

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter VII. **ULTIMATA**

ON Saturday morning, July 25, I had just seated myself at my table and was yielding to all those trifling temptations by which the indolent will postpones the task of composition — sharpening lead-pencils, alining them on the desk, arranging notes and paper, looking out the window at the summer day — and the golf-links so near ! — and at last, having exhausted all the possibilities of petty occupations which by a trick of the lazy mind might serve as excuses for procrastination, I was about to go to work when the morning papers were sent up. I would glance over the report of the Caillaux case, at any rate, though the full reports were in the Paris papers which Omer would bring out at noon. I picked up *L'Étoile Belge*, and there was the ultimatum which the Austrian Government had sent to Serbia on Thursday evening.

There had been references to it in the newspapers of Friday. Over at Ravenstein, as I stood on the terrace chatting with Sir Francis Villiers, M. Paul Hymans, the Parliamentary leader of the Belgian Liberals, had come up and said :

"It looks serious."

We thought for the moment that he referred to the troubles in Ulster, but no, he said ; Austria had sent "an ultimatum to Serbia. But ultimata were not so infrequent in Balkan diplomacy, and we had been too much absorbed in pleasanter things ! But here it was in full ; I read it through, marvelling more and more at the amazing brutality of its successive exigencies, that ended on the peremptory note of demand for a reply within forty-eight hours. The delay was even then almost up ; any one could see that it meant but one thing — war, for surely no nation could yield to such a summons ! The smouldering fire in the Balkans would break out again ! Could the flames be confined to that arcs by the diplomacy that twice before in recent years had succeeded in doing that, or would they spread and involve ail Europe ? The mind for a moment was aghast at the thought, and then — but no ! Impossible in our day, humanity advanced as it is, at an epoch where as never before the spirit of goodwill is working in men. I read the dispatches from the various capitals; the thing could not be. Diplomacy would find a way ; there would be discussions and *pourparlers* and exchange of notes. The Balkans were far away from the field of American thought and preoccupation, and far away from snug little Belgium, safe in its neutrality ; far away, surely, from Bois-Fleuri, tucked away there among its roses and its grove of sweet-smelling pines, the wide fields about almost audibly purring with peace and contentment. War ! — on such a summer morning Let the Balkans settle their rascally quarrels among themselves what had we to do with them ?

I thrust aside *L'Étoile*, hitched up my chair to my desk and went to work. I wrote until noon.

The Marquis of Villalobar, my Spanish colleague, an old friend whom I had known in America, was coming to luncheon that day, and when he arrived the Austrian ultimatum, of course, came up at once. I can see him now as he stood there in our small *salon*, shrugging his stout Castilian shoulders at mention of it. The word so often lightly spoken came to our lips and suddenly assumed the sinister connotation it should always bear, and as it was uttered now it had a new dread sound. War ! We speculated, to no purpose of course, and spoke of the fortunate neutrality of Belgium.

" At any rate," the Marquis said as we were going out to luncheon, " we have a comfortable *loge* from which to watch the performance."

It was a thought in which there was comfort ; we could bug it to ourselves in the inveterate and persistent selfishness of our deplorable human nature, fling aside our preoccupation, and talk of the Caillaux case, of French politics, of Washington, or of the visit the Marquis had once made us at Toledo. He was on his way to the Château de Dave, near Namur, to spend the week-end with an aunt, and shortly after luncheon he drove away in the rain in his big green English car, behind Griffin, his English chauffeur, who seemed so integral a part of it.

The next day, Sunday, we went to Antwerp, my wife and I, to meet the *Lapland*, which was bringing our mothers from America. The delay fixed in the Austrian ultimatum had expired, on that dull Sunday of dismal rain, and yet there was no war — the world was quite normal. Dawdling about the Hôtel St.-Antoine at Antwerp I asked the old Swiss porter — one asks porters everything — and he said there would be no war ; he said it was impossible. Of course !

We had to stop over at Antwerp for the night ; the *Lapland* was lying outside waiting for the tide and would not dock before Monday, and it was indeed late on Monday afternoon before the great bulk of the steamship, enveloped in the mystery of its long voyage, loomed in the rain across the misty reaches of the Scheldt. The ship came up to her wharf and the happy passengers came ashore, ready to scatter over Europe on their summer holiday — and there were the mothers !

Brussels was calm at the beginning of that week and we were all more or less unconscious, or more or less insensible. We spoke of war, accustomed ourselves to the word at least, but when we thought or spoke of it, it was in the sense of security of that inveterate human egoism which leads one to think that an evil will not come, or if it does, that it will pass by and leave one untouched.

The newspapers of Tuesday published Austria's declaration of war against Serbia. England and France and Russia were sounding the Cabinet at Vienna, seeking some means of satisfying her demands without hostilities. On Wednesday President Poincaré, overtaken by a wireless message on the sea, returned in haste to Paris from his visa to Scandinavia, and — a return that had for us a more personal interest — Aunt Sarah came back, arriving with the breathless air of one who has raced home just before a storm ; she had motored in haste back from the Vosges. We had just received the news that the Austrian cannon had bombarded Belgrade.

But that was general, remote, like President Poincaré's return to the Elysée. Aunt Sarah had something personal to relate, far more moving tales to tell of her experiences at Nancy. No one would change her money for her ; everywhere she had been jostled by moving troops. I think we were somewhat sceptical of that ; there had been no mobilization, we insisted.

And she had a grievance, one of the most personal a woman can know, since it had to do with *douanes*. She had bought a quantity of the famous linen of the Vosges, and her rigid Puritan conscience had moved her to have the linen shipped to her instead of packing it in her trunks ; but at the frontier there was such commotion, such confusion, that the inspectors chalked her trunks hastily without so much as opening them. They vouchsafed only a cursory glance into the motor, and there their eyes lighted on two golden melons, hastily bought at Nancy, whose picturesque market was not to be resisted, and rolled into the car ; and upon these the inspector seized and made her pay a heavy duty — that Belgian melons might be protected, I suppose, and that the ironic spirits might laugh at her

conscientiousness in the matter of the linen, which might as well have been in those unopened trunks. Aunt Sarah insisted that universal war was imminent, but we were not yet convinced ; at any rate, was not Belgium's neutrality guaranteed in solemn treaties ?

All that she knew, as she admitted frankly, was that she was glad to get home ; but we must start off soon again and motor down to Dinant, that gem that crowned the Meuse. And we began to plan the journey to Dinant, until I took up the papers to read Maître Labori's *plaidoirie* in defence of Madame Caillaux ; the newspapers, indeed, gave more columns to that *cause célèbre* than to the discussions in the larger court. Sir Edward Grey was making another effort to do what he had done two years before — confine the war to the Balkan States by a conference at London. He had sent a dispatch to Sir Edward Goschen, the British Ambassador at Berlin, to propose to Germany that Austria be influenced to occupy Belgrade provisionally while the Powers sought the terms of an accord. The proposal was welcomed by France and Russia.

What would Germany do ? The decision rested with her. We waited for news from Berlin.'

It was now no longer a question of days but of hours ; and then even of minutes, which throbbed by in an atmosphere that was charged with dreadful potentialities. One was sensible of it in ail the faces, usually so preoccupied, that flitted by one in the street — almost in the hard glitter of the splendid sun that shone on those fateful days.

And yet there was a strange normality, a persistent, almost inappropriate, usualness in ordinary things ; life went on quite the same. The Legation was quiet, deserted, dull. Gibson and I strolled down to the Caveau de Paris, the little restaurant in the Rue du Marché-aux-Herbes where diplomats were always to be found at noon, and where one could always pick up the gossip of our world ; but there everything was as it had been. Count van der Straeten Ponthos, of the Belgian Foreign Office, was sitting in his place in the corner where the luncheon-hour always found him, with his coffee and his cigar, taking his little after luncheon nap. I can see now the young Prince Georges de Ligne at one of the tables, turning about to greet us, a brilliant smile on his handsome face . . . We talked, indeed, more of the acquittal of Madame Caillaux, just pronounced by the Cour d'Assises, than of war.

The Socialists were to hold a monster meeting that night ; numerous speeches were to be made, of course, invoking that article of their creed which provides the specific panacea for war. Jean Jaurès was to speak, and I had the notion of going to hear him but I did not ; it was rather a long way from Bois-Fleuri. I regret now that I did not.

Still we waited for news from Berlin. One man could stop this thing ; and there was stillness, an immense, preposterous, fateful stillness that seemed to fill the universe, as mankind waited for the word from William Hohenzollern.

Never had diplomatist written an appeal more beautiful in ail that it implied for the peace of the world and for the happiness of mankind than that dispatch sent by Sir Edward Grey from Downing Street to the Wilhelmstrasse. And as millions waited, we waited ; the best in one could not give up the hope that such an opportunity held out. But the word did not come, the one man did not speak. Instead there came the clash of arms ; the stillness was broken by the rumble of mobilized cannon, and an ultimatum was flashed to St. Petersburg.

And yet, strange enough for us of the little household at Bois-Fleuri, the whole problem, too stupendous to be grasped by one mind, had reduced itself, as things will in great crises, to one small personal question, namely : Would Omer be called to the colours ?

Omer was a gentle soul, with a spirit far removed from the brutality of war.

We were all fond of him. He had finished his military service years before ; he had been in the carabiniers, He was in the eleventh class of reserves, and that figure, 11 came to have for us a terrible significance. For days the mobilization of the Belgian army had been in progress, already troops were on the frontier to protect the nation's neutrality. The King had returned from Ostend — or had never gone back there after the *Te Deum*. There were lights in the Ministries all night and in the Palace, where councils of state were in progress. But to us Omer somehow symbolized the whole international situation. Would he have to go or not ? He went about, calm, unperturbed, smiling. I used to stop at the Galeries du Roi with the crowds at a bulletin-board to see what classes had been called ; one afternoon I read that the ninth class of reserves had just been called ... Omer's was the eleventh. It was Friday, July 31.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.