

THE RECRUIT

BY HENDRICK CONSCIENCE

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER VI.

On the following morning by daybreak, Trien was again on her way, with the knapsack on her back and the blind soldier behind her.

The grass by the roadside, and the herbs on the heath, glistened in the early rays of the sun as if they had been strewn with diamonds; while the tops of the firs, moistened with dew, seemed all arrayed in silver. The eastern heavens were lighted up with a golden and purple glow; and away towards the distant cope, the night-vapours rose and floated between earth and sky. The birds were awake, and filled the air with their songs; the bees hummed busily round the wild thyme, while beetles and butterflies flew cheerfully about. All nature smiled at the dawn of beautiful day; everything proclaimed the advent of light.

The good maiden, too, found herself in a pleasing though unconscious harmony with nature. From time to time she sang lively snatches from various ballads, to give utterance to the joy which she felt; while the soldier walked on silently, but with a pleased expression which showed a heart at rest.

"How comes it, Trien dear," he said, after some time, "that you are so happy? It must be owing to the beautiful weather surely. I cannot see it, but I hear the merry song of the birds welcoming the day, and the joyful hum of the bees at my feet."

"No, John, that is not the reason," she replied; "come closer and I shall tell you what it is—something which will make you wonder. It is only a dream, to be sure, and I had almost forgotten it; but this fine fresh air has revived me, and it has all come to mind again. It is a pleasant thing to dream, is it not, John?"

"Sometimes,"

"Yes; I mean when the dreams are beautiful. I do not know when I have been so happy as last night when asleep, and I would not give my dream for twenty crown-pieces, and that is a tremendous lot of money. It is vexing, John, that dreams are not true."

"What dream have you had then, Trien, that was so very beautiful?"

"You, too, are concerned in it, John; that you may well suppose. Ah! It was so delightful! only listen: The farmer's wife—may God reward her for it, good woman!—had shown me into a little bedroom for the night. When I found myself alone, I knelt and prayed before the image of the Virgin which stood on the little house-altar. I do not know how long I knelt, but when I rose my head whirled round, and I almost lost the power of knowing where I was or what I was—so at least it seemed to me. The moon had in the meantime risen, and shone so brightly through the little window, that my room seemed all glorified with such a flood of light, that I could scarcely recognise it to be the same place. I laid my brow upon the window-pane to cool my head, and then threw myself half-dressed on the bed, that I might be ready early on the following morning. But still I could not sleep, for the moon seemed always right before my eyes; and I tormented myself to find out the man with the bundle of sticks in it.

Whether I fell asleep at last is more than I can tell; but it must have been so, for only hear what happened to me next. All of a sudden, the moon changed into a mouth and blue eyes of wonderful beauty; then a ruddy hue like that of a ripe apple came over it,

and it looked at me with so friendly a smile, that I was quite enchanted. I have never in my life seen a woman so beautiful, and so like an angel in heaven; for if there were such a one on earth, every body would certainly kneel down and worship her. I am quite sure of that; but listen to what followed. Gradually there grew out of the moon arms and legs, and a long robe adorned with great golden blossoms; and on its head there appeared a silver crown of seven bright stars. And now it was no longer the moon, but a woman who bore in her arms a little child more beautiful than the little cherubs in heaven. And, oh, John! it was our dear Lady out of the little room at home, who had become alive, and had our blessed Lord in her arms; and He smiled and beckoned to me. But there is more and better yet. How she came there I do not know, but I saw her next sitting on a chair outside the window, and you too saw her with your blind eyes; for we fell down together on our knees, and stretched out our arms from behind the window, as if calling upon the Holy Mother to come to us. Then she came gently, gently down, always nearer and nearer, and right through the window into the room. She said something to her child, Jesus, and the child touched your eyes with his finger, and you, John, exclaimed, quite mad with joy, 'I see! I see!' I, poor thing, was so overpowered by it all, that I sprang up in my sleep and fell out of bed; and oh, John, it was not true. I had only dreamt; for the moon, with the man in it, still shone in the sky, and the image of the Virgin still stood calmly on the little altar in the corner of the room. Is not that a charming dream?"

She was silent, and waited for a reply. After a short pause, the young man said:

"Trien, how beautifully you can tell a story. My heart beat with pleasure while you were speaking; I seemed to see it all happen. And when you said that our Lord touched my eyes, I felt something which I cannot describe; and I saw our dear Lady so clearly and distinctly, that I could draw on the sand the golden flowers which sparkled on her robe."

"What kind of flowers did you see, John?"

"Large roses."

"And so did I; that is strange."

"And lilies, like those which stood in the brewer's garden last year."

"I saw roses and lilies too. But how is that possible? It quite puzzles me."

"Ah, dearest," sighed John; do not deceive yourself with a false hope. 'Dreams are bubbles,' says the proverb; it is only a little comfort which God has sent to cheer us on our way."

"Never mind," said Trien joyfully; "since last night, I seem to love the Virgin-Mother more than ever; and when we are at home, I shall go to the sexton's daughter Marion, and beg some silver paper, in order to make just such a silver crown with seven stars, as I saw last night, to put on the image under the linden-tree; and if we are ever able to do it, we shall dress it in a robe adorned with golden-flowers besides. Let us now make speed, before the sun rises higher; and take hold of the stick, John, for the footpath is growing narrow and rugged. I think we must have waited out of our way when I was telling my dream."

"Trien dear, take great care to keep the right way, for my knees begin to grow weary already. I don't think I shall be able to manage ten hours to-day."

"Do not vex yourself, John," she replied, walking more slowly, "on a flat heath like this one can't go far wrong; and I see yonder in

the distance, the two towers, Moll and Baelen, as we were told this morning."

