

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter LVII. "Vive le Roi !"

NOVEMBER 15 is the *jour de fête* of Albert I, King of the Belgians, and it had a poignant significance for his people in that tragic year of 1914. The news of the horror of Roulers had just come to town, another Louvain in the fury of its vengeance on the civil population because the Belgian army had again blocked the path of German imperialism. The King — down there on the battle-line in the far corner of the land, fighting with his men behind the Yser, whose yellow waters had flooded Western Flanders — older, as Arno Dorch, who had seen His Majesty at Furnes, could describe him to us, moustache grown long, a fixed sadness in his face and a steady flame in his eye, somehow like a Viking ; and the little Queen, quite simple, going about on errands of mercy, a romantic picture — was never so near to the hearts of his people. And Brussels was arranging a demonstration. The people wished it to assume the solemn form of a High Mass at Sainte-Gudule, and the word was whispered about ; every one was going. But the Germans got wind of that, as of everything, and forbade it, and there was no High Mass. So every one went, instead, to Low Mass, an enormous crowd that trooped in out of the rain mixed with the snow that was falling, to fill the old grey church and stand in silent throngs in the aisles while the Low Mass was said, and then at the end to shout the passionate :

" *Vive le Roi ! Vive la Belgique !* "

At the church of St.-Boniface a Belgian flag was displayed and a German soldier tore it down. The *Livre d'or* at the house of the Grand Maréchal, in which people were to sign for the King, was seized by the German police. Two boys who shouted "*Vive le Roi!*" were arrested, and, since nothing was too insignificant to pass unnoticed, the little son of the Countess de Buisseret was arrested for making goose-steps in the street while a squad of German soldiers was passing. The Countess was an American, and it required a week of effort on my part to have the lad released from the Kommandantur. And I heard of a man who was arrested *pour avoir regardé une dame allemande avec insolence dans la rue.*

Some one was always being arrested ; the *Polizei* were beginning to saunter up and down the streets; they went in twos or threes, and the Kommandantur there in the Rue de Louvain was soon filled, as was once the Bastille, with prisoners. They arrested high and low, from the wife of the Grand Maréchal of the Court down to the man, slinking by in the twilight, who offered the *Times* for sale. The oldest and proudest names in Belgium were on the roll of patriots.

The Germans began, too, the seizure of property, not only public but private. They closed the gates of the lovely Park, designed by Zinner in 1774, with its lofty trees, its pleasant alleys, its fountains and statues, the Park where Brussels loved to loiter and listen to the music, and where the children played. It was all changed ; in the *place réservée aux jeux d'enfants* officers exercised their horses. Already in the villages and suburbs they were seizing bronze and copper — even the doorknobs and kitchen utensils.

The directors of the Banque Nationale were subjected to the first of a long series of vexations, in revenge for the action of the Bank in removing all of its treasury to Antwerp and thence to England. Then the Germans began to arrest those members of the *Garde Civique* who had considered it a point of patriotism not to report to the *Meldeamt* in obedience to the German order.

Antwerp, too, was having its troubles and anxieties like all Belgium. There the German commandant gave his word that the Gardes Civiques who had fled might return and be immune, but when they came they were immediately arrested, though later they were released on parole. The city fathers had signed a convention with the Germans to the effect that no indemnity would be demanded from Antwerp, but the paper was no sooner signed than the Germans demanded fifty million francs.

These troubles all had their reaction on us, besides that which came upon us daily with the almost inextricable complications in organizing the *ravitaillement*.

It was of course inevitable that people should come, even across the sea, on all sorts of wild-goose chases ; a group of reformers actually came to me proposing to organize a committee to spray the battlefields with disinfectants.

There was trouble about our courier from Holland, who was always being arrested or stopped and searched by the *militaires* ; there were troubles about the post ; the Germans were opposed to our carrying letters for any one but them ; and when the *militaires* heard that a Belgian had sent word to a friend in Holland to address his letters in care of the American Legation, they thought that this was conclusive evidence that we were receiving and delivering and dispatching letters. We finally arranged the affair of the post satisfactorily, the courier going into Holland in a motor with a German soldier on the box, carrying the pouches of the Spanish, Dutch, and American Legations, and though the service was now and then interrupted, as a military necessity, the Germans always respected the seals on our pouches. It was hard to refuse the poor folk who wished to send letters to their friends and relatives outside, but having given my word not to forward any letters, the constant refusals became one of the hard tasks of each day. They could see no reason why one should keep one's word. when it had been given to a German, which shows what example will do.

There was no escaping troubles, one's own or those of others, whose troubles were so much worse than one's own. The universal tragedy touched one on every hand. Hermancito, distressed over the sad plight of his own land, was going to leave. The Mexican Legation did not exist any more. He made a famous *mot* of it, in his merry way, saying of his situation :

*" Je représente un pays sans gouvernement auprès d'un gouvernement sans pays."*

But all these troubles faded into nothing one night late in November, when a message came from Washington in these words :

*"Your dispatch of —, referring to conditions in Brussels since its occupation by the Germans, has been received and read by the Department with much interest. The Department informs you that the patriotic and efficient way in which the numerous difficulties that have arisen during the past few months in Belgium have been met is appreciated."*

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.