," he said firmly, "and then I must speak with the Prince... Yes! yes! I know," he added somewhat impatiently, as once again he felt that warning pressure on his arm. "Next to God my every thought is for him; nor did he think of himself when he refused to acknowledge the autocracy of Alva. Our time is at hand, mother dear, I feel it in my bones. The last response has been splendid: we have promises of close on two thousand ducats already, and two hundred men are ready to take up arms in the city at any moment. Yes! yes! I know! and I am careful-I am as wary as the fox! But how can I at such a moment think of matrimony? How can I think of bending the knee to such abominable tyranny? I bend the knee only to the Prince of Orange, and by him I swear that I will not wed the daughter of Juan de Vargas! I will not bring to this hearth and to my home one of that gang of execrable tyrants who have ravaged our country and crushed the spirit of our people. I have work to do for Orange and for my country. I will not be hindered by bonds which are abhorrent to me."

He gave his mother a final kiss and then hurried out of the room. She would have detained him if she could, for she was terrified of what he might do; but she called after him in vain, and when presently she went to his room to look for him, he was not there. But on his desk there was a letter addressed to his father; Clémence van Rycke took it up: it was not sealed, only rolled, and tied with ribbon: this she undid and read the letter. There were only a few words, and when the unfortunate woman had grasped their full meaning she uttered a moan of pain and sank half-fainting on her knees. Here Jeanne found her half an hour later, sobbing and praying. The faithful creature comforted her mistress as best she could, then she half carried, half led her back to her room. The letter written to his father by Laurence van Rycke contained the following brief communication:

"Find someone else, My Father, to help you lick our Spanish tyrants' boots. I cannot do it. I refuse to wed the Daughter of that Bloodhound de Vargas, but as I cannot live under Your roof and disobey You, I will not return until You bid Me come."

III

This had occurred early this morning; it was now late in the afternoon, and Laurence had not returned. The levie at the Town Hall was timed for eight o'clock, and the High-Bailiff had just come home in order to don his robes for the solemn occasion.

Clémence van Rycke had made an excuse not to see him yet: like all weak, indecisive natures she was hoping against hope that something would occur even now to break Laurence's obstinacy and induce him to bow to that will against which it was so useless to rebel.

But the minutes sped on, and Laurence did not return, and from a room close by came the sound of Messire van Rycke's heavy footstep and his gruff voice giving orders to the serving man who was helping him with his clothes. Another hour, or perhaps two at most, and she would have to

tell her husband what had happened-and the awful catastrophe would have to be faced. As she sat in the high-backed chair, Clémence van Rycke felt as if an icy chill had crept into her bones.

"Put another log on the fire, Jeanne," she said, "this autumn weather hath chilled me to the marrow."

Jeanne, capable, buxom and busy, did as she was bid. She did more. She ran nimbly out of the room and in a trice had returned with Madame's chaufferette-well filled with glowing charcoal-and had put it to her mistress' feet: then she lit the candles in the tall candelabra which stood on a heavy sideboard at the further end of the room, and drew the heavy curtains across the window. The room certainly looked more cosy now: Madame only gave one slight, final shiver, and drew her shawl closer round her shoulders.

"Is Messire Mark dressed yet, Jeanne?" she asked wistfully.

"Messire came in about ten minutes ago," replied the woman.

"Let him know that I wish to speak with him as soon as he can come to me.'

"Yes, Madame."

"You have seen to the soldiers' supper?"

"They have had one supper, Madame. They are on duty at the Town Hall till eleven o'clock; then they are coming home for a second supper."

"Then will don Ramon de Linea sup with us, think you?"

"He didn't say."

"In any case lay his place ready in case he wants to sup. He'll be on duty quite late too, and it will anger him if his supper is not to his taste."

"Whatever I do will never be to the commandant's taste: he didn't like his room and he didn't like the dinner I had cooked for him. When he heard in whose house he was he swore and blasphemed, as I never heard any one blaspheme before. I worked my fingers to the bone last night and this morning to mend his linen and starch his ruff, but even then he was not satisfied."

There was a tone of bitter wrath in Jeanne's voice as she spoke. Madame drew a fretful little sigh, but she made no comment. What was the use? The Spanish soldiers and officers quartered in the houses of Flemish burghers had an unpleasant way of enforcing their wishes with regard to food and drink which it was not wise to combat these days. So Clémence van Rycke dismissed Jeanne, and remained brooding alone, staring into the fire, repeating in her mind all that Laurence had said, looking into the future with that same shiver of horror which was habitual to her, and into all the awful possibilities which must inevitably follow Laurence's hot-headed act of rebellion.

IV

And as she sat there huddled up in the high-backed chair it would be difficult to realise that Clémence van Rycke was still on the right side of fifty.

She had married when she had only just emerged out of childhood, and had been in her day one of the brightest, prettiest, gayest of all the maidens in the city of Ghent. But now her eyes had lost their sparkle, and her mouth its smile. Her shoulders were bent as if under a perpetual load of care and anxiety, and in her once so comely face there was a settled look of anxiety and of fear. Even now, when a firm footstep resounded along the tiled corridor, she lost nothing of that attitude of dejection which seemed to have become habitual to her.

In answer to a timid knock at the door, she called a fretful "Enter!" but she did not turn her head, as Mark-her younger son-came close up to her chair. He stooped to kiss the smooth white forehead which was not even lifted for his caress.

"Any news?" were the first words which Clémence van Rycke uttered, and this time she looked up more eagerly and a swift glimmer of hope shot through her tear-dimmed eyes.

"Nothing definite," replied Mark van Rycke. "He had food and drink at the hostelry of St. John just before midday, and at the tavern of 'The Silver Bell' later in the afternoon. Apparently he has not left the city as no one saw him pass through any of the gates-but if Laurence does not mean to be found, mother dear," he added with a light shrug of the shoulders, "I might as well look for a needle in a haystack as to seek him in the streets of Ghent."

The mother sighed dejectedly, and Mark threw himself into a chair and stretched his long legs out to the blaze: he felt his mother's eyes scanning his face and gradually a faint smile, half ironical, half impatient, played round the corners of his mouth.

To a superficial observer there was a great likeness between the two brothers, although Mark was the taller and more robust of the two. Most close observers would, however, assert that Laurence was the better-looking; Mark had not the same unruly fair hair, nor look of boyish enthusiasm; his face was more dour and furrowed, despite the merry twinkle which now and then lit up his grey eyes, and there were lines around his brow and mouth which in an older man would have suggested the cares and anxieties of an arduous life, but which to the mother's searching gaze at this moment only seemed to indicate traces of dissipation, of nights spent in taverns, and days frittered away in the pursuit of pleasure.

Clémence van Rycke sighed as she read these signs and a bitter word of reproach hovered on her lips; but this she checked and merely sighed-sighing and weeping were so habitual to her, poor soul!

"Have you seen your father?" she asked after a while.

"Not yet," he replied.

"You will have to tell him, Mark. I couldn't. I haven't the courage. He has always loved you better than Laurence or me-the blow would come best from you."

"Have you told him nothing, then?"

"Nothing."

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "and he has to meet señor de Vargas within the next two hours!"

"Oh! I hadn't the courage to tell him, Mark!" she moaned piteously, "I was always hoping that Laurence would think better of it all. I so dread even to think what he will say ... what he will do..."

"Laurence should have thought of that," rejoined Mark dryly, "before he embarked on this mad escapade."

"Escapade!" she exclaimed with sudden vehemence. "You can talk of escapade, when..."

"Easy, easy, mother dear," broke in Mark good-humouredly, "I know I deserve all your reproaches for taking this adventure so lightly. But you must confess, dear, that there is a comic side to the tragedy-there always is. Laurence, the happy bridegroom-elect, takes to his heels without even a glimpse at the bride offered to him, whilst her beauty, according to rumour, sets every masculine heart ablaze."

The mother gave a little sigh of weariness and resignation.

