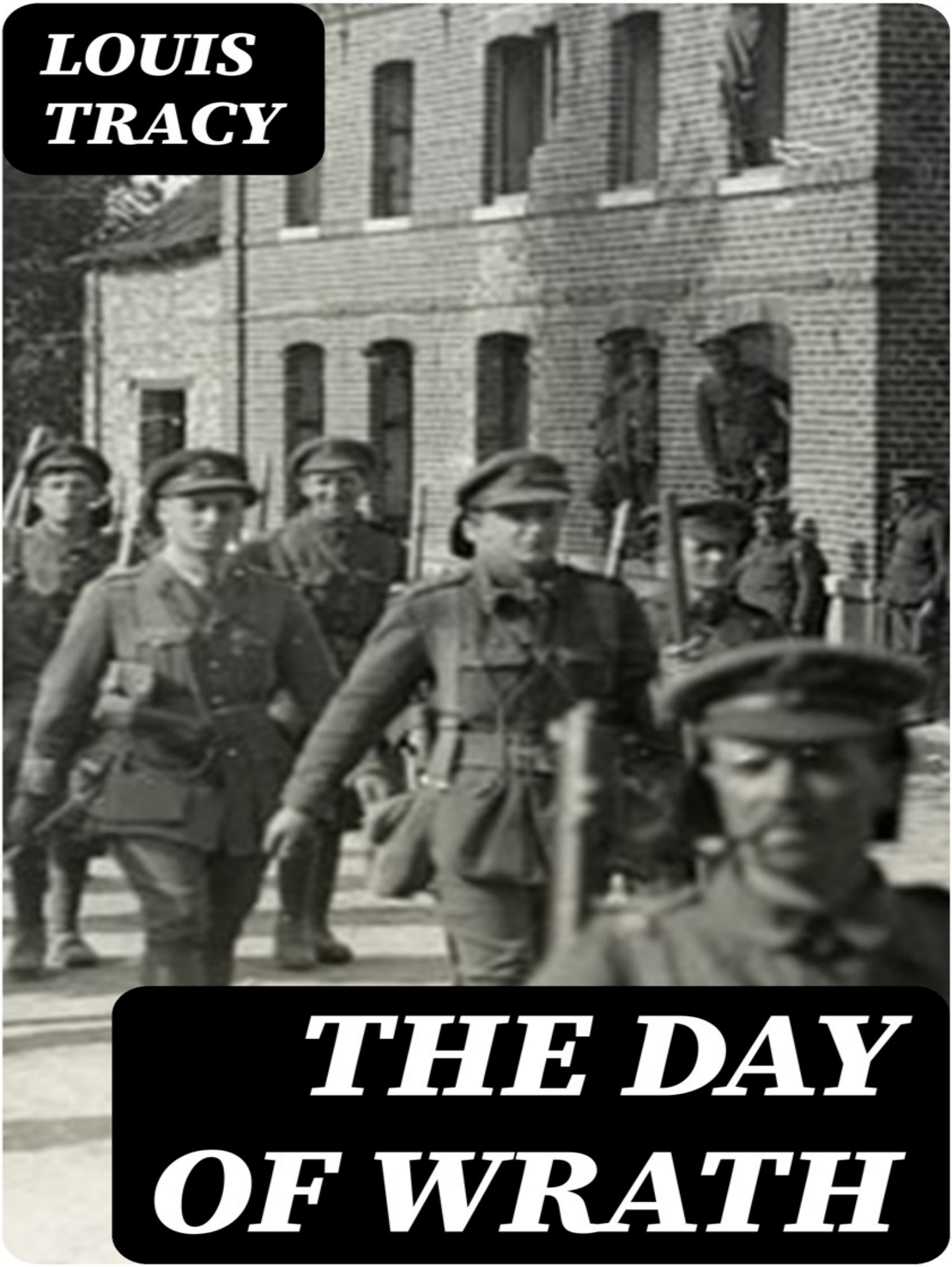
LOUIS TRACY



THE DAY OF WRATH

Louis Tracy

The Day of Wrath

A Story of 1914

EAN 8596547231271

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

PUBLISHER

Table of Contents

PREFACE

Table of Contents

This book demands no explanatory word. But I do wish to assure the reader that every incident in its pages casting discredit on the invaders of Belgium is founded on actual fact. I refer those who may doubt the truth of this sweeping statement to the official records published by the Governments of Great Britain, France, and Belgium.

