

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter LXXXII. Under fire.

WE had been joined by the father-in-law of one of the officers, an old German civilian with a long grey beard that covered his breast. He had been a soldier in the war of 1870, was then engaged in business in Hamburg, and was on his annual holiday. He explained to me that he had found himself in need of rest, and knew no better way to spend his vacation than by visiting the front.

Von der Lancken, Villalobar, and I mounted into the motor of the Crown Prince, and our young Captain — he of the broad jaw and the short moustache — was at the wheel. He drove that car like a demon, whirling and dashing and swerving through the streets, shouting to people to get out of his way, and so on to the road and through the villages of Siglin and Carvin on the way to Lens and the French front.

The memory of the haggard villages, with that bedraggled, unkempt air which the occupation gave them, that palpable layer of dirt, those sad women lifting their weary eyes in languid interest as we passed, those ragged children seeing only the superficial glamour of the military spectacle, those soldiers in dirty grey, those swanking officers and conspicuous salutes — it can never leave me. It was good to get out on to the highway again, in the sunlight, with the harvests ripe in the fields on either side, though there were no peasants to gather them ; Russian prisoners, great fellows out of the novels of Turgenev and Tolstoy, had taken their places at the reapers. We were running sixty miles an hour, too fast to talk, but just before we got to Lens, lying there before us in a little valley, we stopped, and our Captain pointed away off across the fields and rolling hills to the right.

*" La Chapelle de Notre-Dame de Lorette,"* he said.

It was the famous and sanguinary Loretta Heights, where in Joffre's great offensive the terrible fighting of May 21 had occurred. It lay a little to the north-west of Souchez, almost half-way to Arras. There is an old legend in Northern France, brought down through centuries of battles, that the one who holds Loretta Heights will win the war. It is not, perhaps, altogether a soldier's superstition, but is founded, no doubt upon the very salient and substantial fact that the army that held those hills had a strategical position that commanded the countryside for miles around.

Behind was La Sassée, and a little farther on Neuve-Chapelle, where the English heroically failed. These, of course, were out of sight, but we could see Loretta Heights, see the smoke rising and hear the thunder of the guns in the artillery duel that goes on there for ever. There lay those lovely fields in the sunlight of France, under a haze of grey smoke and grey dust.

We drove down into Lens, a little town, dirty like the rest, reeking of the odour of invasion, deserted by everybody who could get away,

inhabited now by slatternly women, depressed and bedraggled, and by children on the sidewalks watching the endless stream of grey soldiers flow by. We drove through the town and beyond into a cemetery — for of course, after the factory, one must visit the cemetery. There, at the entrance of the cemetery, where in the blazing sun lay closely huddled graves decorated with artificial flowers, crosses of wood or of iron ornamented with photographs and other mementoes of the deceased, was a monument that had been erected to the citizens of Lens who had fallen in the war of 1870, and already there were the new graves of those other heroes who had fallen in this latest war.

But they took us there not to see so much the French as the German cemetery. The Germans had acquired a plot of ground adjoining the French cemetery, and therein were buried, with German regularity — the officers in the centre, in a sacred enclosure by themselves — the German soldiers killed in that vicinity. Already eighteen hundred Germans had been buried there, men who had fallen in the battles of May and June, and there was a significant repetition of the same date on the rough wooden crosses over the graves, and the inscription "*Hier ruht in Gott . . .*"

Ivy had been planted in the yellow ground, and there was colossal angel in stone — heavy, stalwart, muscular, Teutonic — with a sword in his hands larger than the sword of Gideon . . . And immediately adjoining this space the French were buried, and over the graves the same little wooden crosses, the same dates, and "*Ici repose en paix . . .*"

From the brow of a lofty hill, crowned by a colliery, its great iron building lifting its gaunt sides high above the surrounding country, its cupola shattered by a shell, we looked down into the broad valley. The thunder of the guns below us was loud ; once more we heard the shriek of the hurtling shells and the sharper rattle of the artillery over at Notre-Dame de Lorette. Off to our left a whistling and shrieking of German shells ; one could hear them, and one thought one could almost see them before they struck and exploded in a puff of smoke. We stopped, watching the duel through glasses. But :