"You never will understand your brother, Mark," she said with deep earnestness, "not as long as you live. You never will understand your mother either. You are your father's son-Laurence is more wholly mine. You can look on with indifference-God help you! even with levity-on the awful tyranny which has well-nigh annihilated our beautiful land of Flanders. On you the weight of Spanish oppression sits over lightly... Sometimes I think I ought to thank God that He has given you a shallow nature, and that I am not doomed to see both my sons suffer as Laurence-my eldest-does. To him, Mark, his country and her downtrodden liberties are almost a religion: every act of tyranny perpetrated by that odious Alva is a wrong which he swears to avenge. What he suffers in the innermost fibre of his being every time that your father lends a hand in the abominable work of persecution nobody but I-his mother-will ever know. Your father's abject submission to Alva has eaten into his very soul. From a gay, light-hearted lad he has become a stern and silent man. What schemes for the overthrow of tyrants go on within his mind, I dare not even think. That awful bloodhound de Vargas-murderer, desecrator, thief-he loathes with deadly abomination. When the order came

forth from your father that he should forthwith prepare for his early marriage to the daughter of that execrable man, he even thought of death as preferable to a union against which his innermost soul rose in revolt."

She had spoken thus lengthily, very slowly but with calm and dignified firmness. Mark was silent. There was a grandeur about the mother's defence of her beloved son which checked the word of levity upon his lips. Now Clémence van Rycke sank back in her chair exhausted by her sustained effort. She closed her eyes for a while, and Mark could not help but note how much his mother had aged in the past two years, how wearied she looked and how pathetic and above all how timid, like one on whom fear is a constant attendant. When he spoke again, it was more seriously and with great gentleness.

"I had no thought, mother dear," he said, "of belittling Laurence's earnestness, nor yet his devotion. I'll even admit, an you wish, that the present situation is tragic. It is now past six o'clock. Father must be at the Town Hall within the next two hours... He must be told, and at once... The question is, what can we tell him to ... to..."

"To soften the blow and to appease his fury," broke in Clémence van Rycke, and once more the look of terror crept into her eyes—a look which made her stooping figure look still more wizened and forlorn. "Mark," she added under her breath, "your father is frightened to death of the Duke of Alva. I believe that he would sacrifice Laurence and even me to save himself from the vengeance of those people."

"Hush, mother dear! now you are talking wildly. Father is perhaps a little weak. Most of us, I fear me, now are weak. We have been cowed and brow-beaten and threatened till we have lost all sense of our own manhood and our own dignity."

"You perhaps," protested the mother almost roughly, "but not Laurence. You and your father are ready to lick the dust before all these Spaniards—but I tell you that what you choose to call loyalty they call servility; they despise you for your fawning—men like Orange and Laurence they hate, but they give them grudging respect..."

"And hang them to the nearest gibbet when they get a chance," broke in Mark with a dry laugh.

V

Before Clémence van Rycke could say another word, the heavy footstep of the High-Bailiff was heard in the hall below. The poor woman felt as if her heart stood still with apprehension.

"Your father has finished dressing: go down to him, Mark," she implored. "I cannot bear to meet him with the news."

And Mark without another word went down to meet his father.

Charles van Rycke—a fine man of dignified presence and somewhat pompous of manner—was standing in the hall, arrayed ready for the reception, in the magnificent robes of his office. His first word on seeing Mark was to ask for Laurence, the bridegroom-elect and hero of the coming feast.

"He is a fine-looking lad," said the father complacently, "he cannot fail to find favour in donna Lenora's sight."

The news had to be told: Mark drew his father into the dining-hall and served him with wine.

"This marriage will mean a splendid future for us all, Mark," continued the High-Bailiff, as he pledged his son in a tankard of wine: "here's to the happy young people and to the coming prosperity of our house. No more humiliations, Mark; no more fears of that awful Inquisition. We shall belong to the ruling class now, tyranny can touch us no longer."

And the news had to be told. Clémence van Rycke had said nothing to her husband about Laurence's letter—so it all had to be told, quietly and without preambles.

"Laurence has gone out of the house, father, vowing that he would never marry donna Lenora de Vargas."

It took some time before the High-Bailiff realised that Mark was not jesting; the fact had to be dwelt upon, repeated over and over again, explained and insisted on before the father was made to understand that his son had played him false and had placed the family fortunes and the lives of its members in deadly jeopardy thereby.

"He has gone!" reiterated Mark for the tenth time, "gone with the intention not to return. At the reception to-night the bride will be waiting, and the bridegroom will not be there. The Duke of Alva will ask where is the bride-groom whom he hath chosen for the great honour, and echo will only answer 'Where?'"

Charles van Rycke was silent. He pushed away from him the tankard and bottle of wine. His face was the colour of lead.

"This means ruin for us all, Mark," he murmured, "black, hideous ruin; Alva will never forgive; de Vargas will hate us with the hatred born of humiliation... A public affront to his daughter! ... O Holy Virgin protect us!" he continued half-incoherently, "it will mean the scaffold for me, the stake for your mother..."

He rose and said curtly, "I must speak with your mother."

He went to the door but his step was unsteady. Mark forestalled him and placed himself against the door with his hand on the latch.

"It means black ruin for us all, Mark," reiterated the High-Bailiff with sombre despair, "I must go and speak of it with your mother."

"My mother is sick and anxious," said Mark quietly, "she cannot help what Laurence has done-you and I, father, can talk things over quietly without her."

"There is nothing that you can say, Mark ... there is nothing we can do ... save, perhaps, pack up a few belongings and clear out of the country as quickly as we can ... that is, if there is time!"

"Your imagination does not carry you very far, meseems," quoth Mark dryly. "Laurence's default is not irreparable."

"What do you mean?"

"Am I not here to put it right?"

"What? – you?"

"By your leave."

"You, Mark!"

VI

The transition from black despair to this sudden ray of hope was too much for the old man: he tottered and nearly measured his length on the floor. Mark had barely the time to save him from the fall. Now he passed his trembling hand across his eyes and forehead: his knees were shaking under him.

"You, Mark," he murmured again.

He managed to pour himself out a fresh mug of wine and drank it greedily: then he sat down, for his knees still refused him service.

"It would be salvation indeed," he said, somewhat more steadily.

Mark shrugged his shoulders with an air of complete indifference.

"Well! frankly, father dear," he said, "I think that there is not much salvation for us in introducing a Spaniard into our home. Mother-and Laurence when he comes back-will have to be very careful in their talk. But you seem to think the present danger imminent..."

"Imminent, ye gods!" exclaimed the High-Bailiff, unable to repress a shudder of terror at the thought. "I tell you, Mark, that de Vargas would never forgive what he would call a public insult-nor would Alva forgive what he would call open disobedience. Those two men-who are all-powerful and

as cruel and cunning as fiends-would track us and hunt us down till they had brought you and me to the scaffold and your mother to the stake."

"I know that, father," interposed Mark with some impatience, "else I would not dream of standing in Laurence's shoes: the bride is very beautiful, but I have no liking for matrimony. The question is, will de Vargas guess the truth; he hath eyes like a lynx."

"No! no! he will not guess. He only saw Laurence twice-a fortnight ago when I took him up to Brussels and presented him to señor de Vargas and to the Duke: and then again the next evening: both times the lights were dim. No! no! I have no fear of that! de Vargas will not guess! You and your brother are at times so much alike, and donna Lenora hath not seen Laurence yet."

"And you did not speak of Laurence by name? I shouldn't care to change mine."

"No, I don't think so. I presented my son to the Duke and to señor de Vargas. It was at His Highness' lodgings: the room was small and dark; and señor de Vargas paid but little heed to us."

"We Netherlanders are of so little account in the sight of these grandees of Spain," quoth Mark with a light laugh, "and in any case, father, we must take some risk. So will you go and see my mother and calm her fears, whilst I go and don my best doublet and hose. Poor little mother! she hath put one foot into her grave through terror and anxiety on Laurence's account."

"As for Laurence..." exclaimed the High-Bailiff wrathfully.

"Don't worry about Laurence, father," broke in Mark quietly. "His marriage with a Spaniard would have been disastrous. He would have fallen violently in love with his beautiful wife, and she would have dragged sufficient information out of him to denounce us all to the Inquisition. Perhaps," he added with good-humoured indifference, "it is all for the best."

The High-Bailiff rose and placed a hand upon his son's shoulder.

"You are a true son to me, Mark," he said earnestly, "never shall I forget it. I am a wealthy man-more wealthy than many suppose. In virtue of your marriage with that Spanish wench you will be more free from taxation than we Netherlanders are: I'll make over the bulk of my fortune to you. You shall not regret what you have done for me and for your mother."

"It is time I went up to dress," was Mark's only comment on his father's kindly speech, and he quietly removed the paternal hand from off his shoulder.

"Hurry on," said the High-Bailiff cheerfully, "I'll wait until you are ready. I must just run up to your mother and tell her the good news. Nay! but I do believe if that hot-headed young rascal were to turn up now, I would forgive him his senseless escapade. As you say, my dear son, it is all for the best!"

CHAPTER III THE RULING CASTE

I

Donna Lenora de Vargas stood beside her father whilst he-as representing the Lieutenant-Governor-was receiving the homage of the burghers and patricians of Ghent. This was a great honour for so young a girl, but every one-even the women-declared that donna Lenora was worthy of the honour, and many a man-both young and old-after he had made obeisance before señor de Vargas paused awhile before moving away, in order to gaze on the perfect picture which she presented.

She was dressed all in white and with extreme simplicity, but the formal mode of the time, the stiff corslet and stomacher, the rigid folds of the brocade and high starched collar set off to perfection the stateliness of her finely proportioned figure, whilst the masses of her soft fair hair crowned her as with a casque of gold.

When the brilliant throng of Flemish notabilities and their wives had all filed past the Duke of Alva's representative and had all had the honour-men and women alike-proud patricians of this ancient city, of kissing his hand, the High-Bailiff respectfully asked for leave to formally present his son to the high officers of state.

All necks were immediately craned to see this presentation, for already the rumour had spread abroad of the coming interesting engagement, and there were many whispers of astonishment when Mark's tall figure-dressed in sombre purple silk with fine, starched ruff of priceless Mechlin lace-came forward out of the crowd. Every one had expected to see Laurence van Rycke as the happy bridegroom-elect, and it seemed passing strange that it should be Mark-happy-go-lucky, easy-going Mark, the wastrel of the family, the ne'er-do-well-who had been selected for the honour of this alliance with the daughter of all-powerful de Vargas.

Well! perhaps Laurence never would have stooped before a Spaniard as Mark had done quite naturally; perhaps Laurence was too avowedly a partisan of the Prince of Orange to have found favour in beautiful donna Lenora's sight. She certainly looked on Mark van Rycke with cool indifference; those who stood close by vowed that she flashed a glance of contempt upon him, as he bowed low before señor de Vargas and the other officers of state.

"Your eldest son, Messire?" asked one of these seigniors graciously.

"My sons are twins," replied the High-Bailiff, "and this is my son Mark."

"Señor del Rio," said de Vargas turning to his colleague, "I have the honour to present to you Messire Mark van Rycke, son of a loyal subject of our King, the High-Bailiff of Ghent."

After which he turned to speak again with the High-Bailiff, and don Alberic del Rio drew Mark into a brief conversation. Excitement in the gaily-dressed throng was then at its height: the vague feeling that something unusual and even mysterious was occurring caused every one's nerves to be on tenterhooks. All this while donna Lenora had been quite silent, which was vastly becoming in a young girl, and now her father came up to her and he was closely followed by Mark van Rycke.

The momentous presentation was about to take place: a man and a woman-of different race, of different upbringing, of the same religion but of widely different train of thought-were on the point of taking a solemn engagement to live their future life together.

Those who stood near declared that at that moment donna Lenora looked up at her father with those large, dark eyes of hers that had been veiled by the soft, sweeping lashes up to now, and that they looked wonderfully beautiful, and were shining with unshed tears and with unspoken passion.

They also say that she was on the point of speaking, that her lips were parted, and that the word "Father!" came from them as an appealing murmur.

But the next moment she had encountered Vargas' stern glance which swiftly and suddenly shot out on her from beneath his drooping lids—that cruel, evil glance of his which dying men and women were wont to encounter when their bodies were racked by torture and which gave them a last shudder of horror ere they closed their eyes in death. Donna Lenora too shivered as she turned her head away. Her cheeks were whiter than her gown, neither had her lips any colour in them, and the kindly Flemish women who stood by felt that their motherly heart ached for this beautiful young girl who seemed so forlorn in the midst of all this pomp.

II

The curious formalities demanded by ancient Flemish custom had now to be complied with, before Messire van Rycke and donna Lenora de Vargas could be publicly announced as affianced to one another.

Mark having his father on his right and Messire Jean van Migrode, chief-sheriff of the Keure, on his left, advanced toward his future bride. Young Count Mansfeld and Philip de Lannoy seigneur de Beauvoir walked immediately behind him, and with them were a number of gentlemen and ladies-relatives and friends of the High-Bailiff of Ghent.

In like manner a cortège had been formed round the bride-elect: she was supported on either side by her father and by don Alberic del Rio, his most intimate friend, and around her were many Spanish seigniors of high rank, amongst whom the Archbishop of Sorrento, who was on a visit to Brussels, and don Gonzalo de Bracamonte, commanding the Governor's bodyguard, were the most noteworthy.

A tense silence hung over the large and brilliant assembly, only the frou-frou of brocaded gowns, the flutter of fans, and up above in the vaulted roof the waving of banners in the breeze broke that impressive hush which invariably precedes the accomplishment of something momentous and irrevocable.

And now the High Bailiff began to speak in accordance with the time-honoured tradition of his people-wilfully oblivious of the sneers, the sarcastic smiles, the supercilious glances which were so conspicuous in the swarthy faces of the Spanish grandees opposite to him.

"It is my purpose, señor," he began solemnly, and speaking directly to don Juan de Vargas, "to ask that you do give your daughter in wedlock to my son."

And don Juan de Vargas gave answer with equal solemnity:

"Before acceding to your request, Messire," he said, "I demand to know whether your son is an honourable man and possessed of goods sufficient to ensure that my daughter continue to live as she hath done hitherto, in a manner befitting her rank."

"My son Mark, señor," thereupon rejoined the High-Bailiff, "is possessed of ten thousand ducats in gold, of twelve horses and of one half-share in the fleet of trading vessels belonging to me, which carry the produce of Flemish farms and of Flemish silk-looms to the ports of France, of Italy and of England. Moreover, six months after my son's marriage I will buy him a house in the St. Bavon quarter of this city, and some furniture to put into it so that he may live independently therein and in a manner befitting his rank."

"My daughter, Messire," resumed de Vargas still with the same grave solemnity, "is possessed of five thousand ducats and of the prestige attached to her name, which next to that of the Lieutenant-Governor himself hath more power than any other name in this land."

The chief sheriff now spoke:

"And on the day of the marriage of Messire van Rycke," he said, "with the bride whom he hath chosen, I will give him sixteen goblets of silver and four silver tankards."

"And on the day of the marriage of donna Lenora de Vargas with the bridegroom chosen for her by her father," said don Alberic del Rio, "I will give her a girdle of gold, a necklace of pearls and three rings set with diamonds and rubies."

"I will give the bridegroom two silver dishes and four gold salt cellars," came in solemn fashion from young Count Mansfeld.

"To the bride I will give two gold bracelets and a rosary specially blessed by His Holiness," announced the Archbishop of Sorrento.

"To the bridegroom I will give two gold dishes and four silver spoons," said the seigneur de Beauvoir.

"To the bride I will give a statue of Our Lady wrought in ivory, and two silken carpets from Persia," said don Gonzalo de Bracamonte.

Whereupon the High-Bailiff spoke once more:

"My son Mark hath two hundred and twenty friends and kindred each of whom will present him with a suitable wedding gift."

"My daughter will have a gift from our Sovereign Lord the King, from the Governor of the Provinces and from the Lieutenant-Governor, and from fifteen Spanish grandees, three of whom are Knights of the Golden Fleece."

"Wherefore, O noble seignior," continued the High-Bailiff, "I do ask you to give your daughter to my son for wife."

"Which request I do grant you, Messire," said de Vargas, "and herewith make acceptance on my daughter's behalf, of your son Mark to be her husband and guardian."

