

THE LION OF FLANDERS.

BY HENDRIK CONSCIENCE

CHAPTER X.

Bruges being now entirely at the mercy of the French party, De Chastillon began to think seriously of executing the several commissions with which he had been charged; and the first that occurred to him was the securing, according to the queen's desire, of the person of the young Matilda de Beune. It might seem, indeed, as though nothing need stand in the way of his immediately carrying out this design, seeing that the city was occupied by his troops in overpowering force; nevertheless, a motive of policy restrained him for a time. He was anxious, in the first instance, to establish his dominion on a firm and permanent basis; and this he conceived could be effected only by breaking once for all the power of the guilds, and erecting a strong citadel in order to overawe the town; this accomplished, he was prepared without further delay, to seize Matilda and send her off to France.

The arrival and entry of the French troops had filled Adolf of Nieuwland with the most serious apprehensions for his young charge, now in the midst of her encephalitis, and the young Matilda de Beune. He had tried to establish her dominion on a firm and permanent basis; and this he conceived could be effected only by breaking once for all the power of the guilds, and erecting a strong citadel in order to overawe the town; this accomplished, he was prepared without further delay, to seize Matilda and send her off to France.

Some weeks had now passed since Adolf's complete recovery, when one day with sauntering steps he passed the city gates, and struck into a narrow pathway across the fields, which led him on in dreamy mood towards the little hamlet of Sevecoote. The sun was fast sinking towards the horizon, and the western sky was already glowing with the tints of even light. With head bowed down, and full of bitter thought, Adolf walked on, following the path mechanically, and taking little heed whether he was going. A fear glistened from beneath his eyelids, and many a heavy sigh broke from his bosom. A thousand times had he strained his imagination to find some means of alleviating the young Matilda's lot, and as often had he fallen back into deeper despair, so sad and hopeless did it appear. And, for himself, what wretchedness, what shame! each day, and all day long, to watch her pining away with sorrow, and sinking into an early grave, and thus to stand by the while with folded arms, powerless alike to help, to counsel, or to console!

He was now at some distance from the city. Wearied more with the burden of his sadness than with the length of the way, he seated himself upon a bank, and still allowed his thoughts to drift along upon the drowsy current of his reverie. As he sat there, with his eyes bent upon the ground, he suddenly became aware that he was no longer alone;—a stranger stood before him.

The unknown was dressed in a friar's frock of brown woolen, with a wide and deep hood; a long grey beard hung down upon his breast, and his bright black eyes were overhung by shaggy brows. His complexion was deeply bronzed; his features hard and strongly marked; his forehead scarred, and deeply furrowed with wrinkles. Like some way-worn traveller, he dragged his weary steps to the spot where Adolf sat, and with an instant gleam of satisfaction seemed to light up his features, as though he recognized one whom he was glad to meet. This, however, was but for a moment; the grave and cold expression, whether real or worn as a mask, with which he had first regarded the youth, instantaneously returned.

Adolf, aware of the friar's presence only when the latter stood close before him, immediately rose from his seat, and greeted the stranger in words of courtesy. But the melancholy tenor of his thoughts had communicated a tone of sadness to his voice; and, to say the truth, he had to put some violence on himself to speak at all.

"Noble sir," responded the friar, "a long day's journey has wearied me, and the pleasantness of the spot which you have chosen tempts me to linger awhile to snatch a few moments' rest; but I pray you let me not disturb you."

So saying he threw himself upon the grass; and, motioning with his hand, invited Adolf to do the like: who thereupon, moved either by respect for the friar's sacred character, or by some secret wish to enter into conversation with him, resumed at once his former seat, and thus found himself side by side with the stranger.

Something there was in the strange priest's voice which had a familiar sound to Adolf's ear, and he endeavored to recollect when and where he heard it; but as all his efforts failed he was at last obliged to dismiss the notion as a groundless fancy.

"Weigh well now," resumed the stranger in a solemn tone, "whether you in very truth are ready to risk your life for the Lion, your liege lord. The castellan of Bourges is ready to set him free for a season, upon his knightly word to render himself on the appointed day; but he must find some faithful and loving subject to take his place the while."

"O happy hour!" he cried; "and shall it be mine to procure this consolation for Matilda? Shall she once more behold her father, and that by my assistance? How does my heart beat with gladness! Father, you see before you the happiest man upon earth. You cannot tell what delight, what unmixed happiness, your words have given me. I will fly to my prison on the wings of joy! More precious to me than gold shall be the iron bars of my dungeon. O Matilda! would that the winds could speed to you this rapid news!"

Without interrupting the knight's transport, the friar now rose from his seat; Adolf followed his example, and they walked on together slowly towards the city.

"Noble sir," said the priest again, "I can but admire the generosity of your spirit; but though I doubt not of your courage, think you, have you well weighed the risk you are about to run? The deception once discovered, the reward of your devotedness is death."

