

***MARIE BELLOC  
LOWNDES***



***THE RED  
CROSS  
BARGE***

**Marie Belloc Lowndes**

# **The Red Cross Barge**

EAN 8596547332909

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: [DigiCat@okpublishing.info](mailto:DigiCat@okpublishing.info)



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[PART I](#)

[PART II](#)

[PART III](#)

[PART IV](#)

[PART V](#)

# PART I

## Table of Contents

### 1

The Herr Doktor moved away his chair from the large round table across half of which, amid the remains of a delicious dessert a large-scale map of the surrounding French countryside had been spread out.

On the other half of the table had been pushed a confusion of delicate white-and-gold coffee-cups and almost empty liqueur-bottles—signs of the pleasant ending to the best dinner the five young Uhlan officers who were now gathered together in this French inn-parlour had eaten since 'The Day.'

Although the setting sun still threw a warm, lambent light on the high chestnut trees in the paved courtyard outside, the low-walled room was already beginning to be filled with the pale golden shadows of an August night. A few moments ago the Herr Commandant had loudly called for a lamp, and Madame Blanc, owner of the Tournebride, had herself brought it in. Placed in the centre of the table the lamp illumined the flushed, merry young faces now bent over the large coloured map.

Alone the Herr Doktor sat apart from the bright circle of light, and, although he was himself smoking a pipe, the fumes of the other men's strong cigars seemed to stifle him.

Of only medium height, with the thoughtful, serious face which marks the thinker and worker; clad, too, in the plain, practical 'feld-grau' uniform of a German Red Cross surgeon,

he was quite unlike his temporary comrades. And there was a further reason for this unlikeness. The Herr Doktor, Max Keller by name, was from Weimar; the young officers now round him were Prussians of the Junker class. They were quite civil to the Herr Doktor—in fact they were too civil—and their high spirits, their constant, exultant boasts of all they meant to do in Paris—in Paris where they expected to be within a week, for it was now August 27, 1914—jarred on his tired, sensitive brain.

Behind his large tortoise-shell spectacles the Herr Doktor's eyes ached and smarted. He belonged to the generation which had been, even as children, put into spectacles. His present companions, more fortunate than he, had been born into the 'nature-eye' cycle of German oculistic research. Not one of them wore spectacles, and their exemption was one of the many reasons why he, though only thirty-four years of age, felt so much older, and so apart from them in every way.

Alone, of the six men gathered together to-night in that French inn-parlour, the Herr Doktor knew what war really means, and something—as yet he did not know much—of what it brings with it. He had been, if not exactly in, then what he secretly thought far worse, close to, the battle of Charleroi, and for the ten days which had followed that battle he had been plunged in all the stern horrors, and the gaspingly hurried, unceasing work, of an improvised field hospital.

The fine abounding-with-life young officers, with whom a special circumstance had thrown him for some days, had so far escaped even a skirmish with the unfeared enemy; that

they loudly lamented the fact, that they cursed, in all sincerity, the chance which had delayed their regiment till the first series of victories—Mons, St. Quentin, Charleroi—which had opened the wide road to Paris, was over, secretly irritated the Herr Doktor. *He* knew the limitless extent to which they were to be envied. And that knowledge made him hopelessly out of touch with them—out of touch as he could never be with the arrogant by-his-mother-spoilt lieutenant, his Highness Prince Egon von Witgenstein, whose arrival in the luxurious motor ambulance now standing just outside in the courtyard of the Tournebride alone accounted for the Herr Doktor's presence here. It was true that the boastful, childishly vain, fretful-tempered Prince Egon also talked unceasingly of the baser charms of Paris, but he, at any rate, had earned his right to those same base charms by the three wounds from which he was now slowly recovering, thanks to the skill and care of the Weimar surgeon.

Sitting there, apart from the others, puffing steadily, silently, at his pipe, the Herr Doktor's mind, his dreamy, sensitive, imaginative mind, retraced all that had happened in the last two hours.

The taking possession of this charming little town of Valoise-sur-Marne had been carried through with most agreeable ease. The Mayor had blustered a bit, and had expressed his determination to write an account of all that had taken place to his Government. But when he had been told, in language of careful, cold, calculated brutality, that at the slightest disturbance or ill-behaviour of his townsmen or townswomen, he himself would be at once led out and shot,

he had come to heel, and promised to do his best to preserve order.

