

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter LXVIII. In the *châteaux*.

BRUSSELS, as I have so often said, had changed ; from the gayest it had become the dullest, saddest city imaginable. The Quartier Léopold was a though deserted, and the boulevard and the avenue were no longer bright with the daily promenade. Men walked there, it is true, at noon, for the exercise, or to pick up a bit of gossip — if possible some good news, some hope — and in the afternoon the avenue took on something of its old air ; but it could never be happy any more. I went walking there one day with a friend ; we had agreed not to mention the war, but we had hardly gone a block when a woman in new deep mourning, coming out of a house, met some friends and ran toward them crying :

" *Mon fils est mort* "

They were always receiving such news ; it was almost the only news they could receive.

I have spoken of dining out, but I should not like thereby to give the impression that there was anything like social gaiety. Brussels was in mourning, and it was only occasionally that a few friends were asked to dinner, and then most informally. Evening dress was laid aside for the war, and by some tacit, common understanding men paid deference to conventions only by donning dinner-jackets, even when ladies were present. The great houses were closed, and when one went to see one's friends those houses always gave the effect of closed shutters and drawn blinds. The women had spontaneously laid aside jewels and colours ; they were always in black, and most of them ere long in deep mourning. Many persons, indeed, made strange vows — to wear black, not to drink any wine, to impose this or that little personal sacrifice, until the war should end. Perhaps some could make such vows because of a belief that the war would not, could not, last very long ; it may have been because they could not endure the thought of it lasting very long. And, of course, the want of food, the restrictions imposed, and what amounted to rationing, imposed an economy, so that in general dinners were of the simplest ; and finally dinners were almost never given, for it was too difficult to go about at night — there were only a few sorry old *fiacres* left in all Brussels. Then the few who entertained their friends at all — and most of the houses were closed — asked them to what they called a *déjeuner de guerre*.

To appreciate the contrast wrought by all the changes of the war one must have known Brussels in the days before the war. In the population there was a fine joviality, that joyousness that came down from the days when Rubens and Jordaens and Teniers were painting *la vie plantureuse* of Flanders. This same gaiety was reflected, in more refined forms, in the lives of the upper classes. At dinner vine or ten wines were served, one with each course, not to be drunk but to be tasted : *déguster*. The guests would take pride in guessing at the year of the wine, merely by inhaling the *bouquet* ; it was none of your vulgar champagne, which the *nouveaux riches* "open", as they say, but rare old *bourgogne*. Men were proud of their *caves*. It had been a custom in Belgium, when a child was born, to lay away a barrel or several barrels of the vintage of that year ; it would be left to

mellow through the years, and not be decanted until the child came of age — or perhaps not until her wedding-day, if the child were a girl ; then the wine would crown the feast. The *caves* were handed down in families. I recall a dinner in a château down in Hainaut, where the guests were tasting with the leisurely, appraising motions of the connoisseur whose sense of taste had been artistically developed, as the sense of hearing is developed to music or the sense of sight to painting. One of the guests seemed to remember that peculiar vintage — it was of some famous year — and spoke of it with the fear that not much more of it could remain.

Alas, replied the master of the house, there is not much, and then timing to the butler he said :

"Charles, combien nous reste-t-il de ce vin ?"

"Malheureusement, monsieur", replied the butler, "*il ne nous reste que dix-huit mille bouteilles.*"

A rich man at Brussels brought a suit against the tramway company because its trams in rumbling by his house, he said, troubled the slumber of his *bourgognes* and unsettled them.

The German soldiers, of course, when they came into Belgium did not allow these joys to go untasted ; they did not *déguster* the *bourgognes*, they guzzled them, and when it happened to be a new wine the Belgians relished the illness and the pain it caused them.

The Germans emptied the cellars of M. Hubert, the Belgian Minister of Industry and Labour, when they occupied his château of Irchonwelz-lez-Ath.

In one day 400 German soldiers consumed the contents of 4.600 bottles of wine ; they then mixed the other wines in barrels and shipped them to Germany. The Belgians enjoy telling stories of the fearful concoctions German officers made by mixing various wines and then guzzling them in their formidable drinking-bouts. There were always tales of such scenes ; and tales, too, of *caves* that had been bricked up. I know of a man whose house was occupied by an Oberkommandant. The house had a cellar renowned throughout the whole of the province, and the neighbours saw German soldiers going out from it day after day bearing bottles. The man complained to the Oberkommandant, who, ordering a few hundred bottles of *vin ordinaire* to be set out for his own use, sealed up the *cave*. But the temptation was too great and, no doubt in his capacity of superman, he broke his own seals, and the foot of the *cave* continued until a protest was made to General von Bissing, who reprimanded the Oberkommandant.

The dinners during the war were always sober functions, and afterwards, before the fire in the *fumoir*, while the ladies were knitting those things that ladies were always knitting in the early stages of the war, the talk was inevitably of the great conflict — usually speculation as to how long it would last. Every one would give his opinion, speak of Kitchener's dreadful prophecy that it would last three years — they were all bitter against Kitchener for saying such a thing — or of the spring drive of the English. Then they would go over all the gossip of the day.

"The German Governor at Ghent has ordered the town to change all the street signs from French to German, at a cost to the city of seven thousand francs !"

"Dear me !"

"And Von Bissing is out with a new 'law' that provides that any business found to be adverse to the interests of Germany will be taken over by the Germans."

"And it is *défendu* to sing or to play 'La Marseillaise' — two years' imprisonment !"

"Then may one whistle it ?" said the witty Baron, and they would try to laugh.

"And did you know that Reseis [the Baron Reseis was the Italian Chargé] went to German headquarters and demanded an interview with Von der Lancken, and was refused ?"

"That means that Italy is going to declare war !"

"And Rumania is going to enter the dance, because Mitilineu [the Rumanian Chargé] has received orders to hold himself in readiness."

A French paper, or a copy of *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, was a godsend. Any one with a bit of news, or even a rumour, was welcome ; and any one with a piece of good news, in a town and time when good news never came, or never stayed long if it did come, was assured of a popularity all evening long. And any one from the country was welcome because that meant new incidents, for it was in the country, in lonely châteaux where German officers quartered themselves, that *la mentalité allemande* was best exemplified. There was a charming old dowager whom no German general could daunt. One of them, with his staff, came to lodge in her château ; they remained several weeks, and when they left the general asked the *maître d'hôtel* to request the *douairière* to be good enough to receive him for a moment. The old *grande dame* in her white hair came slowly down the stairs, and pausing at the bottom stood there with folded hands, and in her mild voice asked what he wished of her. The general said that during their stay there they had been so kindly treated that he wished to thank her for himself and for his staff. The old lady looked at him a moment and then said calmly :

" *Vous n'avez pas à me remercier ; je ne vous avais pas invité.*"

Madame W—, having been at her château near Mons with her husband, who was ill, on her return to town told this story : The Germans came in numbers to be quartered in the château ; she protested and said that her husband was very ill and confined to his bed with heart disease — his brother had dropped dead from the same cause in the summer, and W— himself did not know that the land had been invaded. She was ready to let the Germans lodge in her house, but she asked that they respect her husband's apartments. The officer said that it would be necessary to examine W— ; then she asked to be allowed to inform him gently and to prepare him for the ordeal, so that he would not suffer from the effects. But no : a military doctor with a squad of soldiers tramped heavily down the corridor, burst open the door of the sick-room ; the doctor threw back the bedclothes, opened poor W—'s shirt, clapped a stethoscope over his heart, listened, and exclaimed, "*Ganz schlecht ! Ganz schlecht !*"

One of the B—'s had received a visit at her *château* from the Germans, headed by Prince H—. The soldiers were ransacking the palace, and the Prince told her to place the *objets d'art* that she held most dear in a certain cabinet and that thus they would be safe. She did this, and when she had finished, having selected the articles she prized most, they bore the cabinet away with all its contents !

Madame Q— described to me the pillaging of her *château*. The whole place was in a shocking condition ; bestial outrage had been committed ; the piano was scribbled over with chalk — "*Deutschland über Alles,*" besides

phrases that one does not repeat. And S— told me of similar incidents that had happened to his *château* near Tervueren. It had been occupied from the beginning ; sixty thousand bottles of wine had been taken, and those that they — the Germans (when one says "*they*" in Belgium it means the Germans) — could not drink they had broken and emptied of their wine. He had spoken of the fear of the soldiers — how they would skulk behind trees with guns, fearing to enter the houses, and how at night they would not go out nor sleep in rooms alone ; so that when his brother said, "*Are you not afraid to go to sleep at night ?*" he could answer, "*No, that is the safest time ; they are afraid to go out at night.*"

Madame R— had been ordered to be in her *château* in the country on a certain day to receive a visit from the Governor General, who was looking for a house for the summer ; the poor woman was afraid to go and more afraid not to go. She had been to the Pass-Zentrale to secure permission to go to Holland, and there had talked with Major von der M—, who said the German officers whom she had known before the war complained that she did not notice them or recognize them in the streets, and then he asked her why it was that the German officers were not liked in Brussels !

To be seen speaking to a German was enough to send a Belgian to Coventry ; and when officers went along the boulevards in their striking colours, and their grey cloaks bellying in the wind, those who passed them affected not to see. The Nuncio was obliged to insert in *La Belgique*, perhaps the principal of the subsidized newspapers that had come into existence — journaux *embochés*, the Belgians called them — a note officially denying that he had given a dinner to the German authorities at the Nunciature.\*

The attitude of the Belgians conveyed in itself a reproach under which the Germany seemed to smart. With their war at that time "*fresh and joyous*", they did not like the assumption of mourning, the absence of all life and gaiety. They displayed, as a nation, every one of the characteristics of the *parvenu*. They had expected not only to impress, but to astonish and dumbfound the world when they overran it — expected to be the objects of gaping wonder and awe ; and it piqued them to find themselves rated pretty generally at their real merit.

The theatres were all closed and declined to open ; Belgian actors refused to appear ; Belgian singers would not sing ; Belgian playwrights would not permit the presentation of their plays. The usual carnival at Mardi Gras, with the great maskball at the royal theatre of the Monnaie, had been forbidden by the city authorities ; the Monnaie had been dark all winter long. Then one day, among the usual rumours, there was one to the effect that a concert was to be given at the Opera ; it proved to be true, and a few days later great posters were on the walls announcing it. Artists were coming from Germany with an orchestra and a chorus, 350 persons in all ; they were to give the "*Leonora*" overture and an act from *Die Meistersinger*. And Brussels loved music so ! The question was, would any one go ?

The day came, and the town was in excitement. There was even a rumour that the German Kaiser was to be in the royal box. But by universal tacit consent it was made a point of honour not to go, a sign of patriotism — that touching patriotism that was mounting in intensified resistance. It was said that the only Belgian who would be present was an old functionary of the Monnaie, who for nearly forty years had been at the door and knew every one in Brussels. He was the only one of all the *employés* who would consent to work that night, and he would make a report afterwards on the attendance. I was walking back from

Devreese's studio. The red sun, sinking behind the city, reminded me that we had German time, and that the sun was setting an hour too soon; I would have time to take a turn down by the Monnaie. I went through the narrow, twisting streets, idling along, feeling as I always did the charm of the old city. Crowds were gathered, and finally, at the Rue du Fossé-aux-Loups, turning into the Rue Léopold, three policemen stopped me. The street was barred, and a cordon of soldiers was around the theatre ; I had to make a detour. The Rue Neuve was impassable, so great was the crowd ; I had to go down, then, to the Boulevard Anspach and around that way. Everywhere there were the immense crowds waiting, not to go to the concert, but to see who did so ! The atmosphere seemed charged with trouble. But then the German seemed to like trouble . . .

At times it seemed as if one could no longer endure it, that one must get out of the suffocating atmosphere. As I passed the Park, the gates of which were barred and locked, with sentinels on guard, a bird was singing in the twilight, like the darkling thrush. in Mr. Thomas Hardy's poem :

*So little cause for caroling  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air,  
Some blessed hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.*

I went on around by the Palace and past the Ministry of Industry, where Von der Lancken had the enormous German Imperial flag with the black eagle floating from the staff over his window, and in the sunset there were thousands and thousands of starlings, a great aerial army of them, spread out like an enormous fan ; they rose and fell in graceful manoeuvres, and whirred and turned round and round over the Park. I was glad that there were no sentinels for the starlings ; they could fly up and away . . .

They were the only beings who could fly away, though there were always stories of boys and men who had succeeded in crossing the frontier, and stories of boys and men who had been shot by sentinels or killed by the highly charged electric wires in trying to do so. Every mother in Brussels with a son growing up was dreading the day when he would be big enough to serve, dreading the night when he would go away. Besides these lads, whose patriotism was so beautiful, there were soldiers of other armies. After the battles of August near Mons, hundreds of English and French soldiers were left behind in the retreat, and all winter they hid in the woods, enduring untold miseries, and now they were escaping too ; one man was said to have shown two hundred the way across the frontier into Holland.

There was another movement, coming in the opposite direction, groups of men in utter misery — the Belgian civilian prisoners who, having been sent to prison camps in Germany during the atrocities, were now being

sent back. They came, pale and spectral figures, wasted beyond recognition, having subsisted in those German camps on beet soup — tatterdemalions in the rags of the summer garments they had worn when they were herded into cattle-cars for their exile in that terrible August, and, as a last indignity, with one side of their faces shaven, the other heavily bearded.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

\* Depuis quelque temps circulent dans le public et dans la presse certains bruits tendancieux relativement à l'attitude de la Nonciature en Belgique vis-à-vis de l'autorité occupante.

On prétend, entre autres, que le Nonce aurait donné un dîner aux autorités allemandes, et cela à l'hôtel de la Nonciature.

La Nonciature apostolique tient à opposer à cette nouvelle le démenti le plus formel.

*Translation*

For some time there have been circulating among the people and in the Press certain rumours relating to the attitude of the Nunciature in Belgium toward the occupying authority.

They say, among other things, that the Nuncio has given a dinner to the German authorities, and that in the house itself of the Nunciature.

The Apostolic Nunciature categorically denies this rumour.