"Is death, then, a word to frighten a Flemish knight?" answered Adolf; "but nothing shall keep me back. I did you but know how, day and night, for these six months past, I have had no other thought but to devise means how I might serve the house of Flanders at the peril of my life, you would hardly speak to me of danger or of fear. Even now, when first you saw me sitting sorrowfully beside the path, was I earnestly praying God to show me how I might best accomplish the object nearest to my heart; and He has answered me by your His priest."

"We must depart this very night, lest our secret be discovered," rejoined the friar, "and I shall have to leave you at Bourges; in thought I am already at Bourges with the Lion of Flanders, my lord and prince."

"But remember, sir knight, you are somewhat young for the part you have to play. It may be that in feature you are not unlike to Robert de Beune; but the difference of age is much to be regarded. That, however, shall be no hindrance to us; in a few moments my art shall make up the deficiency in years."

"What mean you, father? how can you make me older than I am?" "That indeed I cannot do; but I can change your face, so that the very mother who bore you should not recognize you. This I can do by means of herbs which I have learned to know the virtues of; think me that any natural art has sought to do therewith. But, noble sir, we are now hard upon the city; can you tell me whereabouts resides one Adolf of Nieuwland?"

"Adolf of Nieuwland!" exclaimed the knight; "it is with him you are now conversing. I am Adolf of Nieuwland." Great seemed the friar's surprise; he bowed, turned full towards Adolf, and regarded him with well feigned astonishment.

"What! you Adolf of Nieuwland! Then it is in your house that the lady Matilda de Beune now is?" "That honour has fallen to its lot," answered Adolf. "Your news, father, will bring me consolation; and not before it is wanted; for Matilda's life is fast wasting away with sorrow."

"Here, then, is a letter from her father, which I commit to your charge to place in her hands; for I can well perceive that it will be to you no trifling satisfaction to be the bearer of such happy tidings."

With these words he drew from underneath his frock a parchment secured with a seal and silken cord, and handed it to the knight, who received it in silence and with deep emotion. Already he seemed to be in Matilda's presence, and to have a foretaste of the joy which her delight would give him.

The friar's pace was now too slow for him; so urgent was his impatience, that he always found himself a step or two in advance of his companion.

Once within the city, they soon stood before Adolf's house; and here the priest took general but attentive survey both of it and of all the neighbouring tenements, as though fixing them in his memory for future recognition. At last he said: "Sir Adolf, I must now bid you farewell; ere the day close I will be here again; probably it may be somewhat late; meanwhile, make all the necessary preparations for your journey."

"Will you not, then, allow me to present you to the lady? Moreover, you are weary; I pray you do me the honour of taking refreshment and repose beneath my roof."

"I thank you, sir; my duty as a priest calls me elsewhere; at ten o'clock I will see you again. God have you in His holy keeping!"

And with this greeting he parted from the astonished knight, and turned into the Wool street, whence he speedily vanished into Deconinck's house.

Transported with joy at his unexpected good fortune, which has come upon him like a golden dream, Adolf knocked with the greatest impatience at his door. His dear master's letter seemed to glow between his fingers; and as soon as the door was opened, he rushed past the servant and along the corridor like one mad.

"Where is the Lady Matilda," he inquired, in a tone which demanded speedy answer.

"In the front room," replied the servant. He hurried up stairs, and hastily opened the door of the chamber. "Dry your tears, Lady Matilda," he cried, "no more sadness and sorrow! Light is breaking in upon our darkness!"

As Adolf entered, the young Countess was sitting disconsolately in the window, and from time to time sighing heavily. She looked at the knight for some moments with a countenance on which was depicted wonder, mingled with doubt bordering on incredulity. "What mean you?" she cried at last; "what light can visit such darkness as mine?"

"Nay, but so it is, noble lady; a better lot awaits you. See, here is a letter: does not the throbbing of your heart already tell you from whose hand it comes?"

More he would have said; but, even as he spoke, Matilda sprang from her seat, and snatched the letter from his hand. Her bosom heaving, her cheeks glowing with a colour that had long been stranger to them, and tears of joy streaming down her cheeks, she broke the seal and tore off the silken cord; and thence had her eyes wandered over the writing on the parchment ere she seemed to catch its purport. Then, at last, she understood it too well; unhappy maiden! her tears ceased not to flow, but the excess of them was broken up by sobs; and she sat upon a heap of woe and bitter sorrow.

"Sir Adolf," at last she said, in a tone of deep suffering, "your joy adds torture to my grief. What was it you said? Light! Read, and weep with me for my unhappy father."

