

THE RECRUIT

By HENDRICK CONSCIENCE

(CONTINUED.)

Within the hospital, there was a room set apart for those with diseased eyes, its windows securely covered with shutters of green paper, so that not a ray of light could enter. To those who could see, it was a horrible place; for a shade of light, gloomier than the deepest black, threw a painful colouring over everything, oppressing the heart of the spectator with mingled sadness and fear. It could be called neither light nor darkness; and it was necessary to accustom one's self to the green and death-like day, before any object could be distinguished. In addition, there reigned throughout this abode of affliction the stillness of death, only broken from time to time by a cry of pain, when the eyes of some poor patient were being burnt with caustic. Along the walls on wooden benches sat the blind and diseased, like a row of spectres, motionless and silent in the darkness. Each had on a large green shade, which so entirely covered the brow and face, that the features could not be distinguished.

In the furthest corner sat John Bragans with sunken head, sadly dreaming of things which he loved, and should never see again. Under the green shade, a quiet smile played round his mouth, while his lips moved, as if he were conversing with some invisible beings. He had just conjured up the image of his darling friend, and made her whisper in his ear once more the modest confession of her love, when an almost inaudible noise was suddenly heard upon the stairs. He seemed to hear his name mentioned. All trembling, he sprang from his seat, as if moved by some invisible hand, and sighed involuntarily: "Trien! Trien!"

The door was opened from without, and the maiden, accompanied by the corporal, stood on the threshold. Trien shuddered as she looked into the dark room, and saw rows of spectre-like shadows all masked with green shades. She drew back with a cry of alarm; but John had recognized her voice, and advanced with outstretched hands, groping his way towards her. She perceived her unfortunate friend, and hastening up to him, fell weeping on his neck. For a time nothing was heard but "Trien!" "John!" uttered in tones of love, sympathy, and sorrow. The maiden lay weeping on the young man's breast, and seemed at last to have fainted with her emotion; for her head lay on one side, and her hands hung powerless from her lover's shoulders.

Meanwhile the rest of the blind had collected in a circle round the girl, and were feeling her, as if they too might perchance recognise some friend. Their touches awoke her out of her frightfulness, and drawing back, half afraid, she said with alarm:

"Heavens! John dear, what is all this? Tell them to let me alone, otherwise I can't stay here."

"Don't be afraid, Trien," replied John; "it is nothing. The blind see with their fingers. They are feeling your clothes; and find out in that way from what quarter you come. They mean no harm."

"Ah, poor fellows!" sighed Trien, "since that is the reason, I forgive them with all my heart; but I don't like it much. Let us go into that dark corner and sit down on the bench, John; I have so much to say to you."

With these words, she led her friend to the bench, and sat down beside him, holding his hands in hers.

The conversation which now began must have been very moving, for joy, sorrow, smiles, and tears often succeeded each other on Trien's face; and from time to time,

one might see her press John's hands with deep emotion. She was endeavouring to infuse the balsam of consolation into the unfortunate man's heart, for the sounds of her voice were as tender and impressively sweet as the sweetest tones of some love-song. John had pushed the shade higher up on his brow, and on his countenance there was visible a peculiar expression of dreamy attention, and at the same time of sadness and despair, like one listening out of the abyss of suffering to words which cannot make him forget his sorrow, though they may delude him for a moment with imaginary happiness.

The blind stood round them in silence, and listened attentively to pick up some of those consolatory sounds. The corporal remained outside the door, marching up and down, and every now and then putting his head into the room to see if Trien was ready to leave. Suddenly he grew pale, and intense fear was depicted on his face—he saw the sergeant ascending the stairs. Without making any remark, he opened the door and admitted him into the blind-room, following him with sunken head, and a look of conscious guilt, like a malefactor who awaits his sentence. Scarcely had the sergeant perceived the girl, when he broke out into a storm of angry words, and at last turning to the corporal, said:

"Ha! and so you have admitted a stranger—and a woman too! I'll not be long of relieving you of your duties, my good fellow, and getting fourteen days from the Governor for you. It will not be my fault I can tell you, if you retain your corporal's dress."

