

Le Queux William

**At the Sign of the Sword:
A Story of Love and War
in Belgium**



William Le Queux

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Chapter One. The Waters of the Meuse

Warm, brilliant, and cloudless was the July noon.

Beneath the summer sun the broad, shallow waters of the Meuse sparkled as they rippled swiftly onward through the deep, winding valley of grey rocks and cool woods on their way from the mountains of Lorraine, through peaceful, prosperous Belgium, towards the sea.

That quiet, smiling land of the Ardennes was, in July in the year of grace 1914, surely one of the most romantic in all Europe – a green, peaceful land, undisturbed by modern progress; a land where the peasantry were still both honest and simple, retaining many of their primitive customs; a land where the herdsman still called home the cattle by the blast of the horn as they had done for past centuries, where the feudal castles studding the country – mostly now in ruins – were once the abodes of robber-knights.

In that long, deep green valley, which wound from Namur up past Dinant to the French frontier at Givet, the people had advanced but little. Legend and history, poetry and fiction, provoked an interesting reminiscence at almost every turn, for it was, indeed, a land that fascinated those used to the mad hurry of our modern money-making life.

Not far from quaint, old-world Dinant, with its church with the slate-covered, bulgy spire nestling beneath its fortress-crowned rock, its narrow cobbled streets, and its picturesque little Place, lay the pretty riverside village of Anseremme, the favourite resort of artists, being situated at the junction of the Lesse – one of the loveliest of rivers – with the Meuse.

Seated at a shaded table eating their *déjeuner*, upon the rose-embowered *terrasse* of the unpretending little Hôtel Beau Séjour, which ran beside the rippling Meuse, sat a young man with a girl.

That the pair had met clandestinely was apparent to the white-aproned *patron*– who also acted as *chef*– from the fact that the young man had arrived on foot with rather dusty boots an hour before, had seated himself, ordered an *apéritif* and idled somewhat impatiently over the *Indépendance Belge*, until, from the direction of Givet, a fine grey car, sweeping along the road and raising a cloud of dust, suddenly pulled up before the hotel. From it a well-dressed young girl had alighted, and as she passed on to the *terrasse*, the young man had sprang up, uttered a loud cry of welcome, and bent over her hand.

Meanwhile, the chauffeur had discreetly moved on to the Hôtel de la Meuse, where he apparently intended to get his luncheon.

The young girl was distinctly handsome, as she sat leaning her elbows upon the table, gazing into her companion's eyes, and bending forward to listen to the low words he was uttering. She was little more than twenty, with dark hair, regular, well-chiselled features; a small, pretty mouth, which puckered when she smiled; soft, delicate cheeks, and a pair of those great, dark-brown liquid eyes, which are so characteristically Belgian. Her dark-blue serge gown was a model of tailored neatness, while her little, close-fitting hat, in black straw, suited admirably a delicate, refined face, about which there could be no two opinions.

The poise of her head, the white, delicate throat, discreetly open, and upon which hung a beautiful diamond and pearl pendant; the smallness of her white, ungloved hands, and the daintiness

of her grey suede shoes and silk stockings to match, all combined to produce a *chic* which was that of one living in a smart circle of the *haut monde*.

Both speech and gesture betrayed an education in France, for her accent was not of the Bruxellois but, like her graceful bearing, that of the true Parisienne.

She was laughing merrily at some remark the young man had made, and in her eyes, as they fixed themselves upon his, there showed the love-light – that one expression that can never be feigned by any man or woman in the world.

Her companion, a dark, oval-faced, well-set-up young fellow, was under thirty, above the average height for a Belgian, perhaps, with a pair of keen, shrewd eyes, in which was a kindly, sympathetic look, closely trimmed hair, and a small dark moustache cut in English fashion. He was broad-shouldered, strong, and manly, and by his gesture and attitude the keen observer would have marked that he had had more military training than was usual in the circle in Brussels in which he moved. He was dressed in a suit of well-cut grey tweeds, with straw hat, while the silver watch set in the well-worn leather wristlet gave him an altogether English air. Indeed, he had lived five years in London – in lodgings in Shepherd's Bush – when a student, and, as a consequence, spoke English fairly well.

That they were a handsome pair Monsieur le Patron of the hotel, quizzing them through the low-set window of his kitchen which looked out upon the *terrasse*, could not disguise from himself. Often he had seen the big car sweep past, but of its ownership he was in ignorance. Yet more than once the interesting pair had met at his hotel and had lunched quietly together, while signs had not been wanting that those meetings were in secret.

Jules, the little bald-headed waiter from Rochefort, had flicked out the white cloth and spread it between them; he had placed two yard-long loaves crosswise upon it, with serviettes flat upon the plates and single knives and forks, when Aimée, with a light musical laugh, exclaimed in French:

“I had the greatest difficulty to get away to-day, Edmond. At the very last moment I feared lest I should disappoint you. My mother wanted some lace from Teitz's, in Brussels, and I, of course, last night volunteered to go shopping for her. But this morning, while I was taking my *petit déjeuner*, Mélanie came to me to say that mother had made up her mind to come with me, as she wanted to see the Countess d'Echternach before she went to England. She and her husband are taking their yacht to Cowes, and we had been asked to join the party, as you know, but father unfortunately is kept at home because of important meetings of the Senate.”

“Then your mother, the Baroness, may suspect – eh?” exclaimed Edmond Valentin with some apprehension.

“No. I think not,” reflected the girl. “But at first I didn't know what to do. I knew that by that time you had already left Brussels, and I could not telephone and stop you. Suddenly I recollected that mother has a bad memory, so presently I reminded her of a purely fictitious engagement she had made with the Committee of the Archaeological Society of Antwerp on that day, and succeeded in inducing her to remain to receive the Burgomaster and his antiquarian friends, to whom her father had granted a permit to see over the Château.”

“And so you succeeded in escaping!” he laughed; “and instead of shopping in Brussels and lunching with old Madame Garnier, you are here. Splendid!” Then, glancing round to reassure himself that nobody was present, his fingers tenderly closed over the tiny hand which lay upon the tablecloth.

“But, dearest,” he went on in French, with a grave expression in his kind, dark eyes, “when you did not come at eleven o'clock I began to fear – fear what I am, alas! always fearing – ”

“What?” she asked quickly.

He hesitated for a few seconds.

“That somebody may have discovered the truth, and told the Baron – Aimée,” he replied very slowly.

“Really, Edmond, I don’t see what there is to fear. I know you have enemies, and further, that my father does not view you in exactly a friendly spirit, simply because you are not rich, like Arnaud – ”

“Arnaud Rigaux!” Interrupted Edmond angrily. “I hate to hear the very name of the fellow! Your father, the Baron, wishes you to marry him, in order to cement the two greatest financial houses in Belgium – that of Neuville Frères and the Banque de Tervueren. Besides, he must be at least thirty years your senior, Aimée.”

“This is really unkind of you, Edmond,” exclaimed the girl in reproach, withdrawing her hand. “I came to meet you, so that we might spend a pleasant day in the country. Surely you believe that I love you, and that being so, how could I possibly consent to marry Monsieur Rigaux?”

