

FICTION

Louis Tracy

The Day of Wrath

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

THE DAY OF WRATH

A STORY OF 1914

BY

LOUIS TRACY

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PREFACE

This book demands no explanatory word. But I do wish to assure the reader that every incident in its pages casting discredit on the invaders of Belgium is founded on actual fact. I refer those who may doubt the truth of this sweeping statement to the official records published by the Governments of Great Britain, France, and Belgium.

L. T.

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CHAPTER I

THE LAVA-STREAM

"For God's sake, if you are an Englishman, help me!"

That cry of despair, so subdued yet piercing in its intensity, reached Arthur Dalroy as he pressed close on the heels of an all-powerful escort in Lieutenant Karl von Halwig, of the Prussian Imperial Guard, at the ticket-barrier of the Friedrich Strasse Station on the night of Monday, 3rd August 1914.

An officer's uniform is a *passe-partout* in Germany; the showy uniform of the Imperial Guard adds awe to authority. It may well be doubted if any other insignia of rank could have passed a companion in civilian attire so easily through the official cordon which barred the chief railway station at Berlin that night to all unauthorised persons.

Von Halwig was in front, impartially cursing and shoving aside the crowd of police and railway men. A gigantic ticket-inspector, catching sight of the Guardsman, bellowed an order to "clear the way;" but a general officer created a momentary diversion by choosing that forbidden exit. Von Halwig's heels clicked, and his right hand was raised in a salute, so Dalroy was given a few seconds wherein to scrutinise the face of the terrified woman who had addressed him. He saw that she was young, an Englishwoman, and undoubtedly a lady by her speech and garb.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Get me into a train for the Belgian frontier. I have plenty of money, but these idiots will not even allow me to enter the station."

He had to decide in an instant. He had every reason to believe that a woman friendless and alone, especially a young and good-looking one, was far safer in Berlin--where some thousands of Britons and Americans had been caught in the lava-wave of red war now flowing unrestrained from the Danube to the North Sea--than in the train which would start for Belgium within half-an-hour. But the tearful indignation in the girl's voice--even her folly in describing as "idiots" the hectoring jacks-in-office, any one of whom might have understood her--led impulse to triumph over saner judgment.

"Come along! quick!" he muttered. "You're my cousin, Evelyn Fane!"

With a self-control that was highly creditable, the young lady thrust a hand through his arm. In the other hand she carried a reticule. The action surprised Dalroy, though feminine intuition had only displayed common-sense.

"Have you any luggage?" he said.

"Nothing beyond this tiny bag. It was hopeless to think of---"

Von Halwig turned at the barrier to insure his English friend's safe passage.

"Hallo!" he cried. Evidently he was taken aback by the unexpected addition to the party.

"A fellow-countrywoman in distress," smiled Dalroy, speaking in German. Then he added, in English, "It's all right. As it happens, two places are reserved."

Von Halwig laughed in a way which the Englishman would have resented at any other moment.

"Excellent!" he guffawed. "Beautifully contrived, my friend.--Hi, there, sheep's-head!"--this to the ticket-inspector--"let that porter with the portmanteau pass!"

Thus did Captain Arthur Dalroy find himself inside the Friedrich Strasse Station on the night when Germany was already at war with Russia and France. With him was the stout leather bag into which he had thrown hurriedly such few articles as were indispensable--an ironic distinction when viewed in the light of subsequent events; with him, too, was a charming and trustful and utterly unknown travelling companion.

Von Halwig was not only vastly amused but intensely curious; his endeavours to scrutinise the face of a girl whom the Englishman had apparently conjured up out of the maelstrom of Berlin were almost rude. They failed, however, at the outset. Every woman knows exactly how to attract or repel a man's admiration; this young lady was evidently determined that only the vaguest hint of her features should be vouchsafed to the Guardsman. A fairly large hat and a veil, assisted by the angle at which she held her head, defeated his intent. She still clung to Dalroy's arm, and relinquished it only when a perspiring platform-inspector, armed with a list, brought the party to a first-class carriage.

There were no sleeping-cars on the train. Every *wagon-lit* in Berlin had been commandeered by the staff.

"I have had a not-to-be-described-in-words difficulty in retaining these corner places," he said, whereupon Dalroy gave him a five-mark piece, and the girl was installed in the seat facing the engine.

The platform-inspector had not exaggerated his services. The train was literally besieged. Scores of important officials were storming at railway employes because accommodation could not be found. Dalroy, wishful at first that Von Halwig would take himself off instead of standing near the open door and peering at the girl, soon changed his mind. There could not be the slightest doubt that were it not for the presence of an officer of the Imperial Guard he and his "cousin" would have been unceremoniously bundled out on to the platform to make room for some many-syllabled functionary who "simply must get to the front." As for the lady, she was the sole representative of her sex travelling west that night.

Meanwhile the two young men chatted amicably, using German and English with equal ease.

"I think you are making a mistake in going by this route," said Von Halwig. "The frontier lines will be horribly congested during the next few days. You see, we have to be in Paris in three weeks, so we must hurry."

"You are very confident," said the Englishman pleasantly.

He purposely avoided any discussion of his reasons for choosing the Cologne-Brussels-Ostend line. As an officer of the British army, he was particularly anxious to watch the vaunted German mobilisation in its early phases.

"Confident! Why not? Those wretched little *piou-pious*"--a slang term for the French infantry--"will run long before they see the whites of our eyes."

"I haven't met any French regiments since I was a youngster; but I believe France is far better organised now than in 1870," was the noncommittal reply.

Von Halwig threw out his right arm in a wide sweep. "We shall brush them aside--so," he cried. "The German army was strong in those days; now it is irresistible. *You* are a soldier. You *know*. To-night's papers say England is wavering between peace and war. But I have no doubt she will be wise. That Channel is a great asset, a great safeguard, eh?"

Again Dalroy changed the subject. "If it is a fair question, when do you start for the front?"

"To-morrow, at six in the morning."

"How very kind of you to spare such valuable time now!"

"Not at all! Everything is ready. Germany is always ready. The Emperor says 'Mobilise,' and, behold, we cross the frontier within the hour!"

"War is a rotten business," commented Dalroy thoughtfully. "I've seen something of it in India, where, when all is said and done, a scrap in the hills brings the fighting men alone into line. But I'm sorry for the unfortunate peasants and townspeople who will suffer. What of Belgium, for instance?"

"Ha! *Les braves Belges!*" laughed the other. "They will do as we tell them. What else is possible? To adapt one of your own proverbs: 'Needs must when the German drives!'"

Dalroy understood quite well that Von Halwig's bumptious tone was not assumed. The Prussian Junker could hardly think otherwise. But the glances cast by the Guardsman at the silent figure seated near the window showed that some part of his vapouring was meant to impress the feminine heart. A gallant figure he cut, too, as he stood there, caressing his Kaiser-fashioned moustaches with one hand while the other rested on the hilt of his sword. He was tall, fully six feet, and, according to Dalroy's standard of physical fitness, at least a stone too heavy. The personification of Nietzsche's Teutonic "overman," the "big blonde brute" who is the German military ideal, Dalroy classed him, in the expressive phrase of the regimental mess, as "a good bit of a bounder." Yet he was a patrician by birth, or he could not hold a commission in the Imperial Guard, and he had been most helpful and painstaking that night, so perforce one must be civil to him.

Dalroy himself, nearly as tall, was lean and lithe, hard as nails, yet intellectual, a cavalry officer who had passed through the Oxford mint.

By this time four other occupants of the compartment were in evidence, and a ticket-examiner came along. Dalroy produced a number of vouchers. The girl, who obviously spoke German, leaned out, purse in hand, and was about to explain that the crush in the booking-hall had prevented her from obtaining a ticket.

But Dalroy intervened. "I have your ticket," he said, announcing a singular fact in the most casual manner he could command.

"Thank you," she said instantly, trying to conceal her own surprise. But her eyes met Von Halwig's bold stare, and read therein not only a ready appraisal of her good looks but a perplexed half-recognition.

The railwayman raised a question. Contrary to the general custom, the vouchers bore names, which he compared with a list.

"These tickets are for Herren Fane and Dalroy, and I find a lady here," he said suspiciously.

"Fraulein Evelyn Fane, my cousin," explained Dalroy. "A mistake of the issuing office."

"But----"

"*Ach, was!*" broke in Von Halwig impatiently. "You hear. Some fool has blundered. It is sufficient."

At any rate, his word sufficed. Dalroy entered the carriage, and the door was closed and locked.

"Never say I haven't done you a good turn," grinned the Prussian. "A pleasant journey, though it may be a slow one. Don't be surprised if I am in Aachen before you."

Then he coloured. He had said too much. One of the men in the compartment gave him a sharp glance. Aachen, better known to travelling Britons as Aix-la-Chapelle, lay on the road to Belgium, not to France.

"Well, to our next meeting!" he went on boisterously. "Run across to Paris during the occupation."

"Good-bye! And accept my very grateful thanks," said Dalroy, and the train started.

"I cannot tell you how much obliged I am," said a sweet voice as he settled down into his seat. "Please, may I pay you now for the ticket which you supplied so miraculously?"

"No miracle, but a piece of rare good-luck," he said. "One of the attaches at our Embassy arranged to travel to England to-night, or I would never have got away, even with the support of the State Councillor who requested Lieutenant von Halwig to befriend me. Then, at the last moment, Fane couldn't come. I meant asking Von Halwig to send a messenger to the Embassy with the spare ticket."

"So you will forward the money to Mr. Fane with my compliments," said the girl, opening her purse.

Dalroy agreed. There was no other way out of the difficulty. Incidentally, he could not help noticing that the lady was well supplied with gold and notes.

As they were fellow-travellers by force of circumstances, Dalroy took a card from the pocket-book in which he was securing a one-hundred-mark note.

"We have a long journey before us, and may as well get to know each other by name," he said.

The girl smiled acquiescence. She read, "Captain Arthur Dalroy, 2nd Bengal Lancers, Junior United Service Club."

"I haven't a card in my bag," she said simply, "but my name is Beresford--Irene Beresford--Miss Beresford," and she coloured prettily. "I have made an effort of the explanation," she went on; "but I think it is stupid of women not to let people know at once whether they are married or single."

"I'll be equally candid," he replied. "I'm not married, nor likely to be."

"Is that defiance, or merely self-defence?"

"Neither. A bald fact. I hold with Kitchener that a soldier should devote himself exclusively to his profession."

"It would certainly be well for many a heart-broken woman in Europe to-day if all soldiers shared your opinion," was the answer; and Dalroy knew that his *vis-a-vis* had deftly guided their chatter on to a more sedate plane.

The train halted an unconscionable time at a suburban station, and again at Charlottenburg. The four Germans in the compartment, all Prussian officers, commented on the delay, and one of them made a joke of it.

"The signals must be against us at Liege," he laughed.

"Perhaps England has sent a regiment of Territorials across by the Ostend boat," chimed in another. Then he turned to Dalroy, and said civilly, "You are English. Your country will not be so mad as to join in this adventure, will she?"

"This is a war of diplomats," said Dalroy, resolved to keep a guard on his tongue. "I am quite sure that no one in England wants war."

"But will England fight if Germany invades Belgium?"

"Surely Germany will do no such thing. The integrity of Belgium is guaranteed by treaty."

"Your friend the lieutenant, then, did not tell you that our army crossed the frontier to-day?"

"Is that possible?"

"Yes. It is no secret now. Didn't you realise what he meant when he said his regiment was going to Aachen? But, what does it matter? Belgium cannot resist. She must give free passage to our troops. She will protest, of course, just to save her face."

The talk became general among the men. At the moment there was a fixed belief in Germany that Britain would stand aloof from the quarrel. So convinced was Austria of the British attitude that the Viennese mob gathered outside the English ambassador's residence that same evening, and cheered enthusiastically.

During another long wait Dalroy took advantage of the clamour and bustle of a crowded platform to say to Miss Beresford in a low tone, "Are you well advised to proceed *via* Brussels? Why not branch off at Oberhausen, and go home by way of Flushing?"

"I must meet my sister in Brussels," said the girl. "She is younger than I, and at school there. I am not afraid--now. They will not interfere with any one in this train, especially a woman. But how about you? You have the unmistakable look of a British officer."

"Have I?" he said, smiling. "That is just why I am going through, I suppose."

Neither could guess the immense significance of those few words. There was a reasonable chance of escape through Holland during the next day. By remaining in the Belgium-bound train they were, all unknowing, entering the crater of a volcano.

The ten-hours' run to Cologne was drawn out to twenty. Time and again they were shunted into sidings to make way for troop trains and supplies. At a wayside station a bright moon enabled Dalroy to take stock of two monster howitzers mounted on specially constructed bogie trucks. He estimated their bore at sixteen or seventeen inches; the fittings and accessories of each gun filled nine or ten trucks. How prepared Germany was! How thorough her organisation! Yet the hurrying forward of these giant siege-guns was premature, to put it mildly? Or were the German generals really convinced that they would sweep every obstacle from their path, and hammer their way into Paris on a fixed date? Dalroy thought of England, and sighed, because his mind turned first to the army--barely one hundred thousand trained men. Then he remembered the British fleet, and the outlook was more reassuring!

After a night of fitful sleep dawn found the travellers not yet half-way. The four Germans were furious. They held staff appointments, and had been assured in Berlin that the clock-work regularity of mobilisation arrangements would permit this particular train to cover the journey according to schedule. Meals were irregular and scanty. At one small town, in the early morning, Dalroy secured a quantity of rolls and fruit, and all benefited later by his forethought.

Newspapers bought *en route* contained dark forebodings of England's growing hostility. A special edition of a Hanover journal spoke of an ultimatum, a word which evoked harsh denunciations of "British treachery" from the Germans. The comparative friendliness induced by Dalroy's prevision as a caterer vanished at once. When the train rolled wearily across the Rhine into Cologne, ten hours late, both Dalroy and the girl were fully aware that their fellow-passengers regarded them as potential enemies.

It was then about six o'clock on the Tuesday evening, and a loud-voiced official announced that the train would not proceed to Aix-la-Chapelle until eight. The German officers went out, no doubt to seek a meal; but took the precaution of asking an officer in charge of some Bavarian troops on the platform to station a sentry at the carriage door. Probably they had no other intent, and merely wished to safeguard their places; but Dalroy realised now the imprudence of talking English, and signed to the girl that she was to come with him into the corridor on the opposite side of the carriage.

There they held counsel. Miss Beresford was firmly resolved to reach Brussels, and flinched from no difficulties. It must be remembered that war was not formally declared between Great Britain and Germany until that evening. Indeed, the tremendous decision was made while the pair so curiously allied by fate were discussing their programme. Had they even quitted the train at Cologne they had a fair prospect of reaching neutral territory by hook or by crook. But they knew nothing of Liege, and the imperishable laurels which that gallant city was about to gather. They elected to go on!

A station employe brought them some unpalatable food, which they made a pretence of eating. Irene Beresford's Hanoverian German was perfect, so Dalroy did not air his less accurate accent, and the presence of the sentry was helpful at this crisis. Though sharp-eyed and rabbit-eared, the man was quite civil.

At last the Prussian officers returned. He who had been chatty overnight was now brusque, even overbearing. "You have no right here!" he vociferated at Dalroy. "Why should a damned Englishman travel with Germans? Your country is perfidious as ever. How do I know that you are not a spy?"

"Spies are not vouched for by Councillors of State," was the calm reply. "I have in my pocket a letter from his Excellency Staatsrath von Auschenbaum authorising my journey, and you yourself must perceive that I am escorting a lady to her home."

The other snorted, but subsided into his seat. Not yet had Teutonic hatred of all things British burst its barriers. But the pressure was increasing. Soon it would leap forth like the pent-up flood of some mighty reservoir whose retaining wall had crumbled into ruin.

"Is there any news?" went on Dalroy civilly. At any hazard, he was determined, for the sake of the girl, to maintain the semblance of good-fellowship. She, he saw, was cool and collected. Evidently, she had complete trust in him.

For a little while no one answered. Ultimately, the officer who regarded Liege as a joke said shortly, "Your Sir Grey has made some impudent suggestions. I suppose it is what the Americans call 'bluff'; but bluffing Germany is a dangerous game."

"Newspapers exaggerate such matters," said Dalroy.

"It may be so. Still, you'll be lucky if you get beyond Aachen," was the ungracious retort. The speaker refused to give the town its French name.

An hour passed, the third in Cologne, before the train rumbled away into the darkness. The girl pretended to sleep. Indeed, she may have dozed fitfully. Dalroy did not attempt to engage her in talk. The Germans gossiped in low tones. They knew that their nation had spied on the whole world. Naturally, they held every foreigner in their midst as tainted in the same vile way.

From Cologne to Aix-la-Chapelle is only a two hours' run. That night the journey consumed four. Dalroy no longer dared look out when the train stood in a siding. He knew by the sounds that all the dread paraphernalia of war was speeding toward the frontier; but any display of interest on his part would be positively dangerous now; so he, too, closed his eyes.

By this time he was well aware that his real trials would begin at Aix; but he had the philosopher's temperament, and never leaped fences till he reached them.

At one in the morning they entered the station of the last important town in Germany. Holland lay barely three miles away, Belgium a little farther. The goal was near. Dalroy felt that by calmness and quiet determination he and his charming protege might win through. He was very much taken by Irene Beresford. He had never met any girl who attracted him so strongly. He found himself wondering whether he might contrive to cultivate this strangely formed friendship when they reached England. In a word, the self-denying ordinance popularly attributed to Lord Kitchener was weakening in Captain Arthur Dalroy.

Then his sky dropped, dropped with a bang.

The train had not quite halted when the door was torn open, and a bespectacled, red-faced officer glared in.

"It is reported from Cologne that there are English in this carriage," he shouted.

"Correct, my friend. There they are!" said the man who had snarled at Dalroy earlier.

"You must descend," commanded the new-comer. "You are both under arrest."

"On what charge?" inquired Dalroy, bitterly conscious of a gasp of terror which came involuntarily from the girl's lips.

"You are spies. A sentry heard you talking English, and saw you examining troop-trains from the carriage window."

So that Bavarian lout had listened to the Prussian officer's taunt, and made a story of his discovery to prove his diligence.

"We are not spies, nor have we done anything to warrant suspicion," said Dalroy quietly. "I have letters----"

"No talk. Out you come!" and he was dragged forth by a bloated fellow whom he could have broken with his hands. It was folly to resist, so he merely contrived to keep on his feet, whereas the fat bully meant to trip him ignominiously on to the platform.

"Now you!" was the order to Irene, and she followed. Half-a-dozen soldiers closed around. There could be no doubting that preparations had been made for their reception.

"May I have my portmanteau?" said Dalroy. "You are acting in error, as I shall prove when given an opportunity."

"Shut your mouth, you damned Englishman"--that was a favourite phrase on German lips apparently--"would you dare to argue with me?--Here, one of you, take his bag. Has the woman any baggage? No. Then march them to the----"

A tall young lieutenant, in the uniform of the Prussian Imperial Guard, dashed up breathlessly.

"Ah, I was told the train had arrived!" he cried. "Yes, I am in search of those two----"

"Thank goodness you are here, Von Halwig!" began Dalroy.

The Guardsman turned on him a face aflame with fury. "Silence!" he bellowed. "I'll soon settle *your* affair.--Take his papers and money, and put him in a waiting-room till I return," he added, speaking to the officer of reserves who had affected the arrest. "Place the lady in another waiting-room, and lock her in. I'll see that she is not molested. As for this English *schwein-hund*, shoot him at the least sign of resistance."

"But, Herr Lieutenant," began the other, whose heavy paunch was a measure of his self-importance, "I have orders----"

"*Ach, was!* I know! This Englishman is not an ordinary spy. He is a cavalry captain, and speaks our language fluently. Do as I tell you. I shall come back in half-an-hour.--Fraulein, you are in safer hands. You, I fancy, will be well treated."

Dalroy said not a word. He saw at once that some virus had changed Von Halwig's urbanity to bitter hatred. He was sure the Guardsman had been drinking, but that fact alone would not account for such an amazing *volte-face*. Could it be that Britain had thrown in her lot with France? In his heart of hearts he hoped passionately that the rumour was true. And he blazed, too, into a fierce if silent resentment of the Prussian's satyr-like smile at Irene Beresford. But what could he do? Protest was worse than useless. He felt that he would be shot or bayoneted on the slightest pretext.

Von Halwig evidently resented the presence of a crowd of gaping onlookers.

"No more talk!" he ordered sharply. "Do as I bid you, Herr Lieutenant of Reserves!"

"Captain Dalroy!" cried the girl in a voice of utter dismay, "don't let them part us!"

Von Halwig pointed to a door. "In there with him!" he growled, and Dalroy was hustled away. Irene screamed, and tried to avoid the Prussian's outstretched hand. He grasped her determinedly.

"Don't be a fool!" he hissed in English. "I can save you. He is done with. A firing-party or a rope will account for him at daybreak. Ah! calm yourself, *gnadiges Fraulein*. There are consolations, even in war."

Dalroy contrived, out of the tail of his eye, to see that the distraught girl was led toward a ladies' waiting-room, two doors from the apartment into which he was thrust. There he was searched by the lieutenant of reserves, not skilfully, because the man missed nearly the whole of his money, which he carried in a pocket in the lining of his waistcoat. All else was taken--tickets, papers, loose cash, even a cigarette-case and favourite pipe.

The instructions to the sentry were emphatic: "Don't close the door! Admit no one without sending for me! Shoot or stab the prisoner if he moves!"

And the fat man bustled away. The station was swarming with military big-wigs. He must remain in evidence.

During five long minutes Dalroy reviewed the situation. Probably he would be executed as a spy. At best, he could not avoid internment in a fortress till the end of the war. He preferred to die in a struggle for life and liberty. Men had escaped in conditions quite as desperate. Why not he? The surge of impotent anger subsided in his veins, and he took thought.

Outside the open door stood the sentry, holding his rifle, with fixed bayonet, in the attitude of a sportsman who expects a covey of partridges to rise from the stubble. A window of plain glass gave on to the platform. Seemingly, it had not been opened since the station was built. Three windows of frosted glass in the opposite wall were, to all appearance, practicable. Judging by the sounds, the station square lay without. Was there a lock and key on the door? Or a bolt? He could not tell from his present position. The sentry had orders to kill him if he moved. Perhaps the man would not interpret the command literally. At any rate, that was a risk he must take. With head sunk, and hands behind his back,

obviously in a state of deep dejection, he began to stroll to and fro. Well, he had a fighting chance. He was not shot forthwith.

A slight commotion on the platform caught his eye, the sentry's as well. A tall young officer, wearing a silver helmet, and accompanied by a glittering staff, clanked past; with him the lieutenant of reserves, gesticulating. Dalroy recognised one of the Emperor's sons; but the sentry had probably never seen the princeling before, and was agape. And there was not only a key but a bolt!

With three noiseless strides, Dalroy was at the door and had slammed it. The key turned easily, and the bolt shot home. Then he raced to the middle window, unfastened the hasp, and raised the lower sash. He counted on the thick-headed sentry wasting some precious seconds in trying to force the door, and he was right. As it happened, before the man thought of looking in through the platform window Dalroy had not only lowered the other window behind him but dropped from the sill to the pavement between the wall and a covered van which stood there.

Now he was free--free as any Briton could be deemed free in Aix-la-Chapelle at that hour, one man among three army corps, an unarmed Englishman among a bitterly hostile population which recked naught of France or Belgium or Russia, but hated England already with an almost maniacal malevolence.

And Irene Beresford, that sweet-voiced, sweet-faced English girl, was a prisoner at the mercy of a "big blonde brute," a half-drunken, wholly enraged Prussian Junker. The thought rankled and stung. It was not to be borne. For the first time that night Dalroy knew what fear was, and in a girl's behalf, not in his own.

Could he save her? Heaven had befriended him thus far; would a kindly Providence clear his brain and nerve his spirit to achieve an almost impossible rescue?

The prayer was formless and unspoken, yet it was answered. He had barely gathered his wits after that long drop of nearly twelve feet into the station yard before he was given a vague glimpse of a means of delivering the girl from her immediate peril.



CHAPTER II

IN THE VORTEX

The van, one among a score of similar vehicles, was backed against the curb of a raised path. At the instant Dalroy quitted the window-ledge a railway employe appeared from behind another van on the left, and was clearly bewildered by seeing a well-dressed man springing from such an unusual and precarious perch.

The new-comer, a big, burly fellow, who wore a peaked and lettered cap, a blouse, baggy breeches, and sabots, and carried a lighted hand-lamp, looked what, in fact, he was--an engine-cleaner. In all likelihood he guessed that any one choosing such a curious exit from a waiting-room was avoiding official scrutiny. He hurried forward at once, holding the lamp above his head, because it was dark behind the row of vans.

"Hi, there!" he cried. "A word with you, *Freiherr!*" The title, of course, was a bit of German humour. Obviously, he was bent on investigating matters. Dalroy did not run. In the street without he heard the tramp of marching troops, the jolting of wagons, the clatter of horses. He knew that a hue and cry could have only one result--he would be pulled down by a score of hands. Moreover, with the sight of that suspicious Teuton face, its customary boorish leer now replaced by a surly inquisitiveness, came the first glimmer of a fantastically daring way of rescuing Irene Beresford.

He advanced, smiling pleasantly. "It's all right, Heinrich," he said. "I've arrived by train from Berlin, and the station was crowded. Being an acrobat, I took a bounce. What?"

The engine-cleaner was not a quick-witted person. He scowled, but allowed Dalroy to come near--too near.

"I believe you're a *verdammte* Engl----" he began.

But the popular German description of a Briton died on his lips, because Dalroy put a good deal of science and no small leaven of brute force into a straight punch which reached that cluster of nerves known to pugilism as "the point." The German fell as though he had been pole-axed, and his thick skull rattled on the pavement.

Dalroy grabbed the lamp before the oil could gush out, placed it upright on the ground, and divested the man of blouse, baggy breeches, and sabots. Luckily, since every second was precious, he found that he was able to wedge his boots into the sabots, which he could not have kept on his feet otherwise. His training as a soldier had taught him the exceeding value of our Fifth Henry's advice to the British army gathered before Harfleur:

In peace there's nothing so becomes a
man
As modest stillness and humility;
But when the blast of war blows in our
ears
Then imitate the action of the tiger.

The warring tiger does not move slowly. Half-a-minute after his would-be captor had crashed headlong to the hard cobbles of Aix-la-Chapelle, Dalroy was creeping between two wagons, completing a hasty toilet by tearing off collar and tie, and smearing his face and hands with oil and grease from lamp and cap. Even as he went he heard a window of the waiting-room being flung open, and the excited cries which announced the discovery of a half-naked body lying beneath in the gloom.

He saw now that to every van was harnessed a pair of horses, their heads deep in nose-bags, while men in the uniform of the Commissariat Corps were grouped around an officer who was reading orders. The vans were sheeted in black tarpaulins. With German attention to detail, their destination, contents, and particular allotment were stencilled on the covers in white paint: "Liege, baggage and fodder, cavalry division, 7th Army Corps." He learnt subsequently that this definite legend appeared on front and rear and on both sides.

Thinking quickly, he decided that the burly person whose outer garments he was now wearing had probably been taking a short cut to the station entrance when he received the surprise of his life. Somewhat higher up on the right, therefore, Dalroy went back to the narrow pavement close to the wall, and saw some soldiers coming through a doorway a little ahead. He made for this, growled a husky "Good-morning" to a sentry stationed there, entered, and mounted a staircase. Soon he found himself on the main platform; he actually passed a sergeant and some Bavarian soldiers, bent on recapturing the escaped prisoner, rushing wildly for the same stairs.

None paid heed to him as he lumbered along, swinging the lamp.

A small crowd of officers, among them the youthful prince in the silver *Pickel-haube*, had collected near the broken window and now open door of the waiting-room from which the "spy" had vanished. Within was the fat lieutenant of reserves, gesticulating violently at a pallid sentry.

The prince was laughing. "He can't get away," he was saying. "A bold rascal. He must be quieted with a bayonet-thrust. That's the best way to inoculate an Englishman with German *Kultur*."

Of course this stroke of rare wit evoked much mirth. Meanwhile, Dalroy was turning the key in the lock which held Irene Beresford in safe keeping until Von Halwig had discharged certain pressing duties as a staff officer.

The girl, who was seated, gave him a terrified glance when he entered, but dropped her eyes immediately until she became aware that this rough-looking visitor was altering the key. Dalroy then realised by her startled movement that his appearance had brought fresh terror to an already overburdened heart. Hitherto, so absorbed was he in his project, he had not given a thought to the fact that he would offer a sinister apparition.

"Don't scream, or change your position, Miss Beresford," he said quietly in English. "It is I, Captain Dalroy. We have a chance of escape. Will you take the risk?"

The answer came, brokenly it is true, but with the girl's very soul in the words. "Thank God!" she murmured. "Risk? I would sacrifice ten lives, if I had them, rather than remain here."

Somehow, that was the sort of answer Dalroy expected from her. She sought no explanation of his bizarre and extraordinary garb. It was all-sufficient for her that he should have come back. She trusted him implicitly, and the low, earnest words thrilled him to the core.

He saw through the window that no one was paying any attention to this apartment. Possibly, the only people who knew that it contained an Englishwoman as a prisoner were Von Halwig and the infuriated lieutenant of reserves.

Jumping on to a chair, Dalroy promptly twisted an electric bulb out of its socket, and plunged the room in semi-darkness, which he increased by hiding the hand-lamp in the folds of his blouse. Given time, no doubt, a dim light would be borrowed from the platform and the windows overlooking the square; in the sudden gloom, however, the two could hardly distinguish each other.

"I have contrived to escape, in a sense," said Dalroy; "but I could not bear the notion of leaving you to your fate. You can either stop here and take your chance, or come with me. If we are caught together a second time these brutes will show you no mercy. On the other hand, by remaining, you may be fairly well treated, and even sent home soon."

He deemed himself in honour bound to put what seemed then a reasonable alternative before her. He did truly believe, in that hour, that Germany might, indeed, wage war inflexibly, but with clean hands, as befitted a nation which prided itself on its ideals and warrior spirit. He was destined soon to be enlightened as to the true significance of the *Kultur* which a jack-boot philosophy offers to the rest of the world.

But Irene Beresford's womanly intuition did not err. One baleful gleam from Von Halwig's eyes had given her a glimpse of infernal depths to which Dalroy was blind as yet. "Not only will I come with you; but, if you have a pistol or a knife, I implore you to kill me before I am captured again," she said.

Here, then, was no waste of words, but rather the ring of finely-tempered steel. Dalroy unlocked the door, and looked out. To the right and in front the platform was nearly empty. On the left the group of officers was crowding into the waiting-room, since some hint of unfathomable mystery had been wafted up from the Bavarians in the courtyard, and the slim young prince, curious as a street loungeur, had gone to the window to investigate.

Dalroy stood in the doorway. "Pull down your veil, turn to the right, and keep close to the wall," he said. "Don't run! Don't even hurry! If I seem to lag behind, speak sharply to me in German."

She obeyed without hesitation. They had reached the end of the covered-in portion of the station when a sentry barred the way. He brought his rifle with fixed bayonet to the "engage."

"It is forbidden," he said.

"What is forbidden?" grinned Dalroy amiably, clipping his syllables, and speaking in the roughest voice he could assume.

"You cannot pass this way."

"Good! Then I can go home to bed. That will be better than cleaning engines."

Fortunately, a Bavarian regiment was detailed for duty at Aix-la-Chapelle that night; the sentry knew where the engine-sheds were situated no more than Dalroy. Further, he was not familiar with the Aachen accent.

"Oh, is that it?" he inquired.

"Yes. Look at my cap!"

Dalroy held up the lantern. The official lettering was evidently convincing.

"But what about the lady?"

"She's my wife. If you're here in half-an-hour she'll bring you some coffee. One doesn't leave a young wife at home with so many soldiers about."

"If you both stand chattering here neither of you will get any coffee," put in Irene emphatically.

The Bavarian lowered his rifle. "I'm relieved at two o'clock," he said with a laugh. "Lose no time, *schoene Frau*. There won't be much coffee on the road to Liege."

The girl passed on, but Dalroy lingered. "Is that where you're going?" he asked.

"Yes. We're due in Paris in three weeks."

"Lucky dog!"

"Hans, are you coming, or shall I go on alone?" demanded Irene.

"Farewell, comrade, for a little ten minutes," growled Dalroy, and he followed.

An empty train stood in a bay on the right, and Dalroy espied a window-cleaner's ladder in a corner. "Where are you going, woman?" he cried.

His "wife" was walking down the main platform which ended against the wall of a signal-cabin, and there might be insuperable difficulties in that direction.

"Isn't this the easiest way?" she snapped.

"Yes, if you want to get run over."

Without waiting for her, he turned, shouldered the ladder, and made for a platform on the inner side of the bay. A ten-foot wall indicated the station's boundary. Irene ran after him. Within a few yards they were hidden by the train from the sentry's sight.

"That was clever of you!" she whispered breathlessly.

"Speak German, even when you think we are alone," he commanded.

The platform curved sharply, and the train was a long one. When they neared the engine they saw three men standing there. Dalroy at once wrapped the lamp in a fold of his blouse, and leaped into the black shadow cast by the wall, which lay athwart the flood of moonlight pouring into the open part of the station. Quick to take the cue, it being suicidal to think of bamboozling local railway officials, Irene followed. Kicking off the clumsy sabots, Dalroy bade his companion pick them up, ran back some thirty yards, and placed the ladder against the wall. Mounting swiftly, he found, to his great relief, that some sheds with low-pitched roofs were ranged beneath; otherwise, the height of the wall, if added to the elevation of the station generally above the external ground level, might well have proved disastrous.

"Up you come," he said, seating himself astride the coping-stones, and holding the top of the ladder.

Irene was soon perched there too. He pulled up the ladder, and lowered it to a roof.

"Now, you grab hard in case it slips," he said.

Disdaining the rungs, he slid down. He had hardly gathered his poise before the girl tumbled into his arms, one of the heavy wooden shoes she was carrying giving him a smart tap on the head.

"These men!" she gasped. "They saw me, and shouted."

Dalroy imagined that the trio near the engine must have noted the swinging lantern and its sudden disappearance. With the instant decision born of polo and pig-sticking in India, he elected now not to essay the slanting roof just where they stood. Shouldering the ladder again, he made off toward a strip of shadow which seemed to indicate the

end of a somewhat higher shed. He was right. Irene followed, and they crouched there in panting silence.

Nearly every German is a gymnast, and it was no surprise to Dalroy when one of their pursuers mounted on the shoulders of a friend and gained the top of the wall.

"There's nothing to be seen here," he announced after a brief survey.

The pair beneath must have answered, because he went on, evidently in reply, "Oh, I saw it myself. And I'm sure there was some one up here. There's a sentry on No. 5. Run, Fritz, and ask him if a man with a lantern has passed recently. I'll mount guard till you return."

Happily a train approached, and, in the resultant din Dalroy was enabled to scramble down the roof unheard.

The ladder just reached the ground; so, before Fritz and the sentry began to suspect that some trickery was afoot in that part of the station, the two fugitives were speeding through a dark lane hemmed in by warehouses. At the first opportunity, Dalroy extinguished the lantern. Then he bethought him of his companion's appearance. He halted suddenly ere they entered a lighted thoroughfare.

"I had better put on these clogs again," he said. "But what about you? It will never do for a lady in smart attire to be seen walking through the streets with a ruffian like me at one o'clock in the morning."

For answer, the girl took off her hat and tore away a cluster of roses and a coquettish bow of ribbon. Then she discarded her jacket, which she adjusted loosely across her shoulders.

"Now I ought to look raffish enough for anything," she said cheerfully.

Singularly enough, her confidence raised again in Dalroy's mind a lurking doubt which the success thus far achieved had not wholly stilled.

"My candid advice to you now, Miss Beresford, is that you leave me," he said. "You will come to no harm in the main streets, and you speak German so well that you should have little difficulty in reaching the Dutch frontier. Once in Holland you can travel to Brussels by way of Antwerp. I believe England has declared war against Germany. The behaviour of Von Halwig and those other Prussians is most convincing on that point. If so----"

"Does my presence imperil you, Captain Dalroy?" she broke in. She could have said nothing more unwise, nothing so subtly calculated to stir a man's pride.

"No," he answered shortly.

"Why, then, are you so anxious to get rid of me, after risking your life to save me a few minutes ago?"

"I am going straight into Belgium. I deem it my duty. I may pick up information of the utmost military value."

"Then I go into Belgium too, unless you positively refuse to be bothered with my company. I simply must reach my sister without a moment of unnecessary delay. And is it really sensible to stand here arguing, so close to the station?"

They went on without another word. Dalroy was ruffled by the suggestion that he might be seeking his own safety. Trust any woman to find the joint in any man's armour when it suits her purpose.

