

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter VIII. " *C'est la guerre !* "

I WAS awakened suddenly out of a sound sleep by a light, apologetic, and yet insistent knock at my door. It was six o'clock on Saturday, August 1. I got up, opened the door, and there stood Omer in uniform — the rough blue tunic, the linen pantaloons, and the little *bonnet de police*. He stood at attention, his hand at the salute.

" *C'est la guerre, Excellence !* "

The words, of course, were superfluous. Omer standing there ready to depart was the living symbol of the thing we had feared for a week. He was in a hurry ; he had to get to town, report, and go to Liège at once. I fumbled through my *porte-monnaie*, gave him all the money that I had, while he told me the latest news : the Germans had invaded the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg and were throwing down the bridges. I told him I might have him excused, but no :

" *Je ferai mon devoir*", he said.

I shook his hand. He smiled in the tender, gentle way he had and went downstairs and was gone.

I dressed, had my tea, and gave the order to move back to town. All day the servants were packing up, and late in the afternoon we were ready to leave the lovely spot where we had spent two such happy months. I gathered together my papers, the manuscript of my novel, beginning to attain a respectable size. I put it in a dispatch-box and went across the hall to see if I had left anything — to have that last look with which we will stab ourselves in moments of departure.

I found my wife in the great open window looking over the trees toward Tervueren, its little red roofs warm in the sun. She was in tears.

" My poor little Tervueren ! " she said . . .

We drove into town, the two mothers and I, the motor piled with bags ; a little silk American flag that Eugène had fastened there fluttered from the car. We passed some mounted troops in the Avenue de Tervueren. Mobilization was well under way then ! At the Cinquantenaire there was much movement and bustle ; the authorities were already requisitioning motors and parking them there. We made a detour into the Rue Belliard and so on to the Legation.

Among the things I had hurriedly swept off my writing-table into the dispatch-box — it is an insignificant incident, but there are those who will understand it — were two little books that I do not like ever to have far from the reach of my hand ; they respond to two widely differing moods. One of them was a copy of " *A Shropshire Lad* " ; the other a small volume, bound in red leather, of Marcus Aurelius. I opened it at hazard, and my eyes lighted on these words : " *Like a soldier and a Roman, having taken his post.*"

I speak of this, not to intimate that there was anything of the Roman then or ever in me, but because these words in that moment were a tonic for human weakness, facing a task of which the only thing I knew was that it would be hard, and that I was unprepared for it. I kept repeating them to myself as we drove through the noble forest that wore that summer afternoon the mysterious beauty of loved things beheld for the last time — so it seemed to us in that moment. I looked at those two sweet old women in the motor with me ; they had lived through one war in their youth and they faced this latest war with the serenity of those

advanced years which gave them the exemption of a detachment that I could envy them. " *Like a soldier and a Roman, having taken his post* "— those words, that came down to me out of the old Pagan world, were in my mind when I saw those cavalymen trotting westward under the trees along the Avenue de Tervueren ; they were associated, too, with the thought of Omer, who had refused the privilege that his attachment at a neutral Legation might have gained for him. Brave, gentle Omer ! His example was not without its force and effect . . .

At the Legation there were crowds of Americans in panic. What to do ? Well, one thing at a time, and *doucement*, as the French say. And try to comfort, to reassure . . . How many days, how many nights, it was to be my lot to do that when my own heart was sinking !

It was late before the others came in from the country, too late to dine at the Legation, and we went down to the Restaurant de la Monnaie. The dim familiar streets seemed strangely deserted, and yet almost palpably panic and fear stalked through them. There were not many in the restaurant. Near us at a little table sat a man with his bottle of Burgundy beside his plate, scowling at his newspaper with dark looks of preoccupation and concern ; beside him sat his wife, a buxom Bruxelloise, glancing about, waiting until her lord should finish reading the dispatches — one of those cairn scenes of Brussels domesticity somewhat reassuring by its mere normality. I remember too that we were gratefully surprised when our money was taken without question, for the restaurants were refusing ail money except gold. On the way home I bought a copy of *Le Petit Bleu*, which men were hoarsely crying in the Rue d'Arenberg at the entrance to the Galerie du Roi. It had an article against Germany, and across its first page was a great headline in the American style : " *Honte à la Barbarie !* "

Germany had declared war on Russia, Luxemburg had been invaded, the whole world was mobilizing — France, England, and Belgium ; declarations of war had become mere formalities. Jaurès had been assassinated at Paris ; there was a rumour that Caillaux had been killed. The world was tumbling in ruins about us.

Brand WITHLOCK

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