FLANDERS LITERATURE

Ironhead

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Pier and I carry the basket out onto the street. The stack of washing sways in between us. We don't hurry, not wanting to lose a shirt or sock along the way. It's cold out, and the chimneys are puffing. There's hardly anyone about. A few boys, their clothes black with dust, carry coal sacks they'll deliver to someone's home. Two wooden rafts float on the Lieve canal, chained to the iron rings in the quay wall. On the rafts, women and servant girls scrub laundry with lumps of hard white soap. Every morning you can smell the soap scent for miles around, and there's a blanket of white foam on the dark water. The fish in the Lieve are the cleanest in all of Ghent. Pier and I cross the first raft to the second one, where there's still plenty of room. We set down the wash basket. Most of the washerwomen here work for the wealthier families, but my mother doesn't need a maid: she's got me, Stans.

The women on the raft have rolled up their sleeves, and with bare arms they scrub, soak and rinse the washing at a fierce tempo. I take my time, and my lazy brother sits down on the raft in his expensive school uniform. Those stupid white kneesocks of his are going to get dirty, anybody can see that. His boat-shaped hat stays on. He's afraid that if he takes it off, I'll toss it in the water to see if it floats.

I get chatting with Mie De Peeze, a real gossipmonger, a busybody who's never been married and who shamelessly reports on the doings of her employer, the brewer Hans de Grote, whose wife can't keep away from the beer and whose children swing from the rafters like wild monkeys. At least, that's what Mie De Peeze says.

"Do you want to know something?" is how Mie De Peeze finally gets down to business. "The brewer delivered a barrel of beer on his donkey cart to Widow Coppieters. Not to the widow's tavern, though, but to the Franciscans' monastery. There's to be a boxing match there today."

"What do you know," I say as I hand Pier a corner of a sheet. He stands up. We each twist our end of the sheet in the opposite direction, and droplets spatter onto the raft.

"And not just any boxing match, mind you," Mie whispers in a conspiratorial tone, as though God isn't supposed to hear, "but a boxing match between two women."

Pier drops his end of the sheet and crosses himself.

"May God forgive them," says Mie De Peeze. She crosses herself a few times and wonders out loud what's to become of our country, now that monks have been chased out of their cloisters, Flemish youths are marching in the French army, and marriage—which is sacred and everlasting and indestructible—can be dissolved with the stroke of a civil servant's pen down at city hall, just like that.

"These are godless times," Mie De Peeze laments as she lathers up the brewer's soiled nightshirts. "It all started with that French rabble murdering their king and that poor Marie-Antoinette."

Mie De Peeze shakes her head as though she's still in mourning over that spoilt woman. Pier puts on a long face, too, as if Marie-Antoinette was his own cousin. But I don't give a darn about that baggage. I'm a child of the Revolution, and while I fold the sheet I whistle the *Marseillaise* just to taunt my brother and Mie De Peeze. They don't even notice. Mie has already struck up a chinwag with someone else.

A quarter of an hour later, I wring out the last shirt. I toss it to Pier. My hands are white from the cold water.

"We're going to that boxing match," I say.

Pier looks at me like he's just had his ears boxed by God himself. Then he folds father's shirt without giving me any further notice, like he always does when I come up with a terrific plan he doesn't approve of, the smart aleck. He places father's shirt on the pile and takes hold of one of the basket's handgrips.

"Lift," he commands.

I take the other handgrip and we lift the basket, now heavy from the wet washing. In unison we take a big step from the raft to the stone steps leading up to the quay. We climb the twelve steps to the quay without a word. Our basket leaves behind a trail of droplets. We set the basket down on the stone pavement. I roll down my sleeves. Some color returns to my fingers. They tingle.

"Did you hear what I said, Spiering?" I say. "We're going to see a boxing match."

A *spiering* is a horrid little fish, and yes, that's what I call my brother whenever he gets on my nerves.

"We're going home," he says. "You have to hang up the washing. Come on, lift."

We carry the basket a bit further, but I stop when we reach the small bridge that looks out onto the ruins of the old castle. I lower my side of the basket to the ground and let go of the handgrip. The washing nearly topples over. Pier lowers his side, too.

"You can't carry this thing home on your own," I say. "We're in this together: the washing, the boxing match, and then home."

Pier tries to make himself bigger than he is.

"We're not going! If mother finds out, you'll get such a thrashing that you'll make it into the *gazette* for sure."

"Fine—it's about time I got into the newspaper."

