

## BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

### A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

#### Chapter XXIX. Some German testimony.

GENERAL VON LÜTTWITZ had heard that the son of the Burgomaster of Louvain had killed a German general. But the Burgomaster of Louvain had no son, and no German general or other officer was killed at Louvain.

The story of a general shot by the son of a burgomaster was a variant of the account of a tragedy that had occurred in Aerschot on the 19th, where the fifteen-year-old son of the Burgomaster had been killed by a firing-squad, not because he had shot a general, but because a colonel had been shot, probably by Belgian soldiers retreating through the town. This story flew all over Belgium, with embellishments and improvements : the colonel became a general, thereby increasing the gravity of the offence, and the boy became a man; enlarging the responsibility, and finally, by the time the story got down into the province of Namur, the son of the Burgomaster became the daughter of the Burgomaster, thus intensifying the horror of the deed. The tale was only a week old when General von Lüttwitz heard it. But the story has been best told by the one who knew it best, Madame Tielemans, wife of the Burgomaster of Aerschot, whose boy — telling her to be brave — was torn from her and shot, as was her husband.\*

The story of the son of the Burgomaster and the shooting of the general did not serve long as the reason for destroying Louvain ; the alleged cause took on larger proportions as the effects grew. The Germans claimed that the civilians of Louvain fired on the soldiers from windows along the Rue de la Station, the most consequential street of the old university city, a long quiet avenue lined with the handsome residences of the local quality — university professors, lawyers, doctors, and the *haute bourgeoisie*. But even this was not enough ; it was not sufficiently *Kolossal* : the thing must be deeper, more profound, more in accord with the current legend of the *francs-tireurs* — and so it grew and expanded until in the final and official version it blossomed forth as a *Volkskrieg*. In the very houses where German soldiers were quartered, so it was asserted by Germans, Belgian soldiers, who had changed their uniforms for civilian attire, had been concealed armed to the teeth, provided even with *mitrailleuses*, and, in secret communication with the Belgian Government at Antwerp, at the moment when Belgian troops were making a *sortie* from the Antwerp forts, suddenly, at a preconcerted signal, had sprung forth, firing from windows and even from loopholes in the houses — placed there, it is intimated, with a view to this very exigency when the houses were built — and had treacherously fired on innocent German soldiers who were going to the support of their sorely tried comrades at the front. Such is the German version, given in the *White Book* of May 10, 1915.

The signal for this uprising is said to have been sky-rockets falling like stars in the evening sky. It is not at all unlikely that Germans did see stars that evening. Never in history were soldiers more badly frightened than they were when those riderless horses came galloping into town through the Porte de Malines, and disturbed the officers at their food and wine. For forty years they had been reading about those French *francs-tireurs* with the ferocious names, those dark villains that had skulked through German popular fiction for two score years.

There are many accounts of it, but the account that I like best is the one written by Carl Moenckeberg and published in the *Düsseldorfer General-*

*Anzeiger* for September 10, 1914, under the title "*Our Baptism of Fire at Louvain*". I like this account because it falls in with my notion of the essential romanticism of German fiction.

