

# THE RECRUIT

By HENDRICK CONSCIENCE

(CONTINUED.)

It was a strange and interesting sight to see, walking through the streets of Venloo, this blooming peasant girl leading the blind soldier by the hand. The passers-by stood still to look at them— attracted, not so much by the appearance of the unfortunate youth with his knapsack on his back and the green shade over his eyes, as by the inexplicable expression of pride and joy which gave to the young girl's countenance an expression at once noble and wondrously beautiful. The good Trien was so happy, so proud at the unexpected result of her self-sacrifice and determination, that she stepped forward with elated head and exulting mien, far too happy to cast down her eyes before the curious looks of the wondering citizens.

She was in great haste to leave the city, and urged the blind man to walk quickly. The unlooked-for success had surprised and astounded her, even yet she could scarcely believe it, and felt at intervals an anxious shudder creep over her, with the fear that it was still possible for some one to tear her friend from her.

At last she gained the city gate; she saw the free fields stretching away towards the distant horizon, and over these lay the way to her village. Now for the first time a loud cry of joy burst from her lips; she turned her eyes thankfully towards heaven, and exclaimed with a sweet rapture:

"Now, John, come; now we are free!"

## CHAPTER V.

It was still oppressively hot, though the shadows of the trees were now considerably lengthened. Over head and field still hovered the transparent summer air: no breeze whispered among the foliage; the birds sat panting and still among the motionless leaves; every voice of nature was silent; so far as the eye could reach, neither man nor beast was visible; the earth seemed to have fallen asleep with weariness.

By the side of a solitary road, overhung by the branches of some young oaks, lay a soldier asleep, with his head on his knapsack. His feet were bare, and his shoes lay on the ground near him. A young peasant girl sat by his side, with her anxious look fixed on him, while with a birch twig she drove the flies from his face and feet, and maintained the deepest silence.

The soldier lay on a bed of wild thyme, which emitted its sweet odours round him, while the blue-bell bent its little cups over his brow; lower down, beside his feet, the azure gentian raised to him its beautiful petals. He must have already slept long, for his companion looked uneasily towards the sun, as if she would measure by the progress of heaven's torch how far the day was spent. Perhaps her sadness had another cause. In truth, she was vexed to perceive that the sun had turned round the corner of the oak wood, and was already casting some of its beams in full glow on the body of the sleeper. Her annoyance increased. She rose, and endeavoured to bend the young oak branches and bind them together, to form a thicker shade overhead to protect the soldier's repose; but she soon gave up this, as the sun seemed to fall on the roadside almost horizontally. Advancing softly, and with the greatest caution, she crept into the bush and cut off two long straight twigs, and placing herself before the soldier and looking at the sun as if making a calculation, she stuck both sticks beside him in the earth. She next took her apron, and hung it like a broad

wall of shade before his face, and then sat down again with an expression of satisfaction. For a considerable time she looked at him as he slept, and watched his breathing, as if she would count the very pulsations of his heart. She could not see his eyes, for a green shade concealed them.

At last the soldier moved, groped anxiously round him and stretching out his hands, called out with a voice of alarm:

"Trien! Trien! where are you?"

The maiden took his hand and said: "Here I am, John. Compose yourself. You are trembling; what is the matter?"

"Oh! I dreamt that you had left me," replied the young man, sitting up. "Heavens! what a fearful dream! The cold sweat still breaks from me when I think of it."

"What could make you think such a thing as that?" observed the girl with a kind of good-humoured indignation. "Only, it is so much the better that you have dreamt it, John; it is a sure sign that I shall not leave you—dreams always go by contraries."

"It is true, 'dearest,'" said the soldier, pressing her hands, "God will reward you in heaven for all this."

Meanwhile, Trien had unbuckled the straps of the knapsack, and taken out a piece of bread and meat. She cut the bread into little bits, laid them on the thyme, and then covered them with meat; at the same time saying affectionately:

"How are you now, John? Are you rested? Has your sleep refreshed you?"

"I am no longer weary, Trien dear; but, I do not know how it is, that hateful dream makes me quite melancholy."

"Oh, that will soon go away, John; it comes from sleeping on the hard ground. Will you eat something?"

"Yes Trien, I feel hungry."

The girl put the bits of bread and meat one after the other into his hand. While he silently took the proffered food, she remarked a peculiar expression of dejection and trouble on his face. Believing, however, that the uneasy sleep was the only cause of this apparent melancholy, she made no attempt to enliven his spirits, but so soon as she had given him the last bit of bread, she drew on his stockings and shoes, and prepared to resume their journey. The soldier picked up the knapsack, but the girl took it from him.

"No, no, Trien," he said, "let me carry it now. I entreat you: you weary yourself too much. It is not proper, besides, that a young girl should walk with a knapsack on her back; it must already look singular enough to see a peasant maid travelling with a blind soldier. What will people think of it?"

"Why should people's opinions trouble us, John? You, who can't see, suffer a hundred times more fatigue than I do, for you are always making false steps. Besides, you are far from being well and strong yet. The knapsack is nothing to me."

So saying, she took it again upon her back, and being now ready to set out, led the soldier into the middle of the road, putting a staff into his hand and fastening the other end on her shoulder, that the blind man might walk securely in her footsteps. When setting out, she said:

"Should I walk too quickly, dear John, you must tell me. And let us talk a little as we go; it will shorten the way."

As she received no answer, she turned round, but without stopping, and said to her companion:

"John, you should not hang your head in that way; it fatigues your chest."

