

THE RECRUIT

BY HENDRICK CONSCIENCE

(CONTINUED.)

Suddenly John's mother rose, and, seizing the girl's hand, said:

"Wait a little, Trien. You do not mean to say, surely, that John is not good? That is so short a way of beginning a letter; would it not be better to set down, Beloved son, or, Dear child?"

Trien scarcely heard her; for she was busy licking the paper, and half angrily exclaimed:

"Look there! that comes of it all. A great blot on the paper; and no licking will do any good—it will not go out. I must take the other sheet."

"Now, Trien, what do you say to it? Beloved son—that sounds much better, don't you think?"

"No, I will not put down that," grumbled Trien, in a slightly irritated tone. "Can I write to John as if I were his mother?"

"Well, what will you write, then?"

The maiden blushed all over, while she replied:

"Let us write, Dear friend. Does that not sound well?"

"No, no, I'll not have that," said the mother. "I would rather have John, short as it is."

"Beloved John—will that do?"

"Ay, ay, that's right!" replied the others all at once, as if overjoyed at the solution of the heavy problem.

"Now, keep off from the table all of you," cried Trien; "and keep Pawk away, that he may not shake me."

She now began to work. Immediately after, pure drops of perspiration stood upon her brow; she held her breath, and her countenance glowed. Soon after, she heaved a deep sigh as if she felt a great burden lifted from her, and said joyfully:

"Ah, it is the most difficult of letters that B. But there it stands now, with its thick head."

Both women stood up and looked with great admiration at the letter, which was as big as a finger-joint at least.

"Well, that is clever!" exclaimed John's mother; "the thing looks like a wallet, and it stands for Beloved John! Well, well, writing is a fine thing; one would almost think it was witchcraft."

"Come, let me get on," said Trien courageously. "I shall manage it famously now; if only the pen would not spirt so."

Trien now laboured on, perspiring and groaning. The grandfather panted and coughed; the women were silent, and did not venture to stir; the little brother busied himself dipping his fingers in the ink, and bespattering his little arms with black spots.

After a time, the first line was full of great letters, and the girl paused a moment.

"Well, Trien, how far are you now?" asked John's mother. "You must read us what you have got on the paper, there."

"Do not be so very impatient," said Trien; "nothing more stands there yet than, Beloved John. All goes on well. Just look how the sweat breaks out on me! I'd rather muck the stable; you seem to think, surely, that writing is no labour.—Pawken, let alone the ink, you rascal, else you will upset the cup."

"Come now, go on, girl," said the grandfather, "otherwise the letter will not be written till next week."

"Yes, that's true enough," replied Trien; "but tell me what I shall put down next."

"In the first place, and before anything else, inquire after his health."

She wrote on again for a time, wiped out two or three incorrect letters with her finger, annoyed herself very much with efforts to

get hold of the hair which had found its way into the slit of the pen, scolded the parish-clerk because the ink was so thick, and then read, with a loud voice, "Beloved John, how is it with your health?"

"That is as it should be," said the mother. "Now, write that we are all well—both ourselves and the cattle—and that we wish him good-day."

Trien reflected for a moment, and then went on with her writing. As soon as she was ready she read—

"God be praised, we are all in good health, and the ox and the cow likewise, except grandfather, who is ill; and we all together wish you good-day."

"Heavens!" cried the mother, Trien, child, where have you learned all that? The parish-clerk himself!"

"Do not confuse me," interrupted Trien, "and make me forget something. I feel now that all will go capitally."

For half an hour the deepest silence reigned. The work seemed to go on more easily, for Trien smiled at times while writing. Pawken alone annoyed her, for he was now dipping his whole hand in the ink, and his arm was black all over. She had pushed the cup to the other side of the table several times; but the little fellow was so bent upon playing with the ink, that nothing could take him away from it.

Spite of that, the two first pages were now full to the edge. At the request of the women, Trien now read what she had set down, with a certain self-satisfaction, and it was as follows:

"BELOVED JOHN. — How is it with your health? God be praised, we are all in good health, and the ox and the cow likewise, except grandfather, who is ill; and we all together wish you good-day. It is now six months since we heard from you. Send us word, then, whether you are still in life. It is not right of you, so to forget us—us, who are so fond of you that your mother speaks of you all day long, and that I dream of you every night—dreaming that you are unhappy, and that I hear sounding 'Trien! Trien!' so that I start up in my sleep and leap out of bed. And the ox, poor thing! is always looking out of its stall and heaving sighs, which it would almost make you shed tears to hear. And that none of us know anything at all about you is a great cause of grief to us, and you ought to have pity on us, John, for it will make your poor mother quite ill. Poor woman! if she only hears your name, a spasm seizes her throat and she begins to weep, so that it almost breaks my heart to see her."

While she was reading these lines, the eyes of the listeners gradually filled with tears; at the sad tones of the last words, they could no longer restrain their emotion, and the maiden was interrupted by loud sobs and groans. The grandfather had laid his head on the bedstead to conceal his tears; John's mother, too deeply affected to be able to repress her feelings, sprang up, and fell speechless on the young girl's neck, who beheld with surprise the effect of her writing.

"Trien, Trien! where did you find these words?" cried the other widow. "They go like a knife through my heart; and yet they are very beautiful!"

"Ah! it is the simple truth," sighed John's mother; "it is better that he should know what I have suffered in my heart. Read on farther, Trien dear; it quite astonishes me that you can write so well—there never was the like of it. Your hands are much too good, child, to milk cows or till the land;

but God lets many strange things happen in the world."

