

Blind Rosa.

BY HENDRICK CONSCIENCE

On a beautiful day in 1846, the Diligence rolled as usual over the highway between Antwerp and Turnhout. The tramp of horses, the rattle of wheels, the creaking of the frame, and the loud voice of the driver, accompanied its onward progress. The dogs barked in the distance as it passed, the birds rose startled from the fields, and the shadow of the old coach danced grotesquely among the trees and hedges.

Suddenly the coachman pulled up not far from a lonely tavern. Springing from his seat, he opened the door of his vehicle, and without saying a word, proffered his hand to a traveller, who immediately leapt out upon the highway, carrying a leather travelling-bag under his arm. With equal silence the coachman put up the steps, shut the door, and ascending the box, drew the whip gently across the horses' backs, as a sign to proceed; and the clumsy machine rumbled on in its own spiritless and monotonous way.

Meanwhile the traveller had entered the tavern, and calling for a glass of beer, sat down at a table. He was a man of very high stature, and appeared to be about fifty years of age. One might have even supposed him to be sixty, had not his vigorous bearing, his lively eye, and the youthful smile upon his lips, shown that his heart and soul were much younger than his face would have indicated. His hair, indeed, was gray, his brow and cheeks furrowed, and his whole countenance expressed that waste of power which care and toil stamp on the face as the sign of premature old age. And yet one could see that his chest rose and fell with fulness and life, that his head sat erect and high, and his sparkling eyes expressed the energy of manhood.

From his dress one would have inferred that he was a wealthy citizen, although it perhaps would not have attracted attention at all had not the coat been buttoned up to the chin—a peculiarity which, when taken in connection with his great meerschaum, made one suspect that he was a soldier or a German.

The people of the house, after serving the traveller, resumed their work without paying any further attention to him. He saw the two daughters going and coming, the landlord fetch wood and peat for the fire, the mother fill the kitchen-pot; but no one said a word to him, although his eyes followed every one as if he desired to enter into conversation, and his sad and gentle smile seemed to say—"Ah! do you not know me then?"

Suddenly a clock struck. This sound seemed to pain him, for an expression of melancholy surprise passed over his face, and he chased the smile from his lips. He stood up, and with a disturbed look, gazed at the clock till nine strokes one after the other, had died away in the room. The house-mother had observed the emotion of the stranger, and advancing to him, she also looked up at the clock with a wondering look, as if she expected to see something unusual about it, which she had never observed before.

"Yes, sir, it sounds prettily, doesn't it?" she said. "It has gone for twenty years so, and a watchmaker has never laid a finger on it."

"Twenty years," sighed the traveller; "and where then is the clock which used to hang here before? And where is the pretty image of the Virgin which stood there on the chimney piece? Gone, destroyed, forgotten?"

The woman looked at the stranger with surprise, and answered:

"Our Zanna was playing with the image one day when a child, and broke it. It was so very badly made, at any rate, that the pastor himself had told us to buy a new one; and there it stands now. Is it not much prettier?"

The traveller shook his head. "And the old clock you will hear immediately," she continued. "It is only a piece of lumber, and is always behind; it has hung for an age in our cellar. Listen, it is striking now!"

A peculiar noise might be heard proceeding from another part of the house. It was the voice of a bird, which cried "Cuckoo, cuckoo" for nine times in succession. A cheerful smile at once lighted up the stranger's face; and hastening, accompanied by the hostess, to a little cellar, he gazed with inexpressible joy at the old clock, as the cuckoo concluded its nine times repeated song.

Meanwhile, both the daughters of the family approached the traveller full of curiosity, and looked at him with wonder, turning their great blue questioning eyes alternately on him and on their mother. The looks of the two girls recalled the stranger to himself; and, apparently satisfied, he returned to the adjoining apartment, still followed by the mother and her daughters, all wondering at this mysterious conduct.

