

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter LXXXIV. Little tragedies.

MEANWHILE we were having a more important display of the German mentality in the notes on the *Lusitania* case, and indeed on the whole submarine controversy, that ran like a serial through all the troubled months of that summer. We could only read them, of course, and marvel at them, and live on from day to day wondering when the war that we felt to be so inevitable would come. The experience repeated on its own gigantic scale the smaller experiences we were having, in which the deeds were so at variance with the discussions that pretended to regulate them. I would read the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* at evening and think the whole controversy settled, and Gibson in the morning would come in and say :

"Well, they've blown up another ship."

Thus we lived through the incidents of the *Hesperian* and of the *Arabic* — with our trunks packed.

The whole of Germany, as we were coming to understand it, was revealed in those notes. The explanation was simple. The notes were written by the civil government and the ships were blown up by the military : the military was not, as in our Western system, a weapon of the civil power, an arm in the hand of government ; the civil power was a rudimentary organ, tolerated for the sake of appearances by the military cabal, which was the ruling power and the real government.

These notes were, however, as not every one at the time seemed to realize, the pleadings in the great cause that was being tried before the jury of civilization and the judges of history, and it was a matter of pride that our cause was pleaded by a President who, almost without effort, could strip the German words of the very last of their pretensions and expose their speciousness, their immature, inconsequential, and immaterial statements, so that even then the issues were joined and America entitled to a judgment on the pleadings. While the common law and the civil law, proceeding from widely differing sources, practically unite in the same rules of evidence, the Germans seemed to be wholly ignorant of such rules — at least they disregarded them. We were constantly having, on a smaller scale, experiences that were identical : the civil officers would promise one thing, the military would straightway do another ; and, what was more astonishing, they seemed to see nothing extraordinary in such inconsistency. "*Messieurs les militaires*", they would say, perhaps give a shrug of the shoulders — and that was a reason and an argument. The German mentality, indeed, offered a psychological phenomenon that was baffling to the most profound study, and the Belgians had daily examples of it. For instance, when the city fathers of Louvain began to discuss the rebuilding of the portions of the city that had been destroyed, and Brussels architects submitted plans, German architects submitted plans too, with the price of what they delicately called the "*public improvement*" indicated, and the German architects were wholly unaware that their taste in ethics was as bad as it is in art ; it never occurred to them that there could be any

repugnance on the part of the people of Louvain to the engagement of German architects to reconstruct what German soldiers had so wantonly destroyed, though perhaps there is another explanation in the fact that the Germans seemed to be incapable of seeing two things at the same time.

The Countess K. de R—, for instance, living on in her château, was ordered by the *Kommandant* of the region to furnish his men with so many eggs each day. She did so. Then she was ordered to dispose of her chickens in order to save food. But how, she asked, could she then provide the eggs ? They had not thought of that. It was wholly characteristic of the German mind, which, so exceedingly keen in many ways, cannot always put two and two together — does not often think, as I said, of two things at the same time. They would have a commission on eggs composed of thirty-six Herr Professors, and they would make an intricate study, and another commission of Herr Doktors on hens and all sorts of statistics, but they would fail to note the relation between hens and eggs.

Going down the Rue de la Madeleine those summer afternoons, we used to smile as we passed a café with this sign :

" CAFE DES "

and then a blank. It had been the "Café des *Alliés*" in the early days of the war, but the Germans ordered the proprietor to change the name ; the proprietor, with Belgian cleverness, simply erased the word "*Alliés*" and left a blank, and thereupon his café had an extraordinary advertisement and such a vogue as he had never dreamed of when at first he had thus flaunted his colours. It was but another instance of that incomparable inability to understand all things that have to do with the mystery of human nature ; they were myopic of soul, as of vision, seeing nothing beyond their purblind eyes — and they could not understand why the Belgians did not like them, and actually complained, as I fear I have said, or shall say, more than once, that they were not more cordially received.