“But I am only a mere obscure Brussels lawyer, Aimée,” he said. “How can I ever hope to marry you?”

The girl did not reply. Her heart was too full for mere words. They were alone upon that shady *terrasse*, with the great river swirling and rippling past them, while at the moment the quiet was broken by the sweet carillon of old church bells somewhere, chiming the hour of noon.

“I know, my darling,” he said in a low voice, in English, so that none should overhear and understand, as he looked at her across the table, “that your father and his friends hold the money-strings of our little nation. They reckon the world by its millions of francs, and the finances of Belgium are in their hands. He will make the most strenuous effort to force you to marry Rigaux, and so strengthen the position of both houses.”

“I will never marry the man —*never!*” Aimée de Neuville declared emphatically in good English. “I hate him!”

“You swear that?” he demanded quickly, a fierce light suddenly in his eyes.

“I do, Edmond.”

“Ah?” he sighed in deep relief. “Then I am satisfied. Let us discuss the subject no further.”

And at that moment old Jules reappeared with the plate of tempting *hors d’oeuvres* and the *carafe* of *vin-blanc ordinaire*.

Edmond Valentin, the *avocat*, who struggled hard and fought for small fees in that most palatial Palais de Justice in the world, sat for a few moments gazing thoughtfully across the broad sunlit Meuse, where, on the opposite bank, a train, looking like a small toy, was following the bend of the river on its way to France, leaving a long trail of white smoke behind. He was thinking – thinking of something he knew – a secret – and as it arose in his mind his strong hands clenched themselves tightly beneath the table.

The girl, watching his countenance, wondered when she saw that strange expression of fierce hatred flit across his broad brow. But next second it had vanished, and smiling upon her, he began to help her to the anchovies and salad which the bald-headed waiter had placed before them.

They were truly a striking pair, she pretty and dainty, with a soft, sweet expression that men always found so charming, while he was particularly smart and handsome, without the slightest trace of foreign effeminacy, a fine, well-set-up fellow, who, but for the depth and largeness of his eyes, might easily have been mistaken for an Englishman. Yet their social positions were wide as the poles. She was the only child of Baron Henri de Neuville, the great financier, whose money controlled railways and tramways in half a dozen countries in Europe, and whose splendid old Château de Sévérac, higher up the river, was one of the show-places of Belgium. Ex-Minister of Finance and a member of the Senate, his position gave his wife, the Baroness, and her daughter, the *entrée* to the Court circle in Brussels, hence Aimée moved in the most exclusive set.

Her companion, however, was the son of the late Burgomaster of Ghent, an estimable man, who had amassed a considerable fortune and possessed much land around Antwerp, but who had, with hundreds of others, been completely ruined by dabbling in a wild-cat scheme on the Congo, and who had died penniless, save for the little pittance which his son Edmond could afford him.

Love, however, laughs at money-bags, and Aimée, while she was passionately fond of the man before her, detested that thin-faced, black-haired, narrow-eyed man, Monsieur Rigaux, whose praises the Baron was so constantly singing when they sat at table together. There was an indescribable look in the financier's eyes which had, for the past four years – ever since she returned from school at Roedean – always frightened her. It was an expression which, though with her woman's intuition she distrusted, yet she could neither describe it, nor the feeling which it always aroused within her. What we too often term natural antipathy, is a silent, mysterious warning which springs from our innermost conscience, and surely should never be dismissed.

The little cloud which had descended between the pair had quickly lifted, and as they sat eating their *déjeuner*, childishly happy in each other's love, two officers of the 8th Chasseurs, in their braided tunics and undress caps, came along the *terrasse*, and, seeing a lady, saluted as they passed, and took seats at a little table at the farther end.

"My old regiment!" Edmond remarked. "Sometimes, Aimée, I regret that I resigned to take up law," he added, with a sigh and a wistful look as he glanced at the two men in uniform.

"But you are making a name at the Courts," the girl declared. "I read in the paper yesterday a case in which you are defending – the *Affaire of the Rue du Trône*, they call it – a murder-mystery."

"Yes," the man answered, with a touch of bitterness in his voice. "I am defending the man Sigart, though I myself am convinced of his guilt."

"And yet you defend him?"

Edmond Valentin shrugged his shoulder.

"An advocate is forced to serve whichever side engages him," he replied. "That is why the profession of arms is so much more honest."

"Granted," his companion said. "It gives you an *entrée* to the better houses – you can become a member of the *Cercle Militaire*, and all that, but is it not all useless? The war, which has been predicted all these years, has never come – nor, in my belief, will it ever come. Germany only raises a bogey from time to time, in order to terrify Europe, as my father puts it," the girl added.

"Ah! I fear the Baron is a little too optimistic," replied her lover. "War, when it comes – as it most assuredly will – will come in the hour when we least expect it. Then, when the Teuton hordes burst their bonds, woe-betide the nations they attack."

"Well, Edmond, we have one consolation, that they will never attack us. We are neutral, and the Powers – even Germany herself – have agreed to respect our neutrality."

"Ah, Aimée, that remains to be seen," was his slow, apprehensive reply. "Germany, when she fights, will fight for world-wide power, irrespective of treaties or of agreements. The Kaiser is the great War Lord, and his intention is to vindicate his self-assumed title, and to rule the world."

"Father, who is behind the scenes of international politics, quite disputes that view."

"The Baron will not admit it – nobody in Belgium will admit it – because no cloud appears to-day upon the political horizon. But the dark cloud will arise ere long, depend upon it, and then we shall, every man of us, be compelled to fight for our lives, and for all we hold most dear."

A silence fell between them. The young man slowly stirred his coffee, and then, taking a cigarette from his case, lit it, with a word of apology at having expressed such words of warning, and daring to disagree with the view held by the Baron de Neuville.

"But do you really fear war, Edmond?" asked the girl at last, having reflected deeply upon her lover's words.

"Oh, I didn't mean to alarm you, dearest," he laughed quickly. "War will, I believe, break out in Europe; but not yet – probably not for years to come. Germany is not ready; and besides, she fears both France and England. Nevertheless, she is preparing to conquer the world. Of that, one has evidence everywhere in Germany."

"My father does not believe it."

“Because, like so many others all the world over who are piling up their money and reaping rich dividends, he does not wish to believe it. He, like millions of others, is content in the blissful paradise which he himself creates. But there, dearest, enough of my controversial subjects. Let us enjoy this glorious day,” and he blew a cloud of blue cigarette smoke from his lips, and laughed at her merrily across the little coffee-cup which he raised to his lips.

Then presently, Edmond having settled the account, the blissful pair entered the great grey car, in which Antoine, the Baron’s clean-shaven chauffeur, loyal to his young mistress, drove them rapidly away, up the white, winding road which led due east into the heart of the peaceful, picturesque Ardennes.

Chapter Two. The Rising Cloud

A fortnight later – the second day of August, to be exact.