L. T.

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

THE LAVA-STREAM

Table of Contents

“

For God’s sake, if you are an Englishman, help me!”

That cry of despair, so subdued yet piercing in its intensity, reached Arthur Dalroy as he pressed close on the heels of an all-powerful escort in Lieutenant Karl von Halwig, of the Prussian Imperial Guard, at the ticket-barrier of the Friedrich Strasse Station on the night of Monday, 3rd August 1914.

An officer’s uniform is a *passe-partout* in Germany; the showy uniform of the Imperial Guard adds awe to authority. It may well be doubted if any other insignia of rank could have passed a companion in civilian attire so easily through the official cordon which barred the chief railway station at Berlin that night to all unauthorised persons.

Von Halwig was in front, impartially cursing and shoving aside the crowd of police and railway men. A gigantic ticket-inspector, catching sight of the Guardsman, bellowed an order to “clear the way;” but a general officer created a momentary diversion by choosing that forbidden exit. Von Halwig’s heels clicked, and his right hand was raised in a salute, so Dalroy was given a few seconds wherein to scrutinise the face of the terrified woman who had addressed him. He saw that she was young, an

Englishwoman, and undoubtedly a lady by her speech and garb.

“What can I do for you?” he asked.

“Get me into a train for the Belgian frontier. I have plenty of money, but these idiots will not even allow me to enter the station.”

He had to decide in an instant. He had every reason to believe that a woman friendless and alone, especially a young and good-looking one, was far safer in Berlin—where some thousands of Britons and Americans had been caught in the lava-wave of red war now flowing unrestrained from the Danube to the North Sea—than in the train which would start for Belgium within half-an-hour. But the tearful indignation in the girl’s voice—even her folly in describing as “idiots” the hectoring jacks-in-office, any one of whom might have understood her—led impulse to triumph over saner judgment.

“Come along! quick!” he muttered. “You’re my cousin, Evelyn Fane!”

With a self-control that was highly creditable, the young lady thrust a hand through his arm. In the other hand she carried a reticule. The action surprised Dalroy, though feminine intuition had only displayed common-sense.

“Have you any luggage?” he said.

“Nothing beyond this tiny bag. It was hopeless to think of ——”

Von Halwig turned at the barrier to insure his English friend’s safe passage.

“Hallo!” he cried. Evidently he was taken aback by the unexpected addition to the party.

“A fellow-countrywoman in distress,” smiled Dalroy, speaking in German. Then he added, in English, “It’s all right. As it happens, two places are reserved.”

Von Halwig laughed in a way which the Englishman would have resented at any other moment.

“Excellent!” he guffawed. “Beautifully contrived, my friend.—Hi, there, sheep’s-head!”—this to the ticket-inspector—“let that porter with the portmanteau pass!”

Thus did Captain Arthur Dalroy find himself inside the Friedrich Strasse Station on the night when Germany was already at war with Russia and France. With him was the stout leather bag into which he had thrown hurriedly such few articles as were indispensable—an ironic distinction when viewed in the light of subsequent events; with him, too, was a charming and trustful and utterly unknown travelling companion.

Von Halwig was not only vastly amused but intensely curious; his endeavours to scrutinise the face of a girl whom the Englishman had apparently conjured up out of the maelström of Berlin were almost rude. They failed, however, at the outset. Every woman knows exactly how to attract or repel a man’s admiration; this young lady was evidently determined that only the vaguest hint of her features should be vouchsafed to the Guardsman. A fairly large hat and a veil, assisted by the angle at which she held her head, defeated his intent. She still clung to Dalroy’s arm, and relinquished it only when a perspiring platform-inspector, armed with a list, brought the party to a first-class carriage. There were no sleeping-cars on the train. Every *wagon-lit* in Berlin had been commandeered by the staff.

“I have had a not-to-be-described-in-words difficulty in retaining these corner places,” he said, whereupon Dalroy gave him a five-mark piece, and the girl was installed in the seat facing the engine.