When the Germans arrived at Marchienne-au-Pont, near Charleroi, they made an investigation as to the status of the *Garde Civique* of the vicinity. The *Oberkommandant* had an officer of the *Garde Civique* called before him, and with him inspected the barracks. All the arms were turned over to the Germans and a number of blank cartridges, but the *Oberkommandant* said that these were not dangerous and of no use to the German army, and left them where he found them. Several months afterwards the *Oberkommandant* was replaced by another officer, who one morning called the officer of the *Garde Civique* and reproached him with having, in spite of all orders, kept munitions. The officer explained to him that they were blank cartridges formerly used for exercises, and repeated what the first *Kommandant* had said. "Then", said the German, "*the Kommandant made a mistake ; he failed in his duty, and will be punished.*" Whether the *Kommandant* who seemed to be so reasonable was punished or not I cannot say, but the officer of the *Garde Civique* was sent to prison for three months. That would have seemed to be sufficient injustice, or enough bad luck, for one time, but no : while the officer was in prison a fire broke out in his home, and his pigeons flew away from the *colombier*, which was burning, and he was condemned to pay a fine — because it had been forbidden to allow pigeons to fly !

The pigeons in Belgium, indeed, had almost as bard a time of it as the people themselves. At Nivelles a poor man had some carrier-pigeons and

the Belgian love for them ; but he had no food for them, and so was obliged to kill them. He cut off their heads, and these his children ranged along a window-sill, and underneath wrote "*Morts pour la Patrie*". The Germans saw the little heads and the inscription — and the man was sent for fifteen days to the *Kommandantur* and fined two hundred francs.

There was literally no end to the incidents of injustice and cruelty. For instance, I was told, on what seemed to be indisputable authority, that the Germans visited a stock farm, one of the most famous in Belgium, took six or seven stallions and turned them into a paddock together to see them fight ; and afterwards some of the officers hamstrung the stallions with their sabres — wantonly, with loud guffaws.

And yet the delegates of the C.R.B., who were always with officers in the north of France, used to tell us how, with this brutality, the young German officers, or many of them, were strangely effeminate — that they all had, for instance, delicate toilet articles, like those that women use, and that they had them in profusion. It may be that there was something pathologic in it all, and that the scientists would see in the two instances a consistency instead of what appears to be an inconsistency. It was a common sight in the country to see soldiers, their guns slung on their backs, bending by the roadside picking wild flowers.

Those pigeons were not the only animals that were sacrificed. I had a friend, the most charming of country gentlemen, who had the finest pack of foxhounds in Belgium ; he had been M.F.H. for many years. There were more than a hundred of the noble dogs, the result of years of careful breeding. But food was growing scarce, and the peasants near the master's château were complaining of the feeding of dogs while they themselves were so limited as to food. And so he sacrificed the poor beasts. He made a sad ceremony of it — gave them their last supper, the best he could provide, photographed them as they enjoyed it, then had them put painlessly to death. Poor old hunter ! He was quite broken up over the tragedy of it ! Another pack of beagles was taken off to Germany, in that systematic stealing that went on until Belgium was stripped bare, with all the breeds of her horses and her dogs destroyed or transplanted.

But there were darker tragedies ; there were artists who committed suicide, and insanity was on the increase. We received at the Legation quantities of letters from people who had evidently gone mad. And a friend of mine rescued, just as they had turned on the gas to asphyxiate themselves, an artist and his wife, who had nothing more to eat and were too proud to let their condition become known. Dr. van Dyke had entrusted to me a fund raised by the Authors' Club at New York for the relief of needy artists, and with the advice of certain friends in Brussels it was, I think, so wisely bestowed that many a painter and sculptor and writer was saved from despair.

It is one of the inscrutable mysteries of life that it should be so cruel, and it is appalling to dwell on the extent of cruelty to animals that goes on constantly in the world — almost as much, indeed, in the case of animals as in the case of man. Every morning, down the Rue Belliard, there would come those herds of lowing cattle, being led to the *abattoir* or seized by the Germans. The horses had long since disappeared ; no one ever saw them any more save in the hands of the Germans. The streets were filled with bicycles, which suddenly enjoyed a remarkable renaissance as a means of locomotion, until the Germans requisitioned them too, and then there were no vehicles left in the streets, save the little pony-carts that went jingling

along the boulevards on sunny afternoons toward the Bois ; the ponies were too small for any military purpose.

