

OUT OF THE DEPIHS.

By JOHN P. RIFEEN.

Near the close of the year 1870, there stood, in the neighborhood of Dordrecht, a windmill, so tall that the miller, even at the highest, did not reach the dormer windows in its turret-shaped roof; so black and weather-stained; of such an antique, craggy aspect that, if the credulous peasants who daily saw its huge arms flap in the wind had been told that it was a relic of the ark, they would have believed it without a question.

In its upper chambers, high above the world, lived Hermann Kapell, the miller, with his wife and only child. He was a broad-shouldered powerful man, honest and brave, but withal self-assertive and impatient of restraint. Impressionable and impulsive, as such men generally are, it was, perhaps, not strange that he should have been carried away by the ideas of political and religious license that then prevailed in the Netherlands.

At that period the people of the Low Countries were actively engaged in the long, long warfare against King Philip of Spain that ultimately resulted in their independence as a nation. From the beginning of the struggle they had strenuously contended the secular authority of their sovereign with the spiritual authority of the Church. In opposing the one, they deemed it necessary to repudiate the other; and the bankrupt nobles and vagabond gossippers, who were, unfortunately their leaders, encouraged and confirmed them in the error. Thus it happened that the germs of heresy, which were scattered broadcast on the very air he breathed, had found lodgment in Kapell's mind and taken root there.

The miller's wife was several years his junior. She was a frail little woman, with a wealth of golden hair encircling a face of singular attractiveness. Her cheeks were thinner and paler than is usual with women of her country, and there was a dreamy, wistful expression in her large blue eyes, suggesting that her deepest thoughts were far removed from the sphere of her daily life.

Thus was indeed the case. An ardent Catholic herself, the apostasy of her husband, whom she dearly loved, caused her the keenest unhappiness. He had let go his hold upon her faith, of faith to which she clung, and had been swept away far beyond her reach. Yet she did not sorrow as one without hope; she could not believe him lost to her forever; but dedicated her every act to God, and made of her life a continuous prayer for his repentance and conversion.

His child was a beautiful boy of five years, having his mother's eyes and golden hair, and much of her winsome expression. He was a delicate, ethereal little creature, far too sensitive and frail to develop and blossom in the stormy period in which his young life was cast. At least, so his parents feared; and they watched over him with the anxious care that only those who possess such an exquisite treasure can appreciate.

One night this little family were sitting together in the black old turret of the mill, when they heard a great booming of bells in all the towers and steeples of Dordrecht. The wind had been blowing violently from the sea during the day, and, after sundown, had increased in fury, until it had attained the velocity of a hurricane.

Then the good burgomasters of Dordrecht sent instructions to all the bell-ringers in the city to resort immediately to their posts, and give voice to the innumerable iron tongues with which their bellies were provided. This was done, partly out of regard for a superstition of the times, which averred that the ringing of bells frightened away the evil spirits that rode on the wind, and so dissipated its violence, and partly to warn the people who lived along the dykes to be on their guard against an assault by their ancient enemy—the ocean.

And now they clanged tumultuously—small bells, great bells—now ringing singly, now by twos and threes together—sometimes heard faintly, as the gale for a moment abated, again seeming to sound within the turret itself when a mighty gust swept by.

The miller went over to one of the dormer windows, and opened it to look at the sky. The wind rushed in with a fury that almost carried away the roof. Hastily closing it again, he staggered back into the apartment, shaking his head gravely and saying: "There'll be mischief done along the coasts this night. My place is on the dykes, not here."

"Surely you'll not venture out a night like this, Hermann?" asked his wife, anxiously. "Aye, Joan, dear! it was the choiry reply. "Where a man's duty calls him, there he must go, will he, nil he. That's my creed, and you must not dissuade me from it."

The young wife said no more. She knew that it was useless to parley with this resolute man when he had determined on a course of action for himself, so she gathered her child close to her breast, and watched him prepare to face the storm, with a look of terrorful resignation.

Hermann put on a great leather jerkin over his miller's jacket, and taking a heavy staff from a corner to aid his progress against the wind, was ready to depart.

And then the woman in his brave heart, perhaps most needs exhibited itself. She first held the child up for him to kiss, and then bowed her face upon his shoulder, weeping. "Oh! if you return not, Hermann, what will become of poor Paul and me? Promise to be cautious for our sakes, for there's danger in the air this night, I know; else why do they clang the bells so loud and long?"

"Would you anman me by weeping, little wife?" asked the stalwart miller gently. "Have you never known a storm before that you must needs make this ado?"

"Aye, I have known many's the storm, but never one like this. Hark, how the wind shrieks!"

She clung to his arm, trembling from head to foot. At this most men would have regarded it their duty to stay at home; but not so the miller. Although he loved his wife dearly, he expected her to be as courageous in an emergency as he was himself. He gently reminded her of this now.

"But, little wife, you must be brave!" he said. "The only arant knaves and cowards would stay at home and such a storm a raging against the dykes. So kiss me, deary, and let me go, and bide you here till I return."

He embraced her tenderly and departed. She followed him to the door and heard him descend the winding stairs of the tower with resolute tread. Then she returned to her place, and sat down quietly with her child in her arms to watch through the long, long night.

What a sense of peril the wild clamor of the bells inspired! The tongues of the steeples mingled in a confused uproar, that swept past the tower on the waves of the tempest like the affrighted cries of living things. The wind was now blowing with such a tremendous velocity that it seemed as if the crazy windmill must be carried away before it. It rocked and swayed violently. The huge arms of the mill sails, revolving with astonishing rapidity, imparted to the old tower a promiscuousness that extended through its gaunt frame from foundation to roof.

Although Joan was in a state of nervous excitement, bordering on hysteria, she did not move, or utter a sound, for fear of waking the child that slept tranquilly on her bosom. Yet her whole soul was uplifted in silent prayer.

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" she prayed, "spare my dear husband for repentance. Protect him from dangers that encompass him. Do not call him before the awful Judgment-seat in his present sinful state; but give him time to realize his errors. He had been led away by evil counselors. Oh, let not Satan triumph over him! Bring him back to the true faith! He has sinned, I know, dear Jesus; but let me bear the burden of his penance. Visit me with sorrow, sickness, death, but save his immortal soul. Grant me this prayer, my Saviour, and I will gladly bear any cross that Thou mayest see fit to impose upon me."

"Awake! mistress, awake! What, can you sit dreamin' there with open eyes when the world's come to an end?" It was the voice of the miller's hind, Petrus, who had tumbled up the stairs from his berth on the ground floor of the mill, half dead with fright. Joan was recalled to herself on the instant. "Why, my poor fellow, what can be the matter?" she asked. "We are lost, mistress, lost!" was the agonized answer. "The dykes have burst."

Joan hastened to a window that was protected from the wind by the walls of the mill and looked out. The night was utterly dark. She could see great banks of clouds driving across the sky with impetuous fury, but nothing more. Yet what she heard appalled her. It was the lashing of waves against the stone foundation of the tower. She knew then that they were completely surrounded by the waters of the ocean, and that her husband's return was out of off. Still she hoped that he might have reached a place of safety ere the bursting of the dykes; for she had the utmost confidence in his resources and courage, and knew that he was not likely to perish in any emergency when a single chance for life remained.

The bells of Dordrecht were now silent, as if completely routed and subdued by the evil spirits of the tempest. Thus made her fear that some dreadful calamity had happened to the city; yet she could not ascertain the truth on account of the darkness and the tremendous wind that blew from that quarter of the sky. As she was in the act of closing the window, Petrus cried out:

"See, mistress, a rat! a rat!" He would have killed the creature, which had evidently followed him up from below, had she not restrained him.

"What, Petrus!" she cried, "would you kill one of God's creatures in a flood? Did not Noah have rats in his ark, think you? And is not this our ark of safety now? 'Tis a good omen that it followed thee here, for I've oft heard the mariners at Dordrecht say that rats abide in the seaworthy ship and desert the rotten hulk. So we'll keep our rat, my lad."

With these words she sat down by his side to wait for the day to dawn. As the hours dragged wearily along, the roaring of the wind became more and more terrific.