Don Gonzalo de Bracamonte now handed him a drawn sword, a hat, a ring and a mantle: de Vargas holding the sword upright, placed the hat on the tip of the blade and hung the ring upon a projecting ornament of the hilt. This together with the mantle and a piece of silver he then handed over to Mark, saying:

"With these emblems I hereby hand over to you the custody of my daughter, and as I have been her faithful custodian in the past, so do I desire you to become her guardian and protector henceforth, taking charge of her worldly possessions and duly administering them honourably and loyally."

In the meanwhile the chief sheriff had in similar manner given Mark seven gloves: these the young man now handed to señor de Vargas in exchange for the emblems of his own marital authority, and saying the while:

"I accept the trust and guardianship of your daughter Lenora which you have imposed upon me, and herewith I plight you my troth that I will henceforth administer her worldly possessions both honourably and loyally."

With this the quaint ceremonial came to an end. The Spanish seigniors very obviously drew deep sighs of relief. The Archbishop and don Gonzalo as well as de Vargas himself had studied their parts carefully, for the Lieutenant-Governor had expressly desired that the betrothal should be done with all the formalities and ceremonies which the custom of the Netherlands demanded. All three seigniors had chafed at this irksome task—they found torrents of ridicule to pour upon the loutish Netherlanders and their vulgar and unseemly habits; but the Duke was firm, and obedience was obligatory. Lenora had, of course, not been consulted on the subject; she was just the sad little bundle of goods which was being bargained for, for the furtherance of political intrigues, together with her five thousand ducats, her golden girdle and rosary specially blessed by the Pope. She stood by while the solemn bargaining was going on, the centre of the group—a pathetic young figure in her white gown, a curious flush—maybe of shame—upon her cheeks. But at last it was over and de Vargas now turned to his daughter.

"Lenora," he said, "this is Mark, the son of the High-Bailiff of Ghent; the alliance which you are about to contract with him is a source of great satisfaction to me."

Mark in the meanwhile had stood by—quite impassive and seemingly indifferent—while the ceremony of betrothal was taking place. There was nothing new to him in the solemn speeches

delivered by his father and his friends, nor in those which the Spanish seigniors had learned so glibly by heart; he had more than once been present at the betrothal of one or other of his friends, and these customs and ceremonials were as familiar, as sacred to him, perhaps, as the divine service of his Church. Now at de Vargas' last words he advanced, with back bent, nearer to his beautiful fiancée. He had refrained from looking on her while his worldly goods and hers were being thus proclaimed in loud tones by their respective friends, because he felt that she-being a total stranger-must find his country's custom either ridiculous or irksome.

But now when he straightened out his tall figure, he suddenly sought her eyes, and seemed to compel her glance by the very intentness of his own.

"Give Messire van Rycke your hand, Lenora," commanded de Vargas.

And the girl-obediently and mechanically-stretched out her small, white hand and Mark van Rycke touched her finger tips with his lips.

Every one noticed how closely señor de Vargas had watched his daughter all the while that the formal ceremony of betrothal was taking place, and that, as soon as donna Lenora had extended her hand to Messire van Rycke a smile of intense satisfaction became apparent round the corners of his mouth.

"And now, Messire," he said solemnly, and turning once more to the bridegroom-elect, "it is my pleasant duty to apprise you that our Sovereign Lord and King hath himself desired that I should be his mouthpiece in wishing you lasting happiness.

"I thank you, Messire," said Mark van Rycke quietly.

"As you know," continued de Vargas speaking with paternal benevolence, "it is the Lieutenant-Governor's earnest wish that we should hasten the wedding. He himself hath graciously fixed this day sennight for the religious ceremony-the festival day of Our Lady of Victory-a great and solemn occasion, Messire," he continued unctuously, "which will sanctify your union with my daughter and confer on it an additional blessing."

"As His Highness commands," rejoined Mark somewhat impatiently.

He had made several efforts to meet his beautiful bride's glance again, but she kept her eyes steadily averted from his now.

Truly so cold and unemotional a bride was enough to put any bridegroom out of patience. No doubt had Laurence van Rycke stood there instead of Mark there might have been enacted a little scene of ill-temper which would have disturbed don Juan de Vargas' unctuous manner. But Mark took it all as a matter of course: he looked supremely indifferent and more than a little bored whilst his prospective father-in-law delivered himself of all these urbane speeches. He had obviously been deeply struck at first by donna Lenora's exquisite beauty, but now the effect of this pleasing surprise had worn off, he looked down on her with cool indifference, whilst a little smile of irony became more and more accentuated round his lips. But the High-Bailiff appeared overjoyed; his flat, Flemish face gradually broadened into a huge, complacent smile, he leaned on the arm of his son with easy familiarity and every one felt that-had señor de Vargas demanded such a token of gratitude and loyalty-Mynheer Charles van Rycke would have laid down on the floor and licked the dust from Monseigneur's slashed shoes.

III

At last the interminable ceremony of betrothal was over and donna Lenora was given a little breathing time from the formal etiquette which surrounded her father whenever he represented the Lieutenant-Governor, and which oppressed this poor young girl physically like the stiff corslet which she wore.

She looked around her a little wistfully: her father was busy conversing with the High-Bailiff, no doubt on matters connected with the respective marriage-jointures: all around in the magnificent hall,

under the high roof emblazoned and decorated with the arms of the city and the banners of the city guilds, a noisy throng, gaily dressed, pressed, jostled and chattered. The ladies of Ghent-somewhat unwieldy of figure and with none of the highly-trained æsthetic taste of Spanish civilisation-had decked themselves out in finery which was more remarkable for its gorgeousness than for harmony of colour.

The lateness of the season had proved an excuse for wearing the rich velvets and brocades imported from Italy, cloth of gold heavily embroidered, stomachers wrought in tinsel threads and pearls, hooped petticoats and monster farthingales moved before donna Lenora's pensive eyes like a kaleidoscope of many colours, brilliant and dazzling. The deep window embrasures each held a living picture grouped against the rich background of heavy velvet curtains or exquisite carved panelling; men and women in bright crimson, or yellow or green, the gorgeous liveries of one or other of the civic corporations, the uniforms of the guild-militia, the robes of the sheriffs and the wardmasters, all looked like a crowd of gaily plumaged birds, with here and there the rich trenchant note of a black velvet tunic worn by a member of one of the learned bodies, or the purple satin doublet of a Spanish grandee. The Flemish bourgeoisie and patriciate kept very much to itself-the women eyeing with some disfavour the stiff demeanour and sombre clothes of the Spaniards who remained grouped around the person of don Juan de Vargas. There was also the element of fear, never far distant when the Spanish officers of State were present. They personified to all these people the tyranny of Spain-the yoke of slavery which would never again be lifted from the land. The Netherlanders feared their masters, and many cringed and fawned before them, but they never mixed with them; they held themselves entirely aloof.

There were no Spanish ladies here. The Duchess of Alva was not in Flanders, the grandees and officers of Alva's army had left their wives and daughters at home in Arragon or Castile; the stay in these dour and unsympathetic Low Countries was always something of a punishment to these sons and daughters of the South, who hated the grey skies, the north-easterly winds and perpetual rains.

Thus donna Lenora found herself strangely isolated. The Flemish ladies banded themselves in groups, they chatted together, whispered and made merry, but the Spanish girl who had stood in high honour beside the Lieutenant-Governor's representative was not one of themselves. She was slim and tall and graceful, she was dressed in simple white; above all, she belonged to the ruling caste, and though many a kind-hearted Flemish vrouw pitied her in her loneliness, not one of them thought of going to speak to her.

Donna Lenora sighed and her eyes filled with tears-with tears not altogether of sorrow, but also of self-pity mingled with bitter resentment. Even the company of her future husband might have been acceptable at this moment, when she felt so very lonely.

But Mark van Rycke was no longer nigh.

IV

Then suddenly her face lit up with joy, the colour rushed to her cheeks, and her lips parted in a smile.

She had just espied in the brilliant throng, one no less brilliant figure which was slowly pushing its way through the crowd in her direction.

"Ramon," she whispered, as soon as the young man was quite close to her, "I didn't know you were here."

"His Highness," he replied, "has given me command of the garrison here; I arrived last night with my regiment."

"But where are your lodgings?"

