

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter II. THE SEASON

IT had been a brilliant and a crowded season, even if its beginnings had been touched by the shadow of mourning for the Countess of Flanders, the mother of the King, from which the Court was just emerging. The two *salons bleus* with which the season at Brussels begins had been given at the Palace, and the Queen's garden-party, with which it ends, in the Summer Palace at Laeken. But that year, destined to be so tragic in Belgian history and in the history of mankind, had been distinguished by events of unusual social interest. There had been the special mission from the new Chinese Republic ; the visit of the King and Queen of Denmark ; and, later in the fatal summer, the visit of the Lord Mayor of London, who in robes and golden chains came riding — at least from the Gare du Nord to the Palace — in his ancient coach with his beefeaters and all the civic pomp of old London town. And these events had laughing echoes and brilliant reflections in the Quartier Léopold, which never perhaps had been so gay. It is the quarter sacred, from time if not immemorial at least what would be immemorial in most of our cities, to the aristocracy, and lies west of the boulevards of the " upper town," as that part of the city was called when Léopold I came to the throne, and, with its solid blocks of stately houses, it extends now eastward almost to the Cinquanteenaire ; so has aristocracy flourished. Joseph Conrad in one of his stories refers to those houses as having given him the impression of " whitened sepulchres," and the *quartier* does wear indeed an aspect of vague melancholy un *peu triste*, with its monotonous façades of grey or white or *café au lait*, that have a way of scowling gloomily in the raie that drops down so easily from the low grey northern skies. The houses seem always to be closed and the *persiennes* drawn, as though their owners were not at home ; perhaps it is because they are not at home to everybody, though when one of the great doors is opened with a great clatter of chains by an impassive footman, and one has been admitted, one attributes the external aspect to the reserve that one finds characterizing everything within, surcharging even the cairn atmosphere. Through these great doors in other days carnages rolled as motor-cars roll in ours, or as they did roll until the Germans came, and at the other end of the *porte cochère*, which pierces the house like a tunnel, one has a bright glimpse of those lovely gardens where so much of the intimate life of Brussels is passed. For the *Bruxellois* knows the charm of formal gardens, the mystery of high walls with the lavender blossoms of wistaria or the bloom of a peach-bough falling over them in spring, just as, from long intercourse with France, he knows the beauty of subdued colours and the exquisite fines of the furniture that was made in the time of the Louis.

The inner doors of these old mansions have a sense of exclusion and intimacy that enhances their hospitality once one is admitted to it ; they give into stately halls, with a wide staircase leading up to the great *salons* with their lofty ceilings and their heavily curtained windows overlooking the street, and the *espion* to tell who stands at the door without—a device that might have relieved Horace of the bore Crispinus and delivered Emerson out of the dangers of those awful devastators of the day who dwell in every land. The old house there on the corner of the Rue Belliard and the Rue de Trèves that is the 'American Legation did very well for the ordinary times of peace, though it was hardly prepared for those extraordinary times then lurking in the dark future, when it was to be daily crowded with the victims of tragedies that even Joseph Conrad could not have imagined, and to become the strange stage of events that are now part of the history of the

dear, the charming, the tragic land. There was little hint of those tragedies in the bright spring that came so early in that fateful year. It all seems like a dream now from some dim land of youth, and of another day when we were all young and the world was otherwise. How long ago those dinners at the various Ministries — at M. Davignon's, first of all, where an American lady, whose husband had just been ordered home, glancing down the long table brilliant with its napery, its flowers, its plate, the uniforms of the men and the *toilettes* of the women about it, and the flashing jewels, sighed and whispered to me:

" I hate to leave it all I "

We were all soon to leave it and we did not know, and the master of the house was to be among the first to go not only into exile, while Germans came to pillage his wine-cellars and carouse in that very dining-hall, but to hasten on into that longer, darker exile where myriads have since been hurried. . . .