"I had just eaten a bite at the *Hôtel Métropole*", says Moenckeberg. "Numerous detachments of infantry that did not belong to our regiment were passing in the street. It was said that they were going to sound the alarm, and that perhaps at night we would have to take part in a combat. I ran as far as the Place. There were our horses, saddled, that had just come from the station, and there was installed a camp of our field-wagons. We mounted and, on horseback, rode in the streets where the soldiers were swarming. The excitement was great, and swelled even more as darkness fell. No one knew what was going on, and the officers were forced to hold back their men by crying at the top of their voices in order to dominate the noise of the shuffling of the soldiers and the pawing of the horses. After a certain time a counter-order arrives. We return to the rear and again occupy the Place, whose space was filled to the last little corner with the wagons hitched up. Now they must once more distribute forage in order that before night men and horses may take their quarters. My neighbour, impatient, was citing to me the following phrase : 'The soldier passes the greatest part of his life in waiting in vain.' When the last word was hardly out of his mouth a formidable detonation had just come from the corner of the Place. We turned about with the rapidity of a flash of lightning. I saw at the height of a man a brilliant light. My first thought is that the Belgian artillery has just arrived and is shooting at the troops parked in the Place ; at the same moment all the saddle-horses rush to the side opposite from that whence came the detonation, jostle one another, and enter the street that is just in front. The harnessed horses also, seized by, panic, shy and drag the wagons in every direction ; many break their straps and start to galop across all that crowd. Impossible to control them. The panic of the horses threatens to extend itself to the men. No one knows what is going on. All, without understanding anything, look fixedly in the direction of the first explosion, awaiting the second. Then from the four sides of the Place a rain of bullets, coming from the windows of the principal houses, falls crackling on us. All precaution is useless. From whatever side one turns the bullets whistle and crackle in our ears in a bewildering way. Whoever has an arm — and every one has either an infantry gun or a musket or a revolver — shoots mechanically toward the first point where he thinks there is an enemy. They shoot a second time, then a third. They shoot without ceasing, and every one finds himself in the double danger, equally great — either to be brought down by the Belgians or by his own comrades. My revolver misses fire ; the ball is choked in the barrel. I throw myself down on my stomach under a tree, at the same time with several soldiers who were shooting. I realize in a manner very clear, but also very hopeless, that only a highly impossible miracle can save me, for this infernal chaos must endure for some minutes yet. I ask only to be struck by a blow that will finish me and not leave me half dead in the hands of these aggressors. There ! Listen ! What signify these appeals or orders shouted with insistence ? First we understand nothing because explosion follows explosion. 'The English come !' says a neighbour in my ear. 'The German troops come to our aid !' cries another. At last the shots became rarer, the voices more distinct. We hear, Don't shoot any more ; thunder and lightning, keep stil ! 'And indeed the storm quiets down a little. German discipline triumphs, the enemy is vanquished !"

Could any psychologist give a better description of the state of mind of those soldiers ? One almost has sympathy for poor Moenckeberg ; not bad as to

heart at all, but young, sentimental, imaginative, far from home — and writing for the papers.

One is not quite sure whether it is the Place de la Station or the Place du Peuple that Moenckeberg is writing about ; perhaps he is not quite sure himself. But one concludes that it must have been the Place de la Station.

Oberleutnant Telemann, in his deposition, is more matter-of-fact, less literary : "*Out in the Place, meanwhile*", he says, "*there was a terrible excitement [ein tolles Durcheinander] : the horses were frightened and ran away in all directions, and the soldiers were crying, Die Franzosen sind da ! Die Engländer sind da !*"

At any rate, Moenckeberg's story is now a classic, since it has received official recognition and is published by the Government as evidence of what occurred at Louvain, and of why the army had to do what it did there. For the Germans had an investigation — a commission was appointed to examine into the matter, to take evidence ; and this commission reported that it was all the fault of Belgian *francs-tireurs*. The witnesses were all German soldiers and a few officers ; no Belgians and no neutrals were allowed to follow the progress of the hearing. Certain Belgians, among the notables of the city of Louvain, volunteered to appear and testify, but their testimony was for the most part refused, and that which was given does not appear in the ***German White Book***, which is the official document on the subject. The inquiry was conducted, or in part conducted, by a German *Feldkriegsgerichtsrat*, Dr. Ivers. He seems to have been a kind of judge-advocate. His conclusions, of course, were that the Germans were in no wise to blame for what occurred at Louvain and that they were wholly justified in doing what they did.

The Germans had been eager to have Gibson, Bulle, Poussette, and Blount testify to the effect that while at Louvain they had seen Belgian civilians shooting from the windows. I would not consent to Gibson's testifying unless the American Government desired it, and the American Government did not desire it. Thereupon Poussette and Bulle declined to testify. Their testimony in any event, according to our rules of evidence, could have established no other fact than that three days after the tragedy began there was still shooting in the streets at Louvain. They had no means of knowing who it was that was firing, and even if civilians had fired it would not be surprising. That which had been going on for three days was enough to make any civilian fire, if he had anything to fire with, and his firing three days after the horror had begun could not throw the least light on the question of initial responsibility. Indeed, for all that the secretaries knew, the Belgian theory that German soldiers had been placed in empty houses to shoot from upper windows in order to impress the representatives of neutral Powers with the viciousness of the Belgians was just as valid as the German claim.