Finally it was the children's turn. They must be regulated, forbidden to play ; kites were *verboten*. And one August day the Governor-General, by an *affiche*, forbade the Boy Scouts to assemble or to march in the Bois, as they had always done — bright pictures in the Forest with their sombreros and necker-chiefs ; but now this must stop, and they must no longer go forth in bands. It was done, no doubt, partly to repress the national spirit, which, I suppose, found some expression in those promenades, but there was the passion to regulate, to govern everything. Meanwhile, however, the German Boy Scouts, in their clumsy costumes — they did not have the *chic* of the Belgian boys — were marching on Sundays in the Forest singing German songs :

### **DER GUTE KAMERAD**

*Ici hat einen Kameraden,  
Einen bessern findest du nicht,  
Die Trommel schlug zum Streite,  
Er ging an meiner Seite  
In gleichem Schritt und Tritt.*

*Eine Kugel kam geflogen,  
Gilt es mir, oder gilt es dir ?  
Ihn hat es weggerissen,  
Er liegt mir von den Füßen,  
Als wär's ein Stück von mir.*

*Will mir die Hand noch reichen,  
Derweil ici eben lad' ;  
Kann dir die Hand nich geben,  
Bleib du in ew'gem Leben  
Mein guter Kamerad.*

The number of Germans in town, indeed, seemed to increase daily ; they swarmed everywhere, not only military, but civilians. They had almost taken over the Bois ; the officers had all the tables at the "*Laiterie*", the restaurant once so popular, where it used to be pleasant of an afternoon at tea-time, with so much light and life and music and show of pretty costumes. Many of the officers and civilian officials had brought their wives to Brussels because, it was said, it was so much easier to live in Belgium ; and there were other officers accompanied by women not their wives. There were family groups, indubitably German, to be seen on the boulevards on Sunday afternoon, and one began to hear almost as much German as French. Indeed, they became so numerous finally that they created a new problem for us in the *ravitaillement* : we began to wonder whether, since they could not carry over into Germany the food that we imported, the Germans were not gradually to import their whole population over into Belgium to eat it up on the spot. We solved the problem eventually, and justly enough, we felt, but it was never quite divested of its complications.

It was estimated that there were fifteen thousand German civilians in Brussels, of whom six thousand were spies. I have no way of verifying the figures, of course, but we were always hearing of the trouble and

pain they caused, and of their unconscionable exactions. I knew of a family who were literally driven out of their apartment by a German family that came to live in the same building with them ; the German family preferred the apartment in which the family of which I write was living, and by a series of petty persecutions forced them to leave. They had no redress, because the *Kommandantur* would punish any Belgian on the bare complaint of a German.

Again, there was a certain *pension* kept by a Belgian and his wife, an Alsatian woman. German officers came to the *pension*, insisted on boarding there, and brought their mistresses with them ; whereupon all the other inmates of the *pension* and all the servants left. The poor man and his wife could find no Belgian servants to work for them, and they had to do all the work and serve the officers and their companions ; and when the mistress of the ranking officer, whose whimsical exactions and debaucheries had given the wife of the proprietor no end of trouble and caused no end of scandal in the neighbourhood, had a quarrel and left, the officer refused to pay the bill for her board.

I knew of a man who, boarding a tram one day at the Bourse, gave the receiver one of the little franc notes that were in circulation in Brussels at that time. When the receiver gave him in change some German pfennigs the passenger replied :

*"I paid you in Belgian money, and you give me back pfennigs ; I don't know what to do with that dirty money."*

A man in a soft felt hat sitting beside him suddenly turned and said :

*"What did you say, sir ?"*

*"I said something to the receiver, sir ; I was not speaking to you."*

At the Gare du Midi the man in the soft felt hat got up, left the tram, hailed two German soldiers, and arrested M. N—. He was taken to the *Kommandantur* and sent to prison at St.-Gilles.

