

UNDER THE GERMAN SHELLS

**BY
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PREFACE

LIFE is a curious thing. In time of war Life is itself the extraordinary and Death seems the only ordinary thing possible for men.

In time of war man is but a straw thrown into the wide ocean. If the tossing waves do not engulf him he can do no more than float on the surface. God alone knows his destiny.

This book, *Under the German Shells*, is another instance of war's uncertainties. Sent by my government to America to join the new American army as instructor, I wrote the greater part of the book on the steamer which brought me. The reader will, perhaps, read it when I am dead; for another steamer is about to carry me back to France, where I shall again be "under the German shells," before the book will see the light.

This is the second work which I have written during the war. The first, *Gens du Front*, appeared in France while I was in America. I wrote it in the trenches. The second will appear in America when I shall be in France. The father will not be present at the birth of either of his two children. "C'est la Guerre."

My only wish is that the work may be of use. I trust it may, for every word is sincere and true. That it may render the greatest service, I wish to give you, my reader, a share in my effort: a part of the money which you pay for the book will be turned over to the French Red Cross Society, to care for the wounded and assist the widows whom misfortune has overtaken while I have been writing.

Thus you will lighten the burden of those whom the scourge has stricken.

I hope that you will find in the work some instruction—you who are resolutely preparing to defend Justice and Right and to avenge the insults of the infamous Boche.

I have no other wishes than these for my work, and that victory may be with our united arms.

EMMANUEL BOURCIER.

CAMP GRANT, December 16, 1917.

Under the German Shells

I THE MOBILIZATION

ONLY those who were actors in the great drama of the mobilization of July, 1914, in France, can at this time appreciate clearly all its phases. No picture, however skilful the hand which traces it, can give in full its tragic grandeur and its impassioned beauty.

Every man who lived through this momentous hour of history regarded its development from a point of view peculiar to himself. According to his situation and environment he experienced sensations which no other could entirely share. Later there will exist as many accounts, verbal or written, of this unique event as there were witnesses. From all these recitals will grow up first the tradition, then the legend. And so our children will learn a story of which we, to-day, are able to grasp but little. This will be a narrative embodying the historic reality, as the Iliad, blending verity and fable, brings down to us the glowing chronicle of the Trojan War. Nevertheless, one distinct thing will dominate the ensemble of these diverse accounts; that is, that the war originated from a German provocation, for no one of Germany's adversaries thought of war before the ultimatum to Serbia burst like a frightful thunderclap.

At this period there existed in Europe, and perhaps more in France than elsewhere, a vague feeling that a serious crisis was approaching. A sense of uneasiness permeated the national activities and weighed heavily on mind and heart. As the gathering storm charges the air with electricity and gives a feeling of oppression, so the war, before breaking forth, alarmed men and created a sensation of fear, vague, yet terrifying.

To tell the truth, it had been felt for a long time, even in the lowest strata of the French people, that Germany was desirous of provoking war. The Moroccan affair and the incidents in Alsace, especially that of Saverne, made clear to men of every political complexion the danger hanging over the heads of all. No one, however, was willing to believe what proved to be the reality. Each, as far as possible, minimized the menace, refused to accept its verity, and trusted that some happy chance would, at the last moment, discover a solution.

For myself, I must admit this was the case. Although my profession was one that called me to gather on all subjects points of information which escaped the ordinary observer, in common with the rest I allowed my optimism to conceal the danger, and tried always to convince myself that my new-found happiness need fear no attack. I had "pitched my tent." At least, I believed I had. After having circled the globe, known three continents and breathed under the skies of twenty lands, my wanderlust was satiated and I tried to assure myself that my life henceforth was fixed; that nothing should again oblige me to resume the march or turn my face to adventure.

Alas! human calculations are of little weight before the imperious breath of destiny.

I closed my eyes, as did all my countrymen; but to shut out the storm was impossible. Mingled in all the currents of public events I felt the menacing tempest and, helpless, I regarded the mounting thunder-clouds. All showed the dark path of the future and the resistless menace of 1914.

I see again the Paris of that day: that fevered Paris, swayed by a thousand passions, where the mob foresaw the storm, where clamors sprang up from every quarter of the terrible whirlpool of opinions, where clashed so many interests and individuals. Ah! that Paris of July, 1914, that Paris, tumultuous, breathless, seeing the truth but not acknowledging it; excited by a notorious trial^[A] and alarmed by the assassination of Sarajevo; only half reassured by the absence of the President of the republic, then travelling in Russia; that Paris on which fell, blow after blow, so many rumors sensational and conflicting.