Trien rose and said imploringly to the enraged sergeant:

"Oh, sir, be pitiful! I alone am to blame, for having prevailed upon him with my tears to admit me. Do him no harm for having been so kind-hearted!"

The sergeant shook his head impatiently, and prevented her from adding more.

"What has all that to do with the matter?" he interrupted. "I know my duty, and what I have to do; and you, Micken, out at once, and that quickly too!"

The maiden was grieved and surprised when she heard this order; he seemed to be in earnest, however, and she went all trembling up to him, and entreated:

"Ah! grant me, I beseech you, only one half hour! I will often pray to God for you, and kiss your hand with joy."

"Come, come, make an end of this stupid game," snarled the sergeant; "not one minute longer!"

"But oh, sir," cried the distracted Trien, "I have come on foot all the way from the other end of the land to bring comfort to our unfortunate John, poor fellow, and you will not, surely, drive me out. I have scarcely spoken with him yet."

"Are you going, or are you not?" said the sergeant, adding a few coarse threats, which made her tremble.

The tears gushed out of the maiden's eyes; she raised her folded hands to the sergeant, and sobbed out:

"For God's sake, friend, only one quarter of an hour! Do not kill me! Have compassion on a poor blind man; it may happen to you too. Would it not tear your heart then, if your mother or your sister were to be hunted away like a dog? Ah, sir! take pity on us; all my life long I will thank you for it."

John and the other blind men, who were all angry at the sergeant's severity, urged the maiden's petition, and the whole room was in confusion, as if the blind were rebelling against their inexorable overseer. This only enraged him the more; he threatened to put all

on bread and water, and suddenly seizing Trien by the arm, was about to drag her forcibly out of the room. She, however, perceived his intention, and tearing herself loose, ran weeping to John, whom she embraced, with loud lamentations. As deeply grieved as she, but yet convinced that nothing could prevent their separation, the young man tried to console her, and hastily said to her a multitude of things which had been forgotten during their quiet conversation. The sergeant, however, was not slow in following her, and had again laid hold of her arm. He attempted to tear her from John, but the sorrowing girl kept her arms locked around her blind friend like an iron band, and resisted the sergeant's violence with determination; whereupon he called out to Kobe, who was standing in perplexity at the door:

"Corporal, what are you doing standing there? Come here; I command you to turn that peasant woman out of the door, or you will pay dearly for it. Do you hesitate?"

Kobe approached the girl, and taking her arm, said:

"Trien dear, I am very sorry, but it can't be helped. Go out peaceably, otherwise they will throw you down stairs. Such is the order; the sergeant must do what his duty commands."

Trien separated herself from her friend, and holding up her head with quiet dignity, she advanced to the sergeant, and said:

"Mr. Overseer, I will go; but, friend, forgive me and Kobe also; it will be well done, and God will certainly reward you. You have a heart in your breast as well as others; and all men in this world are brothers. You will be so good as to forget, Mr. Sergeant, will you not? I will remember you in my prayers."

The wrath of the sergeant was appeased when he saw his commands humbly obeyed; his sweet voice and expressive blue eyes of the maiden also had touched his heart, and he replied, in a more kindly tone:

"Now, then, only go out without further delay; and if the fault is concealed, I shall say nothing about it, and forgive it out of compassion for you."

"Ah, you kind man!" cried Trien; "I knew it; you speak Flemish, like ourselves. I go in a moment—only one farewell!"

She once more embraced the unhappy blind man, who speechlessly received her farewell kiss—murmured in his ear a few consoling words, and then walked to the door weeping and sobbing. There she turned her head, and uttering a piercing cry, endeavored to return, struggling with the sergeant, who, however, now held her fast. The truth was, she had seen that her unfortunate friend had fallen to the ground, and lay as if lifeless, with his head upon the bench, and the sight of this excited her to such a degree that she trembled with anxiety and grief, and struggled wildly with the sergeant to free herself. He dragged her out, however, and shut the door behind him.