It all seems like a dream, we say, in our despair of giving a real sense of the unreality of some very real event, and I suppose that what leads one to say that, asile from one's inability to give clearness to a rather vague thought, is the fact that such light, gay, inconsequential, natural and human things are impossible in our world any more since it entered upon this long and endless night and the terrible reality of its nightmare ; they are events that belong to a world in which we used to live — a world so changed now that it can never be the same again. And yet there is a succession of scenes that live vivid in the memory ; I can even recall with perfect distinctness phrases that were uttered, phrases of not the least importance, apropos of nothing at all—the old habit of a memory in which arrangements of words have a way of embedding themselves. For instance, that night at the Lamberts, when the Baroness in a kind of haughty beauty was moving among her guests, with emeralds flashing in her hair : Madame Guinotte entered the *salon* with her two pretty daughters ; they were all in white and might have been taken for sisters — a charming sight — and Count John d'Oultremont stopping before them, saying in his deliberate way : " *Bonsoir, madame. Comment se porte voire nombreuse famille ?* "

I can see the fashionable *cohue* that thronged the *salons* of the Prince Charles de Ligne's house there on the Avenue des Arts, in those famous soirées that began at eleven o'clock ; the old Prince is leading my wife out to the dining-room and the handsome young Prince Georges de Ligne is talking to the pretty Countess B. . . And the old Prince Charles is dead, and the Baroness Lambert is dead, and the Count John d'Oultremont is a prisoner in Germany \* — they used to call him *le beau d'Oultremont* in his youth, when he was an officer in the Guides — and young Prince Georges de Ligne is dead, killed at Winghe-St.-Georges, and the great *salons* hung in red in the old house in the Avenue des Arts are closed and dark. . . .

And again that afternoon at the Wittoucks. Debussy is playing ; his finger-nails had an odd way of striking the counter of the piano as he played. And there was an actress from the Comédie Française, *une diseuse*, down from Paris for the day, who stood and recited while Debussy played ; she had a voice as sweet as falling rain . . .

I have a vision of the Marquis of Villalobar standing beside the Prince Napoléon near the great palms of a fountain in the conservatory of Prince Ernest de Ligne's house in the Rue Montoyer, looking on the world he estimated to a nicety by every one of its various standards. The Princess Clémentine is there — ladies are making sweeping curtsies before her and gentlemen with orders on their hearts are kissing her hand.

And then the ball at the Palace and the dancers under the brilliant chandeliers, the jewels and the gleam of white shoulders, and the gold lace of the officers of the

Guides — their trousers of cherry-red ; and old generals whose breasts were heavy with orders ; and suddenly the King, in black evening dress, his arm in a black silk sling, the result of a fall from a vicious horse in the Forêt de Soignes the other day.

And then there was the opera, every night if one cared to go, at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie ; all the old operas, and the *Ring of the Nibelungen*, sung by a German company from the Opera at Dresden with German thoroughness, not a line cut — and Wagner needs a blue pencil. Every one dined during the long *entracte* in the Restaurant de la Monnaie, and a bugler would blow the "Siegfried" *motif* to announce the curtain. Then *Parsifal* a score of times in French, and *Electra* and *Salomé*, with Richard Strauss himself conducting and the audience gone wild, standing up and shouting its enthusiastic bravos. La Monnaie is the soul of the city ; it was in this very theatre, at a performance of Auber's *La Muette de Portici*, that the Revolution of 1830 burst forth. Every one goes — the men keeping on their operahats until the curtain rises, standing and sweeping the loges with their glasses, and the royal box to see if the , little Queen, who is very fond of music, is there, or across at the Burgomaster's box to see if M. Max has come ; and this until the conductor appears, bows, taps with his baton, and the lights slowly die away into darkness and stillness falls, and one enters into that other world whose harmonies are so impossible to this that man has so stupidly arranged for himself.

There was, of course, the theatre ; every week the company from the Comédie Française came to Le Parc. Kraus that spring was playing *Servir*, the play whose terrible climax was so soon to be reproduced on a titanic scale with the whole vast theatre of Europe as its stage ; while at Les Galeries, Max Dearly was playing *Mon Bébé*, the French adaptation of Margaret Mayo's comedy *Baby Mine*, in which for us there was a double amusement in the inaccurate adaptation of a Chicago scene to the French stage.