Indeed, when the year had rolled round and the anniversary of August 4 came again, it was no longer the old Brussels, though we loved it all the more in its saddened aspect. The shops were depleted ; there was no such thing as a new hat or a new style ; many articles could scarcely be procured at tooth-brushes, medicines, cigarettes ; and prices had quadrupled. It cost us to live four times what it used to cost before the war. Butter was difficult to obtain, and the famous *poulets de Bruxelles* were disappearing, for there was no food to fatten them on. The streets were deserted, with no animation in them ; people dragged hopelessly along, staring aimlessly, looking a little more shabby, a little more threadbare, every day. At every block there was a squad or a company of the grey *Landsturm* tramping stolidly along in their heavy hobnailed boots.

Often we would be awakened in the morning at five o'clock by that ring of heavy heels on the roughly paved streets. It was a dreadful sound, somehow symbolic, rolling nearer and nearer in a loud insistent beat, broken now and then as the feet lost step, then caught up again, and it came on with a brutal crescendo louder and louder, more and more menacing, until it was a veritable thunder. It seemed as though it had been one of the carefully calculated effects of *Fürchterlichkeit*.

Often they were singing their dull, heavy, lugubrious hymns, or sometimes, though I suppose it is not a hymn, "*Ich bin ein Preusse und will ein Preusse sein.*"

The Germans, indeed, of themselves were enough to change the aspect as well as the atmosphere of the city. Once the most beautiful city Europe, or surely one of the most beautiful, they had destroyed its artistic appearance by the evidences of their own taste. They had built everywhere kiosks for the vendors of German newspapers and publications — hideous things of brilliant colours ; and they set up everywhere the sentry-boxes painted in stripes with garish black, white, and red, like monstrous barber-shop signs,

The country lay bare, stripped to the bone. The atrocities the soldiers committed in the early weeks of the war were not worse than those other Machiavellian or Borgian crimes they were committing then — the attempts at slow poisoning and corruption of the minds of those they would enslave. There was no press, no post, no communications, no liberty whatever. Every one of the rights enumerated in the charters of English and American liberty, and in the French Rights of Man, was denied. Those are years I do not like to look back upon ; I do not know how I lived through them. And I was the most privileged man in Belgium.

One day we overheard a servant at a doorway in the Rue Belliard, near the Legation, ask an old woman if she had been caught in the rain of the morning, and the poor creature replied :

*"Non, j'ai vite couru, tellement j'avais peur qu'il ne pleuve dans ma soupe."*

I used to go often to the bookstalls, and I shall always have in kindly memory old M. Lamertin, who sold books — and at one time, I think, published them — in his shop at the corner of the Rue Coudenberg and the Rue d'Isabelle. There were many idle hours to be filled in Brussels, much time to be passed away in waiting for the King to come back, and all the books worth reading one by one disappeared. There was no way to replenish the stock ; Brussels no longer knew what London or Paris was reading, writing, thinking.

"*C'est la misère noire*", M. Lamertin said to me one afternoon, when I went to look for a certain volume of Maeterlinck. "*Mais je remuerai tout Bruxelles demain pour le trouver*", he said, glad of a commission.

Le Jeune had been compelled to dispose of his fashionable establishment at the Porte de Namur, and had removed to a little shop in the Rue Thérésienne. I went in there one day. The place was quite empty. Le Jeune was thin, aged by fifteen years, with burning eyes, breathing with difficulty. The war had ruined him, but he talked no more about *les sales Boches*. I bought everything I could think of in his little shop, and he said: "*Merci, merci, Excellence, pour votre belle visite.*" Poor Figaro ! How many tragedies like his there were in the town ! And on millions of such miseries the glory of emperors rests !

And yet I never heard a German express the least commiseration for the sorrow there was all about them, or saw one give evidence of the slightest pity. Autumn was coming on ; and while Belgians, of course, were forbidden to take advantage of it, there were always carts and *wagonettes* in the Bois filled with German officers armed with shot-guns

going out for game. The Forêt de Soignes echoed with the reports of their fowling-pieces ; they must always be shooting something.

