

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LV. The arrest of the English.

IN the first, and in many respects the best, of his short stories, "*Boule de Suif*", which, with the remorseless precision of the author's impeccable and cynical art, depicts the incredible meanness of human nature, Guy de Maupassant sums up in a phrase the essential spiritual significance of the Prussian occupation of Normandy in 1870 when he says :

"Il y avait cependant quelque chose dans l'air, quelque chose de subtil et d'inconnu, une atmosphère étrangère et intolérable, comme une odeur répandue, l'odeur de l'invasion."

As in France in 1870 so in Belgium in 1914. It was the atmosphere, the moral odour of invasion, that was hardest to bear. To those who had been used all their lives carelessly to breathe its air, liberty, now that it was lost, became a very real and beautiful thing. It was always galling and at times maddening, even for us who were the most privileged in the land, to have every desire, every impulse, every right, obstructed by *verboden*. At every prominent corner in town there were German sentinels with red flags, great placards labelled "*Halte !*" and guns, their long bayonets fixed. Every one must have *Passierscheins* and personal *Ausweis*, and we floundered in a morass of regulations that made life an intolerable burden. Much has been written of the cleanliness and order of German cities — I have written some of it myself ; but I should rather live in a city as dirty as some I might name in certain parts of the Continent, governed by a machine as corrupt as some I have heard of on our own side of the Atlantic, composed of the most renowned and reprehensible of our bosses, and have liberty as one does have it in them, than to dwell in one of those cities of Germany, clean and regulated to the fast degree, of course, but with their *Eingangs* and *Ausgangs*, and wholly without charm, with the institutional odour of a penitentiary.

It came on us gradually, a slow closing in of the remorseless and inflexible grip of steel. To understand it one must understand the Belgian cities, full of civic pride and civic virtue, and full of liberty too. They are free cities, and after due reflection I should say that they are perhaps the best-governed cities anywhere in this world precisely because they govern themselves, and what is more, because they have a pride in themselves, a conscious, collective, communal, civic pride. To understand it, too, one must take into account the Belgian love of democracy, the Belgian love of liberty. The King is not King of Belgium, he is King of the Belgians — *Roi des Belges* ; there is a vast difference. This love of liberty was developed in the democratic school of the commune ; it was the commune again resisting at Liège, at Dixmude, and the Yser.

Each of the cities of Belgium has its marked personality, its distinct individuality ; each has its peculiar charm, almost its own customs. Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels, Liège, all lovely, full of poetry and romance, are yet all different, as sisters in one family are different. And they are very proud — proud of their history, proud of their beautiful city halls and public monuments, proud of their burgomaster if he looks well in the red scarf, proud of their liberty and fierce in their independence. Attacked from the outside,

their burgers all stand together — Catholic, Liberal, Socialist, Flemish, and Walloon. The cities are scrupulously clean : cleanliness, indeed, is a Belgian trait ; there is an ordinance or by-law in Brussels that forbids citizens to wash their sidewalks or the fronts of their houses after ten o'clock in the morning, otherwise the splashing and mopping would go on all the time.

The Germans sought to introduce German ways and German regulations — tried to make the cities over, and to make over the people in them. The way to do this, they thought, was to issue orders and to publish them in *affiches* on the city walls, or to give paternal counsel, like that advice of the Pasha to the people to save their money and to put it in the savings banks, where, he said, it would be respected — advice given at the very moment when levies were being imposed on all the cities and provinces in the land !

Not a day passed without a new and vexing regulation. In an *affiche* posted on November 6 there was an *avis* which, by way of proving the paternal interest of the Government in the people, said that the German Government had done all it could to get food and fuel for the Belgians, urged the people to return to their usual employments, and advised the communal authorities not to give money to anybody who would not work, and, in the third place, announced that on and after November 8 the affairs of life would be regulated by *normal* time, which was, of course, German time, fifty-six minutes earlier than Belgian time, which was Greenwich, or English, and prevailed all over the west of Europe.*

The public docks were duly advanced, but nobody in Brussels paid the slightest attention ; every one continued to regulate by *l'heure belge* such affairs of life as were left to him. Turning into the Place de la Monnaie from the Rue des Fripiers one afternoon, I saw two women stop ; one asked the hour, and the other, glancing up at the dock which marked seven o'clock, said instantly, "*It's six o'clock*". It was like that everywhere, though for us of the Legations there was a complication ; when we had an appointment with a Belgian we had to remember Belgian time, and in speaking to a Belgian one must remember not to refer to *l'heure allemande*. The fact gave rise at once to a new example of *la zwanze bruxelloise* :