The knight took the letter from Matilda's hands, and as he read it, his countenance fell. For a moment he feared that the priest had dealt treacherously by him, and had made him the bearer of evil tidings; no sooner, however, had he fully possessed himself of the contents of the letter than his suspicions vanished; but recollecting his incautious exclamations, he was seized with self reproach, and remained silent and list in thought. And now compassion filled Matilda's breast; seeing him musing so sadly, with his eyes fixed mournfully upon the letter, she repented of her hasty words, and approaching him where he stood, while a smile gleamed through her tears.

"Forgive me, Sir Adolf," she said; "be not thus troubled. Think not that I am angry with you for having raised my hopes too high; full well I know the fervour of your zeal for all that touches me and mine. Believe me, Adolf, I am not ungrateful for your generous self-devotion."

"Princely lady," he exclaimed, "I have not raised your hopes too high. I repeat, there is light for you, and my joy is not in vain. All that the letter tells you was known to me already; but it was not for that I so rejoiced. Dry your tears, lady, again I say, and cease your mourning; for soon your father shall press you to his heart."

"What!" cried Matilda, "can it indeed be true? Shall I, then, see my father, and speak to him? But why torture me thus? why talk to me in riddles? O Adolf! speak, I pray you, and free my heart from doubt."

A slight shade of raptorial passed across the young knight's countenance. Gladly would he have given her these assurances; but she sought; but his generous spirit could not bear to publish his own doubts. He answered therefore, in an earnest tone: "I pray you, illustrious lady, take not my silence amiss. Be assured that you shall in truth see my lord, your father; that you shall hear his beloved voice, receive his warm embrace; and that too, on the soil of our own dear Flanders. More to tell you is not in my power."

But the young maiden was not to be thus put off. A double feeling—her woman's curiosity and a lingering doubt—alike impelled her not to rest till she had discovered the solution of the enigma. Evidently not well pleased, she began again: "But do, Sir Adolf—do tell me what this is which you would fain conceal from me. You surely do not rate my discretion so low as to suppose that I shall betray your secret—I suppose that so much at stake?"

"I pray you spare me, lady," he replied, "it is impossible. I must not, I cannot tell you more."

With each refusal or evasion of the knight, Matilda's curiosity grew more and more. Again and again she pressed him to disclose his secret; but in vain. To curiosity succeeded impatience, to impatience irritation; till at last she lost all self-command, and burst into a flood of tears, like a child that cannot have its way.

Adolf could now resist no longer; he resolved to tell her all, however much it might cost him to be the herald of his own self-sacrifices. Matilda soon read her victory in his countenance, and drawing more closely to him, regarded him with a smile of pleasure, while he thus addressed her: "Listen, then, lady, since it must be so, and hear in how wonderful a manner this letter and these joyful tidings reached me. I had wandered out toward Sevecoote, and was sitting upon a bank deep in thought, feverishly seeking heaven to have mercy upon my lawul but unhappy lord. Suddenly, happening to raise my head, my surprise I saw before me a stranger priest. In the instant it seemed to me that my prayer had been heard, and that some consolation was at hand, of which this stranger was to be the minister. And so it was, lady; for it was from his hand that I received the letter, and from his mouth the happy news. Your noble father has obtained from a generous keeper the boon of a few days' liberty; but on condition that another knight take his place in prison."

"O joy!" exclaimed Matilda; "I shall see him! I shall speak with him! Ah! my father! how has my heart longed for one kiss of your lips! O Adolf, I am beside myself with joy! How sweet are your words, my brother! But who will be willing to take my father's place?"

"The man is already found," was the brief reply. "The blessings of our Lord be upon him! How noble a spirit must his be who can thus devote himself for my father's safety! But tell me now, who is this generous knight? Let me know his name, that I ever think of it with love and gratitude; that is the least return I can make to one who thus bestows me so life at the instant peril of his own."

For a moment Adolf hesitated; the words would not pass his lips. At last, bending one knee to the ground, with a hasty effort he exclaimed: "Who else, lady, could it be than your servant Adolf?"

Her eyes were now fastened upon him with an expression of deep emotion; then, raising him from the ground, she said: "Adolf, my good brother, how shall we be ever able to repay your self-devotion? Well do I know all that you have done to soften my hard lot. Have I not seen that my well-being has been the one constant subject of your thoughts? And now you are about to take my father's place within the dangerous walls—to risk your very life for him and me! Ungrateful that I have been—thankless as I must have seemed—how have I deserved so much?"

An annual fire sparkled in the eyes of the young knight, and communicated itself to his speech. In the exultation of his feelings he exclaimed: "Does not the ancient blood of the Counts of Flanders flow in your veins? Are you not the beloved daughter of the Lion—the him who is the glory of our common country, the benefactor to whom I can never sufficiently express my gratitude? My blood, my life, are devoted to your illustrious house; and all that the Lion of Flanders loves is sacred to me."

While Matilda was still regarding him with astonishment, a servant came to announce the arrival of the stranger priest. Immediately after, the father himself entered the apartment.

