

## BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

### A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

#### Chapter XXXI. NAMUR, ANDENNE and elsewhere.

AFTER Dinant we began to have news of Namur. Even in those lovely September days the town was still living under a reign of terror. The Germans, after a bombardment lasting two hours, had entered on August 23 — the same Sunday that witnessed the horror at Dinant. At 6.30 that evening soldiers, with fixed bayonets and drawn revolvers, entered every house in the neighbourhood of the railway-station, ordered the people into the street ; in the great waiting-room of the station they gathered about five hundred of them, to be held as hostages. But after an hour the women and children were released, while the men and youths were detained. An hour later a German officer entered the hall. A man described the strange scene. The officer stood there before them with his heels together, then suddenly shouted :

*"Declaration !"*

He paused ; then :

*"We make war on armies, not on the populations !"*

Then he went on to announce that if they fired on the German soldiers they would all be shot, and he told them of the fate of Andenne.

At ten o'clock the same officer returned, again with his strange formula :

*" Silence ! Declaration !"*

And after that :

*"You may go now. If you have arms you must surrender them at once, even your penknives. You will be searched and then you may go."*

The people remained calm, and in a pathetic effort to placate the soldiers even served meals to them. And on the night of the 27th, suddenly — no one knew why — in the best quarter of the town, the Germans began to set fire to the houses. The Hôtel de Ville and nearly all the houses on the Place d'Armes, many buildings in the Place Léopold, and many residences as far as the Rue des Brasseurs were consumed by the flames. And it was a final touch — one is almost tempted to say artistic — to the terror of that night that all through its horrid, tragic hours the Germans kept the church bells tolling.

And one night, just as I was going to bed, a man told me how the soldiers, first evacuating the German patients who were cared for there, had set fire to the Hôpital Bribosia, an eye and ear hospital, and either shot down on the door-sill the Belgians and French who tried to escape or left them to perish in the flames.

They will tell you in Belgium that Namur escaped the fate of Dinant and Louvain because there was a disagreement among the Germans — some wishing to destroy it, while the milder party wished merely to exact a tribute from it. I know nothing of the facts, except that Namur paid a contribution of 32.000.000 francs.

Andenne, to whose fate the German officer had alluded in his declaration, is a town on the Meuse, not far from Namur. It has, or had, a population of 7.800.

On the morning of August 19, in the course of sharp fighting, the Belgians blew up the bridge across the river and then evacuated the town. The Uhlans entered immediately, seized the city treasury, and took the Burgomaster as a hostage. In the afternoon the infantry entered, and, except for the brutalities of drunken soldiers, comparative quiet prevailed during that night. The next afternoon the Germans threw a temporary bridge over the Meuse and began crossing ; the inhabitants

were watching them from the windows. Suddenly, at six o'clock p.m. there was a shot, then a *fusillade* ; the soldiers on the bridge wavered, fell back, and, panic-stricken, began shooting wildly, and all night the killing and the pillaging went on. It went on the next day, and at four o'clock on the morning of August 21 soldiers began breaking into houses and turning the inmates into the street. The crowd was ordered to walk toward the Place des Tilleuls ; those who did not walk fast enough were shot down. A Flemish clockmaker, so it was said, came out of his dwelling supporting his aged father-in-law ; he was ordered to hold up his hands, but he could not do so without letting the old man fall, so a soldier struck him in the neck with an axe. Arrived at the Place des Tilleuls, the women and children were separated from the men, and, haphazard, the soldiers picked out forty or fifty men and shot them down in cold blood.

And all the while, day and night, in the flaming streets, the pillage and the murder went on, until nearly three hundred persons were killed. The man who described it all to me had a vivid memory of a "*tall, red-headed soldier*" who was particularly conspicuous by the ferocity with which he wielded his axe and mutilated his victims — a baby among them, in the arms of its mother.

At Falisolle, French soldiers had placed machine-guns in abandoned houses and fired on the Germans as they approached. The burgomaster and the druggist went out to meet the oncoming Germans, explained that the inhabitants had taken no part in the *fusillade*, and asked that the village be spared. The German officers accepted the explanation and ordered them to dig a trench in which to bury the soldiers who had been killed. The burgomaster and the druggist called on seven other burghers to help them, and when the work was done the Germans shot the nine men and threw them into the ditch they had just dug.

