

THE LION OF FLANDERS.

BY HENDRIK CONSCIENCE.

CHAPTER XI. CONTINUED.

At Maria's first touch the maiden started from her sleep in alarm, opened wide her eyes, and regarded her friend with mingled doubt and terror.

"Is it you, Maria?" she exclaimed, hastily passing her hand over her eyelids; "what brings you to me at this strange hour?"

"My poor friend!" cried Maria, bursting into tears, "you must get up and let me dress you. Nerve yourself as best you can, and above all make haste. A great misfortune has befallen you."

In her bewilderment Matilda rose from her bed, fixing a look of anxious inquiry upon Maria, who immediately began dressing her, sobbing bitterly the while, and making no answer to the terrified girl's repeated questions, till, at the moment of handing her a long riding dress, with a painful effort she said:

"You are about to take a journey, dear Matilda! My St. George portrait and keep you! What means this, my Maria? Ah, now I see what lot awaits me! My sad dream, then, was a true one; for, even as you woke me, I thought I was being carried off to France, to Joanna of Navarre. Now is all hope gone from me! I never again shall behold my beloved father! I shall never see you, my father, never again in this world, shall you embrace your child!"

Overcome with grief, Maria had sunk into a chair; her voice inarticulate with sobs, was unable to utter a word of comfort, when she felt her neck encircled by Matilda's arms, and heard her tender accents sounding in her ear:

"Weep not for me, sweet friend. Sorrow upon sorrow is nothing new to my sad heart; is left for the house of Flanders there is left no joy, not even peace."

"O hapless, yet ever noble girl!" Maria at last found words to say; "you know not that the French soldiers who are to carry you hence all ready guard the house!"

At these words Matilda turned pale, and an evident shudder passed over her frame. "Soldiers! she exclaimed, "am I then to be exposed to the insolence of ruffian hirelings? Save me, my Maria! O God! that I might now die! My father! my father! you know not what insults are offered to your blood!"

"Be not thus terrified, my Matilda; the leader is a good knight and a noble gentleman, and he will not return to Courtrai; for he knew enough of the true feelings of the men of Bruges not to feel himself ill at ease within their walls. Meanwhile, the garrison which he had left behind to insure submission indulged them selves in deeds of violence of every description,—plundering, insulting and wantonly annoying the citizens in a thousand ways. The foreign merchants, disgusted at this state of things, had mostly betaken themselves elsewhere; the commerce of this city fell off from day to day, and with it the prosperity of the manufacturing and working classes, whose sullen dislike of their new rulers had thus gradually ripened into active hatred, which waited only an opportunity to exhibit itself in open rebellion. The time to attempt this however, with any hope of success was not yet come. The French garrison was too numerous, and every possible means had been adopted by them in order to secure what they had already won. The city had been dismantled, in a great measure, of its defensive works, and a strong citadel was in progress of erection, by which they hoped more effectually to overawe the inhabitants."

To the great surprise of his fellow-citizens, Deconinck allowed all this to proceed without opposition, and, as far as the public could discern, went quietly on his way, as though now only intent upon his own affairs. In the private assemblies of his guild, however, he was all the while encouraging, by his fervent exhortations, the hearts of his fellows, and cherishing in their hearts the warmest and noblest aspirations for the deliverance of their country."

As for Breydel, there seemed to be nothing of his former self remaining. Ever darkly musing, with knitted brows and downcast eyes, the gallant Butcher went about as if bowed under the weight of years. It was seldom, indeed, that he left his house. Bruges, enchained and oppressed, was to him but a wider prison, whither the light and air of freedom could no more enter; upon the forehead of each brother-citizen he read only the brand of shame; in the eye of each stranger glanced the insulting taunt, "Slave! slave!" For him there was neither joy nor comfort more. In this mood he was one day pacing his shop in the early morning, and fitfully continuing the dreams of the past night,—now plunged in gloomy thoughts, now fuming with rage; at one moment grimly smiling upon his axe as he poised it in his hand, and at another wrathfully casting it from him as the useless plaything of a slave,—when suddenly the door opened, and to his surprise the Dean of the Clothworkers stood before him.

"A good morning to you, master," said the Butcher; "what evil tidings is it that brings you to me thus early?"

"My friend Jan," answered Deconinck, "I am not why you are sad; the thought of slavery."