The platform-inspector had not exaggerated his services. The train was literally besieged. Scores of important officials were storming at railway employés because accommodation could not be found. Dalroy, wishful at first that Von Halwig would take himself off instead of standing near the open door and peering at the girl, soon changed his mind. There could not be the slightest doubt that were it not for the presence of an officer of the Imperial Guard he and his “cousin” would have been unceremoniously bundled out on to the platform to make room for some many-syllabled functionary who “simply must get to the front.” As for the lady, she was the sole representative of her sex travelling west that night.

Meanwhile the two young men chatted amicably, using German and English with equal ease.

“I think you are making a mistake in going by this route,” said Von Halwig. “The frontier lines will be horribly congested during the next few days. You see, we have to be in Paris in three weeks, so we must hurry.”

“You are very confident,” said the Englishman pleasantly.

He purposely avoided any discussion of his reasons for choosing the Cologne-Brussels-Ostend line. As an officer of the British army, he was particularly anxious to watch the vaunted German mobilisation in its early phases.

“Confident! Why not? Those wretched little *piou-pious*”—a slang term for the French infantry—“will run long before

they see the whites of our eyes."

"I haven't met any French regiments since I was a youngster; but I believe France is far better organised now than in 1870," was the noncommittal reply.

Von Halwig threw out his right arm in a wide sweep. "We shall brush them aside—so," he cried. "The German army was strong in those days; now it is irresistible. *You* are a soldier. You *know*. To-night's papers say England is wavering between peace and war. But I have no doubt she will be wise. That Channel is a great asset, a great safeguard, eh?"

Again Dalroy changed the subject. "If it is a fair question, when do you start for the front?"

"To-morrow, at six in the morning."

"How very kind of you to spare such valuable time now!"

"Not at all! Everything is ready. Germany is always ready. The Emperor says 'Mobilise,' and, behold, we cross the frontier within the hour!"

"War is a rotten business," commented Dalroy thoughtfully. "I've seen something of it in India, where, when all is said and done, a scrap in the hills brings the fighting men alone into line. But I'm sorry for the unfortunate peasants and townspeople who will suffer. What of Belgium, for instance?"

"Ha! *Les braves Belges!*" laughed the other. "They will do as we tell them. What else is possible? To adapt one of your own proverbs: 'Needs must when the German drives!'"

Dalroy understood quite well that Von Halwig's bumptious tone was not assumed. The Prussian Junker could hardly think otherwise. But the glances cast by the Guardsman at the silent figure seated near the window

showed that some part of his vapouring was meant to impress the feminine heart. A gallant figure he cut, too, as he stood there, caressing his Kaiser-fashioned moustaches with one hand while the other rested on the hilt of his sword. He was tall, fully six feet, and, according to Dalroy's standard of physical fitness, at least a stone too heavy. The personification of Nietzsche's Teutonic "overman," the "big blonde brute" who is the German military ideal, Dalroy classed him, in the expressive phrase of the regimental mess, as "a good bit of a bounder." Yet he was a patrician by birth, or he could not hold a commission in the Imperial Guard, and he had been most helpful and painstaking that night, so perforce one must be civil to him.

Dalroy himself, nearly as tall, was lean and lithe, hard as nails, yet intellectual, a cavalry officer who had passed through the Oxford mint.

By this time four other occupants of the compartment were in evidence, and a ticket-examiner came along. Dalroy produced a number of vouchers. The girl, who obviously spoke German, leaned out, purse in hand, and was about to explain that the crush in the booking-hall had prevented her from obtaining a ticket.

But Dalroy intervened. "I have your ticket," he said, announcing a singular fact in the most casual manner he could command.

"Thank you," she said instantly, trying to conceal her own surprise. But her eyes met Von Halwig's bold stare, and read therein not only a ready appraisement of her good looks but a perplexed half-recognition.

The railwayman raised a question. Contrary to the general custom, the vouchers bore names, which he compared with a list.

“These tickets are for Herren Fane and Dalroy, and I find a lady here,” he said suspiciously.

“Fräulein Evelyn Fane, my cousin,” explained Dalroy. “A mistake of the issuing office.”