One morning, during the progress of the hearing, a German officer appeared at the Legation. He was large, portly, dressed in the grey-green uniform, wore a heavy sword and thick professorial spectacles. Under his arm he bore an enormous portfolio that might have contained, could he have found it, enough evidence to convict seven million Belgians. He entered, clicked his heels, placed his hand at his helmet, bowed stiffly, and without more ado seated himself at my desk, opened his portfolio, spread it out before him, and, in short, told us to begin testifying. I looked at the man in amazement. I do not know just what confused notions of his power and authority were ebullient in his skull, but I finally convinced him that he was labouring under some misapprehension ; and ultimately he went away, pausing only for a rather petulant salute. I do not know whether this man was Dr. Ivers or not. It would be too bold a confession of the weakness of my own character to say that I wish it were so, for reading

the other day of Dr. Ivers this man's physiognomy came to my mind — the thick neck, the heavy jowls, the upstanding stiff cropped hair, the myopic spectacles, and the manner. I know that the *ad hominem* argument is a fallacy, and a repugnant weapon besides, but it is not wholly uninteresting in this connexion to note that Feldkriegsgerichtsrat Ivers has since been tried and convicted before the criminal courts of Berlin on a charge of having used his legal functions for the purpose of extorting money from the mother of a man then serving in the army, whose wife was suing him for a divorce, that for this he has been sent to prison, and that in sentencing him the judge who presided at the trial said that from the evidence it had been shown that the accused Ivers was without moral sense or judgment.

The investigation, however, seems not to have been a hearing in the ordinary sense of the word. The Feldkriegsgerichtsrat evidently had a rogatory commission, for he went about from one place to another, much as he came into the Legation that morning, holding court wherever he found a witness whose testimony was desired. There was no cross-examination. The depositions were taken in many different places ; I am not quite sure that they were sworn to — not that it makes any difference, for I could never quite see myself why so much to-do was made about oaths, since a man who would lie would probably be willing to swear to it. But the depositions were made, many of them, weeks and even months afterwards, and it is a curious coincidence that they were devised so as to refute in advance the points that were afterwards raised.

The *échauffourée* in the Place de la Station was the most intense. Pay-officer Rudolph testified that from the night of the 24th to the 25th all of the chambers were still held by German officers. He tried to get a room at the Hôtel Marie-Thérèse but it was full. On the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup>, the cafés were closed at eight o'clock in accordance with the order of the Kommandantur, and no civilian was allowed in the street. The Place de la Station was at the moment Med with wagons and with soldiers. A few moments after eight o'clock a whistle blew somewhere, and immediately the soldiers in the Place began shooting in all directions. The occupants of the houses, naturally frightened, took refuge in the rear rooms and in the cellars. The officers and soldiers, themselves stricken with panic, joined the people in the cellars. Every one in Louvain knows and smiles grimly about it, except when they speak of those Germans who had the very persons with whom they had taken refuge dragged out afterwards and shot.

One other deposition is of interest — that of Oberleutnant von Sandt, the comrade of Berghausen, a captain of the Neuss Landsturm. Von Sandt's company was at the railway-station early in the evening when the shooting began.

*"In about an hour", he says, "an adjutant came who cried my name, Von Sandt. He told me that he was the adjutant of Excellency von Boehn and he put the following question to me : 'Can you affirm on oath that Belgians shot at your company from the houses situated in front and at the side ?' I replied : 'Yes, I can swear it.' Thereupon the adjutant conducted me to Excellency von Boehn, who was near by. His Excellency desired an exact report ; I gave it to him exactly as I have made it here before the member of the Council of War, Dr. Ivers. When I had finished my report His Excellency said to me : 'Can you affirm, on oath, that which you have just told me, in particular that it was the inhabitants who began to shoot from the houses ?' I replied to him : 'Certainly, I can'."*

All through Von Sandt's deposition are such phrases as *"I was told so"* and *"Soldiers told me that"*, and all of the soldiers' depositions are full of hearsay and of conclusions — which must be believed in Germany because

they are made by German soldiers.

But the account would not be complete — no history of those times, by whomever written, would be complete — without a word or two concerning Dr. Georg Berghausen.

