

THE MARTYR'S WIDOW

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I

DANGER

DO NOT FEAR, Liesken. Our Father cares for me." The speaker was an intelligent and prosperous artisan about thirty years of age. The room in which he sat was plainly but comfortably furnished, not without that air of sober and cleanly quaintness usually associated with the interior of a dwelling in the land of dikes and sandhills. It was late at night, and a lamp burned before him on the table. His young wife, Lisa, stood by his side, her blue eyes filled with tears, and her features shadowed by an expression of anxious care.

"I am sure He does, Carl; but you know He lets those He cares for suffer so often. He lets them be imprisoned — tortured. Oh, Carl," she added with a look of anguish, "He does not *now* 'quench the violence of fire,' as

He did in those old days of which you read to me in the Book."

"No, Lisa," replied Carl, his face lit with faith and courage. "But there still walks with them in the furnace 'one like unto the Son of man.'"

His look at that moment seemed to Lisa a stronger confirmation of her fears than any expression of alarm would have been. She went on almost wildly.

"You are doomed, Carl, and you know it. Since you attended those field preachings last summer twelvemonth, our Burgomaster knows you for a Calvinist, and has had his eye upon you. God help us! In all this blood-stained country, the King of Spain and the terrible Duke have not a servant more willing to aid them in 'wearing out the saints of the Most High' than the Burgomaster of our poor unhappy Gouda."

"He cannot harm me," Carl answered, "until my hour has come, for I serve a mightier King than Philip of Spain — even the King of Glory, the Lord of Life, who hath the keys of hell and of death. See here." He drew a little book from beneath his leather doublet.

But at that moment a low cry proceeded from a room overhead, arousing Lisa to an anxiety more near and pressing, if far less awful, than the horrible apprehension which had just before filled her mind.

"It is our little Franz," she said. Lighting a small lamp she hurried upstairs.

Left alone, Carl opened the volume he held in his hand. It was that treasure of the persecuted Reformed Churches in France and the Low Countries — "The Psalms of David, translated into French verse by Clement Marot." Although Dutch was his native language, Carl, in common with many others of his class, understood French.

In those times it was death, without mercy and without appeal, "to print, write, copy, keep, conceal, buy, or give," any of these books, or any part of them, as well as "to converse or dispute concerning the Holy Scriptures openly or secretly . . . or to read, teach, or expound the Scriptures." The Word of the Lord was precious in those days, and every drop of the water of life which was borne to thirsting souls was like that brought to David from the well of Bethlehem — "the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives."

Yet Carl could not read this night. He was well aware that Lisa's words were true. For months he had gone to his daily work and returned, sat by his fireside, ate and drank, slept and prayed, in the consciousness that any moment he might be summoned from his peaceful home to the dungeon and the stake. Was that a strange life to lead? A

solemn one it certainly was, yet it was such a life as thousands led in his country. For a brief space, after years of grinding oppression, the Calvinists of Holland and the adjacent provinces had enjoyed a measure of toleration, they had been permitted to live, under the powerful shadow of the Prince of Orange. Now their protector had himself been forced to flee, and the years of Alva's tyranny had begun — those terrible years, marked evermore in history "with blood and fire, and vapour of smoke." A great cry went up from the bleeding country to Heaven — such a cry as that in Egypt, when "there was not a house where there was not one dead."

Carl was among those who received the truth in the love of it during the interval of comparative quiet. Now he had counted the cost, and held himself prepared, if necessary, to seal his faith with his blood. Yet, were it his Father's will, he would gladly be spared the fiery trial. And who could blame him for this? Had he not Lisa to live for, beside his little fair-haired Franz, pretty Mayken and baby Carl? It was of these he thought as he sat motionless, — his head resting on one hand, while the other still held the psalm-book of Clement Marot. But Carl had acquired a habit. With him thought nearly always changed to prayer, and this constant communion with his Father in Heaven kept

him, as it were, in a quiet place, above the storms of his perilous and uncertain life. He was silently, but very earnestly, laying his fears for those he loved at the feet of Him who cared for him and them, when Lisa hastily re-entered the apartment.

To his inquiry, she answered, "Nothing serious, love. Our little Franz is wakeful and rather feverish. I should like to give him a soothing draught. You need not stir; I have all I want here in the pantry." She moved, lamp in hand, to the further end of the room.

A casual observer would never have perceived the door of this little closet, so carefully was it concealed, and perhaps designedly, being in no way distinguished from the quaint panellings which formed the walls of the room. A panel had to be pushed aside in order to find the way into the dark close recess which Lisa called her pantry — a very inconvenient one, she had often declared and wondered why people built houses in such a senseless manner.

On this occasion she had just begun her search for what she needed, when a thundering knock at the street-door brought her back into the sitting-room, pale and trembling. There was little need for words. Both felt sure the expected trial had come at last. Carl stood before her pale also, but with a flashing eye and an expression of firm determina-

tion in his quiet grave countenance and compressed lip.

"It is, Liesken — "

"Fly, Carl! oh, fly while you can!"

"It is too late! Whither should I fly?"

Another loud impatient knock, and a sound of rough voices outside.

But a thought, sent as she believed from Heaven into her heart, inspired Lisa with sudden hope and courage. She seized her husband by the arm, and drew him towards the little closet, the door of which she had left open.

