

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter XXXV. The Battle of the Marne.

*Affiches*, indeed, just then and afterwards, played as large a part in the life of Brussels as had newspapers before the war. They might not always provide news but they could provide sensation, and, if written by the proper hand, send a thrill through the community. On the morning of the last day of August the crowds that, with necks craned forward and eyes peering, pressed eagerly up to the walls where the *affiches* were posted were thrilled by one of the most stupendous sensations the city had ever known ; for there was a white poster with black characters, its text vibrating with the passion of the man who had written it. It was the Burgomaster himself who, with the consecrated phrase the French use when they wish to give the effect of the short and ugly word they are too polite to use, had pricked the German pride :

#### VILLE DE BRUXELLES

Le gouverneur allemand de la ville de Liège, lieutenant-général von Kolewe, a fait afficher hier l'avis suivant :

*" Aux habitants de la ville de Liège*

"Le bourgmestre de Bruxelles a fait savoir au commandant allemand que le gouvernement français a déclaré au gouvernement belge l'impossibilité de l'assister offensivement en aucune manière, vu qu'il se trouve lui-même forcé à la défensive."

*J'oppose à cette affirmation le démenti le plus formel.*

Le Bourgmestre, ADOLPHE MAX.

BRUXELLES, le 30 août 1914. \*

It was the very thing to catch the crowd ; Brussels was delighted, and celebrated its dashing and daring Burgomaster. Thon, a few hours later, there was another *affiche* on the walls.

#### AVIS IMPORTANT

Il est strictement défendu, aussi à la municipalité de la ville, de publier des affiches sans avoir reçu ma permission spéciale.

Le Gouverneur militaire, BARON VON LÜTTWITZ, Général *Major*.  
BRUXELLES, le 31 août 1914 \*\*

The town was swept by laughter ; the Burgomaster, already popular, became an idol.

Brussels was to spend much of its time thenceforth in reading the *affiches* on its walls, even if it did make it a point of patriotic honour not to believe a word it read when the *affiches* were German. For to the proclamations and decrees and orders and *avis* that grew more and more numerous as time went on, there were added *Nouvelles publiées par le Gouvernement allemand* great white posters on all the walls in three languages, German, Flemish, and French. *Les Nouvelles publiées par le Gouvernement allemand* were edited by a rather cunning hand over there in the *ministères*, where the vast organization, with clumsy thoroughness, was getting itself installed, but the task could not have been more subtly performed if Machiavelli himself had been in charge and wished to poison the wells of public information. I do not know that the statements were

deliberately false ; they may have told nothing but the truth, but they did not tell the whole truth, and they were almost artistically contrived to depress and discourage, constituting a kind of diurnal dose of despair. We read in them that Von Kluck was before Paris, and we waited daily, almost hourly, for the announcement of the fall of the French capital ; we read of the departure of the Government for Bordeaux, and of Gallieni's famous phrase : "*Je remplirai cette mission jusqu'au bout.*"

We followed in imagination from day to day the progress toward Paris of those armies we had seen sweep through Brussels — the very same, no doubt, which, in a tragic moment, Sir John French's scouts saw looming before them a few days after. The very mystery added to the terror of the thought, the very uncertainty made us all the more certain. Every day, over at the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, General von Lüttwitz, with the impersonal calmness of the Fates themselves, would tell me of the progress of those armies, nearer the French capital by so many kilometers each day — nearer and nearer, then, day by day ; and at last one afternoon he remarked simply :

"*We shall enter Paris tomorrow.*"

It seemed like the end of the world — our world, the world as we of the West knew it. I did not see him the next day. But the day following I said, in a manner as casual as I could command :

"*I presume you are in Paris now ...*"

"No", he said. "*Alter all, you see, our objective is not Paris. Our army is swinging around, making an enveloping movement*", and he made an enveloping movement himself with his arm, swinging it about with an inclusive gesture that seemed to embrace and gather into its toils the whole of the French nation. "*We must destroy the French army.*"

And that, at the time, was what I knew of the battle of the Marne. I do not know much more about it now ; I do not at all understand what happened there south of us on that day. I mean, some day, to read the story, though I shall probably be unable to understand it, military movements being for me a profound mystery. Once, before the war, down at Waterloo, the old English lance-sergeant who lectured on the panorama of the battle described to me that engagement, not then dwindled into the skirmish it has since become. He was in uniform, with waxed moustaches, and an odour on his breath, and in all the air about, that was of the essence of all the alcohol distilled in the British Isles since the Crimean War ; he had, of course, a little swagger-stick, and he said, poising it horizontally, delicately, before my eyes :

"*Now sir, look sharp, sir. This, Napoleon's left, Wellington's right ; this, Napoleon's right, Wellington's left. Do you follow me, sir ?*"

I nodded with the inane acquiescence of one dazed under instruction ... Half an hour later he said, again poising the swagger-stick horizontally :

"*And now, sir, I shall describe to you the Battle of Gettysburg.*"

But for once I was firm.

"*Pardon me*", I said, "*you will do no such thing ! I spent my youth hearing of that battle from original sources.*" And I gave him his half-crown and went out, past the catchpenny booths and cheap museums with

their squalid trinkets and trash of souvenirs, into which all earthly glory soon or late dwindles. The only description of a battle that I could ever understand is that of Tolstoy's in "*War and Peace*", and I understand that only because Tolstoy makes it so plain that the military science is not so much a science as a congeries of human fallibilities and spiteful little accidents. If it were otherwise the Germans would have vindicated General von Lüttwitz's predictions, and not have left the imperial armies to the ironie hazard of all those Paris taxicabs, of which, I am sure, there was never the slimmest dossier in the archives of the French General Staff.

We heard for the first time, too, of Hindenburg — a "Colonel-General" then, whatever that may be. No newspapers were published in Brussels, for the editors of the Brussels Press unanimously declined to submit to German censorship and suspended publication for the duration of the occupation. No newspapers were allowed to enter Belgium \*\*\* unless they were German, but as one walked along the streets toward evening furtive figures would approach and whisper, "*Times*, monsieur ?" and one might buy a copy several days old for ten or twelve francs. Then we learned that these salesmen were being shot if they were discovered ; so we bought their contraband papers no more, not caring to be associated even indirectly with such tragedies. When our pouches got through the lines the newspapers they brought were old, and nothing so quickly evaporates, perhaps, as the interest of a newspaper, which, like waffles, must be hot from the irons to be worth white.

Thus more and more we turned in upon ourselves and our own little affairs — little, that is, in comparison with the larger affairs "*outside*", as we soon came to think of the greater world beyond those grey lies that hemmed us in.

" *Nous deviendrons crétins*," said Villalobar one day, as we discussed the latest little problem ; it may have been the question of cards and calls. It was delicate because it had to do with etiquette, which is always delicate. The Governor-General, it had been stated, would call on the Marquis at a certain hour, but he did not appear — was suddenly called away and had left the city. What did it mean ? We learned, however, from Major von Harwaerts, who was an excellent sort ; he had been Military Attaché at Washington. And there, in Davignon's old drawing-room, stood as of yore the sofas, the two *canapés* that Madame Davignon had so cleverly maintained in use ; the empty *tête-à-tête* waited, the framed photographs of the King and of the little Queen were still on the piano. And after we had heard about German victories and Belgian *francs-tireurs* and the English — the Major remarking that Germany would win the war because "*we get up two hours earlier than the English and have no week-ends*" — it fell out that the mystery about the Pasha's sudden departure the day before was to be solved in the simplest manner. The old Field-Marshal had dashed off to observe, as a spectator, the military operations around Antwerp ; that was all. He went to battles as an office-boy goes to baseball games ; he was always gazing on the battle, and not from afar, for one day he was wounded slightly in the cheek. Thus I did not get his call returned for a week, and even then I did not see him.

But in the meantime we arranged Villalobar's affair. It was all most complicated. The Pasha had called on me because I had had charge of German interests — which he, by the way, to my relief, had formally reassumed when he called ; but he could not, it seemed, bring himself to make the first call on the other diplomatists. And so, when the Marquis and the Baron von der Lancken met at my house one morning there was some delightful fencing between the two ; finally Baron von der Lancken said that

the Governor-General would like to drop in at my house the following afternoon for a cup of tea if I expected to be at home. And it was simple to say to Villalobar :

" *Voulez-vous me faire l'honneur de venir prendre une tasse de thé chez moi demain à cinq heures ?*"

" *Oui, merci* " — and so the situation was adjusted.

It was like that, every minute, for nearly three years.

The Pasha duly came the next afternoon at five with von der Lancken and the Count Ortenbourg and an *aide*, and Villalobar came, and they were made acquainted over the cup of tea that the servants served with, I felt, a somewhat reluctant grace ; though if they had not served those few cups of tea there might not have been bread for seven millions of their countrymen, as the event turned out — such big things so often depending on such little ones.

It was all of the exquisite delicacy that was implicit in the situation, for Belgians could not encounter Germans or meet them ; if they saw them in the streets they passed them by with a fine stony indifference, as though the Germans were not, or as though they had remained in the Fatherland where they belonged. And at the very moment of that day when the Pasha was in one of the *salons* there was a Belgian princess in another, much troubled about her son in the Belgian army, just then severely wounded ; she desired to go to Antwerp to see him.

Indeed some one in trouble was always waiting, and the desire to help was often much stronger than the power that was being so exaggerated by the silly reports. The story had already developed into an amazing and impossible legend, and the German newspapers were beginning to take offence. A Cologne newspaper \*\*\*\*, edited by some one who was able to maintain his mind at the boiling-point of rage continuously for three years, was already growling ominously about my aiding Belgians, but he seemed so to have exhausted himself by his daily diatribes that he had no energy left for even the mildest approbation when the person helped happened to be some German.

The family d'Arenberg, for instance, was having trouble in Belgium during those days. Like so many other German families, the devotion of the d'Arenbergs to the *Vaterland* was not sufficient to induce them to reside there, and after Germany had betrayed Belgium the Belgians failed in the respect that had characterized their hospitality during so many years. The d'Arenberg castle, indeed, at Marche-les-Dames, had been destroyed by Belgian troops because, it seems, one of the young princes had a wireless-telegraph apparatus on the castle roof, and the d'Arenbergs were already under suspicion as German spies. After the destruction of Marche-les-Dames the old Princess Pauline Marie Joseph d'Arenberg had gone to another of the family properties at Malaise — not inappropriately named under the circumstances, though there she lived quietly and in peace. One Sunday afternoon Villalobar and I drove out through the lovely forest with its green and gold lace-work in the sunlit glades, through Groenendael and on to La Hulpe, beyond which Malaise stood, to see her and render her what aid we could. There, in the modest little château hidden away among the trees, the Princess — a tall, white-haired, soft-voiced old lady — received us. We sat in a little drawing-room that had Louis XV tapestry and splendid carven doors and wainscoting from an old château near Namur. The Princess was very voluble in her French — the language in which to be voluble if one is voluble in any — sitting there on her little sofa and with graceful gestures telling of the loss of her artistic treasures and of the destruction of the home where her ancestors *ont fermé les yeux*.

An old servitor — a man of seventy, I should say, fat and round and sleek, with a smile that trembled over his face — came in at her ring to receive an order about our motor, and there was a great Groenendael dog, old, like all the rest, slipping about over the parquet floor, against which his claws rattled ; he would sink down now and again, and scratch himself with such vigorous movements that the whole house shook. The Princess offered us tea and wine, and we talked for a long time ; and then she must show us her house, filled with tapestries, paintings, and *bibelots*, and, in a *vitrine* in a room upstairs, a wonderful collection of fans painted by Carlo van Loo, just as in Dobson's poem:

This is the Pompadour's fan !  
But where is the Pompadour ?

Here the old *grande dame* lived, with her treasures, a pious life, for there were yellow ivory crucifixes everywhere and a priest in a black *soutane* meditating out in the garden.

She desired me to ask the Germans to protect what remained of Marche-les-Dames, but Villalobar and I told her to write to the Pasha. She was afraid to come into Brussels herself, so she took down his address and, most scrupulously, all his titles — or all of his titles that Villalobar, who is as competent in that line as the *Almanach de Gotha*, could give her.

Finally we got away, not without an effort, after having said adieu three times and kissing her hand. As we drove away she stood gravely in the doorway, the old servitor with his trembling smile and the great dog guarding her, and her chaplain in his long black *soutane* standing there solemnly under the trees.

*Afar though nation be on nation hurled ;  
And life with toil and ancient pain depressed,  
Here one may scarce believe the whole wide world  
Is not at peace, and all man's heart at rest.*

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

\* CITY OF BRUSSELS

The German Governor of the City of Liège, Lieutenant-General von Kolewe, has caused to be published the following notice :

*" To the Inhabitants of the City of Liège*

*"The Burgomaster of Brussels has informed the German Commander that the French Government has notified the Belgian Government of the impossibility of assisting it offensively in any manner in view of the fact that it finds itself compelled to take the defensive."*

***To this affirmation I oppose the most formal denial.***

BRUSSELS, August 30, 1914.

The Burgomaster, ADOLPHE MAX.

**\*\* IMPORTANT NOTICE**

It is strictly forbidden, even to the municipality of the city, to publish notices without having received my special permission.

The Military Governor, BARON VON LÜTTWITZ, *Major-General*

BRUSSELS, August 31, 1914.

\*\*\* AVIS

Je rappelle à la population de Bruxelles et des faubourgs qu'il est strictement défendu de vendre ou de distribuer des journaux qui ne sont pas expressément admis par le gouverneur militaire allemand. Les contraventions entraînent l'arrestation immédiate des vendeurs, ainsi que des peines d'emprisonnement prolongé.

Le Gouverneur militaire allemand, BARON VON LUTTWITZ, General.

\*\*\*\* Article from the *Kölnische Zeitung* : " The American Minister in Belgium must, according to Belgian and Dutch ideas, be a very extraordinary man ! First, when the Germans came to Brussels, he is said to have played a rôle with which legally he had no concern, as if he was a kind of superior supervisor of the German war tactics. Now he appears as supervising the measures that have to be taken by the German soldiers in Louvain (see *De Tijd* of September 4). It is rendering the Minister a bad service in crediting him with matters that do not concern him, and it is rendering a bad service to the Belgians in making them believe that the Germans are compelled to give way, because this feeling from the Belgians might make them resist orders and prepare trouble. The Burgomaster of Brussels has already to answer several of these points, and the Burgomaster of Louvain is likely dealing unwisely in saying that from now there will be no more incendiarism, no thefts, which might give to believe that the Germans have ever allowed such things ! "

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VILLE DE BRUXELLES

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**Le Gouverneur Allemand de  
la Ville de Liège, Lieutenant-Général  
von Kolewe, a fait afficher hier  
l'avis suivant :**

« *Aux habitants de la Ville de Liège.*

« Le Bourgmestre de Bruxelles a fait savoir au  
» Commandant allemand que le Gouvernement  
» français a déclaré au Gouvernement belge  
» l'impossibilité de l'assister offensivement en  
» aucune manière, vu qu'il se voit lui-même forcé  
» à la défensive. »

**J'oppose à cette affirmation le  
démenti le plus formel.**

Bruxelles, le 30 août 1914.

*Le Bourgmestre,*  
**ADOLPHE MAX.**

# Wichtige Bekanntmachung

Ich verbiete hierdurch auf das strengste einen jeden Maueranschlag, auch von seiten der Stadtverwaltung, ohne meine ausdrückliche Genehmigung.

Brüssel, 31. August 1914.

*Der Militaergouverneur,*  
(Gez.) **VON LUETTWITZ,**  
Generalmajor.

Brüssel. — Druckerei und Lithographie E. Guyot, Dachsenstrasse, 12.

# Avis important

Il est strictement défendu, aussi à la municipalité de la ville, de publier des affiches sans avoir reçu ma permission spéciale.

Bruxelles, le 31 août 1914.

*Le Gouverneur militaire allemand,*  
(Signé) **VON LUETTWITZ,**  
Général.

Bruxelles. — Typ. et lith. E. Guyot, rue Dachsen 12.