His heart was evidently gladdened by what he had seen; his countenance was lighted up with a sweet expression of love and genial feeling; and his eyes, moist with emotion, sparkled so joyously, that both the girls simultaneously approached him with visible interest. He took each by the hand, and said:

"What I do seems singular, children, does it not? You cannot understand, I daresay, why the voice of the old cuckoo moves me so deeply? Ah! I too was once a child; and in those days my father used to come every Sunday after church to drink his pint of beer in this very room. When I was good, I was allowed to come with him. And then I used to stand from hour to hour, waiting till the dear cuckoo should open its little door; I danced and skipped at its call, and in my childish soul I admired the poor little bird as an incomprehensible masterpiece of art. And the image of the Virgin, too, which one of you broke, I used to love, because it wore such a beautiful blue mantle, and because the little Jesus in her arms held out its little hands and smiled to me. The child of those days is now a man of threescore years; his hair is gray, and his face full of wrinkles. Four-and-thirty years have I lived in the wilds of eastern Russia; and yet I still remember the image and the cuckoo, as if only a single day had fled since my father last brought me here."

"Are you, then, from our village?" asked Zanna.

"Yes, yes," replied the traveller with joy. But the effect of his words was not what he expected. A smile played for a moment on the girls' features, but that was all; they seemed neither astonished nor overjoyed at his declaration.

"But where is the old landlord, Joostens?" he at last inquired of the mother.

"John the landlord, do you mean? He has been dead for more than five-and-twenty years."

"And his wife—the good, stout Peeternelle?"

"Dead too," was the reply.

"And the young shepherd, Andries, who could make such beautiful baskets?"

"Dead too," replied the hostess.

The traveller hung his head, and gave himself up for a time to melancholy reflections. Meanwhile, the woman betook herself to the barn, to tell her husband what had happened with the unknown visitor.

"I daresay, farmer; Peer John must now be ninety years old at least."

"Peer John? That is not our grave-digger's name; he is called Lauw Stevens."

The farmer now entered the room heavily, and with the noise of his wooden shoes roused the traveller out of his painful reverie. The latter rose, and hastened to him with outstretched arms and a cheerful face, as if he would fain greet him as an old friend; but the farmer took his hand coldly, and looked at him with indifference.

"And you, too, Peer Joostens," he exclaimed sadly, "and you, too, do not recognise me?"

"No; I do not think I have ever seen you, sir," he replied.

"Then you do not know him who, at the risk of his life, dived under the ice at Torfmoor to rescue you from certain death?"

The farmer shrugged his shoulders. The traveller seemed deeply pained, and said almost imploringly:

"Have you, then, forgotten the young man who used to take your part among your companions, and bring you so many bird's eggs to adorn your May-wreath?—him who taught you to make trumpets and whistles of the meadow-reeds, and took you with him when he drove Pauvel the brickmaker's son's fine cart to market?"

"I have forgotten," replied the farmer, doubtfully. "But I remember that my father, now in heaven, used to tell me that when I was six years old I was nearly drowned in the great Torfmoor. But it was Long John who pulled me out—and who, in the French time under Napoleon, was carried off, with many others, to be food for powder. Who knows in what unconsecrated ground his corpse is lying now? May God be gracious to his poor soul!"

"Ah! ah!" cried the stranger, with exultation, "now you know me: I am Long John—or rather, John Slaets, of High Dries."

As he got no immediate reply, he said with surprise:

"Do you not remember the rifle-shooter of the Muschenguld?—him who for four leagues round was famed as the best rifleman? who had no equal in sureness of aim, and was envied by all the other young men because the young lasses looked so kindly on him? I am he, John Slaets, of High Dries!"

"It is possible," replied the farmer distrustfully; "but I do not know you, sir, and I hope you will not take it ill. There is no Muschenguld in all our district; and what was formerly the shooting-ground is now the site of a country house, which has been for several years uninhabited, for Mevrouw is now dead."

