

CHAPTER VIII

AMERICA ENTERS THE WAR

The first three months of 1917 were the most agonizing period of all Whitlock's service in Belgium. The "war of peace notes" which the German Government, in victorious mood, had begun by its proposal of negotiations on December 12, 1916, continued into the new year. It ended in nothing save President Wilson's noble statement of just terms of peace on January 22nd. Meanwhile, the deportation of the Belgian unemployed continued. So also did the struggle in Germany between opponents and champions of unrestricted submarine warfare. Before the end of January von Tirpitz had won, and Germany proclaimed the new zone of ruthless submarine sinkings. President Wilson, appearing before Congress on February 3rd to announce the severance of diplomatic relations with Germany, declared that if American ships and lives were sacrificed in violation of international law and the dictates of humanity, then he would again come to Congress for authority to protect Americans in their "legitimate errands on the high seas." From that moment Whitlock's position in German-occupied territory became almost intolerably anxious. He knew that war was at hand; he did not know what would become of the revictualing; he was far from certain that he and the C.R.B. officers would be permitted to leave. From the outset he believed that the proper course would be to transfer the C.R.B. administration in Belgium to men supplied by Holland and Spain. That view was for a time opposed by others. Contradictory and confused orders from Washington caused Whitlock grave anxiety. Jealousy appeared between the Dutch and Spanish; Mr. Hoover's distrust of Villalobar and Francqui was a complicating factor; the Germans blew hot and cold. But in the end a working arrangement was perfected upon the basis that Whitlock had favored, while he obtained guarantees for the egress of all C.R.B. workers. He left Belgium with a sad heart, but the revictualing continued without interruption.