

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LXXI. SPRING.

THE winter was over and spring had come, and, to adapt a phrase from that wonderful first paragraph of Tolstoy's "*Resurrection*", spring was spring, even in Belgium. In the Place de l'Industrie the young leaves were a vivid green, the soft buds were falling on the damp pavement. The flower-market in the Grand' Place was once more blooming in its brilliant colours. Walking one morning in the Rue de la Paix I saw a pretty boy — he could not have been fifteen — playing a guitar ; he played it loudly and triumphantly, and it was the prohibited "*Marseillaise*" that he played ! Windows were flung up suddenly all along the street, there was delighted laughter and a clapping of hands, a sudden shower of coins on the sidewalk, and then all the windows were as suddenly closed. Along the Avenue Louise, under the budding chestnut-trees, the whole population seemed to be taking deep inhalations of the spring air, basking in the sunlight after the dreary winter. German soldiers sat before the open cafés drinking beer as though they were quite at home, but the people went on their way calmly as though the soldiers did not exist, a way of sending them to Coventry — the only place, apparently, to which they could send them.

In the Bois people were rowing on the little lake, youths and maidens were courting, and children playing hide-and-seek behind the noble trees. In the Park, old Von Bissing, in his bluish-grey greatcoat, with the broad white collar and the red revers, the cap with the red band, and an enormous sabre clanking against his boots, accompanied by an *aide*, was taking the air, walking slowly, stiffly, like an automaton. The spring seemed to have affected him too ; he was just out in a new *affiche* about the pigeons. In view of the excellent conduct — either of the Belgians or of the pigeons, we could not be quite sure — the pigeons might fly from three o'clock to six, but at that hour they must all be snugly in their cotes once more. It was a fait, abundantly recognized by all, especially on sunny mornings, that the war could not last another winter ; there were innumerable reasons, military, political, financial, dynastic, social, and hope was high ; the Allies might arrive at any time !

It was impossible to resist the temptation of the fields, the wistful haze, the warm air, the sky without a cloud — without even the usual ugly German captive *balloons* — *saucissons* they were called, because they looked like sausages — to mar it. Every one felt the need of movement, the longing to get away, but since the Brussels folk could not go far — there was always the lack of *Passierscheins*, which spring itself, alas, could not amend ! — they would invade the Forêt in bands on Sundays, and explore all the lovely land toward Tervueren. A few friends and I even ventured out to Ravenstein for a round of golf ; true, the course had not been kept up ; the two English professionals were gone — Pannell in the British army and Kyte a prisoner at Ruhleben ; the members were scattered, the grass was long, and few had the heart to play any more. But the old château was a peaceful place of an afternoon ; the larks were soaring and singing again, and there were other songs, or one afternoon there was another song, from across the fields toward Tervueren ; a procession of children was winding along the road far in the hazy distance ; their clear, sweet, childish voices came to us, borne on the breeze — in the strains of "*La Brabançonne*". And my Belgian companion turned away, biting his lip . . .

To be sure we of the Legations were shamelessly privileged ; we could motor where we would, as long as we stayed in the Occupationgebiet. Villalobar

frequently drove to Namur to inspect the Château de Dave, belonging to his aunt, who had fled before the oncoming tide of war and was in Spain. And now and then I was called by some duty, or, if not by duty, by some whim, to Dinant or Louvain or Mons, and the drives never lost their charm. Much of the country about Brussels showed no physical effect of the war, though one could never escape its presence, the grim tact of it, or rid oneself of the depressing preoccupation that all was not well with the world. And yet, there along the roads with their wayside shrines were still the cumbersome carts and the strange wagons with three wheels, though they had cows yoked to them ; now and then a country doctor, who might have driven out of one of Balzac's novels of provincial life, was jogging along in his high gig ; a sower was going forth to sow, his bag under his arm, casting the seed abroad with that long, leisurely sweep of the arm — Millet might have painted him, as Jacques might have painted the flocks of sheep, the shepherds in their cloaks, with their crooks and their dogs.