Indeed there was the suggestion of the theatre in the whole series of events that made that season memorable. Not that it was theatrical in its effect, much less in its intention, but it provided a succession of *tableaux* known to our Western world only through the theatre, as when the special Chinese Mission was received at the Hôtel de Ville or at the dinner given at the Chinese Legation, the gardens outlined in coloured Oriental lights and the Belgian Ministers all wearing the new celestial decorations which the special Ambassador of the latest republic had so generously distributed.

Or in the first moments of the *dîner de gala* given by the King to the new Brazilian Minister and the new American Minister — the vast hall and the waiting guests, and the brilliant group of officers at the great double doors, the sudden cry " *Le Roi !* " and the doors swinging open and the King standing there.

And then there was the Queen's garden-party at the Summer Palace at Laeken, in the vast conservatories, with their masses of soaring green and towering palms and the heavy odour of strange flowers. The garden-party usually marks the close of the official season. It is given in May, when the flowers without as well as the flowers within the royal gardens are all in bloom ; but since it is apt to rain on any day in Belgium, the party, with its reception to the diplomatie corps, is always given in the royal conservatories.

But there was another event in that year which succeeded the garden-party — the visit of the King and Queen of Denmark. There had been no such festivities in Brussels since the visit of the German Emperor and Empress. They began with the reception King Christian held for the diplomatic corps at the Palace, his tall form in the scarlet coat giving him the air of an officer of the Life Guards. There was the *concours hippique*, and a review of the Belgian army, with a pavilion for the two Queens and a tribune for the diplomatic corps at the Rond Point of the Avenue de

Tervueren : a day of heat and clouds of dust raised by the marching infantry, the lovable Belgian dogs dutifully trundling their *mitrailleuse* behind them, the rumbling guns of the artillery, and the Guides and the Lancers galloping in review before the two Kings, side by side on their chargers with their staffs behind them ; while military bands played and trumpets blared and drums rolled, and all Brussels turned out to see and to cheer.

There was, too, the reception given by the municipality at the Hôtel de Ville. We were all assembled in the ancient Salle Gothique hung about with the old tapestries, under the Spanish flags that have depended from that oaken ceiling since the time of the Spanish domination. The Burgomaster Max, *svelte*, pale, with his prominent eyes, his pointed blonde beard, his curling moustaches, wearing the uniform and the scarlet sash of the Burgomaster, delivers in his exquisite French an address of welcome, to which the King of Denmark responds. There is a quartet to play and Croiza is there to sing, and there are two *premières danseuses* from the Monnaie. The *divertissement* over, the throng drifted along the corridors to the splendid chambers of the Burgomaster, the King and Queen signed in the *Livre d'or*, and then we went out on to the balcony to see the royal party drive away.