"*We must not stay here too long*", said our Captain, "*or they will see us and take a shot at us.*"

We went back to the motors, and our Jehu dashed through the village and on to Liévin, out on the way to Angre, where were the outer defences of Lens. A dismal little town, Angre, wholly abandoned by its inhabitants and occupied by German troops in force ; we drave through it and on to the road just outside and up a little hill, straight in the direction of Notre-Dame de Lorette — now, as it seemed, not half a mile away. The road was crowded : wagon-trains trundled up the hill ; caissons were drawn up by the roadside, in the shelter of a crumbling bank and a row of tall trees, the artillery men sitting with their legs carelessly crooked over the pommels of their saddles — grim, sullen fellows, waiting for I know not what. Off to the right, across an open field above the bank, we had a better view of the Loretta Heights — a grey-green, bald hill ; looking through the glass one could see that the foliage of the woods had all been shot away. And the guns were pounding in that sullen, stupid reiteration of the one argument they know . . .

Then suddenly a shell burst in the field, there on our right. The Captain instantly stopped the car.

"*Mais c'est tout près !*" I said.

"*Je comprends !*" said Von der Lancken, who was sitting in a seat in front of me.

The shell had exploded not more than fifty yards away, and there seemed to be something preposterous in the fact that it had fallen so close. There had been, there still was, a great puff of brown smoke, and then a shower of dirt and stones right there beside us. Then, the shriek of another shell ; it exploded just to our left and a little ahead of us, much nearer. They were shooting at us evidently, having seen the two big grey motors on the exposed hill-top.

"*Look out for the third one !*" our Captain cried.

Look out ? How was one to look out ? It seemed to me a most stupid, silly thing to say. We sat there in the motor and waited. Nobody spoke. I had a confused recollection of the old superstition of policemen, railwaymen, and sailors, that catastrophes come in threes. I was wondering at this, accepting it as a phenomenon at last confirmed by reality. But in the stillness Von der Lancken was explaining the way gunners find the range, fixing first on one side, then on the other, and then in the middle — *la fourchette*, he said, and striking the finger of his right hand between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, he illustrated just how the third shell, for which we were waiting, would strike us. I waited in a fascination of suspense. There it was — that shriek, that tearing of heavy cloth. Still the waiting, the suspense. Then Lancken exclaimed :

"*Il n'a pas éclaté !*"

It was a dud, as the soldiers say. Then another shell exploded in front of us in the field, a little closer to the road. They were finding the range. The Captain at the wheel was backing his car as fast as he could; he backed it down near the caissons under cover of the bank. The shells were exploding all about in that field above us to the right. The artillery horses were bucking and prancing, the gunners irritably trying to calm them. On the other side of the road a *sous-officier* in spectacles, who had been sitting his horse carelessly, shouted an order in a loud, angry, resentful voice. The gunners reined in their horses, shouted at them, jerked them about ; and the caissons turned, lumbered down the hill, and disappeared behind the shelter of the vacant houses.

We alighted from the motors. The shells were still exploding in the field. The officers of our party clambered up the bank to the edge of the field. I climbed up with them, feeling that I should do as the others did. I was filled with an intense depression — the depression, I suppose, of fear ; but I did not wish Villalobar and Von der Lancken and the Captain, just then at least, to know of this fear. And so I climbed up the bank to the field to look over toward the Loretta Heights again.

The name stands out in my mind as the most important point in this war. I looked, and it seemed inexpressibly foolish and futile and stupid to be standing there in the field where shells were exploding, tearing up the earth, and throwing up clouds of dust.