Once under its influence one can never escape the spell of Belgium, or wish to do so. It is not only picturesque, but — a detail that picturesqueness in certain other lands too frequently lacks — it is clean ; not a fallen twig that is not picked up ; the people are scrubbing and polishing all the time. The great Forêt de Soignes, which once had covered with its noble splendour all that land between the city and Tervueren and south to Waterloo — the Park and the Bois in Brussels are remnants of it, and it remains in pristine glory there about Tervueren — had all the enchantment of the Forest of Arden, which was not, after all, so far away, and I recall a sunny day when there at the Eight Cross-Roads we turned and went thence on through the woods, with their tender greens and blossoms, and their birds. Far off falling trunks crashed with a solemn boom. The wily peasants were surreptitiously felling the trees. We went on deeper into the woods of Tervueren, along an avenue of noble pines, low-hanging and cool, like our woods in Michigan, and then out into a new clearing where whole acres of pines had been felled, a sad spectacle ; it takes so long to produce a tree The trunks lay in windrows on the ground, the air was laden with the odour of their balsam. The old Flemish woodsman, his hands black with resin, stood a moment to rest, leaning on the axe with which he had been lopping off the boughs, and he explained that the trees were being cut out at the order of the Germans. Where were they to go ? He shook his wise old head.

Out of the woods, on a hill, below us and all around for miles the little fields in the harmonious tones of their green and red and brown lying like soft, rich carpets in the warm sun : suddenly, just over the horizon I saw a slender spire and four sails of a windmill turning lazily in the breeze, and recognized them instantly as the spire and the windmill we used to watch with endless interest and emotion in their peculiar charm from the terrace of Bois-Fleuri that long-lest summer ; Christminster, we used to call the unknown town lest in the mystery of the far horizon.

The patient peasants were tilling their fields ; with what courage, with what faith ! There was a strong, handsome peasant woman who might have come out of, or at least gone into, a novel by Mr. Thomas Hardy. She paused to talk with us, glad of an excuse to rest from her heavy toil. The brown men working with her in the fields paused too in their labour and looked up, and beyond there were other peasants going homeward over the hill . . . Then, at the risk of destroying another illusion, on through a sunken road, like the one at Ohain, with old, ancient, humble cots and wayside shrines, and so into Christminster, just around the turn of the road. But for once the reality equalled the dream. We entered the pretty little village of Duysbourg (Duisburg), with its eighteenth-century church, its high town pump, and its bevy of curious children, and as we emerged again, old walls overhung with cherry-boughs in bloom.

*Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with blooms along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride,
Wearing white for Eastertide.*

The sun-rays slanted across the fields, enveloping every roof and outline with an aura — a phenomenon the effect of which is enhanced by the moist atmosphere of the Low Countries. Just as one turns into Tervueren, in a dell below an old château is a stone grotto and a shrine within ; three candles were burning there, three little pointed flames against the blackness of the grotto, and a girl was kneeling before it at her prayers . . .

But at Tervueren there are again those grey figures who have ravished the lovely land and wellnigh ravished faith and hope out of the breast of man. A sentinel stops us, then waves us on again. A company of soldiers, plodding in their clumsy boots, march into a flock of sheep and scatter them right and left in panic. Across the fields a squadron of Uhlans, the black-and-white pennants fluttering from their lances, gallop recklessly over the ground the peasants have just tilled, the peasants flying in terror before them.

Down a peaceful side road, half-way to Louvain, is the old château of Leefdael. There had been an engagement near there in August 1914, Belgian Chasseurs galloping along the road and over the fields, and a German hussar plunging his horse into a ditch and breaking his neck. The Germans pillaged the château and took *objets d'art*, everything, away, cut the old paintings out of their frames, carried off even the bed-clothing. There is a pretty chapel.

"*Did they go in there ?*" I asked an old peasant.

"*No, only one of the officers.*"

"*And what did he do ?*"

"*He said his prayers for half an hour.*"

The light fades from the fields. High over Brussels in the blurred sky two ugly captive balloons mark the place for the Zeppelins to return from their raids ; and the sound of the cannonading comes from the distant front in France.

Occasionally we would go down to Mariemont to lunch with Raoul Warocqué, taking the road to Waterloo through the little villages, occupied by companies of the melancholy old men of the *Landsturm* ; there were always troops of children shouting "*Vive l'Amérique !*" and old peasants doffing their caps, or, if it happened to be a Sunday, processions of young girls in white frocks for their first communion.

The present château of Mariemont was built in the middle of the last century to replace the old, which, having been burned in 1794 during the French Revolution, lies now in picturesque ruins in the great park. Charles V, Marie-Thérèse, Louis XIV, and other monarchs whose glories have departed, were entertained there, but the park is given another aspect to-day, something of contemporaneity, by the great vase of Devreese and statues by Rousseau, the Belgian, and by Rodin. A replica of *The Bourgeois of Calais* is there, and there are strange trophies of Warocqué's life in

China, great Buddhas and temples, and in the château there are collections that give it the aspect of a museum. In those spring days of 1915 there were always, besides the grazing deer, German officers and German soldiers strolling about, entirely at home. The officers went frequently ; they used to send an orderly to say what they wished for dinner, announce the number of uninvited guests, and insist on Warocqué making up bridge-parties in the evening.

