

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LXXVI. AIR RAIDS.

I WAS awakened one morning in that June, the 7th of the month, by what I thought was thunder ; but no, there was that sharp resonant explosion, there times — a shed, evidently. I got up and went to my window. It was half-past two o'clock and the dawn was breaking over the huddled roofs, whose tiles and chimney-pots gave the illusion of upholding the quadriga of the Cinquantenaire. A moon in the last quarter, with the dull glitter of old battered silver, hung in the pale sky, and near it the morning star. There was the cool breath, the stillness, the solemnity, of dawn, and a touch of delicate rose in the heavens. Then, suddenly, those sharp reports again. One by one the windows along the Rue de Trèves were opened and heads popped out.

"*C'est un aéroplane*", said the inevitable wiseacre to be found in all crowds, with his satisfied and important air.

The *agent de police*, glad of human companionship in his vigils, sauntered into the middle of the street and addressed the out-thrust heads above him ; he spoke in Flemish, and I did not know what he was saying, but every one laughed, though nervously, and the policeman was evidently satisfied — avenged momentarily, no doubt, by some *zwanze* for having to salute the arrogant conquerors. The man across the way, who was always reading novels at his upper window, now unlocked his door with a great rattle of keys, came out into the street and joined the *agent* ; they sauntered off to the corner. Some one sneezed and every one laughed. Then it was still.

And there in the lovely dawn we watched and listened. The shells, solemnly, not unmusically, boomed in the silence, incessantly. We saw nothing at first, then out over the roofs toward the north-east, beyond the Cinquantenaire, in the direction of Evere, high in the sky, we detected flashes of fire, gone before one could point them out, shells exploding in the air, and we knew that the Allied aviators had come to bomb the Zeppelins at Evere, their great hangar painted in varicoloured stripes, as though by a Futurist painter ; *camouflé* — though the old French word in the new meaning the war gave it had not come to Brussels then.

And then suddenly there was another sound — two dull explosions, in a lower, heavier, more muffled note ; surely, one thought, bombs falling on the hangar. Then a furious cannonade, and the flashes in the sky, and then all was still again. We waited.

Then — the *ronflement* of a motor, and there, high in the sky, a monoplane was flying toward the north ; the firing began again. Having now fixed the dramatic centre of that strange conflict in the air, it was easier to follow it. The shrapnel was exploding below and around the monoplane, flashes of fire — but the youth sailed on . . .

The Rue de Trèves was filled with men gazing upward, one man having thoughtfully provided himself with binoculars. All Brussels was awake and watching, following with bated breath and intense,

affectionate sympathy that unknown friend flying so high in the northern sky. One was acutely conscious of a prayer in all hearts — a universal aspiration going up from the silent city toward that brave, unknown flyer there out of sight, in God's sweet dawn, and the guns making a kind of solemn music all the while.

It was well on toward three o'clock and quite light, the sky gold and rose all around to the east, and not a cloud. He soared aloft there, going north, higher and higher, smaller and smaller, the guns booming on in the solemn stillness, the shells flashing into sheets of flame, leaving little white balls of smoke behind, exploding about him while we watched ; would one reach him ?

It was a beautiful, inspiring sight, that battle in the air in the still and lovely dawn — symbolic, somehow ; the old conflict between the Prince of the Powers of the Air and the Prince of the Powers of Darkness. What bravery, what heroic daring ! That lad up there, some fair, clean, beautiful English boy, with his traditions of honour, who had flown up out of France, across the hell of those trenches, and unerringly in the moonlight to that spot where he had a tryst with the dawn. There in the morning light, exposed to all dangers, seen of all men — not skulking like those submarines in nether darkness, stealing up and striking a treacherous, cowardly blow at the innocent, at non-combatants, at women and children ! The implications of it all were tremendous. That unknown youth in the skies that serene morning was the darling of half a million Brussels hearts ; their greetings, their gratitude must have risen to him in waves that were almost palpable ; he might almost have been imagined then as waving friendly hands — the sign of that democracy for which he was risking his life ! ...

