

### Blind Rosa.

By HENDRICK CONSCIENCE

CONCLUDED.

Meanwhile the traveller stepped on. The whole village seemed to him irradiated with a heavenly light; the foliage coloured with a fresher green; the humble little cottages smiled to him, and it was for him the birds were singing their enchanting song; the air seemed filled with glowing life and balmy odours.

Revelling in this new feeling of happiness, he turned his attention from the child. His eyes were fixed upon the distance, and his glance tried to penetrate the trees which limited the prospect at the other end of the village. Suddenly the child pulled his hand, and cried with a loud voice:

"There! down there, comes blind Rosa with our Trieny!"

An old blind woman might be seen, led by a little girl of five, entering the broad street of the village from behind a little house.

Instead of responding to the child's eagerness and haste, the traveller stood still, and looked earnestly and sadly at the poor blind woman as she slowly approached. And was this, then, his Rosa?—the beautiful, the lovely maiden, whose image, so fresh and young, was yet deeply engraven on his heart?

In a moment these thoughts vanished, and he hastened on to meet his friend. When he had approached to within fifty paces of her, he could restrain his emotion no longer, but, "Rosa, Rosa!" burst involuntarily from his heart. When the voice fell upon the blind woman's ear, she withdrew her hand from her guide, and trembled as if she had been struck by paralysis. She stretched out her arms gropingly before her, and, exclaiming, "John, John!" hastened towards her long-lost lover.

At the same moment, she put one hand in her bosom, and tearing a string which hung round her neck, she held out a golden cross with an unsteady and trembling hand; and so she fell into her friends' arms. Then gently withdrawing from his embrace, she took his hand, and exclaimed:

"O John, I die of joy—but I have vowed a vow to God. Come, come, lead me to the churchyard."

John Slaets did not understand what Rosa's purpose was; but feeling, from the tone of her voice, that an earnest, perhaps a sacred work was about to be done, he at once complied with her wish; and, without paying any attention to the villagers, who by this time surrounded them in great numbers, he led his blind friend to the churchyard. Here she turned towards the kneeling bench, and with the words:

"Pray, pray; I vowed it to God," she forced him to kneel by her side.

She raised her hands, and for a long time prayed in a low murmuring voice. She then threw her arms round her friend's neck, and kissed him; but her strength had now failed her, and speechless, but smiling, she laid her head upon his throbbing breast.

Peerken, meanwhile, danced among the villagers, and as he clapped his hands, kept shouting as loud as he could:

"It is Long John! it is Long John!"

On a beautiful day in the autumn of 1846, the Diligence rolled as usual over the highway between Antwerp and Turnhout. Suddenly the driver pulled up, not far from a lonely tavern, and descending from his box, opened the carriage-door. Two young travellers sprang out upon the road, laughing, rejoicing, and swinging about their arms like two birds just escaped from a long imprisonment. They

looked at the trees and the beautiful blue autumnal air with the cheerful, bright expression of people who have left the crowded city, and would now fain inhale with their breath the whole of broad, laughing nature. Suddenly the younger of the two turned his face towards the fields, while his face shone with poetic enthusiasm.

"Listen, listen!" he said.

From behind the fir-clumps there came the sound of distant music. The measure was so light and gay, that one was compelled to associate it with the quick beating of dancers' feet.

The younger companion pointed with silent delight towards the pine-copse, and then exclaimed in a jocular way:

"Oh! hark to the sound of the fiddle and horn,

The dance and the song—'tis a festal morn.

Oh! little they reck of dull care or of sorrow:

They will laugh for the day—tho they weep on the morrow."

"Come, come, friend John, your inspiration is premature. It is probably only the new burgomaster whom they are inaugurating."

"No, no, that is no official merriment. Let us go and see the peasant girls dancing—it is so wonderfully pretty."

"We shall first drink a glass of beer with mine host Joostens, and ask him what is going on in the village."

"And defraud ourselves of the pleasure of surprise? Prose!"

The travellers entered the tavern and both burst into a loud laugh the moment they had put their heads into the room.

Mine host Joostens stood in front of the fireplace, as straight as an arrow, and as stiff as a log. His long, brown, copious Sunday-coat hung round him, reaching to his feet. He greeted the guests with a constrained smile, in which appeared a certain perplexity, for he dared not move his head in the least, as his high stiff shirt-collar took every opportunity of pinching him behind the ears. When the travellers entered, he called out with impatience, but without the slightest movement of his head:

"Zanna, Zanna, I hear the music. Did I not tell you that you would be too late?"

Zanna came running into the room with a great basketful of flowers. Oh! she was so beautiful with her folded lace-cap, her gown of pilot-cloth, the great golden heart upon her breast, and the dear little ear-rings! Her face was red with joy and delighted anticipation: it looked like a gigantic flower which is just on the point of unfolding its petals.

"A majestic peony opening its cup on a beautiful Mayday!" whispered the younger.

Meanwhile she had fetched two glasses of beer, and then hastened out of the house with her flowers, singing and laughing as she went. With the greatest impatience mine host now shouted:

"Beth, Beth, if you do not come down at once, I shall go alone, as true as I stand here!"

Just at this moment the old clock, which hung on the wall, pointed to nine, and a bird's voice called in a plaintive tone: Cuckoo! cuckoo! cuckoo!"

"What is the meaning of that?" asked one of the travellers. "You have sold the clock, I suppose, which used to hang here, to be tormented all the year round with that detestable song?"

"Yes, yes," said mine host with a cunning smile, "laugh at the bird as you please; it brings me fifty Dutch florins a year, and a bunder\* of good land into the bargain."

\* Two hundred and forty feet long by one hundred and twenty broad.

In the distance, four gun-shots resounded at equal intervals.