"Silence, Deconinck! I pray you, speak not that word; the very walls of my house seem to re-echo it around me in a thousand tones of insult. Oh, my friend, would that I had died that day upon the ramparts of our city! I should not then have fallen unrevenged and, oh, what bitterness of spirit should I have been spared! But I lost that chance, and—"

"Calmly, but not unmoved, Deconinck interrupted him: "Be of good cheer, my noble hearted friend," said he; "our day shall yet come. The embers still glow under

the ashes and the time will surely arrive, though it is not yet. Let the chains press more sorely still upon our necks, until they become too galling even for our heads. For a moment he Black Lion shall yet again float aloft, with Bruges in the van."

A smile full of confidence flitted over the countenance of Breydel; and as he seized the Dean's hand, he joyfully exclaimed, "You alone, my friend, you alone know how to comfort me; you alone understand my heart."

"But now, Master Jan," proceeded the Clothworker, "to the object of my visit. You have not forgotten our promise to keep guard over the Lady Matilda?"

"What now?" cried Breydel, hastily his cheeks flushing at once with anxiety and anticipated indignation.

"She was seized and carried off by the French last night. The Butcher took a step forward, caught up his axe, and furiously swung it over his head. For a moment he was unable to speak; then a torrent of incoherent curses burst from his lips; at last he exclaimed:

"Deconinck, this is too much,—not a word more! I listen to no pitiful now, to day I must see blood if I die for it. Reasonable, you life long, by reasonable country, and you must by no means risk it uselessly."

"Not a syllable will I hear! I thank you for your good advice; but I neither can nor will follow it. Spare words, therefore, for they are all in vain."

"But be reasonable, Master Jan," rejoined the Clothworker; "you cannot drive the French out all by yourself."

"What care I for that? My thoughts carry me not so far. Vengeance and death, therefore, for they are all in vain."

The violence of his emotion prevented further speech. After a few instants' pause, however, he continued more calmly:

"Well, Master Deconinck, after all, I will be cool, as you tell me. What more, then, do you know about this matter?"

"Not much. This morning, before daylight, I was disturbed by an urgent message from Sir Adolf of Nieuwland's house, to the effect that the Lady Matilda had been carried off in the night; by the French, and that it was their guide."

"Brakels! There is another for my axe! He shall not play the spy for the French much longer."

"Whither they have taken her I know not," continued Deconinck; "but I suspect it may be to the Castle of Male; for the more polished and softer accents which sounded from the mouth of the messenger had been recognized more than once among the soldiers. You see well, Breydel, that it will be better to wait for some further information than to take any step hastily, especially as there is every reason to believe that the countess is by this time already in France. It seems that the only course is to stay at home and bide our time."

"You press to the deaf, my friend," replied the Butcher; "at all events, I must and will go out. Forgive me if I now leave you."

And with these words, concealing his axe under his garment, he moved towards the door. By a sudden side movement, however, Deconinck so placed himself as to intercept his passage.

"Have done with this childish impatience," said the Clothworker, while Breydel looked round as though of that moment ready to spring through the window; "forth with that axe you shall not go. You are by far too dear a friend to me, and too valuable to our cause, that I should let you thus rush upon destruction."

"Let me pass, Master Peter. I pray you, let me go; you keep me on the rack."

"Not so, Master Jan. Think you that you are your own property, and may risk your life at pleasure? No, no, master; God has given you your great gifts for nobler aims than that. Rejoice in your high calling, master; think of your country, and of the service you may do her. How shall you aid and save her if now you fling away your life upon a useless vengeance?"

While Deconinck was speaking, Breydel had gradually cooled down, and now answered in a calmer tone:

"You are right, my friend," he said; "I am too easily carried away. There, now, see my axe is hung up in its place again. You can let me go; for to-day I must to Thourout to buy cattle."

"Well, I will keep you no longer; though I know well enough that it is not to Thourout you are going to day."

"Indeed, what I tell you is true, master; I haven't a hoof in, and I must provide myself a fresh supply this very day."

"You cannot pass that off upon me, Master Jan. I have known you too long, and I can see into your soul through your eyes: you are going to Male."

"You are certainly a conjurer, Master Peter; I believe you know my thoughts better than I do myself. Yes, I am going to Male; but I give you my word it is only to reconnoitre, and if possible to procure some intelligence of our unfortunate princess. I promise you to put off the reckoning till a more convenient season; but I warrant you they shall pay with interest when they do pay, or my name is not Jan Breydel."

The two deans now went out together, and parted, after exchanging a few more words, in the street. Breydel walked off without delay, and a rapid walk of half an hour brought him to the village of Male, which at this time consisted of some thirty thatched cottages scattered here and there in the immediate neighbourhood of the castle. All around stretched away impenetrable forests, amidst which the industry of the villagers had cleared an open space of cultivated fields. To judge by the fertility of the soil and abundance of the harvests, the peasantry should have been rich and prosperous,—a position, however, which was strangely

belied by their dress and general appearance, which in all respects bespoke the deepest poverty. Slavery and despotism had borne their fruits. The peasant did not labour for himself; all belonged to his feudal lord; and he thought himself fortunate, if, after payment of all exactions, he could, by unremitting exertion, secure for himself even the barest maintenance.