There had been, however, a rather painful scene, one which the Herr Doktor disliked to remember, with the parish priest. The Curé of Valoise was an old, white-haired man, and at first he had behaved with considerable dignity—with far more dignity, for instance, than the excitable Mayor. Also he had expressed himself as quite willing to be hostage for his flock's good behaviour.

The scene had occurred when the priest had been ordered off with the guard to the temporary prison he was to share with the Mayor. With what had seemed a most uncalled-for agitation, he had pleaded to be allowed to go and pay a last visit to three dying men. 'Surely you will accept my word of honour to return within one hour?' he had exclaimed, and then, in answer to a natural, if sharply uttered question—'No, I cannot—I will not—tell you where these dying men are! All I can say is that they are well within the limits of the town.' To accede to his request had been, of course, out of the question; and to the Herr Doktor's surprise, and indeed to his disgust, it was plain that the German Commandant's refusal to let the old priest have his way had gratified the Mayor—indeed the only smile any of them had seen on the French Republican official's face was while this discussion, this urgent painful discussion, was going on.

After it was over, the two of them had been marched off to the Tournebride, where a large windowless fruit and tool house, standing isolated in the middle of Madame Blanc's kitchen garden, had been assigned to them as prison.

Everything else had gone quite smoothly, and both officers and men had found delightful quarters in the fine old inn which stood at the top of the hill, taking up all one side of the Grande Place. The Tournebride, so the Commandant informed the Herr Doktor, had been noted among gay Parisians, in the days of peace which now seemed so long ago, as a motoring luncheon and supper resort. Thus the conquerors of Valoise had found there the best of good wine, good food, and good beds.

## 2

At last the Herr Doktor got up from his chair. Unnoticed by the others, he slipped out into the cooler air outside. The courtyard, shaded by high horse chestnut trees, was now crowded with good-humoured German cavalry-men waiting, patiently enough, for the savoury meal which Madame Blanc and her two anxious-faced young daughters were engaged in preparing for them.

As the Herr Doktor walked quickly over to the other side of the quadrangle, the soldiers respectfully made way for him, and he stood, for a few moments unnoticed, on the threshold of the big kitchen of the Tournebride. To eyes already war-worn it was a pleasant sight.

To and fro in her low, arch-roofed, spacious domain, the landlady came and went, busily intent on her considerable task of feeding over a hundred men. There were huge copper cauldrons on the steel top of the *fourneau*, and Madame Blanc herself constantly stirred and inspected their contents. But when she became suddenly aware of the



German doctor's presence at the kitchen door, she stayed her labours and came towards him.

Silently she waited, a stern look of heavy-hearted endurance on her face, for him to speak; and at last, in a French which was somewhat halting, he put the question he had come to ask, and on the answer to which, as he well knew, depended a good deal of the future comfort of his illustrious, tiresome patient, Prince Egon von Witgenstein. Was there a hospital in Valoise?

'There is no hospital in Valoise.' Madame Blanc's voice was very, very cold. But after a moment's pause she added: 'The nuns were chased away four years ago, and the Government have not yet decided what to do with their convent.'

As there came a look of disappointment on his mild face she went on, as if the words were being dragged from her reluctant lips: 'But M. le Médecin will find a Red Cross barge on the river.'

Madame Blanc's powerful, swarthy face was set and grim; she did not look as if she had ever smiled, or if she had, would ever smile again. Yet the man now standing opposite to her remembered that, when he had first arrived with his patient, she had shown a certain maternal interest in the inmate of the Red Cross motor ambulance which now stood in a corner of her large paved courtyard, also that within a few minutes of the peaceful assault of her inn she had herself cooked for the wounded officer a delicate little meal.

The Herr Doktor smiled conciliatingly, but she gave him no answering smile. Her heart was still too full of wrath, of

surprise, of agonised, impotent rage, at the happenings of the last two hours.

A troop of the abhorred, dreaded Uhlans had suddenly appeared, clattering along the wide Route Nationale which followed the right bank of the river Marne. Without drawing rein they had ridden up the steep, central street of Valoise, and then they had turned straight into the courtyard of the Tournebride.

Madame Blanc had been amazed at the extent and particularity of the Prussians' knowledge of the town, and of her inn. Not only had they greeted her, with a strange mixture of joviality and sternness, by name, but the golden-haired, pink-cheeked commanding officer had actually alluded to the *spécialité* of the Tournebride—a certain chicken-liver omelette which Parisians motored out to enjoy on all fine Sundays from each May to each October! And then, perhaps because she had tacitly refused to fall in with his pleasant humour, the young Uhlan officer, after his first roughly jovial words, had suddenly threatened her with mysterious and terrible penalties if she disobeyed, in any one particular, his own and his comrades' confusing orders.

Yes, they had only arrived two hours ago, and yet already Madame Blanc hated these arrogant Uhlan officers with all the strength of her powerful, secretive French nature. Quite willingly, had she thought it would have served the slightest good purpose, would she have put a good dose of poison in the excellent soup they, in the company of the man now talking to her, had just eaten.

She also hated, but in an infinitely lesser degree, their men—those big, bearded, splendidly equipped soldiers clad

in the grey-green cloth which her strong common sense had at once told her must be so far more serviceable, because blending with nature's colouring, than the bright blue and red uniforms of her own countrymen. But for the wounded youth, who now lay straight and still in the huge grey motor-car, bearing on its side a painted Red Cross which she could almost touch from where she stood at her low kitchen door, she felt a thrill of motherly pity and concern....

'A Red Cross barge on the river?' repeated the Herr Doktor doubtfully.

For a man who had never been in France before, and who had been taught French by a German who, in his turn, had never been in France save during the brief, glorious-and-ever-victorious-campaign of 1870, the Herr Doktor spoke very fair French. But while he spoke, and even more while he listened to Madame Blanc's quick, short utterances, he blamed himself severely for having wasted so much time on the English language. English was now never likely to be of much use to him, save perhaps during the coming Occupation of London. If only he had spent as much time and trouble over French as he had done over English, not only would it have been useful here and now, but it would have been invaluable a little later on—when he took up his quarters, as he hoped to do within the next two or three weeks, at the Pasteur Institute in Paris.

'Yes,' said Madame Blanc, with a touch of irritation in her even, vibrating voice, 'as I have just had the honour of explaining to M. le Médecin, there is a Red Cross barge on our river. Mademoiselle Rouannès is there all day, from six in the morning till nine o'clock each night.'

'Is Mademoiselle'—he had not really caught the curious name, 'is she'—he hesitated for the right phrase—'is she a Sister of Compassion?'

'I have just told M. le Médecin that all our good sisters were chased away by the Government four years ago. Mademoiselle Rouannès is our doctor's daughter.'

And then, as the man standing before her uttered a quick guttural exclamation of relief, she added sharply, 'You cannot see Doctor Rouannès, for he is very ill—some say he is dying.' As again she saw a look of disappointment overcast his face, she added—'But his daughter is a very serious demoiselle. The wounded have every confidence in Mademoiselle Rouannès.'

'Thank you, Madame, I will now the barge of the Red Cross go and seek,' he said, and bowed courteously.

'It is just at the bottom of the hill, this side of the lock. But wait a minute—I can show you the exact place from the *abreuvoir*.'

She stepped across the threshold of her kitchen, and walked, with a good deal of simple dignity, through the groups of tall soldiers who stood at ease, contentedly smoking their big pipes under the chestnut-leaves canopy of her courtyard. They made way for her pleasantly enough—some even smiled the foolish, fond smile of the big man-child, for she reminded more than one of these burly giants of his own mother. But Madame Blanc gave no answering smile, as, gazing straight before her, she hurried on towards the high gilt gates of her domain—a domain which till a hundred years ago, and for more than a hundred years

before that, had kennelled royal staghounds, and housed their huntsmen.

The Herr Doktor stopped for a moment to speak to a non-commissioned officer, a good fellow who came from his own town of Weimar. 'Keep an eye on the motor ambulance,' he muttered. 'You might, in fact, go and ask His Highness if he requires anything further just now. Tell him I have gone out to look for quiet quarters. It would be impossible to have the Prince here to-night; the house won't settle down for a long time.'

The other grinned, broadly. 'These are comfortable, greatly-to-be-commended quarters, nevertheless, Herr Doktor.' And the Herr Doktor, nodding, hastened after his guide.

He followed her through the wrought-iron gilt gates, now wreathed with white jessamine and orange-coloured trumpet flowers, and so to the great open space which formed the apex, not only of the hill, but of the little town, of Valoise-sur-Marne.

A moment later they stood before the oval *abreuvoir*, a stone-rimmed pool at which the timid does sometimes come, even now, to quench their thirst at night.

For a few moments Madame Blanc gazed dumbly over the dear familiar scene, and the German surgeon respected her silence.

Lit by the afterglow of the setting August sun, the little town of Valoise lay spread before them ... a picturesque, gaily charming cluster of white, grey, and red roof-trees, full of the peaceful stateliness of aspect which is a distinguishing mark of so many of the old villages and towns