The Taverne Joseph, that popular restaurant in the Boulevard d'Anspach, in Brussels, where, beneath the shadow of the Bourse, the business-man gets such delicious *plâts du jour*, was crowded, as it always is each day at noon. The many little tables set out upon the pavement, along which the life of the bright little Belgian capital ebbed and flowed, were filled by men who daily, year in and year out, ate their midday meal, gossiped, and drank long glasses of iced *bock*.

At one table, in a corner by the glass screen which divided the pavement before Joseph's establishment from that belonging to a restaurant next door, Edmond Valentin sat alone.

He had every reason to congratulate himself most heartily. An hour ago, after making a most brilliant and impassioned speech for the defence in the Assize Court, the trial of the Affaire of the Rue du Trône had at last ended. The chemist's assistant, Sigart, a cruel-hearted assassin who had killed his young wife by administering gelsiminium – as the prosecution had alleged – had been acquitted, and upon Edmond's remarkable success he had been everywhere congratulated by his *confrères* in the great atrium of the Courts.

As he sat alone, idly watching the passers-by, he was wondering what Aimée would think. She would read in the *Petit Bleu* that night the account of the trial, which she was so closely following, he knew. What would she say when she saw that he had been successful – that he had made a name in the legal world at last!

He was in the act of lighting a cigarette, one of a special brand of Egyptians which were sold only at the little *Mosque* in the courtyard of the Grand Hotel opposite, when a strident voice reached his ear, and next second a perspiring young vendor of newspapers, in a peaked cap, thrust under his nose a newspaper, crying in French, "German Ultimatum to Belgium! — *V'la Le Journal!*" He paid his sou, and eagerly opened the thin damp sheet.

His quick eyes scanned the sinister news which the paper contained, to the effect that the German Minister in Brussels had, at seven o'clock on the previous evening, offered Belgium an *entente* with Germany in return for her facilitating German military operations. A pistol was held at Belgium's head. She had been given till seven o'clock that morning to reply. A Council Meeting had been held which had lasted till midnight, after which Messieurs Hymans and Van den Heuvel had drafted a reply, which for three hours further had been discussed. Belgium relied upon the treaty to which Germany herself had been signatory, guaranteeing her neutrality, and had therefore replied that she could not accept the proposal.

Edmond Valentin held his breath as he read those significant lines of print.

Half the men in the restaurant eagerly bought papers, were silent for a moment, and then the greatest excitement was apparent everywhere.

"*War with Germany!*" yelled the newsvendors in strident tones as they rushed along the Boulevard, and even the police – the most correct in Europe – were so dumbfounded that they did not raise a voice in protest at this unseemly breach of the regulation which prohibits the crying of news.

Belgium had defied the great and terrible machine of Prussian militarism. She had told the Kaiser, openly and plainly, that she would, like Holland, remain neutral, in accordance with the solemn treaty to which the Powers had put their signatures.

"Well, my friend," remarked a fat stockbroker, to whom Valentin was known as having his lunch daily at the Joseph. "This is defiance – eh? We have held up our hand to stop the great War Lord of Germany. We have no quarrel with our neighbours. This is only newspaper gossip. There will be no war, I assure you. A Bourse canard – perhaps."

“But if Germany attacks us?” queried the young lawyer, placing his newspaper on the table.

“Bah! that she will never do. We know the Kaiser and his mailed fist of old. If Russia has mobilised, surely it cannot concern us?”

“But France and Great Britain are Russia’s allies, remember.”

“Exactly. Germany will never dare to face Europe with only Austria, an effete nation, as an ally. Your agreement supports mine, my dear friend,” laughed the fat over-dressed man, who wore a large diamond in his cravat.

“But are there not already violations of the French frontier, and also in Luxembourg? The Germans have also occupied frontier towns in Russia,” Edmond argued.

“*Bien!* But it is only a menace on the part of Germany – and menace is not war. Do not forget the Agadir incident. No, no, m’sieur. The coming war is not yet – not yet, although I quite admit that we have felt the unrest on the Bourse this morning.”

“Unrest?” echoed Edmond. “I tell you that to-day there is war in the air, m’sieur! The German Emperor has created, by his clever chicanery, a diplomatic position in Europe which is impossible. The preparations of Prussia are complete. That the Emperor means war is apparent to those who have studied events, as I have, ever since the deplorable assassinations in Sarajevo.”

“Ah! *mon ami*, I see you are pessimistic,” laughed the stockbroker, draining his glass of Benedictine. “It would be bad for Belgium if all her sons were alarmists like yourself.”

“No, m’sieur, pardon?” was Edmond Valentin’s quick response. “If all were like yourself, we should be lulled to deep by the assurances of our bitter enemy – the enemy who intends to march through this capital of ours to Antwerp, and the sea.”

“Bah! The old story told to us for so many years!” laughed the man at the next table as he rose slowly and took his straw hat. “We shall meet here again – say this day week, and then you will be forced to admit the truth of my argument.”

“Well – let us hope so, m’sieur. We shall see,” Valentin replied with a gesture of apprehension, which showed him to be concerned.

The fat man wished him a merry “*bon jour*,” and passed out upon the sun-baked pavement, where the excited crowds were now hurrying, eagerly discussing the alarming news.

“War! War! WAR!”

The word was upon everyone’s lips throughout the length and breadth of the animated little capital of *les braves Belges*– the people so long sneered at by their superiors in Paris until the very expression had become synonymous of a populace actuated by timid arrogance, and who merely aped all the culture and most of the vices of the Parisians.

When the optimistical stockbroker had gone, Edmond again took up his paper and read how Sir Edward Grey had made a statement in the House of Commons, in London, regarding the obligations of honour, and of national security involved in the maintenance by Great Britain of Belgian neutrality. France and Russia were already in a state of war with Germany. Would Great Britain stand by Belgium?

Upon the *terrasse* of the crowded restaurant and within, the sole topic of the excited conversation was the seriousness of the situation. Old men who had been scared times without number by the war-clouds which had risen over Europe, laughed to scorn the idea of a great conflict.

“My dear Jules?” shouted a thin-faced, white-bearded man – the head of a great commercial house – across the restaurant. “Do not give it another thought. There will be no war. The Germans are not yet ready, and the diplomats will arrange it all, as they always do. They are paid for it. The Kaiser’s bark is worse than his bite.”

Whereat many laughed.

But not so Edmond Valentin. He had been a close student of international politics, and in order to supplement his income at the criminal bar, he had often written articles upon international politics

for the *Indépendance Belge*, and the *Matin* of Antwerp. What he had feared and predicted was, alas! coming rapidly true.

Germany, with her horde of spies everywhere in Belgium, France, and England, and her closely guarded military and naval secrets had deceived Europe. She was fully prepared – and her Emperor intended to make war, and to crush civilisation beneath the despotic heel of Prussian militarism. The cross of Christ was to be overthrown by the brutal agnosticism of Nietzsche, the blasphemous “philosopher” who died in a madhouse.

Edmond Valentin held his breath, and replacing the paper again upon the table, while the buzz of dispute and argument was still in his ears, stared straight before him into the busy, glaring thoroughfare.

War! War! WAR!