Dr. Georg Berghausen, Surgeon-in-Chief of the end Battalion of the Landsturm of Neuss, is a young man who appears at several points in this narrative, and in his own deposition, almost in the first line, he gives us an accurate description of himself ; for there is this terrible and fatal quality in all writing, which should no doubt adjure us all to silence — namely, that no matter how imperfect a picture the writer gives of everything else, he always draws a perfect portrait of himself.

"*I arrived at Louvain*", says our doctor, "*the 24th of August in the afternoon, and went to the hotel. In order favourably to impress the landlord and his waiters I turned out of my pocket the sum of fifty francs, destined to the purchase of food.*"

There you have him, at his entrance on the stage.

No sooner arrived in Louvain than he goes to the penitentiary in order to set at liberty all prisoners of German nationality — not prisoners of war, but Germans condemned long before the war for felonies.

Again, on September 21 we find him in the heat of the fray. He goes out to battle, and at the head of several Hussars captures a *mitrailleuse* from the Belgians, and is given the Iron Cross — of the second class.

Next we see him bending to kiss the hands of Belgian nurses at the hospital, expatiating to them on the solidarity that binds all workers of the Red Cross together. Later on in September, according to a newspaper of Cologne, he is at a religious ceremony in Louvain, mounting to the pulpit beside the Dominican father and translating into German, for the benefit of German soldiers present, the sermon which the monk had just delivered in French to his own people. Thus it is not surprising to find him in the midst of the affray there in the Place de la Station that night. He had gone on foot, he says, to the Place de la Station, and on the way Belgians had fired at him from upper windows ten or twelve times. However, he was not touched by the shots of the *francs-tireurs*, and he arrived at the statue of Juste Lipse. He arrived tardily on the scene — it was then half-past ten o'clock — and he saw the body of a German soldier lying in the street, and, as he says in his deposition, asking some German soldiers near by who it was that killed the man, " they pointed to the house of David Fishbach.

But it is better that he tell it himself.

"*I myself broke in the door with the aid of my orderly, and I found the occupant of the house, M. David Fishbach the elder. I asked him the reason for the murder of the soldier, because, I said to him, 'his comrades had told me it was from the windows of your house that the shot was fired which brought down the soldier extended there on the square'. The old man assured me that he knew nothing of it. Upon this his son, the young Fishbach, came downstairs from the first story, and the old servant came out of the porter's lodge. I led outside at once the father, the son, and the servant. At this moment a panic took place in the street because from several houses situated a little farther on, on the same side, they were firing in a terrible fashion on the soldiers who were near the statue and on me. In the darkness I lost sight of the father Fishbach, the son, and the servant.*"

Again Berghausen is almost miraculously spared, and goes down the street, encountering Von Manteuffel, "*accompanied by the President of the Croix Rouge, the Dominican friar, and the old Curé*", as he refers to Monseigneur Coenraets. "*We four, or rather we five*" — Berghausen is always meticulous in minute details — "*we all saw the dead soldier*". Berghausen's star had been constant, for, like all the other soldiers on

whom, as he says, they were shooting in such terrible fashion from the windows, once more he passed through the fire unscathed. "*We all saw the dead soldier, and a few steps farther on M. David Fishbach the elder, dead also. He was stretched before the statue. I suppose that the comrades of the soldier, having seen that it was indeed from the house of Fishbach that the shot was fired that killed him, had immediately inflicted punishment on the possessor of the house.*"

Nothing here from Berghausen of his own responsibility as an officer. He had dragged an old gentleman from his own house, after breaking in his door, and had turned him over to the wrath of frenzied soldiers, and then lost sight of him in the darkness. And he *supposes* that they had killed him because he was the possessor of the house from which shots had been fired !

