

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXXII. TAMINES.

I HAVE said that the worst of all was Tamines, but perhaps it only seems the worst because it made such an impression on the minds of the young men of the C.R.B. They were always talking of it.

"Yes, but have you seen Tamines ?" they would say whenever the conversation, with a kind of fatal and persistent irrelevancy, turned on the atrocities. They knew Tamines only as they passed through it on their way to and from the Borinage, and all they had seen was the poor little cemetery there in the churchyard, crowded with the new-made graves whose wooden crosses all bore the same date.

Many of the young men of the C.R.B., whose experience of human kind had been as fortunate as their own natures were kind, came to Belgium with the scepticism that did so much credit to their natures, but somehow that little graveyard at Tamines was more potent as proof to them than direct evidence could have been.

Tamines is a little mining town on the Sambre, down in what is known as the Borinage, the coal-fields between Namur and Charleroi. The Little church stands on the village green overlooking the river, its façade all splotched where the bullets and *mitraille* spattered against it. And in the graveyard beside the church there are hundreds of new-made graves, long rows of them, each with its small wooden cross and its bit of flowers. The crosses stand in serried rows, so closely that they make a very thicket, with scarcely room to walk between them. They were all new, of painted wood, alike except for the names and the ages — thirteen to eighty-four. But they all bore the same date : August 22, 1914.

The Germans had been in Tamines for several days, but the occupation was what would be called, in such times, peaceful. The only deed of violence, it seems, concerned a little girl and her two brothers ; they were standing on the village green staring with childish wonder at the German soldiers, who suddenly turned on them and spot them. The French were holding the bridge on the Sambre ; there was a sharp fight, and after the Germans had carried the bridge they sent the main body of the troops on after the French, but they left enough troops behind to wreak the usual vengeance on the civilians. The Germans then began to pillage and burn the houses, 676 of them ; then they turned all the inhabitants into the street, promiscuously, marching them about in bodies, in order, as the man from whom we had the story said, "*to terrorize the population and to frighten the women and children.*" It went on for long hours ; the people were given no food or drink. "*During a halt they forced them to lie beneath the machine-guns, then they lined them up against the church wall and performed a mock execution — that is to say, the soldiers fired over the heads of the victims.*" It was the evening of Saturday, August 22, about seven o'clock. Nearly six hundred men were massed in St. Martin's Square, on the river-bank, and the womenfolk — their wives, mothers, daughters — were assembled by the soldiers to witness the scene.

"*They lined up their victims*", said the man from Tamines, "*in three rows along the Sambre and tumbled [culbutèrent] 150 of them head over heels into the river, shoving back with their bayonets those who attempted to cling to the bank ; only four or five escaped by swimming. During this first execution the machine-guns were trained on the*

remaining limes. The first discharge carried away all but twenty men — among them my brother, who still stood facing the enemy in spite of three wounds in the shoulder and one in the left side of the groin. A soldier then approached him and knocked him over with a blow on the head with his gun-stock."

The accounts differ slightly. Some witnesses, who escaped out of the country and gave their testimony either before the British or the Belgian Commissions, say that the first volley was fired by a squad, and that after this a number of men jumped into the river and escaped by swimming, while others, fired upon by the soldiers from the banks, were killed as they struggled in the water ; that after the first volley the Germans ordered the survivors to rise, and that it was at this time that the machine-gun was used. Others told dreadful tales of the killing of the wounded. That there should have been confused accounts of what transpired there in that summer twilight on that village green by the river-side, with its demoniac confusion and horrid deeds, is not surprising. Darkness fell ; soldiers, using electric pocket-lamps, prowled through the rows of the fallen, dispatching with the butts of their rifles or with their bayonets those who still breathed.

Some day, no doubt, the evidence will all be marshalled and the whole truth told. There is no available testimony from German sources ; for in the White Book, issued to explain and justify all that was done in Belgium, there is no reference to Tamines, no mention of it.

But when the firing had ceased that night there were more than four hundred dead ; women, too, and children lying there.

The bodies lay there stark on the green all night, sentinels guarding them ; the next day they were buried in one trench. Their graves are now near by, in the cemetery, and the ages given as from thirteen to eighty-four.

"At the beginning of last week" — our narrator came on September 7 — "the inhabitants were able to exhume the bodies and bury decently each one. Several days were spent in this dismal undertaking. One of my brothers and my brother-in-law came on Wednesday, September 2, to identify the body of my poor brother, and begged in vain for permission to have it removed to the family vault. My brothers were able to satisfy themselves — and this detail is not without importance — that a sum of three thousand francs which my brother had pocketed before leaving his house, so that it would not be stolen when the place came to be pillaged, had disappeared. My sister, who resides in the same house as my brother, was informed of this fact. Highway robbers demand your money or your life, but the Germans take both, your money and your life!"

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.