The young man silently raised his head; but after a few steps, let

it sink again. He was evidently lost in earnest thought. Trien saw this; but also anxiety was expressed in her features, she said in a clear cheerful tone as if she would rouse him out of his dependency:

"O, John, to-morrow evening we shall be home! That will be glorious! Your poor mother thinks that you are still pining away in the dark sick-room. How happy she will be and with what joy she will embrace you again! And Pawken, who shed so many tears when you went away to be a soldier, how he will leap and dance—and my mother, and grandfather! I can see them all coming out with open arms to meet you. And the ox, poor beast! when it hears you, will be as happy as the rest; for I could see every day in his eyes that he had not forgotten you. And then grandfather will kill the fat buck, and we shall all feast and rejoice together, like kings. Ah, I wish that I were sitting there now!"

While chatting away in this style, she often looked round at the blind man, who walked behind holding by the leading-stick, in order to see the effect of her words on his face. A faint smile was the only change she perceived on it; but this indication of pleasure, slight as it was, encouraged her, and though her companion had made no reply, she proceeded:

"And when we once find ourselves at home again, John, I will stay by you, and never leave you. I will buy songs, and learn them by heart, to sing them to you in the evening by the fireside; when I am working in the fields, you will always be beside me, and we shall talk together during our work; and what you can't see, I shall let you feel with your hands, and in that way you shall know just as well as I how the crops are getting on—you shall see them grow in your mind. I will take you to church, too; and on Sunday evening drink a can of beer with you at the 'Crown', that you may have a chat with your old friends. Everything will be just as if you were not blind. What do you say to all that? Is it not all very delightful to think of?"

A few tears fell from under the green shade which covered the soldier's eyes, and rolled like rain-drops upon the road. He replied in a melancholy tone:

"Trien dear, your voice is so sweet that it makes my heart tremble with a kind of sadness. When I listen to your beautiful talking, I feel as if my guardian angel were walking on before me: I see you standing in front of me; you have wings, and your body is as bright as the sun. I believe it is our dear heavenly Father who lets me see with my poor blind eyes how you are to be afterwards rewarded in heaven for your inconceivable goodness."

"Ah, John, you must not speak in that singular way," replied Trien; "I desire only one reward for my labour, and that is to see you less melancholy. You were much more cheerful yesterday."

The blind man drew back the stick, and taking the maiden's hand that he might walk beside her, said:

"Trien, yesterday I was merry because I was thinking of my return home. But since this morning, and especially since I slept yonder, I perceive how matters really stand. Something disturbs my heart which I will not hide from you—God himself would punish me were I to repay your love with selfishness."

"Well, John, what has come into your head now. You make me so anxious that I can scarcely walk on. Tell me what grieves you so; it must be some fancy or other."

"Let us talk quietly and calmly over the matter, Trien," replied the young man, with a choking voice. "You are strong, pretty, and good of heart, and can do

every kind of work; is it proper that you should let your young life wasted and lost out of love and pity for an unfortunate blind man? And then, when our parents lie in the churchyard, you will be old, alone, and destitute, and all for my sake."

The maiden, moved by the sad tones of his voice, wept bitterly, though the young man did not perceive it.

"Trien, even on my deathbed shall I think of that blessed moment by the linden-tree, when we took farewell of one another. I understood what your darling blue eyes then said, and it has made me happy in my sufferings. Even when the doctor was burning my eyes with the caustic so that I screamed with the agony, you stood before me with the same blush upon your brow, and I still felt your hand tremble in mine. Ah! if the all-merciful God had left me but one eye to work for our daily bread, I would have fallen on my knees before you, Trien, to entreat that we should be united for life; and I would have worked myself to death to reward you for your kindness in granting me entreaty. But now, that is all over."

"But, for God's sake, John," cried the girl, full of despair, "what are you talking of? Do you say all this to torture me? What in the world then do you wish?"

"Sorrow—and death!" sighed the young man.

"Death!" cried Trien with vexation. "Do you think I will let you die? What do you mean? Speak more clearly, I can't bear these mysterious words. I will go no further. Sit down here for a little that these hateful thoughts may be driven out of your head."

She led the blind man to the roadside, and taking off the knapsack, sat down with him on the thin grass, and said:

"Now, then, John, let me hear what you have got to say; and speak right out what you mean."

"Ah, dear Trien, you know what I mean; you will cast away your youth for my sake. Can I then desire that you should waste your whole life out of compassion for me? The very thought tears my heart to pieces. If you wish me to have an easy mind and be cheerful, then promise that you will be henceforth nothing more to me than a sister; that you will go to merry-makings as formerly, and be friendly to other young men."

Trien interrupted him with sobs and tears:

"John, John! how is it possible that you can be so cruel? You cut my heart in two like a butcher. All the reward for my kindness is, 'Go, seek other young men.' How have I deserved that, or what have I done wrong?"

John sought for the maiden's hand, and when he had grasped it, said with a melancholy voice:

"Ah, Trien, you will not understand me. Had I still six eyes I would let them all be burnt out just that I might love you, if I could do so without bringing you sorrow. And yet blindness is a calamity the bitterness of which no one can conceive so long as he has the light. But God would assuredly punish me were I to use your life for my own advantage."

"And were I to follow your hateful advice, I suppose you would forget me too?"

"Forget!" replied the blind man. "It is always night around me. My whole life long I must think and dream. On whom and on what? Only on your goodness, and on what your eyes said when we parted yonder."

"And even if you gained your wish, you would still continue to love Trien, then, would you?"

"Always, always—till death!"

The maiden wiped the tears from her eyes. A totally different expression now took possession of

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