In the street the tension of life was at the breaking-point. In the home it was scarcely less. Events followed each other with astonishing rapidity. First came the ultimatum to Serbia. On that day I went to meet a friend at the office of the newspaper edited by Clemenceau, and I recall the clairvoyant words of the great statesman:

“It means war within a month.”

Words truly prophetic, but to which at that moment I did not attach the importance they merited.

War! War in our century! It was unbelievable. It seemed impossible. It was the general opinion that again, as in so many crises, things would be arranged. One knew that in so many

strained situations diplomacy and the government had found a solution. Could it be that this time civilization would fail?

However, as the days rolled on the anxiety became keener. One still clung to the hope of a final solution, but one began little by little to fear the worst. In the Chamber of Deputies the nervousness increased, and in the corridors the groups discussed only the ominous portent of the hour. In the newspapers the note of reassurance alternated with the tone of pessimism. The tempest mounted.

At night, when the dinner-hour came, I returned to my young wife. I found her calm as yet, and smiling, but she insistently demanded the assurance that I would accompany her to the seaside at the beginning of the vacation. She had never before asked it with such insistence. She knew that, in spite of my desire, it was impossible for me to be absent so long a time, and other years she had resigned herself to leaving with her baby some weeks before I should lay aside my work. Generally I joined her only a fortnight before her return to Paris. This time a presentiment tortured her far more than she would admit. She made me repeat a score of times my promise to rejoin her at the earliest possible moment. In spite of my vows she could not make up her mind to go, and postponed from day to day our separation. At last I had almost to compel her to leave; to conduct her to the train with a display of gentle authority. She was warned by an instinct stronger than all my assurances. I did not see her again until thirteen months later.

Abruptly the storm broke. It came with the suddenness of a thunderclap. The happenings of this period are a part of history. It is possible, however, to review them briefly.

It was announced that the President of the republic, abandoning his intended visit to the King of Denmark, would return precipitately to Paris, just as the Kaiser, terminating abruptly his cruise along the Norwegian coast, had returned to Berlin.

I went to the station curious to witness this historic return. The approaches were black with people, and an unusual force of police protected the entrance. The interior was decorated as usual with carpets and green plants, but most unusual was the throng there gathered. One noticed, in addition to the numerous officials, many notables little accustomed to going out of their way to see affairs of this sort. I still see clearly the gray-clad figure of M. Edmond Rostand, the distinguished author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*; the eager face of M. Maurice Barrès, and many others.

The presidential train arrived precisely at the announced hour. The engine, covered with tricolor flags, had scarcely come to a stop amid clouds of steam, when the parlor-car opened and the President appeared. He was immediately followed by M. Viviani, at that time president of the Council of Ministers, who had accompanied M. Poincaré on the Russian visit. The two advanced to M. Messimy, minister of war, shook his hand and then those of the other officials. I looked with deepest interest on these men on whom fate had placed a responsibility so sudden and so heavy. They appeared calm, but it appeared to me the countenances of both were pale as if they realized the gravity of the moment and the weight of their trust. Whatever their feeling, only the most commonplace words of greeting were uttered, and the group at once proceeded to the exit.

Here something out of the ordinary occurred. Though I should live a hundred years, the scene would remain undimmed before my

eyes. In my memory there is no similarly indelible picture, in spite of the fact that in the course of my ten years in the army I had witnessed a considerable number of remarkable spectacles. Even at the funeral of President Carnot, or that of President Félix Faure, even at the visit to France of Czar Nicholas II, even at the Congress of Versailles after the election of President Poincaré or any of the great public events of our national life, I had not seen anything with so dramatic a note as the occurrence of this instant.

Leading the procession, the President came close to the barrier which restrained the crowd of privileged persons, who had been allowed to enter the station. Not a sound had been made, when, sudden as a lightning-flash, the silence was rent by an intense cry from thousands of throats. It swelled immediately, was taken up by the throng outside, echoing and reverberating, till it became a tonal torrent, capable, like the clamors of the Romans, of killing the birds. And this cry was:

“Vive la France!”

It was so strong, so powerful, and, in these circumstances, so poignant, that there was a wavering, a hesitation on the part of all. Even the horses attached to the carriages, and those of the cavalry guard, seemed to thrill at its fervor.

While the carriages filled and the escort, with sabres flashing, took its place, the same acclamation, the same cry, deep and powerful, continued to roar, in its fury demonstrating better than any deed the national will, and expressing it in a manner so intense and precise, that any Boches in the crowd (and there certainly were many) must at this moment have felt the abyss opening beneath their feet; that

the horrible adventure into which their Emperor was hurling them was destined to hasten their fall rather than assure their triumph.

Through this crashing human concert the escort moved forward. The crowd, however, was so dense that the carriages were not able to open a passage, and it was as in a living wave, with men and horses in a confused mass, that they reached Rue La Fayette, where at last they were able to disengage the presidential cortège from the still shouting throng.

In the crowd left behind, a remarkable patriotic demonstration spontaneously developed under the leadership of two noted deputies, M. Galli and Admiral Bienaimé, chanting the “Marseillaise” and acclaiming France.

Now let the war come! Unity dated from this instant.

From this hour the war imposed itself on every one. Each Frenchman resolutely prepared himself. The Miracle, that wondrous French miracle which was to stupefy the world and arrest the enemy at the Marne, this sublime display of strength on the part of a France seized by the throat, was born, under German provocation, at the Gare du Nord, in this furious shout, in this cry of passionate love:

“Vive la France!”

From that evening each family felt itself warned, each man felt his heart grow stronger, and each woman lived in shuddering anticipation.

Throughout the land there gushed forth a will to battle, an admirable spirit of resolution and sacrifice, on which the enemy had not counted, that he had not foreseen, and which all his power

could not conquer. France, insulted, provoked, assailed, stood erect to her foes.

This period was brief. People followed in the papers the energetic move for peace undertaken by France and England, but the day of wavering was past. War, with all its consequences, was accepted. The national sentiment was unanimous, and the mobilization found the public ready in spite of the shocks inseparable from such an event.

The most serious of these which I recall, was the assassination of Jaurès, the great Socialist leader, in Rue Montmartre. Although several of the newspapers, and particularly the Italian press, printed that I was in the party of the great tribune when he was killed, the statement was inexact. I learned of the assassination shortly after it occurred, and with several of my associates hurried to the scene. The moment was tragic and the tense state of public feeling caused an immense throng to swarm the boulevard. I was able, nevertheless, to reach the office of l'Humanité and, with others, to write my name in homage to the fallen one.

Already history was on the march. The national defense was in organization, and each individual had too many personal preoccupations to give even to the most legitimate occupation more than a few brief minutes of attention. For myself it was necessary to think at once of the rôle of soldier, which I was reassuming.

I hurried to my home. In the empty apartment I assembled my military equipment with the skill of an old stager; the compact baggage indispensable to the trooper, which should serve all his needs while taking up the smallest space, and add as little as

possible to the weight of his burden. The experience I had had in the trade of soldiering, the expeditions in which I had taken part (the campaign in China, where, for the first time, I had as companions in arms the splendid soldiers of free America; my journeys into Indo-China and the Sahara), enabled me to know, better than most others, the essentials of the soldier's personal provision; what must be chosen and what rejected, and the precise size limits by which a useful article should be judged indispensable or abandoned because too cumbersome.

I provided for myself accordingly without waiting for the official call. In consequence I was able to devote my last free hours to some of my less experienced neighbors. Among these, two poor fellows interested me particularly. They were brothers, one of them recently married, who, by uniting their savings, had just opened a shop not far from my home. They had watched with dismay the coming of the tempest, and questioned me incessantly, hoping to find in my answers some words of reassurance. I was able to give only such answers as increased their fears, and to add advice which they would not heed.

"Imitate me," I said to them; "the war is inevitable. Buy some heavy shoes and thick socks. Provide yourselves with needles and thread. One always needs them, and too often one hasn't them when the need is greatest," etc.

They wouldn't listen. They continued to worry and do nothing, refusing to the end to accept the terrible reality, closing their eyes to the spectre as if they had a premonition that they were destined to be crushed in the torment and both killed; which, as I have since learned, was their fate within the first month of the war.

In the meantime I had to write consoling letters to my wife, abandoned at the seaside, amid a populace shocked and bewildered by the thunderbolt, and lacking definite news to satisfy the anxious need which saddened each individual.

But I was a soldier. I had to rejoin my command, and I had only enough time to pay a farewell visit to the home of my parents, where my brothers, ready like myself, awaited me with their wives and children.