At intervals, low, ominous sounds, like the rumbling of distant thunder, smote upon their ears; and, whenever they roared, Petrus would turn his blanched face toward his mistress, and exclaim in tones tremulous with fear:

"Another dyke has burst!"

Sometimes these sounds were accompanied by a shock as of an earthquake, and the wind-rocked tower would tremble and shudder to its very foundation. They knew then that the sea had made a breach in a dyke near at hand. And this would make Joan fearful lest the walls beneath them would be swept away and they would be plunged into the tempestuous waters.

At last a sullen glimmer illumined the little panes in the eastern window of the turret, and the day began slowly to break. Joan waited until the light had grown strong enough to assure her a good view of the country, and then opened the sashes. As she swung back on its hinges, two pieces that had found refuge from the storm beneath the eaves of the turret, flew in and perched themselves on one of the cross beams of the roof.

"Another good omen!" she exclaimed cheerily. "Noah had doves in his ark, and now so have I in mine."

But this humor gave place to dismay when she looked abroad and saw the devastation that the storm had wrought overnight. The country surrounding the windmill was completely submerged by the waters of the ocean, and white-capped waves were hurrying madly inland as far as the eye could see. Fishing vessels and great ships, that she had observed the day before riding safely at anchor in the harbor of Dordrecht, had been torn from their moorings by the gale, and driven for miles over the inundated plains.

One seagoing ship had become entangled in the topmost branches of a grove of lindens, about a mile away, and she could behold the mariners on her deck working with might and main to get her clear. Only steeples, turrets and the roofs of the tallest houses appeared above the flood; and upon them were clustered groups of human beings waving frantically for assistance.

It seemed indeed as if the ancient deluge had been renewed.

It was apparent that the gale had not abated one jot of its violence with the dawn of day. Still the ocean poured in upon the land with incredible fury, and still the mighty wind lashed it on to its work of inundation and destruction.

Gazing her eyes around upon the watery waste, Joan saw a multitude of objects float by her—boats filled with refugees, roofs and floors of houses, with half-naked people clinging to them; the carcasses of horses, cattle, sheep, and innumerable scraps of wreckage. Every conceivable article that could buoy up a life had been eagerly seized upon, and bore its human freight. All were being borne irresistibly inland toward the distant horizon, where the angry sky and water met.

Twelve miles to the east the dark, round tower of the Castle Lowestein could be described looming above the water like a rock far out at sea, and, north of it appeared the battlements and spires of Goroum. Perhaps some of the shipwrecked people might be borne thither and saved!

And Hermann!

Joan gasped and sobbed as she thought of his probable fate. If he were not already drowned, he must be struggling for life somewhere out there in the flood. Perhaps he had floated close by her on some fragment of wreckage, as she had seen so many others float by. Why had she allowed him to leave her last night? Why had she not clung to him with all the strength she possessed, and borne down his resolute will by sheer force of conjugal affection? Ah! she had not prized him sufficiently. Her love for him must have been lukewarm, or she would never have consented to his going forth to face such a deadly peril.

While she was reproaching herself thus bitterly, a sudden gust of wind, more violent, if such a thing were possible, than any that had preceded it, swept round the tower with a prodigious, whistling sound, and passed on. It was accompanied by a crash and jar that made every timber in the structure groan.

Leaving out of the window, Joan saw that the wooden axle upon which the sail-arms revolved had been snapped off close to the walls, carrying with it the mill sails with it. The debris lay floating in the water at the foot of the tower. Yet not at its foot, for the water had risen above the lower stories, and was howling along barely five feet below the flooring upon which she stood.

Now, for two-thirds of its height, this queer old wind-mill was made of stone. The other third, which comprised the chambers occupied by the miller's family, was of wood. The flooring of the upper part was a great circular platform that overlapped the walls below. It was made of heavy planks, and the superstructure that rested upon it was shaped like turret, with dormer windows stuck all round its pointed roof.

On a sudden, without the least sign or sound of warning, the stone part of the mill crumbled into a thousand fragments, precipitating the wooden

part into the water, where it was lost to view in clouds of spray and whirl pools of seething foam.

