

2 THE LION OF FLANDERS.

BY HENDRIK CONSCIENCE CHAPTER XXII.

The French general had pitched his camp in a broad plain at a short distance from the city of Lille, and the tents of his countless warriors covered a space of more than two miles in extent. The breastwork which surrounded the host might have led a distant spectator to imagine that he saw before him a fortified city, with not the neighing of horses, the cries of soldiers, the smoke ascending from their numerous fires, and the fluttering of a thousand flags, betrayed the presence of a military camp. The part assigned to the nobles and knights was easily distinguished by the splendour and costliness of its standards and embroidered banners; and while the warlike pavilions glowed with every color of the rainbow, the rest of the camp showed only the ordinary tents of canvas, or bits of straw. It might have been matter of wonder that such an enormous host did not perish of hunger, for in those days armies seldom took stores with them; yet they were supplied in such overabundance that corn was suffered to lie about in the mud, and the most valuable articles of food were everywhere trampled under foot. The French took the best means at once to supply their own wants and to deepen the hatred with which the Flemings regarded them. They scorned the country day by day in large bands, plundering and laying waste on all sides; for the furious soldiers well understood the wishes of their general, Robert d'Artois, and their way was traced by countless deeds of violence and devastation. As a symbol of the sweeping desolation with which they threatened Flanders, they had tied small brooms to the points of their spears; and their conduct amply redeemed their pledge, for in all the southern part of the country there remained not a house, not a church, not a castle, not a monastery, scarcely a tree standing—all were ruthlessly razed and destroyed.

Thus the French commenced their expedition. In the midst of their ferocious course, no fear or apprehension of defeat occurred to them, so confidently did they rely on their overwhelming numbers. Flanders was doomed to a memorable destruction; they had sworn it. On the same morning on which Guy had bestowed on Deoninck and Breydel the meed of their loyal good service, the French general had invited his most illustrious knights to a sumptuous banquet. The tent of the Count d'Artois was of unusual length and breadth, and divided into many compartments; there were rooms for the knights of his suite, rooms for the squires and standard-bearers, rooms for culinary purposes, rooms for all the various personages of his train. In the middle was a spacious saloon, capable of containing a large number of knights, and used alternately for revelling and for the deliberations of the council of war. The silk with which the tent was covered was powdered with fleurs de lys, at the entrance hung the shield of the house of Artois, and outside, on a small eminence, waved the royal standard of France. The saloon was hung with rich tapestry, and rivalled a palace in magnificence.

At the upper end of the table sat Count Robert d'Artois. He was still in the flower and full vigour of life, and a scar which traversed his right cheek, at once gave evidence of his bravery and imparted to his countenance a more forbidding expression. Although his face was disfigured by deep wrinkles and stained with dark spots, yet his eyes gleamed like a fire from under his dark eyebrows with manly ardour and energy. His manner was harsh, and denoted the fierce and unrelenting man of war.

Close to him, on his right hand, sat Sigs, king of Melinde; age had silvered his hair and bowed his head, yet was he eager for the combat. In that company he felt his martial ardor return, and boasted that he would yet perform glorious feats of arms. The countenance of the old man inspired respect; it bore the impress of goodness and gentleness. Certainly the good Sigs would never have taken arms against the Flemings had he known the real state of the case; but he had been persuaded, as many others had been, that they were but Christians, and worse than Saracens, and that it was a good work in the sight of God to chastise and exterminate them.

On the left hand of the Count sat Bathasar, king of Melinde, an impetuous and daring warrior, the gaze of whose dark eyes it was scarcely possible to endure. A wild glint shone in his features; for he hoped now to reconquer his kingdom, which had been seized by the Moors. Near him sat De Chatillon, the late Governor-General of Flanders, the man who, as the tool of Queen Joanna, was the cause of all this disturbance. His was the guilt that so many Frenchmen had been put to death in Bruges and Ghent; and on that tyrant head lay the blood of all that were slain in this quarrel. He remained how disgracedly he had been expelled from Bruges; he craved no petty revenge; and he sat with joy in his heart and smiles on his face, for he held it impossible that the Flemings could oppose the combined might of so many kings, princes, and counts. Next to him, and like him, eagerly thirsting for revenge, was his brother, Guy de St. Pol. There might be distinguished also Thibaud, Duke of Lorraine, between Messires John de Barlas and Renaud de Trie; he had come to the aid of the French with six hundred horse and two thousand archers. On the left side of the table, next to Messire Henry de Ligny, sat Rodolf de Nesle, a brave and noble-hearted knight; on his face were depicted displeasure and sorrow; it was evident that the ferocious threats which the knights were uttering against Flanders were not to his taste. About the middle of the right side, between Louis de Clermont and Count John d'Anmale, sat Godfrey of Brabant, who had brought the French five hundred horse. Near him sat one whose gigan-

tic form might well strike the beholder with astonishment; it was the Zelandeer, Hugo van Arokkel; he raised his head proudly above the surrounding knights, and his powerful frame smilingly indicated how terrible an adversary he must be on the battle field. For many years he had had no other abode than the camp. Everywhere known and renowned for his feats of arms, he had gathered around him a troop of eight hundred intrepid men, well accustomed to war; and with them he roved from place to place wherever there was fighting to be done. Many a time had he decided a battle in favor of the prince whom he was aiding; and he and his men were liberally covered with wounds and scars. War was his element and his life; peace and repose were unendurable to him. Now he had joined the French host, because many of his old companions in arms were there; impelled only by love of fighting, he recked little for whom or in what cause he did battle.

Besides these were present, amongst others, Simon de Piedmont, Louis de Beauja, Froid, governor of Douay, Alain de Bretagne. At the farther end of the table, and apart from them, was a group of knights. It was the least honorable place; and as the French would not admit them to their company, they had found themselves obliged to occupy it. And truly the French were in the right; they were contemptible beneath contempt; for while their vassals, as genuine Flemings, were asserting their country's cause, these their feudal lords were banqueting with the foe! What blindness could lead these degenerate traitors to tear, like vipers, the bosom of their mother? They were marching under a hostile banner to shed the blood of their brethren and bosom friends on the soil of their common fatherland; and for what? that the country which gave them birth might be made a land of slaves, and humbled to nearly the yoke of the alien. They had time to feel that shame and contempt were their portion, and to feel at their heart's gnawing worm. The names of these traitors have been handed down to posterity: amongst many others, Henry van Bantershem, Godefroy van Wingham, Arnold van Eyckhove, and his eldest son, Henry van Wilre, Willem van Redinghe, Arnold van Hofstadt, William van Cranendonck, and John van Rancel, were the most conspicuous.

The knights ate of silver dishes, and drank the choicest wines from cups of gold. The goblets which were placed before Robert d'Artois and the two kings were larger and more costly than the rest; their coats of arms were cunningly graven upon them, and their rims shone with rare and precious gems. During the meal, a lively conversation went on amongst the knights on the position and prospects of the expedition; and from its tone the fearful doom of Flanders might easily be gathered. "Most undoubtedly," answered the general to a question of De Chatillon, "they must be all exterminated. These cursed Flemings can be tamed only by the sword; and why should we let such wretched boors live? Let us make a thorough end of them, messires, that we may not again have to stain our swords with their plebeian blood."

"Right!" said John van Rancel, the Lilyard; "you say right, Messire d'Artois. We must make no terms with the seditious rascals; they are too rich, and would soon give us trouble again. Already they refuse to recognize us, who are sprung from noble blood, as their rightful lords: they seem to think that the wealth which they gain by their industry makes their blood nobler still. They have built houses in Bruges and in Ghent which surpass our castles in magnificence; and is not that an insult to us? Certainly, we will endure it no longer."

Unless we wish to have a fresh outbreak every day," remarked John van Cranendonck, "all the craftsmen must be put to death; for the survivors will never be quiet; and therefore I am of opinion that Messire d'Artois ought not to spare one of them alive."

"And what are we to do when we have slain all our vassals?" asked the burly Hugo van Arokkel with a laugh. "By my troth, we shall have to plough our land ourselves; a goodly prospect, truly!"

"What mean you?" exclaimed the general. "Is it not true that you wish to spare these seditious traitors? Have they not deserved to die, since they have put to death seven thousand Frenchmen without mercy?"

"Beyond a doubt they have deserved death; and therefore will I avenge on them the honor of the crown of my prince; but they shall find their death only on the battle-field, and with arms in their hands. I appeal to these knights whether they deem it fitting that we should stain our swords by doing the work of executioners on poor unarmed people while they are peacefully ploughing their fields?"

"He is right," exclaimed Hugo van Arokkel, with loud and angry voice; "we are fighting like the very Moors, let us receive a disgrace to us; let us receive, messires, that we have to do with Christian men. Besides, Flemish blood flows in my veins, and I will not suffer my brethren to be dealt with like dogs; they off us battle in open and fair field, and we must fight with them according to the laws of honorable warfare."

"Is it possible," replied d'Artois, "that you can defend these base boors? Our good prince has made a trial of all other means to reach them; but they have been in vain. A woe to allow our soldiers to be butchered, our king to be set at naught and put to shame, and then spare the lives of these dastard rebels? No, that shall never be! I know the commands which I have received, and I will both obey them and cause them to be obeyed."

"Messire d'Artois," interposed Rodolf de Nesle with angry impetuosity. "I know not what commands you have received, but I declare to you that I will not obey them unless they accord with the honor of knighthood; the king himself has no right to stain my sword with dishonor. A dastard, messires, whether I am right or not: this morning early I went out of the camp, and found everywhere the tokens of the most revolting rapine and robbery. The churches are burnt; the dead bodies of young children and of women were lying exposed in the fields to be devoured by ravens. I ask you, is this the work of honorable warriors?"

Having uttered these words, he rose from the table, raised a portion of the hangings of the tent, and continued, pointing to the country: "Look you, messires, turn your eyes in all directions; everywhere you behold the flames of this atrocious devastation; the sky is blackened with smoke; the whole country is in a conflagration. What does such a war as this betoken? It is worse than if the ruthless Northmen had come again, and turned the world into a den of robbers. Robert d'Artois, but he does not speak with anger; he moved himself impatiently in his chair, and cried: "This has lasted too long; I can no longer permit any man to speak thus in my presence. I know well enough what I have to do; Flanders must be swept clean, and it is out of my power to prevent it. This strife of words discomposes me, and I beseech Messire the Constable to speak no more in this tone. Let him keep his sword unsheathed; we will all do the same; for no disgrace can rebound to us from the excesses of our soldiers. Let us now end this angry dispute; and each man see that he does his duty."

But at this moment the old king Sigs von Melinde arose, and waved his hand in token that he wished to speak. The great veneration with which both the combatants regarded him restrained them, and they stood still in silence to hear him. The old man spoke thus: "Messires, let your angry passions subside awhile, and give heed to my counsel. You, Count Robert, are not at this moment master of your life, were you to fall, the army of your prince would be deprived of its leader, and consequently exposed to disorder and disorganization; you cannot resolve to risk this. And now, Messire van Arokkel, I ask you, have you any doubt of the bravery of Messire d'Artois?"

"No, truly," replied van Arokkel; "I acknowledge Messire Robert to be a fearless and intrepid knight."

"Well, then," continued the king, "you hear, general, that your personal honor is not called in question; there remains to you only the honor of France to save. I counsel you both to postpone the combat to the day after tomorrow. I pray you speak, messires, as my counsel is wise and prudent?"

"Unless the general will grant to one of us the favor of taking up the glove in his stead."

"Silence!" exclaimed d'Artois; "I will not hear of it."

"Messire van Arokkel, do you agree to this?"

"That is no business of mine; it has taken up too much time when he will give it back to me."

"Be it so," said Robert d'Artois; "and if the battle do not last until sunset, I shall come in quest of you that very evening."

"On my spare yourself the trouble," answered Hugo; "I shall be at your side before you are aware of it."

This was followed by threatnings on both sides; but they proceeded no further, for Sigs interposed with the words: "Messires, it is not fitting that we should longer discuss this matter. Let us once more fill our goblets, and forget all bitter animosity. Be seated, Messire van Arokkel, and let me hear."

"No, no," cried Hugo; "I sit here no longer. I leave the camp immediately. Farewell, messires, we shall see one another again on the battle field. Meanwhile, may God have you in His holy keeping!"

With these words he left the tent, and called his eight hundred men to him; and in a very short time the bright rays of the sun fell on the glittering steel of their armor, and surrounded the clanging armor of a departing band. The same evening he reached the camp of the Flemings, and he may imagine with what joy he was received by them; for he and his men had the reputation of being invincible, and, indeed, they had deserved it.

The French knights meanwhile had resumed their banquet and song, and continued to drink in peace. While they were discoursing of Hugo's temerity, a herald entered the tent, and inclined himself respectfully before the king. His clothes were covered with dust, the sweat ran from his brow, and everything indicated that he had ridden in great haste. The knights looked at him with curiosity, he drew a parchment from beneath his armour, and said, as he gave it to the general. "Messire, this letter will inform you that I come from Messire van Lens at Courtrai, to report to you the extreme peril we are in."

"Speak, then," cried d'Artois, impatiently; "cannot Messire van Lens hold out the citadel of Courtrai against a handful of foot soldiers?"