Lancken told us to take the car and to join them at a group of houses on another road beyond the field, some distance away. They started on foot, while Villalobar and I got into the car and were driven by a detour around the angle of that high field, down a little road and again in the

direction of the Loretta Heights. We were on the brow of the range of hills, the triangular field in which the shells exploded lay to the left of us ; to our right was a row of houses, deserted, with innocent little flower gardens before them, there on the brink of that inferno. The officers huddled under the lee of the house, peering around the corner of it at the wide battle. We joined them and took turns at looking at the artillery duel through the glass ; all that we could see were the faint puffs of smoke from the shells, exploding first on one side, then on the other side of the wide valley. We could see no soldiers, only the bursting shells, now over at Loretta Heights, now on our side, there at the foot of the range of hills, across the invisible trenches. And so we stood there at the corner of that house taking turns at the glass — the old man who had been in the war of 1870 twisting his long white beard in his fingers, peering now and then out around the corner of the house, looking over at Loretta Heights, enjoying his holiday . . .

We could really see no more than we had seen from the colliery ; but I said to myself that I could stay as long as they could, play the actor with the best of them. I do not know how long we stood there. The battery that had fired at us and had come so near to hitting us was at last directing its fire in another direction ; its shells were falling elsewhere. . . .

After we got into the motor and were driving back into the village, Lancken, twisting about in his little seat in front of us, said :

"Well, you have had your baptism of fire."

We were racing back through the little town of Liévin. In a dirty and deserted square a band was playing, an old white-haired conductor leading it, raising his *baton* high in the air to salute us as we passed.

After such a morning, after the incidents of the sleepless night and the rising at such an unhallowed hour, we were all tired. We drove to the Hôtel de l'Europe, had a miserable luncheon, and at five — four, our time — started back for Brussels.

We made a detour and stopped for tea in a pretty little cottage built in the English style, where some young officers of aviation were living. The tea proved to be coffee, and the young officers all very gay. They were strong, good-looking young chaps of aristocratic families who had taken to aviation, which in our day replaces the cavalry as the smart branch of the military service. They liked the life of the villa, where they lived like a college fraternity, and they were naïvely anxious to have the war go on indefinitely.

"*J'espère*", said one of them, who spoke a little French, "*que la paix n'éclatera pas !*"

He said it seriously, innocent of the charming *mot*, the amusing figure that he had made.

Von der Lancken wished to go around through Audenarde, and that involved another detour. We drove through Roubaix and raced on to Waterloo — not the historic Waterloo — and then through a village in which every window and every door were closed and not a soul abroad. There in the glare of the afternoon sun it was like a city of the dead, but finally we saw people cautiously peeping at us from

behind curtains. There was one person abroad, a boy in the street, who said they had to enter their houses at six o'clock. But a little farther up the road, not a quarter of a mile, the houses were open, the population loafing pleasantly in the street — and we knew that we had entered Belgium. The people were all gazing upward into the sky, and there, looking up, we saw an English aviator. As we rolled along he came after us. For miles and miles he flew as we rode, much of the time directly over us.

The sun was low, the air was clear and soft, and the windmills extended their graceful arms against a silver western sky ; the low barges on the canal were spreading their brown sails for the evening breeze ; the slender trees along the canal were bending like plumes ever towards the East, the characteristic mark of the Flemish landscape. It was a lovely evening, and we looked forward to a restful drive in the peaceful twilight. But all the while that aviator was flying along with us. Now and again Harrach would glance up, as would Lancken ; presently he said :

*"If he were to drop a bomb on us . . ."*

The aviator raced along with us for an hour and then turned back and was lost in the pearly clouds away to the south. And we drove on in the quiet evening, far, it seemed, from the war, for none of war's ravages were visible in that part of Flanders . . .

The spires of Audenarde were showing in the distance, and then suddenly — *une panne*. Harrach and the chauffeur got out ; but it was no ordinary blow-out or *pneu crevé* — the chassis was broken.

*"Rien à faire !"* said the chauffeur, shaking his head. Perhaps he might get the car to Audenarde, three kilometers away. He went slowly, picking his way carefully, over the terrible Belgian blocks that pave the roads of Belgium.

We crawled along, and finally reached Audenarde. Harrach got out and was gone a long time. There was no motor to be had. He found the name of a garage and sent the chauffeur there with the car. In the twilight we wandered through the Grand' Place and to the *Hôtel de Ville* — smaller, but more beautiful even than the *Hôtel de Ville* in Brussels ; then to the little *Hôtel de la Pomme d'Or*, where we ordered supper. While the supper was being prepared, Harrach, who had been to the garage to see about repairing the car, came in with a long face.