He was flying serenely on and up like some glorious bird, never turning, never swerving, sailing on in a kind of majesty. He disappeared behind one of the old chimney-pots, then appeared again across the red files. The guns fired a last shot, the shells flashed spitefully in the clear morning sky ; then against its blue a cloud of smoke arose, and we said that the hangar was burning, that the aviator had accomplished his mission and was safely on his way back to the lines of the Allies. Rue de Trèves was excited for a while — then went back to sleep.

At nine o'clock that morning a company of German troops went trudging in their clumsy boots down the Rue de Trèves. They plodded along, heads hanging, singing lugubriously, evidently under orders. It was a sad, sodden kind of singing, and the Rue de Trèves laughed and knew that the man of the air had succeeded. The Germans would, of course, do something to show that they did not care.

And then Marie, my wife's maid, popped in, all excitement.

"Oh, Monsieur le Ministre ! Les avions ont détruit le hangar à Evere, et le Zeppelin qu'il contenait ! Le laitier vient de me le dire ! Il y en avait six — il les a vus !"

She stopped to catch her breath.

"Je me suis éveillée aux deux explosions — bomb ! bomb ! — et j'ai couru vite, vite !"

She ran out and was back at once ; some one had arrived with confirmation. The streets all about Evere were barred, the hangar and

the Zeppelin therein destroyed. All the people at Auderghem had been at their windows, and all exclaiming, as they watched the aviator :

"Que Saint Antoine le garde ! Que Saint Antoine le garde !"

The population at Evere mocked the Germans during the attack ; the people ran out in their night-clothes, and one Belgian got out a cornet and played "*La Brabançonne*".

De Levai had spent the night out at the château Charles-Albert, at Boitsfort, had been awakened by the noise of the motors, and had seen it all. He had seen the aeroplanes flying across the Forêt de Soignes, there were ten of them, he said ; he had seen them circle over the hangar, one swooping very low.

Then at eleven o'clock fair Inez came, riding by on her bicycle, all rosy with smiles and very pretty and charming in a fresh linen morning gown (the day was very warm). She had risen and with her maid had pedalled out to Evere ; had heard that eight German soldiers were killed, one badly mangled.

Topping had seen it all too ; he was sitting up reading and had seen the aeroplanes, six or more, arriving in the form of a flying wedge, and he watched the battle.

Thus all morning the stories came in, until in the afternoon a gentleman from Mont-Saint-Amand (Sint Amandsberg), near Ghent, called at the Legation to say that at half-past two that morning four aeroplanes had flown over Ghent and that the Zeppelin there rose to meet them ; they flew high over it and, dropping bombs, destroyed it so that it fell and was shattered to pieces, killing the twenty-three Germans in it. But a shell also struck a convent and killed a nun and a girl living in the convent, the daughter of a Belgian officer. The man brought me a piece of the frame of the Zeppelin as a souvenir.

— And so Brussels was smiling that day, much encouraged. The exploit had small military significance, perhaps, but it cheered the people.

"Ça prouve", said one man, *"qu'on pense à nous !"*

No one went to the Germans for passes or other favours that day. No newspapers were permitted, and they kept companies of soldiers marching about the city all day singing !

A German officer, speaking to an American just then in Brussels, Mr. Montgomery, said :

"It must have been an Englishman ; he was so brave !"

And so it was. The attack on the hangar was made, not by ten or by six, but by two men, Flight-Lieutenants J. P. Wilson and J. S. Mills, R.N. The hero of the dramatic conflict at Ghent was Flight Sub-Lieutenant R. A. Jr. Warneford, R.N., who was killed so short a time afterwards, with Henry Beach Needham, at Paris.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Grâce à l'admirable travail de Benoît Majerus et Sven Soupart, nous pouvons découvrir le ***Journal de guerre*** (*Notes d'un Bruxellois pendant l'Occupation 1914-1918*) de Paul MAX (cousin du bourgmestre Adolphe MAX) était accessible sur INTERNET – qui a été publié aux Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles / Archief van de Stad Brussel en 2006 –, où il nous parle de ce bombardement du 7 juin 1915 (pages 202-203) :

[http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal de %20guerre de Paul Max bdef.pdf](http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de%20guerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf)