

## BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

### A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

#### Chapter XVII. "*Les forts tiennent toujours !*"

WHO, having lived in Brussels through that terrible month of August, can think of those days, with their various emotions, their exultations, their hopes and fears, their terror and despair, without the memory of that wonderful sunlight which filled them to the brim ? Day after day went by, and with each new morning the miracle was renewed. It was a phenomenon unusual in Brussels and in Belgium, where it rains as often as it does in Scotland. It was of the irony implicit in life. There were moments when, looking at the wide cloudless sky, thinking perhaps of Bois-Fleuri, where doubtless the rabbits still nibbled at the rose-leaves and the two magpies fluttered about with the *bonne nouvelle* they never delivered, or of Ravenstein, where the larks were warbling in the sun high above the eleventh hole, one would say that all this madness and fury could not be ! That a world so lovely, wherein life might have so much beauty and so much glory and meaning, should instead be given over to such an insane orgie of blood and lust and cruelty was to make one despair of the human race. It could not be ! And yet — there were those miserable German refugees for ever huddling in the corridors of the Legation, shaken by their fears ; and there in the courtyard, whiling away their time playing at cards, the lads of the Garde Civique, those young lawyers and doctors and clerks, that rudimentary organism of the Belgian commune, the old *Burgerwacht*, with its traditions of Jacques van Artevelde.

The heroic resistance of the little Belgian army in the forts along the Meuse — the forts that General Leman, who then commanded them, had himself constructed — created an extraordinary enthusiasm that vibrated nervously in the sparkling sunlight, producing a kind of contagious exhilaration, a veritable intoxication. Men met each other in the streets and said ecstatically :

" *Les forts tiennent toujours !* "

The newspapers were full of the valour of the Belgians. The French Republic had conferred the Legion of Honour on the City of Liège and the French colours fluttered brightly on the statue of Liège at the Cinquantenaire. Complimentary letters were exchanged between President Poincaré and King Albert. All Belgium was proud. There was a new spirit of solidarity ; the old feeling between Flemish and Walloons was forgotten. In those fierce fires a nation was being born anew.

The Grand' Place had never looked so beautiful. The flag of Belgium and the red and green of Brussels floated on the Hôtel de Ville ; there were flags on the guild-houses too, and over by the Maison du Roi there were the great umbrellas and the masses of colour of the flower-market. But the Place was very still ; looking at it one might see the various protagonists who had struggled there for liberty in all ages, as Belgium was struggling then. In the excitement emotions were easily stirred ; tears, for no reason, would start to the eyes of those with whom one talked. There was something wistful in all the faces ; somehow, humanity seemed no longer ugly, but dear, good to look upon. One spoke to persons one did not know — a kind of miracle that, in the general solemn *camaraderie*.

Lovely Brussels was lovelier than ever, but somehow with a wistful, waning loveliness, infinitely pathetic. All over the Quartier Léopold the white façades of the houses bloomed in flags, their black and red and yellow colours transparent in the sunlight ; in the Forêt the sunlight filtered through the leaves, irradiating the green boles of the trees, and through the hazy sunlight that lay on the fields the mount of Waterloo

was outlined against the sky.

In the Bois, in the midst of woodland peace, the children were playing and lovers whispered still their marvellous discoveries. The expected battle was not yet — but the Uhlans were drawing nearer ; one could almost fancy them there behind the trees. But no, not yet ; — it was only a troop of Gardes Civiques à Cheval, in their uniforms of green and their grey fur busbies, young Davignon among them, waving his hand at me.

At night the town was strangely still, every one seemed to be waiting. The outposts of the German army were only thirty miles away; the German cavalry was said to be at Tirlemont. But the movements of the French and the English were surrounded with impenetrable mystery. There was nothing to do but to wait.

" *De quoi demain sera-t-il fait?*" de Leval would say before going home for the night.

And yet nothing happened. The days went by. The city grew quieter, was filled indeed with a kind of silent glory ; with its countless flags, like mammoth tulips full of light, the shimmer of the sun — and the waiting.

Our information was all so fragmentary, so unrelated, so disproportionate. We were like the man who tried to write a history of the Civil War while a battle was going on — a battle which, in the light of subsequent developments, proved to be only a skirmish. We knew, in fact, nothing save bits of gossip or small items of personal interest. The young Princes, Léopold and Charles, had appeared on the boulevard with their governess, quite simply ; the crowds swarmed around them enthusiastically ; and returning to the Legation one afternoon, I could tell how, near the Hôpital Saint-Jean, there at the Boulevard Pacheco, the military guard had suddenly called, " *Garde à vous !* " and there was the Queen in her motor, with, General Jungbluth in uniform by her side ; and we uncovered while Her Majesty, who seemed to bear the sorrows of her country on her heart, went in to visit the wounded who had already been brought from Liège.