Aix-la-Chapelle was more awake on that Wednesday morning at one o'clock than on any ordinary day at the same hour in the afternoon. The streets were alive with excited people, the taverns and smaller shops open, the main avenues crammed with torrents of troops streaming westward. Regimental bands struck up martial airs as column after column debouched from the various stations. When the musicians paused for sheer lack of breath the soldiers bawled "*Deutschland, Deutschland, uber alles*" or "*Die Wacht am Rhine*" at the top of their voices. The uproar was, as the Germans love to say, colossal. The enthusiasm was colossal too. Aix-la-Chapelle might have been celebrating a great national festival. It seemed ludicrous to regard the community as in the throes of war. The populace, the officers, even the heavy-jowled peasants who formed the majority of the regiments then hurrying to the front, seemed to be intoxicated with joy. Dalroy was surprised at first. He was not prepared for the savage exultation with which German militarism leaped to its long-dreamed-of task of conquering Europe.

Irene Beresford, momentarily more alive than he to the exigencies of their position, bought a common shawl at a shop in a side street, and threw away her tattered hat with a careless laugh. She was an excellent actress. The woman who served her had not the remotest notion that this bright-eyed girl belonged to the hated English race.

The incident brought back Dalroy's vagrom thoughts from German methods of making war to the serious business which was his own particular concern. The shop was only a couple of doors removed from the Franz Strasse; he waited

for Irene at the corner, buying some cheap cigars and a box of matches at a tobacconist's kiosk. He still retained the lantern, which lent a touch of character. The carriage-cleaner's breeches were wide and loose at the ankles, and concealed his boots. Between the sabots and his own heels he had added some inches to his height, so he could look easily over the heads of the crowd; he was watching the passing of a battery of artillery when an open automobile was jerked to a standstill directly in front of him. In the car was seated Von Halwig.

That sprig of Prussian nobility was in a mighty hurry, but even he dared not interfere too actively with troops in motion, so, to pass the time as it were, he rolled his eyes in anger at the crowd on the pavement.

It was just possible that Irene might appear inopportunistly, so Dalroy rejoined her, and led her to the opposite side of the cross street, where a wagon and horses hid her from the Guardsman's sharp eyes.

Thus it happened that Chance again took the wanderers under her wing.

A short, thick-set Walloon had emptied a glass of schnapps at the counter of a small drinking-bar which opened on to the street, and was bidding the landlady farewell.

"I must be off," he said. "I have to be in Vise by daybreak. This cursed war has kept me here a whole day. Who is fighting who, I'd like to know?"

"Vise!" guffawed a man seated at the bar. "You'll never get there. The army won't let you pass."

"That's the army's affair, not mine," was the typically Flemish answer, and the other came out, mounted the wagon, chirped to his horses, and made away.

Dalroy was able to note the name on a small board affixed to the side of the vehicle: "Henri Joos, miller, Vise."

"That fellow lives in Belgium," he whispered to Irene, who had draped the shawl over her head and neck, and now carried the jacket rolled into a bundle. "He is just the sort of dogged countryman who will tackle and overcome all obstacles. I fancy he is carrying oats to a mill, and will be known to the frontier officials. Shall we bargain with him for a lift?"

"It sounds the very thing," agreed the girl.

In their eagerness, neither took the precaution of buying something to eat. They overtook the wagon before it passed the market. The driver was not Joos, but Joos's man. He was quite ready to earn a few francs, or marks--he did not care which--by conveying a couple of passengers to the placid little town of whose mere existence the wide world outside Belgium was unaware until that awful first week in August 1914.

And so it came to pass that Dalroy and his protege passed out of Aix-la-Chapelle without let or hindrance, because the driver, spurred to an effort of the imagination by promise of largesse, described Irene to the Customs men as Henri Joos's niece, and Dalroy as one deputed by the railway to see that a belated consignment of oats was duly delivered to the miller.

Neither rural Germany nor rural Belgium was yet really at war. The monstrous shadow had darkened the chancelleries, but it was hardly perceptible to the common people. Moreover, how could red-fanged war affect a remote place like Vise? The notion was nonsensical. Even Dalroy allowed himself to assure his companion that there was now a reasonable prospect of reaching Belgian soil without incurring real danger. Yet, in truth, he was taking her to an inferno of which the like is scarce known to history. The gate which opened at the Customs barrier gave access apparently to a good road leading through an undulating country. In sober truth, it led to an earthly hell.

CHAPTER III

FIRST BLOOD

Though none of the three in the wagon might even hazard a guess at the tremendous facts, the German wolf had already made his spring and been foiled. Not only had he missed his real quarry, France, he had also broken his fangs on the tough armour of Liege. These things Dalroy and Irene Beresford were to learn soon. The first intimation that the Belgian army had met and actually fought some portion of the invading host came before dawn.

The road to Vise ran nearly parallel with, but some miles north of, the main artery between Aix-la-Chapelle and Liege. During the small hours of the night it held a locust flight of German cavalry. Squadron after squadron, mostly Uhlans, trotted past the slow-moving cart; but Joos's man, Maertz, if stolid and heavy-witted, had the sense to pull well out of the way of these hurrying troopers; beyond evoking an occasional curse, he was not molested. The brilliant moon, though waning, helped the riders to avoid him.

Dalroy and the girl were comfortably seated, and almost hidden, among the sacks of oats; they were free to talk as they listed.

Naturally, a soldier's eyes took in details at once which would escape a woman; but Irene Beresford soon noted signs of the erratic fighting which had taken place along that very road.

"Surely we are in Belgium now?" she whispered, after an awed glance at the lights and bustling activity of a field hospital established near the hamlet of Aubel.

"Yes," said Dalroy quietly, "we have been in Belgium fully an hour."

"And have the Germans actually attacked this dear little country?"

"So it would seem."

"But why? I have always understood that Belgium was absolutely safe. All the great nations of the world have guaranteed her integrity."

"That has been the main argument of every spouter at International Peace Congresses for many a year," said Dalroy bitterly. "If Belgium and Holland can be preserved by agreement, they contended, why should not all other vexed questions be settled by arbitration? Yet one of our chaps in the Berlin Embassy, the man whose ticket you travelled with, told me that the Kaiser could be bluntly outspoken when that very question was raised during the autumn manoeuvres last year. 'I shall sweep through Belgium thus,' he said, swinging his arm as though brushing aside a feeble old crone who barred his way. And he was talking to a British officer too."

"What a crime! These poor, inoffensive people! Have they resisted, do you think?"

"That field hospital looked pretty busy," was the grim answer.

A little farther on, at a cross-road, there could no longer be any doubt as to what had happened. The remains of a barricade littered the ditches. Broken carts, ploughs, harrows, and hurdles lay in heaps. The carcasses of scores of dead horses had been hastily thrust aside so as to clear a passage. In a meadow, working by the light of lanterns, gangs of soldiers and peasants were digging long pits, while row after row of prone figures could be glimpsed when the light carried by those directing the operations chanced to fall on them.

Dalroy knew, of course, that all the indications pointed to a successful, if costly, German advance, which was the last thing he had counted on in this remote countryside. If the tide of war was rolling into Belgium it should, by his reckoning, have passed to the south-west, engulfing the upper valley of the Meuse and the two Luxembourgs perhaps, but leaving untouched the placid land on the frontier of Holland. For a time he feared that Holland, too, was being attacked. Understanding something of German pride, though far as yet from plumbing the depths of German infamy, he imagined that the Teutonic host had burst all barriers, and was bent on making the Rhine a German river from source to sea.

Naturally he did not fail to realise that the lumbering wagon was taking him into a country already securely held by the assailants. There were no guards at the cross-roads, no indications of military precautions. The hospital, the grave-diggers, the successive troops of cavalry, felt themselves safe even in the semi-darkness, and this was the prerogative of a conquering army. In the conditions, he did not regard his life as worth much more than an hour's purchase, and he tortured his wits in vain for some means of freeing the girl, who reposed such implicit confidence in him, from the

meshes of a net which he felt to be tightening every minute. He simply dreaded the coming of daylight, heralded already by tints of heliotrope and pink in the eastern sky. Certain undulating contours were becoming suspiciously clear in that part of the horizon. It might be only what Hafiz describes as the false dawn; but, false or true, the new day was at hand. He was on the verge of advising Irene to seek shelter in some remote hovel which their guide could surely recommend when Fate took control of affairs.

Maertz had now pulled up in obedience to an unusually threatening order from a Uhlan officer whose horse had been incommoded in passing. Above the clatter of hoofs and accoutrements Dalroy's trained ear had detected the sounds of a heavy and continuous cannonade toward the south-west.

"How far are we from Vise?" he asked the driver.

The man pointed with his whip. "You see that black knob over there?" he said.

"Yes."

"That's a clump of trees just above the Meuse. Vise lies below it."

"But how far?"

"Not more than two kilometres."

Two kilometres! About a mile and a half! Dalroy was tortured by indecision. "Shall we be there by daybreak?"

"With luck. I don't know what's been happening here. These damned Germans are swarming all over the place. They must be making for the bridge."

"What bridge?"

"The bridge across the Meuse, of course. Don't you know these parts?"

"Not very well."

"I wish I were safe at home; I'd get indoors and stop there," growled the driver, chirping his team into motion again.

Dalroy's doubts were stilled. Better leave this rustic philosopher to work out their common salvation.

A few hundred yards ahead the road bifurcated. One branch led to Vise, the other to Argenteau. Here was stationed a picket, evidently intended as a guide for the cavalry.

Most fortunately Dalroy read aright the intention of an officer who came forward with an electric torch. "Lie as flat as you can!" he whispered to Irene. "If they find us, pretend to be asleep."

"Hi, you!" cried the officer to Maertz, "where the devil do you think you're going?"

"To Joos's mill at Vise," said the gruff Walloon.

"What's in the cart?"

"Oats."

"*Almachtig!* Where from?"

"Aachen."

"You just pull ahead into that road there. I'll attend to you and your oats in a minute or two."

"But can't I push on?"

The officer called to a soldier. "See that this fellow halts twenty yards up the road," he said. "If he stirs then, put your bayonet through him. These Belgian swine don't seem to understand that they are Germans now, and must obey orders."

The officer, of course, spoke in German, the Walloon in the mixture of Flemish and Low Dutch which forms the *patois* of the district. But each could follow the other's meaning, and the quaking listeners in the middle of the wagon had no difficulty at all in comprehending the gravity of this new peril.

Maertz was swearing softly to himself; they heard him address a question to the sentry when the wagon stopped again. "Why won't your officer let us go to Vise?" he growled.

"Sheep's-head! do as you're told, or it will be bad for you," was the reply.

The words were hardly out of the soldier's mouth before a string of motor lorries, heavy vehicles with very powerful engines, thundered up from the rear. The leaders passed without difficulty, as there was plenty of room. But their broad flat tires sucked up clouds of dust, and the moon had sunk behind a wooded height. One of the hindermost transports, taking too wide a bend, crashed into the wagon. The startled horses plunged, pulled Maertz off his perch, and dragged the wagon into a deep ditch. It fell on its side, and Dalroy and his companion were thrown into a field amid a swirl of laden sacks, some of which burst.

Dalroy was unhurt, and he could only hope that the girl also had escaped injury. Ere he rose he clasped her around the neck and clapped a hand over her mouth lest she should scream. "Not a word!" he breathed into her ear. "Can you manage to crawl on all-fours straight on by the side of the hedge? Never mind thorns or nettles. It's our only chance."

In a few seconds they were free of the hubbub which sprang up around the overturned wagon and the transport, the latter having shattered a wheel. Soon they were able to rise, crouching behind the hedge as they ran. They turned at an angle, and struck off into the country, following the line of another hedge which trended slightly uphill. At a gateway they turned again, moving, as Dalroy calculated, on the general line of the Vise road. A low-roofed shanty loomed up suddenly against the sky. It was just the place to house an outpost, and Dalroy was minded to avoid it when the lowing of a cow in pain revealed to his trained intelligence the practical certainty that the animal had been left there unattended, and needed milking. Still, he took no unnecessary risks.

"Remain here," he murmured. "I'll go ahead and investigate, and return in a minute or so."

He did not notice that the girl sank beneath the hedge with a suspicious alacrity. He was a man, a fighter, with the hot breath of war in his nostrils. Not yet had he sensed the cruel strain which war places on women. Moreover, his faculties were centred in the task of the moment. The soldier is warned not to take his eyes off the enemy while reloading his rifle lest the target be lost; similarly, Dalroy knew that concentration was the prime essential of scout-craft.

Thus he was deaf to the distant thunder of guns, but alive to the least rustle inside the building; blind to certain ominous gleams on the horizon, but quick to detect any moving object close at hand. He made out that a door stood open; so, after a few seconds' pause, he slipped rapidly within, and stood near the wall on the side opposite the hinges. An animal stirred uneasily, and the plaintive lowing ceased. He had dropped the sabots long since, and the lamp was lost in the spill out of the wagon, but most fortunately he had matches in his pocket. He closed the door softly, struck a match, guarding the flame with both hands, and looked round. He found himself in a ramshackle shed, half-barn, half-stable. In a stall was tethered a black-and-white cow, her udder distended with milk. Huddled up against the wall was the corpse of a woman, an old peasant, whose wizened features had that waxen tint of *camailleu gris* with which, in their illuminated missals of the Middle Ages, the monks loved to portray the sufferings of the early Christian martyrs. She had been stabbed twice through the breast. An overturned pail and milking-stool showed how and where death had surprised her.

The match flickered out, and Dalroy was left in the darkness of the tomb. He had a second match in his hand, and was on the verge of striking it when he heard a man's voice and the swish of feet through the grass of the pasture without.

"This is the place, Heinrich," came the words in guttural German, and breathlessly. Then, with certain foulnesses of expression, the speaker added, "I'm puffed. That girl fought like a wild cat."

"She's pretty, too, for a Belgian," agreed another voice.

"So. But I couldn't put up with her screeching when you told her that a bayonet had stopped her grandam's nagging tongue."

"*Ach, was!* What matter, at eighty?"

Dalroy had pulled the door open. Stooping, he sought for and found the milking-stool, a solid article of sound oak. Through a chink he saw two dark forms; glints of the dawn on fixed bayonets showed that the men were carrying their rifles slung. At the door the foremost switched on an electric torch.

"You milk, Heinrich," he said, "while I show a glim."

He advanced a pace, as Dalroy expected he would, so the swing of the stool caught him on the right side of the head, partly on the ear and partly on the rim of his *Pickel-haube*. But his skull was fractured for all that. Heinrich fared no better, though the torch was shattered on the rough paving of the stable. A thrust floored him, and he fell with a fearsome clatter of accoutrements. A second blow on the temple stilled the startled oath on his lips. Dalroy divested him of the rifle, and stuffed a few clips of cartridges into his own pockets.

Then, ready for any others of a cut-throat crew, he listened. One of the pair on the ground was gasping for breath. The cow began lowing again. That was all. There was neither sight nor sound of Irene, though she must have heard enough to frighten her badly.

"Miss Beresford!" he said, in a sibilant hiss which would carry easily to the point where he had left her. No answer. Nature was still. It was as though inanimate things were awake, but quaking. The breathing of the unnamed German changed abruptly into a gurgling croak. Heinrich had traversed that stage swiftly under the second blow. From the roads came the sharp rattle of horses' feet, the panting of motors. The thud of gun-fire smote the air incessantly. It suggested the monstrous pulse-beat of an alarmed world. Over a hilltop the beam of a searchlight hovered for an instant, and vanished. Belgium, little Belgium, was in a death-grapple with mighty Germany. Even in her agony she was crying, "What of England? Will England help?" Well, one Englishman had lessened by two the swarm of her enemies that night.

Dalroy was only vaguely conscious of the scope and magnitude of events in which he was bearing so small a part. He knew enough of German methods in his immediate surroundings, however, to reckon as little of having killed two men as though they were rats. His sole and very real concern was for the girl who answered not. Before going in search of her he was tempted to don a *Pickel-haube*, which, with the rifle and bayonet, would, in the misty light, deceive any newcomers. But the field appeared to be untenanted, and it occurred to him that his companion might actually endeavour to hide if she took him for a German soldier. So he did not even carry the weapon.

He found Irene at once. She had simply fainted, and the man who now lifted her limp form tenderly in his arms was vexed at his own forgetfulness. The girl had slept but little during two nights. Meals were irregular and scanty. She had lived in a constant and increasing strain, while the real danger and great physical exertion of the past few minutes had provided a climax beyond her powers.

Like the mass of young officers in the British army, Dalroy kept himself fit, even during furlough, by long walks, daily exercises, and systematic abstention from sleep, food, and drink. If a bed was too comfortable he changed it. If an undertaking could be accomplished equally well in conditions of hardship or luxury he chose hardship. Soldiering was his profession, and he held the theory that a soldier must always be ready to withstand the severest tax on brain and physique. Therefore the minor privations of the journey from Berlin, with its decidedly strenuous sequel at Aix-la-Chapelle, and this D'Artagnan episode in the neighbourhood of Vise, had made no material drain on his resources.

A girl like Irene Beresford, swept into the sirocco of war from the ordered and sheltered life of a young Englishwoman of the middle-classes, was an altogether different case. He believed her one of the small army of British-born women who find independence and fair remuneration for their services by acting as governesses and ladies' companions on the Continent. Nearly every German family of wealth and social pretensions counted the *Englische Fraulein* as a member of the household; even in autocratic Prussia, *Kultur* is not always spelt with a "K." She was well-dressed, and supplied with ample means for travelling; but plenty of such girls owned secured incomes, treating a salary as an "extra." Moreover, she spoke German like a native, had a small sister in Brussels, and had evidently met Von Halwig in one of the great houses of the capital. Undoubtedly, she was a superior type of governess, or, it might be, English mistress in a girls' high school.

These considerations did not crowd in on Dalroy while he was holding her in close embrace in a field near Vise at dawn on the morning of Wednesday, 5th August. They were the outcome of nebulous ideas formed in the train. At present, his one thought was the welfare of a hapless woman of his own race, be she a peer's daughter or a postman's.

Now, skilled leader of men though he was, he had little knowledge of the orthodox remedies for a fainting woman. Like most people, he was aware that a loosening of bodices and corsets, a chafing of hands, a vigorous massage of the feet and ankles, tended to restore circulation, and therefore consciousness. But none of these simple methods was practicable when a party of German soldiers might be hunting for both of them, while another batch might be minded to follow "Heinrich" and his fellow-butcher. So he carried her to the stable and laid her on a truss of straw noted during that first vivid glimpse of the interior.

Then, greatly daring, he milked the cow.

Not only did the poor creature's suffering make an irresistible appeal, but in relieving her distress he was providing the best of nourishment for Irene and himself. The cow gave no trouble. Soon the milk was flowing steadily into the pail. The darkness was abysmal. On one hand lay a dead woman, on the other an unconscious one, and two dead men guarded the doorway. Once, in Paris, Dalroy had seen one of the lurid playlets staged at the Grand Guignol, wherein a woman served a meal for a friend and chatted cheerfully during its progress, though the body of her murdered husband was stowed behind a couch and a window-curtain. He recalled the horrid little tragedy now; but that was make-believe, this was grim reality.

Yet he had ever an eye for the rectangle of the doorway. When a quality of grayness sharpened its outlines he knew it was high time to be on the move. Happily, at that instant, Irene sighed deeply and stirred. Ere she had any definite sense of her surroundings she was yielding to Dalroy's earnest appeal, and allowing him to guide her faltering steps. He carried the pail and the rifle in his left hand. With the right he gripped the girl's arm, and literally forced her into a walk.

The wood indicated by Maertz was plainly visible now, and close at hand, and the first rays of daylight gave colour to the landscape. The hour, as Dalroy ascertained later, was about a quarter to four.

It was vitally essential that they should reach cover within the next five minutes; but his companion was so manifestly unequal to sustained effort that he was on the point of carrying her in order to gain the protection of the first hedgerow when he noticed that a slight depression in the hillside curved in the direction of the wood. Here, too, were shrubs and tufts of long grass. Indeed, the shallow trough proved to be one of the many heads of a ravine. The discovery of a hidden way at that moment contributed as greatly as any other circumstance to their escape. They soon learnt that the German hell-hounds were in full cry on their track.

At the first bend Dalroy called a halt. He told Irene to sit down, and she obeyed so willingly that, rendered wiser by events, he feared lest she should faint again.

When travelling he made it a habit to carry two handkerchiefs, one for use and one in case of emergency, such as a bandage being in sudden demand, so he was able to produce a square of clean cambric, which he folded cup-shape and partly filled with milk. It was the best substitute he could devise for a strainer, and it served admirably. By this means they drank nearly all the milk he had secured, and, with each mouthful, Irene felt a new eichor in her veins. For the first time she gave heed to the rifle.

"How did you get that?" she asked, wide-eyed with wonder.

"I picked it up at the door of the shed," he answered.

"I remember now," she murmured. "You left me under a hedge while you crept forward to investigate, and I was silly enough to go off in a dead faint. Did you carry me to the shed?"

"Yes."

"What a bother I must have been. But the finding of a rifle doesn't explain a can of milk."

"The really important factor was the cow," he said lightly. "Now, young lady, if you can talk you can walk. We have a little farther to go."

"Have we?" she retorted, bravely emulating his self-control. "I am glad you have fixed on our destination. It's quite a relief to be in charge of a man who really knows what he wants, and sees that he gets it."

He led the way, she followed. He had an eye for all quarters, because daylight was coming now with the flying feet of Aurora. But this tiny section of Belgium was free from Germans, for the very good reason that their cohorts already held the right bank of the Meuse at many points, and their engineers were throwing pontoon bridges across the river at Vise and Argenteau.

From the edge of the wood Dalroy looked down on the river, the railway, and the little town itself. He saw instantly that the whole district south of the Meuse was strongly held by the invaders. Three arches of a fine stone bridge had been destroyed, evidently by the retreating Belgians; but pontoons were in position to take its place. Twice already had Belgian artillery destroyed the enemy's work, and not even a professional soldier could guess that the guns of the defence were only awaiting a better light to smash the pontoons a third time. In fact, barely half-a-mile to the right of the wood, a battery of four 5.9's was posted on high ground, in the hope that the Belgian guns of smaller calibre might be located and crushed at once. Even while the two stood looking down into the valley, a sputtering rifle-fire broke out across the river, three hundred yards wide at the bridge, and the volume of musketry steadily increased. Men, horses, wagons, and motors swarmed on the roadway or sheltered behind warehouses on the quays.

As a soldier, Dalroy was amazed at the speed and annihilating completeness of the German mobilisation. Indeed, he was chagrined by it, it seemed so admirable, so thoroughly thought-out in each detail, so unapproachable by any other nation in its pitiless efficiency. He did not know then that the vaunted Prussian-made military machine depended for its motive-power largely on treachery and espionage. Toward the close of July, many days before war was declared, Germany had secretly massed nine hundred thousand men on the frontiers of Belgium and the Duchy of Luxembourg. Her armies, therefore, had gathered like felons, and were led by master-thieves in the persons of thousands of German officers domiciled in both countries in the guise of peaceful traders.

Single-minded person that he was, Dalroy at once focused his thoughts on the immediate problem. A small stream leaped down from the wood to the Meuse. Short of a main road bridge its turbulent course was checked by a mill-dam, and there was some reason to believe that the mill might be Joos's. The building seemed a prosperous place, with its two giant wheels on different levels, its ample granaries, and a substantial house. It was intact, too, and somewhat apart from the actual line of battle. At any rate, though the transition was the time-honoured one from the frying-pan to the fire, in that direction lay food, shelter, and human beings other than Germans, so he determined to go there without further delay. His main purpose now was to lodge his companion with some Belgian family until the tide of war had swept far to the west. For himself, he meant to cross the enemy's lines by hook or by crook, or lose his life in the attempt.

"One more effort," he said, smiling confidently into Irene's somewhat pallid face. "Your uncle lives below there, I fancy. We're about to claim his hospitality."

He hid the rifle, bayonet, and cartridges in a thicket. The milk-pail he took with him. If they met a German patrol the pail might serve as an excuse for being out and about, whereas the weapons would have been a sure passport to the next world.

It was broad daylight when they entered the miller's yard. They saw the name Henri Joos on a cart.

"Good egg!" cried Dalroy confidently. "I'm glad Joos spells his Christian name in the French way. It shows that he means well, anyhow!"



CHAPTER IV

THE TRAGEDY OF VISE

Early as was the hour, a door leading to the dwelling-house stood open. The sound of feet on the cobbled pavement of the mill-yard brought a squat, beetle-browed old man to the threshold. He surveyed the strangers with a curiously haphazard yet piercing underlook. His black eyes held a glint of red. Here was one in a subdued torment of rage, or, it might be, of ill-controlled panic.

"What now?" he grunted, using the local argot.

Dalroy, quick to read character, decided that this crabbed old Walloon was to be won at once or not at all.

"Shall I speak French or German?" he said quietly. The other spat.

"*Qu'est-ce que tu veux que je te dise, moi?*" he demanded. Now, the plain English of that question is, "What do you wish me to say?" But the expectoration, no less than the biting tone, lent the words a far deeper meaning.

Dalroy was reassured. "Are you Monsieur Henri Joos?" he said.

"Ay."

"This lady and I have come from Aix-la-Chapelle with your man, Maertz."

"Oh, he's alive, then?"

"I hope so. But may we not enter?"

Joos eyed the engine-cleaner's official cap and soiled clothes, and his suspicious gaze travelled to Dalroy's well-fitting and expensive boots.

"Who the deuce are you?" he snapped.

"I'll tell you if you let us come in."

"I can't hinder you. It is an order, all doors must be left open."

Still, he made way, though ungraciously. The refugees found themselves in a spacious kitchen, a comfortable and cleanly place, Dutch in its colourings and generally spick and span aspect. A comely woman of middle age, and a plump, good-looking girl about as old as Irene, were seated on an oak bench beneath a window. They were clinging to each other, and had evidently listened fearfully to the brief conversation without.

The only signs of disorder in the room were supplied by a quantity of empty wine-bottles, drinking-mugs, soiled plates, and cutlery, spread on a broad table. Irene sank into one of half-a-dozen chairs which had apparently been used by the feasters.

Joos chuckled. His laugh had an ugly sound. "Pity you weren't twenty minutes sooner," he guffawed. "You'd have had company, pleasant company, visitors from across the frontier."

"I, too, have crossed the frontier," said Irene, a wan smile lending pathos to her beauty. "I travelled with Germans from Berlin. If I saw a German now I think I should die."

At that, Madame Joos rose. "Calm thyself, Henri," she said. "These people are friends."

"Maybe," retorted her husband. He turned on Dalroy with surprising energy, seeing that he was some twenty years older than his wife. "You say that you came with Maertz," he went on. "Where is he? He has been absent four days."

By this time Dalroy thought he had taken the measure of his man. No matter what the outcome to himself personally, Miss Beresford must be helped. She could go no farther without food and rest. He risked everything on the spin of a coin. "We are English," he said, speaking very slowly and distinctly, so that each syllable should penetrate the combined brains of the Joos family. "We were only trying to leave Germany, meaning harm to none, but were arrested as spies at Aix-la-Chapelle. We escaped by a ruse. I knocked a man silly, and took some of his clothes. Then we happened on Maertz at a corner of Franz Strasse, and persuaded him to give us a lift. We jogged along all right until we reached the cross-roads beyond the hill there," and he pointed in the direction of the wood. "A German officer refused to allow us to pass, but a motor transport knocked the wagon over, and this lady and I were thrown into a field. We got away in the confusion, and made for a cowshed lying well back from the road and on the slope of the hill. At that point

my friend fainted, luckily for herself, because, when I examined the shed, I found the corpse of an old woman there. She had evidently been about to milk a black-and-white cow when she was bayoneted by a German soldier----"

He was interrupted by a choking sob from Madame Joos, who leaned a hand on the table for support. In pose and features she would have served as a model for Hans Memling's "portrait" of Saint Elizabeth, which in happier days used to adorn the hospital at Bruges. "The Widow Jaquinot," she gasped.

"Of course, madame, I don't know the poor creature's name. I was wondering how to act for the best when two soldiers came to the stable. I heard what they were saying. One of them admitted that he had stabbed the old woman; his words also implied that he and his comrade had violated her granddaughter. So I picked up a milking-stool and killed both of them. I took one of their rifles, which, with its bayonet and a number of cartridges, I hid at the top of the ravine. This is the pail which I found in the shed. No doubt it belongs to the Jaquinot household. Now, I have told you the actual truth. I ask nothing for myself. If I stay here, even though you permit it, my presence will certainly bring ruin on you. So I shall go at once. But I *do* ask you, as Christian people, to safeguard this young English lady, and, when conditions permit, and she has recovered her strength, to guide her into Holland, unless, that is, these German beasts are attacking the Dutch too."

For a brief space there was silence. Dalroy looked fixedly at Joos, trying to read Irene Beresford's fate in those black, glowing eyes. The womenfolk were won already; but well he knew that in this Belgian nook the patriarchal principle that a man is lord and master in his own house would find unquestioned acceptance. He was aware that Irene's gaze was riveted on him in a strangely magnetic way. It was one thing that he should say calmly, "So I picked up a milking-stool, and killed both of them," but quite another that Irene should visualise in the light of her rare intelligence the epic force of the tragedy enacted while she lay unconscious in the depths of a hedgerow. Dalroy could tell, Heaven knows how, that her very soul was peering at him. In that tense moment he knew that he was her man for ever. But--*surgit amari aliquid!* A wave of bitterness welled up from heart to brain because of the conviction that if he would, indeed, be her true knight he must leave her within the next few seconds. Yet his resolution did not waver. Not once did his glance swerve from Joos's wizened face.

It was the miller himself who first broke the spell cast on the curiously assorted group by Dalroy's story. He stretched out a hand and took the pail. "This is fresh milk," he said, examining the dregs.

"Yes. I milked the cow. The poor animal was in pain, and my friend and I wanted the milk."

"You milked the cow--before?"

"No. After."

"*Grand Dieu!* you're English, without doubt."

Joos turned the pail upside down, appraising it critically. "Yes," he said, "it's one of Dupont's. I remember her buying it. She gave him fifty kilos of potatoes for it. She stuck him, he said. Half the potatoes were black. A rare hand at a bargain, the *Veuve Jaquinot*. And she's dead you tell me. A bayonet thrust?"

"Two."

Madame Joos burst into hysterical sobbing. Her husband whisked round on her with that singular alertness of movement which was one of his most marked characteristics.

"Peace, wife!" he snapped. "Isn't that what we're all coming to? What matter to Dupont now whether the potatoes were black or sound?"

Dalroy guessed that Dupont was the iron-monger of Vise. He was gaining a glimpse, too, of the indomitable soul of Belgium. Though itching for information, he checked the impulse, because time pressed horribly.

"Well," he said, "will you do what you can for the lady? The Germans have spared you. You have fed them. They may treat you decently. I'll make it worth while. I have plenty of money----"

Irene stood up. "Monsieur," she said, and her voice was sweet as the song of a robin, "it is idle to speak of saving one without the other. Where Monsieur Dalroy goes I go. If he dies, I die."

For the first time since entering the mill Dalroy dared to look at her. In the sharp, crisp light of advancing day her blue eyes held a tint of violet. Tear-drops glistened in the long lashes; but she smiled wistfully, as though pleading for forgiveness.

"That is sheer nonsense," he cried in English, making a miserable failure of the anger he tried to assume. "You ought to

be reasonably safe here. By insisting on remaining with me you deliberately sacrifice both our lives. That is, I mean," he added hastily, aware of a slip, "you prevent me too from taking the chance of escape that offers."

"If that were so I would not thrust myself on you," she answered. "But I know the Germans. I know how they mean to wage war. They make no secret of it. They intend to strike terror into every heart at the outset. They are not men, but super-brutes. You saw Von Halwig at Berlin, and again at Aix-la-Chapelle. If a titled Prussian can change his superficial manners--not his nature, which remains invariably bestial--to that extent in a day, before he has even the excuse of actual war, what will the same man become when roused to fury by resistance? But we must not talk English." She turned to Joos. "Tell us, then, monsieur," she said, grave and serious as Pallas Athena questioning Perseus, "have not the Prussians already ravaged and destroyed Vise?"

The old man's face suddenly lost its bronze, and became ivory white. His features grew convulsed. He resembled one of those grotesque masks carved by Japanese artists to simulate a demon. "Curse them!" he shrieked. "Curse them in life and in death--man, woman, and child! What has Belgium done that she should be harried by a pack of wolves? Who can say what wolves will do?"

Joos was aboil with vitriolic passion. There was no knowing how long this tirade might have gone on had not a speckled hen stalked firmly in through the open door with obvious and settled intent to breakfast on crumbs.

"*Ciel!*" cackled the orator. "Not a fowl was fed overnight!"

In real life, as on the stage, comedy and tragedy oft go hand in hand. But the speckled hen deserved a good meal. Her entrance undoubtedly stemmed the floodtide of her owner's patriotic wrath, and thus enabled the five people in the kitchen to overhear a hoarse cry from the roadway: "Hi, there, *dummer Esel!* whither goest thou? This is Joos's mill."

"Quick, Leontine!" cried Joos. "To the second loft with them! Sharp, now!"

In this unexpected crisis, Dalroy could neither protest nor refuse to accompany the girl, who led him and Irene up a back stair and through a well-stored granary to a ladder which communicated with a trap-door.

"I'll bring you some coffee and eggs as soon as I can," she whispered. "Draw up the ladder, and close the door. It's not so bad up there. There's a window, but take care you aren't seen. Maybe," she added tremulously, "you are safer than we now."

Dalroy realised that it was best to obey.

"Courage, mademoiselle!" he said. "God is still in heaven, and all will be well with the world."

"Please, monsieur, what became of Jan Maertz?" she inquired timidly.

"I'm not quite certain, but I think he fell clear of the wagon. The Germans should not have ill-treated him. The collision was not his fault."

The girl sobbed, and left them. Probably the gruff Walloon was her lover.

Irene climbed first. Dalroy followed, raised the ladder noiselessly, and lowered the trap. His brow was seamed with foreboding, as, despite his desire to leave his companion in the care of the miller's household, he had an instinctive feeling that he was acting unwisely. Moreover, like every free man, he preferred to seek the open when in peril. Now he felt himself caged.

Therefore was he amazed when Irene laughed softly. "How readily you translate Browning into French!" she said.

He gazed at her in wonderment. Less than an hour ago she had fainted under the stress of hunger and dread, yet here was she talking as though they had met in the breakfast-room of an English country house. He would have said something, but the ancient mill trembled under the sudden crash of artillery. The roof creaked, the panes of glass in the dormer window rattled, and fragments of mortar fell from the walls. Unmindful, for the moment, of Leontine Joos's warning, Dalroy went to the window, which commanded a fine view of the town, river, and opposite heights.

The pontoon bridge was broken. Several pontoons were in splinters. The others were swinging with the current toward each bank. Six Belgian field-pieces had undone the night's labour, and a lively rat-tat of rifles, mixed with the stutter of machine guns, proved that the defenders were busy among the Germans trapped on the north bank. The heavier ordnance brought to the front by the enemy soon took up the challenge; troops occupying the town, which, for the most part, lies on the south bank, began to cover the efforts of the engineers, instantly renewed. History was being written in blood that morning on both sides of the Meuse. The splendid defence offered by a small Belgian force was thwarting the advance of the 9th German Army Corps. Similarly, the 10th and 7th were being held up at Verviers and on

the direct road from Aix to Liege respectively. All this meant that General Leman, the heroic commander-in-chief at Liege, was given most precious time to garrison that strong fortress, construct wire entanglements, lay mines, and destroy roads and railways, which again meant that Von Emmich's sledge-hammer blows with three army corps failed to overwhelm Liege in accordance with the dastardly plan drawn up by the German staff.

Dalroy, though he might not realise the marvellous fact then, was in truth a spectator of a serious German defeat. Even in the conditions, he was aglow with admiration for the pluck of the Belgians in standing up so valiantly against the merciless might of Germany. The window was dust-laden as the outcome of earlier gun-fire, and he was actually on the point of opening it when Irene stopped him.

"Those men below may catch sight of you," she said.

He stepped back hurriedly. Two forage-carts had been brought into the yard, and preparations were being made to load them with oats and hay. A truculent-looking sergeant actually lifted his eyes to that particular window. But he could not see through the dimmed panes, and was only estimating the mill's probable contents.

Dalroy laughed constrainedly. "You are the better soldier of the two," he said. "I nearly blundered. Still, I wish the window was open. I want to size up the chances of the Belgians. Those are bigger guns which are answering, and a duel between big guns and little ones can have only one result."

Seemingly, the German battery of quick-firers had located its opponents, because the din now became terrific. As though in response to Dalroy's desire, three panes of glass fell out owing to atmospheric concussion, and the watchers in the loft could follow with ease the central phase of the struggle. The noise of the battle was redoubled by the accident to the window, and the air-splitting snarl of the high-explosive shells fired by the 5.9's in the effort to destroy the Belgian guns was specially deafening. That sound, more than any other, seemed to affect Irene's nerves. Involuntarily she clung to Dalroy's arm, and he, with no other intent than to reassure her, drew her trembling form close.

It was evident that the assailants were suffering heavy losses. Scores of men fell every few minutes among the bridge-builders, while casualties were frequent among the troops lining the quays. Events on the Belgian side of the river were not so marked; but even Irene could make out the precise moment when the defenders' fire slackened, and the line of pontoons began to reach out again toward the farther shore.

