THE BABIES OF BELGIUM

By Will Irwin.

Two or three little pictures before I begin:

It was the Pas de Calais at the end of October—an October blessed in this year of dread with clear, cool, bracing weather, much like our own Indian Summer. Around a turn in the road came a strange, shuffling multitude, doubly strange in that well-ordered landscape.

At the head marched an old woman, a stalwart, straight-backed Flemish woman, vigorous in spite of her 60 years. Besides her walked a boy of not more than 12, his figure already settling into a peasant solidity. He, like the old woman, carried on his back a bundle wrapped in a sheet. And between them they dragged by the hand a little girl, not more than six years old—half carried her, since now and then she raised her feet from the ground and let them support her.

It was plain to see why she lifted her feet. Her poor little shoes, heavy though they had been in the beginning, were worn clear through. Her clothes and hair were matted with dirt, and her face was gray with it, save for the streaks made by her tears. She had stopped crying now; she was past that. There comes the time with all these refugees, young and old, when they get beyond tears.

Behind followed the rest of the refugee caravan, like these leaders except for minor details. Of course, there was not among them a man of vigorous years—only a few grandfathers, trudging along beside their women folks. Mainly it was a collection of young children—all, like the little girl in the leading party, beyond tears with misery.

A dozen of the women, at least, carried babes in arms who had somehow survived the miseries of days and days of walking. These were the last of the Belgian refugees to pour into France. They came, mainly, from that thickly settled, fertile, once prosperous southwestern strip, along which Germans and allies were now fighting for the bridge-head of the Yser.

But not all. Some of them—as I learned from the few who had the energy to talk—lived further North. A month before, they had fled from the German advance after the capture of Antwerp; and they had been fleeing ever since—sleeping in the fields through rain and shine, eating what bread of charity Heaven only knows.

The tail of the procession, I found, had halted at a crossroads beside which someone had erected a tent from blankets strung on sticks. As I approached, wondering what this might be, an automobile came whizzing down the road at 70 miles an hour—there are no speed laws for military automobiles in time of war. It stopped beside the tent; there was a parley; and a man in Belgium uniform wearing a Red Cross brassard on his arm alighted.

"What is it—what is happening?" I asked the first of the refugees beside the tent—an old man who crouched in the gutter.

"Un enfant—a baby is being born," he said briefly. The man in uniform was a Belgian surgeon taking time from his work of repairing death to assist in giving life.

Again; it was the next day in Calais—Calais, once so busy and so venerable, and in spots so pretty, but now faded and dirty with the passage of armies. Ten thousand of these refugees came into Calais that day. That day, also the Red Cross was bringing in Belgian wounded by the thousand—there had been serious fighting along the Yser.

The refugees, herded or escorted by the police, streamed down the streets to the concentration yards prepared for them on the docks by the French government, which was going to transport them to the Midi as soon as it could get the steamers. You would hear now and then the toot of an automobile horn, and the refugees would make way for the passage of a motor-car loaded to capacity with the white-faced wounded. The car would go on, and the refugees would close their gaps and resume their weary, nerveless pace.

At the concentration yard they sat in family groups, the children huddled about their mothers and grandmothers like chickens around hens. No child among them laughed or played; they were too weary for that; but no child cried. I was trying to have speech with these refugees, and finding them too nerveless to give any account of their adventures when an ambulance arrived.

A nurse and a physician descended. A woman rose from a distant group and joined them. She carried in her arms a bundle wrapped in rags. The slant of her back showed that the bundle contained a child—there is an attitude of motherhood which none can mistake.

The women in the nearest group followed the pantomime with their tearless, hopeless eyes.

"What is it?" I asked.

For a time none of the women answered. Then one spoke in a dead tone.

"Her baby is dead," she said. "She had no milk in her."

All that happened on the fringe of Belgium, to the refugees who had made their way out and were nearing safety, and enough comfort to keep soul and body together.

I could multiply instances from the observation of others. There was, for example, the group of two hundred refugees who arrived in Holland early in November. They carried with them four dead, newborn babies.

It was the same story which one hears everywhere. The mothers were so reduced by privation that they had no milk of their own. As for cows' milk, it was not to be had for any money.

Add another picture, brought out by an American from Belgium. He stood one morning by the back door of a German cook camp, watching a group of Belgian women grubbing through the trash-heap piled up behind the camp. All these women carried babies.

"What are they doing?" he asked a German sergeant with whom he had struck up acquaintance.

"Scraping our condensed milk cans," said the sergeant. "It's the only way to get milk for their babies. I've seen them run their fingers round a can which looked as bright as a new coin, and hold them into the babies' mouths to suck. My company," he added, "has been getting along without milk in its coffee and giving it to these women. We've received no orders to the contrary—and we're mostly family men. But we're an exception; and it doesn't go very far."

Here is another recent picture from stricken Brussels, that gay, dainty, lively city in old times—the city whose smiling people called it petit Paris. The scene is the once busy, pleasant boulevard Bischofsheim. A woman collapses on a bench set along the sidewalk after the ashion of the Greater Paris. In her arms is a baby. A child staggers along, clinging to her apron. The woman's face is blue and yellow; she is on the verge of collapse. The baby, surely not over five months old, has a pale, lead-colored skin. Its mouth is open as though set that way. Its eyes are closed.

Two women of Brussels pass this unhappy group. They hurriedly exchange some words, turn back to the woman on the bench. Then one stands guard while the other hastens for some milk and bread—such as is to be found in the Brussels of today. They force a little milk between the teeth of the mother. They let the baby drink. It drinks as though it had never drunk otherwise.

To the face of the mother comes a few patches of color. She slowly recovers until she is able to eat a bit of bread. The baby opens its mouth, drinks more greedily. "It has not fed since two days," the mother whispers.

The mother tries to rise from the bench but she cannot. The elder child drinks the milk that is left. It looks curiously at the piece of bread as if it did not know what it was. The mother forces it to eat. A crowd has gathered, murmuring. This sight is not new, yet each time it draws a little crowd. Every one would like to give—but no one can. Who is not poor at this moment? Many of them have children at home who today weigh less than the day they were born.

France and England and Germany and Austria are issuing their lists of the dead, which are mounting up day by day to a ghastly million. But these take account only of the strong young men who have died in the fighting. They do not take account of mere non-combatants. They do not list the women, who foolishly or ignorantly sticking to their homes, have died under the shell-fire of enemies or friends. They do not list the weak and helpless who have dropped out from the pathetic carvans of refugees to perish along the edges of the roads. They do not list those who are beginning to die by hunger in stricken Belgium. And finally, they do not list these babes of Belgium, dropping off before their lives have fairly begun, because there is no milk.

Let us view the situation in cold blood. Belgium is shut off from the world—ringed with steel. Her own food supply was used up long ago, either by the people or by their conquerors. The cattle were first of all to go; even in August I saw the Germans killing milch cows for rations. A cow or a small dairy herd is left here or there; but they are the exceptions.

The supply of condensed milk ran short long ago. Now milk is a necessity to most civilized children between the ages of one and two years. Some children, it is true, pull through under exceptional circumstances of privation, without it; but these are the sturdy; they stand apart from the rule. The average young child must have milk or he will die. And there is no milk.

Again, the suckling baby must have mother's milk or a substitute. There is, of course, no substitute to be had in Belgium and equally there is little mother's milk.

Every woman knows that a civilized nursing mother must "keep up her strength." She must have nourishing food—in many cases special food. Every woman knows that a certain proportion of civilized mothers cannot feed their own babies even at that.

Nourishing food—special food! The news which filters out of that locked, stricken country to The Commission for Relief in Belgium makes a sarcasm and a mockery of those phrases.

In many, if in not most Belgian cities, the populace is down to one large baker's bun a day, issued by the municipal authorities. In some places, the authorities have been able to supplement that ration by one bowl of cabbage soup a day. One bun and one bowl of cabbage soup a day—for a nursing mother!

Yet that is all they have and all they will have this winter at the best America can do. The commission hopes at most to transmit ten ounces of food a day to each inhabitant of Belgium—and to do that the people of the United States must strain every resource of charity. How little that is for a civilized human being, and especially for a nursing mother, becomes plain when one learns that the average inhabitant of Greater New York consumes 42 ounces of food a day. The mothers of Belgium can hope only for a quarter ration this winter!

Even allowing for the reduction of the birth rate due to the war, there must have been 40 thousand births in Belgium since the Germans came. There will be 40 thousand more in this winter of hardship and privation. How many of the newly arrived 40 thousand have already died unnecessarily—undecorated, unsung victims of this war—no one will ever know.

How many of the coming 40 thousand will die this winter depends upon us in America—upon how much food we send to the nursing mothers, how much milk to the babies.