"O Heavens!" cried mine host, "the fest has begun. The wife wears my very life away with her off-putting and dawdling!"

"But, mine host Joostens," asked the other traveller, "what is afoot here? Is it the church-fest today? That would be singular on a Thursday. Or is it the King coming?"

"Things of far greater importance, sir, are going on here to-day: the like was never heard before! If you only knew it, you would not require—this time at least—to draw long bows to invent lies in order to fill your books. And this old cuckoo, too, has something to do with the tale of Blind Rosa."

"Blind Rosa!" cried the younger companion with joyful surprise. "What a beautiful title! It would be a good pendant to the Zieke Jongeling.\*"

"Hallo! that won't do," replied the other. "We have come out together to hunt after tales, and the spoil must be honourably shared."

"Well, well, we shall draw lots for it at once," muttered the younger, half sorrowfully.

"But," said the other, "it is all a mystery to us yet. Come, mine host Joris, off with that detestable collar, and let us have the story in a friendly way. You will get the book for nothing when it is printed."

"Yes, but I cannot tell you all the outs and ins of it at present," replied mine host. "There, I hear my wife on the stair; but come along with us to the village, and by the way I will let you know how it comes about that guns are firing and music playing so merrily to-day."

The wife entered with a dress which immediately fixed the attention of the younger traveller, by its flaming red, blue, yellow, and white colours. She ran up to her husband and affectionately tugged his shirt-collar up a little higher, and then taking his arm, led him hastily out of the house. Both travellers followed.

Mine host Joostens now told the whole history of Blind Rosa and Long John to his attentive companions as they walked towards the village; and also he had spoken himself quite out of breath, the travellers did not cease to ply him with all sorts of questions. He told, likewise, how Herr Slaets had purchased the old cuckoo clock, and promised him fifty florins a year if he would let it hang in his tavern-room as of old; how Long John had lived four-and-thirty years in Asiatic Russia, and had amassed considerable wealth by the fur-trade; how he had purchased the estate of old Mevrouw, and meant to live on it with Rosa and Nelis's family, all of whom he had adopted; how he had given the grave-digger a large sum; and finally, how this very evening a grand peasants' banquet was to be given at the Hall, and for which a whole heifer was to be roasted, and two huge pots of rice-soup were to be boiled. Mine host was still in the full flow of his description, when they reached the broad central street of the village.

The travellers listened no longer to his talk, for they were now staring their eyes out of their heads, gazing at all the striking and beautiful things which presented themselves on every side. The whole village was adorned with pine-branches along the front of the houses in an uninterrupted line, bound together by snow-white kerchiefs or flower-wreaths. Interspersed, and above the spectators' heads, swung inscriptions in great

\* These two travellers were Hendrik Conscience, the author of this tale, and Jan van Beers, unquestionable the greatest Flemish lyric poet of the day, and the author of the poem *Zieke Jongeling*.

red letters. Here and there a fine May-tree was planted, with its hundred tiny flags of gold leaf fluttering against one another, with chains of birds' eggs, and ringing little glass rods. On the ground the boys and girls had scattered heath-flowers profusely, and formed out of them as usual the initials of Jesus and Mary. Alongside might be seen J. R., prettily woven with flowers. This was meant to stand for *John—Rosa*, and was the invention of the school-master. Amid all these beauties moved a living mass of people, who had flocked from the neighboring villages to be present at this singular marriage-festival.

The young travellers amused themselves by moving from one group to another, and listening to the people's remarks. But when the procession was seen approaching the village through the fields, they hastened to the churchyard gate, and took up their position on an eminence whence they could see all that was going on. They looked upon the procession with a kind of reverence; and indeed, it was so beautiful and impressive, that the hearts of the travellers throbbed with emotion—for their hearts were young, and full of poetic enthusiasm. More than sixty little girls, between the ages of five and ten, all clothed in white, with a bright, child-like smile on their faces, advanced through the blue air like a little flock of lambs.

Above their fresh little faces, and on their loose and flowing hair, lay a wreath of monthly roses, which seemed as if they would fain contest the prize of beauty with the laughing lips of the little maidens.

"It is one of Anderson's fairy tales," said the younger in a low voice. "The sylphs have left their flower-cups—Innocence, Purity, Youth, Joy! How beautiful it is!"

"Ha!" said the other "there come the peonies all in a row, and Zanna Joostens at the head of them!"

The younger was, however, too much enchanted to condescend to notice this unpoetical remark. With a kind of rapture he was gazing at the great number of marriageable young maidens who followed the little children, all in their best ornaments, and beaming with life and health. How finely the features of those blooming girls came out under their snow-white lace caps! how charmingly their quiet virgin bashfulness was painted on their blushing cheeks! how bewitching was the shy smile which howered round their lips!—like the gentle ripple which the summer-breeze stirs upon the lake, when it plays with the water and makes it laugh.

Ha! there comes Blind Rosa, leaning on her bridegroom's arm. How happy must the poor woman feel!—she has endured so much; she was reduced to bear the beggars' wallet. For four-and-thirty years she mourned her absent lover, and cradled her soul in a hope which she herself half-suspected to be a delusion. And there he is now, the friend of her childhood and youth! Leaning on his arm, she walks to the altar of the God who has heard her prayers. The vows which they interchanged under the cross near the churchyard are about to be fulfilled. She is his bride! On her breast glitters the plain golden cross which Long John gave her so many years ago. She hears now the joy, the welcomings, the song, and the music which celebrate his return. She trembles in her agitation, and nervously presses her bridegroom's arm, as if she almost doubted the reality of her happiness.

Behind comes Nelis, with his wife and children; they are clothed now like country people well-to-do. The parents hang their heads as they walk, and dry a tear of ad-

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