At length he rose, and making his way blindly to the Bourse, only a few steps away, he boarded one of the open-air trains, and ascended the steep, winding streets, the narrow Marche aux Herbes, and the Rue de la Madeline, until he reached the broad Rue de la Régence, which led straight up to the great façade of the domed Palais de Justice. Half-way up the street he alighted and, entering a block of offices, ascended to his bureau.

The city was agog with excitement. In that hot, blazing noontide, everyone seemed outside discussing the grave peril in which Belgium was now placed by daring to stem the overwhelming tide of Teutons.

“If they come they will not hurt us,” a man in the tram had laughed. “They will simply march through Belgium – that is all. What on earth have we to fear?”

Edmond had overheard those words. They represented the opinion of the populace, who had been frightened by the bogey of threatened war so many times, until now they had grown to regard the regularly rising cloud over Europe as part of the German policy, the brag and swagger of the great War Lord.

Edmond was alone. His one clerk was still away at his *déjeuner* as usual, from noon till two o'clock. From the open window of the small, dingy room he watched the animated scene below – watched like a man in a dream.

At the moment he was not thinking of the threatened war, but of the man Arnaud Rigaux.

An imprecation escaped his set teeth, as his face assumed a dark, threatening expression, his strong hands clenched, as they always did when certain thoughts arose.

“One day ere long,” he murmured, “we will settle the account between us, m'sieur. With us it is an eye for an eye, but you little dream what form my revenge will take. The hour is now fast approaching – depend upon it!”

Turning suddenly from the window, he lit a cigarette, for, like most Belgians, he was an inveterate smoker as well as something of a dandy in his attire, and seating himself at his big writing-table he began to scribble hastily memorandum after memorandum. For fully two hours he continued.

Old André, his clerk, returned, and placed a copy of a newspaper containing the report of the Affaire of the Rue du Trône at his elbow, saying:

“The Press are full of your praise, m'sieur. Is it not splendid – magnificent!”

But his master took no heed, so intent was he upon his writing, referring to various bundles of legal papers before him, as he scribbled on.

Then, at last, just before four o'clock, he put on his hat and went forth again, walking to the Palais de Justice, where, after searching through the courts, he found, in the dark panelled Court of Appeal, a *confrère* of his – a tall, thin man, with a bushy black beard. His friend congratulated him heartily upon his success in the *cause célèbre* that morning, after which they both went out into the atrium and sat upon a bench, while Edmond Valentin gave him a number of instructions.

Afterwards, just before five, Edmond emerged again, crossed into the wide, leafy Avenue Louise, and boarding a tram, rode straight up that splendid boulevard of fine private residences, to

the gates of the pretty natural park of which Bruxellois are so proud, the Bois de la Cambre. Upon a seat in one of the secluded paths, not far from the entrance, he found Aimée, dressed in white embroidered muslin, awaiting him.

“Ah, Edmond!” she cried, springing up. “Terrible, is it not? There will be war! You were right – quite right – dearest. Germany intends to encroach upon our land?”

“Yes, darling,” he replied, bending over her little gloved hand with *deep* apology at being late. “I fear that it is so, and that we shall be compelled to defend ourselves,” he sighed. “The terror of war is upon us.”

“But there will not be fighting in Belgium – surely?” the girl declared. “Colonel Maclean, the British military attaché, was at lunch with us to-day, and he told my father that England did not anticipate war. It is only the German nature to be aggressive against Russia.”

“Ah! no. Do not believe the optimists, my darling,” the man said, seating himself at her side. “Do not believe in the soft words and the self-styled culture of the Germans. They are the natural enemies of Europe, and the camarilla of Potsdam intends now to fight for world-power.”

She was silent, tracing a semicircle on the gravel with the ferrule of her white silk sunshade.

It was a pretty, leafy nook where they were sitting – a spot where it was often their habit to meet in secret when she was in Brussels. That big white mansion of the Baron Henri de Neuville he had passed half-way up the Avenue Louise was one of the largest and most handsome private residences in Brussels, with its imposing gates of ornamental ironwork surmounted by a gilt coronet, and huge glass-covered winter-garden – a place pointed out to *messieurs*, the tourists of the Agence Cook, who passed daily in the motor char-à-banc, as the “town-house of the Baron de Neuville, the great Belgian millionaire,” as the uniformed guide put it each morning in his parrot-like English, when he conducted his charges on their way to the field of Waterloo.

“Do you know, Aimée,” exclaimed her companion seriously at last, “I have decided to return to my old regiment, and to act my part – the part of a true Belgian. I can at once return as *sous-officier*.”

“What?” gasped the girl in quick alarm. “But, Edmond – you – you – you might be wounded if war really broke out! You might even be killed! No! For my sake, dear, don’t go,” she implored, placing her trembling little hand upon his arm and looking up appealingly into his eyes.

“War will be upon us, if not to-day, then to-morrow. My place is in the ranks of the defenders,” he said firmly. “I have no money-bags to protect, as your father the Baron has. My profession will be at an end with war, hence I have decided. I have made all arrangements for my friend Verbruggen to take my cases in the Courts.”

“And you will really rejoin the Chasseurs-à-pied?” she asked anxiously.

“I shall. It is only my duty, dearest. Against the great Germany our little Belgium will require every man who can hold a rifle,” replied her lover. “The German Kaiser means war – and war means the shedding of blood in our land.”

“But think – if you were killed, Edmond!” she gasped, staring at him.

“I should at least die knowing that we loved each other, darling,” he answered, taking her hand tenderly in his own and raising it to his lips. “You are mine, and I am yours; only death can part us.”

He glanced up and down. They were alone in that narrow, leafy way, with the birds twittering gaily above them, and the hot sunshine filtering through the branches; for the charm of the Bois was its rural picturesqueness, near as it was to the centre of the gay, vivacious little capital.

His arm stole very slowly around her waist, and she fell back into his embrace in the supreme ecstasy of that moment.

“Though the barrier between us – the barrier of money – is insurmountable, Aimée, I love you better – ah! better than my own life, sweetheart. To-day, though the sun still shines over our dear Belgium, it is, alas! the darkest day of our history. The terror of the Uhlan is already over our land. Your father, the Baron, will, I know, endeavour to snatch you from me, and marry you to the man whom I have so just a cause to hate – enemy as he is of my own race, my name, my country. But,

darling, I refuse, in this hour of deadly peril, to remain inactive. I love you, and, my darling, I know that you love me. Our dear country is threatened by the invader, who intends to smash and to crush us, to sweep our smiling, peaceful land with fire and sword; to stamp out our national life, and to grind us beneath the millstones of a blasphemous autocracy. And, as an officer of the Belgian army, my place is with my regiment – to defend our country; to defend our innocent women – to defend you, my own beloved.”

Tears welled in her great dark eyes as she listened to his words, and he bent until his lips pressed hers.

His argument was complete. How could she protest further? Her secret lover was a fine, manly man – far more manly than any she had ever met in her own select circle of that vain bejewelled society, where mammon was god, and where finance daily juggled with the destiny of nations.

To rejoin his regiment was, after all, her lover’s duty. She knew it in her innermost consciousness. Yes, he was right. Though a lieutenant, he could rejoin as *sous-officier*. The war-cloud, so black and lowering, must burst within a few hours.

As a true daughter of Belgium she was at heart a patriot, even though, in her own home, the only patriotism ever taught her had been the love of self-esteem.

He was silent, not daring to utter further word; and she, looking into his dark, thoughtful, serious eyes, in silence, wept.

Yet in the ears of both of them rang that single word of such awful and such fatal significance:
War! *War!* WAR!

Chapter Three. The Heart's Desire

At ten o'clock on the same evening the Baron Henri de Neuville sat smoking a cigar in a small, luxuriously furnished room in the great white mansion in the Avenue Louise.

A broad-shouldered, grey-haired, slightly bald man, whose heavy jaws were fringed by short grey side-whiskers, and whose deep-set eyes were rendered darker by the natural pallor of his complexion. His hair was well brushed to hide his baldness, and in his well-cut evening clothes he looked younger than he really was. He had been commanded to the Palace earlier in the evening, for the King had consulted him in connection with some secret financial transaction affecting the nation, and therefore at his throat he wore the ribbon and cross of the Order of Leopold.

With him sat his friend, Arnaud Rigaux, a dandified thin-faced man, a few years his junior, with black hair plastered down upon his head, a pair of narrow-set beady eyes, a countenance of distinctly Hebrew cast, and a small pointed black moustache, unmistakably dyed. The shrivelled thinness of his hands was certainly not in keeping with the artificial youth of his face, and, on second glance, the most casual observer would have realised that he was one of those men who, by reason of a fast life, have aged prematurely, and who endeavour to remain young, and believe themselves still attractive to the fair sex.

He had, in years past, been a rather handsome man. But the life he had led had left its mark indelibly upon him, for he looked what he was, a *roué* who had run the whole gamut of the gaities of Europe, from the Casino at Aix to the Villa Regala at Bucharest, and from the haunts of the *demi-monde* on the Riviera to the night-café of Berlin and the *cabarets* of the Montmartre.

As he lounged back in the big, soft, saddle-bag chair, the fine diamond glistening in his shirt, he presented a picture of the affluent parvenu, that type of wealthy financier of Hebrew strain, which is so familiar the world over.

The Baron was certainly of a refined and gentlemanly type, though there was in his face that shrewd, hard expression which seems inseparable from the financial mind. Yet his companion was of an entirely different stamp – coarse, unsympathetic, with sensuality stamped upon his loose lips.

He removed the cigar from his mouth, and lifting his narrow eyes to his companion, remarked: “I am relieved to hear your opinion, my dear Henri. It agrees entirely with mine. Though the Bourses show signs of panic, I cannot but think that war is impossible.”

“The Minister Orts was at the Palace, and I had a few words with him,” the Baron said. “They had, at the Ministry, a telegram from our Minister in London only an hour ago. War is not anticipated there.”

“Nor here – only by the ignorant,” laughed Rigaux. “Germany cannot – nay, she dare not – attack Europe.”

“It is whispered that the King has appealed to King George of England to uphold our neutrality. But in one or two quarters I hear it alleged that the fixed purpose to provoke a general war has underlain Germany's policy for many years, and now, with Austria as her ally, she has wantonly flung down the gauntlet to all Europe.”

“I don't believe it at all,” declared the other. “The Kaiser cannot commit such an outrage on all justice and all public right. Our neutrality was guaranteed by Germany herself. How can she dishonour her own signature?”

“But Germany aspires to supremacy, we must not forget, my dear friend, and to supremacy as complete as that claimed by Napoleon. She intends that all the other Powers shall be her subordinate allies. She would drag them all in her wake.”

“Bah! England will not bargain away to Germany her obligations to us, depend upon it,” was the other’s reply. “The Kaiser fears the British fleet. He is not yet ready, my dear Baron. So let us dismiss the so-called peril, for it does not exist, I assure you.” The Baron rose from his chair, and stepped out upon the long balcony into the close, breathless night.

A regiment of Lancers were clattering along the broad avenue, just distinguishable among the trees, and the people were cheering wildly as they passed.

War was in the air. Notwithstanding the assurances of his friend Rigaux, the Baron could not disguise from himself the serious apprehension that had so suddenly arisen in his mind. Hitherto, he had been loudest in his expressions that war would not be yet, but since he had been at the Palace, an hour ago, and seen the serious expression upon the faces of his sovereign, and of certain officials, he had become suspicious of the worst.

What if England defied this sabre-rattling of Germany, and declared war to protect Belgium? He pondered as he stood there, glancing down into the leafy avenue where the people were shouting, “*À bas les Allemands!*”

He had his back turned to his friend, who still sat smoking. Had he turned, he might, however, have seen something which would have aroused wonder within him, for while he stood there, looking down upon the straight, leafy way, bright under its lines of lamps, his friend, behind his back, had clenched his fists fiercely. Arnaud Rigaux’s teeth were set, and upon his countenance was a fierce look of hatred of the man whom he was trying to lull into a false sense of security.

A distinctly evil expression played about the corners of his sensuous mouth, as his narrow-set eyes glinted with the fire of a detestation which, until that moment, he had so cleverly concealed.

Though posing as an intensely patriotic Belgian, he was, if the truth be told, one of the few men in Brussels who knew the German intentions, and who, for a fortnight past, had been fully prepared.

War must come, he was well aware. It had all been arranged two years ago, yet the Belgian Government, and even the Baron de Neuville, its chief financial adviser, had remained in utter ignorance. They had never suspected the Kaiser’s treachery.

Rigaux smiled as he reflected how cleverly the secret of it all had been kept. Great Britain must now certainly fall into the trap so cunningly prepared for her, and then Europe would, as the Kaiser intended, be drenched in blood.

In those moments, while the Baron stood outside, he reflected upon the private audience he had had with the Emperor at Potsdam nine months before, of the secret reports he had furnished regarding the financial situation of Belgium, and other matters, and the preparations for war in Luxembourg and along the frontier, which were revealed to him by a high official in the Wilhelmstrasse. He had returned from his “business-visit” to Berlin, and not a soul in Brussels had ever dreamed that he had been received by the Most Highest. The secret policy of the Kaiser was to court the good-will of certain financiers who, most of them, willingly became his agents and cats’-paws, and kept the War Office in Berlin well informed of the trend of events. It was so in the case of the clever, wealthy, and unscrupulous Arnaud Rigaux.

The Baron turned, but in an instant the face of his friend reassumed its expression of easy-going carelessness.

“This silly war-scare seems to please the people – eh?” he laughed aloud. “Hark at them shouting! It is to be hoped they will not attack the German Legation, burn the German flag, or commit some ridiculous outrage of that sort.”

“Let’s hope not, or it might be misconstrued into an act of war,” the Baron agreed, as he stepped again into the small, cosy, but exquisitely furnished room. “Probably the Garde Civile have taken every precaution to avoid demonstrations. Nevertheless,” he added, “I do not like the outlook at all, my dear Arnaud. I confess I do not like it at all.”