Such an unforgettable repast. The paternal table surrounded by the group of sons and grandchildren, each still forcing himself to smile to hearten the others, each in the bottom of his heart wondering anxiously what the morrow would unfold. Several of those who on this final evening partook of the food prepared by their mother, or touched their glasses and drank "A la France," "A la Victoire," will never return. They have fallen on the field of honor, battling the odious invader, breasting his blows and giving their lives that their sons may remain French and free. No one knew who would fall, who would be alive a year, even a month later, but one would have looked in vain for a quiver in any eye or a tremor in any voice. All were French. All accepted their duty, however it might present itself; each in his rank, in his assigned place; to do simply, without discussion, without hesitation, whatever the threatened country might demand of its children.

We had the courage to laugh, at this last dinner. We heard our father recall the memories of the other war, that of 1870, in which he had served as a volunteer, and then we separated with words of *au revoir* and not good-by on our lips.

We were keenly conscious that everywhere in France, in all the homes and in all the families, an identical scene was presented at that instant. At each table the mother offered the departing ones a farewell repast; the wives repeated their vows of affection, and the children gave their tender love. Every one swore to make the Prussian pay dearly for his provocation, to chastise his insolence, to arrest him, cost what it might, and to defeat him. One entered the drama without effort and almost without hatred, because it was unavoidable, because France called and it was necessary to defend her. One was sure of the right, that the cause was just, and without discussion one obeyed. French blood—the blood which has flowed in so many wars, the blood of Bouvines, of Valmy, and of Jena, the blood of the Revolution and of 1870—surged in the veins, quickened the pulse and grimly expressed itself:

“They shall not pass!”

The night of the second of August seemed short. For myself, my preparations completed, I retired early, well aware of the fatigues to come; a little shaken, it must be admitted, at the thought of leaving, for a time which might be long, an abiding-place where I had tasted so much of pure happiness and calm joy with my young wife and our pretty baby.

Adventure, the great adventure of war, of journeys, of battles, and of blood: Adventure left behind so short a time before, as I had believed, forever, had seized me again and thrown me as an insignificant atom into the path of the unknown, breaking all the bonds whose forming had given me so much joy, and whose stability had seemed so humanly sure.

When the hour arrived for my departure, I contemplated my deserted apartment, and gave a last kiss to the pictures of my absent loved ones. Then, in marching attire, my light sack on my shoulder, I descended to the street with firm step and heart beating high, to begin my journey to the front.

The animation of the streets was extraordinary. All Paris seemed to have turned out to form an escort for the soldiers. These latter were easily recognized by the stern resolution of their faces, quite as much as by the accoutrement they bore. Most of them were accompanied by parents or friends; those who were alone were constantly saluted by the crowds as they passed. Many people offered their carriages to the soldiers, and others had placarded their motors with announcements that they would carry mobilized men to the stations without charge. Around these machines there was an ever-increasing crowd.

I entered this human wave. Immediately one dropped the manner of civilian life and became a soldier. By an old French habit, obligatory in the barracks, all the men replaced their formal speech by the intimate forms—*le tutoyer*—reserved ordinarily for one's family and intimate friends.

Costumes of all sorts were there; the long coat of the workman, business suits, peasant blouses, bourgeois jackets with a touch of color given by the occasional red or blue uniform. Hair-cuts were in equal variety, from the tousled head of the peasant lad and the waving curls of the student to the closely cropped state of those who had anticipated the military order. At the station all was well ordered. The trains, requisitioned before our coming, and with directions clearly indicated by placards, were quickly filled. Throughout the cars the men were singing and shouting, giving

assurance of triumph, of prompt return, and of chastisement for the Boche. The coaches were covered with inscriptions naïve and gay.

“Excursion-train for Berlin.”

“Round trip to Germany.”

“Good fellows’ compartment-car.”

And a hundred others, many accompanied by satirical drawings, showing occasionally real talent on the part of the caricaturist. At the hour fixed all moved forward. All these men departed, singing; starting on their journey toward battle, toward glory, and toward death, while along the way, in the gardens or at the doors of the houses, the women, the children, and the old men waved their hands and their handkerchiefs, threw kisses and flowers, endlessly applauding, in a warm sentiment of love and of recognition, those who went forth to defend them.

No one, perhaps, of all those who departed, of all those who saluted, believed that the war would be long, that it would involve the world and become what it now is, the battle for human freedom, the battle to death, or to the triumph of democracy over autocracy.

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