"Are the poor Belgians beaten, then?" she asked, with a tender sympathy which showed how lightly she estimated her own troubles in comparison with the agony of a whole nation.

"I think not," said Dalroy. "I imagine they have changed the position of some, at least, of their guns, and will knock that bridge to smithereens again just as soon as it nears completion."

The forage-carts rumbled out of the yard. Dalroy noticed that the soldiers wore linen covers over the somewhat showy *Pickel-hauben*, though the regiments he had seen in Aix-la-Chapelle swaggered through the streets in their ordinary helmets. This was another instance of German thoroughness. The invisibility of the gray-green uniform was not so patent when the *Pickel-haube* lent its glint, but no sooner had the troops crossed the frontier than the linen cover was adjusted, and the masses of men became almost merged in the browns and greens of the landscape.

The two were so absorbed in the drama being fought out before their eyes that they were quite startled by a series of knocks on the boarded floor. Dalroy crept to the trap door and listened. Then, during an interval between the salvos of artillery, he heard Leontine's voice, "Monsieur! Mademoiselle!"

He pulled up the trap. Beneath stood Leontine, with a long pole in her hands. Beside her, on the floor, was a laden tray.

"I've brought you something to eat," she said. "Father thinks you had better remain there at present. The Germans say they will soon cross the river, as they intend taking Liege to-night."

Not until they had eaten some excellent rolls and butter, with boiled eggs, and drank two cups of hot coffee, did they realise how ravenously hungry they were. Then Dalroy persuaded Irene to lie down on a pile of sacks, and, amid all the racket of a fierce engagement, she slept the sleep of sheer exhaustion. Thus he was left on guard, as it were, and saw the pontoons once more demolished.

After that he, too, curled up against the wall and slept. The sound of rifle shots close at hand awoke him. His first care was for the girl, but she lay motionless. Then he looked out. There was renewed excitement in the main road, but only a few feet of it was visible from the attic. A number of women and children ran past, all screaming, and evidently in a state of terror. Several houses in the town were on fire, and the smoke hung over the river in such clouds as to obscure the north bank.

Old Henri Joos came hurriedly into the yard. He was gesticulating wildly, and Dalroy heard a door bang as he vanished.

Refusing to be penned up any longer without news of what was happening, Dalroy lowered the ladder, and, after ascertaining that Irene was still asleep, descended. He made his way to the kitchen, pausing only to find out whether or not it held any German soldiers.

Joos's shrill voice, raised in malediction of all Prussians, soon decided that fact. He spoke in the local *patois*, but straightway branched off into French interlarded with German when Dalroy appeared.

"Those hogs!" he almost screamed. "Those swine-dogs! They can't beat our brave boys of the 3rd Regiment, so what do you think they're doing now? Murdering men, women, and children out of mere spite. The devils from hell pretended that the townsfolk were shooting at them, so they began to stab, and shoot, and burn in all directions. The officers are worse than the men. Three came here in an automobile, and marked on the gate that the mill was not to be burnt--they want my grain, you see--and, as they were driving off again, young Jan Smit ran by. Poor lad, he was breathless with fear. They asked him if he had seen another car like theirs, but he could only stutter. One of them laughed, and said, 'I'll work a miracle, and cure him.' Then he whipped out a revolver and shot the boy dead. Some soldiers with badges on their arms saw this. One of them yelled, '*Man hat geschossen*' ('The people have been shooting'), though it was their own officer who fired, and he and the others threw little bombs into the nearest cottages, and squirted petrol in through the windows. Madame Didier, who has been bedridden for years, was burnt alive in that way. They have a regular corps of men for the job. Then, 'to punish the town,' as they said, they took twenty of our chief citizens, lined them up in the market-place, and fired volleys at them. There was Dupont, and the Abbe Courvoisier, and Monsieur Philippe the notary, and--*ah, mon Dieu*, I don't know--all my old friends. The Prussian beasts will come here soon.--Wife! Leontine! how can I save you? They are devils--devils, I tell you--devils mad with drink and anger. A few scratches in chalk on our gate won't hold them back. They may be here any moment. You, mademoiselle, had better go with Leontine here and drown yourselves in the mill dam. Heaven help me, that is the only advice a father can give!"

Dalroy turned. Irene stood close behind. She knew when he left the garret, and had followed swiftly. She confessed afterwards that she thought he meant to carry out his self-denying project, and leave her.

"You are mistaken, Monsieur Joos," she said now, speaking with an aristocratic calm which had an immediate effect on the miller and his distraught womenfolk. "You do not know the German soldier. He is a machine that obeys orders. He will kill, or not kill, exactly as he is bidden. If your house has been excepted it is absolutely safe."

She was right. The mill was one of the places in Vise spared by German malice that day. A well-defined section of the little town was given up to murder, and loot, and fire, and rapine. Scenes were enacted which are indescribable. A brutal soldiery glutted its worst passions on an unarmed and defenceless population. The hour was near when some hysterical folk would tell of the apparition of angels at Mons; but old Henri Joos was unquestionably right when he spoke of the presence of devils in Vise.

CHAPTER V

BILLETS

The miller's volcanic outburst seemed to have exhausted itself; he subsided to the oaken bench, leaned forward, elbows on knees, and thrust his clenched fists against his ears as though he would shut out the deafening clamour of the guns. This attitude of dejection evidently alarmed Madame Joos. She forgot her own fears in solicitude for her husband. Bending over him, she patted his shoulder with a maternal hand, since every woman is at heart a mother--a mother first and essentially.

"Maybe the lady is right, Henri," she said tenderly. "Young as she is, she may understand these things better than countryfolk like us."

"Ah, Lise," he moaned, "you would have dropped dead had you seen poor Dupont. He wriggled for a long minute after he fell. And the Abbe, with his white hair! Some animal of a Prussian fired at his face."

"Don't talk about it," urged his wife. "It is bad for you to get so excited. Remember, the doctor warned you----"

"The doctor! Dr. Lafarge! A soldier hammered on the surgery door with the butt of his rifle, and, when the doctor came out, twirled the rifle and stabbed him right through the body. I saw it. It was like a conjuring trick. I was giving an officer some figures about the contents of the mill. The doctor screamed, and clutched at the bayonet with both hands. And who do you think the murderer was?"

Madame Joos's healthy red cheeks had turned a ghastly yellow, but she contrived to stammer, "*Dieu!* The poor doctor! But how should I know?"

"The barber, Karl Schwartz."

"Karl a soldier!"

"More, a sergeant. He lived and worked among us ten years--a spy. It was the doctor who got him fined for beating his wife. No wonder Monsieur Lafarge used to say there were too many Germans in Belgium. The officer I was talking to watched the whole thing. He was a fat man, and wore spectacles for writing. He lifted them, and screwed up his eyes, so, like a pig, to read the letters on the brass door-plate. '*Almachtig!*' he said, grinning, 'a successful operation on a doctor by a patient.' I saw red. I felt in my pocket for a knife. I meant to rip open his paunch. Then one of our shells burst near us, and he scuttled. The wind of the explosion knocked me over, so I came home."

The two, to some extent, were using the local *patois*; but their English hearers understood nearly every word, because these residents on the Belgian border mingle French, German, and a Low Dutch dialect almost indiscriminately. Dalroy at once endeavoured to divert the old man's thoughts. The massacre which had been actually permitted, or even organised, in the town by daylight would probably develop into an orgy that night. Not one woman now, but three, required protection. He must evolve some definite plan which could be carried out during the day, because the hordes of cavalry pressing toward the Meuse would soon deplete Joos's mill; and when the place ceased to be of value to the commissariat the protecting order would almost certainly be revoked. Moreover, Leontine Joos was young and fairly attractive.

In a word, Dalroy was beginning to understand the psychology of the German soldier in war-time.

"Let us think of the immediate future," he struck in boldly. "You have a wife and daughter to safeguard, Monsieur Joos, while I have Mademoiselle Beresford on my hands. Your mill is on the outskirts of the town. Is there no village to the west, somewhere out of the direct line, to which they could be taken for safety?"

"The west!" growled Joos, springing up again, "isn't that where these savages are going? That is the way to Liege. I asked the officer. He said they would be in Liege to-night, and in Paris in three weeks."

"Is it true that England has declared war?"

"So they say. But the Prussians laugh. You have no soldiers, they tell us, and their fleet is nearly as strong as yours. They think they have caught you napping, and that is why they are coming through Belgium. Paris first, then the coast, and they've got you. For the love of Heaven, monsieur, is it true that you have no army?"

Dalroy was stung into putting Britain's case in the best possible light. "Not only have we an army, every man of which is worth three Germans at a fair estimate; but if England has come into this war she will not cease fighting until Prussia grovels in the mud at her feet. How can you, a Belgian, doubt England's good faith? Hasn't England maintained your

nation in freedom for eighty years?"

"True, true! But the Prussians are sure of victory, and one's heart aches when one sees them sweep over the land like a pestilence. I haven't told you one-tenth----"

"Why frighten these ladies needlessly? The gun-fire is bad enough. You and I are men, Monsieur Joos. We must try and save our women."

The miller was spirited, and the implied taunt struck home.

"It's all very well talking in that way," he cried; "but what's going to happen to you if a German sees you? *Que diable!* You look like an Aachen carriage-cleaner, don't you, with your officer air and commanding voice, and your dandy boots, and your fine clothes showing when the workman's smock opens! The lady, too, in a cheap shawl, wearing a blouse and skirt that cost hundreds of francs!--Leontine, take monsieur----"

"Dalroy."

"Take Monsieur Dalroy to Jan Maertz's room, and let him put on Jan's oldest clothes and a pair of sabots. Jan's clogs will just about fit him. And give mademoiselle one of your old dresses."

He whirled round on Dalroy. "What became of Jan Maertz? Did the Germans really kill him? Tell us the truth. Leontine, there, had better know."

"I think he is safe," said Dalroy. "I have already explained to your daughter how the accident came about which separated us. Maertz was pulled out of the driver's seat by the reins when the horses plunged and upset the wagon. He may arrive any hour."

"The Germans didn't know, then, that you and the lady were in the cart?"

"No."

"I hope Jan hasn't told them. That would be awkward. But what matter? You talk like a true man, and I'll do my best for you. It's nothing but nonsense to think of getting away from Vise yet. You're a Liegeois whom I hired to do Jan's work while he went to Aix. Everybody in Vise knows he went there four days ago. I can't lift heavy sacks of grain at my age, and I must have a man's help. You see? Sharp, now. When that fat fellow gets his puff again he'll be here for more supplies. And mind you don't wash your face and hands. You're far too much of a gentleman as it is."

"One moment," interrupted Irene. "I want your promise, Captain Dalroy, that you will not go away without telling me."

She could not guess how completely old Joos's broken story of the day's events in Vise had changed Dalroy's intent.

"I would as soon think of cutting off my right hand," he said.

Their eyes met and clashed. It was dark in the mill's kitchen, even at midday; but the girl felt that the tan of travel and exposure on her face was yielding to a deep crimson. "Come, Leontine," she cried almost gaily, "show me how to wear one of your frocks. I'll do as much for you some day in London."

"You be off, too," growled Joos to Dalroy. "When the Germans come they must see you about the place."

The old man was shrewd in his way. The sooner these strangers became members of the household the less likely were they to attract attention.

Thus it came about that both Dalroy and Irene were back in the kitchen, and clothed in garments fully in keeping with their new roles, when a commissariat wagon entered the yard. A Bavarian corporal did not trouble to open the door in the ordinary way. He smashed the latch with his shoulder. "Why is this door closed?" he demanded fiercely.

"Monsieur----" began Joos.

"Speak German, you swine!"

"I forgot the order, Herr Kaporal. As you see, it was only on the latch."

"Don't let it happen again. Load the first wagon with hay and the second with flour. While you're at it, these women can cook us a meal. Where do you keep your wine?"

"Everything will be put on the table, *mons--*Herr Kaporal."

"None of your lip!--Here, you, the pretty one, show me the wine-cupboard. I'll make my own selection. We Bavarians

are famous judges of good wine and pretty women, let me tell you."

The corporal's wit was highly appreciated by the squad of four men who accompanied him. They had all been drinking. It is a notable fact that during the early days of the invasion of Belgium and France--in effect, while wine and brandy were procurable by theft--the army which boasts the strictest discipline of any in the world was unquestionably the most drunken that has ever waged successful war.

Irene was "the pretty one" chosen as guide by this hulking connoisseur, but she knew how to handle boors of his type.

"You must not talk in that style to a girl from Berlin," she said icily. "You and your men will take what is given you, or I'll find your *oberleutnant*, and hear what he has to say about it."

She spoke purposely in perfect German, and the corporal was vastly surprised.

"Pardon, *gnadiges Fraulein*," he mumbled with a clumsy bow. "I no offence meant. We will within come when the meal is ready. About--turn!" The enemy was routed.

The miller and his man worked hard until dusk. The fat officer turned up, and lost no opportunity of ogling the two girls. He handed Joos a payment docket, which, he explained grandiloquently, would be honoured by the military authorities in due course. Joos pocketed the document with a sardonic grin. There was some fifteen thousand francs' worth of grain and forage stored on the premises, and he did not expect to see a centime of hard cash from the Germans, unless, as he whispered grimly to Dalroy, they were forced to pay double after the war. Meanwhile the place was gutted. Wagon after wagon came empty and went away loaded.

Dribbles of news were received. The passage of the Meuse had been achieved, thanks to a flanking movement from Argenteau. Liege had fallen at the first attack. The German High Sea Fleet was escorting an army in transports to invade England, where, meanwhile, Zeppelins were destroying London. Vise, having been sufficiently "punished" for a first offence, would now be spared so long as the inhabitants "behaved themselves." If a second "lesson" were needed it would be something to remember.

The first and last of these items were correct, inasmuch as they represented events and definite orders affecting the immediate neighbourhood. Otherwise, the budget consisted of ever more daring flights of Teutonic imagination, the crescendo swelling by distance. Liege was so far from having fallen that the 7th Division, deprived of the support of the 9th and 10th Divisions, had been beaten back disastrously from the shallow trenches in front of the outer girdle of forts. The 10th was about to share the same fate; and the 9th, after being delayed nearly three days by the glorious resistance offered by the Belgians at Vise, was destined to fare likewise. But rumour as to the instant "capture" of Liege was not rife among the lower ranks alone of the German army. The commander-in-chief actually telegraphed the news to the All-Highest at Aix; when the All-Highest discovered the truth the commander-in-chief decided that he had better blow his brains out, and did.

The fact was that the overwhelming horde of invaders could not be kept out of the city of Liege by the hastily mobilised Belgian army; but the heroic governor, General Leman, held the ring of forts intact until they were pulverised by the heavy ordnance of which Dalroy had seen two specimens during the journey to Cologne. Many days were destined to elapse before the last of the strongholds, Fort Loncin, crumbled into ruins by the explosion of its own magazine; and until that was achieved the mighty army of Germany dared not advance another kilometre to the west.

When the Bavarian corporal had gone through every part of the house and outbuildings, and satisfied himself that the only stores left were some potatoes and a half-bag of flour, he informed the miller that he and his squad would be billeted there that evening.

"Your pantry is bare," he said, "but the wine is all right, so we'll bring a joint which we 'planted' this morning. Be decent about the wine, and your folk can have a cut in, too."

Possibly he meant to be civil, and there was a chance that the night might pass without incident. Vise itself was certainly quiet save for the unceasing stream of troops making for the pontoon bridge. The fighting seemed to have shifted to the west and south-west, and Joos put an unerring finger on the situation when he said pithily, "Liege is making a deuce of a row after being taken."

"How many forts are there around the city?" inquired Dalroy.

"Twelve, big and little. Pontisse and Barchon cover the Meuse on this side, and Fleron and Evegnée bar the direct road from Aix. Unless I am greatly in error, monsieur, the German wolf is breaking his teeth on some of them at this minute."

Liege itself was ten miles distant; Pontisse, the nearest fort, though on the left bank of the river, barely six. The evening

was still, there being only a slight breeze from the south-west, which brought the loud thunder of the guns and the crackle of rifle-fire. It was the voice of Belgium proclaiming to the high gods that she was worthy of life.

The Bavarians came with their "joint," a noble piece of beef hacked off a whole side looted from a butcher's shop. Madame Joos cut off an ample quantity, some ten pounds, and put it in the oven. The girls peeled potatoes and prepared cabbages. In half-an-hour the kitchen had an appetising smell of food being cooked, the men were smoking, and a casual visitor would never have resolved the gathering into its constituent elements of irreconcilable national hatreds.

The corporal even tried to make amends for having damaged the door. He examined the broken latch. "It's a small matter," he said apologetically. "You can repair it for a trifle; and, in any case, you will sleep all the better that we are here."

Though somewhat maudlin with liquor, he was very much afraid of the "girl from Berlin." He could not sum her up, but meant to behave himself; while his men, of course, followed his lead unquestioningly.

Dalroy kept in the background. He listened, but said hardly anything. The turn of fortune's wheel was distinctly favourable. If the night ended as it had begun there was a chance that he and Irene might slip away to the Dutch frontier next morning, since he had ascertained definitely that Holland was secure for the time, and was impartially interning all combatants, either Germans or Belgians, who crossed the border. At this time he was inclined to abandon his own project of striving to steal through the German lines. He was somewhat weary, too, after the unusual labour of carrying heavy sacks of grain and flour down steep ladders or lowering them by a pulley. Thus, he dozed off in a corner, but was aroused suddenly by the entry of the commissariat officer and three subalterns. With them came an orderly, who dumped a laden basket and a case of champagne on the floor.

The corporal and his satellites sprang to attention.

The fat man took the salute, and glanced around the kitchen. Then he sniffed. "What! roast beef?" he said. "The men fare better than the officers, it would seem.--Be off, you!"

"Herr Major, we are herein billeted," stammered the corporal.

"Be off, I tell you, and take these Belgian swine with you! I make my quarters here to-night."

Joos, of course, he recognised; and the miller said, with some dignity, that the gentlemen would be made as comfortable as his resources permitted, but he must remain in his own house.

The fat man stared at him, as though such insolence were unheard-of. "Here," he roared to the corporal, "pitch this old hog into the Meuse. He annoys me."

Meanwhile, one of the younger officers, a strapping Westphalian, lurched toward Irene. She did not try to avoid him, thinking, perhaps, that a passive attitude was advisable. He caught her by the waist, and guffawed to his companions, "Didn't I offer to bet you fellows that Busch never made a mistake about a woman? Who'd have dreamed of finding a beauty like this one in a rotten old mill?"

The Bavarians had collected their rifles and sidearms, and were going out sullenly. Each of the officers carried a sword and revolver.

Irene saw that Dalroy had risen in his corner. She wrenched herself free. "How am I to prepare supper for you gentlemen if you bother me in this way?" she demanded tartly.

"Behave yourself, Fritz," puffed the major. "Is that your idea of keeping your word? *Mama*, if she is discreet, will go to bed, and the young ones will eat with us.--Open that case of wine, orderly. I'm thirsty.--The girls will have a drink too. Cooking is warm work.--Hallo! What the devil! Kaporal, didn't you hear my order?"

Dalroy grabbed Joos, who was livid with rage. The two girls were safe for the hour, and must endure the leering of four tipsy scoundrels. A row at the moment would be the wildest folly.

"March!" he said gruffly. "The *oberleutnant* doesn't want us here."

"*Le brave Belge* knows when to clear out," grinned one of the younger men, giving Dalroy an odiously suggestive wink.

Somehow, the fact that Dalroy took command abated the women's terror; even the intractable Joos yielded. Soon the two were in the yard with the dispossessed Bavarians, these latter being in the worst of temper, as they had now to search for both bed and supper. They strode away without giving the least heed to their presumed prisoners.

Joos, like most men of choleric disposition, was useless in a crisis of this sort. He gibbered with rage. He wanted to attack the intruders at once with a pitchfork.

Dalroy shook him to quieten his tongue. "You must listen to me," he said sternly.

The old man's eyes gleamed up into his. In the half-light of the gloaming they had the sheen of polished gold. "Monsieur," he whimpered, "save my little girl! Save her, I implore you. You English are lions in battle. You are big and strong. I'll help. Between us we can stick the four of them."

Dalroy shook him again. "Stop talking, and listen," he growled wrathfully. "Not another word here! Come this way!" He drew the miller into an empty stable, whence the kitchen door and the window were in view. "Now," he muttered, "gather your wits, and answer my questions. Have you any hidden weapons? A pitchfork is too awkward for a fight in a room."

"I had nothing but a muzzle-loading gun, monsieur. I gave it up on the advice of the burgomaster. They've killed him."

"Very well. Remain here on guard. I'll go and fetch a rifle and bayonet. Nothing will happen to the women till these brutes have eaten, and have more wine in them. Don't you understand? The younger men have made a hellish compact with their senior. You heard that, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes, monsieur. Who could fail to know what they meant? Surely the good God sent you to Visé to-day!"

"Promise, now! No interference till I return, even though the women are frightened. You'll only lose your life to no purpose. I'll not be long away."

"I promise. But, monsieur, *pour l'amour de Dieu*, let me stick that fat Busch!"

Dalroy was in such a fume to secure a reliable arm that he rather neglected the precautions of a soldier moving through the enemy's country. It was still possible to see clearly for some distance ahead. Although the right bank of the Meuse that night was overrun with the Kaiser's troops along a front of nearly twenty miles, the ravine, with its gurgling rivulet, was one of those peaceful oases which will occur in the centre of the most congested battlefield. Now that the crash of the guns had passed sullenly to a distance, white-tailed rabbits scurried across the path; some stray sheep, driven from the uplands by the day's tumult, gathered in a group and looked inquiringly at the intruder; a weasel, stalking a selected rabbit as is his piratical way, elected to abandon the chase and leap for a tree.

These very signs showed that none other had breasted the slope recently, so Dalroy strode out somewhat carelessly. Nevertheless, he was endowed with no small measure of that sixth sense which every *shikari* must possess who would hunt either his fellowmen or the beasts of the jungle. He was passing a dense clump of brambles and briars when a man sprang at him. He had trained himself to act promptly in such circumstances, and had decided long ago that to remain on the same ground, or even try to retreat, was courting disaster. His plan was to jump sideways, and, if practicable, a little nearer an assailant. The sabots rendered him less nimble than usual, but the dodge quite disconcerted an awkward opponent. The vicious downward sweep of a heavy cudgel just missed his left shoulder, and he got home with the right in a half-arm jab which sent the recipient sprawling and nearly into the stream.

Dalroy made after him, seized the fallen stick, and recognised--Jan Maertz! "How now," he said wrathfully, "are you, too, a Prussian?"

Jan raised a hand to ward off the expected blow. "*Caput!*" he cried. "I'm done! You must be the devil! But may the Lord help my poor master and mistress, and the little Leontine!"

"That is my wish also, sheep's-head! What evil have I done you, then, that you should want to brain me at sight?"

"They're after you--the Germans. They mean to catch you, dead or alive. A lieutenant of the Guard pulled me away from in front of a firing-party, and gave me my life on condition that I ran you down."

Here was an extraordinary development. It was vitally important that Dalroy should get to know the exact meaning of the Walloon's disjointed utterances, yet how could he wait and question the man while the Prussian sultans were feasting in the mill?

Dalroy stooped over Maertz, who had risen to his knees, and caught him by the shoulder. "Jan Maertz," he said, "do you hope to marry Leontine Joos? If so, Heaven has just prevented you from committing a great crime. She, and her mother, and the lady who came with me from Aix, are in the mill with four German officers--a set of foul, drunken brutes who will stop at no excess. I'm going now to get a rifle. You make quietly for the stable opposite the kitchen door. You will find Joos there. He will explain. Tell me, are you for Belgium or Germany in this war?"

The Walloon might be slow-witted, but Dalroy's words seemed to have pierced his skin.

"For Belgium, monsieur, to the death," he answered.

"So am I. I'm an Englishman. As you go, think what that means."

Leaving Maertz to regain his feet and the stick, Dalroy rushed on up the hill. The unexpected struggle had cost him but little delay; yet it was dark, and the miller was nearly frantic with anxiety, when he returned.

"Is Maertz with you?" was his first question.

"Yes, monsieur," came a gruff voice out of the gloom of the stable.

"Do you know now how nearly you blundered?"

"Monsieur, I would have tackled St. Peter to save Leontine."

"Quick!" hissed Joos, "let us kill these hogs! We have no time to spare. The others will be here soon."

"What others?"

"Jan will tell you later. Come, now. Leave Busch to me!"

"Keep quiet!" ordered Dalroy sternly. "We cannot murder four men in cold blood. I'll listen over there by the window. You two remain here till I call you."

But there was no need for eavesdropping. Leontine's voice was raised shrilly above the loud-clanging talk and laughter of the uninvited guests. "No, no, my mother must stay!" she was shrieking. "Monsieur, for God's sake, leave my mother alone! Ah, you are hurting her.--Father! father!--Oh, what shall we do? Is there no one to help us?"



CHAPTER VI

THE FIGHT IN THE MILL

As Dalroy burst open the door, which was locked, the heartrending screams of the three women mingled with the vile oaths of their assailants. He had foreseen that the door would probably be fastened, and put his whole strength into the determination to force the bolt without warning. The scene which met his eyes as he rushed into the room was etched in Rembrandt lights and shadows by a lamp placed in the centre of the table.

Near a staircase--not that which led to the lofts, but the main stairway of the domestic part of the dwelling--Madame Joos was struggling in the grip of the orderly and one of the lieutenants. Another of these heroes--they all belonged to a Westphalian detachment of the commissariat--was endeavouring to overpower Irene. His left arm pinned her left arm to her waist; his right arm had probably missed a similar hold, because the girl's right arm was free. She had seized his wrist, and was striving to ward off a brutal effort to prevent her from shrieking. Busch, that stout satyr, was seated. Dalroy learnt subsequently that the sudden hubbub arose because Irene resisted his attempt to pull her on to his knee. The last of the younger men was clasping Leontine to his breast with rascally intent to squeeze the breath out of her until she was unable to struggle further.

Now Dalroy had to decide in the fifth part of a second whence danger would first come, and begin the attack there. The four officers had laid aside their swords, but the lieutenants had retained belts and revolvers. Busch, as might be expected, was only too pleased to get rid of his equipment. His tunic was unbuttoned, so that he might gorge at ease. Somehow, Dalroy knew that Irene would not free the hand which was now closing on her mouth. The two Walloons carried short forks with four prongs--Joos had taken to heart the Englishman's comment on the disadvantage of a pitchfork for close fighting--and Jan Maertz might be trusted to deal with the ruffian who was nearly strangling Leontine. There remained the gallant lieutenant whose sense of humour permitted the belief that the best way to force onward a terrified elderly woman was to plant a knee against the small of her back. He had looked around at once when the door flew open, and his right hand was already on the butt of an automatic pistol. Him, therefore, Dalroy bayoneted so effectually that a startled oath changed into a dreadful howl ere the words left his lips. The orderly happened to be nearer than the officer, so, as the bayonet did its work, Dalroy kicked the lout's feet from under him, and thrust him through the body while on the floor. A man who had once won the Dholepur Cup, which is competed for by the most famous pig-stickers in India, knew how to put every ounce of weight behind the keen point of a lance, because an enraged boar is the quickest and most courageous fighter among all the fierce creatures of the jungle. But he was slightly too near his quarry; the bayonet reached the stone floor through the man's body, and snapped at the forte.

Then he wheeled, and made for Irene's assailant.

The instant Dalroy appeared at the door the girl had caught the Prussian's thumb in her strong teeth, and not only bit him to the bone but held on. With a loud bellow of "Help! Come quickly!" he released her, and struck fiercely with his left hand. Yet this gentle girl, who had never taken part in any more violent struggle than a school romp, had the presence of mind to throw herself backward, and thus discount the blow, while upsetting her adversary's balance. But her clenched teeth did not let go. It came out long afterwards that she was a first-rate gymnast. One day, moved by curiosity on seeing some performance in a circus, she had essayed the stage trick of hanging head downward from a cross-bar, and twirling around another girl's body girdled by a strap working on a swivel attached to a strong pad which she bit resolutely. Then she discovered a scientific fact which very few people are aware of. The jaw is, perhaps, the strongest part of the human frame, and can exercise a power relatively far greater than that of the hands. Of course, she could not have held out for long, but she did thwart and delay the maddened Prussian during two precious seconds. Even when he essayed to choke her she still contrived to save herself by seizing his free hand.

By that time Dalroy had leaped to the rescue. Shortening the rifle in the way familiar to all who have practised the bayonet exercise, he drove it against the Prussian's neck. The jagged stump inflicted a wound which looked worse than it was; but the mere shock of the blow robbed the man of his senses, and he fell like a log.

In order to come within striking distance, Dalroy had to jump over Busch. Old Joos, piping in a weird falsetto, had sprung at the fat major and spitted him in the stomach with all four prongs of the fork. Busch toppled over backward with a fearsome howl, the chair breaking under his weight combined with a frantic effort to escape. The miller went with him, and dug the terrible weapon into his soft body as though driving it into a truss of straw. Maertz, a lusty fellow, had made shorter work of his man, because one prong had reached the German's heart, and he was stilled at once. But Joos thrust and thrust again, even using a foot to bury the fork to its shoulder.

This was the most ghastly part of a thrilling episode. Busch writhed on the floor, screaming shrilly for mercy, and striving vainly to stay with his hands the deadly implement from eating into his vitals.

That despairing effort gave the miller a ghoulisn satisfaction. "Aha!" he chortled, "you laughed at Lafarge! Laugh now, you swine! *That's* for the doctor, and *that's* for my wife, and *that's* for my daughter, and *that's* for me!"

Dalroy did not attempt to stop him. These men must die. They had come to the mill to destroy; it was just retribution that they themselves should be destroyed. His coolness in this crisis was not the least important factor in a situation rife with peril. His method of attack had converted a fight against heavy odds into a speedy and most effectual slaughter. But that was only the beginning. Even while the frenzied yelling of the squirming Busch was subsiding into a frothy gurgle he went to the door and listened. A battery of artillery was passing at a trot, and creating din enough to drown the cries of a hundred Busches.

He looked back over his shoulder. Madame Joos was on her knees, praying. The poor woman had no thought but that her last hour had come. Happily, she was spared the sight of her husband's vengeance. Happily, too, none of the women fainted. Leontine was panting and sobbing in Maertz's arms. Irene, leaning against the wall near the fireplace, was gazing now at Joos, now at the fallen man at her feet, now at Dalroy. But her very soul was on fire. She, too, had yielded to the madness of a life-and-death struggle. Her eyes were dilated. Her bosom rose and fell with laboured breathing. Her teeth were still clenched, her lips parted as though she dreaded to find some loathsome taste on them.

Maertz seemed to have retained his senses, so Dalroy appealed to him. "Jan," he said quietly, "we must go at once. Get your master and the others outside. Then extinguish the lamp. Hurry! We haven't a second to spare."

Joos heard. Satisfied now that the fork had been effective, he straightened his small body and said shrilly, "You go, if you like. I'll not leave my money to be burnt with my house.--Now, wife, stir yourself. Where's that key?"

The familiar voice roused Madame Joos from a stupor of fear. She fumbled in her bodice, and produced a key attached to a chain of fine silver. Her husband mounted nimbly on a chair, ran a finger along one of the heavy beams which roofed the kitchen, found a cunningly hidden keyhole, and unlocked a long, narrow receptacle which had been scooped out of the wood. A more ingenious, accessible, yet unlikely hiding-place for treasure could not readily be imagined. He took out a considerable sum of money in notes, gold, and silver. Though a man of wealth, with a substantial account in the state bank, he still retained the peasant's love of a personal hoard.

Stowing away the money in various pockets, Joos got down off the chair. Busch was dying, but he was not unconscious. He had even watched the miller's actions with a certain detached curiosity, and the old fellow seemed to become aware of the fact. "So," he cackled, "you saw, did you? That should annoy you in your last hour, you fat thief.--Yes, yes, monsieur, I'll come now.--Leontine, stop blubbing, and tie up that piece of beef and some bread in a napkin. We fighting men must eat.--Jan, put the bottles of champagne and the pork-pie in a basket.--Leontine, run and get your own and your mother's best shoes. You can change them in the wood."

"What wood?" put in Maertz.

"We can't walk to Maestricht by the main road, you fool."

"That's all right for you and madame here, and for Leontine, perhaps. But I remain in Belgium. My friends are fighting yonder at Liege, and I'm going to join them. And these others mustn't try it. The frontier is closed for them. I was offered my life only two hours ago if I arrested them."

"Jan!" cried Leontine indignantly.

"It's true. Why should I tell a lie? I didn't understand then the sort of game the Prussians are playing. Now that I know----"

"Miss Beresford," broke in Dalroy emphatically, "if these good people will not escape when they may we must leave them to their fate."

"Do come, Monsieur Joos," said Irene, speaking for the first time since the tragedy. "By remaining here you risk your life to no purpose."

"We are coming now, ma'm'selle."

Suddenly the miller's alert eye was caught by a spasmodic movement in the limbs of the last man whom Dalroy struck down. "*Tiens!*" he cried, "that fellow isn't finished with yet."

He was making for the prostrate form with that terrible fork when Dalroy ran swiftly, and collared him. "Stop that!" came the angry command. "A fair fight must not degenerate into murder. Out you get now, or I'll throw you out!"

Joos laughed. "You're making a mistake, monsieur," he said. "These Prussians don't fight that way. They'd kill you just

for the fun of the thing if you were tied hand and foot. But let the rascal live if it pleases you. As for this one," and he spurned Busch's body with his foot, "he's done. Did you hear him? He squealed like a pig."

Dalroy was profoundly relieved when the automatic pistols and ammunition were collected, the lamp extinguished, the door closed, and the whole party had passed through a garden and orchard to the gloom of the ravine. The hour was about half-past eight o'clock. Twenty-four hours earlier he and Irene were about to leave Cologne by train, believing with some degree of confidence that they might be allowed to cross the frontier without let or hindrance! Life was then conventional, with a spice of danger. Now it had descended in the social scale until they ranked on a par with the dog that had gone mad and must be slain at sight. The German code of war is a legal paraphrase of the trickster's formula, "Heads I win, tails you lose." The armies of the Fatherland are ordered to practise "frightfulness," and so terrorise the civil population that the inhabitants of the stricken country will compel their rulers to sue for peace on any terms. But woe to that same civil population if some small section of its members resists or avenges any act of "frightfulness." Soldiers might murder the Widow Jaquinot and ravish her granddaughter, officers might plan a bestial orgy in the miller's house; but Dalroy and Joos and Maertz, in punishing the one set of crimes and preventing another, had placed themselves outside the law. Neither Joos nor Maertz cared a farthing rushlight about the moral consequences of that deadly struggle in the kitchen, but Dalroy was in different case. He knew the certain outcome. Small wonder if his heart was heavy and his brow seamed. His own fate was of slight concern, since he had ceased to regard life as worth more than an hour's purchase at any time from the moment he leaped down into the station yard at Aix-la-Chapelle. But it was hard luck that the accident of mere association should have bound up Irene Beresford's fortunes so irrevocably with his. Was there no way out of the maze in which they were wandering? What, for instance, had Jan Maertz meant by his cryptic statements?

"We must halt here," Dalroy said authoritatively, stopping short in the shadow of a small clump of trees on the edge of the ravine, a place whence there was a fair field of view, yet so close to dense brushwood that the best of cover was available instantly if needed.

"Why?" demanded Joos. "I know every inch of the way."

"I want to question Maertz," said Dalroy shortly. "But don't let me delay you on that account. Indeed, I advise you to go ahead, and safeguard Madame Joos and your daughter. I would even persuade, if I can, Mademoiselle Beresford to go with you."

"I don't mind listening to Jan's yarn myself," grunted the miller. "And isn't it time we had some supper? Killing Prussians is hungry work. Did you hear Busch? He squealed like a pig.--Leontine, cut some chunks of beef and bread, and open one of these bottles of wine."

There was solid sense in the old man's crude rejoinder. Criminals about to suffer the death penalty often enjoy a good meal. These six people, who had just escaped death, or--where the women were concerned--a degradation worse than death, and before whose feet the grave might yawn wide and deep at once and without warning, were nevertheless greatly in want of food.

So they ate as they talked.

Maertz's story was coherent enough when set forth in detail. He was dazed and shaken by the fall from the wagon; but, helped by the sentry, who bore witness that the collision was no fault of his, being the outcome of obedience to the officer's order, he contrived to calm the startled horses. The officer even offered to find a few men later who would help to pull the wagon out of the ditch, so Jan was told to "stand by" until the column had passed. Meaning no harm, he asked what had become of his passengers. This naturally evoked other questions, and a search was made, with the result that the lamp and Dalroy's discarded sabots were found. The lamp, of course, was numbered, and carried the initials of a German state railway; but this "exhibit" only bore out Maertz's statement that a man from Aix had come in the wagon to explain to Joos why the consignment of oats had been so long held up in the goods yard.

In fact, a squad of soldiers had put the wagon right, and were reloading it, when the bodies of Heinrich and his companion were discovered in the stable. Suspicion fell at once on the missing pair. Maertz would have been shot out of hand if an infuriated officer had not recollected that by killing the Walloon he would probably destroy all chance of tracing the man who had "murdered" two of his warriors. So Maertz was arrested, and dumped into a cellar until such time as a patrol could take him to Vise and investigate matters there.