“*Mon cher ami*, surely you, of all men, are not being led away by this sensation in the newspapers!” exclaimed his friend, pursing his thick lips. “We both know the value to be placed upon *messieurs les journalistes*. We buy them all whenever we desire their favour – do we not?”

But the Baron cast himself into his chair and shook his head gravely, saying:

“I fear, notwithstanding, that the outlook is very black for Belgium. War would mean ruin to us both. We have, both of us, large interests in France and Germany,” he added, ignorant of the vile treachery of which his friend had been guilty. “If war came in Europe, I should be ruined.”

“Exactly,” responded the other. “That is why, in such circumstances as these, a union of our houses would be so intensely desirable. Have you spoken to Mademoiselle Aimée again?” he asked, regarding the Baron with those narrow, crafty eyes of his.

“Yes,” was the reply.

“And what has Mademoiselle said?”

“Up to the present,” sighed the Baron, “she is still obdurate.”

“Because of that good-looking *avocat*— eh?” he retorted. “Why do you allow her still to meet the fellow?”

“She does not meet him to my knowledge.”

“She does – almost daily. I have set watch upon them. They met to-day – in the Bois, at five o’clock.”

The Baron was again silent for a few moments. Then he said:

“Valentin has, it seems, made quite a sensational success in the *Affaire* of the Rue du Trône. There is a long account in to-night’s papers. Berton, the Minister of Justice, was speaking of it.”

“But surely you will not allow your daughter to marry a penniless lawyer?” protested the financier. “Think what you and I could do, if only we amalgamated upon fair and equivalent business lines. As you well know, I am extremely fond of Aimée.”

“You have spoken to her, she tells me.”

“I have. But, unfortunately, she treats me with a calm and utter indifference.”

“Perhaps she will, eventually, grow tired of Edmond Valentin’s attentions,” her father suggested.

“Never,” growled Rigaux. “I believe she loves the fellow. But if you were only firm, my dear friend, she would, in the end, consent to marry me.”

“I am firm.”

“Yet you allow them to meet daily!”

“How can I prevent it?”

“By sending her away – say to England. I will go to England also.”

“My own opinion is that you would fare no better in England than here. Aimée is a girl of spirit. She may be led, but driven never,” her father declared emphatically.

“But cannot you compel her to give up this man?” urged Rigaux eagerly.

“Have I not tried, for weeks and weeks? Personally, my friend, I don’t think you dance attendance sufficiently upon her, if you really mean to win her. She has been spoiled ever since a child, and likes lots of attention.”

Arnaud Rigaux’s brows narrowed slightly, for he at once realised that what the Baron said was the truth. He had certainly been deficient in his amorous advances, for, truth to tell, he had become so utterly *blasé* that few women nowadays attracted him.

“Yes,” he sighed grossly. “Perhaps you are right, Baron. Is she at home this evening?”

“She’s alone in the *petit salon*, reading, I believe. My wife is out at dinner with the wife of the Roumanian Minister.”

“Then, if there is nothing else for us to discuss, I will go down and spend an hour with her – eh?”

“*Très bien*,” acceded the Baron, while Rigaux, casting away his cigar, settled his cravat before a big mirror at the end of the room, smoothed his hair with both his hands, and left.

Passing down the softly carpeted corridor he paused before a door, and opening it entered, to find himself in a good-sized salon carpeted in Saxe blue, with white enamelled walls and gilt furniture of the style of Louis Quatorze. Over the elegant apartment was suffused a soft light, the source of which was cunningly concealed behind the wide cornice running round the walls, the electric glow being thrown down by the white ceiling itself.

Upon a side-table stood a great silver bowl of La France roses, which filled the room with their fragrance, and near it, in a comfortable *chaise-longue*, reclined Aimée, looking sweet and dainty in a soft, filmy evening-gown of palest carnation pink.

She looked up from her book, startled, as the door opened, and then, recognising her visitor, rose, rather stiffly, to greet him.

“What, all alone, my dear Mademoiselle?” exclaimed Rigaux, as though in surprise, as he bowed over her hand. “I have been chatting with the Baron, but I expected to find Madame here. Well, and what do you think of all this very alarming news – eh?”

“Awful – is it not?” the girl replied, inviting him to a chair.

“The Baron and I have just been discussing it, and we are of opinion that there will be no war. I notice, however, in the papers to-night, a report of Monsieur Valentin’s great success in the Affaire of the Rue du Trône. I must congratulate him – and yourself.”

The girl blushed slightly. It was the first time this man, whom she so heartily hated, had ever mentioned her lover. Indeed, she was not, until that moment, quite certain whether he was aware of her secret – whether the Baron had told him.

“Yes,” she managed to reply at last. “It should secure him a foothold in his profession. The papers say that his speech for the defence was apparently one of the most clever and brilliant ever heard in the Courts.”

“And you, of course, must be justly proud, eh, Mademoiselle?” he remarked, looking straight into her beautiful eyes.

“Well, I suppose so,” she laughed, her fingers toying nervously with the leaves of Bazin’s latest romance.

He sighed deeply. Then, after a pause, said:

“Ah! I only wish that you entertained one little thought for me, Aimée – one kindly reflection regarding myself – I who love you so.”

And, bending, he stretched forth his hand to seize hers. But she swiftly withdrew it.

“Oh, why return to that subject again, m’sieur!” she protested impatiently. “Its discussion only pains us both. I am fully aware that my father is anxious, for business reasons, that we should marry, but I assure you, once and for all, that I will never accept any man whom I do not love.”

“You put it – well, a trifle bluntly, Mademoiselle.”

“I only speak the truth, quite openly and frankly,” she responded, her big serious eyes turned upon his. “Would you have me accept, and afterwards fool you!”

Her question – a somewhat disconcerting one – held him silent for some moments.

“Remember, Aimée,” he said at last, in a deep voice, “I have known you ever since you were a tiny child. I have watched you grow to become a woman, and gradually I have realised that there is no woman in the whole world whom I love – except your own dear self. Can you doubt me?”

And with an earnest expression that was well feigned, he looked straight into her pale, set countenance.

“No, m’sieur, I do not doubt you,” was the girl’s quiet response, and he fancied he saw her trembling slightly. “But when, the other day, you asked if I could ever love you, I told you the bare truth – brutal as it may have appeared. Yet I am not mistress of my own heart, and I tell you that I do not love you – I can never love you —*never!*”

“I am too old,” he murmured bitterly.

“Not that,” she responded, shaking her well-poised head. “Age matters nothing when a woman really loves.”

“You love that man Edmond Valentin,” he snapped, almost savagely.

She nodded in the affirmative, but no word escaped her lips.

Arnaud Rigaux set his teeth, and his fingers clenched themselves into his palms. But only for a second, and she, with her eyes cast down upon the carpet, did not detect the fire of hatred which shone, for a second, in his crafty, narrow-set eyes.

Next second his manner entirely changed. He was one of those men whose cunning enables them to conceal their feelings so cleverly that, while they smile and hold out the hand of friendship, murder lurks within their heart. This attribute is, alas! one of the elements of success in business in our modern days, and is a habit cultivated by the man whom the world admires as “keen and smart.”