"At the house of those thrice accursed van Ryckes," he muttered with an oath. "The billeting was arranged without my knowledge, and of course I and my men leave those quarters to-morrow. Every morsel I eat in that house seems to choke me."

"Poor Ramon!" she whispered with tender pity. "I too have been unutterably wretched since I saw you in Brussels."

"I couldn't communicate with you again, sweetheart-and this to my great grief-but I was bundled out of Brussels like a bale of goods, and here I am! Imagine my joy when I realised that I should see you to-night."

"Hush!" she murmured quickly, for with a quick impulse he had seized her hand and was pressing it to his lips. "My father can see us."

"What matter if he do," retorted don Ramon. "He has taken you from me, but he cannot kill my love ... our love, Lenora," he added with passionate ardour-an ardour in which he himself believed for the moment, since he loved Lenora and she was so exquisite, in her stateliness, her white gown and that casque of golden hair upon her head.

"You must not say that, Ramon," she said with earnestness that was far more real than his, "you must try and help me ... and not make my sacrifice altogether unbearable. It has been terrible," she added, and a curious, haunted look came into her eyes.

"It has been the most damnable thing that has ever been done on this earth, Lenora. When I arrived in this accursed city last night and quartered myself and some of my men in the house of the High-Bailiff, I would gladly have put the whole accursed family to the sword. There is no limit to my hatred of them-and of all those who stand between me and your love. I have hated your father, Lenora, ever since he parted us... I have hated Alva! God help me! I have hated even the King!"

Ramon spoke in a low, hoarse murmur, inaudible to every one save to the shell-like ear for which it was intended. With irresistible force he had drawn Lenora's arm through his own, and had led her-much against her will-into one of the deep window embrasures, where heavy curtains of Utrecht velvet masked them both from view. He pressed her to sit on one of the low window seats, and through the soft-toned stained glass the dim light of the moon came peeping in and threw ghostlike glimmers upon the tendrils of her hair, even whilst the ruddy lights of the candles played upon her face and her white gown. For the first time to-night the young man realised all that he had lost and how infinitely desirable was the woman whom he had so airily given up without a fight. He cursed himself for his cowardice, even though he knew that he never would have the courage to dare defiance for her sake.

"Lenora," he said, with passionate intensity, "ever since your father and the Duke of Alva made me understand that they were taking you away from me, I have been wondering if it was humanly possible for any man who has known you as I have done, who has loved you as I love you still, to give you up to another."

"It has to be, Ramon," she said gently. "Oh! you must not think that I have not thought and fought-thought of what was my duty-fought for my happiness. Now," she added with a little sigh of weariness, "I cannot fight any more. My father, the Duke of Alva, the King himself in a personal letter to me, have told me where my duty lies. My confessor would withhold absolution from me if I refused to obey. My King and country and the Church have need of me it seems: what is my happiness worth if weighed in the balance of my country's service?"

"You are so unfitted for that sort of work," he murmured sullenly, "they will make of you something a little better than a spy in the house of the High-Bailiff of Ghent."

"That is the only thing which troubles me," she said. "I feel as if I were doing something mean and underhand. I shall marry a man whom I can never love, who belongs to a race that has always been inimical to Spain. My husband will hate all those whom I love. He will hate everything that I have always honoured and cherished-my King, my country, the glory and grandeur of Spain. He will rebel against her laws which I know to be beneficent even though they seem harsh and even cruel at times. A Netherlander can never have anything in common with a Spaniard..."

"Oh! they'd murder us if they could," the young man rejoined with a careless shrug of the shoulders, "but only in the dark streets or from behind a hedge."

"The King is very angry with them, I know; he declared that he would not come to the Netherlands until there is not a single rebel or heretic within its shores."

"The terms are synonymous," he retorted lightly, "and I fear that His Majesty will never grace this abominable country with his presence, if his resolution holds good. They are a stiff-necked crowd, these Netherlanders-Catholics and heretics, they are all rebels-but the heretics are the worst."

Then, as she said nothing, but stared straight out before her at this crowd of people amongst whom she was doomed to live in the future, he continued with a tone of sullen wrath:

"We have burnt a goodly number of these rebels, but still they swarm."

"It is horrible!" exclaimed the young girl with a shudder.

"Horrible, my dear love?" he said with a cynical laugh, "it is the only way to deal with these people. Their arrogance passes belief; their treachery knows no bounds. The King's sacred person would not be safe here among them; the Duke's life has often been threatened; the heretics have pillaged and ransacked the churches! No! you must not waste your sympathy on the people here. They are rebellious and treacherous to the core. As for me, I hate them tenfold, for it is one of them who will take you from me."

"He cannot take my heart from you, Ramon, for that will be yours always."

"Lenora!" he whispered once more with that fierce earnestness which he seemed unable to control, "you know what is in my mind? – what I have thought and planned ever since I realised that you were being taken from me?"

"What is it, Ramon?"

"The Duke of Alva-the King himself-want you to work for them-to be their tool. Well! so be it! You have not the strength to resist-I have not the power to rebel! If we did we should both be crushed like miserable worms by the powers which know how to force obedience. Often have I thought in the past two miserable days that I would kill you, Lenora, and myself afterwards, but..."

The words died on his lips, his olive skin became almost livid in hue. Hastily he drew a tiny image from inside his doublet: with it in his hand he made the sign of the Cross, then kissed it reverently.

"You would die unabsolved, my Lenora," he whispered, and the girl's cheeks became very white, too, as he spoke, "and I should be committing a crime for which there is no pardon ... and I could not do that," he added more firmly, "I would sooner face the fires of the Inquisition than those of hell."

Superstitious fear held them both in its grip, and that fanatical enthusiasm which in these times saw in the horrible excesses of that execrable Inquisition-in its torture-chambers and scaffolds and stakes-merely the means of killing bodies that were worthless and saving immortal souls from everlasting torture and fire. Lenora was trembling from head to foot, and tears of horror and of dread gathered in her eyes. Don Ramon made a violent effort to regain his composure and at the same time to comfort her.

"You must not be afraid, Lenora," he said quietly, "those demons of blind fury, of homicide and of suicide have been laid low. I fought with them and conquered them. Their cruel temptations no longer assail me, and the Holy Saints themselves have shown me the way to be patient-to wait in silence until you have fulfilled your destiny-until you have accomplished the work which the King and the Church will demand of you. After that, I know that the man who now will claim what I would give my life to possess-you, Lenora-will be removed from your path. How it will be done, I do not know ... but he will die, Lenora, of that I am sure. He will die before a year has gone by, and I will then come back to you and claim you for my wife. You will be free then, and will no longer owe obedience to your father. I will claim you, Lenora! and even now, here and at this hour, I do solemnly plight you my troth, in the very teeth of the man whose wife you are about to be."

"And of a truth," here broke in a pleasant and good-humoured voice with a short laugh, "it is lucky that I happened to be present here and now and at this hour to register this exceedingly amiable vow."

V

Don Ramon de Linea had jumped to his feet; his hand was upon his sword-hilt; instinctively he had placed himself in front of donna Lenora and facing the intruder who was standing beside the velvet curtain, with one hand holding back its heavy folds.

"Messire van Rycke?" he exclaimed, whilst he strove to put into his attitude all the haughtiness and dignity of which the present situation had undoubtedly robbed him.

"At your service, señor," replied Mark.

"You were spying on donna Lenora and on me, I see."

"Indeed not, señor. I only happened upon the scene-quite accidentally, I assure you-at the moment when you were prophesying my early demise and arranging to be present at my funeral."

"Are you trying to be insolent, sirrah?" quoth don Ramon roughly.

"Not I, señor," rejoined Mark, good-humouredly, "I should succeed so ill. My intention was when I saw señor de Vargas' angry glance persistently directed against my future wife to save her from the consequences of his wrath, and incidentally to bear her company for awhile: a proceeding for which-I think you will admit, señor-I have the fullest right."

"You have no rights over this gracious lady, fellow," retorted the Spaniard with characteristic arrogance.

"None, I own, save those which she deigns to confer upon me. And if she bid me begone, I will go."

"Begone then, you impudent varlet!" cried don Ramon, whose temper was not proof against the other's calm insolence, "ere I run my sword through your miserable body..."