At Herve several notables and women and children were torn from their homes and, prodded by German bayonets, driven off to the hamlet of La Bouche, near the Fort of Evegnée. As in most of these tragic processions, they were forced to hold their hands above their heads — and as they went they were shot in the back.

One of the best-known personalities in Belgium told me about Rossignol. The village is on the River Semois, and found itself in the centre of a battle between French and German troops. The Germans entered and sacked the village on August 22 ; they burned every house in it, not one was left. The entire male population — 117 men — and, for some reason the gentleman did not know, one woman were arrested. The woman was Madame Huriaux, and she was French ; perhaps that is why she was arrested. The next morning they were all taken to Arlon, forced to walk the entire distance under heavy escort, and reminded constantly that they would be shot upon their arrival. Not one of them could speak German, so in one of the villages through which they passed, knowing of a man who could speak that language, they asked him to accompany them and to interpret for them at the trial which they expected to have the next morning. He consented, and joined them. Upon their arrival at Arlon, without any semblance of trial, they were all alined before the railway-station and shot down — including the interpreter, whom the Germans refused to hear. Madame Huriaux, as she died, shouted : "*Vive la France !*"

When the Germans arrived at Monceau-sur-Sambre, a suburb of Charleroi, they had a list showing the names and addresses of a hundred prominent persons of the place, which it is believed was furnished by a German who had worked in the Zimmerman factory at Monceau. They seized this hundred as hostages ; among them were five well-known citizens, who afterwards related their experiences for me.

The Germans, with this band of hostages, set out on the high road toward Montigny, forcing their prisoners to run with their uplifted arms in front of Uhlans, who prodded them with their lances and struck them with the butts of their guns, and when they would not run fast enough, charged their horses upon them. One of the men was struck so violently that his shoulder was dislocated ; another, who as the result of kicks was ill for a long time; tried to intervene on behalf of his companions, but himself had only redoubled blows in consequence. A third, who was lame, could not run fast enough to suit the soldiers ; they became enraged and rained more blows upon him, and when at last, unable to go farther, he fell on the road, they pitched him over a hedge into a field and left him there. Two or three times the officers gave the order to halt, and at random took one man, or a group of four or five men, and, without listening to appeals or explanations, shot them down.

The survivors arrived at Montigny and were placed together in a barn, the door of which was left open in order that those within might look on while the soldiers piled bales of straw around the barn and saturated it with oil. While these sinister preparations were going on — it lasted all night — soldiers came from time to time, took some of the hostages, and shot them on the spot. An officer approached one of the five and, playing with a cartridge, said :

*"This is for you ; you will not be burned there."*

And then suddenly — the hostages knew not why — the soldiers seized their arms and, under a sharp order, marched away ; and, thus strangely delivered, the prisoners fled, pausing only for a last glance at the bodies of their companions huddled there against the wall, where they had been shot during the night.

Madame Tielemans has told the story of Aerschot better than I or any one can tell it. But it may be noted that the greater part of the inhabitants of Aerschot who had not fled the town were shut up in the church for days with hardly any food ; on August 28 they were marched to Louvain and turned loose, to be fired on by German soldiers ; the following day they were marched back to Aerschot and again shut up — the men in the church, the women in "a building belonging to M. Fontaine." Many women and girls were violated by the German soldiers. Seventy-eight men were taken outside the town and literally made to run the gauntlet ; German gendarmes struck them with the butts of their revolvers — and of the seventy-eight only three escaped death. Yet other men were ranged in line, the Germans shooting every third man.

The Germans killed over 150 of the inhabitants of Aerschot, among them 8 women and several children, and on September 6 300 were carted off in wagons to Germany. The pillage and burning continued for days, and a great quantity of furniture and objects of art were sent to Germany. In the seven small villages surrounding Aerschot 42 persons were killed, 462 were sent to Germany, 115 houses were burned and 823 were pillaged.

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