“But, my darling?” he exclaimed, in a voice broken by an emotion which was so cleverly feigned that it deceived even her woman’s sharp observance, “you do not know how very deeply I love you,” he declared, bending to her, and again trying to take her hand, which, however, she again snatched away and placed behind her. “All these years I have watched you grow up, and I have longed and longed for the day when I might beg of you to become my wife. Think of what our marriage would mean to you – to your father, the Baron, and to myself. He and I, united, could rule the whole finances of the nation; we could dictate terms to the Chamber, and we should be the greatest power in Belgium – next to his Majesty himself. Surely your position as my wife would be preferable to that of the wife of a poor struggling lawyer, however estimable he may be.”

She sat listening without interrupting him. She had heard this man’s praises sung daily by her father for so long that at last they now fell upon deaf ears. She listened quite coldly to his outpourings, yet, at the moment, she despised him in her innermost heart.

What Edmond had declared was the bare, naked truth. Arnaud Rigaux was only seeking to gain further personal riches and aggrandisement by doing her the honour of offering her his hand in marriage.

Her anger arose within her as his words fell upon her ears. She had not been blind to his stealthy unscrupulousness, for she remembered how, on one occasion, she had overheard her father upbraid him for participating in some shady financial transaction with some electric tramways in Italy, the details of which she, as a woman, had been unable to follow. But her father’s bitter words of reproach had been, to her, all-sufficient. The Baron had told him, openly and plainly, that he had swindled the Italian company, and she had always remembered his outspoken words.

The man seated before her suddenly rose, and unable to take her hand because she was holding it behind her, placed his sensuous grasp upon her shoulder, and bent in an attempt to kiss her.

She turned her head swiftly from his foetid breath. It was nauseous. It caused her a fierce revulsion of feeling.

She sprang up, her eyes aflame in an instant.

“M’sieur Rigaux! This is intolerable!” she protested, drawing herself up in proud defiance. “I wish you to remember who I am, and further, I wish you to go to my father and tell him, that no matter what may happen, no matter what pressure he may place upon me, no matter if I die unmarried, I will never become the wife of Arnaud Rigaux. *You hear!*”

He drew back at this obstinate rebuff – he whose money bought women’s smiles from end to aid of Europe.

In a second he became apologetic.

“But, Mademoiselle, I – ”

“Please leave this room,” she ordered, very firmly. “If not, I shall ring for the servants. Go!” and she pointed determinedly to the door. “Go! Describe this scene to my father, and tell him from me, once and for all, that I love Edmond Valentin, and that I intend to marry him.”

The man's loose lips hardened. He murmured something which the girl could not catch, but she saw in his eyes, for the first time, the light of a fierce and terrible hatred, as he bowed stiffly, and, turning on his heel, took his *cong *, and with a fierce imprecation upon his lips strode out of the pretty, artistic room, wherein she stood, an imperious and defiant figure, in the centre of the carpet.

Chapter Four.

The Man from Cologne

Two hours later Arnaud Rigaux entered his small, well-furnished den in the big house on the broad Boulevard de Waterloo, close to the medieval Porte de Hal, that medieval castle-like structure, now the fine Musée d'Armes, known to every traveller in Brussels.

Scarcely had he crossed the threshold when his man, a white-haired, ultra respectable-looking valet, ushered in a rather stout, middle-aged man of military bearing, with fair hair and blue-grey eyes. He was wearing a cap and a motor dust-coat.

"Ah! my dear Guillaume! I must apologise," Rigaux said. "I had no idea you had been waiting for me."

"Your servant was unaware where you were. We telephoned to a dozen places. I arrived from Cologne just after nine o'clock."

Rigaux glanced at the closed door rather apprehensively, and then in a low voice asked:

"What does it all mean?"

"War," replied the other in a whisper. "The Emperor is in Cologne in secret. I had audience with him at three o'clock, and he sent me to you. I have to return at once. I was to tell you that his Majesty wishes for your final report."

For a moment the financier's narrow eyes grew serious, and his lips quivered.

"The reply from England has not yet been received," his visitor went on, speaking in excellent French, though he was undoubtedly German. "But whatever it may be, the result will be the same. Eight Army Corps are moving upon the Luxembourg frontier. They will soon be in Belgium. What a surprise our big howitzers will be for the forts of Namur and Liège – eh?"

And he laughed lightly, chuckling to himself. Captain Wilhelm von Silberfeld, of the famous Death's Head Hussars, was a trusted messenger of the Kaiser, a man who had performed many a secret mission for his Imperial Master. He was attached to the General Staff in Berlin, and for hours he had sat in the fast two-seated motor-car, travelling swiftly over the hundred and sixty miles or so of long, straight white roads which led from Cologne to the Belgian capital.

"In four days we shall be in Belgium," the German officer whispered. "The Emperor, as you know, decided upon war three months ago, and ever since we have been steadily and carefully making the final preparations. What is the opinion here?"

"The Cabinet meets to-night. The Government do not, even now, believe that Germany really intends to defy Europe, and I, of course, have endeavoured still to lull them to sleep," responded the financier. "But I have not been idle these past three days. My reports are all prepared. The last was written at seven o'clock this evening."

And crossing to a big, heavy book-case, which occupied the whole of one side of the room, he opened one of the glass doors. Then, pulling forward a section of the books which swung round upon a pivot, there was disclosed the green-painted door of a safe, securely built into the wall. This he opened with a key upon his chain, and from a drawer took out a large envelope filled with papers, which he handed to his visitor.

"All are here?" asked the other.

"Yes. According to instructions I received by courier yesterday, I have prepared the list of names of influential persons in Liège and Louvain – the banks, and what cash I believe them to hold. How are you proceeding in Antwerp?"

"Antwerp is practically a German city. We have, outside the city, six concrete platforms ready for our big howitzers. They were put down two years ago by German residents in their gardens – for the English game of tennis," and he laughed. "Besides, we have three secret wireless installations

of wide range communicating with Nauen, as we also have here in Brussels. Is your wireless here in working order?"

"S-s-sh, my friend?" Rigaux said warningly. "I will send Michel out on a pretext, and you shall see. He is loyal, but I trust no man. I never let him know too much."

Then he rang, and his man, white-haired and humble, appeared.

"Michel, go down to the Grand Hotel at once and ask for Monsieur Legrand. Tell him I wish to see him. If he will kindly come up here in a taxi."

"*Bien, m'sieur!*" and the grave-faced servant bowed and withdrew.

A few moments later Arnaud Rigaux took from a drawer in his library table an electric torch and led the way up the great wide staircase, through his own bedroom, past a door into a smaller dressing-room, in which was a huge mahogany wardrobe. The door of this he opened, and pushing the back outwards through a line of coats hanging there, a dark opening was revealed. Into this both men passed, finding themselves upon a wooden flight of dusty stairs, up which they ascended for two floors, until they arrived in a long, low attic, beneath the sloping roof of which were suspended, upon porcelain insulators, many thin, black-enamelled wires.