Meanwhile the unforeseen resistance offered to the invaders along the line of the Meuse and neighbourhood of Liege was throwing the German military machine out of gear. In this initial stage of the campaign "the best organised army in the world" was like a powerful locomotive engine fitted with every mechanical device for rapid advance, but devoid of either brakes or reversing gear. As the 7th and 10th Divisions recoiled from the forts of Liege in something akin to disastrous defeat, congestion and confusion spread backward to the advanced base at Aix. Hospital trains from the

front compelled other trains laden with reserves and munitions to remain in sidings. The roads became blocked. Brigades of infantry and cavalry, long lines of guns and wagons, were halted during many hours. Frantic staff-officers in powerful cars were alternately urging columns to advance and demanding a clear passage to the rear and the headquarters staff. No regimental commandant dared think and act for himself. He was merely a cog in the machine, and the machine had broken down. Actually, the defenders of Liege held up the Kaiser's legions only a few days, but it is no figure of speech to say that when General Leman dropped stupefied by an explosion in Fort Loncin he had established a double claim to immortality. Not only had he shattered the proud German legend of invincibility in the field, but he had also struck a deadly blow at German strategy. With Liege and Leman out of the way, it would seem to the student of war that the invaders must have reached Paris early in September. They made tremendous strides later in the effort to maintain their "time-table," but they could never overtake the days lost in the valley of the Meuse.

What a tiny pawn was Jan Maertz in this game of giants! How little could he realise that his very existence depended on the shock of opposing empires!

The communications officer at the cross-roads had not a moment to spare for many an hour after Jan's execution was deferred. At last, about nightfall, when the 9th Division got into motion again, he snatched a slight breathing-space. Remembering the prisoner, he detailed a corporal and four men to march him to Visé and make the necessary inquiries at Joos's mill.

For Maertz's benefit he gave the corporal precise instructions. "If this fellow's story is proved true, and you find the man and the woman he says he brought from Aachen, return here with the three of them, and full investigation will be made. If no such man and woman have arrived at the mill, and the prisoner is shown to be a liar, shoot him out of hand."

A young staff-officer, a lieutenant of the Guards, stretching his legs while his chauffeur was refilling the petrol-tank, overheard the loud-voiced order, and took a sudden and keen interest in the proceedings.

"One moment," he said imperatively, "what's this about a man and a woman brought from Aachen? Who brought them? And when?"

The other explained, laying stress, of course, on the fractured skulls of two of his best men.

"Hi, you!" cried the Guardsman to Maertz, "describe these two."

Maertz did his best. Dalroy, to him, was literally a railway employe; but his recollection of Irene's appearance was fairly exact. Moreover, he was quite reasonably irritated and alarmed by the trouble they had caused. Then the lamp and sabots were produced, and the questioner swore mightily.

"Leave this matter entirely in my hands," he advised his confrere. "It is most important that these people should be captured, and this is the very fellow to do it. I'll promise him his life, and the safety of his friends, and pay him well into the bargain, if he helps me to get hold of that precious pair. You see, we shall have no difficulty in catching and identifying him again if need be. Personally, I believe he is telling the absolute truth, and is no more responsible for the killing of your men than you are."

Lieutenant Karl von Halwig's comparison erred only in its sheer inadequacy. The communications officer's responsibility was great. He had failed to control his underlings. He was blind and deaf to their excesses. What matter how they treated the wretched Belgians if the road was kept clear? It was nothing to him that an old woman should be murdered and a girl outraged so long as he kept his squad intact.

"So now you know all about it, monsieur," concluded Maertz. "When I met you in the ravine I thought you were escaping, and let out at you. God be praised, you got the better of me!"

"Was the staff officer's name Von Halwig?" inquired Dalroy.

"Name of a pipe, that's it, monsieur! I heard him tell it to the other pig, but couldn't recall it."

"And when were you to meet him?"

"He had to report to some general at Argenteau, but reckoned to reach the mill about nine o'clock."

"Oh, father dear, let us all be going!" pleaded Leontine.

"One more word, and I have finished," put in Dalroy. He turned again to Maertz. "What did you mean by saying a little while ago that the frontier is closed?"

"The lieutenant--Von Halwig, is it?--sent some Uhlans to the major of a regiment guarding the line opposite Holland. He wrote a message, but I know what was in it because he told the other officer. 'They're making for the frontier,' he said,

'and if they haven't slipped through already we'll catch them now without fail. They mustn't get away this time if we have to arrest and examine every ---- Belgian in this part of the country.'

"Ho! ho!" piped Joos, who had listened intently to Jan's recital, "why didn't you tell us that sooner, animal? What chance, then, have I and madame and Leontine of dodging the rascals?"

"*Caput!*" cried Maertz, scratching his head, "that settles it! I never thought of that!"

"Oh, look!" whispered Leontine. "They're searching the mill!"

So earnest and vital was the talk that none of the others had chanced to look down the ravine. They saw now that lights were moving in the upper rooms of the mill. Either Von Halwig had arrived before time, or some messenger had tried to find the commissariat officers, and had raised an alarm.

Joos took charge straight away, like the masterful old fellow that he was. "This locality isn't good for our health," he said. "The night is young yet, but we must leg it to a safer place before we begin planning. Leave nothing behind. We may need all that food.--Come, Lise," and he grabbed his wife's arm, "you and I will lead the way to the Argenteau wood. The devil himself can't track me once I get there.--Trust me, monsieur, I'll pull you through. That lout, Jan Maertz, is all muscle and no brain. What Leontine sees in him I can't guess."

For the time being, Dalroy believed that the miller might prove a resourceful guide. Before deciding the course he personally would pursue it was absolutely essential that he should learn the lay of the land and weigh the probabilities of success or failure attached to such alternatives as were suggested.

"We had better go with our friends," he said to Irene. "They know the country, and I must have time for consideration before striking out a line of my own."

"I think it would be fatal to separate," she agreed. "When all is said and done, what can they hope to accomplish without your help?"

Joos's voice came to them in eager if subdued accents. He was telling his wife how accounts were squared with Busch. "I stuck him with the fork," he chortled, "and he squealed like a pig!"



CHAPTER VII

THE WOODMAN'S HUT

The miller was cunning as a fox. He argued, subtly enough, that if a man just arrived from Argenteau was the first to discover the dead Prussians, the neighbourhood of Argenteau itself might be the last to undergo close search for the "criminals" who had dared punish these demi-gods. Following a cattle-path through a series of fields, he entered a country lane about a mile from Vise. It was a narrow, deep-rutted, winding way--a shallow trench cut into the soil by many generations of pack animals and heavy carts. The long interregnum between the solid pavement of Rome and the broken rubble of Macadam covered Europe with a network of such roads. An unchecked growth of briars, brambles, and every species of prolific weed made this particular track an ideal hiding-place.

Gathering the party under the two irregular lines of pollard oaks which marked the otherwise hardly discernible hedgerows, Joos explained that, at a point nearly half-a-mile distant, the lane joined the main road which winds along the right bank of the Meuse.

"That is our only real difficulty--the crossing of the road," he said. "It is sure to be full of Germans; but if we watch our chance we should contrive to scurry from one side to the other without being seen."

Such confidence was unquestionably cheering. Even Dalroy, though he put a somewhat sceptical question, did not really doubt that the old man was adopting what might, in the circumstances, prove the best plan.

"What happens when we do reach the other side, Monsieur Joos?" he inquired.

"Then we enter a disused quarry in the depths of a wood. The Meuse nearly surrounds the wood, and there is barely room for a tow-path between the river's edge and a steep cliff. The quarry forms the landward face, as one may say, and among the trees is a woodman's hut. I shall be surprised if we find any Germans there."

"From your description it seems to be a suitable post for a strong picket watching the river."

"No, monsieur. The slope falls away from the river, while the opposite bank is flat and open. I have been a soldier in my time, and I understand these things. It would be all right for observation purposes if these pigs hadn't seized the bridge-heads at Vise and Argenteau; but I saw their cursed Uhlans on the left bank many hours ago."

"Lead on, friend," said Dalroy simply. "When we come within a hundred metres of the main road let me do the scouting. I'll tell you when and how to advance."

"Is monsieur a soldier then?"

"Yes."

"An officer perhaps?"

"Yes."

"Ah, a thousand pardons if I presumed to lecture you. Yet I am certainly in the right about the wood."

"I have never doubted you, Monsieur Joos. Do you know what time the moon rises?"

"Late. Eleven o'clock at the earliest."

"All the better, if you are sure of the way."

"I could find it blindfolded. So could Leontine. She goes there to pick bilberries."

The homely phrase was unconsciously dramatic. From the highroad came the raucous singing of German soldiers, the falsetto of drunkards with an ear for music. In the distance heavy artillery was growling, and high explosive shells were bursting with a violence that seemed to rend the sky. Over an area of many miles to the west the sharp tapping of musketry and the staccato splutter of machine guns told of hundreds of thousands of men engaged in a fierce struggle for supremacy. On every hand the horizon was red with the glare of burning houses. The thought of a village girl picking bilberries in a land so scarred by war and rapine produced an effect at once striking and fantastic. It was as though a ray of pure white light had pierced the lurid depths of a volcano.

Dalroy advised the women to take off their linen aprons, and Madame Joos to remove as well a coif of the same material. He unfastened and threw away the stump of the bayonet. Then they moved on in Indian file, the miller leading.

A definite quality of blackness loomed above the low-lying shroud of mist which at night in still weather always marks the course of a great river.

"The wood!" whispered Joos. "We are near the road now."

Dalroy went forward to spy out the conditions. A column of infantry was passing. These fellows were silent, and therefore sinister. They marched like tired men, and their shuffling feet raised a cloud of dust.

An officer lighted a cigarette. "Those guzzling Prussians would empty the Meuse if it ran with wine," he growled, evidently in response to a remark from a companion.

"Our brigadier was very angry about the broken bottles in the streets of Argenteau," said the other. "Two tires were ruined before the chauffeur realised that the place was littered with glass."

These were Saxons, cleaner-minded, manlier fellows than the Prussians. Behind them Dalroy heard the rumble of commissariat wagons. He failed utterly to understand the why and wherefore of the direction the troops were taking. According to his reckoning, they should have been going the opposite way. But that was no concern of his at the moment. He knew the Saxon by repute, and hurried back to the two men and three women crouching under a hedge, having already noted a little mound on the left of the cross-roads where cover was available. He explained what they were to do--steal forward, one by one, hide behind the mound, and dart across when a longer space than usual separated one wagon from another, as the mounted escort would probably be grouped in front and in rear of the convoy.

"Ah, that is the cavalry," said Joos. "It stands on a rock by the roadside."

"It is hard to distinguish anything owing to mist and dust," said Dalroy. "Of course, the darkness is all to the good.--If you ladies do not scream, whatever happens, and you run quickly when I give the word, I don't think there will be any real danger."

In the event, they were able to cross the road in a body, and without needless haste. A horse stumbled and fell, and had to be unharnessed before being got on to its feet again. The incident held up the column during some minutes, so Dalroy was not compelled to abandon the rifle, which it would have been foolish in the extreme to carry if there was the slightest chance of being seen.

Thenceforth progress was safe, though slow and difficult, because the gloom beneath the trees was that of a vault. Even the miller perforce yielded place to Leontine's young eyes and sureness of foot. There were times, during the ascent of one side of the quarry, when whispered directions were necessary, while Madame Joos had to be hauled up a few awkward places bodily.

Still, they reached the hut, a mere logger's shed, but a veritable haven for people so manifestly in peril. They were weary, too. No member of the Joos household had slept throughout the whole of Tuesday night, and the women especially were flagging under the strain.

The little cabin held an abundant store of shavings, because its normal tenant rough-hewed his logs into sabots. Here, then, was a soft, warm, and fragrant resting-place. Dalroy took command. He forbade talking, even in whispers. Maertz, who promised to keep awake, was put on guard outside till the moon rose.

The wisdom of preventing excited conversation was shown by the fact that the five people huddled together on the shavings were soon asleep. There was nothing strange in this. Humanity, when surfeited with emotion, becomes calm, almost phlegmatic. Were it otherwise, after a week of war soldiers would not be sane men, but maniacs.

Dalroy resolved to sleep for two hours. About eleven o'clock he got up, went quietly to the door, and found Maertz seated on the ground, his back propped against the wall, and his head sunk on his breast. As a consequence, he was snoring melodiously.

He woke quickly enough when the Englishman's hand was clapped over his mouth and held there until his torpid wits were sufficiently clear that he should understand the stern words muttered in his ear.

"Pardon, monsieur," he said shamefacedly. "I thought there was no harm in sitting down. I listened to the guns, and began counting them. I counted one hundred and ninety-nine shots, I think, and then----"

"And then you risked six lives, Leontine's among them!"

"Monsieur, I have no excuse."

"Yet you have been a soldier, I suppose? And you gabble of serving your country?"

"It will not happen again, monsieur."

Dalroy pretended an anger he did not really feel. He wanted this stolid Walloon to remain awake now, at any rate, so turned away with an ejaculation of contempt.

Maertz rose. He endured an eloquent silence for nearly a minute. Then he murmured, "Monsieur, I shall not offend a second time. Counting guns is worse than watching sheep jumping a fence."

The moon had risen, revealing a cleared space in front of the hut. A dozen yards away a thin fringe of brushwood and small trees marked the edge of the quarry, while the woodcutter's path was discernible on the left. A slight breeze had called into being the myriad tongues of the wood, and Dalroy realised that the unceasing cannonade, joined to the rustling of the leaves, would drown any sound of an approaching enemy until it was too late to retreat. He knew that Von Halwig, not to mention the military authorities at Vise, would spare no effort to hunt out and destroy the man who had dared to flout the might of Germany, so he was far from satisfied with the apparent safety of even this secluded refuge.

"Have you a piece of string in your pockets?" he demanded gruffly.

Trust a carter to carry string, strong stuff warranted to mend temporarily a broken strap. Maertz gave him a quantity.

"I am going to the cross-road," he continued. "Keep a close watch till I return. When you hear any movement, or see any one, say clearly 'Vise.' If it is I, I shall answer 'Liege.' Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, monsieur. A challenge and a countersign."

Dalroy believed the man might be trusted now. Taking the rifle, he made off along the path, treading as softly as the cumbrous sabots would permit. He was tempted to go bare-footed, but dreaded the lameness which might result from a thorn or a sharp rock. At a suitable place, half-way down the steep path by the side of the quarry, he tied a pistol to a stout sapling, and, having fastened a cord to the trigger, arranged it in such fashion that it must catch the feet of any one coming that way. The weapon was at full cock, and in all likelihood the unwary passer-by would get a bullet in his body.

It was dark under the trees, of course, but the moon was momentarily increasing its light, and the way was not hard to find. He memorised each awkward turn and twist in case he had to retreat in a hurry. Once the lower level was reached there was no difficulty, and, with due precautions, he gained the shelter of a hedge close to the main road.

The stream of troops still continued. Few things could be more ominous than this unending torrent of armed men. By how many similar roads, he wondered, was Germany pouring her legions into tiny Belgium? Was she forcing the French frontier in the same remorseless way? And what of Russia? When he left Berlin the talk was only of marching against the two great allies. If Germany could spare such a host of horse, foot, and artillery for the overrunning of Belgium, while moving the enormous forces needed on both flanks, what millions of men she must have placed under arms long before the mobilisation order was announced publicly! And what was England doing and saying? England! the home of liberty and a free press, where demagogues spouted platitudes about the "curse of militarism," and encouraged that very monster by leaving the richest country in the world open to just such a sudden and merciless attack as Belgium was undergoing before his eyes!

Lying there among the undergrowth, listening to the tramp of an army corps, and watching the flicker of countless rifle-barrels in the moonlight, he forgot his own plight, and thought only of the unpreparedness of Britain. He was a soldier by training and inclination. He harboured no delusions. Man for man, the alert, intelligent, and chivalrous British army was far superior to the cannon-fodder of the German machine. But of what avail was the hundred thousand Britain could put in the field in the west of Europe against the four millions of Germany? Here was no combat of a David and a Goliath, but of one man against forty. Naturally, France and Russia came into the picture, yet he feared that France would break at the outset of the campaign, while Austria might hold Russia in check long enough to enable Germany to work her murderous design. Be it remembered, he could not possibly estimate the fine and fierce valour of the resistance offered by Belgium. It seemed to him that the Teuton hordes must already be hacking their way to the coast, leaving sufficient men and guns to contain the Belgian fortresses, and halting only when the white cliffs of England were visible across the Channel.

If his anxious thoughts wandered, however, and a gnawing doubt ate into his soul lest the British fleet might, as the Germans in Vise claimed, have been taken at a disadvantage, he did not allow his eyes and ears to neglect the duties of the hour.

A fall in the temperature had condensed the river mist, and the air near the ground was much clearer now than at eight o'clock. The breeze, too, gathered the dust into wraiths and scurrying wisps through which glimpses of the sloping

uplands toward Aix were obtainable. During one of these unhampered moments he caught sight of something so weird and uncanny that he was positively startled.

A sorrow-laden, waxen-hued face seemed to peer at him for an instant, and then vanish. But there could be no face so high in the air, twenty feet or more above the heads of a Prussian regiment bawling "*Deutschland, Deutschland, uber alles.*" The land was level thereabouts. The apparition, consequently, must be a mere trick of the imagination. Yet he saw, or fancied he saw, that same spectral face twice again at intervals of a few seconds, and was vexed with himself for allowing his bemused senses to yield to some supernatural influence. Then the vision came a fourth time, and a thrill ran through every fibre in his body.

Because there could be no mistake now. The face, so mournful, so benign, so pitying, bore on the forehead a crown of thorns! Even while the blood coursed in Dalroy's veins with the awe of it, he knew that he was looking at the figure of Christ on the Cross. This, then, was the calvary spoken of by Joos, and invisible in the earlier murk. The beams of the risen moon etched the painted carving in most realistic lights and shadows. The pallid skin glistened as though in agony. The big, piercing eyes gazed down at the passing soldiers as the Man of Sorrows might have looked at the heedless legionaries of Rome.

The travelled Briton, to whom the wayside calvary is a familiar object in many a continental landscape, can seldom pass the twisted, tortured figure on the Cross without a feeling of awe, tempered by insular non-comprehension of the religious motive which thrusts into prominence the most solemn emblem of Christianity in unexpected and often incongruous places. Seen as Dalroy saw it, a hunted fugitive crouching in a ditch, while the Huns who would again destroy Europe were lurching past in thousands within a few feet of where he lay, the image of Christ crucified had a new and overwhelming significance. It induced a vague uneasiness of spirit, almost a doubt. That very day he had killed four men and gravely wounded a fifth, and there was no shred of compunction in his soul. Yet, in body and mind, he was worthy of his class, and this gray old world has failed to evolve any finer human type than that which is summed up in the phrase, an officer and a gentleman. For the foulest of crimes, either committed or contemplated, he had been forced to use both the scales and the sword of justice; but there was something wholly disturbing and abhorrent in the knowledge that two thousand years after the Great Atonement men professedly Christian should so wantonly disregard every principle that Christ taught and practised and died for. He reflected bitterly that the German soldier, whether officer or private, is enjoined to keep a diary. What sort of record would "Heinrich," or Busch, or the three Westphalian lieutenants have left of that day's doings if they had lived and told the truth?

The answer to these vexed questionings came with the swift clarity of a lightning flash. Another rift in the dust-clouds revealed the upper part of the Cross, and the moonbeams shone on a gilded scroll. Dalroy knew his Bible. "And a superscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew: 'This is the King of the Jews.' And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him, saying, 'If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us.'"

From that instant one God-fearing Briton, at least, never again allowed the shadow of a doubt to darken his faith in the divine if inscrutable purpose. He had passed already through dark and deadly hours, while others were then near at hand; but he was steadfast in doing what he conceived his duty without seeking to interpret the ways of Providence. "If Thou be Christ?" It was the last taunt of the unbeliever, though the veil of the temple would be rent in twain, and the earth would quake, and the graves be opened, and the bodies of the saints arise and be seen by many!

A harsh command silenced the singing. An officer had reined in his horse, and was demanding the nature of the errand which brought a squad of men from Vise.

"Sergeant Karl Schwartz, *Herr Hauptmann*," reported the leader of the party. "An Englishman, assisted by a miller named Joos and his man, Maertz, has killed three of our officers. He also wounded Herr Leutnant von Huntzel, of the 7th Westphalian regiment, who has recovered sufficiently to say what happened. The general-major has ordered a strict search. I, being acquainted with the district, am bringing these men to a wood where the rascals may be hiding."

"Killed three, you say? The fiend take all such *schwein-hunds* and their helpers! Good luck to you.--*Vorwarts!*"

The column moved on. Schwartz, the treacherous barber of Vise, led his men into the lane. There were eleven, all told--hopeless odds--because this gang of hunters was ready for a fight and itching to capture a *verdammte Engländer*. And Joos's "safe retreat" had been guessed by the spy who knew what every inhabitant of Vise did, who had watched and noted even such a harmless occupation as Leontine's bilberry-picking, who was acquainted with each footpath for miles around, from whose crafty eyes not a cow-byre on any remote farm in the whole countryside was concealed.

This misfortune marked the end, Dalroy thought. But there was a chance of escape, if only for the few remaining hours of the night, and he took it with the same high courage he displayed in going back to the rescue of Irene Beresford in the railway station at Aix. He had a rifle with five rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber. At the worst, he might be able to add another couple of casualties to the formidable total already piled up during the German advance on

Liege.

The sabots offered a serious handicap to rapid and silent movement, but he dared not dispense with them, and made shift to follow Schwartz and the others as quietly as might be. He was helped, of course, by the din of the guns and the rustling of the leaves; but there was an open space in the narrow road before it merged in the wood which he could not cross until the Germans were among the trees, and precisely in that locality Schwartz halted his men to explain his project. Try as he might, Dalroy, crouched behind a pollard oak, could not overhear the spy's words. But he smiled when the party went on in Indian file, Schwartz leading, because the enemy was acting just as he hoped the enemy would act.

He did not press close on their heels now, but remained deliberately at the foot of the hill and on the edge of the quarry. Standing erect, with the rifle at the ready, he waited. He could hear nothing, but judged time and distance by counting fifty slow steps. He was right to a fifth of a second. A shot rang out, and was followed instantly by a yell of agony. He saw the flash, and, taking aim somewhat below it, fired six rounds rapidly. A fusillade broke out in the wood, the Germans, like himself, firing at the one flash above and the six beneath. A bullet cut through his blouse on the left shoulder and scorched his skin; but when the magazine was empty he ran straight on for a few yards, turned to the right, stepping with great caution, and threw himself flat behind a rock. As he ran, he had refilled the magazine, but now meant using the rifle as a last resource only.

In effect, matters had fallen out exactly as he calculated. Schwartz had blundered into the man-trap set on the path half-way up the cliff, and was shot. The others, lacking a leader, and stupefied by the firing and the darkness, bolted like so many rabbits to the open road and the moonlight as soon as the seeming attack from the rear ceased.

Uncommon grit was needed to press on through a strange wood at night, up a difficult path bordering a precipice when each tree might vomit the flame of a gunshot. And these fellows were not cast in heroic mould. Their one thought was to get back the way they came. They were received warmly, too. The passing regiment, hearing the hubbub and seeing the flashes, very reasonably supposed they were being taken in flank by a Belgian force, and blazed away merrily at the first moving objects in sight in that direction.

Dalroy does not know to this day exactly how the battle ended in rear, nor did he care then. He had routed the enemy in his own neighbourhood, and that must suffice. Regaining the path, he sped upward, pausing only to retrieve the pistol which had proved so efficient a sentinel. Judging by the groans and the stertorous breathing which came from among the undergrowth close to the path, Karl Schwartz's services as a spy and guide were lost to the great cause of *Kultur*. Dalroy did not bother about the wretch. He pressed on, and reached the plateau above the quarry. The clearing was now flooded with moonlight, and the doorway of the hut was plainly visible. Jan Maertz was not at his post, but this was not surprising, as he would surely have joined old Joos and the terrified women at the first sounds of the firing.

"Liege!" said Dalroy, speaking loudly enough for any one in the hut to hear. There was no answer. "Liege!" he cried again, with a certain foreboding that things had gone awry, and dreading lest the precious respite he had secured might be wasted irretrievably.

But the hut was empty, and he realised that he might grope like a blind man for hours in the depths of the wood. The one-sided battle which had broken out in the front of the calvary had died down. He guessed what had happened, the blunder, the frenzied explanations, and their sequel in a quick decision to detach a company and surround the wood.

In his exasperation he forgot the silent figure surveying the scene at the cross-roads, and swore like a very natural man, for he was now utterly at a loss what to do or where to go.

CHAPTER VIII

A RESPITE

Never before in the course of a somewhat varied life had Dalroy felt so irresolute, so helplessly the victim of circumstances. Bereft of the local knowledge possessed by Joos and the other Belgians, any scheme he adopted must depend wholly on blind chance. The miller had described the wood as occupying a promontory in a bend of the Meuse, with steep cliffs forming the southern bank of the river. There was a tow-path; possibly, a series of narrow ravines or clefts gave precarious access from the plateau to this lower level. Probably, too, in the first shock of fright, the people in the hut had made for one of these cuttings, taking Irene with them. They believed, no doubt, that the Englishman had been shot or captured, and after that spurt of musketry so alarmingly near at hand the lower part of the wood would seem alive with enemies.

Dalroy blamed himself, not the others, for this fatal bungling. Before snatching a much-needed rest he ought to have arranged with Joos a practicable line of retreat in the event of a night alarm. Of course he had imposed silence on all as a sort of compulsory relief from the tension of the earlier hours, but he saw now that he was only too ready to share the miller's confidence. Not without reason had poor Dr. Lafarge warned his fellow-countrymen that "there were far too many Germans in Belgium." Schwartz and his like were to be found in every walk of life, from the merchant princes who controlled the trade of Antwerp to the youngest brush-haired waiter in the Cafe de la Regence at Brussels.

Dalroy was aware of a grim appropriateness in the fate of Schwartz. The German automatic pistols carried soft-nosed bullets, so the arch-traitor who murdered the Vise doctor had himself suffered from one of the many infernal devices brought by *Kultur* to the battlefields of Flanders. But the punishment of Schwartz could not undo the mischief he had caused. The men he led knew the nature and purpose of their errand. They would report to the first officer met on the main road, who might be expected to detail instantly a sufficient force for the task of clearing the wood. In fact, the operation had become a military necessity. There was no telling to what extent the locality was held by Belgian troops, as, of course, the runaway warriors would magnify the firing a hundredfold, and no soldier worth his salt would permit the uninterrupted march of an army corps along a road flanked by such a danger-point. In effect, Dalroy conceived a hundred reasons why he might anticipate a sudden and violent end, but not one offering a fair prospect of escape. At any rate, he refused to be guilty of the folly of plunging into an unknown jungle of brambles, rocks, and trees, and elected to go back by the path to the foot of the quarry, whence he might, with plenty of luck, break through on a flank before the Germans spread their net too wide.

He had actually crossed some part of the clearing in front of the hut when his gorge rose at the thought that, win or lose in this game of life and death, he might never again see Irene Beresford. The notion was intolerable. He halted, and turned toward the black wall of the wood. Mad though it was to risk revealing his whereabouts, since he had no means of knowing how close the nearest pursuers might be, he shouted loudly, "Miss Beresford!"

And a sweet voice replied, "Oh, Mr. Dalroy, they told me you were dead, but I refused to believe them!"

Dalroy had staked everything on that last despairing call, little dreaming that it would be answered. It was as though an angel had spoken from out of the black portals of death. He was so taken aback, his spirit was so shaken, that for a few seconds he was tongue-tied, and Irene appeared in the moonlit space before he stirred an inch. She came from an unexpected quarter, from the west, or Argenteau, side.

"The others said I was a lunatic to return," she explained simply; "but, when I came to my full senses after being aroused from a sound sleep, and told to fly at once because the Germans were on us, I realised that you might have outwitted them again, and would be looking for us in vain. So, here I am!"

He ran to her. Now that they were together again he was swift in decision and resolute as ever. "Irene," he said, "you're a dear. Where are our friends? Is there a path? Can you guide me?"

"Take my hand," she replied. "We turn by a big tree in the corner. I think Jan Maertz followed me a little way when he saw I was determined to go back."

"I suppose I had unconscious faith in you, Irene," he whispered, "and that is why I cried your name. But no more talking now. Rapid, silent movement alone can save us."

They had not gone twenty yards beneath the trees when some one hissed, "Vise!"

"Liege, you lump!" retorted Dalroy.

"Monsieur, I----"

"Shut up! Hold mademoiselle's hand, and lead on."

He did not ask whither they were going. The path led diagonally to the left, and that was what he wanted--a way to a flank.

Maertz, however, soon faltered and stopped in his tracks.

"The devil take all woods at night-time!" he growled. "Give me the highroad and a wagon-team, and I'll face anything."

"Are you lost?" asked Dalroy.

"I suppose so, monsieur. But they can't be far. I told Joos----"

"Jan, is that you?" cried Leontine's voice.

"Ah, *Dieu merci!* These infernal trees----"

"Silence now!" growled Dalroy imperatively. "Go ahead as quickly as possible."

The semblance of a path existed; even so, they stumbled over gnarled roots, collided with tree-trunks which stood directly in the way, and had to fend many a low branch off their faces. They created an appalling noise; but were favoured by the fact that the footpath led to the west, whereas the pursuers must climb the cliff on the east.

Leontine, however, led them with the quiet certainty of a country-born girl moving in a familiar environment. She could guess to a yard just where the track was diverted by some huge-limbed elm or far-spreading chestnut, and invariably picked up the right line again, for the excellent reason, no doubt, that the dense undergrowth stood breast high elsewhere at that season of the year.

After a walk that seemed much longer than it really was--the radius of the wood from the hut being never more than two hundred yards in any direction--the others heard her say anxiously, "Are you there, father?"

"Where the deuce do you think I'd be?" came the irritated demand. "Do you imagine that your mother and I are skipping down these rocks like a couple of weasels?"

"It is quite safe," said the girl. "I and Marie Lafarge went down only last Thursday. Jules always goes that way to Argenteau. He has cut steps in the bad places. Jan and I will lead. We can help mother and you."

Dalroy, still holding Irene's arm, pressed forward.

"Are we near the tow-path?" he asked.

"Oh, is that you, *Monsieur l'Anglais?*" chuckled the miller. "Name of a pipe, I was positive those *sales Alboches* had got you twenty minutes since. Yes, if you trip in the next few yards you'll find yourself on the tow-path after falling sixty feet."

"Go on, Leontine!" commanded Dalroy. "What you and your friend did for amusement we can surely do to save our lives. But there should be moonlight on this side. Have any clouds come up?"

"These are firs in front, monsieur. Once clear of them, we can see."

"Very well. Don't lose another second. Only, before beginning the descent, make certain that the river bank holds no Germans."

Joos grumbled, but his wife silenced him. That good lady, it appeared, had given up hope when the struggle broke out in the kitchen. She had been snatched from the jaws of death by a seeming miracle, and regarded Dalroy as a very Paladin. She attributed her rescue entirely to him, and was almost inclined to be sceptical of Joos's sensational story about the killing of Busch. "There never was such a man for arguing," she said sharply. "I do believe you'd contradict an archbishop. Do as the gentleman bids you. He knows best."

Now, seeing that madame herself, after one look, had refused point-blank to tackle the supposed path, and had even insisted on retreating to the cover of the wood, Joos was entitled to protest. Being a choleric little man, he would assuredly have done so fully and freely had not a red light illumined the tree-tops, while the crackle of a fire was distinctly audible. The Germans had reached the top of the quarry, and, in order to dissipate the impenetrable gloom, had converted the hut into a beacon.

"*Misericorde!*" he muttered. "They are burning our provisions, and may set the forest ablaze!"

And that is what actually happened. The vegetation was dry, as no rain had fallen for many a day. The shavings and store of logs in the hut burned like tinder, promptly creating a raging furnace wholly beyond the control of the unthinking dolts who started it. The breeze which had sprung up earlier became a roaring tornado among the trees, and some acres of woodland were soon in flames. The light of that fire was seen over an area of hundreds of miles. Spectators in Holland wrongly attributed it to the burning of Vise, which was, however, only an intelligent anticipation of events, because the delightful old town was completely destroyed a week later in revenge for the defeats inflicted on the invaders at Tirlemont and St. Trond during the first advance on Antwerp.

Once embarked on a somewhat perilous descent, the fugitives gave eyes or thought to naught else. Jules, the pioneer quoted by Leontine, who was the owner of the hut and maker of sabots, had rough-hewed a sort of stairway out of a narrow cleft in the rock face. To young people, steady in nerve and sure of foot, the passage was dangerous enough, but to Joos and his wife it offered real hazard. However, they were allowed no time for hesitancy. With Leontine in front, guiding her father, and Maertz next, telling Madame Joos where to put her feet, while Dalroy grasped her broad shoulders and gave an occasional eye to Irene, they all reached the level tow-path without the least accident. Irene, by the way, carried the rifle, so that Dalroy should have both hands at liberty.

Without a moment's delay he took the weapon and readjusted the magazine, which he had removed for the climb. Bidding the others follow at such a distance that they would not lose sight of him, yet be able to retire if he found the way disputed by soldiers, he set off in the direction of Argenteau.

In his opinion the next ten minutes would decide whether or not they had even a remote chance of winning through to a place of comparative safety. He had made up his own mind what to do if he met any Germans. He would advise the Joos family and Maertz to hide in the cleft they had just descended, while he would take to the Meuse with Irene--provided, that is, she agreed to dare the long swim by night. Happily there was no need to adopt this counsel of despair. The fire, instead of assisting the flanking party on the western side, only delayed them. Sheer curiosity as to what was happening in the wood drew all eyes there rather than to the river bank, so the three men and three women passed along the tow-path unseen and unchallenged.

After a half-mile of rapid progress Dalroy judged that they were safe for the time, and allowed Madame Joos to take a much-needed rest. Though breathless and nearly spent, she, like the others, found an irresistible fascination in the scene lighted by the burning trees. The whole countryside was resplendent in crimson and silver, because the landscape was now steeped in moonshine, and the deep glow of the fire was most perceptible in the patches where ordinarily there would be black shadows. The Meuse resembled a river of blood, the movement of its sluggish current suggesting the onward roll of some fluid denser than water. Old Joos, whose tongue was seldom at rest, used that very simile.

"Those cursed Prussians have made Belgium a shambles," he added bitterly. "Look at our river. It isn't our dear, muddy Meuse. It's a stream in the infernal regions."

"Yes," gasped his wife. "And listen to those guns, Henri! They beat a sort of *roulade*, like drums in hell!"

This stout Walloon matron had never heard of Milton. Her ears were not tuned to the music of Parnassus. She would have gazed in mild wonder at one who told of "noises loud and ruinous,"

When Bellona storms
With all her battering engines, bent to
raze
Some capital city.

But in her distress of body and soul she had coined a phrase which two, at least, of her hearers would never forget. The siege of Liege did, indeed, roar and rumble with the din of a demoniac orchestra. Its clamour mounted to the firmament. It was as though the nether fiends, following Moloch's advice, were striving,

Arm'd with Hell flames and fury, all at once,
O'er Heaven's high towers to force resistless
way.

Dalroy himself yielded to the spell of the moment. Here was red war such as the soldier dreams of. His warrior spirit did not quail. He longed only for the hour, if ever the privilege was vouchsafed, when he would stand shoulder to shoulder with the men of his own race, and watch with unflinching eye those same dread tokens of a far-flung battle line.

Irene Beresford seemed to read his passing mood. "War has some elements of greatness," she said quietly. "The pity is that while it ennobles a few it degrades the multitude."

With a woman's intuition, she had gone straight to the heart of the problem propounded by Teutonism to an amazed world. The "degradation" of a whole people was already Germany's greatest and unforgivable offence. Few, even the most cynical, among the students of European politics could have believed that the Kaiser's troops would sully their country's repute by the inhuman excesses committed during those first days in Belgium. At the best, "war is hell"; but the great American leader who summed up its attributes in that pithy phrase thought only of the mangled men, the ruined homesteads, the bereaved families which mark its devastating trail. He had seen nothing of German "frightfulness." The men he led would have scorned to ravage peaceful villages, impale babies on bayonets and lances, set fire to houses containing old and bedridden people, murder hostages, rape every woman in a community, torture wounded enemies, and shoot harmless citizens in drunken sport. Yet the German armies did all these things before they were a fortnight in the field. They are not impeached on isolated counts, attributable, perhaps, to the criminal instincts of a small minority. They carried out bestial orgies in battalions and brigades acting under word of command. The jolly, good-humoured fellows who used to tramp in droves through the Swiss passes every summer, each man with a rucksack on his back, and beguiling the road in lusty song, seemed to cast aside all their cheerful camaraderie, all their exuberant kindness of nature, when garbed in the "field gray" livery of the State, and let loose among the pleasant vales and well-tilled fields of Flanders. That will ever remain Germany's gravest sin. When "the thunder of the captains and the shouting" is stilled, when time has healed the wounds of victor and vanquished, the memories of Vise, of Louvain, of Aershot, of nearly every town and hamlet in Belgium and Northern France once occupied by the savages from beyond the Rhine, will remain imperishable in their horror. German *Kultur* was a highly polished veneer. Exposed to the hot blast of war it peeled and shrivelled, leaving bare a diseased, worm-eaten structure, in which the honest fibre of humanity had been rotted by vile influences, both social and political.

Women seldom err when they sum up the characteristics of the men of a race, and the women of every other civilised nation were united in their dislike of German men long before the first week in August, 1914. Irene Beresford had yet to peer into the foulest depths of Teutonic "degradation"; but she had sensed it as a latent menace, and found in its stark records only the fulfilment of her vague fears.

Dalroy read into her words much that she had left unsaid. "At best it's a terrible necessity," he replied; "at worst it's what we have seen and heard of during the past twenty-four hours. I shall never understand why a people which prided itself on being above all else intellectual should imagine that atrocity is a means toward conquest. Such a theory is so untrue historically that Germany might have learnt its folly."

Joos grew uneasy when his English friends spoke in their own language. The suspicious temperament of the peasant is always doubtful of things outside its comprehension. He would have been astounded if told they were discussing the ethics of warfare.

"Well, have you two settled where we're to go?" he demanded gruffly. "In my opinion, the Meuse is the best place for the lot of us."

"In with you, then," agreed Dalroy, "but hand over your money to madame before you take the dip. Leontine and Jan may need it later to start the mill running."

Maertz laughed. The joke appealed strongly.

Madame Joos turned on her husband. "How you do chatter, Henri!" she said. "We all owe our lives to this gentleman, yet you aren't satisfied. The Meuse indeed! What will you be saying next?"

"How far is Argenteau?" put in Dalroy.

"That's it, where the house is on fire," said the miller, pointing.

"About a kilometre, I take it?"

"Something like that."

"Have you friends there?"

"Ay, scores, if they're alive."

"I hear no shooting in that direction. Moreover, an army corps is passing through. Let us go there. Something may turn up. We shall be safer among thousands of Germans than here."

They walked on. The Englishman's air of decision was a tonic in itself.

The fire on the promontory was now at its height, but a curve in the river hid the fugitives from possible observation. Dalroy was confident as to two favourable factors--the men of the marching column would not search far along the way

they had come, and their commander would recall them when the wood yielded no trace of its supposed occupants.

There had been fighting along the right bank of the Meuse during the previous day. German helmets, red and yellow Belgian caps, portions of accoutrements and broken weapons, littered the tow-path. But no bodies were in evidence. The river had claimed the dead and the wounded Belgians; the enemy's wounded had been transferred to Aix-la-Chapelle.

Nearing Argenteau they heard a feeble cry. They stopped, and listened. Again it came, clearly this time: "Elsa! Elsa!"

It was a man's voice, and the name was that of a German woman. Maertz searched in a thicket, and found a young German officer lying there. He was delirious, calling for the help of one powerless to aid.

He seemed to become aware of the presence of some human being. Perhaps his atrophied senses retained enough vitality to hear the passing footsteps.

"Elsa!" he moaned again, "give me water, for God's sake!"

"He's done for," reported Maertz to the waiting group. "He's covered with blood."

"For all that he may prove our salvation," said Dalroy quickly. "Sharp, now! Pitch our firearms and ammunition into the river. We must lift a gate off its hinges, and carry that fellow into Argenteau."

Joos grinned. He saw the astuteness of the scheme. A number of Belgian peasants bringing a wounded officer to the ambulance would probably be allowed to proceed scot-free. But he was loath to part with the precious fork on which the blood of "that fat Busch" was congealing. He thrust it into a ditch, and if ever he was able to retrieve it no more valued souvenir of the great war will adorn his dwelling. They possessed neither wine nor water; but a tiny rivulet flowing into the Meuse under a neighbouring bridge supplied the latter, and the wounded man gulped down great mouthfuls out of a *Pickel-haube*. It partially cleared his wits.

"Where am I?" he asked faintly.

Dalroy nodded to Joos, who answered, "On the Meuse bank, near Argenteau."

"Ah, I remember. Those cursed----" Some dim perception of his surroundings choked the word on his lips. "I was hit," he went on, "and crawled among the bushes."

"Was there fighting here this morning?"

"Yes. To-day is Tuesday, isn't it?"

"No, Wednesday midnight."

"*Ach, Gott!* That *verdammte* ambulance missed me! I have lain here two days!"

This time he swore without hesitation, since he was cursing his own men.

Jan came with a hurdle. "This is lighter than a gate, monsieur," he explained.

Dalroy nudged Joos sharply, and the miller took the cue. "Right," he said. "Now, you two, handle him carefully."

The German groaned piteously, and fainted.

"Oh, he's dead!" gasped Irene, when she saw his head drop.

"No, he will recover. But don't speak English.--As for you, Jan Maertz, no more of your 'monsieur' and 'madame.' I am Pierre, and this lady is Clementine. You understand?"

Dalroy spoke emphatically. Had the German retained his wits their project might be undone. In the event, the pain of movement on the hurdle revived the wounded man, and he asked for more water. They were then entering the outskirts of Argenteau, so they kept on. Soon they gained the main road, and Joos inquired of an officer the whereabouts of a field hospital. He directed them quite civilly, and offered to detail men to act as bearers. But the miller was now his own shrewd self again.

"No," he said bluntly, "I and my family have rescued your officer, and we want a safe conduct."

Off they went with their living passport. The field hospital was established in the village school, and here the patient was turned over to a surgeon. As it happened, the latter recognised a friend, and was grateful. He sent an orderly with them to find the major in charge of the lines of communication, and they had not been in Argenteau five minutes before

they were supplied with a *laisser passer*, in which they figured as Wilhelm Schultz, farmer, and wife, Clementine and Leontine, daughters, and the said daughters' fiancés, Pierre Dampier and Georges Lambert; residence Aubel; destination Andenne.

There was not the least hitch in the matter. The major was, in his way, courteous. Joos gave his own Christian name as "Guillaume," but the German laughed.

"You're a good citizen of the Fatherland now, my friend," he guffawed, "so we'll make it 'Wilhelm.' As for this pair of doves," and he eyed the two girls, "warn off any of our lads. Tell them that I, Major von Arnheim, said so. They're a warm lot where a pretty woman is concerned."

Von Arnheim was a stout man, a not uncommon quality in German majors. Perhaps he wondered why Joos looked fixedly at the pit of his stomach.

But a motor cyclist dashed up with a despatch, and he forgot all about "Schultz" and his family. As it happened, he was a man of some ability, and the hopeless block at Aix caused by the stubborn defence of Liege had brought about the summary dismissal of a General by the wrathful Kaiser. Hence, the Argenteau major was promoted and recalled to the base. His next in rank, summoned to the post an hour later, knew nothing of the *laisser passer* granted to a party which closely resembled the much-wanted miller of Vise and his companions; he read an "urgent general order" for their arrest without the least suspicion that they had slipped through the net in that very place.

Meanwhile these things were in the lap of the gods. For the moment, the six people were free, and actually under German protection.

CHAPTER IX

AN EXPOSITION OF GERMAN METHODS

Three large and powerful automobiles stood at rest in the tiny square of Argenteau. Nearly every little town in Belgium and France possesses its *place*, the hub of social and business life, the centre where roads converge and markets are held. In the roadway, near the cars, were several officers, deep in conversation.

"Look," murmured Irene to Dalroy, "the high-shouldered, broadly-built man, facing this way, is General von Emmich!"

By this time Dalroy was acquainted with the name of the German commander-in-chief. He found a fleeting interest in watching him now, while Joos and the others loitered irresolutely on the pavement outside the improvised office of the *Kommandantur*.

Though the moon was high and clear, there was no other light, and the diffused brilliance of the "orbed maiden, with white fire laden," is not favourable to close observation. But Von Emmich's bearing and gestures were significant. He put an abrupt end to the conclave by an emphatic sweep of his right arm, and the larger number of his staff disposed themselves in two of the cars, in which the chauffeurs and armed escorts were already seated. They made off in the direction of Aix. It was easy to guess their errand. More cannon, more cannon-fodder!

The generalissimo himself remained apart from the colonel and captain who apparently formed his personal suite. He strode to and fro, evidently in deep thought. Once he halted quite close to the little company of peasants, and Dalroy believed he saw tears in his eyes, tears instantly brushed away by an angry hand. Whatever the cause of this emotion, the General quickly mastered a momentary weakness. Indeed, that spasmodic yielding seemed to have braced his will to a fixed purpose, because he walked to the waiting car, wrote something by the light of an electric torch, and said to the younger of the staff officers, "Take that to the field telegraph. It must have priority."

Somehow, Dalroy sensed the actual text of the message. Von Emmich was making the humiliating admission that Liege, far from having fallen, as he had announced during the first hours of the advance, was still an immovable barrier against a living torrent of men. So the heart of this middle-aged warrior, whose repute was good when measured by the Prussian standard, had not melted because of the misery and desolation he and his armed ruffians had brought into one of the most peaceful, industrious, and law-abiding communities in the world. His tears flowed because of failure, not of regret. His withers were wrung by mortification, not pity. He would have waded knee-deep in the blood of Belgium if only he could have gained his ends and substantiated by literal fact that first vainglorious telegram to the War Lord of Potsdam. Now he had to ask for time, reinforcements, siege guns, while the clock ticked inexorably, and England, France, and Russia were mobilising. Perhaps it was in that hour that his morbid thoughts first turned to a suicide's death as the only reparation for what he conceived to be a personal blunder. Yet his generalship was marked by no grave strategical fault. If aught erred, it was the German State machine, which counted only on mankind having a body and a brain, but denied it a soul.

Von Emmich's troubles were no concern of Dalroy's, save in their reaction on his own difficulties. He was conscious of a certain surprise that Irene Beresford should recognise one of the leaders of modern Germany so promptly; but this feeling, in its turn, yielded to the vital things of the moment. "Let us be moving," he said quietly, and led the way with Joos.

"Why did you give Andenne as your destination?" he inquired.

"My wife's cousin lives there, monsieur. She is married to a man named Alphonse Stauwaert. I *had* to say something. I remembered Madame Stauwaert in the nick of time."

"But Andenne lies beyond Liege. To get there we shall have to traverse the whole German line, and pass some of the outlying forts, which is impossible."

"We must go somewhere."

"True. But why not make for a place that is attainable? Heaven--or Purgatory, at any rate--is far more easily reached to-night than Andenne."

"I didn't say we were going there at once," snapped the miller. "It's more than twenty-five kilometres from here, and is far enough away to be safe when I'm asked where I am bound for. My wife couldn't walk it to-morrow, let alone to-night."

"Andenne lies down the valley of the Meuse too, doesn't it?"

"Ay."

"Well, isn't that simply falling off a rock into a whirlpool? The Germans must pass that way to France, and it is France they are aiming at, not Belgium."

"They talk mostly about England," said Joos sapiently.

"Yes, because they fear her. But let us avoid politics, my friend. Our present problem is how and where to bestow these women for the night. After that, the sooner we three men leave them the better. I, at least, must go. I may be detected any minute, and then--God help you others!"

"*Saperlotte!* That isn't the way you English are treating us. No, monsieur, we sink or swim together."

That ready disavowal of any clash of interests was cheering. The little man's heart was sound, though his temper might be short. Good faith, however, was not such a prime essential now as good judgment, and Dalroy halted again at a corner of the square. To stay in Argenteau was madness. But--there were three roads. One led to Vise, one to Liege, and one to the German frontier! The first two were closed hopelessly. The third, open in a sense, was fantastic when regarded as a possible avenue of escape. Yet that third road offered the only path toward comparative security and rest.

"I wish you wouldn't look so dejected," whispered Irene, peeping up into Dalroy's downcast face with the winsome smile which had so taken his fancy during the long journey from Berlin. "I've been counting our gains and losses. Surely the balance is heavy on our side. We--you, that is--have defeated the whole German army. We've lost some sleep and some clothes, but have secured a safe-conduct from our enemies, after knocking a good many of them on the head. Some men, I know, look miserable when most successful; but I don't put you in that category."

She was careful to talk German, not that there was much chance of being actually overheard, but to prevent the sibilant accents of English speech reaching suspicious ears. Britons who have no language but their own are often surprised when abroad at hearing children mimicking them by hissing. Curiously enough, such is the effect of our island tongue on foreign ears. Monosyllables like "yes," "this," "it's," and scores of others in constant use, no less than the almost invariable plural form of nouns, lead to the illusion, which Irene was aware of, and guarded against.

Yet, despite the uncouth, harsh-sounding words on her lips, and the coarse Flemish garments she wore, she was adorably English. Leontine Joos was a pretty girl; but, in true feminine parlance, "lumpy." Some three inches less in height than her "sister," she probably weighed a stone more. Leontine trudged when she walked, Irene moved with a grace which not even a pair of clumsy sabots could hide. Luckily they were alike in one important particular. Their faces and hands were soiled, their hair untidy, and the passage through the wood had scratched foreheads and cheeks until the skin was broken, and little patches of congealed blood disfigured them.

"I may look more dejected than I feel," Dalroy reassured her. "I'm playing a part, remember. I've kept my head down and my knees bent until my joints ache."

"Oh, is that it?" she cooed, with a relieved air. How could he know then that the sabots were chafing her ankles until the pain had become well-nigh unbearable. If she could have gratified her own wishes she would have crept to the nearest hedge and flung herself down in utter weariness.

Joos, having pondered the Englishman's views on Andenne as an unattainable refuge, scratched his head perplexedly. "I think we had better go toward Herve," he said at last. "This is the road," and he pointed to the left. "On the way we can branch off to a farm I know of, if it happens to be clear of soldiers."

Any goal was preferable to none. They entered the eastward-bound road, but had not advanced twenty yards along it before the way was blocked by a mass of commissariat wagons and scores of Uhlans standing by their horses.

Two officers, heedless who heard, were wrangling loudly.

"There is nothing else for it, *Herr Hauptmann*," said one. "It doesn't matter who is actually to blame. You have taken the wrong road, and must turn back. Every yard farther in this direction puts you deeper in the mire."

"But I was misdirected as far away as Bleyberg," protested the other. "Some never-to-be-forgotten hound of hell told me that this was the Verviers road. *Gott in himmel!* and I *must* be there by dawn!"

Dalroy was gazing at the wagons. They seemed oddly familiar. The painted legend on the tarpaulins placed the matter beyond doubt. These were the very vehicles he had seen in the station-yard at Aix-la-Chapelle!

At this crisis Jan Maertz's sluggish brain evolved a really clever notion. The Germans wanted a guide, and who so well

qualified for the post as a carter to whom each turn and twist in every road in the province was familiar? Without consulting any one, he pushed forward. "Pardon, *Herr General*," he said in his offhand way. "Give me and my friends a lift, and I'll have you and your wagons in Verviers in three hours."

Brutality is so engrained in the Prussian that an offer which a man of another race would have accepted civilly was treated almost as an insult by the angry leader of the convoy.

"You'll guide me with the point of a lance close to your liver, you Belgian swine-dog," was the ungracious answer.

"Not me!" retorted Maertz. "Here, papa!" he cried to Joos, "show this gentleman your paper. He can't go about sticking people as he likes, even in war-time."

Joos went forward. Moved by contemptuous curiosity, the two officers examined the miller's *laisser passer* by the light of an electric torch.

The commissariat officer changed his tone when he saw the signature. The virtue of military obedience becomes a grovelling servitude in the German army, and a man who was ready to act with the utmost unfairness if left to his own instincts grew almost courteous at sight of the communications officer's name. "Your case is different," he admitted grudgingly. "Is this your party? The old man is Herr Schultz, I suppose. Which are you?"

"I'm Georges Lambert, *Herr General*."

"And what do you want?"

"We're all going to Andenne. It's on the paper. This infernal fighting has smashed up our place at Aubel, and the women are footsore and frightened. So is papa. Put them in a wagon. Dampier and I can leg it."

The Prussian was becoming more civil each moment. He realised, too, that this gruff fellow who moved about the country under such powerful protection was a veritable godsend to him and his tired men.

"No, no," he cried, grown suddenly complaisant, "we can do better than that. I'll dump a few trusses of hay, and put you all in the same wagon, which can then take the lead."

Thus, by a mere turn of fortune's wheel, the enemy was changed into a friend, and a dangerous road made safe and comfort-giving. Jan sat in front with the driver, and cracked jokes with him, while the others nestled into a load of sweet-smelling hay.

"For the first time in my life," whispered Dalroy to Irene, "I understand the precise significance of Samson's riddle about the honey extracted from the lion's mouth. Our heavy-witted Jan has saved the situation. We enter Verviers in triumph, and reach the left of the German lines. Just another slice of luck, and we cross the Meuse at Andenne or elsewhere--it doesn't matter where."

Irene had kicked off those cruel sabots. She bit her lip in the darkness to stifle a sob before answering coolly, "Shall we be clear of the Germans then?"

"I--hope so. Their armies dare not advance so long as we hear those guns."

The girl could not reason in the soldier's way. She thought she would "hear those guns" during the rest of her life. Never had she dreamed of anything so horrific as that drumming of cannon. She believed, as women do, that every shell tore hundreds of human beings limb from limb. In silent revolt against the frenzy which seemed to possess the world, she closed her eyes and buried her head in the hay; and once again exhausted nature was its own best healer. When the convoy rumbled into Verviers in the early morning, having followed a by-road through Julemont and Herve, Irene had to be awaked out of deep sleep. Yet the boom of the guns continued! Liege was still holding out, a paranoiac despot was frantic with wrath, and civilised Europe had yet another day to prepare for the caging of the beast which threatened its very existence.

The leader of the convoy was greeted by a furious staff officer in such terms that Dalroy judged it expedient he and the others should slip away quietly. This they contrived to do. Maertz recommended an inn in a side street, where they would be welcomed if accommodation were available. And it was. There were no troops billeted in Verviers. Every available man was being hurried to the front. Dalroy watched two infantry regiments passing while Maertz and Joos were securing rooms. Though the soldiers were sturdy fellows, and they could not have made an excessively long march, many of them limped badly, and only maintained their places in the ranks by force of an iron discipline. He was puzzled to account for their jaded aspect. An hour later, while lying awake in a fairly comfortable bed, and trying to frame some definite programme for the day which had already dawned, he solved the mystery. The soldiers were wearing new boots! Germany had *everything* ready for her millions. He learnt subsequently that when the German

armies entered the field they were followed by ammunition trains carrying four thousand million rounds of small-arm cartridges alone!

He met Joos and Maertz at *dejeuner*, a rough but satisfying meal, and was faced by the disquieting fact that neither Madame Joos nor Irene could leave the bedroom which they shared with Leontine. Madame was done up; *cette course l'a excède*, her husband put it; while mademoiselle's ankles were swollen and painful.

These misfortunes were, perhaps, a blessing in disguise. An enforced rest was better than no rest at all, and the constant vigil by night and day was telling even on the apple-cheeked Leontine.

Joos wanted to wander about the town and pick up news, but Dalroy dissuaded him. The woman who kept the little *auberge* was thoroughly trustworthy, and hardly another soul in Verviers knew of their presence in the town. News they could do without, whereas recognition might be fatal.

Irene put in an appearance late in the day. She had borrowed a pair of slippers, and the landlady had promised to buy her a pair of strong boots. Sabots she would never wear again, she vowed. They might be comfortable and watertight when one was accustomed to them, but life was too strenuous in Belgium just then to permit of experiments in footgear.

When night fell Joos could not be kept in. It was understood that the *Kommandantur* had ordered all inhabitants to remain indoors after nine o'clock, so the old man had hardly an hour at his disposal for what he called a *petit tour*. But he was not long absent. He had encountered a friend, a cure whose church near Aubel had been blown to atoms by German artillery during a frontier fight on the Monday afternoon.

This gentleman, a venerable ecclesiastic, discovered Dalroy's nationality after five minutes' chat. He had in his possession a copy of a proclamation issued by Von Emmich. It began: "I regret very much to find that German troops are compelled to cross the frontier of Belgium. They are constrained to do so by sheer necessity, the neutrality of Belgium having already been violated by French officers, who, in disguise, have passed through Belgian territory in an automobile in order to penetrate Germany."

The cure, whose name was Garnier, laughed sarcastically at the childishness of the pretext put forward by the commander-in-chief of the Army of the Meuse. "Was war waged for such a flimsy reason ever before in the history of the world?" he said. "What fire-eaters these 'disguised' French officers must have been! Imagine the hardihood of the braves who would 'penetrate' mighty Germany in one automobile! This silly lie bears the date of 4th August, yet my beloved church was then in ruins, and a large part of the village in flames!"

"Verviers seems to have escaped punishment. How do you account for it?" inquired Dalroy.

"It seems to be a deliberate policy on the part of the Germans to spare one town and destroy another. Both serve as examples, the one as typical of the excellent treatment meted out to those communities which welcome the invaders, the other as a warning of the fate attending resistance. Both instances are absolutely untrue. Every burgomaster in Belgium has issued notices calling on non-combatants to avoid hostile acts, and Verviers is exactly on a par with the other unfortified towns in this part of the country. The truth is, monsieur, that the Germans are furious because of the delay our gallant soldiers have imposed on them. It is bearing fruit too. I hear that England has already landed an army at Ostend."

Dalroy shook his head. "I wish I might credit that," he said sadly. "I am a soldier, monsieur, and you may take it from me that such a feat is quite impossible in the time. We might send twenty or thirty thousand men by the end of this week, and another similar contingent by the end of next week. But months must elapse before we can put in the field an army big enough to make headway against the swarms of Germans I have seen with my own eyes."

"Months!" gasped the cure. "Then what will become of my unhappy country? Even to-day we are living on hope. Liege still holds out, and the people are saying, 'The English are coming, all will be well!' A man was shot to-day in this very town for making that statement."

"He must have been a fool to voice his views in the presence of German troops."

The priest spread wide his hands in sorrowful gesture. "You don't understand," he said. "Belgium is overrun with spies. It is positively dangerous to utter an opinion in any mixed company. One or two of the bystanders will certainly be in the pay of the enemy."

Though the cure was now on surer ground than when he spoke of a British army on Belgian soil, Dalroy egged him on to talk. "My chief difficulty is to know how the money was raised to support all these agencies," he said. "Consider, monsieur. Germany maintains an enormous army. She has a fleet second only to that of Britain. She finances her traders and subsidises her merchant ships as no other nation does. How is it credible that she should also find means to keep

up a secret service which must have cost millions sterling a year?"

"Yes, you are certainly English," said the priest, with a sad smile. "You don't begin to estimate the peculiarities of the German character. We Belgians, living, so to speak, within arm's-length of Germany, have long seen the danger, and feared it. Every German is taught that the world is his for the taking. Every German is encouraged in the belief that the national virtue of organised effort is the one and only means of commanding success. Thus, the State is everything, the individual nothing. But the State rewards the individual for services rendered. The German dotes on titles and decorations, and what easier way of earning both than to supply information deemed valuable by the various State departments? Plenty of wealthy Germans in Belgium paid their own spies, and used the knowledge so gained for their private ends as well as for the benefit of the State. During the past twenty years the whole German race has become a most efficient secret society, its members being banded together for their common good, and leagued against the rest of the world. The German never loses his nationality, no matter how long he may dwell in a foreign country. My own church claims to be Catholic and universal, yet I would not trust a German colleague in any matter where the interests of his country were at stake. The Germans are a race apart, and believe themselves superior to all others. There was a time, in my youth, when Prussia was distinct from Saxony, or Wurtemberg, or Bavaria. That feeling is dead. The present Emperor has welded his people into one tremendous machine, partly by playing upon their vanity, partly by banging the German drum during his travels, but mainly by dangling before their eyes the reward that men have always found irresistible--the spoliation of other lands, the prospect of sudden enrichment. Every soldier marching past this house at the present moment hopes to rob Belgium and France. And now England is added to the enticing list of well-stocked properties that may be lawfully burgled. I am no prophet, monsieur. I am only an old man who has watched the upspringing of a new and terrible force in European politics. I may live an hour or ten years; but if God spares me for the latter period I shall see Germany either laid in the dust by an enraged world or dominating the earth by brutal conquest."

But for the outbreak of the war Dalroy would have passed the "interpreter" test in German some few weeks later. He had spent his "language leave" in Berlin, and was necessarily familiar with German thought and literature. Often had he smiled at Teutonic boastfulness. Now the simple words of an aged village cure had given a far-reaching and sinister meaning to much that had seemed the mere froth of a vigorous race fermenting in successful trade.

"Do you believe that the German colony in England pursues the same methods?" he asked, and his heart sank as he recalled the wealth and social standing of the horde of Germans in the British Isles.

"Can the leopard change his spots?" quoted the other. "A year ago one of my friends, a maker of automobiles, thought I needed a holiday. He took me to England. God has been good to Britain, monsieur! He has given you riches and power. But you are grown careless. I stayed in five big hotels, two in London and three in the provinces. They were all run by Germans. I made inquiries, thinking I might benefit some of my village lads; but the German managers would employ none save German waiters, German cooks, German reception clerks. Your hall porters were Germans. You never cared to reflect, I suppose, that hotels are the main arteries of a country's life. But the canker did not end there. Your mills and collieries were installing German plant under German supervisors. Your banks----"

The speaker paused dramatically.

"But our God is not a German God!" he cried, and his sunken eyes seemed to shoot fire. "Last night, listening to the guns that were murdering Belgium, I asked myself, why does Heaven permit this crime? And the answer came swiftly: German influences were poisoning the world. They had to be eradicated, or mankind would sink into the bottomless pit. So God has sent this war. Be of good heart. Remember the words of Saint Paul: 'So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.'"

The cure's voice had unconsciously attained the pulpit pitch. The clear, incisive accents reached other ears.

The landlady crept in, with a face of scare. "Monsieur!" she whispered, "the doors are wide open. It is an order!"

Dalroy went rapidly into the street. No loiterer was visible. Not even a crowd of five persons might gather to watch the military pageant; it was *verboten*. And ever the dim shapes flitted by in the night--horse, foot, and artillery, automobiles, ambulance and transport wagons. There seemed no end to this flux of gray-green gnomes. The air was tremulous with the unceasing hammer-strokes of heavy guns on the anvil of Liege. Staid old Europe might be dissolving even then in a cloud of high-explosive gas.

The scheme of things was all awry. One Englishman gave up the riddle. He turned on his heel, and lit one of the cheap cigars purchased in Aix-la-Chapelle less than forty-eight hours ago!

CHAPTER X

ANDENNE

Madame Joos was old for her fifty years, and heavy withal. Hers was not the finer quality of human clay which hardens in the fire of adversity. She became ill, almost seriously ill, and had to be nursed back into good health again during nine long days. And long these days were, the longest Dalroy had ever known. To a man of his temperament, enforced inactivity was anathema in any conditions; a gnawing doubt that he was not justified in remaining in Verviers at all did not improve matters. Monsieur Garnier, the cure, was a frequent though unobtrusive visitor. He doctored the invalid, and brought scraps of accurate information which filtered through the far-flung screen of Uhlans and the dense lines of German infantry and guns. Thus the fugitives knew when and where the British Expeditionary Force actually landed on the Continent. They heard of the gradual sapping of the defences of Liege, until Fort Loncin fell, and, with it, as events were to prove, the shield which had protected Belgium for nearly a fortnight. The respite did not avail King Albert and his heroic people in so far as the occupation and ravaging of their beautiful country was concerned; but calm-eyed historians in years to come will appraise at its true value the breathing-space, slight though it was, thus secured for France and England.

Dalroy found it extraordinarily difficult to sift the true from the false in the crop of conflicting rumours. In the first instance, German legends had to be discounted. From the outset of the campaign the Kaiser's armies were steadily regaled with accounts of phenomenal successes *elsewhere*. Thus, when four army corps, commanded now by Von Kluck, were nearly demoralised by the steadfast valour of General Leman and his stalwarts, the men were rallied by being told that the Crown Prince was smashing his way to Paris through Nancy and Verdun. Prodigies were being performed in Poland and the North Sea, and London was burnt by Zeppelins almost daily. Nor did Belgian imagination lag far behind in this contest of unveracity. British and French troops were marching to the Meuse by a dozen roads; the French raid into Alsace was magnified into a great military feat; the British fleet had squelched the German navy by sinking nineteen battleships; the Kaiser, haggard and blear-eyed, was alternately degrading and shooting Generals and issuing flamboyant proclamations. Finally, Russia was flattening out East Prussia and Galicia with the slow crunching of a steam roller.

Out of this maelstrom of "news" a level-headed soldier might, and did, extract certain hard facts. The landing of Sir John French's force took place exactly at the time and place and in the numbers Dalroy himself had estimated. To throw a small army into Flanders would have been folly. Obviously, the British must join hands with the French before offering battle. For the rest--though he went out very little, and alone, as being less risky--he recognised the hour when the German machine recovered its momentum after the first unexpected collapse. He saw order replace chaos. He watched the dragon crawling ever onward, and understood then that no act of man could save Belgium. Verviers was the best possible site for an observer who knew how to use his eyes. He assumed that what was occurring there was going on with equal precision in Luxembourg and along the line of the Vosges Mountains.

Gradually, too, he reconciled his conscience to these days of waiting. He believed now that his services would be immensely more useful to the British commander-in-chief in the field if he could cross the French frontier rather than reach London and the War Office by way of the Belgian coast. This decision lightened his heart. He was beginning to fear that the welfare of Irene Beresford was conflicting with duty. It was cheering to feel convinced that the odds and ends of information picked up in Verviers might prove of inestimable value to the allied cause. For instance, Liege was being laid low by eleven-inch howitzers, but he had seen seventeen-inch howitzers, each in three parts, each part drawn by forty horses or a dozen traction-engines, moving slowly toward the south-west. There lay Namur and France. No need to doubt now where the chief theatre of the war would find its habitat. The German staff had blundered in its initial strategy, but the defect was being repaired. All that had gone before was a mere prelude to the grim business which would be transacted beyond the Meuse.

During that period of quiescence, certain minor and personal elements affecting the future passed from a nebulous stage to a state of quasi-acceptance. There was not, there could not be, any pronounced love-making between two people so situated as Dalroy and Irene Beresford. But eyes can exchange messages which the lips dare not utter, and these two began to realise that they were designed the one for the other by a wise Providence. As that is precisely the right sentiment of young folk in love, romance thrived finely in Madame Beranger's little *auberge* in the Rue de Nivers at Verviers. A tender glance, a touch of the hand, a lighting of a troubled face when the dear one appears--these things are excellent substitutes for the spoken word.

Irene was "Irene" to Dalroy ever since that night in the wood at Argenteau, and the girl herself accepted the development with the deftness which is every woman's legacy from Mother Eve.

"If you make free with my Christian name I must retort by using yours," she said one day on coming down to breakfast. "So, 'Good-morning, Arthur.' Where did you get that hat?"

The hat in question was a purchase, a wide-brimmed felt such as is common in Flanders. Its Apache slouch, in conjunction with Jan Maertz's oldest clothes and a week's stubble of beard, made Dalroy quite villainous-looking. Except in the details of height and physique, it would, indeed, be difficult for any stranger to associate this loose-limbed Belgian labourer with the well-groomed cavalry officer who entered the Friedrich Strasse Station in Berlin on the night of 3rd August. That was as it should be, though the alteration was none the less displeasing to its victim. Irene adopted a huge sun-bonnet, and compromised as to boots by wearing *sabots en cuir*, or clogs.

Singularly enough, white-haired Monsieur Garnier nearly brought matters to a climax as between these two.

On the Wednesday evening, when the last forts of Liege were crumbling, Madame Joos was reported convalescent and asleep, so both girls came to the little *salon* for a supper of stewed veal.

Naturally the war was discussed first; but the priest was learning to agree with his English friend about its main features. In sheer dismay at the black outlook before his country, he suddenly turned the talk into a more intimate channel.

"What plans have you youngsters made?" he asked. "Monsieur Joos and I can only look back through the years. The places we know and love are abodes of ghosts. The milestones are tombstones. We can surely count more friends dead than living. For you it is different. The world will go on, war or no war; but Verviers will not become your residence, I take it."

"Jan and I mean to join our respective armies as soon as Monsieur Joos and the ladies are taken care of, and that means, I suppose, safely lodged in England," said Dalroy.

"If Leontine likes to marry me first, I'm agreeable," put in Maertz promptly.

It was a naive confession, and every one laughed except Joos.

"Leontine marries neither you nor any other hulking loafer while there is one German hoof left in Belgium," vowed the little man warmly.

The priest smiled. He knew where the shoe pinched. Maertz, if no loafer, was not what is vulgarly described as "a good catch."

"I've lost my parish," he said jestingly, "and, being an inveterate match-maker, am on the *qui vive* for a job. But if father says 'No' we must wait till mother has a word. Now for the other pair.--What of you?"

Irene blushed scarlet, and dropped her serviette; Dalroy, though flabbergasted, happily hit on a way out.

"I'm surprised at you, monsieur!" he cried. "Look at mademoiselle, and then run your eye over me. Did ever pretty maid wed such a scarecrow?"

"I must refer that point to mademoiselle," retorted the priest. "I don't think either of you would choose a book by the cover."

"Ah. At last I know the worst," laughed Dalroy. "Who would believe that I once posed as the Discobulus in a *tableau vivant*?"

"What's that?" demanded Joos.

Dalroy hesitated. Neither his French nor German was equal to the translation.

"A quoit-thrower," suggested Irene.

"Quoits!" sniffed the miller. "I'll take you on at that game any day you like for twenty francs every ringer."

It was a safe offer. Old Joos was a noted player. He gave details of his prowess. Dalroy, though modestly declining a contest, led him on, and steered the conversation clear of rocks.

Thenceforth, for a whole day, Irene's manner stiffened perceptibly, and Dalroy was miserable. Inexperienced in the ways of the sex, he little dreamed that Irene felt she had been literally thrown at his head.

But graver issues soon dispersed that small cloud. On Saturday, 15th August, the thunder of the guns lessened and died down, being replaced by the far more distant and fitful barking of field batteries. But the rumble on the cobbles of

the main road continued. What need to ask what had happened? Around Liege lay the silence of death.

Late that afternoon a woman brought a note to Dalroy. It bore no address. She merely handed it to him, and hurried off, with the furtive air of one afraid of being asked for an explanation. It ran:

"DEAR FRIEND,--Save yourself and the others. Lose not a moment. I have seen a handbill. A big reward is offered. My advice is: go west separately. The messenger I employ is a Christian, but I doubt the faith of many. May God guard you! I shall accompany you in my thoughts and prayers.--E. G."

Dalroy found Joos instantly.

"What is our cure's baptismal name?" he inquired.

"Edouard, monsieur."

"He has sent us marching orders. Read that!"

The miller's wizened face blanched. He had counted on remaining in Verviers till the war was over. At that date no self-respecting Belgian could bring himself to believe that the fighting would continue into the winter. The first comparative successes of the small Belgian army, combined with the meteoric French advance into Alsace, seemed to assure speedy victory by the Allies. He swore roundly, but decided to follow the priest's bidding in every respect save one.

"We can't split up," he declared. "We are all named in the *laissez passer*. You understand what dull pigs these Germans are. They'll count heads. If one is missing, or there's one too many, they'll inquire about it for a week."

Sound common-sense and no small knowledge of Teuton character lurked in the old man's comment. Monsieur Garnier, of course, had not been told why this queerly assorted group clung together, nor was he aware of the exact cause of their flight from Vise. Probably the handbill he mentioned was explicit in names and descriptions. At any rate, he must have the strongest reasons for supposing that Verviers no longer provided a safe retreat.

Jan Maertz was summoned. He made a good suggestion. The direct road to Andenne, via Liege and Huy, was impracticable, being crowded with troops and transports. Why not use the country lanes from Pepinster through Louveigne, Hamoir, and Maffe? It was a hilly country, and probably clear of soldiers. He would buy a dog-team, and thus save Madame Joos the fatigue of walking.

Dalroy agreed at once. Even though Irene still insisted on sharing his effort to cross the German lines, two routes opened from Andenne, one to Brussels and the west, the other to Dinant and the south. Moreover, he counted on the Allies occupying the Mons-Charleroi-Namur terrain, and one night's march from Andenne, with Maertz as guide, should bring the three of them through, as the Joos family, in all likelihood, would elect to remain with their relatives.

In a word, the orderliness of Verviers had already relegated the excesses of Vise to the obscurity of an evil but half-forgotten dream. The horrors of Louvain, of Malines, of the whole Belgian valley of the Meuse, had yet to come. An officer of the British army simply could not allow his mind to conceive the purposeful criminality of German methods. Little did he imagine that, on the very day the fugitives set out for Andenne, Vise was completely sacked and burned by command of the German authorities. And why? Not because of any fault committed by the unfortunate inhabitants, who had suffered so much at the outbreak of hostilities. This second avalanche was let loose out of sheer spite. By this time the enemy was commencing to estimate the fearful toll which the Belgian army had taken of the Uhlans who provided the famous "cavalry screen." Over and over again the vaunted light horsemen of Germany were ambuscaded and cut up or captured. They proved to be extraordinarily poor fighters when in small numbers, but naturally those who got away made a fine tale of the dangers they had escaped. These constant defeats stung the pride of the headquarters staff, and "frightfulness" was prescribed as the remedy. The fact cannot be disputed. The invaders' earliest offences might be explained, if not condoned, as the deeds of men brutalised by drink, but the wholesale ravaging of communities by regiments and brigades was the outcome of a deliberate policy of reprisal. The Hun argument was convincing--to the Hun intellect. How dared these puny Belgians fight for their hearths and homes? It was their place to grovel at the feet of the conqueror. If any worn-out notions of honour and manhood and the sanctity of woman inspired them to take the field, they must be taught wisdom by being ground beneath the heel of the Prussian jack-boot.

If the dead mouths of five thousand murdered Belgians did not bear testimony against these disciplined marauders, the mere journey of the little party of men and women who set out from Verviers that Saturday afternoon would itself dispose of any attempt to cloak the high-placed offenders.

They arranged a rendezvous at Pepinster. Dalroy went alone. He insisted that this was advisable. Maertz brought

Madame Joos and Irene. Joos, having been besought to curb his tongue, convoyed Leontine. Until Pepinster was reached, they took the main road, with its river of troops. None gave them heed. Not a man addressed an uncivil word to them. The soldiers were cheery and well-behaved.

They halted that night at Louveigne, which was absolutely unscathed. Next day they passed through Hamoir and Maffe, and the peasants were gathering the harvest!

Huy and Andenne, a villager told them, were occupied by the Germans, but all was quiet. They pushed on, turning north-west from Maffe, and descended into the Meuse valley about six o'clock in the evening. It was ominous that the bridge was destroyed and a cluster of houses burning in Seilles, a town on the opposite, or left, bank of the river. But Andenne itself, a peaceful and industrious place, seemed to be undisturbed. While passing a farm known as Dermine they fell in with a priest and a few Belgians who were carrying a mortally wounded Prussian officer on a stretcher.

Then, to his real chagrin, Dalroy heard that the Belgian outposts had been driven south and west only that morning. One day less in Verviers, and he and the others would have been out of their present difficulties. However, he made the best of it. Surely they could either cross the Meuse or reach Namur next day; while the fact that some local residents were attending to the injured officer would supply the fugitives with an excellent safe-conduct into Andenne, just as a similar incident had been their salvation at Argenteau.

The stretcher was taken into the villa of a well-to-do resident; and, it being still broad daylight, Joos asked to be directed to the house of Monsieur Alphonse Stauwaert. The miller was acquainted with the topography of the town, but the Stauwaert family had moved recently to a new abode.

"Barely two hundred metres, *tout droit*," he was told.

They had gone part of the way when a troop of Uhlans came at the gallop along the Namur road. The soldiers advanced in a pack, and were evidently in a hurry. Madame Joos was seated in the low-built, flat cart, drawn by two strong dogs, which had brought her from Verviers. Maertz was leading the animals. The other four were disposed on both sides of the cart. At the moment, no other person was nearer than some thirty yards ahead. Three men were standing there in the roadway, and they moved closer to the houses on the left. Maertz, too, pulled his team on to the pavement on the same side.

The Uhlans came on. Suddenly, without the slightest provocation, their leader swerved his horse and cut down one of the men, who dropped with a shriek of mingled fear and agony.

Retribution came swiftly, because the charger slipped on some rounded cobbles, crossed its forelegs, and turned a complete somersault. The rider, a burly non-commissioned officer, pitched clean on his head, and either fractured his skull or broke his neck, perhaps achieving both laudable results, while his blood-stained sabre clattered on the stones at Dalroy's feet. The nearest Uhlans drove their lances through the other two civilians, who were already running for their lives. In order to avoid the plunging horse and their fallen leader, the two ruffians reined on to the pavement. They swung their weapons, evidently meaning to transfix some of the six people clustered around the cart. The women screamed shrilly. Leontine cowered near the wall; Joos, valiant soul in an aged body, put himself in front of his wife; Maertz, hauling at the dogs, tried to convert the vehicle into a shield for Leontine; while Dalroy, conscious that Irene was close behind, picked up the *unteroffizier's* sword.

Much to the surprise of the trooper, who selected this tall peasant as an easy prey, he parried the lance-thrust in such wise that the blade entered the horse's off foreleg and brought the animal down. At the same instant Maertz ducked, and dodged a wild lunge, which missed because the Uhlan was trying to avoid crashing into the cart. But the vengeful steel found another victim. By mischance it transfixed Madame Joos, while the horse's shoulder caught Dalroy a glancing blow in the back and sent him sprawling.

Some of the troopers, seeing two of their men prone, were pulling up when a gruff voice cried, "*Achtung!* We'll clear out these swine later!"

Irene, who saw all that had passed with an extraordinary vividness, was the only one who understood why the order which undoubtedly saved five lives was given. A stout staff officer, wearing a blue uniform with red facings, rode with the Uhlans, and she was certain that he was in a state of abject terror. His funk was probably explained by an irregular volley lower down the street, though, in the event, the shooting proved to be that of his own men. Two miles away, at Solayn, these same Uhlans had been badly bitten by a Belgian patrol, and the fat man, prospecting the Namur road with a cavalry escort, wanted no more unpleasant surprises that evening. Ostensibly, of course, he was anxious to report to a brigade headquarters at Huy. At any rate, the Uhlans swept on.

They were gone when Dalroy regained his feet. A riderless horse was clattering after them; another with a broken leg

was vainly trying to rise. Close at hand lay two Uhlans, one dead and one insensible. Joos and Leontine were bending over the dying woman in the cart, making frantic efforts to stanch the blood welling forth from mouth and breast. The lance had pierced her lungs, but she was conscious for a minute or so, and actually smiled the farewell she could not utter.

Maertz was swearing horribly, with the incoherence of a man just aroused from drunken sleep. Irene moved a few steps to meet Dalroy. Her face was marble white, her eyes strangely dilated.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

"No. And you?"

"Untouched, thanks to you. But those brutes have killed poor Madame Joos!"

The wounded Uhlan was stretched between them. He stirred convulsively, and groaned. Dalroy looked at the sword which he still held. He resisted a great temptation, and sprang over the prostrate body. He was about to say something when a ghastly object staggered past. It was the man who received the sabre-cut, which had gashed his shoulder deeply.

"*Oh, mon Dieu!*" he screamed. "*Oh, mon Dieu!*"

He may have been making for some burrow. They never knew. He wailed that frenzied appeal as he shambled on--always the same words. He could think of nothing else but the last cry of despairing humanity to the All-Powerful.

Owing to the flight of the cavalry, Dalroy imagined that some body of allied troops, Belgian or French, was advancing from Namur, so he did not obey his first impulse, which was to enter the nearest house and endeavour to get away through the gardens or other enclosures in rear.

He glanced at the hapless body on the cart, and saw by the eyes that life had departed. Leontine was sobbing pitifully. Maertz, having recovered his senses, was striving to calm her. But Joos remained silent; he held his wife's limp hand, and it was as though he awaited some reassuring clasp which should tell him that she still lived.

Dalroy had no words to console the bereaved old man. He turned aside, and a mist obscured his vision for a little while. Then he heard the wounded German hiccoughing, and he looked again at the sword, because this was the assassin who had foully murdered a gentle, kind-hearted, and inoffensive woman. But he could not demean himself by becoming an executioner. Richly as the criminal deserved to be sent with his victim to the bar of Eternal Justice, the Englishman decided to leave him to the avengers coming through the town.

The shooting drew nearer. A number of women and children, with a few men, appeared. They were running and screaming. The first batch fled past; but an elderly dame, spent with even a brief flurry, halted for a few seconds when she saw the group near the dog-team.

"Henri Joos!" she gasped. "And Leontine! What, in Heaven's name, are you doing here?"

It was Madame Stauwaert, the Andenne cousin with whom they hoped to find sanctuary.

The miller gazed at her in a curiously abstracted way. "Is that you, Margot?" he said. "We were coming to you. But they have wounded Lise. See! Here she is!"

Madame Stauwaert looked at the corpse as though she did not understand at first. Then she burst out hysterically, "She's dead, Henri! They've killed her! They're killing all of us! They pulled Alphonse out of the house and stabbed him with a bayonet. They're firing through the openings into the cellars and into the ground-floor rooms of every house. If they see a face at a bedroom window they shoot. Two Germans, so drunk that they could hardly stand, shot at me as I ran. Ah, dear God!"

She swayed and sank in a faint. The flying crowd increased in numbers. Some one shouted, "Fools! Be off, for your lives! Make for the quarries."

Dalroy decided to take this unknown friend's advice. The terrified people of Andenne had, at least, some definite goal in view, whereas he had none. He lifted Madame Stauwaert and placed her beside the dead body on the cart.

"Come," he said to Maertz, "get the dogs into a trot.--Leontine, look after your father, and don't lose sight of us!"

He grasped Irene by the arm. The tiny vehicle was flat and narrow, and he was so intent on preventing the unconscious woman from falling off into the road that he did not miss Joos and his daughter until Irene called on Maertz to stop. "Where are the others?" she cried. "We must not desert them."

In the midst of a scattered mob came the laggards. Joos was not hurrying at all. He was smiling horribly. In his hand he held a large pocket-knife open. "It was all I had," he explained calmly. "But Margot said Lise was dead, so it did his business."

"I'm glad," said Dalroy. "It was your privilege. But you must run now, for Leontine's sake, as she will not leave you, and the Germans may be on us at any moment."

Luckily, the stream of people swerved into a by-road; the "quarries" of which some man had spoken opened up in the hillside close at hand. On top were woods, and a cart-track led that way at a sharp gradient. Dalroy assisted the dogs by pushing the cart, and they reached the summit. Pausing there, while Irene and the weeping Leontine endeavoured to revive Madame Stauwaert, to whom they must look for some sort of guidance as to their next move, he went to the lip of the excavation, and surveyed the scene.

Dusk was creeping over the picturesque valley, but the light still sufficed to reveal distances. The railway station, with all the houses in the vicinity, was on fire. Nearly every dwelling along the Namur road was ablaze; while the trim little farms which rise, one above the other, on the terraced heights of the right bank of the Meuse seemed to have burst into flame spontaneously. Seilles, too, on the opposite bank, was undergoing the same process of wanton destruction; but, a puzzling thing, rifles and machine-guns were busy on both sides of the river, and the flashes showed that a sharp engagement was taking place.

A man, carrying a child in his arms, who had come with them, was standing at Dalroy's elbow. He appeared self-possessed enough, so the Englishman sought information.

"Are those Belgian troops in Seilles?" he inquired.

The man snorted. "Belgians? No! They retreated to Namur this morning. That is a Bavarian regiment shooting at Brandenburgers in Andenne. They are all mad drunk, officers and men. They've been here since eleven o'clock, first Uhlans, then infantry. The burgomaster met them fairly, not a shot was fired, and we thought we were over the worst. Then, as you see, hell broke loose!"

Such was the refuge Andenne provided on Monday, 20th August. Hell--by order!

CHAPTER XI

A TRAMP ACROSS BELGIUM

The stranger, a Monsieur Jules Pochard, proved a most useful friend. In the first instance, he was a cool-headed person, who did not allow imagination to run riot. "No," he said, when questioned as to the chance of reaching Namur by a forced march along country lanes, "every road in that section of the province is closed by cavalry patrols. You cannot avoid them, monsieur. Come with me to Huy, and you'll be reasonably safe."

"Why safer in Huy than here, or anywhere else where these brutes may be?"

"Huy has been occupied by the Germans since the 12th, and is their temporary headquarters. From what I gather, they usually spare such towns. That is why we never dreamed of Andenne being sacked."

Dalroy remembered the aged cure's exposition of *Kultur* as a policy. "Is this sort of thing going on generally, then?" he asked.

Monsieur Pochard was a Frenchman. He raised his eyebrows. "Where can you have been, monsieur, not to know what has happened at Liege, Vise, Flemelle Grande, Blagny Trembleur, and a score of other places?"

"Vise!" broke in the cracked, piping voice of Joos. "What's that about Vise?"

"It is burnt to the ground, and nearly all the inhabitants killed."

"Is anything said of a fat major named Busch, whom Henri Joos the miller stuck with a fork?"

"A Prussian, do you mean?"

"Ay. One of the same breed--a Westphalian."

"I haven't heard."

"He tried to assault my daughter, so I got him. The second one, a Uhlan, killed my wife, and I got *him* too. I cut his throat down there in the main street. It's easy to kill Germans. They're soft, like pigs."

Though Joos's half-demented boasting was highly injudicious, Dalroy did not interfere. He was in a mood to let matters drift. They could not well be worse. He had tried to control the course of events in so far as they affected his own and Irene Beresford's fortunes, but had failed lamentably. Now, fate must take charge.

Pochard's comment was to the point, at any rate. "I congratulate you, monsieur," he said. "I'll do a bit in that line myself when this little one is lodged with his aunt in Huy. If every Belgian accounts for two Prussians, you'll hold them till the French and English join up."

"Do you know for certain where the English are?" put in Dalroy eagerly.

"Yes, at Charleroi. The French are in Namur. Come with me to Huy. A few days, and the *sales Alboches* will be pelting back to the Rhine."

For the second time Dalroy heard a slang epithet new to him applied to the Germans. He little guessed how familiar the abbreviated French form of the word would become in his ears. Briton, Frenchman, Slav, and Italian have cordially adopted "Boche" as a suitable term for the common enemy. It has no meaning, yet conveys a sense of contemptuous dislike. Stricken France had no heart for humour in 1870. The merciless foe was then a "Prussian"; in 1914 he became a "Boche," and the change held a comforting significance.

Dalroy, of course, did not share the Frenchman's opinion as to the speedy discomfiture of the invader; but night was falling, the offer of shelter was too good to be refused. Nevertheless, he was careful to reveal a real difficulty. "Unfortunately, we have a dead woman in the cart," he said. "Madame Stauwaert, too, is ill, but she has recovered from a fainting fit, I see."

"Ah, poor Stauwaert!" murmured the other. "A decent fellow. I saw them kill him. And that's his wife, of course. I didn't recognise her before."

Dalroy was relieved to find that the Frenchman and the bereaved woman were friends. He had not forgotten the priest's statement that there would be a spy in every group in that part of Belgium. Later he ascertained that Monsieur Pochard was a well-to-do leather merchant in Andenne, who, like many others, refused to abandon a long-established business

for fear of the Germans; doubtless he was destined to pay a heavy price for his tenacity ere the war ended. He behaved now as a true Samaritan, urging an immediate move, and promising even to arrange for Madame Joos's burial. Dalroy helped him to carry the child, a three-year-old boy, who was very sleepy and peevish, and did not understand why he should not be at home and in bed.

Joos suffered them to lead him where they listed. He walked by the side of the cart, and told "Lise" how he had dealt with the Uhlan. Leontine sobbed afresh, and tried to stop him, but he grew quite angry.

"Why shouldn't she know?" he snapped. "It is her affair, and mine. You screamed, and turned away, but I hacked at him till his wind-pipe hissed."

Monsieur Pochard brought them to Huy by a rough road among the hills.

It was a dreadful journey in the gloaming of a perfect summer's evening. The old man's ghoulish jabbering, the sobs of the women, the panting of two exhausted dogs, and the wailing of the child, who wanted his father's arms round him rather than a stranger's, supplied a tragic chorus which ill beguiled that *Via Dolorosa* along the heights of the Meuse.

Irene insisted on taking the boy for a time, and the youngster ceased his plaint at once.

"That's a blessed relief," she confided to Dalroy. "I'm not afflicted with nerves, but this poor little chap's crying was more than I could bear."

"He is too heavy that you should carry him far," he protested.

"You're very much of a man, Arthur," she said quietly. "You don't realise, I suppose, that nature gives us women strong arms for this very purpose."

"I hadn't thought of that. The fact is, I'm worried. I have a doubt at the back of my head that we ought to be going the other way."

"Which other way?"

"In precisely the opposite direction."

"But what can we do? At what stage in our wanderings up to this very moment could we have parted company with our friends? Do you know, I have a horrible feeling that we have brought a good deal of avoidable misery on their heads? If we hadn't gone to the mill----"

"They would probably all have been dead by this time, and certainly both homeless and friendless," he interrupted. Then he began telling her the fate of Vise, but was brought up short by an imperative whisper from Pochard. They were talking English, without realising it, and Huy was near.

"And why carry that sword?" added the Frenchman. "It is useless, and most dangerous. Thrust it into a ditch."

Dalroy obeyed promptly. He had thoughtlessly disregarded the sinister outcome if a patrol found him with such a weapon in his hand.

They came to Huy by a winding road through a suburb, meeting plenty of soldiers strolling to and from billets. Luck befriended them at this ticklish moment. None saw a little party turning into a lane which led to the back of the villa tenanted by Monsieur Pochard's married sister. This lady proved both sympathetic and helpful. The cart, with its sad freight, was housed in a wood-shed at the bottom of the garden, and the dogs were stabled in the gardener's potting-shed.

"The ladies can share my bedroom and my daughter's," she said. "You men must sleep in the greenhouse, as every remaining room is filled with Uhlans. Their supper is ready now, but there is plenty. Come and eat before they arrive. They left on patrol duty early this morning."

And that is where the fugitives experienced a stroke of amazing good fortune. That particular batch of Uhlans never returned. It was supposed that they were cut off while scouting along the Tirlmont road. Apparently their absence only contributed to an evening of quiet talk and a night of undisturbed rest. In reality, it saved the lives of the whole party, including the hostess and her family.

Early next morning Monsieur Pochard interviewed an undertaker, and Madame Joos was laid to rest in the nearest cemetery. Maertz, Madame Stauwaert, and Leontine attended the funeral. Joos showed signs of collapse. His mind wandered. He thought his wife was living, and in Verviers. They encouraged the delirium, and dosed him with a narcotic.

Irene helped in the kitchen, and Dalroy dug the garden. Thus, the confederacy remained split up during the morning, and was not noticed by an officer who came to inquire about the missing Uhlans.

About noon Monsieur Pochard drew Dalroy aside. "Monsieur," he said, and his face wore anxious lines, "last night the old man implied that he was Henri Joos, of Vise. No, please listen. I don't want to be told. I can only give you certain facts, and leave you to draw your own conclusions. Active inquiries are being made by the authorities for Henri Joos, Elisabeth Joos, Leontine Joos, their daughter, and Jan Maertz, all of Vise. With them are an Englishwoman aged twenty, and an English officer named Dalroy, both dressed as Belgian peasants. The appended descriptions seem to be remarkably accurate, and a reward of one thousand marks is offered for their capture."

"They may be willing to pay double the price for freedom," said Dalroy.

The Frenchman was not offended. He realised that this was not a suggestion of a personal bribe.

"You have not heard all," he continued. "These people were traced to Verviers, but the trail was lost after Maertz bought a cart and a dog-team in that town three days ago. Unfortunately, some Uhlans, passing through Andenne last night, have reported the presence of just such a party on the main road. Other soldiers believe they saw a similar lot entering Huy after dark, and the burgomaster is warned that the strictest search must be made among refugees at Huy. To make sure, a German escort will assist. It is estimated that Joos and the others will be caught, because they will probably depend on a *laisser passer* issued in Argenteau under false names, which are known. Joos figures as Wilhelm Schultz, for instance. Don't look so surprised, monsieur. The burgomaster is my brother-in-law's partner. He will not reach this quarter of Huy till half-past three or four o'clock."

"But there is the record of Madame Joos's burial," put in Dalroy instantly.

"No. The poor creature remains a 'woman unknown, found dead.' The Germans don't worry about such trifles. But, by a strange coincidence, Madame Stauwaert practically takes her place for identification purposes. By the mercy of Providence, no German soldier was in this house last night, or he would now be the richer by a thousand marks. The notice is placarded at the *Kommandantur*, and is being read by the multitude."

"We shall not bring further trouble on a family which has already run grave risk in our behalf," vowed Dalroy warmly. "We must scatter at once, and, if caught, suffer individually."

"I was sure you would say that, monsieur; but sworn allies carry friendship to greater lengths. Now, let us take counsel. Madame Stauwaert can remain here. Fifty people in Huy will answer for her. My sister can hire a servant, Leontine. If Joos is tractable he can lodge in safety with some cottagers I know. Maertz wishes to join the Belgian army, and you the British; while that charming young lady will want to get to England. Well, we may be able to contrive all these things. I happen to be a bit of an antiquary, and Huy owns more ruined castles and monasteries than any other town of similar size in Belgium, or in the world, I imagine. Follow my instructions to the letter, and you will cheat the Germans yet. They are animals of habit and cast-iron rule. When searching for six people they will never look for one or two. Yet it would be folly if you and mademoiselle wandered off by yourselves in a strange country. Then, indeed, even German official obtuseness might show a spark of real intelligence; whereas, by gaining a few days, who knows whether your armies may not come to you, rather than you go to them?"

The good-hearted Frenchman's scheme worked without a hitch. The cart was broken up for firewood, the harness burnt, and the dogs taken a mile into the country by Maertz, who sold them for a couple of francs, and came back to a certain ruined priory by a roundabout road.

Irene and Dalroy had gone there already. The place lay deep in trees and brushwood, and was approachable by a dozen hidden ways. Although given over to bats and owls, its tumbledown walls contained one complete room, situated some twenty feet above the ground level, and reached by a winding staircase of stone slabs, which looked most precarious, but proved quite sound if used by a sure-footed climber.

Here, then, the three dwelt eleven weary days. During daylight their only diversion was the flight of hosts of aeroplanes toward the French frontier. Twice they saw Zeppelins. For warmth at night they depended on horse-rugs and bundles of a species of bracken which throve among the piles of stones. They were well supplied with food, deposited at dusk in a fosse, and obtained when the opening bars of "La Brabanconne" were whistled at a distance. The air itself was a guarantee that no German was near, because the Belgian national anthem is not pleasing to Hun ears.

A typed note in the basket formed their sole link with the outer world. And what momentous issues were conveyed in the briefest of sentences!

"Namur has fallen after a day's bombardment by a new and terrible cannon."

"Brussels has capitulated without resistance."

"After a fierce battle, the French and English have retired from Charleroi and Mons."

"The retreat continues. France is invaded. Valenciennes has fallen."

On the eleventh morning Dalroy hid among the bushes until the daily basket was brought. Monsieur Pochard himself was the go-between. He feared lest Leontine would contrive to meet Maertz, so the girl did not know where her lover was hidden.

The Frenchman started visibly when Dalroy's voice reached him; but the latter spoke in a tone which would not carry far. "I'm sorry to seem ungrateful," he said, "but we are growing desperate. Do us one last favour, monsieur, and we impose no more on your goodness. Tell me where and when we can cross the Meuse, and the best route to take subsequently. Sink or swim, I, at any rate, must endeavour to reach England, and mademoiselle is equally resolved to make the attempt."

"I don't blame you," came the sorrowful reply. "This is going to be a long war. Twenty years of deadly preparation are bearing fruit. I am sick with anxiety. But I dare not loiter in this neighbourhood, so, as to your affair, my advice is that you cross the Meuse to-morrow in broad daylight. The bridge is repaired, and no very strict watch is kept. Make for Nivelles, Enghien, and Oudenarde. The Belgians hold the Antwerp-Gand-Roulers line, but are being driven back daily. I have been thinking of you. If you delay longer you will--at the best--be imprisoned in Belgium for many months. Are you determined?"

"Yes."

"Do you want money?"

"We have plenty."

"Farewell, then, and may God protect you!"

"Is there no chance of nearing the British force?" was Dalroy's final and almost despairing question.

"Not the least. You would be following on the heels of a quick-moving and victorious army. Progress is slower toward the coast. You have a fighting chance that way, none the other. Good-bye, monsieur."

"Good-bye, best of friends!"

The sudden collapse of Namur, and the consequent failure of the Anglo-French army's initial scheme, had served to alter this shrewd man's opinion completely. His confidence was gone, his nerve shaken. The pressure of the jack-boot was heavy upon him. Dalroy was certain that he walked away with a furtive haste, being in mortal fear lest the people he had helped so greatly might put forth some additional request which he dared not grant.

Next morning they left the priory grounds separately, and strolled into the town, keeping some fifty yards apart. It was only after a struggle that Jan Maertz relinquished the notion of trying to see Leontine before going from Huy, but the others convinced him that he might imperil both the girl and their benefactors. As matters stood, her greatest danger must have nearly vanished by this time; it would be a lamentable thing if her lover were arrested, and it became known that he had visited the villa.

They crossed the river on pontoons. The Germans were already rebuilding the stone bridge. They seemed to have men to spare for everything. That the bridge was being actually rebuilt, and not made practicable by timber-work only, impressed Dalroy more forcibly than any other fact gleaned during his Odyssey in a Belgium under German rule. There was no thought of relinquishing the occupied territory, no hint of doubt that it might be wrested from their clutch in the near future. He noticed that the post-office, the railway station, the parcels vans, even the street names, were Germanised. He learnt subsequently that the schools had been taken over by German teachers, while the mere sound of French in a shop or public place was scowled at if not absolutely forbidden.

There were not many troops on the roads, but crowded troop-trains passed on both sides of the Meuse, and ever in the same direction. Two long hospital trains came from the south-west, and Dalroy knew what *that* meant. Another long train of closed wagons, heavily laden, as a panting engine testified, perplexed him, however. He spoke of it to Maertz, the three being on the road in company as they climbed the hill to Heron, and the carter promptly sought information from a farmer.

The man eyed them carefully. "Where are you from?" he demanded in true Flemish.

"What has that to do with it?" grinned Maertz, in the same *patois*.

The questioner was satisfied. He jerked a thumb toward the French frontier. "Dead uns!" he said. "They're killing Germans like flies down yonder. They can't bury them--haven't time--so they tie the corpses together, slinging four on a pole for easy handling, ship them to Germany, and chuck them into furnaces."

"So," guffawed Maertz, "the swine know where they are going then!"

To Dalroy's secret amazement, Irene, who understood each word, laughed with the others. Campaigning had not coarsened, but it had undeniably hardened her nature. A month ago she would have shuddered at sight of these dun trucks, with their ghastly freight. Now, so long as they only contained Germans, she surveyed them with interest.

"Allowing forty bodies to one wagon," she said, "there are over a thousand dead men in that train alone."

The farmer spat approval. "I've been busy, and have missed some; but that's the tenth lot which has gone east this morning," he remarked cheerfully.

"Is the road to Nivelles fairly open?" Dalroy ventured to inquire.

"One never knows. Anyhow, always give the next village as your destination. If doubtful, travel by night."

This counsel was well meant. In the silent bitterness of hours yet to come, Dalroy recalled it, and wished he had profited by it.

Roughly speaking, they had set out on a fifty miles' tramp, which the men could have tackled in two days, or less. But the presence of Irene lowered the scale, and Dalroy apportioned matters so that twelve miles daily formed their programme, with, as the *entrepreneurs* say, power to increase or curtail. Thus, that first afternoon, the date being September 2nd, they pulled up at Gembloux, quite a small place, finding supper and beds in a farm beyond the village.

Next day they pushed ahead through Nivelles, and entered the forest of Soignies, that undulating woodland on which Wellington depended for the protection of a dangerous flank during the unavoidable retreat to the coast if Napoleon had beaten the British army at Waterloo.

Dalroy explained the Iron Duke's strategy to Irene as they paced a road which provides an ideal walking tour.

"That a General was not worth his salt who did not secure the track of his army if defeated was one of his fixed principles," he said. "He would never depart from it, and his dispositions at Waterloo were based on it. In fact, his solicitude in that respect nearly caused a row between him and Blucher."

"Let me see," mused the girl aloud. "The Germans have never fought the British in modern times until this war."

"That is correct."

"And how far away is Mons?"

Dalroy smiled at the thought which had evidently occurred to her.

"We are now just half-way between Mons and Waterloo. Each is about ten miles distant."

"We were allied then with the Belgians, Germans, and Russians against the French. Now we have joined the Belgians, French, and Russians against the Germans. It sounds like counting in a game of cribbage. A hundred years from to-day our combination may be with the Belgians, Germans, and French against the Russians."

"You mustn't even hint treason against our present Allies," he laughed.

"What are Allies? Of what avail are treaties? You men have mismanaged things woefully. It is high time women took a lead in governing."

"Awful! I do verily believe you are a suffragette."

"I am. During what periods has England been greatest? In the reigns of Elizabeth and Victoria."

"Why leave out poor Queen Anne?"

"She was a very excellent woman. As soon as she came to the throne she declared her resolution 'not to follow the example of her predecessors in making use of a few of her subjects to oppress the rest.' The common people don't err in their estimate of rulers, and they knew what they were about in christening her 'Good Queen Anne.'"

"Now I'm sure."

"Sure of what?"

"You have never told me what you were doing in Berlin."

"You haven't asked me," she broke in.

"Did it matter? I----"

Irene's intuition warned her that this harmless chatter had swung round with lightning rapidity to a personal issue. Sad to relate, she had not washed her face or hands for eleven days, so a blush told no tales; but she interrupted again rather nervously, "What is it you are sure of?"

"You must have been a governess-companion in some German family of position. I can foresee a trying future. I must brush up my dates, or lose caste forever. Isn't there a doggerel jingle beginning:

"In fifty-five and fifty-four
Came Caesar o'er to Britain's
shore?"

"If I learn it, it may save me many a trip."

"Here, you two," growled Jan Maertz, "talk a language a fellow can understand."

The road was deserted save for themselves, and the others had unconsciously spoken English. Dalroy turned to apologise to their rough but trusty friend, and thus missed the quizzical and affectionate glance which Irene darted at him. She was still smiling when next he caught her eye.

"What is it now?" he asked.

"I was thinking how difficult it is to see a wood for the trees," she replied.

Maertz took her literally.

"I'll be glad when we're in the open country again, mademoiselle," he said. "I don't like this forest. One can't guess what may be hiding round the corner."

Yet they stopped that night at Braine le Comte, and crossed Enghien next day without incident. It is a pity that such a glorious ramble should be described so baldly. In happier times, when Robert Louis Stevenson took that blithe journey through the Cevennes with a donkey, a similar excursion produced a book which will be read when the German madness has long been relegated to a detested oblivion. But Uhlan pickets and "square-head" sentries supply wretched sign-posts in a land of romance, and the wanderers were now in a region where each kilometre had to be surveyed with caution.

Maertz owned an aunt in every village, and careful inquiry had, of course, located one of these numerous relatives in Lierde, a hamlet on the Grammont-Gand road. Oudenarde was strongly held by the enemy, but the roads leading to Gand were the scene of magnificent exploits by the armoured cars of the Belgian army. Certain Belgian motorists had become national heroes during the past fortnight. An innkeeper in Grammont told with bated breath how one famous driver, helped by a machine-gun crew, was accounting for scores of marauding cavalymen. "The English and French are beaten, but our fellows are holding them," he said with a fine air. "When you boys get through you'll enjoy life. My nephew, who used to be a great *chasseur*, says there is no sport like chasing mounted Boches."

This frank recognition of Dalroy as one of the innumerable young Belgians then engaged in crossing the enemy's lines in order to serve with their brothers was an unwitting compliment to a student who had picked up the colloquial phrases and Walloon words in Maertz's uncouth speech. A man who looked like an unkempt peasant should speak like one, and Dalroy was an apt scholar. He never trod on doubtful ground. Strangers regarded him as a taciturn person, solely because of this linguistic restraint. Maertz made nearly all inquiries, and never erred in selecting an informant. The truth was that German spies were rare in this district. They were common as crows in the cities, and on the frontiers of Belgium and France, but rural Brabant harboured few, and that simple fact accounts for the comparatively slow progress of the invaders as they neared the coast.

It was at a place called Oombergen, midway between Oudenarde and Alost, that the fugitives met the Death's-Head Hussars. And with that ill-omened crew came the great adventure.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE GATES OF DEATH

Had Dalroy followed his own plans, supported as they were by the well-meant advice tendered by the farmer of the Meuse valley, he might have led his companions through the final barrier without incurring any risk at all comparable with the hair's-breadth escapes of Vise, Argenteau, Andenne, and Huy.

But the weather broke. Rain fell in torrents, and Irene's presence was a real deterrent to spending a night in a ditch or lurking in the depths of a wood till dawn. Maertz, too, jubilant in the certainty that the Belgian outposts were hardly six miles distant, advocated the bold policy of a daylight march. Still, there was no excuse for Dalroy, who knew that patrols in an enemy's country are content to stand fast by night, and scout during the day. Unluckily, Irene was eager as their Belgian friend to rush the last stage. She was infected by the prevalent spirit of the people. Throughout the whole of September these valiant folk in the real Flanders held the Germans rather cheap. They did not realise that outpost affairs are not battles--that a cavalry screen, as its very name implies, is actually of more value in cloaking movements of armies in rear than in reconnoitring.

Be that as it may, in the late afternoon of 5th September the three were hurrying past some lounging troopers who had taken shelter from the pouring rain in the spacious doorway of a ruined barn, when one man called to them, "Hi! where are you off to?"

They pretended not to hear, whereupon a bullet passed through Dalroy's smock between arm and ribs.

It was useless to think of bolting from cavalry. They turned at once, hoping that a bold front might serve. This occurred a mile or more from Oombergen. Maertz had "an aunt" in Oosterzeele, the next village, and said so.

"If she's anything like you, you're welcome to her; but let's have a look at your cousin," grinned the German, striding forward, carbine in hand, and grasping Irene by the shoulder.

"You stop here, *Fraulein*--or, is it *Frau*?" he said, with a vilely suggestive leer. "Anyhow, it doesn't matter. If one of these pig-heads is your husband we can soon make you a widow."

Now to Irene every German soldier was a boor, with a boor's vices and limitations. The man, a corporal, spoke and acted coarsely, using the *argot* of the barrack-room, and she was far too frightened to see in his satyr-like features a certain intellectuality. So, in her distress, she blundered twice.

"Leave me alone!" she said shrilly, trying in voice and manner to copy Leontine Joos.

"Now don't be coy, pretty one," chuckled the trooper, beginning to urge her forcibly in the direction of the barn.

Dalroy and Jan Maertz had remained stock-still when the hussar came up. Suddenly the Belgian sheered off, and ran like a hare into the dense wood surrounding the small cleared space in which stood the barn. The building had evidently been meant to house stock only. There was no dwelling attached. It had served, too, as a rallying-point during some recent scrimmage. The outer walls were chipped with bullets; the doors had been torn off and burnt; it was typical of Belgium under German rule--a husk given fictitious life by the conqueror's horses and men.

Irene had seen Jan make off, while Dalroy lurched slowly nearer. She could not hear the fierce whisper which bade their sturdy ally bolt for the trees, and, if he got away, implore a strong Belgian patrol to come to the rescue. But she knew that *some* daring expedient had been devised on the spur of the moment, and gathered all her resources for an effort to gain time.

The corporal heard Jan break into a run. Letting go the girl, he swung on his heel and raised the carbine.

Dalroy had foreseen that this might happen. With a calm courage that was superb because of its apparent lack of thought, he had placed himself in the direct line of fire. Standing with his hands in his pockets and laughing loudly, he first glanced over his shoulder at the vanishing Maertz, and then guffawed into the hussar's face.

"He's done a bunk!" he cried cheerfully. "You said he might go, *Herr Unteroffizier*, so he hopped it without even saying '*Aufwieder sehn*.'"

Meanwhile, as he was steadily masking the German's aim, he might have been shot without warning. But the ready comment baffled the other for a few precious seconds, and the men in the barn helped unconsciously by chaffing their comrade.

"You've got your hands full with the girl, Franz," said one.

"What's she like?" bawled another. "I can only see a pair of slim ankles and a dirty face."

"That's all you *will* see, Georg," said Franz, believing that a scared Belgian peasant had merely bolted in panic. "This little bit is mine by the laws of war.--Here, you," he added, surveying Dalroy quite amicably, "be off to your aunt! You'll probably be shot at Oosterzeele; but that's your affair, not mine."

"You don't know my aunt," said Dalroy. "I'd sooner face a regiment of soldiers than stand her tongue if I go home without her niece."

If he hoped to placate this swaggering scoundrel by a display of good-humour he failed lamentably. An ugly glint shone in the man's eyes, and he handled the carbine again threateningly.

"To hell with you and your aunt!" he snarled. "Perhaps you don't know it, you Flemish fool, but you're a German now and must obey orders. Cut after your pal before I count three, or I'll put daylight through you! One, two----"

Then the hapless Irene committed a second and fatal error, though it was pardonable in the frenzy of a tragic dilemma, since the next moment might see her lover ruthlessly murdered. To lump all German soldiers into one category was a bad mistake; it was far worse to change her accent from the crude speech of the province of Liege to the high-sounding periods of Berlin society.

"How dare you threaten unoffending people in this way?" she almost screamed. "I demand that you send for an officer, and I ask the other men of your regiment to bear witness we have done nothing whatsoever to warrant your brutal behaviour."

The hussar stood as though he, and not Dalroy, had been silenced by a bullet. He listened to the girl's outburst with an expression of blank amazement, which soon gave place to a sinister smile.

"*Gnadiges Fraulein*," he answered, springing to "attention," and affecting a conscience-stricken tone, "I cry your pardon. But is it not your own fault? Why should such a charming young lady masquerade as a Belgian peasant?"

On hearing the man speak as a well-educated Berliner, Irene became deathly white under the tan and grime of so many days and nights of exposure. She nearly fainted, and might have fallen had not Dalroy caught her. Even then, when their position was all but hopeless, he made one last attempt to throw dust in the crafty eyes which were now piercing both Irene and himself with the baneful glare of a tiger about to spring.

"My cousin has been a governess in Berlin," he said deferentially. "She isn't afraid of soldiers as a rule, but you have nearly frightened her to death."

Their captor still examined them in a way that chilled even the Englishman's dauntless heart. He was summing them up, much as a detective might scan the features of a pair of half-recognised criminals to whom he could not altogether allot their proper places in the Rogues' Gallery.

"You see, she's ill," urged Dalroy. "Mayn't we go? My aunt keeps a decent cellar. I'll come back with some good wine."

Never relaxing that glowering scrutiny, the corporal shouted suddenly, "Come here, Georg!"

The man thus hailed by name strode forward. With him came three others, Irene's fluent German and the parade attitude assumed by Franz having aroused their curiosity.

"You used to have a good memory for descriptions of 'wanteds,' Georg. Can you recall the names and appearance of the English captain and the girl there was such a fuss about at Argenteau a month ago?"

Georg, a strongly-built, rather jovial-looking Hanoverian, grinned.

"Better than leaving things to guess-work, I have it in my pocket," he said. "I copied it at the *Kommandantur*. A thousand marks are worth a pencilled note, my boy. Halves, if these are they!"

Dalroy knew then that he, and possibly Irene, were doomed. A struggle was impossible. Franz's reference to Oosterzeele being in German occupation forbade the least hope of succour by a Belgian force. There was a hundred to one chance that Irene's life might be spared, and he resolved to take it. It was pitiful to feel the girl trembling, and he gave her arm an encouraging squeeze.

Georg was fumbling in the breast of his tunic, when he seemed to realise that it was raining heavily.

"Why the devil stand out here if we're going to hold a court of inquiry?" he cried. Evidently, the iron discipline of the

German army was somewhat relaxed in the Death's-Head Hussars.

"Go to the barn," commanded Franz. "And, mind, you pig of an Englishman, no talking till you're spoken to!"

Dalroy wondered why the man allowed him to assist Irene; but such passing thoughts were as straws in a whirlwind. He bent his wits to the one problem. He was lost. Could he save her? Heaven alone would decide. A poor mortal might only pray for guidance as to the right course.

Inside the tumbledown barn the light was bad, so the prisoners were halted in the doorway, and a score of troopers gathered around. They were not, on the whole, a ruffianly set. Every man bore the stamp of a trained soldier; the device of a skull and cross-bones worked in white braid on their hussar caps gave them an imposing and martial aspect.

"Here you are!" announced the burly Georg, producing a frayed sheet of paper. "Let's see--there's six of 'em. Henri Joos, miller, aged sixty-five, five feet three inches. Elizabeth Joos, his wife, aged forty-five. Leontine Joos, daughter, aged nineteen, plump, good-looking, black eyes and hair, clear complexion, red cheeks. Jan Maertz, carter, aged twenty-six, height five feet eight inches, a Walloon, strongly built. Arthur Dalroy, captain in British army, about six feet in height, of athletic physique, blue eyes, brown hair, very good teeth, regular features. An English girl, name unknown, aged about twenty, very good-looking, and of elegant appearance and carriage. Eyes believed brown, and hair dark brown. Fairly tall and slight, but well-formed. These latter (the English) speak German and French. The girl, in particular, uses good German fluently."

"Click!" ejaculated Franz, imitating the snapping of a pair of handcuffs. "Shave that fellow, and rig out the lady in her ordinary togs, and you've got them to the dots on the 'i's. Who are the first two for patrol?"

A couple of men answered.

"Sorry, boys," went on Franz briskly, "but you must hoof it to Oosterzeele, and lay Jan Maertz by the heels. You saw him, I suppose? You may even pick him up on the road. If you do, bring him back here.--Georg, ride into Oombergen, show an officer that extract from the Argenteau notice, and get hold of a transport. These prisoners are of the utmost importance."

Irene, who lost no syllable of this direful investigation, had recovered her self-control. She turned to Dalroy. Her eyes were shining with the light which, in a woman, could have only one meaning.

"Forgive me, dear!" she murmured. "I fear I am to blame. I was selfish. I might have saved *you*---"

"No, no, none of that!" interrupted the corporal. "You go inside, *Fraulein*. You can sit on a broken ladder near the door. The horses won't hurt you.--As for you, Mr. Captain, you're a slippery fellow, so we'll hobble you."

Dalroy knew it was useless to do other than fall in with the orders given. He did not try to answer Irene, but merely looked at her and smiled. Was ever smile more eloquent? It was at once a message of undying love and farewell. Possibly, he might never see her again. But the bitterness of approaching death, enhanced as it was by the knowledge that he should not have allowed himself to drift blindly into this open net, was assuaged in one vital particular. The woman he loved was absolutely safe now from a set of licentious brutes. She might be given life and liberty. When brought before some responsible military court he would tell the plain truth, suppressing only such facts as would tend to incriminate their good friends in Verviers and Huy. Not even a board of German officers could find the girl guilty of killing Busch and his companions, and this, he imagined, was the active cause of the hue and cry raised by the authorities. How determined the hunt had been was shown by the changed demeanour of the corporal. The man was almost oppressed by the magnitude of the capture. Dalroy was convinced that it was not the monetary reward which affected him. Probably this young non-commissioned officer saw certain promotion ahead, and that, to a German, is an all-sufficing inducement.

The prisoner's hands were tied behind his back, and the same rope was adjusted around waist and ankles in such wise that movement was limited to moderately short steps. But Herr Franz did not hurt him needlessly. Rather was he bent on taking care of him. Throwing a cavalry cloak over the Englishman's shoulders, he said, "You can squat against the wall and keep out of the rain, if you wish."

Dalroy obeyed without a word. He felt inexplicably weary. In that unhappy hour body and soul alike were crushed. But the cloud lifted soon. His spirit was the spirit of the immortals; it raised itself out of the slough of despond.

The day was closing in rapidly; lowering clouds and steady rain conspired to rob the sun of some part of his prerogatives. At seven o'clock it would be dark, whereas the almanac fixed the close of day at eight. It was then about half-past six.

Resolutely casting off the torpor which had benumbed his brain after parting from the woman he loved, Dalroy looked

about him. The hussars, some twenty all told, reduced now to seventeen, since the messengers had ridden off without delay, were gathered in a knot around the corporal. Some of their horses were tethered in the barn, others were picketed outside.

Scraps of talk reached him.

"This will be a plume in your cap, Franz."

"A thousand marks, picked up in a filthy hole like this! *Almachtig!*"

"What are they? Spies?"

"Didn't you hear? They stabbed Major Busch with a stable fork. Jolly old Busch--one of the best!"

"And bayoneted two officers of the Westphalian commissariat, wounding a third."

"The devil! Was there a fight?"

"Some of the fellows said Busch and the others must have been drunk."

"Quite likely. I was drunk every day then."

A burst of laughter.

"Lucky dog!"

"*Ach, was!* what's the good of having been drunk so long ago? There isn't a bottle of wine now within five miles."

"Tell us then, *Herr Kaporal*, do we remain here till dawn?"

Dalroy grew faintly interested. It was absurd to harbour the slightest expectation of Jan Maertz bringing succour, but one might at least analyse the position, though the only visible road led straight to a firing-party.

"Those were our orders," answered Franz. "Things may be altered now. You fellows haven't grasped the real value of this cop. It wasn't stated on the notice, but somebody of much more importance than any ordinary officer was interested in the girl being caught--she far more than the man."

"Well, well! Tastes differ! A peasant like that!"

"You silly ass, she's no peasant. That's the worst of living in a suburb. You acquire no standard of comparison."

These men were Berliners, and were amused by a sly dig at some locality which, like Koepenick, offered a butt for German humour.

"Hello! isn't that a car?" said one.

There was silence. The thrumming of a powerful automobile could be heard through the patter of the rain.

"Attention!" growled Franz. A few troopers went to the picketed horses. The others lined up. A closed motor-car arrived. Its brilliant head-lights proclaimed the certain fact that the presence of Belgian troops in that locality was not feared. Dalroy recognised this at once, and forthwith dismissed from his mind the last shred of hope.

The chauffeur was a soldier. By his side sat the usual armed escort. Georg galloped up. Oombergen was only a mile and a half distant, and the road through the wood was in such a condition that the car was compelled to travel slowly.

A cloaked staff-officer alighted. The hussars stood stiff as so many ramrods. The new-comer took their salute punctiliously, but his tone in addressing the corporal was far from gracious.

"What's this unlikely tale you've sent in to headquarters?" he demanded harshly.

"I don't think I'm mistaken, *Herr Hauptmann*," was the answer. "I've got that English captain and the lady wanted at Vise. They've practically admitted it."

"Where are they?"

"The man is sitting there against the wall. The lady is in the barn.--Stand up, prisoner!"

Franz snatched away the cloak. Dalroy rose to his feet. He was smiling at the ruthlessness of Fate. He was still smiling when Captain von Halwig, of the Prussian Imperial Guard, flashed an electric torch in his face. It was unnecessary, perhaps, to render thus easy the task of recognition. But what did it matter? That lynx of a corporal was sure of his

ground, and would refuse to be gainsaid even by a staff-officer and a Guardsman.

Von Halwig's astonishment seemed to choke back any display of wrath.

"Then it is really you?" he said quietly in English.

"Yes," replied Dalroy.

The torch was switched off. Dalroy's eyes were momentarily blinded by the glare, but he heard an ugly chuckle.

"Where is the female prisoner?" said Von Halwig, with a formality that was as perplexing as his subdued manner.

"Here, *Herr Hauptmann*."

The two entered the barn. So far as Dalroy could judge, no word was spoken. The torch flared again, remained lighted a full half-minute, and was extinguished.

Von Halwig reappeared, seemed to ponder matters, and turned to the corporal.

"Put the woman in my car," he said. "Fall in your men, and be ready to escort me back to the village. You've done a good day's work, corporal."

"Two men have gone in pursuit of Jan Maertz, sir."

"Never mind. They'll have sense enough to come on to headquarters if they catch him. How is this Englishman secured?"

The jubilant Franz explained.

"Mount him on one of your horses. The trooper can squeeze in in front of the car. Has the female prisoner a dagger or a pistol?"

"I have not searched her, *Herr Hauptmann*."

"Make sure, but offer no violence or discourtesy. No, leave this fellow here at present. I want a few words with him in private. Assemble your men around the car, and take the woman there now."

Irene was led out. She paused in the doorway, and the corporal thought she did not know what she was wanted for.

"You are to be conveyed in the automobile, *Fraulein*," he said.

But she was looking for Dalroy in the gloom. Before anyone could interfere, she ran and threw her arms around him, kissing him on the lips.

"Good-bye, my dear one!" she wailed in a heart-broken way. "We may not meet again on this earth, but I am yours to all eternity."

"With these words in my ears I shall die happy," said Dalroy. Her embrace thrilled him with a strange ecstasy, yet the pain of that parting was worse than death. Were ever lovers' vows plighted in such conditions in the history of this gray old world?

Franz seized the girl's arm. She knew it would be undignified to resist. Kissing Dalroy again, she whispered a last choking farewell, and suffered her guide to take her where he willed. She walked with stumbling feet. Her eyes were dimmed with tears; but, sustained by the pride of her race, she refused to sob, and bit her lower lip in dauntless resolve not to yield.

The rain was beating down now in heavy gusts. Von Halwig, if he had no concern for the comfort of the troopers, had a good deal for his own.

"Damn the weather!" he grunted. "Come into the bar. You can walk, I suppose?"

He turned on the torch, which was controlled by a sliding button, and saw how the prisoner was secured. Then he flashed the light into the interior of the barn. It was a ramshackle place at the best, and looked peculiarly forlorn after the rummaging it had undergone since the fight, a recent picket having evidently torn down stalls and mangers to provide materials for a fire. Part of a long sloping ladder had been consumed for that purpose, so that an open trap-door in the boarded floor of an upper storey was inaccessible. The barn itself was unusually lofty, running to a height of twenty feet or more. There were no windows. Some rats, tempted out already by the oats spilled from the horses' nose-bags, scuttled away from the light. Through the trap-door the noise of the rain pounding on a shingle roof came

with a curious hollowness.

Von Halwig did not extinguish the lamp, but tucked it under his left arm. He lighted a cigarette. With each movement of his body the beam of light shifted. Now it played on the wall, against which Dalroy leaned, because the cramped state of his arms was already becoming irksome; now it shone through the doorway, forming a sort of luminous blur in the rain, now it dwelt on the Englishman, standing there in his worn blouse, baggy breeches, and sabots, an old flannel shirt open at the neck, and a month's growth of beard on cheeks and chin. The hat which Irene made fun of had been tilted at a rakish angle when the corporal removed the cloak. Certainly he was changed in essentials since he and the Guardsman last met face to face on the platform at Aix-la-Chapelle.

But the eyes were unalterable. They were still resolute, and strangely calm, because he had nerved himself not to flinch before this strutting popinjay.

"You wonder why I have brought you in here, eh?" began Von Halwig, in English.

"Perhaps to gloat over me," was the quiet reply.

"No. Is it necessary? At Aix I was excited. The Day had come. The Day of which we Germans have dreamed for many a year. I am young, but I have already won promotion. I belong to an irresistible army. War steadies a man. But when we reach Oombergen you will be paraded before a crusty old General, and even I, Von Halwig of the staff, and a friend of the Emperor, may not converse with a spy and a murderer. So we shall have a little chat now. What say you?"

"It all depends what you wish to talk about."

"About you and her ladyship, of course."

"May I ask whom you mean by 'her ladyship'?"

"Isn't that correct English?"

"It can be, if applied to a lady of title. But when used with reference presumably to a young lady who is a governess, it sounds like clumsy sarcasm."

"Governess the devil! With whom, then, have you been roaming Belgium?"

"Miss Irene Beresford, of course."

"You're not a fool, Captain Dalroy. Do you honestly tell me you don't *know*?"

"Know what?"

"That the girl you brought from Berlin is Lady Irene Beresford, daughter of the Earl of Glastonbury."

There was a moment of intense silence. In some ways it was immaterial to Dalroy what social position had been filled by the woman he loved. But, in others, the discovery that Irene was actually the aristocrat she looked was a very vital and serious thing. It made clear the meaning of certain references to distinguished people, both in Germany and in England, which had puzzled him at times. Transcending all else in importance, it might even safeguard her from German malevolence, since the Teuton pays an absurd homage to mere rank.

"I did not know," he said, and his voice was not so thoroughly under control as he desired.

Von Halwig laughed loudly. "*Almachtig!*" he spluttered, "our smart corporal of hussars seems to have spoiled a romance. What a pity! You'll be shot before midnight, my gallant captain, but the lady will be sent to Berlin with the utmost care. Even I, who have an educated taste in the female line, daren't wink at her. Has she never told you why she bolted in such a hurry?"

"No."

"Never hinted that a royal prince was wild about her?"

"No."

"Well, you have my word for it. *Himmel!* women are queer."

"She has suffered much to escape from your royal prince."

"She'll be returned to him now, slightly soiled, but nearly as good as new."

"I wish my hands were not tied."

"Oh, no heroics, please. We have no time for nonsense of that sort. Is the light irritating you? I'll put it here."

Von Halwig stooped, and placed the torch on the broken ladder. Its radiance illumined an oval of the rough, square stones with which the barn was paved. Thenceforth, the vivid glare remained stationary. The two men, facing each other at a distance of about six feet, were in shadow. They could see each other quite well, however, in the dim borrowed light, and the Guardsman flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"You're English, I'm German," he said. "We represent the positive and negative poles of thought. If it hurts your feelings that I should speak of Lady Irene, let's forget her. What I really want to ask you is this--why has England been so mad as to fight Germany?"



CHAPTER XIII

THE WOODEN HORSE OF TROY

The question struck Dalroy as so bizarre--in the conditions so ludicrous--that, despite the cold fury evoked by Von Halwig's innuendoes with regard to Irene, he nearly laughed.

"I am in no mood to discuss international politics," he answered curtly.

The other, who seemed to have his temper well under control, merely nodded. Indeed, he was obviously, if unconsciously, modelling his behaviour on that of his prisoner.

"I only imagined that you might be interested in hearing what's going to happen to your damned country," he said.

"I know already. She will emerge from this struggle greater, more renowned, more invincible than ever."

"*Dummes zeug!* All rubbish! That's your House of Commons and music-hall patter, meant to tickle the ears of the British working-man. England is going to be wiped off the map. We're obliterating her now. You've been in Belgium a month, and must have seen things which your stupid John Bulls at home can't even comprehend, which they never will comprehend till too late."

He paused, awaiting a reply perhaps. None came.

"It's rough luck that you, a soldier like myself, may not share in the game, even on the losing side," went on Von Halwig. "But you would be a particularly dangerous sort of spy if you contrived to reach England, especially with the information I'm now going to give you. You can't possibly escape, of course. You will be executed, not as a spy, but as a murderer. You left a rather heavy mark on us. Two soldiers in a hut near Vise, three officers and a private in the mill, five soldiers in the wood at Argenteau----"

"You flatter me," put in Dalroy. "I may have shot one fellow in the wood, a real spy, named Schwartz. But that is all. Your men killed one another there."

"The credit was given to you," was the dry retort. "But--*es ist mir ganz einerlei*--what does it matter? You're an intelligent Englishman, and that is why I am taking the trouble to tell you exactly why Great Britain will soon be Little Britain. Understand, I'm supplying facts, not war bulletins. On land you're beaten already. Our armies are near Paris. German cavalry entered Chantilly to-day. Your men made a great stand, and fought a four days' rearguard action which will figure in the text-books for the next fifty years. But the French are broken, the English Expeditionary Force nearly destroyed. The French Government has deserted Paris for Bordeaux. And, excuse me if I laugh, Lord Kitchener has asked for a hundred thousand more men!"

"He will get five millions if he needs them."

Von Halwig swept the retort aside with an impatient flourish.

"Too late! Too late! I'll prove it to you. Turkey is joining us. Bulgaria will come in when wanted. Greece won't lift a finger in the Balkans, and a great army of Turks led by Germans will march on Egypt. South Africa will rise in rebellion. Ireland is quiet for the time, but who knows what will happen when she sees England on her knees? Italy is sitting on the fence. The United States are snivelling, but German influence is too strong out there to permit of active interference. And, in any event, what can America do except look on, shivering at the prospect of her own turn coming next? Russia is making a stir in East Prussia and along the Austrian frontier, so poor Old England is chortling because the Slav is fighting her battles. It is to laugh. We'll pen the Bear long before he becomes dangerous. I am not boasting, my friend. Why should I, Captain von Halwig of the Imperial Guard, be messing about in a wretched Flemish village when our men are about to storm Paris in the west and tackle Russia in the east? I'll explain. I'm here because I know England so well. My job is to help in organising the invading force which will gather at Calais. Ah! that amuses you, does it? The British fleet is the obstacle, eh? Not it. Seriously now, do you regard us Germans as idiots? No; I'm sure you don't. You *know*. These fellows in Parliament *don't* know. I assure you, on my honour, our general staff is confident that a German army will land on British soil--in Britain itself I mean--before Christmas."

The speaker interrupted this flood of dire prophecy in order to light a fresh cigarette. Then clasping his hands behind his back, and strutting with feet well apart, he said quite affably, "Why don't you put a question or two? If you believe I'm reciting a fairy tale, say so, and point out the stupidities."

Now, Dalroy had not been "amused" by the statement that the Germans might occupy Calais. He had already

discounted even worse reverses as lying well within the bounds of possibility. He was certain, too, that the Prussian was saying that which he really believed. But his nerves of steel were undoubtedly tried almost beyond endurance at the instant Von Halwig noticed the involuntary movement which elicited that uninvited comment on the British fleet.

As the word "Calais" quitted the Guardsman's lips, a rope, with a noose at the end, dropped with swift stealth through the open trap-door. Its descent was checked when the noose dangled slightly higher than his head, and whoever was manipulating it began at once to swing it slowly forward and backward. Von Halwig stood some six or seven feet nearer the wall than the point which the rope would have touched if lowered to the floor, so the objective aimed at by that pendulum action was not difficult to grasp, being nothing else than his speedy and noiseless extinction by hanging.

It is an oft-repeated though far-fetched assertion that a drowning man reviews the whole of his life during the few seconds which separate the last conscious struggle from complete anaesthesia. That may or may not be true, but Dalroy now experienced a brain-storm not lacking many of the essentials of some such mental kinema.

Think what that swinging rope, with its unseen human agency, meant to a captive in his hapless position! It was simply incredible that one man alone would attempt so daring an expedient. Not only, then, were a number of plucky and resourceful allies concealed in the loft, but they must have been hidden there before the detachment of Death's-Head Hussars occupied the barn beneath. Therefore, they knew the enemy's strength, yet were not afraid. That they were ready-witted was shown by the method evolved for the suppression of that blatant Teuton, Von Halwig. It was evident, too, that they had intended to lie *perdu* till the cavalry were gone, but had been moved to action by a desire to rescue the bound Englishman who was being twitted so outrageously on his own and his country's supposed misfortunes. Who could they be? Were they armed, and sufficiently numerous to rout the Germans? In any event, how could they deliver an effective attack? He, Dalroy, took it for granted that the imminent strangulation of the Guardsman, if successful, was but the prelude to a sharp fight, since Von Halwig's death, though supremely dramatic as an isolated incident, would neither benefit the prisoners nor conduce to the well-being of the people in the loft. How, then, did they purpose dealing with a score of trained soldiers, who must already be fidgeting in the rain, and whose leader, the corporal, might look in at any moment to ascertain what was delaying the young staff captain. Discipline was all very well, but these hussars belonged to a crack regiment, and their colonel would resent strongly the needless exposure of his men and horses to inclement weather. Moreover, how easy it was for the corporal to convey a polite hint to Von Halwig by asking if the chauffeur should not turn the car in readiness for his departure!

All this, and more, cascaded through Dalroy's brain while his enemy was lighting the second cigarette. He was in the plight of a shipwrecked sailor clinging to a sinking craft, who saw a lifeboat approaching, yet dared neither look at nor signal to it. He must bend all his energies now to the task of keeping Von Halwig occupied. What would happen when the noose coiled around the orator's neck? Would it tighten with sufficient rapidity to choke a cry for help? Would it fall awkwardly, and warn him? Were any of the troopers so placed that they could see into that section of the barn, and thus witness their officer's extraordinary predicament? Who could tell? How might a man form any sort of opinion as to the yea or nay of a juggler's feat which savoured of black magic?

Dalroy gave up the effort to guess what the next half-minute might bring forth. Those mysterious beings up there needed the best help he could offer, and his powers in that respect were strictly limited to two channels--he must egg on the talker--he must not watch that rope.

"I am ready to admit Germany's strength on land," he said, resolutely fixing his eyes on an iron cross attached to the Prussian's tunic above the top button. "That is a reasonable claim. How futile otherwise would have been your twenty years of preparation for this very war! But my mind is far too dense to understand how you can disregard the English Channel."

"The *English* Channel!" scoffed Von Halwig. "The impudence of you *verdammt*----No, it's foolish to lose one's temper. Well, I'll explain. The really important part of the *English* Channel is about to become German. For a little time we leave you the surface, but Germany will own the rest. Your navy is about to receive a horrible surprise. We've caught you napping. While Britain was ruling the sea we Germans have been experimenting with it. Our visible fleet is good, but not good enough, so we allowed your naval superiority to keep you quiet until we had perfected our invisible fleet. We are ready now. We possess three submarines to your one; and can build more, and bigger, and better under-sea boats than you. Do you realise what that means? Already we have sunk four of your best cruisers, and they never saw the vessel that destroyed them. We are playing havoc with your mercantile marine. Britain is girdled with mines and torpedoes. No ship can enter or leave any of your ports without incurring the almost unavoidable risk of----"

A rat scampered across one of the speaker's feet, and startled him.

He swore, dropped the cigarette, and lighted another, the third. Like every junior officer of the German *corps d'elite*, he had sedulously copied the manners and bearing of the commissioned ranks in the British army. But your true German is

neurotic; the rat had scratched the veneer. Meanwhile the rope rose quickly half-way to the trap-door; it fell again when Von Halwig donned the prophet's mantle once more.

"We can not only ruin and starve you," he said exultantly, "but we have guns which will beat a way for our troops from Calais to Dover against all the ships you dare mass in those waters. We have you bested in every way. Each German company takes the field with more machine-guns than a British regiment. We have high explosives you never heard of. While you were playing polo and golf our chemists were busy in their laboratories."

His voice rose as he reeled off this litany of war. His perfect command of English was not proof against the guttural clank and crash of German. He became a veritable German talking English, rather than an accomplished linguist using a foreign tongue. Oddly enough, his next tirade showed that he was half-aware of the change. "Old England is done, Captain Dalroy," he chanted. "Young Germany is about to take her place. The world must learn to speak German, not English. Six months from now I'll begin to forget your makeshift language. Six months from now the German Eagle will flaunt in the breeze as securely in London as it flies to-day in Berlin and Brussels, and, it may be, in Paris. If I'm lucky, and get through the war---*Gott in Himm---*"

With a sudden vicious swoop the noose settled on Von Halwig's shoulders, and was jerked taut. A master-hand made that cast. No American cowboy ever placed lasso more neatly on the horns of unruly steer. At one instant the rope was swinging back and forth noiselessly; at the next, rising under the impetus of a gentle flick, it whirled over the Prussian's head and tightened around his neck. He tore madly at it with both hands, but was already lifted off his feet, and in process of being hauled upward with an almost incredible rapidity. There was a momentary delay when his head reached the level of the trap-door; but Dalroy distinctly saw two hands grasp the struggling arms and heave the Guardsman's long body out of sight.

An astounding feature of this tragic episode was the absence of any outcry on the victim's part. He uttered no sound other than a stifled gurgle after that half-completed exclamation was stilled. Possibly, his dazed wits concentrated on the one frantic endeavour--to get rid of that horrible choking thing which had clutched at him from out of the surrounding obscurity.

And now a thick knotted rope plumped down until its end lay on the floor, and a rough-looking fellow, clothed like Maertz or Dalroy himself, descended with the ease and agility of a monkey. He was just the kind of shaggy goblin one might expect to emerge from any such hiding-place; but he carried a slung rifle, and the bewildered prisoner, taking a few steps forward to greet his rescuer, realised that the weapon was a Lee-Enfield of the latest British army pattern.

"'Arf a mo', sir," gurgled the new-comer in a husky and cheerful whisper. "I'll 'old the rope till the next of ahr little knot 'as shinned dahn. Then I'll cut yer loose, an' we'll get the wind up ahtside. Didjever 'ear such a gas-bag as that bloomin' Jarman? Lord luv' a duck, 'e couldn't 'arf tork! But Shiney Black, one of ahrs, 'as just shoved a bynit through 'is gizzard, so *that* cock won't crow agine!"

Dalroy owned only a reader's knowledge of colloquial cockney. He inferred, rather than actually understood, that several British soldiers were secreted in the loft, and that one of them, named "Shiney Black," had closed Von Halwig's career in the twinkling of an eye.

By this time another man had reached the ground. He seized the rope and steadied it, and a third appeared. The first gnome whipped out a knife, freed Dalroy, unslung his rifle, and picked up the electric torch, which he held so that its beam filled the doorway. Man after man came down. Each was armed with a regulation rifle; Dalroy, for once thrown completely off his balance, became dimly aware that in every instance the equipment included bayonet, bandolier, and haversack.

The cohort formed up, too, as though they had rehearsed the procedure in the gymnasium at Aldershot. There was no muttered order, no uncertainty. Rifles were unslung, bayonets fixed, and safety catches turned over soundlessly.

Conquering his blank amazement as best he could, Dalroy inquired of the first sprite how many the party consisted of, all told.

"Twelve an' the corp'ral, sir," came the prompt answer. "The lucky thirteen we calls ahrselves. An' we wanted a bit o' luck ter leg it all the w'y from Monze to this 'ole. Not that we 'adn't ter kill any Gord's quantity o' Yewlans when they troied ter be funny, an' stop us---Here's the corp'ral, sir."

Dalroy was confronted by a clear-eyed man, whose square-shouldered erectness was not concealed by the unkempt clothes of a Belgian peasant. Carrying the rifle at "the slope," and bringing his right hand smartly across to the small of the butt, the leader of this lost legion announced himself.

"Corporal Bates, sir, A Company, 2nd Battalion of the Buffs. That German officer made out, sir, that you were in our

army."

"Yes, I am Captain Dalroy, of the 2nd Bengal Lancers."

Corporal Bates became, if possible, even more clear-eyed.

"Stationed where last year, sir?"

"At Lucknow, with your own battalion."

"Well, I'm--beg pardon, sir, but are you the Lieutenant Dalroy who rode the winner of the Civil Service Cup?"

"Yes, the Maharajah of Chutneypore's Diwan."

"Good enough! You understand, sir, I *had* to ask. Will you take command, sir?"

"No indeed, corporal. I shall only humbly advise. But we must rescue the lady."

"I heard and saw all that passed, sir. The Germans are mounted. The lady's in the car. We were watching through a hole in the roof. The last man remained there so as to warn us if any of 'em came this way. As you know their lingo, sir, I recommend that when we creep out you tell 'em to dismount. They'll do it like a shot. Then we'll rush 'em. Here's the officer's pistol. *You* might take care of the shuffer and the chap by his side."

"Excellent, corporal. Just one suggestion. Let half of your men steal round to the rear, whether or not the troopers dismount. They should be headed off from Oombergen, the village near here, where they have two squadrons."

"Right, sir.--Smithy, take the left half-section, and cut off the retreat on the left.--Ready, sir?--Douse that glim!"

Out went the torch. Fourteen shadows flitted forth into the darkness and rain. The car, with its staring head-lights, was drawn up about thirty yards away, and somewhat to the left. On both sides and in rear were grouped the hussars, men and horses looming up in spectral shapes. The raindrops shone like tiny shafts of polished steel in the two cones of radiance cast by the acetylene lamps.

Dalroy, miraculously become a soldier again, saw instantly that the troopers were cloaked, and their carbines in the buckets. He waited a few seconds while "Smithy" and his band crept swiftly along the wall of the barn. Then, copying to the best of his ability the shrill yell of a German officer giving a command, he shouted, "Squad--dismount!"

He was obeyed with a clatter of accoutrements. He ran forward. Not knowing the "system" perfected by the "lucky thirteen," he looked for an irregular volley at close range, throwing the hussars into inextricable confusion. But not a rifle was fired until some seconds after he himself had shot and killed or seriously wounded the chauffeur and the escort. For all that, thirteen hussars were already out of action. The men who had crossed Belgium from Mons had learnt to depend on the bayonet, which never missed, and was silent and efficacious.

The affair seemed to end ere it had well begun. Only two troopers succeeded in mounting their plunging horses, and they, finding the road to Oombergen barred, tried to bolt westward, whereupon they were bowled over like rabbits. Their terrified chargers, after scampering wildly a few paces, trotted back to the others. Not one of the twenty got away. Hampered by their heavy cloaks, and taken completely by surprise, the hussars offered hardly any resistance, but fell cursing and howling. As for the pair seated in front of the car, they never knew why or how death came.

"Now, then, Smithy, show a light!" shouted Corporal Bates. "Ah! there you are, sir! I meant to make sure of *this* chap. I got him straight off."

The torch revealed Corporal Franz stretched on his back, and frothing blood, Bates's bayonet having pierced his lungs. It were better for the shrewd Berliner if his wits had been duller and his mind cleaner. Not soldierly zeal but a gross animalism led him in the first instance to make a really important arrest. His ghoulish intent was required now in full measure, and the life wheezed out of him speedily as he lay there quivering in the gloom and mire of that rain-swept woodland road. Seldom, even when successfully ambushed, has any small detachment of troops been destroyed so quickly and thoroughly. This killing was almost an artistic triumph.

"Fall in!" growled Bates. "Any casualties?"

"If there is, the blighters oughter be court-mawshalled," chirped Smith.

A momentary shuffling of grotesque forms, and a deep voice boomed, "Half-time score--England twenty, Germany *nil*."

"Left section--look 'em over, and carry any wounded men likely to live into the barn," said the corporal. "Give 'em first aid an' water-bottles. Step lively too! Right section--hold the horses."

This leader and his men were as skilled in the business of slaying an enemy as Robin Hood and his band of poachers in the taking of the king's venison. Dalroy knew they needed no guidance from him. He opened the door of the car.

"Irene!" he said.

She was sitting there, a forlorn figure huddled up in a corner. The windows were closed. Each sheet of glass was so blurred by the swirling rain that she could not possibly make out the actual cause of the external hubbub. After the hard schooling of the past month she realised, of course, that a rescue was being attempted. Naturally, too, she put it down to the escape of Maertz. Although her heart was thrumming wildly, her soul on fire with a hope almost dangerous in its frenzy, she resolved not to stir from her prison until the one man she longed to see again in this world came to free her.

Yet when she heard his voice the tension snapped so suddenly that there was peril in the other extreme. She sat so still that Dalroy said a second time, with a curious sharpness of tone, "Irene!"

"Yes, dear," she contrived to murmur hoarsely.

"It's all over. A squad of British soldiers dropped from the skies. Every German is laid out, Von Halwig with the rest."

"Von Halwig! Is he dead?"

"Yes."

"I am glad. Arthur, they have not wounded you?"

"Not a scratch."

"And Maertz?"

"We must see to him. Will you come out? Never mind the rain."

"The rain! Ah, dear God, that I should feel the blessed rain beating on my face once more in liberty!"

She gave him her hand, and they stood for a moment, peering deep into each other's eyes.

"Arthur," she said, so quietly now that the storm seemed to have passed from her spirit, "you have work to do. I shall not keep you. Tell me where to wait, and there you shall find me. But, before you go, promise me one thing. If we fall again into the hands of the Germans, shoot me before I become their prisoner."

"No need to talk of that," he soothed her. "We have a splendid escort. In two hours----"

She caught him by both shoulders.

"You *must* promise," she cried vehemently.

He was startled by the vibrant passion in her voice. He began then to understand the real horrors of Irene's vigil, whether in the rat-infested darkness of the barn or the cushioned luxury of the limousine.

"Yes," he muttered savagely, "I promise."

Taking her by the arm, he led her to the front of the car, where, clearly visible herself, she would see little if aught of the shambles in rear.

Corporal Bates hurried up.

"Her ladyship all right, sir?" he inquired briskly.

"Yes," replied Dalroy, conscious of a slight tremulousness in the arm he was holding.

Corporal Bates, though in all probability he had never even heard of Bacon's somewhat trite aphorism, was essentially an "exact" man. He never erred as to distinctions of rank or title. His salute was the pride of the Buffs. Blithely regardless of the fact that not more than five minutes earlier Captain Dalroy had confessed himself ignorant of Lady Irene Beresford's actual social status, he alluded to her "correctly."

"I think, sir," he rattled on, "that we ought to be moving. It's quite dark now, an' we have our route marked out."

"How?"

"We've been directed by a priest, sir. The Belgian priests have done us a treat. In every village they showed us the

safest roads. Even when they couldn't make us understand their lingo they could always pencil a map."

"I see. Do you follow the road to Oosterzeele?"

"For about a mile, sir. Then we branch off into a lane leading west to the river Schelde, which we cross by a ferry. Once past that ferry, an' there's no more Germans."

"Very well. Have you searched the enemy for papers?"

"Yes, sir. We're stuffed with note-books an' other little souveneers."

"Do your men ride?"

"Some of 'em, sir, but they'll foot it, if you don't mind. They hate killing horses, so we turn 'em loose generally. This lot should be tied up."

"What of the car?"

"Smithy will attend to that with a bomb, sir."

Bates evidently knew his business, so evidently that Dalroy did not even question him as to the true inwardness of Smithy's attentions.

The squad cleared up their tasks with an extraordinary celerity. Smithy crawled under the automobile with the flashlight, remained there exactly thirty seconds, and reappeared.

The corporal saluted.

"We're ready now, sir," he said. "Perhaps her ladyship will march with you behind the centre file?"

"Do you head the column?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, for a little way, we'll accompany you. There were three in our party, corporal. One, a Belgian named Jan Maertz, risked death to get away and bring help. I'm afraid he has been captured on the Oosterzeele road by two hussars detailed for the job. So, you see, I must try and save him."



CHAPTER XIV

THE MARNE--AND AFTER

"That's awkward, sir," said the corporal, as the detachment moved off into the night, leaving the motor-car's acetylene lamps still blazing merrily.

"Why 'awkward'?" demanded Dalroy.

"Because, when we fellows met in a wood near Monze, we agreed that we'd stick together, and fight to a finish; but if any man strayed by accident, or got hit so badly that he couldn't march, he took his chances, and the rest went on."

"Quite right. How does that affect the present situation?"

"Well, sir," said Bates, after a pause, "there's you an' the lady. Our chaps are interested, if I may say it. You ought to have heard their langwidge, even in whispers, when that--well, I can't call him anything much worse than what he was, a German officer--when he was telling you off, sir."

"What did the German officer say, sergeant?" put in Irene innocently.

"Corporal, your ladyship. Corporal Bates, of the 2nd Buffs."

"I'm sorry to have to interrupt," said Dalroy. "You must give Lady Irene a full account some other time. If you are planning to cross the Schelde to-night there is a long march before you. We part company at the lane you spoke of. I leave her ladyship in the care of you and your men with the greatest confidence. I make for Oosterzeele. If Jan Maertz is a prisoner, I must do what lies in my power to rescue him. If I fail, I'll follow on and report at Gand in the morning."

For a little while none spoke. The other men marched in silence, a safeguard which they had made a rigid rule while piercing their way by night through an unknown country held by an enemy who would not have given quarter to any English soldier.

Bates was really a very sharp fellow. He had sense enough to know that he had said enough already. Dalroy's use of Irene's title conveyed a hint of complications rather beyond the ken of one whose acquaintance with the facts was limited to an overheard conversation between strangers. Moreover, soldier that he was, the corporal realised that one of his own officers was not only deliberately risking his life in order to save that of a Belgian peasant, but felt in honour bound to do no less.

So Irene was left to tread the narrow path unaided. To her lasting credit, she neither flinched nor faltered.

"We may find it difficult to reach Gand, so I'll wait for you in Ostend, Arthur," she said composedly.

Now, these two young people had just been snatched from death, or worse, in a manner which, a few weeks earlier, the least critical reader of romantic fiction would have denounced as so wildly improbable that imagination boggled at it. Irene, too, had unmistakably told the man who had never uttered a word of the love that was consuming him that neither rank nor wealth could interpose any barrier between them. It was hard, almost unbearable, that they should be parted in the very hour when freedom might truly come with the dawn.

Dalroy trudged a good twenty paces before he dared trust his voice. Even then, he blurted out, not the measured agreement which his brain dictated, but a prayer from his very heart. "May God bless and guard you, dear!" was what he said, and Irene's response was choked by a pitiful little sob.

Suddenly Dalroy, whose hearing was quickened by the training of Indian *shikar*, touched the corporal's arm, and stood fast. Bates gave a peculiar click in his throat, and the squad halted, each man's feet remaining in whatever position they happened to be at the moment.

"Horses coming this way," breathed Dalroy.

"Right, sir. This'll be your two, with Jan wot's-his-name, I hope. Leave them to us, sir.--Smithy, Macdonald, and Shiner--forward!"

Three shapes materialised close to the trio in front. The rain was still pelting down, and the trees nearly met overhead, so the road was discernible only by a strip of skyline, itself merely a less dense blackness.

"Them two Yewlans," explained the corporal, "probably bringing a prisoner. Mind you don't hurt him."

No more explicit instructions were given or needed. Of such material were the First Hundred Thousand.

"Take her ladyship back a few yards, sir," gurgled Bates. "The horses may bolt. If they do we must stop 'em before they gallop over us."

Every other consideration was banished instantly by the thrill of approaching combat. By this time, Dalroy was steeped in admiration for his escort's methods, and he awaited developments now with keen professional curiosity. And this is what he saw, after a breathless interval. A flash in the gloom, and the vague silhouettes of two hussars on horseback. One horse reared, the other swerved. One man never spoke. The other rapped out an oath which merged into a frantic squeal. By an odd trick of memory, Dalroy recalled old Joos's description of the death of Busch: "He squealed like a pig."

Then came a cockney voice, "Cheer-o, mitey! We're friends, ammie! Damn it all, you ain't tikin' us for Boshes, are yer?"

"*Hola!* Jan Maertz!" shouted Dalroy.

"*Monsieur!*"

Irene laughed--yes, laughed, though two men had died before her eyes!--at the amazement conveyed by the Walloon's gruff yelp.

"Don't be alarmed! These are friends, British soldiers," went on Dalroy.

"I thought they were devils from hell," was the candid answer.

Jan was unquestionably frightened. For one thing, his hands were tied behind his back, and he was being led by a halter fashioned out of a heel-rope, a plight in which the Chevalier Bayard himself might have quaked. For another, he had been plodding along at the side of one of the horses, thinking bitterly of the fair Leontine, whose buxom waist he would never squeeze again, when a beam of dazzling light revealed a crouching, nondescript being which flung itself upward in a panther-like spring, and buried a bayonet to the socket in the body of the nearest trooper. No wonder Jan was scared.

The soldiers had caught both horses. Dalroy, a cavalryman, had abandoned the earlier remounts with a twinge of regret. He thought now there was no reason why he and Irene should not ride, as the day's tramp, not to speak of the strain of the past hour, might prove a drawback before morning.

"Can you sit a horse astride?" he asked her.

"I prefer it," she said promptly.

Bates offered no objection, as long as they followed in rear. The hussar's cloaks came in useful, and Dalroy buckled on a sword-belt. Jan announced that he was good for another twenty miles provided he could win clear of those *sales Alboches*. He was eager to relate his adventures, but Dalroy quieted him by the downright statement that if his tongue wagged he might soon be either a prisoner again or dead.

A night so rife with hazard could hardly close tamely. The rain cleared off, and the stars came out ere they reached the ferry on the Schelde, and a scout sent ahead came back with the disquieting news that a strong cavalry picket, evidently on the alert, held the right bank. But the thirteen had made a specialty of disposing of German pickets in the dark. In those early days of the war, and particularly in Flanders, Teuton nerves were notoriously jumpy, so the little band crept forward resolutely, dodging from tree to tree, and into and out of ditches, until they could see the stars reflected in the river. Dalroy and Irene had dismounted at the first tidings of the enemy, turning a pair of contented horses into a meadow. They and Maertz, of course, had to keep well behind the main body.

The troopers, veritable Uhlans this time, had posted neither sentry nor vedette in the lane. Behind them, they thought, lay Germany. In front, across the river, the small army of Belgium held the last strip of Belgian territory, which then ran in an irregular line from Antwerp through Gand to Nieupoort. So the picket watched the black smudge of the opposite bank, and talked of the Kron-Prinz's stalwarts hacking their way into Paris, and never dreamed of being assailed from the rear, until a number of sturdy demons pounced on them, and did some pretty bayonet-work.

Fight there was none. Those Uhlans able to run ran for their lives. One fellow, who happened to be mounted, clapped spurs to his charger, and would have got away had not Dalroy delivered a most satisfactory lunge with the hussar sabre.

No sooner had Bates collected and counted sixteen people than the tactics were changed. Five rounds rapid rattled up the road and along the banks.

"I find that a bit of noise always helps after we get the windup with the bayonet, sir," he explained to Dalroy. "If any of 'em think of stopping they move on again when they hear a hefty row."

A Belgian picket, guarding the ferry, and, what was of vast importance to the fugitives, the ferry-boat, wondered, no doubt, what was causing such a commotion among the enemy. Luckily, the officer in charge recognised a new ring in the rifles. He could not identify it, but was certain it came from neither a Belgian nor a German weapon.

Thus, in a sense, he was prepared for Jan Maertz's hail, and was even more reassured by Irene's clear voice urging him to send the boat.

Two volunteers manned the oars. In a couple of minutes the unwieldy craft bumped into a pontoon, and was soon crowded with passengers. Never was sweeter music in the ears of a little company of Britons than the placid lap of the current, followed by the sharp challenge of a sentry: "*Qui va la?*"

"A party of English soldiers, a Belgian, and an English lady," answered Dalroy.

An officer hurried forward. He dared not use a light, and, in the semi-obscurity of the river bank, found himself confronted by a sinister-looking crew. He was cautious, and exceedingly sceptical when told briefly the exact truth. His demand that all arms and ammunition should be surrendered before he would agree to send them under escort to the village of Aspen was met by a blank refusal from Bates and his myrmidons. Dalroy toned down this cartel into a graceful plea that thirteen soldiers, belonging to eight different regiments of the British army, ought not to be disarmed by their gallant Belgian allies, after having fought all the way from Mons to the Schelde.

Irene joined in, but Jan Maertz's rugged speech probably carried greater conviction. After a prolonged argument, which the infuriated Germans might easily have interrupted by close-range volleys, the difficulty was adjusted by the unfixing of bayonets and the slinging of rifles. A strong guard took them to Aspen, where they arrived about eleven o'clock. They were marshalled in the kitchen of a comfortable inn, and interviewed by a colonel and a major.

Oddly enough, Corporal Bates was the first to gain credence by producing his map, and describing the villages he and his mates had passed through, the woods in which they hid for days together, and the cures who had helped them. Bates's story was an epic in itself. His men crowded around, and grinned approvingly when he rounded off each curt account of a "scrap" by saying, "Then the Yewlans did a bunk, an' we pushed on."

Dalroy, acting as interpreter, happened to glance at the circle of cheerful faces during a burst of merriment aroused by a reference to Smithy's ingenuity in stealing a box of hand grenades from an ammunition wagon, and destroying a General's motor-car by fixing an infernal machine in the gear-box. The mere cranking-up of the engine, it appeared, exploded the detonator.

"Is that what you were doing under the car outside the barn?" he inquired, catching Smithy's eye.

"Yes, sir. I've on'y one left aht o' six," said Smithy, producing an ominous-looking object from a pocket.

"Is the detonator in position?"

"Yus, sir."

"Will you kindly take it out, and lay it gently on the table?"

Smithy obeyed, with reassuring deftness.

Dalroy was about to comment on the phenomenal risk of carrying such a destructive bomb so carelessly when he happened to notice the roll collar of a khaki tunic beneath Smithy's blue linen blouse.

"Have you still retained part of your uniform?" he inquired.

"Oh, yus, sir. We all 'ave. We weren't goin' to strip fer fear of any bally Germans--beg pawdon, miss--an' if it kime to a reel show-dahn we meant ter see it through in reggelation kit."

Every man of twelve had retained his tunic, trousers, and puttees, which were completely covered by the loose-fitting garments supplied by the priest of a hamlet near Louvignies, who concealed them in a loft during four days until the mass of German troops had surged over the French frontier. The thirteenth, a Highlander, actually wore his kilt!

The Belgian officers grew enthused. They insisted on providing a *vin d'honneur*, which Irene escaped by pleading utter fatigue, and retiring to rest.

Dalroy opened his eyes next morning on a bright and sunlit world. It might reasonably be expected that his thoughts would dwell on the astounding incidents of the past month. They did nothing of the sort. He tumbled out of a

comfortable bed, interviewed the proprietor of the "*Trois Couronnes*," and asked that worthy man if he understood the significance of a Bank of England five-pound note. During his many and varied 'scapes, Dalroy's store of money, carried in an inner pocket of his waistcoat, had never been touched. *Monsieur le Patron* knew all that was necessary about five-pound notes. Very quickly a serviceable cloth suit, a pair of boots, some clean linen, a tin bath, and a razor were staged in the bedroom, while the proprietor's wife was instructed to attend to mademoiselle's requirements.

Dalroy was shaving, for the first time in thirty-three days, when voices reached him through the open window. He listened.

Smithy had cornered Shiney Black in the hotel yard, and, in his own phrase, was puttin' 'im through the 'oop.

"You don't know it, Shiney, but you're reely a verdamd Henglishman," he said, with an accurate reproduction of Von Halwig's manner if not his accent. "The grite German nytion is abart ter roll yer in the mud, an' wipe its big feet on yer tummy. You've awsked fer it long enough, an' nah yer goin' ter git it in the neck. Blood an' sausage! The cheek o' a silly little josser like you tellin' the Lord-'Igh-Cock-a-doodle-doo that 'e can't boss everybody as 'e dam well likes! Shiney, you're done in! The Keyser sez so, an' 'e ought ter know. W'y? That shows yer miserable hignorance! The Keyser sez so, I tell yer, so none o' yer lip, or I, Von Schmit, o' the Dirty 'Alf-Hundredth, will biff you on the boko. But no! I must keep me 'air on. As you an' hevery hother verdamd Henglishman will be snuffed aht before closin'-time, I shall grashiously tell thee wot's wot an' 'oo's 'oo. Germany, the friend o' peace--no, you blighter, not Chawlie Peace, the burglar, but the lydy in a nightie, wiv a dove in one 'and an' a holive-branch in the other--Germany will wide knee-deep in Belgian an' French ber-lud so as to 'and you the double Nelson. By land an' sea an' pawcels post she'll rine fire an' brimstone on your pore thick 'ead. What 'ave *you* done, you'd like ter know? Wot '*aven't* you done? Aren't you alive? Wot crime can ekal that when the Keyser said, 'Puff! aht--tallow-candle!' *Ach*, pig-dorg, I shpfit on yer!"

"You go an' wash yer fice once more, Smithy," said Shiney, forcing a word in edgeways. "It'll improve your looks, per'aps. I dunno."

"That's done it," yelled Smithy, warming to his theme. "That's just yer narsty, scoffin' British w'y o' speakin' to quiet, respectable Germans. That's wot gets us mad. I'm surprised at yer, Shiney! Yer hattitude brings tears to me heyes. Time an' agine you've 'eard ahr bee-utiful langwidge----"

"I 'ave, indeed," interrupted Shiney. "But none o' it 'ere, me lad. There's a reel born lydy in one o' them bedrooms."

"I'm not torkin' o' the kind of tosh *you* hunderstand," retorted Smithy. "I'm alludin' to the sweet-sahndin' langwidge o' our conquerors. You've 'eard it hoffer enuf from the sorft mowvves o' Yewlans. On'y larst night you 'eard it spoke by that stawr hactor, Von 'Allwig, of the Potsdam Busters. Yet you can git nothink orf yer chest but a low-dahn cockney wheeze w'en a benefactor's givin' yer the strite tip. Pore Shiney! Ye think yer goin' back to Hengland, 'ome, an' beauty--to the barrick-square, bully-beef an' booze, an' plenty o' it. Dontcher believe it! Wot you're in fer is a dose o' German *Kultur*. W'en yer ship's been torpedoed fourteen times between Hostend an' Dover, w'en yer sarth-eastern trine 'as bumped inter a biker's dozen o' different sorts o' mines, w'en you're Zepped the minnit you crosse the Strend to the nearest pub, you'll begin ter twig wot the Hemperor of All the 'Uns is ackshally a-doin' of. It's hall hup wiv yer, Shiney! You've ether got ter lie dahn an' doi, er learn German. Nah, w'ich is it ter be? Go west wiv yer benighted country, or go nap on the Keyser?"

"Torkin' o' pubs reminds me," yawned Shiney. "I couldn't get any forrarder on that ginger-pop the Belgian horficers gev us. In one o' them Yewlans' pawket-books there was five French quid. Wot abart a bottle o' beer?"

"What abart it?" agreed Smithy instantly.

The soap was drying on Dalroy's face, but he thrust his head out of the window to look at two of Britain's first line swaggering through the gateway of the inn, and whistling, "It's a long, long way to Tipperary." Smith and Shiney were true types of the somewhat cynical but ever ready-witted and laughter-loving Londoner, who makes such a first-rate fighting man. They were just a couple of ordinary "Tommies." The deadly fury of Mons, the daily and nightly peril of the march through a land stricken by a brutal enemy, the score of little battles which they had conducted with an amazing skill and hardihood--these phases of immortality troubled them not at all. An eye-rolling and sabre-rattling emperor might rock the social foundations of half the world, his braggart henchmen destroy that which they could never rebuild, his frantic gang of poets and professors indite Hymns of Hate and blasphemous catch-words like "Gott strafe England"; but the Smithies and Shinies of the British army would never fail to cock a humorous eye at the vapourers, and say sarcastically, "Well, an' wot abart it?"

Somehow, on 7th September 1914, there was a hitch in the naval programme devised by the *Deutscher Marineamt*. The Belgian packet-boat, *Princess Clementine*, steamed from Ostend to Dover through a smiling sea unvexed by Krupp or any other form of *Kultur*. Warships, big and little, were there in squadrons; but gaunt super-Dreadnought and perky destroyer alike was aggressively British.

England, too, looked strangely unperturbed. There had been sad scenes on the quay at the Belgian port, but a policeman on duty at the shore end of the gangway at Dover seemed to indicate by a majestic calm that any person causing an uproar would be given the alternative of paying ten shillings and costs or "doing" seven days.

The boat was crowded with refugees; but Dalroy, knowing the wiliness of stewards, had experienced slight difficulty in securing two chairs already loaded with portmanteaus and wraps. He heard then, for the first time, why Irene fled so precipitately from Berlin. She was a guest in the house of a Minister of State, and one of the Hohenzollern princelings came there to luncheon on that fateful Monday, 3rd August.

He had invited himself, though he must have been aware that his presence was an insult and an annoyance to the English girl, whom he had pestered with his attentions many times already. He was excited, drank heavily, and talked much. Irene had arranged to travel home next day, but the wholly unforeseen and swift developments in international affairs, no less than the thinly-veiled threats of a royal admirer, alarmed her into an immediate departure. At the twelfth hour she found that her host, father of two girls of her own age--the school friends, in fact, to whom she was returning a visit--was actually in league with her persecutor to keep her in Berlin.

She ran in panic, her one thought being to join her sister in Brussels, and reach home.

"So you see, dear," she said, with one of those delightfully shy glances which Dalroy loved to provoke, "I was quite as much sought after as you, and I would certainly have been stopped on the Dutch frontier had I travelled by any other train."

The two were packed into a carriage filled to excess. They had no luggage other than a small parcel apiece, containing certain articles of clothing which might fetch sixpence in a rag-shop, but were of great and lasting value to the present owners.

At Charing Cross, while they were walking side by side down the platform, Irene shrieked, "There they are!" She darted forward and flung herself into the arms of two elderly people, a brother in khaki, with the badges of a Guard regiment, and a sister of the flapper order.

Dalroy had been told at Dover to report at once to the War Office, as he carried much valuable information in his head and Von Halwig's well-filled note-book in his pocket. He hung back while the embracing was in progress. Then Irene introduced him to her family.

"You'll dine with us, Arthur," she said simply. "I'll not tell them a word of our adventures till you are present."

"You could have heard a pin drop," was the excited comment of the flapper sister when endeavouring subsequently to thrill another girl with the sensation created by Irene's quiet words. Literally, this trope was not accurate, because the station was noisier than usual. Figuratively, it met the case exactly.

Lady Glastonbury, a gray-haired woman with wise eyes, promptly emulated the action of the British army during the retreat from Mons, and "saved the situation."

"Of course you'll stay with us, too, Captain Dalroy," she said with pleasant insistence. "Like Irene, you must have lost everything, and need time to refit."

Dalroy murmured some platitude, lifted his hat, and only regained his composure after two narrow escapes from being run over by taxis while crossing Northumberland Avenue.

A newsboy tore past, shouting in the vernacular, "Great Stand by Sir John French."

Dalroy was reminded of Smithy, and Shiney, and Corporal Bates. He saw again Jan Maertz waving a farewell from the quay at Ostend. He wondered how old Joos was faring, and Leontine, and Monsieur Pochard, and the cure of Verviers.

Another boy scampered by. He carried a contents bill. Heavy black type announced that the British were "holding" Von Kluck on the Marne. Dalroy's eyes kindled. *His work lay there*. When the soldier's task was ended he would come back to Irene.

CHAPTER XV

"CARRY ON!"

After a few delightful days in London, Dalroy walked down Whitehall one fine morning to call at the War Office for orders. Irene went with him. He expected to be packed off to France that very evening, so the two meant making the utmost of the fast-speeding hours. The Intelligence Department had assimilated all the information Dalroy could give, had found it good, and had complimented him. As a Bengal Lancer, whose regiment was presumably in India, he would probably be attached to some cavalry unit of the Expeditionary Force; from being an hunted outlaw, with a price on his head, he would be quietly absorbed by the military machine. Very smart he looked in his khaki and brown leather; Irene, who one short week earlier deemed *sabots en cuir* the height of luxury, was dressed *de rigueur* for luncheon at the Savoy.

Many eyes followed them as they crossed Trafalgar Square and dodged the traffic flowing around the base of King Charles's statue. An alert recruiting-sergeant, clinching the argument, pointed out the tall, well-groomed officer to a lanky youth whose soul was almost afire with martial decision.

"There y'are," he said, with emphatic thumb-jerk, "that's wot the British army will make of you in a couple of months. An' just twig the sort o' girl you can sort out of the bunch. Cock yer eye at *that*, will you?"

Thus, all unconsciously, Irene started the great adventure for one of Kitchener's first half-million.

She was not kept waiting many minutes in an ante-room. Dalroy reappeared, smiling mysteriously, yet, as Irene quickly saw, not quite so content with life as when he entered those magic portals, wherein a man wrestles with an algebraical formula before he finds the department he wants.

"Well," she inquired, "having picked your brains, are they going to court-martial you for being absent without leave?"

"I cross to-night," he said, leading her toward the Horse Guards' Parade. "It's Belgium, not France. I'm on the staff. My appointment will appear in the gazette to-morrow. That's fine, but I'd rather----"

Irene stopped, almost in the middle of the road.

"And you'll wear a cap with a red band and a golden lion, and those ducky little red tabs on the collar! Come at once, and buy them! I refuse to lunch with you otherwise."

"A man must not wear the staff insignia until he is gazetted," he reminded her.

"Oh!" She was pathetically disappointed.

"But, in my case," he went on, "I am specifically ordered to travel in staff uniform, so, as I leave London at seven o'clock----"

"You can certainly lunch in all your glory," she vowed. "There's an empty taxi!"

Of course, it was pleasant to be on the staff, and thus become even more admired by Irene, if there is a degree surpassing that which is already superlative; but the fly in the ointment of Dalroy's new career lay in the fact that the battle of the Aisne was just beginning, and every British heart throbbed with the hope that the Teuton hordes might be chased back to the frontier as speedily as they had rushed on Paris. Dalroy himself, an experienced soldier, though he had watched those grim columns pouring through the valley of the Meuse, yielded momentarily to the vision splendid. He longed to be there, taking part in the drive. Instead, he was being sent to Belgium, some shrewd head in the War Office having decided that his linguistic powers, joined to a recent first-hand knowledge of local conditions, would be far more profitably employed in Flanders than as a squadron leader in France.

Thus, when that day of mellow autumn had sped all too swiftly, and he had said his last good-bye to Irene, it was to Dover he went, being ferried thence to Ostend in a destroyer.

In those early weeks of the war all England was agog with the belief that Antwerp would prove a rankling thorn in the ribs of the Germans, while men in high places cherished the delusion that a flank attack was possible along the Ostend-Bruges-Brussels line.

But Dalroy was an eminently sane person. Two hours of clear thinking in the train re-established his poise. When the Lieutenant-Commander in charge of the destroyer took him below in mid-Channel for a smoke and a drink, and the talk turned on strategy, the soldier dispelled an alluring mirage with a breath of common sense.

"The scheme is nothing short of rank lunacy," he said. "We haven't the men, France can spare none of hers, and Belgium must be crushed when the big battalions meet. Germany has at least three millions in the field already. Paris has been saved by a miracle. By some other miracle we may check the on-rush in France, but, if we start dividing our forces, even Heaven won't help us."

"Surely you'll admit that we should strengthen the defence of Antwerp?" argued the sailor.

"I think it impracticable. Liege only held out until the new siege howitzers arrived. Namur fell at once. Why should we expect Antwerp to be impregnable?"

The navy deemed the army pessimistic, but, exactly a month later, the Lieutenant-Commander remembered that conversation, and remarked to a friend that about the middle of September he took to Ostend "a chap on the Staff who seemed to know a bit."

It is now a matter of historical fact when Von Kluck and Sir John French began their famous race to the north, the Belgian army only escaped from Antwerp by the skin of its teeth. The city itself was occupied by the Germans on October 9th, Bruges was entered on the 13th, Von Bessler's army reached the coast on the 15th, and the British and Belgians were attacked on the line of the Yser next day.

Thus, fate decreed that Dalroy should witness the beginning and the end of Germany's shameless outrage on a peaceful and peace-loving country. On August 2nd, 1914, King Albert ruled over the most prosperous and contented small kingdom in Europe. Within eleven weeks he had become, as Emile Cammaerts finely puts it, "lord of a hundred fields and a few spires."

Though Dalroy should live far beyond the allotted span of man's life, he will never forget the strain, the misery, the sheer hopelessness of the second month he spent in Belgium. The climax came when he found himself literally overwhelmed by the host of refugees, wounded men, and scattered military units which sought succour in, and, as the iron ring of *Kultur* drew close, transport from Ostend.

With the retreat of the Belgian army towards Dunkirk, and the return to England of such portion of the ill-fated Naval Division as was not interned in Holland, his military duties ceased. In his own and the country's interests he ought to have made certain of a berth on the last passenger steamer to leave Ostend for England. He, at least, could have done so, though there were sixty thousand frenzied people crowding the quays, and hundreds, if not thousands, of comparatively wealthy men offering fabulous sums for the use of any type of vessel which would take them and their families to safety.

But, at the eleventh hour, Dalroy heard that a British Red Cross Hospital party, which had extricated itself from the clutch of the mailed fist, was even then *en route* from Bruges to Ostend by way of Zeebrugge. Knowing they would be in dire need of help, he resolved to stay, though his action was quixotic, since no mercy would be shown him if he fell into the hands of the Germans. He took one precaution, therefore. Some service rendered to a tradesman had enabled him to buy a reliable and speedy motor bicycle, on which, as a last resource, he might scurry to Dunkirk. His field service baggage was reposing in a small hotel near the harbour. For all he can tell, it is reposing there yet; he never saw it again after he leaped into the saddle of the Ariel, and sped through the cobbled streets which led to the north road along the coast. The hour was then about six o'clock on the evening of October 13th.

A Belgian staff officer had assured him that the Germans could not possibly occupy Ostend until late next day. The Belgian army, though hopelessly outnumbered, had never been either disorganised nor outmanoeuvred. The retreat to the Yser, if swift, was orderly, and the rearguard could be trusted to follow its time-table.

Hence, before it was dark, Dalroy determined to cover the sixteen miles to Zeebrugge. The Hospital, which was conveying British and Belgian wounded, would travel thence by the quaint steam-tramway which links up the towns on the littoral. It might experience almost insuperable difficulties at Zeebrugge or Ostend, and he was one of the few aware of the actual time-limit at disposal, while a field hospital bereft of transport is a peculiarly impotent organisation.

Road and rail ran almost parallel among the sand dunes. At various crossings he could ascertain whether or not any train had passed recently in the direction of Ostend, thus making assurance doubly sure, though the station-master at the town terminus was positive that the next tram would not arrive until half-past seven. Dalroy meant intercepting that tram at Blankenberge.

Naturally, the train was late in reaching the latter place, but the only practicable course was to wait there, rather than risk missing it. A crowd of terrified people gathered around the calm-eyed, quiet-mannered Briton, and appealed for advice. Poor creatures! they imposed a cruel dilemma. On the one hand, it was monstrous to send a whole community flying for their lives along the Ostend road; on the other, he had witnessed the fate of Vise and Huy. Yet, by remaining

in their homes, they had some prospect of life and ultimate liberty, while their lot would be far worse the instant they were plunged into the panic and miseries of Ostend. So he comforted the unhappy folk as best he might, though his heart was wrung with pity at sight of the common faith in the Red Cross brassard. Men, women, and children wore the badge indiscriminately. They regarded it as a shield against the Uhlan's lance! Most fortunately for that strip of Belgium, the policy of "frightfulness" was moderated once the country was overrun. So far as local occurrences have been permitted to become known, the coast towns have been spared the fate of those in the interior.

To Dalroy's great relief, the incoming tram from Zeebrugge brought the British hospital. There were four doctors, eight nurses, and fifty-three wounded men, including a sergeant and ten privates of the Gordon Highlanders, who, like Bates, Smithy, and the rest, had scrambled across Belgium after Mons.

The train offered an extraordinary spectacle. Soldiers and civilians were packed in it and on it. Men and women sat precariously on the roofs of the ramshackle carriages, stood on the buffers and couplings, or clung to door-handles. Not even foothold was to be had for love or money on that train at Blankenberge.

Dalroy, who dared not let go his machine, contrived to get a word with the Medical Officer in charge.

As ever, the Briton made light of past troubles.

"We've had the time of our lives!" was the cheery comment. "After Mons we were left in a field hospital with a mixed crowd of British, French, and Germans. Of course, we looked after all alike, and that saved our bacon, because even a German general had to try and behave decently when he found a thousand of his own men in our care. So he sent us to Brussels with a safe conduct, and from Brussels we were allowed to make for Ostend--had to leg it, though, the last twenty miles to the Belgian outposts. Then we refitted, and started for Bruges, where we've been at work in a convent for five weeks. The remnant of the Belgian army passed through Bruges yesterday and the day before, so we cleared out all possible cases, and started away with the crocks early this morning. At the last minute we were hustled a bit by a Taube dropping bombs on the station. One bomb took from us a van-load of kit. We haven't a thing except the stretchers and what we're wearing."

"I'll ride on now, and meet you at Ostend," said Dalroy. He had not the heart to damp the spirits of the party by telling of the chaos awaiting them. Sufficient for the next hour would be the evil thereof.

"I say, it's awfully good of you to take all this trouble," said the doctor.

"I've lost my job with the departure of our troops, so I had to find something to do," smiled the other.

A fleet of Belgian armoured cars cleared a road through the stream of fugitives, and Dalroy kept close in rear, so he made a fast return journey. Dashing past the town station, near which the steam-tram would disgorge its freight, he headed straight for the Gare Maritime. It was now dusk, but he saw at once that the crowd besieging the entrance was denser and more frantic than ever, though the last steamer whose departure was announced officially had left early in the day.

He ascertained from a helpless policeman that the rumour had gone round of a vessel coming in; the sullen, apathetic multitude, waiting there for it knew not what chance of rescue, had suddenly become dangerous.

"The American Consul, who has worked hard all day, has had to give it up," added the man. "He is closing his office."

Just then a harbour official, minus his cap, and with coat badly torn during a violent passage through the mob, strode by, breathless but hurried.

Dalroy recognised him, having had much business with the port authorities during the preceding week.

"Is it true that a steamer is in sight?" he asked.

"Monsieur, what am I to say?" and the accompanying gesture was eloquent. "It is only a little cargo boat, an English coaster. If she nears the quay there will be a riot, and perhaps thousands of lives lost. The harbour-master has sent me to ask the mayor if he should not signal her to anchor outside until daylight."

Prompt decision and steadfast action were Dalroy's chief qualities. If luck favoured him he might set his own project on foot before the mayor's messenger burked it by a civic order. He thanked the man and rode off.

Happily the tram came from Blankenberge without undue delay. He had only dismounted when the engine clanked into the station square. Already his soldier's eye had noted that the Gordons and some of the Belgian soldiers had retained their rifles and bayonets.

"Get your crowd into motion at once," he said to the doctor, as soon as the latter alighted. "Nothing you have gone

through during the last two months will equal the excitement of the next quarter of an hour. But, if your cripples can fix bayonets and show a bold front, we have a fighting chance--no more. And unless we leave Ostend before to-morrow morning it'll be a German prison for you and a firing party for me."

Men who have smelt war and death, not once but many times, do not hesitate and argue when a staff officer talks in that strain.

With an almost marvellous rapidity the members of the mission and the wounded able to walk were formed up, stretchers were lifted, and the march began. Dalroy and the doctor headed the procession with the Gordons, and the mere appearance of a Highlander enforces awe in any part of Europe.

Dalroy explained matters as they went, and impressed on the escort the absolute necessity of showing a determined front. On nearing the packed mass of people clamouring outside the Gare Maritime he vociferated some sharp orders, the rifles came from the "slope" to the "ready," and those on the outskirts of the throng saw a number of war-stained kilties advancing on them with threatening mien.

By some magic a way was opened out. The vanguard knew exactly how to act, and faced about when the main gates were reached. Here there was a hitch, but a threat to fire a volley through the bars was effectual, and the whole party got through, though even the hardened doctors looked grave when they heard the wail of anguish that went up from the multitude without as the gates clashed against further ingress.

Of course, as might be expected, there were hundreds of influential people, both British subjects and Belgians, already inside. To them Dalroy gave no immediate heed. Merely requesting the doctor to keep his contingent together and distinct, he sought the harbour-master.

No orders had been received as yet from the mayor, and the incoming steamer, quite a small craft, was already in the channel.

The harbour-master, a decent fellow, whose sole anxiety was to act for the best, readily agreed to Dalroy's plan, so the vessel, whose skipper had actually brought her to Ostend that evening "on spec," as he put it, was moored at a distance of some ten feet from the quay.

"How many people can you carry?" was Dalroy's first question to the captain.

"Well, sir," came the surprising answer, "we're licensed by the Board of Trade to carry forty-five passengers in summer, but, in a pinch like this, I'll try and stow away two hundred!"

After that there was no hitch. A gangway was fixed in position, the armed guard were disposed around it, and the doctors and Dalroy, with a representative of the burgomaster who arrived later, constituted themselves a committee of selection. The hospital staff and their patients were placed on board first. Wounded soldiers picked up in Ostend itself were given the next claim. Then British subjects, and, finally, Belgian refugees, were admitted.

It was a long and tedious yet almost heart-breaking business, but the order of priority established a method whereby claims might be tested with some show of equity. At last, at some hour, none knew or cared exactly when, the steamer forged slowly out into the channel, backed, and swung, amid the shrieks and lamentations of the thousands who were left to the tender mercies of *Kultur*.

In addition to her crew, she carried 739 passengers, mostly wounded soldiers, women, and children!

There was no room to lie down, save in the space rigidly preserved for the stretcher cases. The decks, the cabins, the holds, were packed tight with a living freight. Surely never before has vessel put to sea so loaded with human beings.

The captain decided not to attempt the crossing by night and lay to till morning. The ship's boats returned to the quay, and brought off some food and water.

Meanwhile, leaders of sections were chosen, the people were instructed as to the danger of lurching, and ropes were arranged so that any unexpected movement of the hull might be counteracted.

At eight o'clock next morning the engines were started; at ten o'clock that night the ship was berthed at Dover. By the mercy of Providence the sea remained smooth all day, though the mid-channel tidal swell caused dangerous and anxious moments. Of course, there were mine-fields to be avoided, and strong tides to be cheated, but, allowing for these hindrances, the trip occupied fourteen hours, whereas the Belgian mail-packets employed on the same journey used to adhere steadily to a schedule of three hours and three-quarters!

On the way, death took his dread toll among the wounded, but to nothing like the extent that might well have been

feared. The bringing of that great company of people from the horrors of the German occupation of Belgium to the safe harbourage of the United Kingdom was a magnificent achievement, worthy of high place in the crowded and glorious annals of British seamanship.

So Irene and her true knight met once more, only to part again after three blissful days. This time, Dalroy went to France, and took his place in the fighting line. He endured the drudgery of that first winter in the trenches, shared in the gain and loss of Neuve Chapelle, earned his majority, and seemed to lead a charmed life until a high explosive shell burst a little too close during the second day at Loos.

He was borne off the field as one nearly dead. But his wounds were slight, and he had only been stunned by the concussion. By the time this diagnosis was confirmed, however, he was at home and enjoying six weeks' leave.

Nothing very remarkable would have happened if the Earl of Glastonbury, an elderly but most observant peer, had not created a rare commotion one day at luncheon.

Dalroy was up in town after a few days' rest at his uncle's vicarage in the Midlands; he and the younger members of the household were planning a round of theatres and suchlike dissipations, when the Earl said quietly:

"You people seem to be singularly devoid of original ideas. George Alexander, Charlie Hawtrey, and the latest revue star provide a sure and certain refuge for every country cousin who comes to London for a fortnight's mild dissipation."

"What do you suggest, dad?" demanded Irene.

"Why not have a war wedding?"

"Oh, let's!" cried the flapper sister ecstatically.

Dalroy swallowed whole some article of food, and Irene blushed scarlet. But "father" had said the thing, and "mother" had smiled, so Dalroy, whose wildest dreams hitherto had dwelt on marriage at the close of the war as a remote possibility, bestirred himself like a good soldier-man, rushing all fences at top speed.

The brother in the Guards secured five days' leave, a wounded but exceedingly good-looking Bengal Lancer was empanelled as "best man" (to the joy and torment of the flapper, who pined during a whole week after his departure), and, almost before they well knew what was happening, Dalroy and his bride found themselves speeding toward Devon in a fine car on their honeymoon.

"And why not?" growled the Earl, striving to comfort his wife when she wept a little at the thought that her beautiful daughter, her eldest-born, would henceforth have a nest of her own. "Dash it all, Mollie, they'll only be young once, and this rotten war looks like lasting a decade! Had we searched the British Isles we couldn't have found a better mate for our girl. He's just the sort of chap who will worship Irene all his life, and he has in him the makings of a future commander-in-chief, or I'm a Dutchman!"

As his lordship is certainly not a Dutchman, but unmistakably English, aristocratic, and county, it is permissible to hope that his prophecy may be fulfilled. Let us hope, too, if Dalroy ever leads the armed manhood of Britain, it will be a cohort formed to render aggressive war impossible. That, at least, is no idle dream. It should be the sure and only outcome of the world's greatest agony.

THE END