Later on in his deposition there is this statement : "*I can declare in the most formal manner that the officers and the soldiers who were following the Rue de la Station, at the moment when I was going to the station, did not shoot. From which it is established that — Berghausen never leaves any doubt in his evidence but himself always draws the desired conclusions for one — "from which it is established", he says, "that on the night from the 25th to the 26th of August, some time between ten and eleven o'clock, the inhabitants of the Rue de la Station, without the German soldiers having furnished them any pretext, shot from their windows on officers and men, and, in particular, when we were passing before the house N°. 120 Rue de la Station they were aiming from the windows of the second story of that house, as I saw myself the murderous fire on officers and soldiers. That all, or at least that some, of us were not killed I can explain only by the fact that the officers and soldiers were on the sidewalk on the side of the street from which they were shooting, and that, besides, profound darkness was reigning.*

"*In my deposition, which I am ready to confirm by oath, made in all conscience, it is established in a manner absolutely undeniable that on the night from the 25th to the 26th of August, as well as on the afternoon of the 26th of August, inhabitants of Louvain shot on numerous occasions on the German soldiers, and this without any pretext, without a shot having been first fired on them by an officer or soldier.*"

Such is his deposition as it appears in the **German White Book**, and such is Berghausen, and such was all of the published evidence in the hearing, such is all the evidence in the **White Book** ; and these are the star witnesses. Their evidence has satisfied the German conscience, though indeed that was satisfied already. Did not ninety-three German professors — scientists whose conclusions are said to be based only on proved facts — even long before the **White Book** appeared, solemnly declare that Louvain had been justly punished.

## **Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

\* I have made the following translation of the declaration of Madame Tielemans, widow of the Burgomaster of Aerschot :

"Here are the facts as I saw them, when the Germans seized Aerschot. About eight o'clock in the morning of August 19, I was unable to go to church with my children because bullets were falling in the streets we installed ourselves in a drawing-room facing the Grand' Place (City Hall Square). Toward nine o'clock, Belgian soldiers appeared from one of the side streets, their faces covered with blood, supporting one another. I opened the window and inquired what was happening. 'We are retreating : the Germans are pursuing us' they cried. A few minutes later, the Grand' Place was covered with German troops, seeing which my son lowered the shade ; they immediately fired into the window ; a bullet ricocheted and wounded him in the leg.

"About ten o'clock the German commander ordered my husband to the City Hall ; when he arrived they called him a *Schweinhund*, and with the greatest brutality exacted the lowering of the national flag ; he was then obliged to translate into German the posters that had been placarded in town, requiring the surrender of firearms, and advising the population to keep quiet.

"Meanwhile officers visited me, asking for hospitality : there were three of them : a general (Stenger, commanding the 8th Infantry Brigade) and two *aides* ; they were conducted to apartments

; their rooms faced the Grand' Place; they could watch the troops resting there. Shortly after they went out ; the chambermaid called me to see the condition in which they had left their rooms ; the worst burglar would not have upset the furniture as the Germans had done ; not a single drawer had escaped inspection, not a paper had remained intact. The explanation of this conduct was given to me later on. The general asked me the name of the Belgian colonel that I had received the evening before, insisted on learning to which branch of the service he belonged, etc. I replied ' I don't know his name any more than I do yours ; I don't know whence he came or where he was going, any more than I know your destination.'

"The German army continued to pass by. They were arresting all men. About four o'clock my husband came in. 'So far, so good, but I am uneasy', he said to me. He took some cigars to give to the sentinels guarding the house. The position of the doorway to the street through the garden enabled us to catch sight of the general on the balcony. I remarked to my husband that what he was doing might displease the authorities. As I re-entered the house, I glanced into the Grand' Place and I saw distinctly two columns of smoke followed by a followed of rifle-shots. My courtyard was immediately invaded by horses and soldiers, who were firing in the air like lunatics. My husband, my children, the servants, and myself had only time to rush into a cellar, hustled by soldiers who took refuge in our house, firing the while. After a few moments of indescribable anguish, one of the aides-de-camp came downstairs shouting 'The general is dead, I want the mayor'. The general had been struck by a German bullet as he stood on the balcony. My husband said to me : 'This will be serious for me'. I grasped his hand, and said : 'Courage !' The captain turned my husband over to the soldiers, who shoved him about and dragged him away. I threw myself before the captain, saying :

"Sir, you can see that neither my husband nor my son has fired, since they, are here unarmed.'

"That makes no difference, madame, he is responsible'.

"My son induced us to move to another cellar ; a half-hour later he said to me : ' Mother, I hear them looking for us.' Well, then, let us go up ; let us bravely meet our fate.'

"The same captain was there ... 'Madame, I must take your son'. He took my son, fifteen years old ! And as my son walked with difficulty owing to his wound, he kicked him along ; I closed my eyes in order not to see, I felt myself dying with pain ... It was atrocious ... I believe he has had my son taken to his father in the City Hall.