In the universal and naïve ignorance every one was expecting a great battle, somewhere there on that historic battle-ground of Europe which it had ever been Belgium's fate to be ; every one spoke of it, waited for it : Dr. E. J. Dillon, the war correspondent, sitting there in grey tweeds in my office smoking a cigarette, a great inlaid walking-stick between his knees ; M. Klobukowski, who came to tell me that he was turning over his interests to the Marquis of Villalobar ; and my Rumanian colleague, M. Djuvara, and his wife. Madame Djuvara had just returned through moving accidents and hairbreadth escapes by field and flood from Germany via Rotterdam.

It was always that, a great battle on the morrow — as soon as the French and English could come up. And we awaited the great event ; some thought it might take place there at Waterloo, just as before ! Meanwhile, in our lives only the smallest incidents.

A colleague comes to ask my advice on a point of taste. Should his wife keep her German maid ? Why not, if she wished to do so ? Ah, but the other servants refuse to associate with her, call her "*a nasty pig*". This is different ! No diplomatic tact, however exquisite, could deal with that ! The old Duchesse Douairière d'Arenberg sends to me to ask protection for some of her German relatives in Belgium. The feeling against the whole family is high, and the dark and stately palace there in the Petit Sablon is avoided, the glory and prestige of its ancient noble name no more able than I to save the family it had sheltered from the universal suspicion that blighted any one in Belgium who had German relations . . .

It is afternoon and de Leval and I are alone at the Legation, where it is quiet save for the furious ticking of his agitated little dock. I am reading

Roland de Mare's column in the *Indépendance Belge*, when suddenly a shot rings out in the Rue de Trèves. I pay no attention at first, then, when a fusillade follows, I look out of the window and see the Garde Civique firing in the air. In the Rue Belliard people are gazing upward and the whole squad is firing at the wide blue sky, The servants rush upstairs in fright, gather in panic in the hall. Going into the courtyard we see a monoplane *hors d'atteinte*, with the wide fanlike tail of the German Taube, sailing leisurely and unconcernedly away in the direction of Liège.

Then one evening a note came from Count Clary, asking if our Consul at Ghent would take over the Austrian Consulate there — their man, a Belgian and an honorary consul, having resigned in indignation. Also, would I take over the Austrian Legation ... the fifth invitation of this kind that I had received in a week.

Villalobar and I had a long serious discussion of the situation. I told him of my intention to remain in Brussels, no matter what befall ; without laying claim to remarkable prevision, I had a feeling that there would be work to do there. I had already accepted the responsibility of protecting British interests, and with American interests I felt that, anomalous as the situation would be were the Government to leave, that work would be more important just then than any other. He was wholly of my opinion. He had promised to take over French interests, and we agreed to act in concert. We had nothing, then, to do but wait . . .

" *Les forts tiennent toujours.*" . . . But we had seen no soldiers save Belgians, though a few German prisoners were brought in they thought that they were in France, and expressed surprise that Paris was not larger.

Then one morning de Leval came in with the news that the French had arrived ; cavalry had entered the city the night before. He had seen them from his balcony going down the Avenue de la Toison-d'Or — a squadron of weary troopers, nodding over their horses' necks ; and Gibson had seen them at the Porte de Namur. They were hailed by shouts of " *Vive la France !* " and the cavalrymen roused themselves to reply " *Vive la Belgique !* " Girls had come out from the cafés at the Porte de Namur with trays of beer, which the soldiers drank thirstily.

The city of Liège had been occupied by the Germans, but this, the *communiqués* assured us, was unimportant so long as the forts held, and " *ils tiennent toujours.*" The population there was said to be calm, even if hostages had been taken, the Bishop and the Burgomaster among them. Then one evening it was told in town that the Uhlans had been seen in the Forêt de Soignes.

We went for a drive in the Bois with the feeling that perhaps it would be for the last time. There suddenly, around a turn in the road, into the peaceful scene swept a train of motor-cars filled with British officers ; the seats of the cars were piled high with baggage, and after them there came two cars of English nurses. They all rushed madly by, and our hearts rose at our first sight of the khaki uniforms. *Les Anglais* were there at last.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

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