

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXXVIII. The siege-guns.

IT was thus that the children, doing the goose-step in the Quartier des Marolles in order to mock the Germans, celebrated the Battle of the Marne when the news in its mysterious way had filtered in. How they learned it I do not know ; even we in our world knew only what I have told and what we learned one afternoon when Villalobar and I went to call on Herr Dr. von Sandt, the chief of the *Zivilverwaltung*. We waited for a while, for the chief was not in. The Herr Dr. von Sandt was, as I recall him, what might be called a handsome man, dark and straight and tall, with a haughty bearing and a reputation for erudition. The numerous functionaries who crowded the rooms where he was installed in the Ministère de l'Agriculture, there in the Rue de la Loi, addressed him as "*Excellenz*" as he came in, and sprang to their feet and clicked their heels loudly and politely as he passed swiftly through the room, scowling to right and left, and they were impressed, or perhaps shocked, when Villalobar and I did not rise but remained sitting in his presence. They were but the vanguard of the vast army of functionaries, that soon descended on Brussels and crowded all the bureaux of the *ministères*, and began filling reams of paper with their figures, statistics, annotations, commentaries, and reports, in that vast and complicated organization that must dehumanize life under German government. We were not sure as yet, Villalobar and I, with whom we were to have our dealings ; we supposed then that it would be with Dr. von Sandt, though it proved not to be, and that was the only time we ever saw him. He spoke that day, after we had been admitted to his presence, of the battle of Paris, "*not very happily begun*", he admitted. But that was all.*

However, if the Germans were not investing Paris they were besieging Antwerp. All day long troops were pouring in and grey motors were dashing about — motors filled with officers in their grey uniforms, and caps with bands of crude scarlet or bright blue or vivid yellow. Long trains rumbled by loaded with cannon covered over with green boughs. In the evening, when the town was still, there would be that fearful drumming of iron heels on the pavements, and those Alberichs would go trudging by.

And there came one evening to our cars a sound like the slamming of a distant heavy door. We listened. The sound came again, and again, punctuating the stillness with heavy thuds. And we knew that the siege of Antwerp had begun. The next morning the sound was even more audible in the heavy air. The ominous detonations rumbled like far-off thunder, and the awful echo was tossed back and forth across the grey sky, where a German Taube was flying.

The sound of the guns increased in intensity ; it had the quality of a sullen and stupid reiteration, as though there were some argument in the mere bellowing, in the constant asseveration of the same thing. The booming detonations shook the houses ; the windows in certain atmospheres would rattle. The weather was grey and heavy ; there were frequent gusts of rain, and a general intolerable depression began to settle down upon the world. The people went about with long faces — those Brussels faces that used to be almost naïvely happy ; men as they met could only assure each other, after glancing about to see that no spy was within earshot, that the forts of Antwerp were impregnable. Mourning began to appear ; people were hearing of the deaths of sons and brothers. Even Le

Jeune, the *coiffeur*, had lost his gaiety. Figaro, if as voluble as ever, was not so insouciant : he had two sons at the front ; one of them had been a steward on the Red Star Line and a great boxer — "*Il a de jolis biceps*", said Le Jeune proudly. He was one of those fortunate persons who fend all things relating to themselves superlative. He was filled with a terrible hatred of the Germans, and was waiting for the Cossacks to double the atrocities committed by the German though he never referred to them as Germans, but always as "*les Boches*", with all the loathing the word connotes. His one regret, he said, was that he could not go to the front himself.

" *Moi*", he would say, "*je suis un des meilleurs tireurs qui existent, vous savez*". But he was too old.

Then the Cuban Vice-Consul came through from Ghent with letters from London and the news that the Burgomaster of Ghent, following the example of Burgomaster Max at Brussels, had arranged for the capitulation of the city. This was happy news, but our feelings were dashed at once, for James Barnes, who had come into Belgium and gone to Ghent, came back from that city late in the evening and told us, to our dismay, that after the peaceful entry of the Germans had been agreed upon, an armoured car equipped with a *mitrailleuse* — driven, it was said, by a former taxi-driver from New York and manned by two foolhardy youths — dashed into town, opened fire, and wounded a German officer and his orderly. And so we might expect another horror !