Exhausted, powerless, and almost dying with despair—obedient as a martyr, and almost unconscious—she walked down stairs and into the open court, between the sergeant and the corporal. Here, she let herself be pushed and dragged along; for her feet refused the motion which was to distance her from John. She did not speak a word; the quiet tears which streamed over her cheeks was the only sign of her sorrow.

At the threshold of one of the doors which opened into the front court, stood a richly-dressed lady, with noble features. She beheld the weeping girl from a distance, and seemed desirous to know what had happened. The nearer they

approached her on their way to the gate, the more strongly did her countenance express a deep concern and sympathy.

Trien observed it, and a ray of hope entered her breast, as Kobe whispered to her:

"That is the wife of the governor of the hospital, and so good and kind a lady. She is from Antwerp."

The girl now made haste, as if she were eager to reach the gate; but as she approached the lady, she turned round and threw herself on her knees before her with outstretched arms, crying out:

"Ah, my lady, help!—pity, for a poor blind man!"

The lady seemed surprised and perplexed by this unexpected appeal. She looked at the young peasant girl, who held her beautiful blue eyes fixed upon her as if in earnest supplication, at the same time smiling hopefully through her tears, as if already thanking her for a benefit received. She took Trien by both hands, raised her up, and said with a friendly voice:

"Poor girl! Come in, my dear child! what is it, that troubles you?"

With these words, and without looking at the sergeant, who put his hand politely to his forehead, she led Trien into the house, and pushed forward a chair for her to sit upon.

In the room there was an officer of the Rifles, who stood before a desk writing. He looked at the weeping maid curiously and sympathizingly, but waited, without making any observation, to get an explanation of the matter.

The lady—she was the officer's wife—again took Trien's hand, and said:

"Come, come, my girl, be comforted; no harm shall happen to you. Tell me what troubles you so much; if it be possible, I will help you."

"Ah, lady," sighed Trien, while she kissed warmly her protector's hand. "God will bless you for your kindness. I am a poor peasant girl from between St. Antonis and Magerhalle in the Kempenland. The lot fell on our John, and he had to be a soldier. Four days ago he wrote to his mother, saying that he had sore eyes; but to me privately he wrote that he was blind for his whole life. I lay for two hours as if dead, under an oak-tree. I did not venture to tell his mother the truth, for fear she would die of grief. On the next day, early in the morning, I set out barefoot, without knowing the road, to walk from our village to Venloo. I asked my way; often wandered from it, and made long roundabouts; suffered shame and pain enough; walked night and day with scarcely any food or drink, till the blood dropped from my feet. After I had suffered three days like a stray sheep, I arrived here. A young man from our village, who is corporal, let me into the hospital out of compassion. I saw our John with his eyes all gone, and was just comforting him, when the sergeant came and drove me out. Now I shall not see John again; I must leave him, poor fellow, without consolation; and oh lady! I cannot, cannot do that. Pray think, if you will be so good, what I have endured to come here; and have compassion with the innocent lamb who wastes and pines away with grief yonder in the dark room."

"Is he your brother?" asked the officer behind the desk.

The maiden hung her head to conceal the blush, which suffused her countenance at this question. After a short silence, she raised her eyes and said:

"Sir, I am not his sister; but from childhood we have dwelt under the same roof. His parents are mine; he loves my mother; his grandfather has carried me before I could walk; labor, gains,

joy, sorrow, in common." After a pause, she continued: "Since he is down, and so fortune, I to his sister!"

Moved by officer had dually approved. "Poor child," you must of your mind yourself. You love a blind her deeply. "Forsake get him be life blind as he so good it cuts my A fresh from her eye. The officer in French w that a mini which gave send the homes, with sence—the discharge from this measure into operation was yet real with the co tion made i girl's unhap cure him that very de to execute Trian di they said, that her pu husband to the half-co head besee thereby en nevolent ur The offic asked: "Would friend retur An indi mingled jo up Trien's wide-open to draw n officer's me ings found "Be glad The very me mad. lude me would cre you, and k tude."

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