"Hush, Ramon," here interposed donna Lenora with cool authority, "you forget your own dignity and mine in this unseemly quarrel. Messire van Rycke is in the right. An he desires to speak with me I am at his disposal."

"Not before he has arranged to meet me at the back of his father's house at daybreak to-morrow. Bring your witnesses, sirrah! I'll condescend to fight you fairly."

"You could not do that, señor," replied Mark van Rycke with perfect equanimity, "I am such a poor swordsman and you so cunning a fighter. I am good with my fists, but it would be beneath the dignity of a grandee of Spain to measure fists with a Flemish burgher. Still-if it is your pleasure..."

Although this altercation had been carried on within the depth of a vast window embrasure and with heavy curtains to right and left to deaden the sound of angry voices, the fact that two men were quarrelling in the presence of donna Lenora de Vargas had become apparent to not a few.

De Vargas himself, who for the past quarter of an hour had viewed with growing wrath his daughter's intimate conversation with don Ramon de Linea, saw what was happening, and realised that within the next few moments an exceedingly unpleasant scandal would occur which would place don Ramon de Linea-a Spanish officer of high rank, commanding the garrison in Ghent-in a false and humiliating position.

In these days, however, and with the perfect organisation of which de Vargas himself was a most conspicuous member, such matters were very easily put right. A scandal under the present circumstances would be prejudicial to Spanish prestige, therefore no scandal must occur: a fight between a Spanish officer and the future husband of donna Lenora de Vargas might have unpleasant consequences for the latter, therefore even a provocation must be avoided.

And it was done quite simply: don Juan de Vargas whispered to a man who stood not far from him and who was dressed very quietly in a kind of livery of sombre purple and black-the livery worn

by servants of the Inquisition. The man, without a word, left de Vargas' side and edged his way along the panelled walls of the great hall till he reached the window embrasure where the little scene was taking place. He had shoes with soles of felt and made no noise as he glided unobtrusively along the polished floor. Neither Mark van Rycke nor don Ramon de Linea saw him approach, but just as the latter, now wholly beside himself with rage, was fingering his glove with a view to flinging it in the other's face, the man in the purple and black livery touched him lightly on the shoulder and whispered something in his ear. Then he walked away as silently, as unobtrusively as he had come.

But don Ramon de Linea's rage fell away from him like a mantle; the glove fell from his nerveless hand to the floor. He bit his lip till a tiny drop of blood appeared upon it; then he hastily turned on his heel, and after a deep bow to donna Lenora but without another word to Mark van Rycke he walked away, and soon disappeared among the crowd.

VI

Donna Lenora was leaning back against the cushioned window-sill, her hands lay in her lap, slightly quivering and twisting a tiny lace handkerchief between the fingers: in her eyes, which obviously followed for some time the movements of don Ramon's retreating figure, there was a pathetic look as that of a frightened child. She seemed quite unaware of Mark's presence, and he remained leaning back against the angle of the embrasure, watching the girl for awhile, then, as she remained quite silent and apparently desirous of ignoring him altogether, he turned to look with indifferent gaze on the ever-changing and moving picture before him.

One or two of the high officers of State had retired, and the departure of these pompous Spanish officials was the signal for greater freedom and merriment among the guests of the High-Bailiff and of the Sheriffs of the city of Ghent. The orchestra in the gallery up above had struck up the measure of a lively galliarde the centre of the hall had been cleared, and the young people were dancing whilst the graver folk made circle around them, in order to watch the dance.

As was usual, the moment that dancing began and hilarity held sway, most of the guests slipped on a velvet mask, which partly hid the face and was supposed-owing to the certain air of mystery which it conveyed-to confer greater freedom of speech upon the wearer and greater ease of manner. There were but few of the rich Spanish doublets to be seen now: the more garish colours beloved of the worthy burghers of Flanders held undisputed sway. But here and there a dark figure or two-clad in purple and black of a severe cut-were seen gliding in and out among the crowd, and wherever they appeared they seemed to leave a trail of silence behind them.

Mark was just about to make a serious effort at conversing with his fiancée, and racking his brain as to what subject of gossip would interest her most, when a man in sombre attire, and wearing a mask, came close up to his elbow. Mark looked him quietly up and down.

"Laurence!" he said without the slightest show of surprise, and turning well away from donna Lenora so that she should not hear.

"Hush!" said the other. "I don't want father to know that I am here ... but I couldn't keep away."

"How did you get through?"

"Oh! I disclosed myself to the men-at-arms. No one seemed astonished."

"Why should they be? Your escapade is not known."

"Has everything gone off well?" queried Laurence.

"Admirably," replied the other dryly. "I was just about to make myself agreeable to my fiancée when you interrupted me."

"I'll not hinder you."

"Have you been home at all?"

"Yes. My heart ached for our dear mother, and though my resolution was just as firm, I wanted to comfort her. I slipped into the house, just after you had left. I saw our mother, and she told me what you had done. I am very grateful."

"And did you speak to father?"

"Only for a moment. He came up to say 'good-night' to mother when I was leaving her room. She had told me the news, so I no longer tried to avoid him. Of course he is full of wrath against me for the fright I gave him, but, on the whole, meseemed as if his anger was mostly pretence and he right glad that things turned out as they have done. I am truly grateful to you, Mark," reiterated Laurence earnestly.

"Have I not said that all is for the best?" rejoined Mark dryly. "Now stand aside, man, and let me speak to my bride."

"She is very beautiful, Mark!"

"Nay! it is too late to think of that, man!" quoth Mark with his habitual good-humour; "we cannot play shuttlecock with the lovely Lenora, and she is no longer for you."

"I'll not interfere, never fear. It was only curiosity that got the better of me and the longing to get a glimpse of her."

VII

This rapid colloquy between the two brothers had been carried on in whispers, and both had drawn well away from the window embrasure, leaving the velvet curtain between them and donna Lenora so as to deaden the sound of their voices and screen them from her view.

But now Mark turned back to his fiancée, ready for *thatête-à-tête* with her which he felt would be expected of him; he found her still sitting solitary and silent on the low window seat, with the cold glint of moonlight on her hair and the red glow of the candles in the ballroom throwing weird patches of vivid light and blue shadows upon her white silk gown.

"Do I intrude upon your meditations, señorita?" he asked, "do you wish me to go?"

"I am entirely at your service, Messire," she replied coldly, "as you so justly remarked to don Ramon de Linea, you have every right to my company and you so desire."

"I expressed myself clumsily, I own," he retorted a little impatiently, "nothing was further from my thoughts than to force my company upon you. But," he added whimsically, "meseems that-since we are destined to spend so much of our future together-we might make an early start at mutual understanding."

"And you thought that conversation in a ballroom would be a good start for the desirable purpose?" she asked.

"Why not?"

"As you say: why not?" she replied lightly, "there is so little that we can say to one another that it can just as well be said in a ballroom. We know so little of one another at present-and so long as my looks have not displeased you..."

"Your beauty, señorita, has no doubt been vaunted by more able lips than mine: I acknowledge it gratefully and without stint as an additional gift of God."

"Additional?" she asked with a slight raising of her brows.

"Aye! additional!" he replied, "because my first glance of you told me plainly that you are endowed with all the most perfect attributes of womanhood. Good women," he added quaintly, "are so often plain and beautiful women so often unpleasant, that to find in one's future wife goodness allied to beauty is proof that one of singularly blessed."

"Which compliment, Messire, would be more acceptable if I felt that it was sincere. Your praise of my looks is flattering; as to my goodness, you have no proof of it."

"Nay! there you wrong yourself, señorita. Are you not marrying me entirely against your will, and because you desire to be obedient to your father and to the Duke of Alva? Are you not marrying me out of loyalty to your King, to your country, and to your church? A woman who is as loyal and submissive as that, will be loyal to her husband too."

"This will I strive to be, Messire," rejoined Lenora, who either did not or would not perceive the slight tone of good-humoured mockery which lurked in Mark van Rycke's amiable speech. "I will strive to be loyal to you, since my father and the King himself, it seems, have desired that I should be your wife."

"But, by the Mass," he retorted gaily, "I shall expect something more than loyalty and submission from so beautiful a wife, you know."

