

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter VI. **A TRAGEDY**

How distinctly the memories of that day come to mind ! The luncheon with Gibson in the crowded café at a little table under the awning on the sidewalk ; the bright glitter of the sun in the streets, the clatter of the *fiacres* over the rough pavingstones, and the Brussels crowd gay on its holiday. The Avenue de Tervueren was thronged as I drove back to Bois-Fleuri in the afternoon ; the trams were packed. Everybody, after the spectacle at midday at Ste.-Gudule, was bound for Stockel to see the exhibition of flying, the Franco-Belgian aeroplane competition that had been in progress all that week. We had not gone, since we had comfortable seats in the belvedere of our own house, and a much finer view than we could have in the stands at Stockel, without the contact with the crowd. A much finer view indeed ! Far over the waving tops of the trees we could see Brussels lying in the plain, the great bulk of the buildings at the Cinquantenaire, the dim white mass of the Palais de Justice, and amidst the domes and towers, if one knew where to look and peered sharply enough, the delicate spire of the Hôtel de Ville, a slender silvery needle in the distance. And looking to the north there was the tower of the cathedra! at Malines ; the lovely panorama of the Brabant plain was spread before us ; one might imagine that one saw the lowlands of Flanders over the vague horizon to the west.

Every afternoon we had gone up there and watched the aeroplanes in utter grace rise and soar and dip and dive and rise again in their amazing evolutions. Olieslager, the best of Belgian flyers, was there, and Pégoud, the great Frenchman, who so short a time before had astonished the world by looping the loop. Up and up they would mount in gigantic spirals, and then, there at that dizzy altitude, poise, hang motionless and still in the upper air, immobile as the buzzards at which I used to gaze as a boy in Ohio, and then suddenly dart downward, checked in their fall, turn over, turn over again, and then again and again and again and yet again — six times ! — and at last dive swiftly downward, to be lost to sight behind the dark bank of trees. A breathless instant and then there would come to us the sound of far-off cheering and the distant strains of the bands as they played "*La Brabançonne*" or "*La Marseillaise*". It was a sight of endless interest and fascination, exhilarating and inspiring — man's airy triumph over the last of the intractable elements with which he had been struggling for ages, the apotheosis of human aspiration, with implications of beauty beyond the wings of the imagination. My mind would go back to the Ohio town, so near to which my father was born ; I could remember the early experiments of the brothers Wright, working with persevering patience, in the midst of provincial scepticism, to realize their ideal. They used to call them "the Crazy Wrights", and one old man had said to one of them :

"My boy, no one will ever invent a machine that will fly ; and if any one does he won't come from Dayton."

And now their dream had come true, this lovely reality there before my eyes above the Brabant plain !

One of those evenings, calm and still, in a transparent sky, a pretty thing had occurred. After Olieslager and Pégoud had performed their miracles three swallows flew up before us, and seemed in the foreshortened perspective to take the very places in the luminous heavens that the larger human birds had just quitted ; they too mounted in

spirals even more graceful, they paused and poised on delicate wing, and then they dived and tumbled there in the soft clear air, turning over and over, looping the loop, not six, but dozens of times, just as though they had awaited their turn and had said, " Now we'll show you how this thing should be done." It was the prettiest performance one could imagine. The servants had come up to the roof to watch the spectacle, and when the birds had done and flown away Colette said :

" *Maintenant, Excellence, les oiseaux disent qu'eux seuls savent faire ce truc, et on peut descendre.*"

And we went down. We never cared, somehow, to wait and see the number that concluded the performance — the woman in tights who mounted with her husband in a biplane and descended in a parachute ; it had seemed to us like some cheap trick of the circus, out of place in that serious triumph of science and human will.

After tea we went for a walk with. Mademoiselle P —, who was staying with. us for a few days. We went out the Chaussée de Malines toward the little village of Wezembeek, where there was a Flemish *kermesse* that Verhaeren might have described or Teniers painted. As we were coming back the hot day turned excessively sultry, ominous black clouds were piling in the west, a storm was coming, up. Just as we turned into the little road that led to Bois Fleuri the biplane with the woman of the parachute rose in the lowering sky ; it paused an instant over the trees. A bevy of Flemish peasant children were pointing excitedly upward and crying :

" *Vliegmaschine ! Vliegmaschine !* "

" *Regardez-la !* " I said.

" *Mais non !* " said mademoiselle, turning away. " *Je n'aime pas ces histoires-là !* "

She gave a nervous shudder and impulsively covered her face with lier bands. There was something of presentiment in the movement and in the moment. I looked the biplane shot suddenly down behind the trees. We reached the house a moment later and the storm broke — an electrical storm of almost tropical violence. Half an hour later Joseph came to me with an excited face and said :

" *Excellence, la femme a été tuée !* "

I did not believe it and I thought no more of it. Some American friends, Dr. and Mrs. Snyder, were there to dinner, and we sat on the terrace after dinner talking of home. The soft air was moist from the storm but the rain no longer fell ; now and then great sheets of lightning quivered over all the humid fields, then the soft darkness closed in again ; the nightingale did not sing.

The next morning, when Colette brought me my tea and toast she said :

" *Où, Excellence, la pauvre femme a été tuée hier soir.*"

The newspapers were full of it, telling how the husband had knelt over the broken form of his wife lying there in her spangles on the plain at Stockel, and how he had cried over and over :

" *Oh, ma pauvre petite poupée ! Ma pauvre petite poupée !* "

And because one life had come to so sudden an end there, on that tragic evening, the newspapers printed long columns giving all the details, and we were somehow depressed all that day because death had struck so near.

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London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.