"Stop it, Stans," Pieter snorts. He's actually picturing tomorrow's newspaper: "*On Sunday the sixth of March, in the year eighteen hundred and eight, Constance Hoste, the eighteen-year-old daughter of the well-known Ghent engineer and inventor Leopold Hoste, was given such a thrashing by her begetter that the young lady will be henceforth impaired in her senses.*"

"You have no sense of adventure, Spiering," I say. "You're as dull as dishwater."

"A boxing match? Between women? That's immoral! On a Sunday, and on St. Colette's feast-day at that," he says. "It's a sin. We'll have to go to confession."

"You go ahead and confess for the two of us," I say, "and we'll split those Our Fathers you'll have to rattle off as penance. Come on, let's go."

"No, we have to be home on time for the midday meal."

"We'll tell them the washing took longer," I say, "because every maid in Ghent was on those washing rafts and we had to wait our turn."

"No."

"Five minutes in the monastery, Spiering, just five minutes. I want to see it. We'll have a peek inside and then leave. In and out. I promise I won't call you 'Spiering' anymore. I'll be nice to you."

"The day you're nice to me will be when Easter and Whitsun fall on the same day."

“Darn it all, Spiering, aren’t you curious? Women boxing! You can boast about it next week at your Latin school to all those sons of marquises and colonels.”

Pier sighs as loudly as he can. He knows I’m more stubborn than the two donkeys on Noah’s ark.

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The sergeant nods and turns toward us: “Which of you can swim?”

Right away, I stick my hand up. Then Cor does. And lastly, hesitantly, so does Gérard, “Rabbit”, who, judging from his sourish body odor, is content with a bath too few rather than one too many.

The sergeant takes Rabbit, Cor, Bouchon, Geoffroy de Soudan and me with him. The six of us run downstream a ways, past a bend in the river. The others stay behind with the Mole to keep an eye on the ferry. Beyond the bend in the river it’s out of view.

“Give me your guns, belts and cartridge pouches,” says the sergeant, and he starts collecting large branches, which he then breaks in half with his boot. I can hear my heart beating. Soon it’ll jump out of my throat and bounce into the river.

“Listen to officer Soudan,” the sergeant says.

“You’ll swim to the other side,” Geoff says, “and then you’ll run straight ahead, three hundred meters through those fields there. Until you come to a road. The deserters will have taken the same road from the ferry, but you’ll head them off if you cut across the field.”

“Understood,” I say, while the sergeant lashes the branches together with two belts. Bouchon rolls up our muskets and cartridge pouches in two overcoats and lays them onto the bundle of branches.

“This’ll be your raft,” the sergeant says. “Don’t lose it.”

“Raft” is a pretty impressive word for the little pile of branches with our muskets wrapped in coats on top.

“Now get undressed,” says the sergeant. “On the double!”

Cor and Rabbit immediately kick off their shoes, take off their coat and tug their shirt over their head. I gawk at the sergeant like an illiterate would a bible. Undress? What for? Should’ve kept that trap of yours shut, Stans.

“I can’t swim,” I say.

“So why did you raise your hand, numbskull?” the sergeant bristles.

Geoff just can’t keep his damn mouth shut. “But you told me you once rescued your brother from drowning, when you were children,” he says.

Sergeant Perrec can’t follow. Cor and Rabbit pull off their kneesocks.

“All right, then,” I say, taking off my shoes and kneesocks, “but I’ll swim with my clothes on.”

“You’ll take them off,” Perrec says sternly. “It’s more than a hundred meters and the water’s ice cold. Your uniform will be soaked within no time and will weigh you down. You’ll never make it to the other side. I haven’t trained you to end up as fish food.”

Cor and Gérard toss their trousers to Bouchon, who ties them and their shirts to the raft. They walk buck-naked, their manly tackle flopping to and fro, toward the shore.

“Take off the rest, soldier.”

It’s dark out, but not dark enough. All is lost. How could you be so damn stupid, Stans! I stand there in my shirt and my trousers, petrified. I’m sick to my stomach with shame.

“What’re you waiting for, goddamn it!” the sergeant screams.

I push down my trousers and out falls the rolled-up sock. My sergeant looks at the sock, and then at me. I toss my shirt, coat and trousers to Bouchon, who is busy lashing our clothing to the raft and doesn’t notice anything. I untie the linen binding from around my breasts and drop it. I

walk towards the water, naked as an earthworm. I hear the sergeant curse in his native Breton. Cor and Rabbit are already neck-deep in the river. Soudan and Bouchon stand with their knees in the water and carefully push the raft out towards Cor. I pass them. The cold water bites into my flesh. My body is a mass of goosebumps.