"Hall to thee, illustrious daughter of the Lion of Flanders!" he began, making a lowly reverence, and at the same time throwing back his hood. The sound of the voice instantly attracted Matilda's attention. She eyed him with a close scrutiny, and as soon as she had recalled to mind the name of one whose accents sounded so familiar to her ear. Suddenly she seized him by the hand, and with eyes flashing with delight passionately exclaimed: "Heaven! I see before me my father's bosom friend! I thought that all besides Sir Adolf here had deserted; but now, thanks be to God, he has sent me a second protector!"

Diederik de Vos stood aghast; his art had failed before a woman's eye. With an air of something like chagrin, he threw off his hood, and now stood before his daughter, then turning to his youthful friends; then turning to Matilda. "In truth, lady," he exclaimed, "I must allow that your sight is sharp and piercing; I may now as well confess my natural voice. I had rather, indeed, have remained unrecognized; for the disguise which you have perceived is of the last necessity for my noble master's work. I pray you, therefore, be careful how you breathe a hint of who I really am; it might cost me my life, and what is of greater moment, defeat the mission I have in hand. Your countenance, lady, witnesses to the sufferings of your heart; but if our boys do not decide as to your sorrow will soon be over. Nevertheless, should your father's spirit be ever so prolonged, we must not cease to put our trust in the justice of heaven. Meanwhile, I have seen the Lord Robert, and conversed with him. His lot is much alleviated by the joy of his father; for the present, therefore, your heart may be at ease regarding mine."

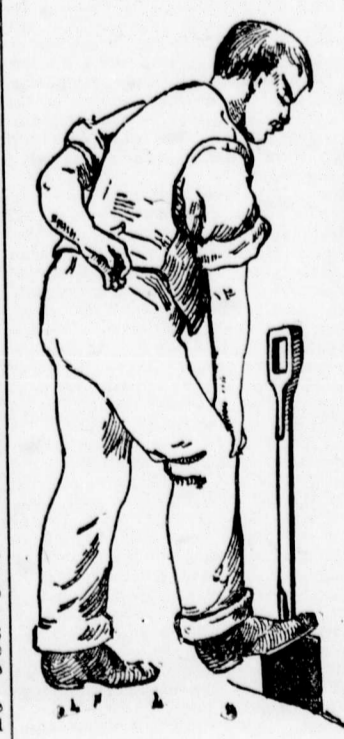
"But tell me all he said, Sir Diederik; describe his prison to me, and how he occupies his time; that I may have the pleasure of picturing it all to myself, since I yet cannot see him." Thereupon Diederik began a minute description to the castle of Bourges; and related circumstantially to the lady all that he thought could interest her, answering with ready sympathy her most trivial questions, and comforting her with the hope of a happier future. Adolf meanwhile had left the room, to inform his sister of the journey he was about to undertake, and to give directions for horse and armour to be ready. He also charged a confidential servant to inform Deconinck Breydel of his absence, that they might keep close watch over their young princess; a precaution, however, which was not, in fact, necessary; since Diederik de Vos had already concerted measures with them to that end.

As soon as the young knight returned Diederik rose from his seat; "Nay, Sir Adolf," said he, "we have not much time to spare; allow me, therefore, before we set out, to throw a little more age into your countenance. Sit down, and let me have my own way, and I shall do nothing that will harm you."

Adolf accordingly took a seat in front of Diederik, and leaned his head backwards. Matilda, quite at a loss to understand the scene before her, looked on in astonishment; with curious eyes she traced many a deep line on Adolf's youthful visage, and darkened its complexion. Her astonishment increased, as at every stroke of the pencil Adolf's countenance gradually changed its expression, and assumed something that reminded her of her father's features. At last the work was completed, and Diederik desired the patient to stand up and show himself.

"There, it is done," said he; "you are as like Lord Robert now as if the same mother had borne you; and I did not know the work of my own hands. I should make my obeisance to you as the noble Lion in person."

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MAY 9, 1908. As for M from one wonder, ha so like her fore her. "Sir A "if you v generous o to start u should an vant see y not only r lessly. The rea was obviu mediately lady!" he sometimes. But what en's emoti simple wor alied at the your und to behold now at on her, that t chased by loss of h called the n heart; treat of h and locae formed a "Take hands of excei serve forg your m your m, and t of your g "Come cried Diederik. "With I heard th one word "Farev "Farev The tr passing mounted moments and re-under her, t under the In the tion had the wood surround and all t the city looked walls had, and left stand guardhat deruined a play and A few land's d mercena in one ruin. A ware an smelly curied up sntly. The wall ative pa with the features stand of a F have n booty." The hand, a here g throws "Tv first, The over a All ey rolled, beat e first t some, again, sary t to th he mig he sud secret medite now in not il hither no nol his ad C are af