“But——”

“*Ach, was!*” broke in Von Halwig impatiently. “You hear. Some fool has blundered. It is sufficient.”

At any rate, his word sufficed. Dalroy entered the carriage, and the door was closed and locked.

“Never say I haven’t done you a good turn,” grinned the Prussian. “A pleasant journey, though it may be a slow one. Don’t be surprised if I am in Aachen before you.”

Then he coloured. He had said too much. One of the men in the compartment gave him a sharp glance. Aachen, better known to travelling Britons as Aix-la-Chapelle, lay on the road to Belgium, not to France.

“Well, to our next meeting!” he went on boisterously. “Run across to Paris during the occupation.”

“Good-bye! And accept my very grateful thanks,” said Dalroy, and the train started.

“I cannot tell you how much obliged I am,” said a sweet voice as he settled down into his seat. “Please, may I pay you now for the ticket which you supplied so miraculously?”

“No miracle, but a piece of rare good-luck,” he said. “One of the attachés at our Embassy arranged to travel to England to-night, or I would never have got away, even with the support of the State Councillor who requested

Lieutenant von Halwig to befriend me. Then, at the last moment, Fane couldn't come. I meant asking Von Halwig to send a messenger to the Embassy with the spare ticket."

"So you will forward the money to Mr. Fane with my compliments," said the girl, opening her purse.

Dalroy agreed. There was no other way out of the difficulty. Incidentally, he could not help noticing that the lady was well supplied with gold and notes.

As they were fellow-travellers by force of circumstances, Dalroy took a card from the pocket-book in which he was securing a one-hundred-mark note.

"We have a long journey before us, and may as well get to know each other by name," he said.

The girl smiled acquiescence. She read, "Captain Arthur Dalroy, 2nd Bengal Lancers, Junior United Service Club."

"I haven't a card in my bag," she said simply, "but my name is Beresford—Irene Beresford—Miss Beresford," and she coloured prettily. "I have made an effort of the explanation," she went on; "but I think it is stupid of women not to let people know at once whether they are married or single."

"I'll be equally candid," he replied. "I'm not married, nor likely to be."

"Is that defiance, or merely self-defence?"

"Neither. A bald fact. I hold with Kitchener that a soldier should devote himself exclusively to his profession."

"It would certainly be well for many a heart-broken woman in Europe to-day if all soldiers shared your opinion," was the answer; and Dalroy knew that his *vis-à-vis* had deftly guided their chatter on to a more sedate plane.

The train halted an unconscionable time at a suburban station, and again at Charlottenburg. The four Germans in the compartment, all Prussian officers, commented on the delay, and one of them made a joke of it.

“The signals must be against us at Liège,” he laughed.

“Perhaps England has sent a regiment of Territorials across by the Ostend boat,” chimed in another. Then he turned to Dalroy, and said civilly, “You are English. Your country will not be so mad as to join in this adventure, will she?”

“This is a war of diplomats,” said Dalroy, resolved to keep a guard on his tongue. “I am quite sure that no one in England wants war.”

“But will England fight if Germany invades Belgium?”

“Surely Germany will do no such thing. The integrity of Belgium is guaranteed by treaty.”

“Your friend the lieutenant, then, did not tell you that our army crossed the frontier to-day?”

“Is that possible?”

“Yes. It is no secret now. Didn’t you realise what he meant when he said his regiment was going to Aachen? But, what does it matter? Belgium cannot resist. She must give free passage to our troops. She will protest, of course, just to save her face.”

The talk became general among the men. At the moment there was a fixed belief in Germany that Britain would stand aloof from the quarrel. So convinced was Austria of the British attitude that the Viennese mob gathered outside the English ambassador’s residence that same evening, and cheered enthusiastically.

During another long wait Dalroy took advantage of the clamour and bustle of a crowded platform to say to Miss Beresford in a low tone, “Are you well advised to proceed *viâ* Brussels? Why not branch off at Oberhausen, and go home by way of Flushing?”

“I must meet my sister in Brussels,” said the girl. “She is younger than I, and at school there. I am not afraid—now. They will not interfere with any one in this train, especially a woman. But how about you? You have the unmistakable look of a British officer.”