At some little distance from the castle was an open space, round which stood a few houses of stone, built somewhat closer together than the rest; in the middle rose a tall stone pillar, which betokened the criminal jurisdiction possessed by the lord. On one side was a small chapel, the wall of its chancel and encroaching a few paces upon the square. Adjoining the chapel stood a tolerably lofty house, the only place of public entertainment which the village boasted. A stone image of St. Martin above the door served for a sign; but so rudely chiselled, that its representation of a human figure might be regarded as purely conventional. The whole ground floor was occupied by a single apartment, one end of which was almost entirely taken up by a projecting fire-place, so disproportionately large, that it left only a recess at either end, for drying-places for herbs and roots. The other walls were white washed, and hung all over with various cooking-tensils in wood and pewter: a halibut, and several large knives in leathern sheaths, occupied a place apart. The whole aspect of the place was gloomy to the extreme. The rafters overhead were black with smoke, and a perpetual twilight reigned even when, as now, the sun shone brightly without; for but few of his rays were admitted by the small panes of the windows, which, moreover, were raised high seven feet above the floor. Some heavy wooden seats and still heavier chairs completed the furnishing of the room.

The hostess ran hither and thither, hastily waiting upon her guests, who, at the time, happened to be unusually numerous. Flagon and breaker were their round incessantly, and the merriment of the revellers blended into one confused hubbub of voices, in which not one intelligible word could be distinguished. It was easy enough, however, to perceive that the result was not perfectly homogeneous, and that two distinct and different tongues combined together to produce it. From about the fire place might be heard the manly and vigorous tones of the Flemish, while in the more polished and softer accents which sounded from the body of the apartment might be recognized the language of France. Among those who spoke in the foreign tongue, and belonged to the garrison of the castle, the principal leader was one Leroux, at least such he seemed to be, by the authoritative tone in which he spoke, and the air of superiority which he assumed. He was, however, but a simple man at arms, like the rest; it was only his extraordinary strength and lofty stature, and his readiness to profit by those advantages, which had procured him this kind of pre-eminence among his fellows.

While the Frenchmen were thus lastly addressing themselves to the flagons, and merry jests and jovial shouts went freely round, another soldier of the garrison entered the room.

"Good news, comrades!" said he; "we shall soon be out of this cursed Flanders. I trust before to-morrow is over we shall see our own pleasant land of France again!"

At this, every man was instantly on the alert, and looked the new-comer in the face with an expression of mingled doubt and inquiry.

"Yes," he went on; "to-morrow we set off for France, with the lady that paid us a visit at such an out of the way time last night."

"Is that so, indeed?" asked Leroux. "Nothing more certain; Messire de St. Pol has sent me to desire you to be in readiness."

"I do not doubt you for you are always a bringer of bad news."

"Why, what now? are you not then glad of the news? and don't you want to get back to France again?"

"No, not a bit of it! Here we are enjoying the fruits of victory, and for my part I don't want to leave the feast so early."

"Well, you needn't be so put out about it; 'tis only for a few days; we shall soon be back."

Just as Leroux was about to reply the door opened, and a Fleming entered, who, with a bold and careless glance at the French soldiers, sat down at a table by himself, and called out:

"Now, host! a stoup of beer. Quick, I'm in haste!"

"Anon, anon! I'm coming, Master Breydel!"

"He's a fine fellow, that Fleming!" whispered to Leroux the soldier who was sitting next him. "He's not so tall as you; but what a build! and what a voice too! He's no peasant that!"

"He is a fine fellow, indeed," answered Leroux; "he has eyes like a lion. I like him."

"Host!" cried Breydel again, rising, "what are you about all this while? my throat is as dry as a smoked herring!"

"Tell me, Fleming," asked Leroux; addressing him "can you speak French?"

"I'm sorry to say I can," answered Breydel in that language.

"Well, then, as I see that you're impatient and thirsty, accept a drink from me, till your own comes. Here, and good luck to you!"

The Fleming took the proffered cup with a motion of thanks, saying, as he raised it to his mouth:

"Health and long life to you!"

But hardly had a few drops of its contents passed his lips, when he hastily set it down again upon the table with an ill-suppressed look of disgust.

