

# BELGIUM

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE

BY

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AND AUTHOR OF  
"FORTY YEARS OF IT,"  
ETC.

VOLUME II



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# BELGIUM

## I

### A VISIT TO THE FRONT

I HAD seen one side, and a hideous side, of the war, but that was the side behind the scenes; and I was always regretting, or reminding myself that one day I should regret, that I had not seen that other side, of martial glory and splendour and heroism, of which we had only the echoes in the distant thud and boom of the cannonading there from the trenches so far to the south of us—the sound that could be heard always when by day one was away from the noises of the city or when by night they were stilled. I had often reproached Lancken with inhospitality in not taking Villalobar and me to see their great spectacle and finally one afternoon he asked me if I was really in earnest, and when I said that of course I was, he forthwith arranged the excursion for the next day, the twentieth of July, and we drove away in the afternoon—Lancken, Villalobar, Count Harrach and I—in Lancken's big grey automobile. We took the familiar road to Hal, and, driving rapidly by Enghien and Ath, we came to Tournay by tea-time. There, after inspecting the cathedral with its famous five towers, a noble specimen of medieval architecture dating from the eleventh century, we went to a

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small *pâtisserie* for tea. *Madame la patronne*, a bright, talkative little woman, was full of curiosity as to who we were and what business we were about, and when von der Lancken said:

*"Nous venons de visiter votre belle cathédrale;"* the woman replied:

*"Oui, et puisque vous avez détruit la belle cathédrale de Rheims j'espère que vous épargnerez la nôtre!"*

The Baron turned as red as the lining of the white collar of his bluish-grey cape—and we sought the motor.

The road to Lille was a descent into Avernus, with destruction and desolation more and more apparent as we passed on. One could almost mark the frontier between Belgium and France by the changed aspect of the population and the scene; instead of the bustling, gossiping groups, we saw only sad women and bedraggled children and old and hobbling men, but not a strong man or a man in middle years—all were off to the front. It was a depressing sight and I felt a sorrow settle over me that was not lifted during all our stay; it is not lifted yet, nor ever will be. I cannot forget those tragic faces, that expression of humiliation, the degradation of living under a conqueror. We entered Lille toward evening with an aeroplane flying high above us amid the bursting shrapnel with which the Germans were trying to bring it down, and from that moment on we were not once beyond the sound of guns.

Lille is an industrial centre, very much like any one of a dozen small cities in the Middle West. In times of peace it is dingy enough, but then, with life prostrate, empty of men and of all who could get away, and swarming with foreign soldiers, it was beyond words haggard, forlorn, and disreputable; everywhere there was dirt,

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the disgusting dirt of war, that seemed to sift into every crevice, every crack and cranny, and to cover everything. The Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, who commanded that district, had invited us to dine with him that night. Villalobar had scented the function from afar and we had taken dinner jackets, absurd as it seemed to do so with a visit to the trenches in prospect, and I dressed that evening in my room overlooking the courtyard of l'Hôtel de l'Europe, the typical caravansari of the French provinces, with the sound of booming guns in my ears.

An old servitor in long dark grey coat with two rows of brass buttons, his bald head bowed in an habitual servile stoop, descended the steps to meet us when at twilight we entered through the great gate between bearded sentinels and drove up to the château which the Prince occupied outside the town. The long *salon* into which we were shown was furnished in the execrable taste of some new rich manufacturer and ornamented with a portrait-bust of the proprietor, which, as a last touch of taste and to lend an air of artistic verisimilitude, the resemblance so much desired in portraiture, wore a pince-nez on its marble nose.

The officers who composed the suite of the Crown Prince came one after another into the *salon*, pausing in the doorway to click their heels and to bow formally, and one after the other were presented; and presently we all fell back and there entered a slender, tall, rather wary man, in a grey tunic jacket, and dark blue trousers, with very wide red stripes, strapped under his military boots. And every one bowed before the Crown Prince. He entered with a vague and rather sad, wan smile on his lips, and von der Lancken presented Villa-

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lobar and me. He spoke to us in French with an accent more refined, I think, than the accent of the Prussians when they speak French. He seemed sincere and cordial in manner, with nothing of exaggeration in his bearing; a thin, grey man, weary, as I have said, with a lean, smooth-shaven grey face and a little brush of grey moustache. He seemed to be about fifty years of age, though I believe he is not so old.

We stood about uttering the customary banalities until the wide glass doors between the *salon* and the dining-room swung open and we went in to dine. Villalobar was seated on the right of the Crown Prince, I on his left. I had on my left the Count A——, a tall, well set-up reddish man, with a pleasant manner and a good deal of intelligence, and we chatted pleasantly throughout the simple dinner that was served. There were but five courses, indicated on the menu by their German names, a pastry, a bit of salmon, a roast chicken, a salad, great mounds of ice cream, and white and red wines. The old servitor handed about cigars and cigarettes at the table and when we had gone into the *salon*, continued to hand them around, bearing the while a candle, from the wavering yellow flame of which we lighted them. The footmen served no coffee, but instead, large goblets of beer, and these they continued to serve throughout the evening, while the old servitor passed gravely around and around with his tall lighted candle.

The Crown Prince withdrew with Lancken into a corner near the window and they talked in low tones for a long time, while I chatted with the affable Count about all sorts of things—trying to avoid the war, for the notes on the *Lusitania* were being exchanged in that



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moment. But by the irresistible attraction of the subject with which the very atmosphere throbbed, the conversation inevitably veered round to it, as the needle, oscillating an instant, turns unerringly to the magnetic pole. And the Count introduced the topic by saying:

*"Si vous autres en Amérique n'aviez pas fourni les munitions aux Alliés, la guerre aurait été finie il y a longtemps."*

I decided to end it there and then. I looked at him and said:

*"Ne le prenez pas sur ce ton, je vous prie!"* He laughed, and we did not discuss munitions of war, nor war at all.

The Crown Prince finished his chat with Lancken after a while, and, seating himself, signed to us all that we might be seated, and beckoned to me to draw up my chair. Villalobar and I then sat on either side of him, and he sent my Count out to see what the news of the day was. His Royal Highness was very amiable. He addressed me in English, with an apology, saying he could not speak the language very well, that he had been out of practise for a long time; but as a matter of fact he spoke it remarkably well, though presently he drifted into French. He told us about his many voyages, especially about his visit to America; and said that he hoped after the war was over to make another visit to America, for he was deeply interested in many of our institutions. He said that it was good of us to have come down to visit his command and that he had tried to arrange a comprehensive itinerary for us, that naturally it was difficult to see everything in the course of one day, but he trusted that we should not find it uninteresting.

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As he sat there he smoked a light cigar and took an occasional sip from the goblet of beer the old servitor had placed on a little table before him, and then at nine o'clock—it was ten o'clock their time—he rose and said that inasmuch as we should have to arise early in the morning he would allow us to *départ* and get some rest. Then, amid universal bowing and clicking of spurred heels, he withdrew.

At the dinner-table there were, besides His Royal Highness, the Count on my left, and Villalobar, Lancken, Harrach, and I, and four other officers—one of them a red-faced, heavy German who said nothing during the entire meal. Next to him and across from Villalobar was a well set-up chap with a head somewhat like that of Louis Philippe; he spoke in a heavy voice, and when he was not talking German he seemed to prefer English, which he spoke with an English accent—indeed, he may have belonged to that class of younger Germans who, as the French put it, *singent les Anglais*. There was another young officer of the same type, wearing a monocle and English puttees, also speaking English with a pronounced English accent. The first of these two, a Captain, had been detailed by the Crown Prince to conduct us on our visit of inspection on the following day. As we were about to leave he explained to me that we must be ready and awaiting him at the hotel at six-forty—that would be twenty minutes to six, Belgian time.

Villalobar, knowing that I had neglected to cultivate the habit of early rising—perhaps the easiest device known to man for acquiring cheaply a reputation for virtue—laughed and said:

“That’s too early for you.”

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"We chose this hour," our Captain explained earnestly, "because naturally we do not wish to expose you more than is necessary. We are going in the trenches opposite the English, and at that hour things are more quiet than at any other time of the day; it is the hour when the English breakfast, and they don't like to be disturbed at their meals."

Villalobar gave me an amused glance. And then we drove away through the darkness of the park—bearded Bavarian sentinels saluting, and a spy in civilian dress emerging from the bushes under the trees, snatching off his hat, and standing stiffly at attention as we rode by and through the great gates.

We went to the hotel, asked to be called at five-thirty—four-thirty our time—and at once retired. When I reached my room and opened the window I could hear the booming of the heavy guns and when I got to bed I discovered that there were two town clocks in Lille within striking distance of each other, and between the ugly booming of the guns and the striking of the clocks it was not easy to get to sleep.

I was awakened by a terrible cannonade, in the midst of which I heard German voices calling to each other across the courtyard which my room overlooked. It was dawn, and, looking out of my window, I saw an aeroplane soaring high overhead and all about it the exploding shrapnel. I could hear the roar of the motor, the whistle and shriek of the shells, and presently to this noise there was added the drumming of *mitrailleuse*. It was weird, there in the silent dawn, in that French provincial hotel. From every window frowsy, sleepy, yellow German heads were thrust out. Two German soldiers were on the roof, one of whom I identified as

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Fritz, von der Lancken's orderly; he had crawled out of his window in the mansard to see this battle in the air. The aviator was flying toward us and was soon directly over the courtyard, and to the horrid racket of the shells and the *mitrailleuse* there was now added the rattle of the falling pieces of shrapnel on the pavement of the courtyard. It was nearly four o'clock—useless to try to sleep—and so I shaved, looking out of my window the while at the black puffs of smoke from the exploding shells. Down in the courtyard, where in time of peace one might have gone back in imagination half a century and pictured a diligence, a little French boy was darting in and out from the cover of a doorway to pick up pieces of the shrapnel, while a covey of birds at each fresh hail of metal flitted uneasily from one tree to another, trying to find a hiding-place.

I was hardly dressed when the waiter brought me my tea—he called it tea—and a few biscuits. The little Frenchwoman who seemed to conduct the hotel had warned me the night before, with a long face and an apologetic gesture:

*"Nous ne sommes pas très riches, Monsieur!"*

At six-thirty, their time, five-thirty ours, we were all in the courtyard below waiting for our Captain; the battle in the sky had ended but the booming of the guns in the distance still came to our ears.

Captain von X—— came promptly in a huge grey car, with a black, white, and red target on the lantern in front, and the arms of the Crown Prince on the side. He was accompanied by the officer with the monocle and by another officer, and we raced off through the city at a frightful speed to a park somewhere beyond the citadel. Sentinels tried to halt us, but the officer with

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the monocle, who had mounted to the seat beside our chauffeur, shouted some terrible German words at them and smote them into an immobile attitude of attention. At several places the road was barred by wooden, stone, or wire barricades, but these our monocled Captain did not respect; he ordered the soldiers to remove them and sometimes even did not wait for them to be thrust aside, but had the car driven high on the sidewalks around them, and thus we were whirled, to the screaming of our siren, out of town. We paused once, by a door in a château-wall, where a sentinel, a Saxon, from his green cap with the horse's tail twisted about it, stood at salute, while a young Saxon officer, an *aide* of the General commanding the corps, whose trenches we were to visit, came out and joined us, and we went screeching out onto the road to Armentières. The long highway was cumbered with all the engines of war—guns, caissons, battalions of infantry, squadrons of cavalry; and always wagon trains, lumbering on heavily toward the insatiable front, stirring up forever clouds of dust, which settled subtly everywhere and made everything obnoxious to the touch, to the sight, to all the senses. But at the unfortunate and imperative screech of the siren on the grey car, with the target of the staff and the arms of the Crown Prince, they all hastily turned aside, and we passed, whirling on through the dusty villages, whose every door was chalked in German, and from whose every window showed the frowsy yellow out-thrust heads of the German soldiers quartered there, with the women slaving for them, and toothless old men with trembling chins sitting on the doorsteps in the sun vacantly staring at the changing scenes of that onward progress toward the front.

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Beyond, there were heavy woods and the terrible devastation of war, ruins, and the wreckage left in the train of the battle with the retreating British in the autumn; back among the trees now and then some ruined old château, its windows staring vacantly, its white façade riddled by shell and ball, inexpressibly sad and desolate. There was not anywhere a single inhabited house, all had been deserted long since. At last we stopped in the edge of a wood, and there, with the sweet morning air blowing over us—already under the artillery fire that goes on continually and, as it were, for ever, between the Germans and the British across the trenches, we heard the screaming of the shells overhead. That shriek of shrapnel is a horrid sound; I had often read descriptions of it. There are many comparisons—“lost souls moaning in the wind,” “the wail of damned spirits,” etc., and it is indeed some one of the many noises of hell, no doubt; but nothing brings the sound more vividly to my mind than the instinctive gesture which the Captain with the head like Louis Philippe’s, made to his brother-officer with the monocle, when, as a shell went over us, he placed his clenched fists together and then rent them apart as though giant hands were ripping asunder some heavy piece of cloth.

The Captain produced an engineer’s drawing of the trenches which we were about to visit and, while we stood there in the edge of that cool wood, began to explain; we would enter the rear trenches here, pass on to the second line here, then enter the first line here. But I was not watching the well-drawn plan of the trenches—what can be more stupid than a plan of anything, especially when you are to see the thing itself?—but a wagon train

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that went rumbling by, the drivers staring at us with that strange expression that dwells in soldiers' eyes.

We left the motors behind and went out from the cover of the woods and walked along the road, stretching dusty yellow before us in the sun, toward a little village where was the entrance to the rear trenches. On either side lay the neglected fields, overgrown with grass and weeds, and beautiful with poppies, *bleuets*, and buttercups, and great masses of an exquisite lavender—some flower that I did not know. And in their wonderful colours under that serene sky those fields breathed peace, even with the shells overhead and the trenches lying just beyond.

We walked on in the hot sun for a quarter of a mile. On each side soldiers were digging new trenches to be used in case of a retreat or, as one officer explained, as if he considered retreat unlikely, to keep the soldiers busy; there were barbed-wire entanglements in the woods, some of them cunningly concealed; and a kind of *chevaux-de-frise* called, to Villalobar's amusement, Spanish cavalry. And always those flowers in the fields and the perfume of them and the sweet morning sunlight, and always overhead that noise of the shrapnel that seemed to darken the sky. There was a lane—a quiet, peaceful country lane, that turned away to the left into the woods that lay across the field; at the entrance to the lane there was a sentinel, a pretty boy, he could not have been more than seventeen. He came to attention, his blue eyes fixed in a kind of terror on those officers; his eyes never left them. He stood very erect and constantly tried to stand more erect, ever more respectfully and attentively and correctly, by jerking his head back again and again—in an agony of fear, an ob-

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sequious, exaggerated respect. All the soldiers did that, boys and old men—all in terror, all obsequious, the old fawning and cringing even more than the young. . . . And the young officers strutted carelessly by, striking their puttees with their *cravaches*, indifferently acknowledging their salutes.

Just ahead was the little village, and across the road a barricade of sand bags and stones and wood piled as high as my head. And there was a hut, with a low door, and from it at our approach there emerged a little man in grey uniform, grey hair, grey eyes and pince-nez, a mild-mannered little man, introduced as Captain X—, who commanded the company stationed at that post—it was his trenches we were to visit. His little hut had a roof of corrugated iron, with sod on top of it; inside, a table with a telephone, some books, some papers, a cot, a washstand, a picture on the wall, a little stove for cold days. And there and thus he lived.

Near by was another hut, with earth thrown over it; and the little grey Captain drew back a curtain at its entrance, revealing soldiers curled up in frowzy bunks, sleeping heavily after their night in the trenches. And the air inside was not pleasant.

The road had now become the main street of the village and the barricade thrown across it, the Captain explained, was necessary because the road was in the direct line of fire from the English trenches. To reach the German trenches we had to cross the road, edging close up to the barricade, to the houses on the other side. The houses were all empty and silent; all the houses in that poor little town were empty and silent; not a window was left in one of them, not a door; the walls were riddled and split by bullets and shrapnel, the bricks



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chipped and peppered. On the floors inside were heaps of wreckage, all the filthy débris, the soiled intimacies of deserted human habitations, sordid relics of sordid lives tragically interrupted, left behind by fleeing refugees before advancing armies in the autumn. The Germans had knocked rude holes in the party walls, so that one could pass directly from one house to another and be sheltered from the fire. And so we passed on through one silent house after another of that deserted village, through gardens overgrown with weeds, littered with rubbish, here and there the souvenirs of some former occupant, happy, maybe, in his quiet home—a portrait hanging crookedly on the wall, having escaped miraculously all those shells; a little lace curtain blowing out of a window in that sweet morning breeze. It was the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet, depressing in the extreme.

There was not a living being in sight, and then suddenly we came upon a soldier sitting in the kitchen of a house, at a common table. His head was bound up in a white surgical bandage, as big as a turban, and he wore an old faded, threadbare black frock-coat, that made him ridiculous. He had been wounded and was convalescing. He was breakfasting on a piece of black bread upon which with a pocket-knife he was spreading some kind of grease from a tin, and he had a tin cup of coffee. At our approach he sprang to his feet, came to attention, and stood there. Our officers spoke to him, with the condescending sugary kindness that wardens and gaolers display toward inmates of prisons when visiting and inspecting committees are about. Myriad flies were crawling over his tin of paste and his hunk of black bread. . . .