"Come! You shall hear for yourself," Rigaux exclaimed; and passing along to the gable-end of the main wall of the house, he paused before two tables, upon which were set out a most complete set of wireless instruments.

To the uninitiated eye those two tables were filled with a most complicated assortment of weird electrical apparatus connected by india-rubber covered wires. To the expert, however, all was quite clear. On the one table stood a receiving-set of the latest pattern, while upon the other was what is technically known as "a five kilowatt set," which would transmit wireless messages as far as Nauen, the great wireless station near Potsdam, and, indeed, over a radius of nearly a thousand miles. It was a Marconi set, not Telefunken.

Arnaud Rigaux seated himself upon a stool before the receiving-table, while overhead, insulated from the rafters of the roof, were a hundred bare copper wires strung across and across. His example was followed by Captain von Silberfeld, both clamping the double head-telephones over their ears, listening.

Next instant both heard the buzzing ticks of wireless, so weird and uncanny to those uninitiated.

"Da-de, Da-de-da. Da-de, Da-de-da."

It was a call. Then followed the code-letters, "B.B.N." with "B.Y.B."

"Hush!" Rigaux exclaimed, glancing at the book at his elbow. "The British Admiralty station at Cleethorpes are calling the battleship *London*."

The big wireless code-book – a book which could be bought in Berne for five francs – lay open before him. There was a quick response in the 'phones.

"The *London* is off the west coast of Ireland," he remarked, bending with interest. "There's the reply. Here is 'London.'"

He touched the "tuner," one of the round ebonite handles upon a long mahogany box, and next moment a little "click" of quite a different note was heard in the head 'phones.

"Listen?" Rigaux exclaimed, and then for a moment he was again all attention. "Marseilles is speaking to one of your North German Lloyd liners on her way from Alexandria." Then he paused. "Are you satisfied that I am leaving to your army a complete set, quite in working order – eh?"

"Entirely. Why, it is splendid," declared the captain, who, though he had no expert knowledge of wireless, had seen quite enough to convince him that the secret installation was practically perfect. "This," he added, "will surely be of great use to us before many weeks are over. It is splendid!"

"Let us descend," Rigaux said. "Michel may now be back. This part of the house is, of course, unknown to my servants."

When they were again back in the financier's snug little business-room, wherein he received visitors privately, he asked earnestly:

“Tell me, Count, is all complete?”

“Everything. We shall advance to-morrow, or next day. We have mobilised secretly, though Europe is in entire ignorance. First Belgium is to be occupied – then we shall cross to England. Paris is only a secondary affair. London is our chief goal. We shall crush for ever the arrogant English with our Zeppelins and our submarines. Oh! what an unpleasant surprise they will have?” and he laughed.

“But you will not conquer Belgium – eh?”

“Not if she offers no defence. If she does, then I tell you – in confidence – the Kaiser means to sweep this country with fire and sword; we shall wipe villages and towns completely out of existence, so as to strike terror and horror into the heart of Europe. War is war, you know.”

“Do you advise me to leave Brussels?”

“Well, not yet – wait and see. Your safety is assured. You already have your safe-conduct, have you not?”

“That has already been arranged.”

“His Majesty told me to give you his Imperial assurance. The final draft in your favour on the Dresdner Bank has been passed, and you will receive it in due course, paid into your bank in London,” replied the German officer.

“But what do you advise me to do, my friend? Remember, I may yet be discovered as having assisted you. And it will be awkward – very awkward?”

“Remain here for a time, and then go back to the coast. You can, as a patriotic Belgian, always cross from Ostend to England as a wealthy refugee – when the time arrives. And that will not be very long, I assure you,” he added, with a grim smile. “The brave Belgians have to-day ended their career. Our big howitzers will come along. Pouf! and Belgium is no more. In a few days we shall be at the mouth of the Scheldt, and at Ostend – in front of Dover. Besides, our grand fleet of Zeppelins are ready in their secret sheds. Later, when Belgium is devastated, they will glide forth for the conquest of our dear, sleepy friends, the British – whom God preserve. Meanwhile, we have a very satisfactory army of secret agents over yonder making ready to undermine any poor, puny defence that they – with all their vaunted might of Empire – can possibly put up.”

Both men laughed heartily as they stood there together, conversing in low tones.

“The intention, then, is first to destroy Belgium?” asked Rigaux, suddenly growing serious.

“Yes. To seize this country, notwithstanding any defence which may be offered. The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg we shall only march through. But the General Staff know that, in Belgium, there may be a desperate resistance, if Britain – the broken reed – is to be relied upon. Hence we shall smash her – and Britain afterwards.”

“But is Great Britain, with her splendid navy, really a broken reed?” queried the financier very seriously.

“Personally, I do not at all agree. I only tell you the declaration of our General Staff.”

“Britain has a very mysterious way of asserting her own superiority,” said the banker, shaking his head dubiously. “France is still, as she has ever been, a nation of great emotions. But Great Britain, with her enormous Colonial possessions, her deep-seated loyalty, and her huge wealth, is a tremendous power – a power which I believe the Kaiser has never yet estimated at its true value.”

“Bah! my dear Arnaud. We, in Berlin, know all that is in progress. Surely you must know, you must feel, the irresistible power of our militarism – of our great and formidable war-machine. Germany is the greatest nation at war that the world has ever seen, and – ”

“And England still rules the seas,” interrupted the financier in a hard voice.

“The seas! Bah!” declared his dusty, travel-worn visitor. “We shall first win on land; then our grand fleet will face those overbearing British. We shall, like the Dutch, place a broom upon the mast-head of the flag-ship of Grand Admiral von Tirpitz, and sweep the British clean off the seas.”

“You are optimistical – to say the least.”

“I am, my dear Arnaud,” he admitted, “because I, as one of the General Staff, know what has been arranged, and what is intended. I know the great surprises we have in store for Europe – those great guns, which will smash and pulverise to dust the strongest fortresses which man can devise, and aircraft which will hurl down five tons of high explosive at a time,” he added, with an exultant laugh. “But, I had almost forgotten. Have you had any report from our friend Van Meenen, in Ostend?”

“It came yesterday, and is included in the papers you have there. Our friends in Liège have been warned, I suppose?”

“They have been warned to-day. Doctor Wilberz, brave Belgian, of course, has a secret wireless in his house, while sixty of our trusty agents are living there, quite unsuspected.”

“Wilberz was here in Brussels a month ago, and told me what he was doing. Truly the ring of forts will stand a very poor chance when you make the attack.”

“Belgium will never dare to resist, we feel sure,” declared Captain von Silberfeld. “In a month the Crown Prince will enter Paris. But I must get away at once. I have to be back in Cologne with the dawn. The Staff are awaiting your reports with eagerness, especially those upon the financial position.”

“I have supplied every detail,” responded the banker. “The position is not good, and even my friend the Baron de Neuville cannot, I happen to know, come to the rescue at the present moment.”

“Good,” exclaimed the Captain, dropping into German. “Adieu!” he said, placing the bulky envelope beneath his cotton dust-coat. “What excitement there is in the streets – eh?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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