"There — in there — fear nothing — I will speak to them."

It was the only plan that offered even a possibility of escape. In a moment more Carl, with the psalm-book still tightly grasped in his hand, was consigned to the dark solitude of the closet. Lisa, after carefully replacing the panel, went forth to meet the intruders, with a silent trembling prayer for strength and wisdom.

And Carl, in his suspense and forced inactivity, prayed also, so earnestly that his whole soul seemed to go up to Heaven in an agony of supplication. His prayer was inarticulate, for words do not come in such moments as these; there are heights and depths in the tried soul beyond their reach. It was not alone or chiefly for himself he

feared. A horrible apprehension possessed his mind, that the persecutors, baffled in their search for him, might wreak their vengeance on his precious Lisa, or even on his innocent and helpless children. Such things had been done. Indeed, it would have been difficult to name any deed of violence and atrocity which had not been committed in that hapless country by men who boasted, and often really believed, that these abominations were particularly "acceptable to Almighty God." Fortunately the closet could be opened from within, and Carl stood with his hand on the door, ready to come forth and surrender himself, if necessary. It was well, too, that he could hear the voices from his retreat, first in the passage, and afterwards still more plainly in the sitting-room.

"The Burgomaster is there in person," he said to himself, "I know his angry tones — and he has brought 'Red-rod' with him."

Then he heard Lisa's voice, at first in low deprecating accents, but gradually acquiring strength and confidence. At length, as she stood quite near his place of concealment, he heard her say boldly, "Ye may search the house from garret to cellar, I have said ye shall not find him."

¹"Red-rod," from the color of his staff of office, was the name given at that time to the officer whose duty it was to arrest criminals and bring them to justice.

Tramp, tramp went the heavy footsteps from the room. Then upstairs. Carl could hear them overhead in the little chamber where his children slept. He could even distinguish the cries of little Franz who had dropped asleep and awoke in terror at the strange intrusion. Now they came down baffled and evidently out of temper they searched the basement story. No, they do not think it worth while to re-enter the sitting-room though the trembling Lisa offered them wine, with the best grace she could. The street door closed heavily. They were gone, thank God! Carl breathed more freely. There was a pause, lest they should return. Then Lisa, slowly and with trembling fingers, attempted to slide the panel back. The momentary strength that danger had inspired forsook her when the strain was over; but Carl's strong hand soon put the barrier aside, and the two stood face to face.

"You have saved me, Lisa," were the first words Carl found power to utter.

"God has saved you, dearest," Lisa answered. She sank on a chair, and looked far paler now than when she confronted the Burgomaster and his officers.

"Then let us thank Him together," answered Carl. He knelt, and in glowing words poured forth his thanksgiving to Him who had just shielded His servants in their hour

of peril. And fervently did he pray that He would still be with them, to save them if He saw fit, or if not, to strengthen them to suffer all things for His sake. The words were few, but earnest and living, as spoken to One whose presence was a felt reality.

A brief consultation followed Carl's prayer. One thing was now certain. If he wished to see the morrow's sun go down, he must look for safety in flight. This was a last and desperate resource, for the country was so completely overspread by the meshes of a network of tyranny that the unhappy fugitive seemed only likely to run into some fresh danger as terrible as that from which he fled. But no alternative remained. Carl, having made, with Lisa's assistance, some hasty preparations, went to a secret spot where he had carefully concealed the savings of years of industry, such precautions being necessary in those evil times. He took from the little store a few pieces of gold, telling Lisa to use the remainder for the wants of the family.

"And where will you go?" asked the poor wife, as she tried to lay up in her memory the directions he gave, relating to various matters connected with their welfare during his absence.

"It is better you should not know, Liesken, but we shall still have the same Heaven above us, and the same Father to pray to."

He then added calmly and sadly, "I am going upstairs to kiss the children once more." He went up. Mayken and the infant slept, but little Franz was wide-awake, and gazed at his father with large wondering eyes.

"Franz," said Carl, "thy father is going, but thou hast still a Father in Heaven. Trust in Him, boy. Love Jesus Christ thy Saviour, and help and comfort thy mother. Now farewell." He embraced the weeping boy tenderly, kissed the other children without awaking them, and then, with the bitterness of death in his heart, turned to go. Something stronger than a presentiment told him that he should see those loved faces no more. But the hardest parting was to come.

Lisa met him at the door of the sitting-room. "You forgot this," she said, putting the little psalter into his hand, "and you say it always comforts you." Then she added, in a lower tone, as if she feared listeners, "but *the Book*, Carl?"

Carl hesitated a moment, and then he answered firmly, "Keep it, and teach the children to read and love it. Only for my sake and theirs, Lisa, be careful. Never use it until after nightfall, and be sure the doors are bolted. Then no harm can come to you, for its hiding-place is secure — secure as the grave. Now God be with thee, Liesken, my own —"

“And with thee, Carl.” A moment more, and Lisa stood alone, the sunshine of her life gone, perhaps for ever. She carefully re-fastened the door and arranged a few matters which their preparations had left in confusion. Then she sat down and wept, until the dawn of a cheerless December morning aroused her to the consciousness that life, with its struggles, cares, and duties must still go on.