“Have I?” he said, smiling. “That is just why I am going through, I suppose.”

Neither could guess the immense significance of those few words. There was a reasonable chance of escape through Holland during the next day. By remaining in the Belgium-bound train they were, all unknowing, entering the crater of a volcano.

The ten-hours’ run to Cologne was drawn out to twenty. Time and again they were shunted into sidings to make way for troop trains and supplies. At a wayside station a bright moon enabled Dalroy to take stock of two monster howitzers mounted on specially constructed bogie trucks. He estimated their bore at sixteen or seventeen inches; the fittings and accessories of each gun filled nine or ten trucks. How prepared Germany was! How thorough her organisation! Yet the hurrying forward of these giant siege-guns was premature, to put it mildly? Or were the German generals really convinced that they would sweep every obstacle from their path, and hammer their way into Paris on a fixed date? Dalroy thought of England, and sighed,

because his mind turned first to the army—barely one hundred thousand trained men. Then he remembered the British fleet, and the outlook was more reassuring!

After a night of fitful sleep dawn found the travellers not yet half-way. The four Germans were furious. They held staff appointments, and had been assured in Berlin that the clock-work regularity of mobilisation arrangements would permit this particular train to cover the journey according to schedule. Meals were irregular and scanty. At one small town, in the early morning, Dalroy secured a quantity of rolls and fruit, and all benefited later by his forethought.

Newspapers bought *en route* contained dark forebodings of England's growing hostility. A special edition of a Hanover journal spoke of an ultimatum, a word which evoked harsh denunciations of "British treachery" from the Germans. The comparative friendliness induced by Dalroy's prevision as a caterer vanished at once. When the train rolled wearily across the Rhine into Cologne, ten hours late, both Dalroy and the girl were fully aware that their fellow-passengers regarded them as potential enemies.

It was then about six o'clock on the Tuesday evening, and a loud-voiced official announced that the train would not proceed to Aix-la-Chapelle until eight. The German officers went out, no doubt to seek a meal; but took the precaution of asking an officer in charge of some Bavarian troops on the platform to station a sentry at the carriage door. Probably they had no other intent, and merely wished to safeguard their places; but Dalroy realised now the imprudence of talking English, and signed to the girl that

she was to come with him into the corridor on the opposite side of the carriage.

There they held counsel. Miss Beresford was firmly resolved to reach Brussels, and flinched from no difficulties. It must be remembered that war was not formally declared between Great Britain and Germany until that evening. Indeed, the tremendous decision was made while the pair so curiously allied by fate were discussing their programme. Had they even quitted the train at Cologne they had a fair prospect of reaching neutral territory by hook or by crook. But they knew nothing of Liège, and the imperishable laurels which that gallant city was about to gather. They elected to go on!

A station employé brought them some unpalatable food, which they made a pretence of eating. Irene Beresford's Hanoverian German was perfect, so Dalroy did not air his less accurate accent, and the presence of the sentry was helpful at this crisis. Though sharp-eyed and rabbit-eared, the man was quite civil.

At last the Prussian officers returned. He who had been chatty overnight was now brusque, even overbearing. "You have no right here!" he vociferated at Dalroy. "Why should a damned Englishman travel with Germans? Your country is perfidious as ever. How do I know that you are not a spy?"

"Spies are not vouched for by Councillors of State," was the calm reply. "I have in my pocket a letter from his Excellency Staatsrath von Auschenbaum authorising my journey, and you yourself must perceive that I am escorting a lady to her home."

The other snorted, but subsided into his seat. Not yet had Teutonic hatred of all things British burst its barriers. But the pressure was increasing. Soon it would leap forth like the pent-up flood of some mighty reservoir whose retaining wall had crumbled into ruin.

“Is there any news?” went on Dalroy civilly. At any hazard, he was determined, for the sake of the girl, to maintain the semblance of good-fellowship. She, he saw, was cool and collected. Evidently, she had complete trust in him.

For a little while no one answered. Ultimately, the officer who regarded Liège as a joke said shortly, “Your Sir Grey has made some impudent suggestions. I suppose it is what the Americans call ‘bluff’; but bluffing Germany is a dangerous game.”

