

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter LXV. The atmosphere of the Occupation.

THERE was, in this regime, the remorseless grip of which was only faintly indicated by the cries it now and then wrung from its victims, something that went deeper, something that goes to the very core of the human heart. Death itself is soon accomplished, but it was not only what the soldiers had done to the dead, it was what they were doing to the living ; it was the violation of all personal right, the contempt of all personal dignity, the incessant, calculated, studied humiliation that was inflicted. What the judges and the lawyers felt when they climbed those back stairs in the palace where once they had swept in their robes, every citizen felt in the presence of some similar indignity. To see that lovable people, once the gayest in the earth, humiliated, trodden upon, stripped of every right, was to feel the vicarious shame of a stupendous and unprecedented insult. It was not immediately apparent ; one had to live in it and be of it ; one had to breathe that atmosphere for a while to realize it in all its utter shame and degradation. It was curious and interesting to note its effect upon strangers. An old friend, Mr. Albert Jay Nock, came across the sea to visit me, but after a few days he went away ; the atmosphere choked him. Dean Howard McClenahan, of Princeton, spent a fortnight in Brussels, and saw Tamines, and could find no words to express his horror. Senator Lafayette Young, of Iowa, was there, and went away with the outraged feelings of one who knew and loved liberty.

But for us who could not go away there was no escape. Toward evening, when there was a lull in the importunate visits, I used to flee the Legation and go for a walk alone, trying to forget for a while ; I would walk to Les Étangs d'Ixelles where Samuel's statue of Eulenspiegel would be brooding in the winter twilight, the young hero of Flanders sitting there wistfully gazing afar, while a maiden of grace and charm and dignity — the Nele of the legend that is the impersonification of the spirit of the land — whispered in his ear ; the lamps set their long, glimmering reflections over the dark waters, two docks moved along swiftly, leaving in their wake two long, diverging ripples, a scene for Whistler's hand. The moist air was pleasant to the lungs, and the grey skies, according somewhat with our sombre spirits, diffused a soft light, restful to the eyes, though a day of sunshine, rare in our experience, was welcome for the cheer it brought. Sometimes I would go far out the Avenue de Tervueren, where a year before we used to see the amiable Belgians at the Trois-Couleurs taking their case in their inn ; and the château of the Duc d'Orléans just showing over the trees, and the line of the dark *Forêt* beyond.

There was, of course, the Avenue Louise and the Bois, like an English park, beautiful at sunset, a swan gliding across the shining surface of the Little lake ; if it was raining, as it was apt to be, there was another picture, the great trunks of the trees a vivid green, their boles glistening with moisture through a veil of mist, and far away in the depths of the woods, down a distant road, a woman laden with bundles of fagots, and some men cutting trees.

And there were the charming streets of the lower town, with the *pignons* of the old Spanish houses, and dark Spanish eyes, too, glowing in the evening lamplight ; and the market near Sainte-Catherine's and the fish-market near the Quai au Bois-à-Brûler. And — what few ever go to see — the smallest street in

Brussels, or in the world, perhaps, the Rue d'Une-Personne. I walked thus alone, in the late afternoon, over all Brussels, and I retain in memory innumerable impressionistic pictures of the city that I came to know so well, and loved the more as she opened her soul to me ; I came to love every stone, every roof, and every chimneypot in the whole agglomeration, though with little shadows of apprehension, for I knew, alas, that loving always includes losing. De Leval went with me now and then ; he knew where the old engravings were, and he was himself a famous collector of *boîtes hollandaises*, those curious old Dutch tobacco-boxes of copper, prettily carved, sometimes with religious subjects, sometimes, what seems to have been more to the taste of the soldiers to whom they were presented by kings during the Hundred Years' War, with scenes of a more secular character and appeal. The kings used to present these boxes to their soldiers, and they seem to have been all that the soldiers ever got out of the war, if they survived it at all . . . It was disturbing, however, to talk of the Hundred Years' War. Would our war last so long ?

The Rue d'Une-Personne, to be sure, is but a gloomy little alley, with a lamp burning over it, and it leads back to some dubious congeries of buildings where illusion ends ; for in all the little streets of that quarter various *cabarets* had been turned into disreputable resorts where German soldiers caroused, as though they were in a western mining town.

So there was after all no escape, either there or in the opposite direction, for on the way in the Avenue de Tervueren, there on the arch of the Cinquantenaire, the German flag floated on the quadriga.

I had been under an intolerable depression because of the sudden news of the death of a younger brother. But everybody was depressed in Brussels. The strain grew more and more tense, what with the closed houses, the sad, deserted appearance of the streets, the idle populace, and the still more idle soldiers who infested the town — their idleness was so vacuous and vicious, born of the utter lack of all human responsibility. There was, too, the rack of all diversion, ail movement, all gaiety. There was nothing for most of the people to do but to wander up and down the melancholy streets ; the shops were darkened because they must economize in light ; they could not renew their stocks, and the few lighted lamps only intensified the gloom that settled more and more upon the world.

Then a day of mild weather would steal into the late winter calendar ; there would be a touch of spring in the air. Ah ! If spring could only come and mean what it once had meant ! But what could spring or anything be without liberty ? And how could one be otherwise than depressed in the daily presence of the great injustice with which the very air was reeking ?

No, there could be no escape so long as that endured. Better that the light of the sun go out and the earth turn cold and dead, and the heavens be rolled together like a scroll, than that mankind be ground under the heels of swaggering officers ignorant of all the essential things in life, with Iron Crosses and ribbons of dirty white and black, and their brutal soldiers swarming everywhere, lifting their legs at the "*Achtung !*" of a *sous-officier* in their graceless and ridiculous goose-step.

"*Pourquoi les soldats font-ils comme ça, maman ?*" asked a little boy of his mother, as they stood on a corner waiting for them to pass.

"*Ah, tu sais*", responded the mother, "*les Allemands saluent toujours avec le pied !*"

One scene resumed it all one cold morning. There had been a new *affiche* that day saying that all political discussion must cease in Belgium, no meetings were to be held, no one was to discuss political matters or criticize the Germans or the war they were waging. Along the boulevard a company of German soldiers, old men of the *Landsturm*, trudged wearily. And then, suddenly, around the corner came into sight a German officer, large and fat and smoothly fair, his pink jowls glowing, his light blue cape floating in the wind, revealing his enormous paunch and the revolver swinging in its holster. The under-officer commanding the company shouted out his "*Achtung!*" and the old men of the *Landsturm*, with that docile, submissive, bovine expression, looked up at the officer, and straining their old legs in the ridiculous goose-step, passed on. And there, not far away, the long waiting line at a soup-kitchen, shivering in its rags, stretched in woe and misery and hunger far down the street.

No, there was no escape. One could not banish from the mind that line of pinched, pathetic faces, those huddled forms in old clothes. And during the remainder of my walk I had to combat an inward rage and rebellion at the whole miserable business, the stupendous insolence, the appalling insult to human dignity and intelligence. Those swinish soldiers, with their thick bandy legs, their brutish necks, and little piggish eyes, and that conception of respect — the goose-step. And this was Germany after forty years of blood and iron, and discipline, and government to the last degree, *Kultur*, and so forth, its own people the first to be conquered and enslaved, surrendering their own liberties and ready to help deprive other people of theirs, like the elephants in Siam that are first captured, then trained to lure their kind into chains.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

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