Poor Warocqué ! He did much for his country. His château was the local headquarters of the C.R.B. ; Mr. Carstairs, the C.R.B. delegate, lived there, and the American flag floated from the staff until the German *Kreischef* objected. And in the midst of all his wealth, his collections, the finest library perhaps in Belgium, and all the trophies of his travels, Warocqué sickened, and the strain and sorrow of the war hastened him toward his end. He came, finally, to have only one wish, one longing, and that was to live to see the King come back, and even that was not to be granted . . .

As one drove from Dinant, all along the road from Brussels to Namur and over all the fields were new barbed-wire entanglements and new trenches with little steel turrets, and German soldiers in the dirty grey uniforms, their guns slung over their backs, bending by the wayside picking buttercups ! The steel turrets were the latest thing in trench warfare, it was said, and they were not altogether unpleasing to the natives, since they suggested the possibility of retreat and gave rise to constant rumours that the Germans were about to fall back along the line of the Meuse. There were ruins, too, at Namur, especially in the Grand Place, and Dinant was another and a worse Louvain. The charming little village was quite gone ; the curious spire, something like a minaret, so familiar in the pictures of the town, had disappeared ; and in the main quarter the poor people were digging among the ruins, pathetically hunting some souvenir of their broken lives, or, with a courage that was remarkable, perhaps trying to clear away the ruins in order to remake them. We drove on through the town, through the cleft of the Rocher Bayard, and on up the hill. The Meuse flowed below, and two little Walloon children stood staring at us. They were just like the children who were shot that terrible August evening near that very spot, on the shore of the river that flowed by so tranquilly . . . Fortunately there was some candy to give them.

There are many inexplicable injustices under the sun, but none, to my mind, so inexplicable as innocent suffering, the cruelty inflicted on children and animals. I knew a man near Givet, a rocky, wooded country beyond Dinant, where many of the earlier atrocities were committed by the Germans. On the night of August 23 from his home he saw twenty-seven villages in flames, the flames of Dinant rising higher than any other in the sky, glowing red as from an inferno, And of all the civilians who were stood up against the walls to be shot not one asked for mercy. But yes — there was one ; a little boy of twelve, who, just as they placed him against the wall, began to whimper and to beg piteously . . . The bullets stilled his crying.

But Nature, like man, though not quite so cruel — since there is impassivity, a kind of impersonality, in her cruelty — forgets. Already the ruins of Dinant had taken on an ancient and detached, almost a classic air, so that we viewed them with hardly more emotion than we viewed the ruins of the Abbaye de Villers, on the road homewards, a point for tourists before the war, when there were few other romantic ruins to see in busy Belgium.

German soldiers were guarding the ruins there in that gloomy ravine, lest some one remove them, perhaps — although they allowed us to wander about among the ruins and to try to decipher the inscriptions on the stone tablets, taken from the graves of the old abbots and the nobles who once were buried there. *Suaviter et*

fortiter and *Post tenebra spero lucem*. Ah yes ; perhaps ! The rooks cawed from the dripping mossy walls and flapped heavily over the high nave and transept that were open to the sky. And all this ruin was wrought in the name of democracy during the French Revolution, as ruin is wrought to-day in the name of autocracy. Is the folly of the human race, after all, quite incorrigible ? . . .

At tea that afternoon in the *salon*, with its soft, faded colours and the grace and harmony of its Louis XIV furnishings, the Baroness was in her corner knitting ; the little table at her elbow covered with *objets d'art*, with a photograph of the Queen and one of the boy who was on the Yser. L— sits on the fender moodily smoking a cigarette. B—'s monocle seems so high in his pale face, and his wife lolls indolently in a *fauteuil*. The old Count d'O—, grown old and white in an abiding grief over the catastrophe of his country, sits and stares vaguely before him. There is the usual gossip, there are the usual stories of the latest German atrocities, of the latest exhibition of German taste, of *la mentalité allemande* ; then the prospects of the Russian advance, speculation as to when the Allies will arrive, the dream of the day when the King will come back ; something too about Kitchener, bitter reflections on Italy, who will not come into the war.

" *Enfin !* " sighs the Baroness wearily. Then a long silence. There is no more to be said, and for the feeling deep in all hearts no expression. It is raining ; the water drips dismally from the trees along the boulevard. There is no spring, after all. In the stillness of the universal depression the Baroness heaves a sigh and says :

" *Mais, tout de même, ils sont diablement près de Paris.* "

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.