"Permit me to say, that you deceive yourself, noble lords," replied the messenger. "The Flemings have no contemptible army in the field; it has sprung up as if by magic; they are more than thirty thousand strong and have cavalry and an abundant supply of provisions. They are constructing tremendous engines, in order to batter the citadel and take it by storm. Our provisions and our arrows are both exhausted, and we have already begun to devour some of our least valuable horses. If your highness shall delay but a day to bring aid to Messire van Lens, every Frenchman in Courtrai will perish; for there are no longer any means of escape. Messires van Lens, De Mortenay, and De Ryecourt beseech you urgently to extricate them from this peril."

"Messires," cried Robert d'Artois, "here is a glorious opportunity; we could have wished for nothing better. The Flemings are all gathered together at Courtrai; we will fall upon them where they are, and but few of them shall escape us; the hoofs of our horses shall avenge our wrongs on this race of detestable people. You, herald, remain in tent; to-morrow you shall return with us to Courtrai. Yet one toast more, messires; then go and get your troops in readiness for departure; we must break up our encampment here with all haste."

All now left the tent to obey the command of the general, and from every part of the camp resounded the flourish of trumpets summoning the dispersed troops, the tramp of horses, and the clash of armor; a few hours later the tents were struck, and the baggage-wagons packed—all was in readiness. Here and there a number of soldiers were occupied in plunder; but in so large a camp this excited no attention. The captains placed themselves at the head of their companies, arranged the cavalry two abreast; and in that order they marched out of the encampments.

The first band, which left the camp with banners flying, consisted of three thousand light cavalry, all picked men, armed with huge battle-axes, and carrying long swords hanging from the pommel of their saddles. These were followed by four thousand archers on foot. They marched onward in a dense mass, protecting their faces from the rays of the sun with their large square shields. Their quivers were full of arrows, and a short sword without a scabbard hung at their girdle. They were mostly from the south of France; but many were by nation Spaniards or Lombards. John de Barles, their cap-

tain, a brave warrior, rode here and there between the ranks to encourage them and keep them in order. The second band was under the command of Renaud de Trie, and consisted of three thousand two hundred heavy cavalry. They were mounted on horses of unusual height and strength, and carried each a broad and flashing sword on his right shoulder, and armor of polished iron protected their bodies. Most of them were from Orleans.

Messire the Constable de Nesle led the third band. First came a troop of seven hundred knights, with glittering armor on their bodies, and graceful banderles on their long spears; their plumes fell waving behind their backs as they rode, and their coats of arms were painted in various colours upon their armor. Their horses were covered from head to foot with iron, and more than two hundred embroidered banners fluttered over the troop. It was truly the most brilliant band of knights that could be seen, even in that age. After them came two thousand horsemen, with battle-axes on their shoulders, and long swords hanging at their saddle-bows.

At the head of the fourth band rode Messire Louis de Clermont, an experienced warrior. It was composed of three thousand six hundred horsemen, bearing spears, from the kingdom of Navarre; and it was easy to see that they were picked and choice warriors. In front of the first column rode the banner bearer, with the great standard of Navarre.

Robert Count d'Artois, general-in-chief of the army, had taken the middle division under his especial command. All the knights who had brought with them no soldiers, or had enrolled them in other companies, were with him; and the kings of Melinde and the dukes of Lorraine, and the magnificent and gorgeous banners of Messires John, Count of Tancarville; Angelin de Vimen, Raoul de Longueval, Farald de Helms, Arnold de Walmeel, Marechal de Brabant, Robert de Montfort, and a countless number besides, who had formed themselves into a company. This band even surpassed the third in magnificence and splendour; the helms of the knights were covered either with silver or with gold, and their coats of mail were adorned with golden studs, by which their joints were secured. The burning rays of the sun fell on the glittering steel of their armor, and surrounded this peerless band as with a glowing fire. The swords which hung dangling at their saddle-bows fell with a sharp and iron clank on the trappings of their steeds, producing a peculiar martial music. Next to these noble knights followed five thousand other horsemen, with battle-axes and swords; and this picked troop was accompanied by sixteen thousand infantry; drawn up in three divisions. The first consisted of a thousand cross-bowmen; their defensive armour was simply a breastplate of steel and a flat square helmet; small quivers full of iron bolts were suspended at their girdles, and long swords hung at their sides. The second was composed of six thousand men with clubs, studded at the end with horrible steel points. The third was made up of "helm cleavers" with their long axes; and all these men were from Gascony, Languedoc and Auvergne.