*"Impossible !"* he reported.

*"Pourquoi impossible ?"* asked Von der Lancken.

*"À cause-de leur sale fête nationale !"* he replied.

It was Belgium's national holiday and the Belgians were observing it, if not in one way, then in another. They would not repair a German car. And so we had the prospect of spending the night at the *Hôtel de la Pomme d'Or*, and the valets with our luggage had gone on from Lille by train to Brussels. We considered the possibility of sending to Brussels for a motor-car, but that involved *Passierscheins* and all sorts of arrangement, in this instance as difficult for these two distinguished German officers as for us in ordinary times ; the motor could not get to Audenarde before morning, we should gain nothing.

But Von der Lancken was resourceful. He sent Harrach to telephone to Brussels and order a special train, and then we sat down to a very good supper.

The yellow-haired Flemish girl who served us wore a brooch with a photograph in it ; she could speak no French, but Harrach could get along with her in Flemish.

"*Who is that ?*" asked Harrach.

She threw back her head with pride :

"*Belge soldat, mijnheer*", she said.

"*Your sweetheart ?*" Harrach asked.

"*Neen, mijn broeder.*"

"*But you have a sweetheart ?*" he persisted.

"*Ik zal niemand beminnen duuring de oorlog*" she said. She was as indomitable as the rest of the Belgians.

We had our dinner, and then a bugle in the street announced the retreat ; everybody must be indoors a little after ten — that is, ten German time.

We left the hotel and walked through the dark and silent streets, Villalobar with Von der Lancken going on ahead, Harrach and I following, talking in low tunes in the intimacy that darkness somehow makes natural. He told me of his experiences at the outbreak of the war ; he had been in Florence studying art. He spoke of his family, of his wife and children, of his ambitions, of art, of the war, of all his interrupted plans. And we strolled on in the soft grateful darkness, weary after our long day of excitement.

Suddenly in the darkness a cry :

"*Halte-là !*"

We halted.

"*Ces vieux bonshommes de Landsturm tirent si à la légère parfois, vous savez*", said Harrach.

Lancken and Villalobar had halted ; they were on the other side of the street. Then Lancken's voice rang out ; he was shouting something in German. Finally he was ordered to draw near. We approached then, and under the light of a lamppost — the only one, I think, in the town that was lighted — the sentinel, a bearded old fellow, read our papers, became suddenly obsequious, and showed us the way to the station. When we got there it was half-past eleven, and we had an hour and a half to wait. Lancken grumbled at the lateness of our return.

"*Si vous n'aviez pas changé l'heure, nous ne serions pas rentrés si tard ce soir*", said Villalobar.

The railroad officials — all German, of course — were saluting right and left. They gave us the waiting-room ; Von der Lancken had them put out the lights, and we stretched out on the cushions with our overcoats over us. I fell asleep immediately and did not awaken until they called us to take the train. There were four compartments in the train and, tired of each other's

presence, we each took one. I wrapped myself in my overcoat and stretched myself out on the seat. The train jerked — started . . .

Some one had opened the door of the carriage and was shouting :  
"Brüssel, mein Herr."

We were in the Gare du Nord ; it was silent and empty, with that desolate air a railway-station wears in the night — an impression intensified then because the *gare* had become a *Bahnhof*, with all the signs in German. In the Place Rogier a cabman was snoozing on his box, and Villalobar's motor was waiting, the Spanish flag at the fore . . . We drove home in the cool morning air.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

### **Footnotes.**

It would be interesting compare with what **Paul MAX** (cousin of the *bourgmestre Adolphe MAX*) told about the same day in his *Journal de guerre* (*Notes d'un Bruxellois pendant l'Occupation 1914-1918*) :

[http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications/Fichier\\_PDF/Fonte/Journal\\_de\\_guerre\\_de\\_Paul\\_Max\\_bdef.pdf](http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de_guerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf)