

Tracy Louis

The Day of Wrath: A Story of 1914



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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.

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 maelström 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 employ  s 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.

"Fräulein 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 attachés 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-à-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 Liège," 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 *viâ* 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 Liège, and the imperishable laurels which that gallant city was about to gather. They elected to go on!

A station employé 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 Liège 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 protégé 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. – Fräulein, 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, *gnädiges Fräulein*. 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 employ   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: "Liège, 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, *schæne Frau*. There won’t be much coffee on the road to Liège.”

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, über 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 Visé by daybreak. This cursed war has kept me here a whole day. Who is fighting

who, I'd like to know?"

"Visé!" 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, Visé."

"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 protégé 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 Visé? 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 Liège. 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 Visé ran nearly parallel with, but some miles north of, the main artery between Aix-la-Chapelle and Liège. 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 manœuvres 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 Visé?" 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. Visé lies below it."

"But how far?"

"Not more than two kilomètres."

Two kilomètres! 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 Visé, 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 Visé," said the gruff Walloon.

"What's in the cart?"

"Oats."

"*Almächtig!* 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 Visé?” 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 Visé 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 *camaillieu 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 new-comers. 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 Visé, 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 Fräulein* 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 Visé 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 Visé 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 VISÉ

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 Visé. 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 Visé?”

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 shrilled. “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, Léontine!" 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 Léontine 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 Liège respectively. All this meant that General Leman, the heroic commander-in-chief at Liège, 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 Liège in accordance with the dastardly plan drawn up by the German staff.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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