Every one knows that a great part of Holland lies below the level of the ocean, from which it is protected by immense dykes or sea-walls, requiring centuries of labor in their construction, and requiring continuous vigilance for their preservation.

Notwithstanding the enormous size and strength of these barriers, the sea has, at times, swept them aside and engulfed entire provinces, with tens of thousands of hapless beings, in a tremendous tidal wave. Dordrecht stands upon one of an archipelago of islands, where the river Meuse widens as it approaches the German Ocean, and, in the sixteenth century, was one of the principal seaports of the Netherlands.

As the city depended for its very existence upon the stability of its dykes, they were regularly patrolled by relays of watchmen, whose duty it was to report the slightest evidence of weakness in the sea-walls that came to their notice, in order that the point of danger might be immediately strengthened and a possible catastrophe averted.

Hermann Kapell was a member of this patrol. On the night of the great flood, he made his way to Dordrecht, and hastened with all possible speed toward the principal dyke of the city—a huge embankment of sand, stone and waven willow work, that formed the western bulwark of the island. He knew that this would be the place of most danger, on account of its exposed position.

As he passed through the city, he observed that the streets were filled with people hurrying hither and thither in the greatest confusion. Some were carrying their goods and chattels to places of safety; others were making for the quays to seek refuge from the impending flood on the great sea-going ships, that were there unloading or taking on cargo. He could see by the lights of the torches they carried that their faces were pale and terror-stricken. Presently he overtook a man he knew, running toward the western gate of the town.

"Hello, Andreas!" he shouted, in order to make his voice heard above the roar and clamor of wind and bells that shook the sky. "Has aught happened to the dykes?"

"Aye," replied the man without slackening his pace, "the sea has made a breach in the westward wall, and 'tis widening every minute, 'I'm told."

Without waiting to hear more, Hermann dashed ahead. A short time afterwards he had passed out of the city gate, and was close upon the imperilled sea-wall. Sand, seaweed and flakes of foam were now driven in his face, and he was compelled to make a vigorous use of his staff to hold his own against the fury of the tempest.

On the huge embankment before him torches were moving hurriedly to and fro. It was evident that the greatest confusion prevailed among the brave workers who were gathered there in a vain effort to drive back the ocean from their homes. On reaching the dyke, a single glance informed him how utterly hopeless was the struggle; yet this did not deter him from lending his assistance.

The ocean had already made a gaping hole in the embankment, from which each successive wave scooped out tons upon tons of sand and stone. Into this yawning chasm, the workers were casting willow baskets filled with sand; while hundreds of men were engaged in constructing a second wall of the first one in the form of a loop.

Hermann entered into the struggle with the energy of despair; for he knew that thousands of human lives depended upon the issue. For hour after hour he worked, grimly, silently, and all the while he realized that the sea was gaining ground. Suddenly a great cry that was audible even above the roar of wind and water, arose from the workers on the dyke, and, an instant afterwards, a gigantic wave struck upon the barrier with a deafening crash. It did not recede, after expending its force, as others had done before it; but poured through the breach in a oarsark of foam, and overwhelmed the lowlands beyond.

Hermann turned and fled along the sea wall that was now trembling and tottering to its fall. He had thrown away the torch that he had used while working, and stumbled forward in the darkness in momentary danger of falling over the edge of the embankment into the sea. Yet the fear of death was upon him, and he did not heed this peril. Blinded by sand and spray, surrounded by tremendous noises, he sped on—whither?

According to all human calculations, he was but fleeing from his doom; but postponing for a few brief moments his destruction by the thundering sea that was fast beating to pieces the narrow bridge beneath his feet. Death certainly hovered over him, but an Angel led him on. God had determined, in His own inscrutable way, to grant the prayer that the faithful Joan was at that moment offering up from the depths of her loving heart.