"What's that? why the noble liquor frightens you! Ah! you Flemings are not used to it," cried Leroux, laughing.

"It's French wine!" answered Breydel, with careless indifference, as though his aversion had been a more natural distaste.

The soldiers looked at one another, and a movement of displeasure contracted Leroux's brow. Nevertheless, Breydel's manner and countenance gave so little appearance of intention to his words, that nothing was said, and the Fleming returned quietly to his table, where the beer he had called for stood ready for him, and resumed his seat, taking no further notice of the French party.

"Now, comrades," cried Leroux, raising his beaker, "one draught more, that we may not go away with dry throats; here's to the health of this Flemish fair one, and may the devil fly away with her!"

At this toast Jan had some trouble to contain himself; but with an effort succeeded, and Leroux went on:

"If only by good luck all keeps quiet while we're gone! These rascally citizens are getting more than half disposed to rebel, and there may be an outbreak any day. A pretty take in it would be for us, if the others are at the plundering of Bruges while we are out of the way! We should have to thank this jade for it!"

Again Breydel's blood began to boil; but he remembered his promise and held his peace, listening, however, the more attentively as the Frenchman resumed:

"I should like to know who she is. I suppose she's the wife of one of the rebel nobles, and going to waste with the others, they've got safe hold of her. Yes, yes! she'll not spend

her time very pleasantly in France, depend upon it!"

Jan, meanwhile, felt that if he was to hold his peace he must bad some vent for his feelings; accordingly he rose from his seat, and paced up and down at the farther end of the apartment, humming over in a low voice a Flemish popular song of the day:

"The noble Lion! Mark him ramping so proudly on his golden shield! Mark well his claws, his giant weapons, That rear the foe's spirit and shield! Behold his eyes, for battle flashing! Behold his mane, how wild it flies! That Lion is our Flemish Lion, That crouching still the foe defies."

The French soldiers looked at one another in astonishment. "Hark!" said one of them; "that is one of the Claward songs; and the insolent Fleming dares to sing it in our presence!"

"These words Jan Breydel heard plainly enough; but he took no notice of them, and went on with his tune. He even raised his voice somewhat, as though in defiance of the Frenchmen:

"He showed his claws in Eastern regions, And trembled at the Eastern heat. Before his keen eye paled the Crescent, The Saracen forced his bow to bow. He quailed for their deeds of fame; He saw and hid his face, He saw and hid his face, A royal and imperial name."

"Tell me, what is the meaning of that song they always have in their mouths?" inquired Leroux of a Fleming belonging to the castle, who was sitting by him.

"Well, the meaning of it is, that the Black Lion clawed the Saracens and their Crescent right handsomenly, and made Count Baldwin Emperor of Constantinople."

"But I say, Fleming," cried Leroux to Breydel, "you must acknowledge that your terrible black lion has had to tarry till before King Philip's lilies; and now, I suspect, he's dead, for good and all."

Master Jan smiled contemptuously. "There's another verse to the song," he said; "listen!"

"He slumbers now; the Gallic Philip Can his fine lines with chains oppress, While robber-bands of foreign hirelings, The Lion's tattered banner possess. But when he wakes—O, then, ye robbers, Then shall ye feel the Lion's claw! Then shall in mud and blood your Lily Lie low beneath his mighty paw!"

There! now ask what that means!"

"The sense of the verse was explained to Leroux, who immediately rose, thrust his seat hastily back, filled his drinking-cup to the brim, and exclaimed:

"Call me a coward my life long, if I don't break your neck, if you speak another word!"

"What, you think I am to be silenced by you?" answered Breydel, with a scornful laugh. "Not by all the lilies of you unbung; and to show you—here's to the Black Lion! and a fig for the French!"

"Comrades!" cried Leroux, trembling with rage, "leave this Flemish dog to me! he shall die by my hand!"

And advancing towards Breydel, he shouted at him: "You lie! the Lily forever!"

"Liar yours! if and the Black Lion forever!" retorted Breydel.

"Come on!" pursued the Frenchman. "You are strong enough; but I will show you that it is another Lion than yours that must tread down the Lily! Come on, and to the death!"

"With all my heart, and the sooner the better. It's a real pleasure to me to have to do with a brave enemy; it's worth all the trouble!"

"No sooner were the words uttered than they left the house, and straight-way proceeded to seek out a convenient place for the encounter. This was soon found, and stepping a few paces apart, the two adversaries made their preparations for the fight. Breydel first took his knife from his girdle and threw it from him, then stripped up his sleeves to his shoulders, laying bare his sinewy arms, the sight of which struck with amazement the soldiers who were standing by. Leroux, too, threw from him

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