Discouraged by the farmer's coldness, the traveller made no further attempt to recall himself to his recollection.

"In the village dwell many of my friends, who cannot have forgotten me," he said quietly, as he rose and prepared to go. "You, Peer Joostens, were very young indeed when all that happened; but Pauvel will fall on my neck the moment he sees me, I am quite sure of that. Does he still dwell on the moor?"

"The brickwork is long since burned down, and the claypits filled up. The finest hay in the whole parish grows there now; it is the rich Tist's pasture."

"And where is Pauvel?"

"The whole family was unfortunate, and left this quarter altogether. What has become of them, I cannot tell; dead, without doubt. But I see, sir, you are talking of our grandfather's times, and it will be a difficult matter to get an answer to all your questions unless you go to our grave-digger. He can tell over on his fingers everything that has happened these hundred years or more."

"I daresay, farmer; Peer John must now be ninety years old at least."

"Peer John? That is not our grave-digger's name; he is called Lauw Stevens."

A smile of pleasure overspread the traveller's countenance. "God be thanked," he exclaimed, "that He has spared at least one of my old comrades!"

"Was Lauw, then, a friend of yours, sir?"

"My friend," said the traveller, shaking his head, "I can scarcely call him, for there was a perpetual rivalry; and sometimes strife between us. Love affairs were at the bottom of our differences. On one occasion, I well remember, when he and I were struggling, I threw him from the bridge at Kälvermoor into the stream beneath, and he was nearly drowned; but that is more than thirty years ago. Lauw will be glad to see me again. Well, Farmer Joostens, give me your hand; I hope to drink many a can of beer in your house!"

Taking his travelling-bag under his arm, he left the tavern, striking into a road behind it which ran through a plantation of young pines. Although the farmer's reception and information were not very cheering, they had notwithstanding poured some consolation and joy into his heart. The sweet odor of earlier years breathed round him; and with the flood of reminiscences which arose in his soul at every step, he felt as if born anew. The young pine-wood, it is true, which surrounded him on all sides, was strange to him; for on this spot a lofty fir-wood had stood, whose trees bore innumerable nests, and around whose borders grew the wild strawberry in abundance. The wood had disappeared like the people of the village: the old trees had died, and their children taken their place, to run their life-course in their turn. They were strangers to the traveller, and he consequently viewed them with indifference.

But the song of the birds which resounded on every side was still the same; the wailing sigh of the wind as it stirred the pine-tops, the chirping of the grasshoppers, and the heath-breeze, with its delicious odors—all the eternal workings of nature were the same as in the days of his childhood and youth. Pleasing thoughts arose in the traveller's mind; and also he walked on with serene and happy feelings, he never raised his musing eyes from the ground till he had left the pine-wood behind him. Here fields and meadows were spread out before him, through which flowed a beautiful stream in pleasant windings; behind the pointed church steeple rose among the trees, with its gilded cock glittering in the sunshine like a day-star. Still farther off, the windmill lazily whirled its heavy red wings.

Overcome by the beauty of the scene, and the memories it suggested, the traveller paused. His eyes became moist, he let his travelling-bag fall on the ground, and spread out his arms, while the expression of a deep and fervent joy beamed upon his countenance.

At this moment the prayer-bell pealed forth the Angelus. The traveller knelt down, and bending his head upon his breast, remained motionless in this attitude for some time, prolonging his devotion, visibly agitated and trembling. An earnest prayer streamed from his heart and lips, while he raised his eyes and folded hands to heaven, full of passionate gratitude. Then picking up his travelling-bag, he hastened impatiently on. Gazing at the church-steeple, he said in a low tone:

"You at least are not altered, humble little church, where I was baptized—where, at my first communion, everything was so joyful, so wondrous, so beautiful, and holy! Ah! I shall see it once more, that image of the holy Mary, with its golden robe and its silver crown; St. Anthony, with his pretty little pig; and the black devil with his red tongue, of which

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