

THE RECRUIT
BY HENDRICK CONSCIENCE

(CONTINUED.)

Scarcely had the girl read, with the greatest effort, the closing words of the letter, when her face became as pale as death, her arms sank powerless by her side, her eyes closed, and her head fell slowly back on the wheelbarrow. There she lay unconscious, in a death-like swoon.

The sultry breeze from the heath lazily stirred the oak twigs overhead, and the quivering leaves threw their shadow on the maiden's pale brow; the honey-bee buzzed and hummed round her head, high up towards the heavens, the skylark soared with its song, far away into the solitude was heard the ceaseless chirping of the crickets — and yet all was still and silent. Nothing awoke the maiden out of her death-like slumber.

The sun advanced gradually in its path, till a warm beam penetrated the foliage, and fell on her face. The unhappy girl slowly opened her eyes, and the blood began to flow again through her veins. She raised her head and looked round with a confused expression, unable to understand where she was. The letter, which still lay open at her feet, recalled the fearful calamity to her mind. She picked it up, and, folding it carefully, put it into her bosom, and bent her head in deep reflection.

After some time she rose, and wheeling the barrow hastily to a little field, half tore and half cut the sainfoin. In less than a minute the barrow was fully laden. With as much rapidity she returned home, threw down the fodder before the cow, and then entering the house, said abruptly:

"To-morrow, at daybreak, I go to John."

"Oh, child!" cried her mother, "it is at the other end of the country. What are you thinking of? You will not reach it in a year!"

"I go to John, I tell you," replied the girl decidedly, "and I shall find him out were it three hundred miles from here. Our parish-clerk will tell me the way."

John's mother went up to her with folded hands and with supplicating mien, and sighed:

"Ah, Trien, dear angel! will you really do that for my child? I will bless you till my dying day!"

"Do it!" cried Trien, do it! The king himself will not prevent me. I will see John, and console him, or perish in the attempt."

"Oh! a thousand thanks, Trien!" exclaimed the mother, and clasped the maiden to her breast.

CHAPTER IV.

It is just seven o'clock in the morning, but the heat is great notwithstanding, for the sun glows brightly in the deep blue sky.

See, yonder on the highway, not far from the beautiful river Meuse, a peasant girl is walking forward vigorously. Her dress shows that she is a stranger here; for such plaited caps ornamented with lace, and such straw hats, are not worn by the women of Limburg. She walks barefoot, carrying her shoes in her hand. The perspiration drops from her brow, and though weary even to fainting, she directs her look with inexpressible joy upon a distant church-tower, for there lies the city Venloo, the termination of her long journey.

Poor Trien! for four days now she has walked steadily on, asking her way, and suffering pain and fatigue. She has allowed herself short repose and little food; but God and her strong nature have aided her. She has found it—the place where her unhappy friend lies suffering and languishing far from his friends and home. All

her grief is forgotten; her heart leaps with joy and beats with impatience. Had she wings, she would fly like lightning to those turrets, from whose roofs the sun is reflected as from a mirror. Increasing her speed, the young peasant girl pushed on, till she came close upon the entrenchments of the city of Venloo. She then quickly put on her shoes, brushed off the dust a little, arranged her dress, and entered the open gate with a stout heart.

After she had advanced a few steps between the outer ramparts, she observed a soldier with a musket in his hand walking up and down before a little house. While still at some distance, she smiled in a friendly way to the sentinel, but he looked at her with perfect indifference. Spite of this, however, she approached boldly, and asked, with an agreeable smile:

"Friend, can you tell me where I can find John Braems? He is here among the soldiers somewhere."

The sentinel was a Walloon, from about Liege.

"Can't understand," he grumbled, and wheeled round to call the corporal.

The latter walked out of the guard-house, and came kindly up to the maiden, who courtesied politely, and inquired:

"Mr. Corporal, can you tell me, if you will be so good, where John Braems is to be found?"

The corporal looked amazed, like one who is disappointed in his expectations, and, turning to the guard-house, he called out in the Hainault dialect:

"Ho, Fleming! come here. Here's a chance of earning a pot of beer."

A young soldier sprang down from the wooden board on which he was sitting and came out, still rubbing a heavy sleep from his eyes, and looking rather cross; but as soon as he saw the girl, his expression became more friendly.

"Now, then, Micken," he asked, "what do you want?"

"I have come here to see John Braems. Can you tell me where he is to be found?"

"John Braems! I have never heard the name."

"But he is a soldier among the Belgians, like yourself."

"Yes, that may be; but does he serve in the cavalry or the infantry?"

"What do you mean, friend?"

"Is he in the horse or foot?"

"I don't know that; but he is a soldier in the Rifles. Are they not in the city?"

"There! — no wonder I didn't know him; we are of the ninth."

During this conversation, the corporal, and three or four soldiers beside the sentinel, had approached the girl. Trien could not understand why they peered into her face in so strange a way, laughing and jesting in the Walloon dialect. She began, however, to feel ashamed and said to the Fleming, imploringly:

"Ah, friend! be so good as to show me the way; I am in such great haste."

The obliging soldier answered quickly:

"Go through the gate, strike into the first street on the right, then to the left—then once more to the left, and after that to the right again, till you come to a chapel; you leave this on your left, and turn to the right, behind the big house, where you will see a shop; when you have gone a considerable way further, then take to your left again, and this will bring you to the market-place; ask there for the barracks of the second Rifles, and any child will show you where it is to be found."

Trien was almost out of her senses; her head whirled with all the lefts and rights which she had endeavoured to fix in her mind.