"Next to the King and to my faith," she replied coldly, "you will always be first in my thoughts."

"And in your heart, I trust, señorita," he said.

"We are not masters of our heart, Messire."

"Well, so long as that precious guerdon is not bestowed on another man," said Mark with a sigh, "I suppose that I shall have to be satisfied."

"Aye, satisfied," broke in the girl with sudden vehemence. "Satisfied, did you say, Messire? You are satisfied to take a wife whom till to-day you had not even seen—who was bargained for on your behalf by your father because it suited some political scheme of which you have not even cognizance. Satisfied!" she reiterated bitterly; "more satisfied apparently with this bargaining than if you were buying a horse, for there, at least, you would have wished to see the animal ere you closed with the deal, and know something of its temper... But a wife! ... What matters what she thinks and feels? if she be cold or loving, gentle or shrewish, sensitive to a kind word or callous to cruelty? A wife! ... Well! so long as no other man hath ever kissed her lips—for that would hurt masculine vanity and wound the pride of possession! I am only a woman, made to obey my father first, and my husband afterwards... But you, a man! ... Who forced you to obey? ... No one! And you did not care... This marriage was spoken of a month ago, and Segovia is not at the end of the world—did you even take the trouble to go a-courting me there? Did you even care to see me, though I have been close on a week in this country? ... You spoke of my heart just now ... how do you hope to win it? ... Well! let me tell you this, Messire, that though I must abide by the bargain which my father and yours have entered into for my body, my heart and my soul belong to my cousin, Ramon de Linea!"

She had thus poured forth the torrent of bitterness and resentment which had oppressed her heart all this while: she spoke with intense vehemence, but with it all retained just a sufficiency of presence of mind not to raise her voice—it came like a hoarse murmur choked at times with sobs, but never loud enough to be heard above the mingled sound of music and gaiety which echoed from wall to wall of the magnificent room. So, too, was she careful of gesture; she kept her hands pressed close against her heart, save when from time to time she brushed away impatiently an obtrusive tear, or pushed back the tendrils of her fair hair from her moist forehead.

Mark had listened quite quietly to her impassioned tirade: there was no suspicion now in his grave face of that good-humoured irony and indifference which sat there so habitually. Of course he could say nothing to justify himself: he could not explain to this beautiful, eminently desirable and sensitive woman, whose self-respect had already been gravely wounded, that he was not to blame for not going to woo her before; that she had originally been intended for his brother, and that all the reproaches which she was pouring upon his innocent head were really well deserved by Laurence but not by him. He felt that he was cutting a sorry figure at this moment, and the sensation that was uppermost in him was a strong desire to give his elder brother a kick.

He did his best with the help of the curtain and his own tall figure, to screen donna Lenora from the gaze of the crowd. He knew that señor de Vargas was still somewhere in the room, and on no account did he want a father's interference at this moment. Whether he was really very sorry for the girl he could not say; she certainly had given him a moral slap on the face when she avowed her

love for don Ramon, and he did not feel altogether inclined at this precise moment to soothe and comfort her, or even to speak perfunctory words of love, which he was far from feeling, and which, no doubt, she would reject with scorn.

Thus now, when she appeared more calm, tired, no doubt, by the great emotional effort, he only spoke quite quietly, but with as much gentleness as he could:

"For both our sakes, donna Lenora," he said, "I could wish that you had not named Ramon de Linea. It grieves me sorely that the bonds which your father's will are imposing upon you, should prove to be so irksome; but I should be doing you an ill-turn if I were to offer you at this moment that freedom for which you so obviously crave. Not only your father's wrath, but that of the Duke of Alva would fall on you with far greater weight than it would on me, and your own country hath instituted methods for dealing with disobedience which I would not like to see used against you. That being the case, señorita," he continued, with a return to his usual good-tempered carelessness, "would it not be wiser, think you, to make the best of this bad bargain, and to try and live, if not in amity, at least not in open enmity one toward the other?"

"There is no enmity in my heart against you, Messire," she rejoined calmly, "and I crave your pardon that I did so far forget myself as to speak of don Ramon to you. I'll not transgress in that way in future, that I promise you. You have no love for me—you never can have any, meseems: you are a Netherlander, I a Spaniard: our every thoughts lie as asunder as the poles. You obey your father, and I mine; our hands will be clasped, but our hearts can never meet. Had you not been so callous, it might have been different: I might have looked upon you as a friend, and not a mere tool for the accomplishment of my country's destiny... And now may I beg of you not to prolong this interview... Would we had not tried to understand one another, for meseems we have fallen into graver misunderstandings than before."

"When may I see you again?" asked Mark van Rycke, with coolness now quite equal to hers.

"Every day until our wedding, Messire, in the presence of my aunt, donna Inez de Salgado, as the custom of my country allows."

"I shall look forward to the wild excitement of these daily meetings," he said, quite unable to suppress the laughter which danced in his grey eyes.

She took no notice of the gentle raillery, but dismissed him with a gracious nod.

"Shall I tell señor de Vargas," he asked, "that you are alone?"

"No, no," she replied hastily. "I prefer to be alone for a little while. I pray you to leave me."

He bowed before her with all the stiffness and formality which Spanish etiquette demanded, then he turned away from her, and soon she lost sight of his broad shoulders in the midst of the gayest groups in the crowd.

VIII

The interview with her future husband had not left donna Lenora any happier or more contented with her lot. The callousness which he had shown in accepting a fiancée like a bale of valueless goods was equally apparent in his attitude after this first introduction to her. The poor girl's heart was heavy. She had had so little experience of the world, and none at all of men. Already at an early age she had become motherless; all the care and the tenderness which she had ever known was from the father whose pride in her beauty was far greater than his love for his child. A rigid convent education had restrained the development of her ideals and of her aspirations; at nineteen years of age the dominating thought in her was service to her King and country, loyalty and obedience to her father and to the Church.

In the crowded ballroom she saw young girls moving freely and gaily, talking and laughing without apparently a care or sorrow; yet they belonged to a subject and rebel race; the laws of a powerful alien government dominated their lives; fear of the Inquisition restrained the very freedom

of their thoughts. They were all of them rebels in the eyes of their King: the comprehensive death-warrant issued by the Duke of Alva against every Netherlander-man, woman, and child, irrespective of rank, irrespective of creed, irrespective of political convictions-hung over every life here present like the real sword of Damocles: even this day all these people were dancing in the very presence of death. The thought of the torture-chamber, the gibbet, or the stake could never be wholly absent from their minds. And yet they seemed happy, whilst she, donna Lenora de Vargas, who should have been envied of them all, was sitting solitary and sad; her lace handkerchief was soaked through with her tears.

A sudden movement of the curtain on her left roused her from her gloomy meditations. The next moment, a young man-with fair unruly hair, eyes glowing through the holes of the velvet mask which he wore, and sensitive mouth quivering with emotion-was kneeling beside her: he had captured one of her hands, and was kissing it with passionate fervour. Not a little frightened, she could hardly speak, but she did not feel indignant for she had been very lonely, and this mute adoration of her on the part of this unknown man acted like soothing balm on her wounded pride.

"I pray you, sir," she murmured timorously, "I pray you to leave me..."

He looked up into her face, and, through the holes of the mask, she could see that his eyes were-like hers-full of tears.

"Not," he whispered with soulful earnestness, "till I have told you that your sorrow and your beauty have made an indelible impression on my heart, and that I desire to be your humble servitor."

"But who are you?" she asked.

"One who anon will stand very near to you-as a brother..."

"A brother? Then you are...?"

"Laurence van Rycke," he replied, "henceforth your faithful servant until death."

Then as she looked very perplexed and puzzled, he continued more quietly: "I stood there-behind the curtain-quite close-whilest my brother spoke with you. I heard every word that you said, and my heart became filled with admiration and pity for you. I came here to-night only because I wished to see you. I looked upon you-without knowing you-as an enemy, perhaps a spy; now that I have seen you I feel as if my whole life must atone for the immense wrong which I had done you in my thoughts. You cannot guess-you will never know how infinite that wrong has been. But there is one thing I would wish you to know: and that is that I am a man to whom happiness in her most fulsome beauty stretched out her hands, and who in his blindness turned his back on her; if you can find it in your heart to pity and to trust me you will always find beside you a champion to defend you, a friend to protect you, a man prepared to atone with his life for the desperate wrong which he hath unwittingly done to you."