“Newspapers exaggerate such matters,” said Dalroy.

“It may be so. Still, you’ll be lucky if you get beyond Aachen,” was the ungracious retort. The speaker refused to give the town its French name.

An hour passed, the third in Cologne, before the train rumbled away into the darkness. The girl pretended to sleep. Indeed, she may have dozed fitfully. Dalroy did not attempt to engage her in talk. The Germans gossiped in low tones. They knew that their nation had spied on the whole world. Naturally, they held every foreigner in their midst as tainted in the same vile way.

From Cologne to Aix-la-Chapelle is only a two hours’ run. That night the journey consumed four. Dalroy no longer dared look out when the train stood in a siding. He knew by the sounds that all the dread paraphernalia of war was

speeding toward the frontier; but any display of interest on his part would be positively dangerous now; so he, too, closed his eyes.

By this time he was well aware that his real trials would begin at Aix; but he had the philosopher's temperament, and never leaped fences till he reached them.

At one in the morning they entered the station of the last important town in Germany. Holland lay barely three miles away, Belgium a little farther. The goal was near. Dalroy felt that by calmness and quiet determination he and his charming protégé might win through. He was very much taken by Irene Beresford. He had never met any girl who attracted him so strongly. He found himself wondering whether he might contrive to cultivate this strangely formed friendship when they reached England. In a word, the self-denying ordinance popularly attributed to Lord Kitchener was weakening in Captain Arthur Dalroy.

Then his sky dropped, dropped with a bang.

The train had not quite halted when the door was torn open, and a bespectacled, red-faced officer glared in.

"It is reported from Cologne that there are English in this carriage," he shouted.

"Correct, my friend. There they are!" said the man who had snarled at Dalroy earlier.

"You must descend," commanded the new-comer. "You are both under arrest."

"On what charge?" inquired Dalroy, bitterly conscious of a gasp of terror which came involuntarily from the girl's lips.

"You are spies. A sentry heard you talking English, and saw you examining troop-trains from the carriage window."

So that Bavarian lout had listened to the Prussian officer's taunt, and made a story of his discovery to prove his diligence.

"We are not spies, nor have we done anything to warrant suspicion," said Dalroy quietly. "I have letters——"

"No talk. Out you come!" and he was dragged forth by a bloated fellow whom he could have broken with his hands. It was folly to resist, so he merely contrived to keep on his feet, whereas the fat bully meant to trip him ignominiously on to the platform.

"Now you!" was the order to Irene, and she followed. Half-a-dozen soldiers closed around. There could be no doubting that preparations had been made for their reception.

"May I have my portmanteau?" said Dalroy. "You are acting in error, as I shall prove when given an opportunity."

"Shut your mouth, you damned Englishman"—that was a favourite phrase on German lips apparently—"would you dare to argue with me?—Here, one of you, take his bag. Has the woman any baggage? No. Then march them to the——"

A tall young lieutenant, in the uniform of the Prussian Imperial Guard, dashed up breathlessly.

"Ah, I was told the train had arrived!" he cried. "Yes, I am in search of those two——"

"Thank goodness you are here, Von Halwig!" began Dalroy.

The Guardsman turned on him a face aflame with fury. "Silence!" he bellowed. "I'll soon settle *your* affair.—Take his papers and money, and put him in a waiting-room till I return," he added, speaking to the officer of reserves who

had affected the arrest. “Place the lady in another waiting-room, and lock her in. I’ll see that she is not molested. As for this English *schwein-hund*, shoot him at the least sign of resistance.”

“But, Herr Lieutenant,” began the other, whose heavy paunch was a measure of his self-importance, “I have orders ——”

“*Ach, was!* I know! This Englishman is not an ordinary spy. He is a cavalry captain, and speaks our language fluently. Do as I tell you. I shall come back in half-an-hour.—Fräulein, you are in safer hands. You, I fancy, will be well treated.”

Dalroy said not a word. He saw at once that some virus had changed Von Halwig’s urbanity to bitter hatred. He was sure the Guardsman had been drinking, but that fact alone would not account for such an amazing *volte-face*. Could it be that Britain had thrown in her lot with France? In his heart of hearts he hoped passionately that the rumour was true. And he blazed, too, into a fierce if silent resentment of the Prussian’s satyr-like smile at Irene Beresford. But what could he do? Protest was worse than useless. He felt that he would be shot or bayoneted on the slightest pretext.