"Good luck," Geoff wants to say, but he doesn't get any further than "good". That "luck" gets stuck in his throat when he sees me sink, stark naked, into the water. But I mustn't think. Just swim. The clouds no longer hide the moon. The leaves on the vague trees across the river are silhouetted against the night sky.

Cor is a strong swimmer. He pushes the raft in front of him and kicks forcefully with his legs. He is the first to reach the far side and drags the dripping bundle of branches holding our muskets and clothes onto shore. He helps Rabbit out of the water. I struggle to reach the other side. The current tugs at my body, and the water is as heavy as lead. Cor gets back in the water, wades out to me, and pulls me ashore. Rabbit is nearly dressed. His mouth drops open. I see him look at my everything. I turn around and pull on my trousers. I thrust my arms into my shirt and button my coat. I hardly dare look Cor and Rabbit in the eye.

"Let's go," Cor says, and gives Rabbit a shove. They run out ahead of me and I run after them. My sopping socks squish in my shoes.

Cor, Gérard and I race across the field. Our clothes stick to our wet bodies. We can hear the deserters' voices. They're talking loudly in German. One of them guffaws. They feel safe on this side of the river. Another hour or two on foot and they'll reach the Austrian troops. They'll take off their hats, hang them on the tip of their sword, and hold them up high so that everyone will know they're defectors. They will be welcomed with open arms. They'll be given fresh bread, cured meat and a pie. And a new uniform. Completely white. An Austrian uniform.

We dig around in the pouch, and each of us takes out a cartridge. But the paper is waterlogged, and it tears. The gunpowder crumbles in my fingers.

Rabbit pulls a leather tobacco pouch from his bag. It's got four cartridges.

"Dry as a bone," he says. It pays to have a poacher in the infantry. The voices have gotten closer now, and we hastily load our muskets. I tear off the top of the heavy paper with my teeth, shake a bit of powder into the pan, snap it shut, insert the cartridge into the barrel and jam it down with the ramrod. I cock the firelock. I'm ready. I see Rabbit looking at me.

"You *shtupid*, *shtupid* broad," he says.

I stiffen. I feel the shame exploding inside me. I've put the cartridge in the wrong way around. With the paper side downwards and the torn part facing up. That way the bullet's on the wrong end of the cartridge, which means the spark can't reach the powder, and the shot won't fire. During my training I loaded that goddamn musket a thousand-and-one times according to the twelve commands, and I've pulled the goddamn trigger a thousand-and-one times—but when it really matters, when the moment of truth arrives, when a bullet can mean the difference between life and death, that thousand-and-second time, just when they discover I'm a woman, right then I muck it up. I turn my musket upside down and shake it. The gunpowder cartridge is stuck in the barrel. Why do I always muck things up? I'm as bad as Pier. I could cry. Scream. What a stupid goose you are, Stans. The stupidest goose that ever crawled out of a goose egg.

By now, the poacher has loaded both his muskets. I hear the deserters laugh as they come nearer.

"Give me one of your guns, Rabbit," I say.

"Shut up. Go knit a sweater," he says.

Cor peers over the shoulder of the hollow road. He sees the deserters approaching.

"There are about twenty of them," he says. "And we're just three."

"Two," Gérard groans.

"What now, Rabbit?" Cor asks.

Rabbit curses and glowers at me as if I'm to blame for all the misfortune in his life: the war in general, this botched foray in particular, and maybe even that wretched morning when he left the woods in the Auvergne and was stopped by an elderly gendarme who caught him with five rabbits and two pheasants under his coat.

"What's a *shtupid* broad like you doing in the army, anyway," Rabbit asks without waiting for an answer.

Cor stays calm. This fellow never panics.

"What'll we do?" he asks.

"We can't do anything," Rabbit says. "And we'll let the *shergeant* know it's all the fault of Miss Ironhead here."

We hear the deserters' shoes tramping through the mud. Soon they'll have passed us. I've ruined it. It's my fault the mission has failed. They'll kick me out of the army. They won't even want me as a provisioner. They'll jeer at me and send me packing, with a chunk of bread and a few coins, on the thousand-mile trek westward along mud roads, the prey of robbers and rapists, only to come scratching and whimpering like a dog at my husband's door, begging to be allowed back in his bed. "Stans-the-Stupid-Bride" cackles in my head. I should have stayed where I was.

"Never," I hear Mademoiselle Courage, the woman boxer, shout in my ear. Never. And I see her get back up, her face covered in scratches.

"You know something, Rabbit?" I say. "You're a milksop. I can smell the poop in your pants from here."

Then I click the bayonet onto my musket and stand up.