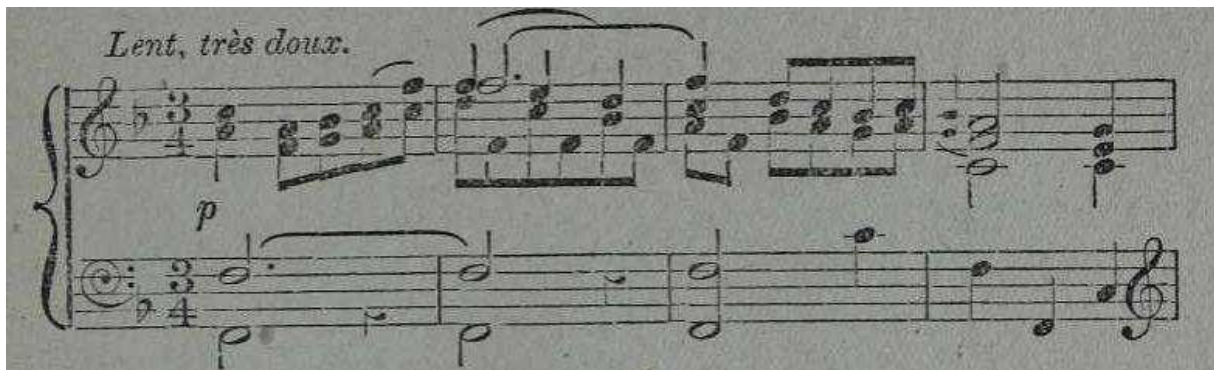
Down there below us, the Grand' Place, the most beautiful square in the world, lies under our eyes ; directly across from us the Maison du Roi, with its gilded façade ; all about the houses of the ancient guilds, and overhead that lovely spire whereon a golden St. Michael stands triumphant over the dragon he has slain. Close to the walls on ail the four sides of the square are massed the delegates from ail the old corporations, all the syndicates, all the societies of Brussels, their silken banners mingled in a mass of red and green and blue and gold. Their bearers stand silertt, motionless, waiting 'for royalty to appear ; the empty square is spread before them. We stand on the narrow stone balcony and gaze clown. The historical implications of the place impose on one the respect of silence. There in that square there had been the jousts of the Knights of the Cloth of Gold ; there had been held the old *fêtes* of the communes ; there the old trade guilds had fought out their fierce quarrels ; the *gueux* had assembled there, and there Egmont and Horne were beheaded. Charles V had ridden there in pomp and the Duke of Alva had stalked across those very stones ; there the cannonballs of Villefroi had wrought their havoc. And it was all as it is to-day — those four gilded façades, that beautiful spire soaring aloft — on that morning when some man, coming into the square from the Rue du Marché-aux-Herbes, related the news of the discovery of America — to be told, no doubt, that such a thing could not be. The centuries had rolled over it and left it unchanged in its beauty, and as we stood there looking clown the modern world faded away. . . . Out from the *portière* below us rode four heralds, slowly, with stately tread of their caparisoned horses ; they rode into the centre of the square, lifted their long trumpets to their lips, held them pointing upward at a graceful angle and blew a long fanfare, and, turning slowly around, blew to the four quarters of the square. And then out from the *portière* there rolled a coach of state, of red and gold, with coachmen and footmen in scarlet liveries and powdered wigs, and then another coach of state and another — six in all — with the Kings and the Queens and the princes and the lords- and ladies-in-waiting, and white the trumpets of the heralds blew they rolled slowly around the Grand' Place in the light that fell from a sky of mother-of-pearl in the mild spring evening. The delegates of the corporations, that dark mass all around the square, lifted the silken banners of crimson and gold and cried : " *Vivent les Rois !* "

Slowly around the square they drove, and drove around again, and then, turning into the narrow Rue au Beurre, they rolled away as though it had been Cinderella and her suite. . . . The light touched the gilt on the façades once more, then slowly

faded from a sky that glowed above the house of the Corporation of the Brewers. . .

Down in the court of the Hôtel de Ville there was a startling sound ; the chauffeurs were tuning up their motors. And we drove back into modern times, back into the twentieth century — and home to dinner.

One more scene remains to be sketched—that summer evening in the little royal theatre in the Palace at Laeken. It is a tiny theatre, where perhaps two hundred might find seats. Talma once acted there, and one evening, resting from his imperial labours, Napoleon commanded a performance in honour of Marie-Louise. It had been seldom opened since and had not been used for years ; the Queen had had it restored for this event, and with her own exquisite taste had herself arranged the entertainment that was given. The King and Queen of Denmark and the King and Queen of the Belgians and the three royal children, wriggling uncomfortably and leaning against their mother, occupied the royal box. An English duke and duchess were present, and the Ministers and the ladies of the diplomatic corps were in the little circle of loges ; in the stalls were the members of the King's and Queen's households. Hedy sang and Ysaye played. And then the second act of *Orpheus* was presented, Ysaye conducting. The stage opened out into the conservatories, whose thick purple shadows in the warm summer night afforded such an Elysian scene as no stage director could have contrived ; and with such a setting, to such an audience, in that miniature theatre the company from La Monnaie rendered Gluck's romantic music. The ballet from La Monnaie was present, and there is one strain from the sweetly sad and stately music of the classic dance that must always recall that warm and pregnant night, the shadowy dancers in their gauze, the shades whence Eurydice was not to be wooed back to a world like this. Whenever that strain comes suddenly to memory, as strains of music will, it comes as a synthesis of all that is beautiful and sweet and evanescent, the *motif* that expresses the personality of the lovely and gracious woman who chose it as an offering to her guests :



\*Count John d'Oultremont, from the effects of his confinement, has died since this line was written.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.