Pleased with the praise she received, Trien said with a self-satisfied smile:

"I will cope with any one in writing. Now, at last, have I discovered the proper way of writing a letter. But listen still, for there is more yet:—

"Ah, John, if you but knew all, you would not neglect to send us news. The clover has failed on account of the severe frost, and because the seed was bad; but the sainfoin smiles at you when you look at it, as mellow as butter. And the grain has suffered a little from the draught; nevertheless, our dear heavenly Father has blessed us with beautiful buck-wheat, and a large crop of early potatoes. And the joiner is married to a girl from Pulderbosh who squints, but she has brought a little dowry with her. John Sus, the butcher, fell from the brewer's roof on our old smith's back, and the smith lies at the point of death, poor fellow." — Trien paused, and looked up at her audience.

"Is that all?" asked the mother, disappointed. "Will you not tell him that the cow has calved?"

"O yes, I forgot that.—See, there it is already—Our cow has calved; all went well, and the calf is sold."

"Will you say nothing about our rabbits, then, Trien?" asked the grandfather.

After it was written, the maiden read:

"Grandfather has made a rabbit-warren in the stable; they are as fat as badgers; but the biggest shall not be killed till you come back, John, and then we shall have a glorious feast."

All burst into a hearty laugh; the little fellow, who saw everybody happy, and was himself somewhat moved by the word feast, clapped his hands. Unfortunately, however, he struck the coffee-cup so violently that it rolled over the table, and the ink was poured over the beautiful letter like a black flood. Laughter disappeared from every countenance; they looked at one another astounded and silent, and held up their hands in despair while Pawken, who was afraid of a beating, was howling and screaming with anticipation. A considerable time was spent in overwhelming the child with reproofs, and in bitter lamentations over the mishap, till at last it occurred to some one to say—

"O Heaven! what is to be done now?"

"Come, come," said Trien in a decided tone, "the mishap is not so bad, after all. I had some inclination to write the letter over again at any rate, for at first it did not go so well as I wished—the letters were too big, and the writing was crooked. Now I shall do it much better—I feel in spirits to attempt it. Just let me run as fast as I can into the village for paper and ink, and to get my pen made again, for it has become far too soft."

"Then go quickly, child," was the reply. "You have the five-franc piece you got for the calf; get the parish-clerk to change it, for we must send at least eighteen-pence to our poor John.—Pawken! get out of the house, and don't show face till evening, if possible."

Trien hastened out of the door on her way to the village, with a pleased expression on her face. The victory she had gained, the conviction that she could henceforth write to John, and above all, a kind of pride she felt in her accomplishments, filled her heart with a secret pleasure.

At the linden-tree, by the cross-roads, she saw the letter-carrier at a distance approaching. This made her stand still, and her heart beat quick with expectation; for as this road led nowhere but to the

mud-huts, and the uninhabited heath and wood beyond, she had no doubt that the postman brought some news from John. And in fact, as he approached, he took a letter out of his pocket, and said smiling:

"Trien, I have got something here for you, which comes all the way from Venloo; but there is thirty-five cents to pay."

"Thirty-five cents!" murmured Trien; as she took the letter with a trembling hand, and dreamily gazed at the superscription.

"Yes, yes," said the letter-carrier, "it is written there on the outside. Am I likely to cheat you for such a trifle?"

"Can you change this?" asked Trien, giving him the five-franc piece.

The letter-carrier changed, deducting the postage, then greeted the maiden in a friendly way, and returned to the village.

Trien ran joyfully home. But unable to resist her impatience, she tore open the letter, and was not a little surprised to see another fall out of the envelope. She lifted it up. A modest blush overspread her brow and face, while a smile played round her lips, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure. On this letter there was written, in large letters, "For Trien alone." For Trien! here, in this bit of paper, John's soul was shut up; his voice spoke out of it to her—to her alone! It was a secret between John and her!

At once moved and perplexed, she stood for a moment looking to the ground; a flood of thoughts flowed through her head, till the distant lowing of the ox recalled her to herself, and she remembered that it was not right to stay away so long. She hid the second letter in her bosom, and hastened to the hut, where she surprised the two widows, who were waiting for her return, with the joyful exclamation, "A letter from John! a letter from John!"

Both came to meet her with joyful surprise, and the good old women almost skipped with delight. The grandfather bent himself so far forward to see the letter, that he almost fell out of bed.

In a few hasty words, Trien told them how she had met the letter-carrier by the way, and how he had asked thirty-five cents; but she was interrupted by the others, who kept calling out: "Oh, Trien, read it! read it Trien!"

Trien seated herself at the table, and began to spell out the letter with a loud voice; and as the writing was not very distinct, she had to do so with every word, and had to repeat many of them before she could bring out any sense. She read as follows:

MY VERY DEAR PARENTS:—I take the pen into my hand in order to inquire into the state of your precious health, and I hope to hear from you soon also. I have got sore eyes, and am at present in the hospital; and I am very anxious, dear parents, and somewhat afraid, because so many comrades have become blind from the same disease."

Trien could read no more; she let her head sink on the ill-starred paper, while the women and the grandfather shed bitter tears, and bewailed their misfortune with loud sobs.

"O God! O God!—my poor child! my poor child! my poor child!" cried the mother, raising her hands to heaven, and walking about the room in despair. "Blind! blind!"

The maiden raised her head again, and said through her tears—"For Heaven's sake do not make it worse than it is—it is bad enough already. Let me go on; perhaps it is not so bad as we suppose. Be still, and listen."

"But tell mother not to be anxious, for I am already a little better, and I hope to recover, if it

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