"*The Kaiser says : 'Advance on Paris', but they don't advance. Then, Advance on Calais', but they don't advance. Then, Advance on Cracow', but they don't advance there either. Then he says, Advance the Brussels docks one hour.*"

The citizens of other countries at war with Germany were subjected to special regulations. There was a strict control ; they had to report at the Meldeamt each week. But this was not enough one evening Mr. Grant-Watson, secretary of the British Legation, who had elected to remain in Brussels, came to the Legation from the Union Club and reported that the English, calmly sitting, there over their whisky and soda, were concerned by a report in the German newspapers that all Englishmen in Germany between seventeen and fifty-five were to be interned as prisoners of war. The British in Brussels thought that the rule would apply to Belgium. We heard no more of it for a week ; then I was told officially that all British citizens between the ages of seventeen and fifty-five were to be arrested — this, as was said, in retaliation for the measures taken in England against the German residents there. I filed a letter of protest and spoke with the officials ; they said that while personally they regretted to have to take this step, public opinion in Germany — and *messieurs les militaires* — forced them to do so. I asked that Mr. Grant-Watson and the British Consul, Mr. Jeffes, and his son, who was Vice-Consul, be exempt, and was told that they would be.

A few evenings later the Rev. Mr. H. Stirling T. Gahan was arrested. I succeeded in securing the release of the chaplain and of two English priests of the Catholic Church who had been arrested with him, but it was all that I could do, and the arrests of the others continued right and left, as fast as German soldiers could find them. Some escaped in various disguises—one as a vendor of mussels (a delicacy, according to some tastes, then in season) — but for most of them there was no escape, and they were confined in the École Militaire. In the midst of this search German soldiers visited the Royal Golf Club at Ravenstein, and, finding no Englishmen there, broke up the golf-clubs belonging to Englishmen and seized their clothing.

And then one morning at German headquarters I was told, to my surprise, that Mr. Grant-Watson himself was to be arrested at the British Legation.

"*But you cannot enter the British Legation*", I said ; "*it is under my flag.*"

And there was a long discussion. Finally the Baron von der Lancken asked that Mr. Grant-Watson himself come and discuss the question with him, saying that some arrangement might possibly be made to put him on his parole or even to allow him to go home to England. The official who had told me that Mr. Grant-Watson and the Messrs. Jeffes would not be molested made an apology for the treatment of the English ; he told me how he detested it, and how sorry he was that he had not been more successful in securing the promised privileges. There was nothing he could do — it was a "*military necessity*", and *messieurs les militaires* had been in a terrible state ever since the narrow escape of the Kaiser at Thielt a few days before.

Mr. Grant-Watson, when the other representatives of belligerent countries had left, had remained in Brussels of his own will ; he had been going about town everywhere for weeks, as, of course, the Germans well knew. I had frequently urged him to go but he would not do so, and I had no quality to urge any action upon him. When the question of his' fate arose I could only tell him of the Baron von der Lancken's suggestion and leave him to decide on the course he would adopt. He said he would go at once to see the Baron, and asked me to accompany

And so we went over that afternoon after tea, and when the introduction was concluded — the meeting was cold and difficult ; they bowed formally but did not shake hands — Baron von der Lancken said that the situation was very painful and disagreeable for him because he was under orders to send Mr. Grant-Watson to Berlin. I could not forbear expressions of my surprise.

"*Je vous demande pardon mais je vous ai promis plus que je ne pouvais faire*", said the Baron.

I asked that Mr. Grant-Watson be allowed to leave on his parole that night and return on the morrow ; this the Baron accepted. Finally Mr. Grant-Watson agreed to report the next morning at eleven o'clock, and Baron von der Lancken said that he would give him the best apartment in the École Militaire and hold him there until he was sent to Berlin. I then took the Baron von der Lancken aside and spoke with him alone, and at length he promised to telegraph to Berlin in an effort to make arrangements that would make it unnecessary to send Mr. Grant-Watson to Berlin, holding him meanwhile *gardé à vue* at the École Militaire.

The Baron told me that the Jeffes, too, were to be arrested.

Unyielding as he had been, however, as it seemed to me, the Baron was reproached by the military men for not having been more severe, and for having allowed Mr. Grant-Watson to go at all. And late that night the military men sent to me asking me to give my "*word of honour*" for him. I gave it, of course, and with my compliments to *messieurs les militaires* sent word to say that as Mr. Grant-Watson was an English gentleman I was perfectly satisfied with any assurances he might give. The next morning Mr. Grant-Watson went to the Ecole Militaire.

Mr. Kimura., secretary of the Japanese Legation, had remained in Brussels on the express understanding that no objections would be made to his presence, and now he too was to be arrested ; and that same morning a German functionary came bearing the request that I "*bring in*" the Japanese secretary. I sent back this as a reply :

" Je vous prie de présenter mes compliments et de dire que je ne suis pas gendarme."

Kimura, however, was notified from the Legation of what was in store for him, and at the news he smiled and went at once himself to the *Zivilverwaltung*, and was sent to the Ecole Militaire.

The next morning I received a call from the clergymen whose release had been secured ; they came to thank me and, as one of them said, to call my attention to an outrage that was being perpetrated by the Germans. I asked, with the gravest apprehensions, what the outrage was.

"Why", said the clergyman, "*they have confined the gentry with the commonalty !*"

It was even so. When on that morning of dismal rain I drove to the Ecole Militaire I found twenty Englishmen gathered in a large hall, sitting at meat at a large table. Around the walls were iron cots on which they slept. There had been, indeed, some recognition of their quality, for certain jockeys, of which there are always many in Brussels, had been removed, but, commonalty or gentry, it was not pleasant to be huddled together, and the facilities for bathing were few, though they were accepting their lot with the ever admirable British calmness and dignity. Mr. Grant-Watson, in his corner, did call my attention to the indubitable fact that he had not been given the private room due to his rank ; it was the result, it seemed, of his having refused to shake hands with the lieutenant in charge — "*One could not shake hands with them, could one ?*" But I asked Baron von der Lancken and the little lieutenant to give him a room and to make him more comfortable, which they promised to do, and did.

I went to see Kimura, installed from the first in his private room. On one side there was an iron bed, and ranged along the floor beside it a long row of Japanese slippers and sandals. A kimono was thrown over the bed ; there were cigarettes and an ash-tray on a little table at the head ; and there was a table set forth with the noonday meal. I asked if there was anything that I could do for him.

"No", he said. "*I have a nice apartment, a soldier's room ; I have rice, meat, bread, beer.*" I asked him if he wanted anything. No, nothing ; he

had everything man could wish, even two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon to walk in the courtyard. He was smiling and cheerful.

"*Have you anything to read ?*" I asked.

"*Oh yes.*"

I had a curiosity about the books that would while away the *ennui* of his honourable confinement, and he pointed to a table where two little volumes lay. I picked one of them up — it was a Japanese-German dictionary ; the other was a German grammar.

"*I study German*", he said, and when Baron von der Lancken and the lieutenant entered the room he saluted them in the military way, and even managed to speak a few words to them in their own tongue. A capable little race, this, which improves each shining hour !

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* AVIS

L'administration militaire allemande a fait tout son possible en prenant soin de faire fournir et parvenir à Bruxelles des vivres et du charbon pour la population de l'agglomération. Dans ce but, les chemins de fer vicinaux ont repris le service dans les environs de la ville et on a facilité de toute façon aux personnes chargées du ravitaillement l'accomplissement de leur tâche. Néanmoins, l'invitation à reprendre l'ouvrage n'a pas encore été suivie par la population dans l'étendue désirable.

Je recommande de la manière la plus énergique aux différentes communes de l'agglomération bruxelloise de ne plus distribuer gratuitement des vivres à des hommes auxquels on peut prouver qu'ils ont l'occasion de travailler, mais qu'ils n'en profitent pas.

Puisque les chemins de fer et la poste se règlent déjà sur l'heure normale de l'Europe centrale, cette heure entrera en vigueur pour toute l'agglomération bruxelloise dès le 8 novembre 1914. Ce jour-là toutes les horloges son à avancer d'environ 56 minutes. L'heure exacte est donnée par les horloges des gares.

Dès le 8 de ce mois, les restaurants, cafés et débits de boissons sont à fermer seulement à 11 heures du soir (heure allemande).

Le Gouverneur de Bruxelles, BARON von LUTTWITZ, Général.

BRUXELLES, le 6 novembre 1914.