Von Halwig evidently resented the presence of a crowd of gaping onlookers.

“No more talk!” he ordered sharply. “Do as I bid you, Herr Lieutenant of Reserves!”

“Captain Dalroy!” cried the girl in a voice of utter dismay, “don’t let them part us!”

Von Halwig pointed to a door. “In there with him!” he growled, and Dalroy was hustled away. Irene screamed, and

tried to avoid the Prussian's outstretched hand. He grasped her determinedly.

"Don't be a fool!" he hissed in English. "*I* can save you. He is done with. A firing-party or a rope will account for him at daybreak. Ah! calm yourself, *gnädiges Fräulein*. There are consolations, even in war."

Dalroy contrived, out of the tail of his eye, to see that the distraught girl was led toward a ladies' waiting-room, two doors from the apartment into which he was thrust. There he was searched by the lieutenant of reserves, not skilfully, because the man missed nearly the whole of his money, which he carried in a pocket in the lining of his waistcoat. All else was taken—tickets, papers, loose cash, even a cigarette-case and favourite pipe.

The instructions to the sentry were emphatic: "Don't close the door! Admit no one without sending for me! Shoot or stab the prisoner if he moves!"

And the fat man bustled away. The station was swarming with military big-wigs. He must remain in evidence.

During five long minutes Dalroy reviewed the situation. Probably he would be executed as a spy. At best, he could not avoid internment in a fortress till the end of the war. He preferred to die in a struggle for life and liberty. Men had escaped in conditions quite as desperate. Why not he? The surge of impotent anger subsided in his veins, and he took thought.

Outside the open door stood the sentry, holding his rifle, with fixed bayonet, in the attitude of a sportsman who expects a covey of partridges to rise from the stubble. A window of plain glass gave on to the platform. Seemingly, it

had not been opened since the station was built. Three windows of frosted glass in the opposite wall were, to all appearance, practicable. Judging by the sounds, the station square lay without. Was there a lock and key on the door? Or a bolt? He could not tell from his present position. The sentry had orders to kill him if he moved. Perhaps the man would not interpret the command literally. At any rate, that was a risk he must take. With head sunk, and hands behind his back, obviously in a state of deep dejection, he began to stroll to and fro. Well, he had a fighting chance. He was not shot forthwith.

A slight commotion on the platform caught his eye, the sentry's as well. A tall young officer, wearing a silver helmet, and accompanied by a glittering staff, clanked past; with him the lieutenant of reserves, gesticulating. Dalroy recognised one of the Emperor's sons; but the sentry had probably never seen the princeling before, and was agape. And there was not only a key but a bolt!

With three noiseless strides, Dalroy was at the door and had slammed it. The key turned easily, and the bolt shot home. Then he raced to the middle window, unfastened the hasp, and raised the lower sash. He counted on the thick-headed sentry wasting some precious seconds in trying to force the door, and he was right. As it happened, before the man thought of looking in through the platform window Dalroy had not only lowered the other window behind him but dropped from the sill to the pavement between the wall and a covered van which stood there.

Now he was free—free as any Briton could be deemed free in Aix-la-Chapelle at that hour, one man among three

army corps, an unarmed Englishman among a bitterly hostile population which recked naught of France or Belgium or Russia, but hated England already with an almost maniacal malevolence.

And Irene Beresford, that sweet-voiced, sweet-faced English girl, was a prisoner at the mercy of a “big blonde brute,” a half-drunken, wholly enraged Prussian Junker. The thought rankled and stung. It was not to be borne. For the first time that night Dalroy knew what fear was, and in a girl’s behalf, not in his own.

Could he save her? Heaven had befriended him thus far; would a kindly Providence clear his brain and nerve his spirit to achieve an almost impossible rescue?

The prayer was formless and unspoken, yet it was answered. He had barely gathered his wits after that long drop of nearly twelve feet into the station yard before he was given a vague glimpse of a means of delivering the girl from her immediate peril.