He paused, and she-still a little bewildered-rejoined gently: "Sir, I thank you for those kind words; the kindest I have heard since I landed in the Low Countries. I hope that I shall not need a champion, for surely my husband-your brother, Messire-will know how to protect me when necessary. But who is there who hath no need of a friend? and it is a great joy to me in the midst of many disappointments, that in my husband's brother I shall have a true friend. Still, methinks, that you speak somewhat wildly. I am not conscious of any wrong that you or your family have done to me, and if your mother is as kind as you are, why, Messire, mine own happiness in her house is assured."

"Heaven reward you for those gentle words, Señorita," said Laurence van Rycke fervently, as he once more took her hand and kissed it; she withdrew it quietly, and he had perforce to let it go. It might have been his for always-her tiny hand and her exquisite person: but for his hot-headed action he might have stood now boldly beside her-the happy bridegroom beside this lovely bride. The feeling of gratitude which he had felt for Mark when the latter chose to unravel the skein of their family's destiny, which he-Laurence-had hopelessly embroiled, was now changed to unreasoning bitterness. What Mark had accepted with a careless shrug of the shoulders he-Laurence-would now give his life

to possess. Fate had indeed made of her threads a tangle, and in this tangle he knew that his own happiness had become inextricably involved.

He could not even remain beside donna Lenora now: he was here unbeknown to his father, a looker-on at the feast, whereat he might have presided. Even at this moment, señor de Vargas, having espied his daughter in conversation with an unknown man, was making his way toward the window embrasure.

"Señorita," whispered Laurence hurriedly, "that ring upon your middle finger ... if at any time you require help or protection will you send it to me? Wherever I may be I would come at once ... whatever you told me to do I hereby swear that I would accomplish ... will you promise that if you need me, you will send me that ring?"

And she, who was lonely, and had no one to love her devotedly, gave the promise which he asked.

CHAPTER IV JUSTICE

I

Don Ramon de Linea was one of the last to leave the Town House. He was on duty until all the Spanish officers of State had left the building, and it was long past midnight before he wended his way through the narrow streets of the city till he reached the house of the High-Bailiff in the Nieuwstraate not far from the new bridge.

The outward appearance of the house suggested that most of its occupants were abed, although there was a light in one of the windows on the ground floor, and through the uncurtained casement don Ramon caught sight of the High-Bailiff and his two sons sitting together over a final cup of wine.

All the pent-up wrath against Mark van Rycke, which Ramon had been forced to keep in check under the eye of señor de Vargas, gave itself vent now in a comprehensive curse, and forgetting every code of decency toward his host and hostess he went up to the front door and gave the heavy oak panels a series of violent kicks with his boot.

"Hey there!" he shouted roughly, "open, you confounded louts! What manners are these to close your doors against the soldiers of the King?"

He had not finished swearing when the serving man's shuffling footsteps were heard crossing the tiled hall. The next moment there was a great rattle of bolts being drawn and chains being unhung, whereupon don Ramon-still impatient and wrathful-gave a final kick to the door, and since Pierre had already lifted the latch, it flew open and nearly knocked the poor man down with its weight.

"Curse you all for a set of lazy louts," shouted don Ramon at the top of his voice. "Here, fellow," he added flinging himself into a chair, "take off my boots and cloak."

He held out his leg, and Pierre, dutiful and obedient, took off the long boots of untanned leather which protected the slashed shoes and silk trunk-hose beneath, against the mud of the streets.

"Where is your master?" queried the Spaniard roughly.

"In the dining hall, so please you, señor," replied the man.

"And my men?"

"They went to the tavern over the way about an hour ago, after they had their supper-and they have not yet returned. They are making merry there, señor," added old Pierre somewhat wistfully.

And-as if in direct confirmation of the man's words-there came from the tavern on the opposite side of the street a deafening noise of wild hilarity. The peace of the night was broken and made hideous by hoarse shouts and laughter, a deafening crash as of broken glass, all intermixed with a bibulous song, sung out of tune in a chorus of male voices, and the clapping of empty mugs against wooden tables.

Don Ramon cursed again, but this time under his breath. The order had gone forth recently from the Lieutenant-Governor himself that the Spanish troops quartered in Flemish cities were to behave themselves in a sober and becoming manner. The tavern of the "Three Weavers" being situated just opposite the house of the High-Bailiff, it was more than likely that the latter would take it upon himself to complain of the ribaldry and uproar which was disturbing his rest, and as the High-Bailiff was in high favour just now a severe reprimand for don Ramon might ensue, which prospect did not appeal to him in the least.

For a moment he hesitated whether he would not go back across the road and order the men to be silent; but as luck or fate would have it, at that very moment the High-Bailiff opened the door of

the dining-room and stepped out into the hall. Seeing the young Spaniard standing there, sullen and irresolute, he bade him courteously to come and join him and his two sons in a tankard of wine.

Don Ramon accepted the invitation. The spirit of quarrelsome fury still brooded within him, and it was that spirit which made him wish to meet Mark van Rycke again and either provoke him into that quarrel which señor de Vargas' timely intervention had prevented before, or, at any rate, to annoy and humiliate him with those airs of masterfulness and superiority which the Spaniards knew so well how to wield.

II

Mark and Laurence greeted their father's guest with utmost politeness. The former offered him a tankard of wine which don Ramon pushed away so roughly that the wine was spilled over the floor and over Mark van Rycke's clothes, whereupon the Spaniard swore as was his wont and murmured something about "a clumsy lout!"

Laurence sitting at the opposite side of the table clenched his fists till the knuckles shone like ivory and the skin was so taut that it threatened to crack; the blood rushed up to his cheeks and his eyes glowed with the fire of bitter resentment and of indignation not easily kept under control. But Mark ignored the insult, his face expressed nothing but good-humoured indifference, and a careless indulgence for the vagaries of a guest, like one would feel for those of an irresponsible child. As for the High-Bailiff, he still beamed with amiability and the determination to please his Spanish masters in every way that lay in his power.

"We would ask you, señor," said Laurence after a slight pause during which he had made almost superhuman efforts to regain his self-control, "kindly to admonish the soldiery in the tavern yonder. My mother is an invalid, the noise that the men make is robbing her of sleep."

"The men will not stay at the tavern much longer," said don Ramon haughtily, "they are entitled to a little amusement after their arduous watch at the Town Hall. An Madame van Rycke will exercise a little patience, she will get to sleep within the hour and can lie abed a little longer to-morrow."

"It is not so much the lateness of the hour, señor," here interposed the High-Bailiff urbanely, noting with horror that his son was about to lose his temper, "neither I nor my sons would wish to interfere with the innocent pleasures of these brave men, but..."

"Then what is the pother about, sirrah?" queried the Spaniard with well-studied insolence.

"Only that..." murmured the unfortunate High-Bailiff diffidently, "only that..."

"There are only two women in charge of the tavern at this hour," broke in Mark quietly, "two young girls, whose father was arrested this morning for attending a camp-meeting outside the city. The girls are timid and unprotected, therefore we entreat that you, señor, do put a stop to the soldiers' brawling and allow the tavern to be closed at this late hour of the night."

Don Ramon threw back his head and burst into loud and affected laughter.

"By the Mass, Messire!" he said, "I find you vastly amusing to be thus pleading for a pair of heretics. Did you perchance not know that to attend camp meetings is punishable by death? If people want to hear a sermon they should go to church where the true doctrine is preached. Nothing but rebellion and high-treason are preached at those meetings."

"We were pleading for two defenceless girls," rejoined Laurence, whose voice shook with suppressed passion. Even he dared not say anything more on the dangerous subject of religious controversy which Don Ramon had obviously brought forward with the wish to provoke a discussion—lest an unguarded word brought disaster upon his house.

"Pshaw!" retorted don Ramon roughly, "surely you would not begrudge those fine soldiers a little sport? Two pretty girls—did you not say they were pretty?—are not to be found in every street of this confounded city: and by the Mass! I feel the desire to go and have a look at the wenches myself."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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