While pursuing his headlong flight, Hermann's foot suddenly struck against a stone, and he plunged forward on his face. He did not stop where he fell, but rolled over and over down the inner side of the dyke upon a stretch

of marsh land below. In an instant, he was on his feet again, running at breakneck speed over the soft ground. The ocean, pouring through the breach in the sea wall, was gradually rising round him, and he was on the point of sinking down in despair, when he chanced to see a little fishing craft moored to the bank of a canal at his right.

He hastened toward it, more through instinct than design, and clambering on board, out of loose from its fastenings and pushed out into the waterway. Scarcely had he done so when he fell senseless upon the deck, completely exhausted in body and mind by the terrible experience through which he had just passed.

On regaining consciousness, he was surprised to discover that it was day light. The wind was still raging in the sky, and his little craft was rising and falling like a feather on the swell of mountainous waves. He thought at first that he had been carried out to sea; but a glance at his surroundings convinced him that such was not the case.

Dordrecht lay to the west of him, and, for the first time since the bursting of the great dyke, he was enabled to ascertain its fate. The ocean had invaded the city, so that only its steeples and the upper stories of its highest buildings were visible. Still there could not have been a great loss of life in the place, judging from the multitude of people crowded upon the tops of the walls, where they remained intact; upon the roofs of the houses and churches, and upon every coign of vantage that protruded out of the waves.

He now became conscious that he was being borne at a rapid rate into the interior of the country. As minute after minute passed by, Dordrecht receded farther and farther away. He passed the wrecked towers of wind-mills; steeples, that rose above the watery waste like obelisks marking the graves of buried hamlets and tree-tops laden with poor, fainting wretches, who slumbered madly after him for succor, and he sobbed and moaned because he was powerless to save them.

Presently his attention was attracted by two objects a short way ahead, rising and falling on the billows, side by side. As the boat moved faster than the wreckage that surrounded it, on account of the pressure of the wind upon its mast and rigging, it gradually overhauled them. As he drew nearer, he made out that one of the objects was a cradle, floating right side up, and steered by the wooden hood that covered one of its ends.

A moment afterwards it arose on the crest of a wave. Could he believe his eyes? Yes, it contained a living infant. He could see two rosy arms waving out of the hood, and a little golden head nestling in the pillows beneath it. The same wave brought into prominence the other object. It was a coffin, the lid of which had been torn off by the waters, so that the grinning skeleton within it could be seen, with the mouldering fragments of a shroud clinging to the bones.

The two extremes of life—the cradle and the grave—had met together on the bosom of the flood. It happened that at that moment, the boat was moving steadily over the billows, stern on to the wind. Hermann crawled into the narrow bow, and grasped the gunwales tightly with both hands. The waves broke over him in sheets of foam, drenching him to the skin, and threatening to overwhelm him every instant; yet he held on firmly, waiting, with every sense alive, for the critical moment to come.

At last it arrived. Like a great ship beating down upon a fragile shallop, the clumsy boat descended from the top of a mighty wave, straight upon the cradle. Releasing one of his hands, to catch the child, Hermann leaned far forward, and took the plunge unflinchingly; but he missed his mark and was hurled back, shuddering upon the deck. Alas! the cradle, with its precious, living cargo, was engulfed; while the coffin, with its ghastly freight, rode triumphantly by on the waves.

As he thought of this horrible incongruity, Hermann uttered a low, despairing wail. It was answered by a wail of a more aggressive tenor, very near him. He looked around, and beheld! The wail he was bemoaning, cradle and all, stranded on the platform of the bow, which was now rising clear of the water. It had evidently been scooped up from the waves when the boat met its plunge.

Taking the infant in his arms, he retreated to a place of safety, near the mast, and, sitting down, pressed it close to his breast. The child fluttered its little arms, and looked up into his face with a smile of ineffable sweetness. And, lo! all his fears were allayed, and a deep peace descended upon him.

When the old mill toppled into the flood, the shock of the catastrophe threw Joan and Petrus upon the broad of their backs, and hurled little Paul out of the cradle in which his mother had placed him into a corner.

Immediately an avalanche of water rushed in through the open window, and it seemed as if their last moment had come; but the wooden platform quickly rose to the surface like a raft, and the stream, that had poured in at the opening, gradually leaked out through cracks in the boards. As

soon as she was able, Joan hastened to the rescue of her child, but, no sooner had she reached his side, than she threw her arms wildly above her head, and gave utterance to a heart-rending cry.

Little Paul was dead. His frail life had been crushed out by a heavy clothes-press that had been thrown violently upon him when the windmill fell. The distracted mother removed the cruel weight from the mangled body as if it had been a feather; then she pressed the little form frantically to her bosom.

"He is not dead; he cannot be dead," she cried in heart-broken accents. "No! God would not deprive me of my son and husband both. He would not leave me wholly desolate." Then, bending close to the child's white face, she whispered, "Paul, darling Paul, speak to me!" Then in tones of inexpressible anguish, "He hears me not! He is dead! Oh, my darling child is dead!"

Petrus endeavored, in his own simple way to comfort her; but she seemed oblivious of his presence. Indeed, after the first paroxysm of her grief had passed, she fell into the dull apathy of complete misery. She neither spoke, nor evinced the slightest interest in her surroundings; but, taking up her station at the window, gazed fixedly out upon the wilderness of water with wild, fearless eyes.

In the meantime the novel ark had recovered from the effects of its first plunge into the waves, and was now riding them gallantly. The wind had imparted to it a slow circling movement, so that Joan could look toward every point of compass in turn as the turret revolved. But she seemed utterly unconscious of the appalling scenes that passed before her vision. Occasionally she pressed the body of her child closer to her breast, or stooped to imprint a passionate kiss upon the fixed white face; but, apart from these instinctive actions, she showed no sign of thought or feeling. Thus the morning wore away.

About midday, Petrus, who was acting the lookout at another window on the same side of the turret, cried out in a loud voice:

"Oh, mistress, mistress, look!" Turning her eyes mechanically in the direction indicated by the hind, she saw that they were fast approaching a small vessel, which was beating and thumping against some submerged impediment with such violence that it seemed a question of seconds only before its slender mast must go by the board. And yet, upon the stability of this mere reed, two human lives depended. A man was clinging to it desperately, holding in one arm a little, fair-haired child that would his tiny arms around his neck.

Whatever the impediment might be on which the boat was beating, it withstood the water's shock right gallantly. Angry waves dashed against it with incredible fury, only to be whirled into atoms. Indeed, it seemed as if the flood had raised a sand bar here, for the obstruction was not confined to any single spot, but stretched for miles across the new-made sea.

During the morning the gale had veered, and was now blowing from the southwest, bearing the ark irresistibly on towards the breakers; and it was apparent, even to Joan's unpracticed eye, that the water on the reef was scarcely deep enough to float them safely over. Although she realized that they were about to enter upon a peril greater than any they had yet encountered, she experienced no solicitude. Indeed, in her unutterable misery, she would have welcomed death gladly; yet she was not altogether insensible to a certain generous interest in the fate of the man and child.

As the vessel rolled from side to side, sometimes rising clear on the crest of the wave, again plunging down with a shuddering shock upon the impassable bar, she saw them rise and sink. Whenever the boat heeled over, they were completely submerged in the breakers; and, when it righted itself again, they were borne aloft on the mast like two toy figures.

She could plainly see that the man was of more than ordinary size, and that he possessed great strength was apparent. Moreover, there was something in the massive contour of his frame that seemed strangely familiar. The ark had by this time drawn so near the vessel that she could readily distinguish his features, if she could but obtain a glimpse of them through the clouds of spray that enveloped him. This opportunity came sooner than she expected.

A mightier wave than any that had passed for some time, lifted the ark on its shoulders, and bore it to the very verge of the breakers. Then it passed on, and burst on the reef with a deafening roar, crushing the little vessel against it as though it were an egg-shell. Some planks and fragments of wreckage could be seen, edging in the whirlpools which formed over the spot; but the man with the man and child upon it had disappeared. Another mighty wave was approaching. Suddenly, in the vortex of a whirlpool, a stern face loomed.

"Hermann!" It was the despairing cry of a woman, rising above the roar of waters and the crash of timber.

The ark had struck the reef. Yes, the man upon the mast was