She could make nothing of it, however, and was about to beg a clearer explanation, when, suddenly, the sentinel shouted as loud as he could:

"Aux armes!"

Every one ran hither and thither, and hastened to the guardhouse to get their arms; while the soldier said hastily to the terrified girl:

"Off with you! off with you! — run, or we shall be put into the lock-up. The town-governor is coming."

The maiden did not wait to be told twice, for at the city gate she saw an officer on horseback, who looked to her like a king, and had a great moustache. Angry, because he had surprised the guard while speaking with a young woman, he looked at the poor peasant girl as if he would eat her, but rode past without saying anything; but she heard with trembling how he scolded the soldiers, without being able to understand what had caused such violent anger.

She hastened into the city, and at last found the market-place. Here and there she saw soldiers in various costumes; but the occurrence with the guard had made her prudent. She now addressed herself to a citizen's wife:

"Do you know Flemish, friend?"

"Dutch! Yes."

"Will you be so good as tell me where the Rifles lie?"

"Certainly. You must turn round the corner there, and go straight on to the end of the street; there you will find the riflemen's barracks."

"A thousand thanks!" said Trien, setting off in the direction pointed out. She easily enough recognized the barrack when she reached it, both on account of the many soldiers going out and in, and the noise of the drums inside.

Smiling with joy, she went straight up to the gate with the intention of entering, but the sentinel called out in a gruff tone:

"Halt! back! — there is no admission here."

And when the girl ventured to advance a step or two, he pushed her back with his hand.

"Ah, friend! I wish very, very much to speak with an acquaintance who is a soldier here; what must I do?"

"In what battalion, and in what company is he?" asked the sentinel.

"Ah! I can't tell that," she replied in a disheartened tone.

"Wait for half an hour," rejoined the sentinel; "the signal for soup is just about to be given, and immediately after is the call to parade. Then you will see every man in the barrack march out, and if you have good eyes, may single out your friend. Go, meanwhile, and drink a glass of beer in the 'Falcon', hard by, and leave me, for I see the adjutant looking at us."

The sentinel now let the perplexed girl stand there unheeded, struck his right hand forcibly on the butt-end of his musket, threw back his head, and marched up and down like a proud soldier without casting another glance at poor Trien.

She remained for a moment sunk in deep thought, and tortured herself to find out how it could be a misdeed to show a stranger the way. Her grief and vexation began to overpower her. Impatient as she was, however, half an hour seemed to her not too long to wait, and she accordingly determined to stand near the barrack-gate when the Rifles were marching out, and take such great care that not one should escape her eye. She would see and recognize John! But with this charming thought, her countenance was suddenly overcast; for it all at once occurred to her that it was impossible that a blind man could march with the rest of the soldiers. Still, what could she know about it! Everything here was so singular and extraordinary to her. In

her despair, she followed the sentinel's advice, and slowly went towards the 'Falcon'. Arrived in the tavern, she called for a glass of beer, and sat down, weary and ashamed, at a table in the corner.

In the tavern room there were eight or ten soldiers standing beside the bar, and gossiping in a rough and loud way of things connected with the 'service'.

When the maiden entered, they had all turned towards her, and exchanged their remarks, at the same time exchanging a smile. As they all spoke French or Walloon, however, Trien did not understand what they said about her, and although the impudent glances of the soldiers annoyed her, she smiled notwithstanding, and said: "Good-day to you all, friends."

These soldiers seemed to her to be fine, gallant fellows, with the exception of one, who was older than the others, and assumed a certain superiority over them. He wore coarse gloves of chamois leather; the buttons of his waistcoat shone like gold; the military cap hung over his left ear, while his magnificent moustache was made to stand up with black wax. He stood with the upper part of his body bent back, and his hand planted on his side, like a perpetual challenge. This haughty warrior must be provost of the regiment, or fencing-master at least, thought Trien.

It was not his exterior and his bearing which made the girl form a bad opinion of him; but it was the shameless way in which he compelled her to hold down her eyes before his impudent gaze, and his appearing to make jests on her in a loud coarse tone, which annoyed her. Nor did she hide what she felt, for the proud rifleman could easily see from her face that she had no friendly feelings towards him.

While both parties were thus looking at each other, the hostess brought a glass of beer to the maiden. A young soldier, with a mild expression and friendly eyes, approached her, put forward his glass, and said in the dialect of the Kempenland:

"Micken, let us touch glasses. You are certainly from the Antwerp country."

"No, comrade, I am from the St. Antonis district, from Schilde or Magerhalle, whichever you please."

"And I am a young man from Wechel-ter-zande, so we are neighbours."

Joy lighted up the maiden's countenance, and she gave the young soldier as affectionate a look as if she had found a brother in him.

Meanwhile, the other riflemen also had advanced to the table, some sitting down upon it. The soldier with the brushed-up moustache sat down so close to Trien, that he almost touched her.

Trien could not bear his mocking and confident air, and trembled as if afraid. She then seized the hand of her countryman, and begged in the friendliest way:

"Oh, my good friend, you must sit by me, if you will be so good, for I am afraid of the Walloons. What does this man here suppose that I am?"

"Bah, bah!" replied her friend, "he is an empty braggart. Let him only dare to touch you, and I will bring my fist down on his moustache, were he a hundred times fencing-master."

Encouraged by these words, Trien turned to the mocking fellow and said confidently:

"Mr. Soldier, I would beg you to sit along a bit. What do you imagine! what do you take me for?"

The fencing-master burst into a loud laugh, showing his stool back a little, at the same time, however, he made various jesting remarks, which the maiden fortunately did not understand.

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