"The captain's rage was not yet appeased ; he returned for me and forced me to accompany him from the cellars to the attic, claiming that the soldiers had been fired on. He was able to see that the rooms were empty and the windows shut. During this inspection he continued to threaten me with his Browning. My daughter placed herself between us. But this was not sufficient to make him realize his cowardice. When we reached the vestibule I said to him 'What is to become of us ?' He answered coldly : 'You will be shot together with your daughter and your servants.' Meanwhile the soldiers were bending their bayonets and showing the frightened servants how well they could prick one. As the captain was leaving us, a soldier approached me, and said : 'Go into the Grand' Place, no harm will befall the women.' I went back to get a coat, a hat ; everything had already been stolen. We left our home without anything. On reaching the square, we found all the inhabitants of the neighbourhood ; they were all weeping. Beside me, a young girl was on the verge of collapse from suffering her father and her two brothers had been shot, and she had been torn from the bedside of her dying mother ; nine hours later she found her mother dead.

" We had been in the square for an hour, surrounded by soldiers All the houses on the right side of the square were in flames. What one could observe was the perfect order and method with which those bandits worked ; there was an absence of that savagery in pillaging of men left to themselves. I can declare that they acted by and with order. While the houses were burning, one could see soldiers enter the houses ; carrying electric pocket lamps, they searched the buildings, opening windows and throwing down mattresses and blankets, which were given to the poor. From time to time the soldiers shouted to us : 'You're going to be shot, you're going to be shot'. Meanwhile, soldiers were coming out of our house, their arms laden with bottles of wine ; they were opening the windows of our rooms and taking everything they could find there. I turned away from this scene of pillage. By the light of the fires my eyes encountered my husband, my son, and my brother-in-law, accompanied by other gentlemen who were being led to execution. I shall never forget that scene, nor the gaze of my husband looking for a last time at his house, and asking himself where were his wife and daughter ; and I, so that he should not lose courage, could not call to him : 'Here I am !'

"About 2 p.m. they said to us : 'The women can go home'. As my house was still filled with soldiers, I accepted a neighbour's hospitality. We had barely reached her home when Germans came to inform us that we must leave the city immediately ; it was about to be bombarded. We were forced to flee in the direction of Rillaer, With some fifty women and children, we were obliged to walk along a road strewn with the bodies of poor Belgian soldiers, civilians, horses, in the midst of burned houses ; on the way we passed hundreds of automobiles filled with German officers whose bravery consisted in levelling their revolvers at women who lacked even enough money to buy a loaf of bread ! Finally, after an hour's walk, we were able to find a farmhouse still standing. We had scarcely reached it when we were forbidden to enter by a German patrol that forced us to remain huddled together in a near-by field. It was not until late at night that we were allowed to enter the house, but only to be unable to leave it. We were obliged to stay there until eight o'clock. During this time the Germans were rounding up the men, witnessing farewells between husbands and wives, then forcing their victims to advance ; 300 meters further on they were all released. Before leaving us the soldiers inquired whether the wife of the Burgomaster of Aerschot was in the crowd. They were told 'No', while friends destroyed my pass. After their departure. I gained the next village, where, at the peril of their lives, friends hid me and later were able to help me into Holland.

"I learned that the Germans had been searching for me for weeks, and that they had even offered a reward of 10.000 francs to the person who would disclose my whereabouts. I never knew why the Germans wished to capture me.

"When my husband and his companions left the City Hall, it was 11 p.m. They were taken outside the city. A political adversary of my husband, M. Claes van Nuffel, spoke up and begged the officer in command of the firing-squad to spare the life of the Burgomaster, saying that he did not belong to the same political party as my husband, but that Aerschot needed him and that he offered his life in exchange for my husband's. The German officer was immovable. My husband thanked M. Claes, saying that he would die in peace, that his life had been spent in trying to accomplish as much good as possible, that he did not ask for his own life, but for that of his son, a child of fifteen, who would console his mother. They did not answer him. My brother-in-law besought them to spare the lives of his brother and nephew. They would not listen to him. Toward five o'clock on August 20 they forced the victims to kneel, and an instant later the best that life held for me had ceased to exist."