"How far distant are they?"

"An hour and a half yet. Can you manage so far this morning?"

"Yes, if we take a rest now and then by the way."

"You must tell when you are tired. We shall not speak, for it will make you sooner fatigued."

The sun meanwhile had risen high, and began to pour its burning light over the heath like a stream of fire. The air was so sultry, that it was with difficulty our travellers could breathe, and the perspiration poured from their faces. Exhausted though he was, the soldier would not allow himself to complain of fatigue, but continued to walk bravely on behind his guide. He had broken the long silence only once, with the observation that his eyes pained him excessively, as if the burning rays had increased the inflammation.

After she had kept steadily on for an hour or more, Trien suddenly stood still. Surprised at the unexpected pause he said:

"Trien, what is the matter? Why do you stop all at once in that way?"

"Well, John," she replied in a pained tone, "here is a pretty business. Heaven knows how far we have wandered from the right road, and now there stands right before us, and running quite across the whole heath; a broad stream, and not a bridge of any kind to be seen."

"That is very vexing," sighed John; "for I am already quite worn out. Is the water deep, Trien?"

"Oh, no; it is a broad shallow stream; I can see the bottom quite well, and it would not take me above the knees to wade across it."

"Let us venture it, Trien; and then we shall be saved going round."

"But it is impossible, John; for the banks are so high that you could go neither up nor down. But come, let us make a virtue of necessity."

She led her blind companion to the edge of the brook, and, first throwing her knapsack across, stepped down into the water; the young man heard her, and asked what she was going to do.

"Throw your arms round my neck, and take fast hold," she replied, and drawing the soldier towards her, she compelled him, spite of his objections, to obey her kindly order; then carrying the heavy burden through the water to the opposite side, she said:

"John, there stands a willow-bush on the bank, take hold of it and help yourself up, and I shall assist you."

He did as she told him, and gained the firm ground without any difficulty. Trien immediately joined him, shaking the water out of her clothes as she approached.

"Ah, Trien!" said the blind man—"you are goodness and love itself! How it grieves me to think that I can never reward you for so much pity and kindness."

"Now, John," she interrupted, "is it worth while to waste a word on such a trifle as my carrying you through the water? That is nothing; the sun will dry my clothes in a very short time. Try to go a little further at a slow pace, for in half an hour we shall reach the first tower, and that is Moll, as we were told. There we shall rest ourselves a little."

"Is the water of this brook pure?" he asked.

"As clear as crystal," she answered; "are you thirsty? Wait a moment—I can't get more than one wetting—and I shall get you a hearty draught of it."

While speaking, she had untied the camp-kettle from the knapsack, but the soldier said:

"No, Trien, I do not wish water to drink. My eyes pain me excessively; and I think if you were to give me water, on a napkin to wash them with, it would refresh them a little."

She stepped down into the brook, and having filled the little vessel with the purest water, went up to the blind man, and, drawing a white linen cloth from her bosom, said to him:

"Sit down, and let me wash your eyes; for you could not do it yourself without wetting your clothes."

The soldier sat down on the grass with his back towards the sun, while Trien took the shade from his head and bathed his closed eyes with the wet cloth. And when he told her that this washing revived and refreshed him very much, she kept lavishing his face and brow copiously, till he held her hand and told her to stop. As she stepped a little aside to pick up the shade, the blind man suddenly sprang to his feet, with a singular cry, and stood trembling and stretching out his hands towards his companion, while unintelligible sounds escaped from his lips:

"Heavens, John! what is the matter with you?" cried Trien, running to him with alarm.

With an air of perplexity and confusion, he pushed her gently back, saying:

"Trien, Trien, go back again to the same spot, I beseech you!"

Astonished at the tone of his voice and the incomprehensible joy depicted in his countenance, the girl did what he desired, and placed herself some steps from him. He opened his dead eyes, and, with outstretched arms, exclaimed:

"Trien, Trien! I saw you! My left eye is not quite gone."

As if struck by lightning, the poor girl trembled all over, and with tottering steps approached the soldier.

"No, no, John, it cannot be! Do not kill me with joy. This bright sunlight must have deceived you, poor fellow!"

"I saw you," exclaimed the soldier almost mad with joy, "like a black mass. You passed before my eyes like a shadow. My left eye is not quite gone, I tell you. Oh, Trien dear, it is your dream of last night."

Trien uttered a cry as piercing as if it had escaped from some one in agony, and falling on her knees, with trembling and uplifted hands she offered up to God a calm and silent but deep and earnest thanksgiving. The soldier saw her in indistinct and shadowy outline, and knelt likewise beside the praying girl. She was so lost, however, in devout adoration, that she did not perceive him, and knelt for a long time absorbed and motionless. At last, calmed by her devotion, she turned her head and saw her friend also on his knees.

"John, John! did you see what I did?" she exclaimed.

"I saw it—I saw it!"

"Oh, our dear Lady!" sighed Trien, while a torrent of tears now burst from her eyes. "This is thy doing, holy Mother of God. I will never forget it; but every year make a pilgrimage barefoot to worship thee at Scherpenheuvel."

After this earnest declaration, strength seemed all at once to leave her; she threw her arm round the soldier's neck, and, leaning her head on his breast, wept in silence. The young man's emotion was equally great; words failed him to express the mingled feelings which overflowed his heart. A whole future of gratitude, of love and joy, had opened itself to his view, and uplifted his soul with the enchanting prospect of a useful and happy life. At last, Trien raised her head, and, every now and then uttering expressions of joy, she bound the shade over the soldier's eyes, and

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