More and more they were shooting Belgians as spies or as traitors, as in their judicial forms they called Belgians who committed any act that was considered inimical to German interests. Every day, almost, there were the fresh *affiches* on the walls. One September morning, standing before the latest of them, which announced the shooting of a young architect and a clerk for *trahison de guerre*, an old gentleman read the *affiche*, uncovered, and said gravely :

*" Ce sont des martyrs. "*

But side by side with their heroism there were more sordid injustices, squalid brawls in public-houses, and that sort of thing. The *estaminets* were ordered to close at nine o'clock (*heure belge*), but there were sometimes German officers or soldiers drinking in them, and they forbade the proprietor to close.

Then, if the proprietor kept his place open, the *Polizei* would arrest him and take flint off to the *Kommandantur* ; if he closed it he had insulted the sacred uniform, and the *Polizei* would hale him off for that.

The calm and stolid brutality of the *Polizei* was beyond belief. One night in a public-house near the Luxembourg station there was a quarrel between some German soldiers and the proprietor. The next morning, as a result, three *Polizei* entered the place, shot down the proprietor, and dragged his body into the street . . .

*"Don't speak of the war"*, Mademoiselle used to say. But there was no escape : it was in all the atmosphere that we breathed, even the pure air of the golf links at Ravenstein and the fields that rolled away toward Tervueren ; the air was always throbbing with the thud of the guns that boomed for ever and without ceasing, there on that front of battle miles to the south and west of us. One morning, as I was sitting by the high old wall of the château looking at the pretty garden, there, on the other side of the wall behind me, I heard boys playing in the woods. They would rush forward, halt at the command of their leader, make the noise with which children imitate the sound of firing, and then the leader would announce :

*"Nous nous sommes emparés de la première ligne de tranchées."*

Then, *"En avant !"* the same thing over again, and then he would cry

*"Nous nous sommes emparés de la seconde ligne de tranchées."*

Golf is as much an art as any, but there was perhaps a more perfect isolation from all that pertained to war in the ateliers of my painter friends. No sound of cannon could reach one there, and they wisely lived in that other world of dreams and visions that is so remote from this. One of them told me that he had not looked at a newspaper half a dozen times since the war. Then one morning he told me, as he turned from squinting at the canvas on his easel — there was a late rose hanging over the garden wall — that the night before he had dreamed of aeroplanes. He began to relate his dream, and dreams are seldom as interesting in the recital as in the reality.

"*Un ciel bleu*", he said, "*comme ce bleu-là*", and he indicated a pale blue stuff on a *canapé*. "*Et puis un Zeppelin d'un gris foncé*." His dream was not of aircraft at all but of artists' colours !

I suppose he had dreamed of aeroplanes because we were having visits in those late September days from the aviators of the Allies. One Sunday the city was all excitement over the visit of an aviator who threw down a number of Paris newspapers, which were snatched up eagerly, and, as a *beau geste*, a Belgian flag, torn immediately to bits for precious souvenirs; the *Polizei* were perquisitioning everywhere the rest of the day trying to find them. There had been suddenly a change in the city it became all at once more animated, and was all excitement over the Allies' offensive ; it wore, somehow, another aspect. Hopes were throbbing high. There were crowds about the Palais des Académies, where the ambulances were once more rushing in with the wounded ; other crowds stood watching the troop trains rumble by in the rain ; and deep meaning was attached to all little things, as when the Allies' *communiqué* was not published or when the number of sentinels was increased at the Porte Louise. And when Germans marched singing through the streets Brussels was almost happy, for whenever the Germans sang ostentatiously Brussels took it as a sign that things were not going well.

Now and then toward evening a great Zeppelin would sail over the town going into the west ; the next morning it would come back. Doubtless it was only the literary imagination that invested it with a hang-dog air, as though it had been returning from some nocturnal sheep-killing expedition, but a few days later we would read of a raid over London.

**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 %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)