The deserters can't see me through the thick brush on the side of the hollow road. They're no more than five meters away. Then four. Three. My friend Mr. Charleville is at his most menacing with his best mate, Mr. Fourchette, attached to him. Every move I'll make, I've repeated countless times during training. Two meters. I take two steps forward and stand in the middle of the hollow road. I bash the butt of the musket into the face of the boy walking up front. He doesn't know what hit him. It's as though he's crashed into a wall. I don't even see him collapse. Then I thump the butt into the stomach of the guy next to him, swing my musket around in one fluid motion—the butt to the back and the bayonet to the fore—and thrust forwards. I slash the cheek of the third fellow to ribbons. Then I shoulder my rifle and point it straight at the fourth man in line.

"Weapons down," I shout, "or I'll blow your stupid brains out!"

The group of men look at me in complete bewilderment. They're youngsters. Greenhorns. That's my good luck. These are German boys who were drafted into the Emperor's army. Lads not even twenty years old who've never even seen a battlefield and who dream of a cup of warm milk on their mama's lap. They gawk senselessly. Their mouths hang open. All I hear are the groans of the boys at my feet.

"Belts off," I hear to my left. "Drop everything." Rabbit and the Hollander are both aiming their muskets.

"Belts off," Cor repeats.

"Belts off," I shout.

One of the deserters tries to make a run for it. Rabbit shoots him without flinching. The poacher drops his musket and immediately shoulders the second one.

"Belts off," he shouts.

The men undo their belts and drop their weapons.

The deserters whimper as we frogmarch them back. One of them whines, '*Mutti, mutti.*' He's crying for his mother, but she won't come rescue him. We take as many weapons as we can carry. The boy who Rabbit took down is carried by two other men. He wails from the pain. His shoulder is ruined.

"There are only three of them," I hear someone mumble in German, but the men have been caught, humiliated, and defeated. They have lost the will to turn and try to overpower us.

We arrive at the cable ferry. On the far shore, the sergeant is standing with the others, their muskets at the ready. The deserters board the same boat they blithely got off of not even a quarter of an hour ago.

"We'll stay here," Rabbit says to Cor and me. "Don't want to risk them overpowering us on the ferry."

We watch from the bank as the deserters pull themselves across the water. They haven't any choice.

Night gradually makes way for day. The stars have gone to bed. Rabbit and Cor sit down facing me. For the past hour, their faces were no more than splotches with eyes. But now they become visible. Our lips are black from the gunpowder, having torn the cartridges open with our teeth. Cor's long face is one big grin. Rabbit's old mug is, too. We're a trio of grinners. And then we laugh. We can't stop laughing. We laugh ourselves silly.

A bit later, Geoff de Soudan and the sergeant cross over on the ferry. They've brought tobacco and pipes.

"Glad to see you alive and well, *mes enfants*," he says. "The captain won't have expected us to return with the deserters."

"With your permission, *shergeant* Perrec," Rabbit says earnestly.

"I'm listening, corporal," the sergeant replies.

"Ironhead here single-handedly confronted those deserters with his bayonet and shouted with the meanest voice a soldier has ever uttered, 'Lay down your weapons, or I'll blow your *shtupid* brains out.'"

Cor collapses with laughter.

"I don't know if that's worth a promotion," says Rabbit, "but I'd be the first to recommend one."

"*Merci* for your commendation, corporal," Perrec says.

We smoke pipes. We take turns tugging the ferry back across the river. The water sloshes under the wood. The sergeant hands me my linen band and sock. I turn and take off my coat and shirt. I wind the band back around my breasts. I push the sock into my trousers. It feels good, that sock in my pants.

"Better," Rabbit says, when I turn back again.

"Better," the sergeant says.

Cor says nothing. He only nods.

"There are things we can't keep secret," the sergeant says. "Officer Bouchon saw our friend jump in the water, and he is about as discreet as the Emperor's washerwoman."

We've almost reached the shore. I'm standing next to the sergeant and see the men in our company gawk at us in the morning light.

"What're you all looking at," the sergeant barks at them. "Soldier Ironhead here has been commended by corporal Gérard for exceptional bravery. It's the first such commendation coming from Rabbit, so that says something. I plan to report this to the captain, and it wouldn't surprise me if Ironhead is presently promoted to corporal."

That gets them quiet. I step onto the riverbank. I get claps on the shoulder, little shoves, and congratulations.

"We'll celebrate another time," the sergeant says. "Fall in, men! We'll bring the deserters back to camp."

And so we march back, the deserters in between us, as the first rays of sun break through the clouds.