Late in the afternoon little Bulle came — we called him " Little " Bulle in our affection when we did not call him Hermancito. His eyes were wide with a new horror ; he brought the dreadful story that five hundred German soldiers had been murdered in their beds the night before at Louvain, their throats all cut while they slept. Bulle had been told this by the Frau Grabowsky, the wife of the old white-haired *conseiller aulique* of the German Legation, and she said that she had the details from her husband.

The tale had its effect on us, of course, but I had just set myself to the task of analysing it, in the belief that it could not be true, when, luckily, von der Lancken came — very calm and casual, very smart in his light grey-blue tunic and dark trousers held under his boots by straps, and carrying a little *cravache*. He said he had just come from Louvain, and I asked him fearfully, and yet with an air as unconcerned as I could adopt, how things were going on there.

" *Why, all right*", he said.

Then I told him of the latest rumour, and he was grimly amused and I immensely relieved ; there was not a word of truth in it.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* NOUVELLES PUBLIÉES PAR LE GOUVERNEMENT ALLEMAND

Berlin, 10 septembre. — Les corps d'armée avancés au cours des poursuites, sur et au-delà de la Marne, ont été attaqués, par des forces supérieures venant de Paris, entre Meaux et Montmirail. Dans de grands combats durant deux jours, ils ont arrêté l'ennemi et ont fait eux-mêmes des progrès.

Lorsque la marche en avant de nouvelles forces ennemies assez fortes fut annoncée, notre aile s'est repliée. L'ennemi n'a suivi nulle part. Jusqu'ici on annonce comme butin : 50 canons et plusieurs milliers de prisonniers.

Berlin, 14 septembre (officiel). — Sur le théâtre de la guerre de l'Ouest (France) ont eu lieu des opérations, dont les détails ne peuvent pas être publiés, et qui ont conduit à une bataille qui est favorable pour nous. Toutes les nouvelles

répandues à ce sujet, par tous les moyens, par l'ennemi, et qui présentent la situation comme défavorable pour nous, sont fausses.

Berlin, 16 septembre (officiel). — La situation sur le théâtre de la guerre de l'Ouest (France) ne s'est pas modifiée depuis hier. En certains endroits du front de bataille, des attaques de troupes françaises, pendant la nuit du 15 au 16 septembre et pendant la journée du 16 septembre, ont été repoussées. Certaines contre-attaques des troupes allemandes ont été couronnées de succès.

Berlin, 17 septembre. — Le *Lokalanzeiger*, de Berlin, écrit, avec l'approbation de l'autorité militaire : " Les combats sur la Marne ne sont donc pas encore terminés, mais ils ont évidemment pris une tournure favorable pour nous. L'aile droite n'a plus cédé à une nouvelle pression, mais elle a, au contraire, repoussé la nouvelle tentative française de passer à travers nos rangs.

Vienne, 17 septembre (officiel). — Il résulte des rapports officiels de nos chefs d'étapes que jusqu'ici 41.000 Russes et 8.000 Serbes ont été conduits comme prisonniers dans l'intérieur de l'empire allemand. Jusqu'ici nous avons gagné 300 canons de campagne. En résumé, nous pouvons affirmer que notre armée a résisté héroïquement et avec grand succès à un ennemi numériquement supérieur et combattant avec bravoure et opiniâtreté.

Berlin, 17 septembre, au soir. — Dans la bataille entre l'Oise et la Meuse (donc sur le théâtre de guerre en France), la décision définitive n'est pas encore intervenue ; mais certains indices font reconnaître que la force de résistance de l'adversaire faiblit. Sur l'extrême aile droite, elle s'est écroulée sans qu'un effort spécial de nos troupes ait été fait. Le centre de l'armée allemande gagne lentement mais sûrement du terrain. Les tentatives de sorties, sur la rive droite de la Meuse, de Verdun sont repoussées facilement.

LE GOUVERNEMENT MILITAIRE ALLEMAND.

This *affiche*, pretending that the struggle along the Marne had evidently taken a turn in favour of the Germans, and that the resistance of the Allied armies was broken by the Germans without effort, only caused the people of Brussels to laugh, for they knew what a defeat the Germans had sustained on the Marne. On a certain number of these *affiches*, after the phrase "*The centre of the German army is slowly but surely gaining ground*", a mischievous hand added the words "*towards Berlin*".