

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XI. The King goes to Parliament.

THE Belgian Government's reply to the German ultimatum — a dignified State paper saying that Belgium refused to break her engagements and would resist German aggression — was delivered on Monday evening at seven o'clock. At ten o'clock the King addressed a telegram of appeal to the King of England. Tuesday morning at six o'clock Herr von Bülow delivered his Government's note saying that Germany could take what she wanted by force. Germany had already declared war on France. The Belgian Government had, been notified by both France and England that they would come to her defence if Belgian soil were invaded ; the formal declarations of war were all that remained.

And at ten o'clock that morning the King went to Parliament.

It was a day of lovely sunshine ; the Belgian flags of black, yellow, and red floated from every house, and the people had gathered early about the Park and the Palace and the Parliament buildings to see the King and the royal family go by. The crowds were massed along the sidewalks, on the *terre-pleins* and the *carrefours* ; people hung out of windows, even the roofs were black. The *Garde Civique*, the Chasseurs and the Infantry, the Gendarmes à Cheval and companies of Boy Scouts, formed a *haie* from the Royal Palace along the Rue Royale to the Parliament Houses at the other end of the Park. The Queen went by in a landau with the three royal children, preceded by the *piqueurs de la Cour*. The King, booted and spurred, mounted on his big bay, came after with his staff and the *escadron* Marie-Henriette in their green tunics and grey busbies as guard of honour. The crowds were wild with enthusiasm.

At ten o'clock Gibson and I drove to the National Palace. Sir Francis Villiers drove up in his motor just as we arrived and I entered with him, and we went slowly up the red-carpeted staircase together to the diplomatic gallery, Sir Francis heavy with care. The Salle des Séances presented a scene one would not soon forget. All around the galleries were crowded, the wives of the Ministers in seats opposite us, though none of the ladies of the diplomatic corps were there. Below were the senators and deputies, all in formal black — some seated, quietly waiting, others in excited groups, discussing the ultimatum of last night and the invasion of the land. The Duc d'Ursel was there in the uniform of the Guides. The Ministers, after their sleepless nights, were on their benches — the Baron de Broqueville, Messrs. Davignon, Carton de Wiart, Hymans, the new Liberal *Ministre d'Etat*, and Vandervelde, the new Socialist *Ministre d'Etat*, receiving congratulations. The hall is a hemicycle with columns all around, not unlike the chamber of the Supreme Court, the old Senate at Washington, though larger. The time had not been sufficient to erect the red velvet throne ; instead, a red-and-gold *fauteuil* was placed for the King on the president's *dais* ; overhead, under the white statue of Léopold I, was the escutcheon of Belgium and a trophy of flags of Belgium and the Congo. The diplomatic tribune was hung with Belgian flags too. Down there on the floor before the president's desk a great green table was set, and at it were seated the doyen and the *greffiers*. Gold *fauteuils* were set for the Queen and the royal family.

The colleagues were gathering in these now changed conditions : the last time we were assembled was at Ste.-Gudule scarcely a fortnight before, at the *Te Deum* to celebrate the founding of the Belgian dynasty, now so rudely shaken. Herr von Bülow, of course, was not there, nor the Count Clary, the Austrian Minister. We waited many minutes ; then there came

through the open window the strains of a band, and suddenly a voice cried :

" *La Reine !* "

The deputies sprang to their feet, and against the solid black of their frock-coats there fluttered the white of the handkerchiefs they waved as they shouted :

" *Vive la Reine ! Vive la Reine !* "

And there was her charming Majesty, all in white, wearing a hat with great white plumes, lovely and gracious, just entering the chamber below to our left, acknowledging this loyal salute with sweeping curtsies right and left. She was escorted by a committee of deputies and had a modest suite — the Countess Hemricourt de Grunne, the Grande Maîtresse, in a violet gown ; the two little princes, Léopold the Duke of Brabant, the heir apparent, and Charles Count of Flanders, in black satin suits that day instead of the costumes of grey they usually wore ; and the elfish little Princess Marie José.

The Queen took the golden chair placed for her on the left of the tribune and the princes took their seats beside her, the little Count of Flanders wriggling up on to his chair in such a boyish manner. The deputies resumed their seats, and the chamber for an instant was still. And then, while we waited, suddenly there was the thunder and tumult of applause outside, a rumble, a roar, and then a *huissier* shouted :

" *Le Roi !* "

The word was caught up by many voices, swelling to a hoarse shout :

" *Le Roi !* "

The Queen, the Ministers, the deputies, everybody rose ; we in the diplomatic gallery never once sat down. The King was just below us, entering the chamber from the right — the side opposite that from which the Queen had entered. The deputies were waving their hands — no handkerchiefs in them now — and shouting in a united voice, deep, rough, masculine, in a mighty crescendo :

" *Vive le Roi ! Vive le Roi ! Vive le Roi !* "

It was as though they could not shout it loudly enough. As they stood there, some in tears, Catholic, Liberal, Socialist, those distinctions faded ; it was Belgium acclaiming her King ...

And there he is, in the fatigue uniform of a lieutenant-general, booted and spurred, his *sabre* clanking at his side. He strides along firmly, swiftly, mounts the rostrum, takes off his *képi*, flings it on the table before him, clicks his heels together, makes a smart military bow, swiftly peels the white glove from his right hand, slaps the glove into the *képi*, and, without waiting, begins at once, in his firm voice and his beautiful French, to read his speech from the notes that he holds in his white-gloved hand.

The Queen, the little princes, the deputies, resume their seats ; the applause that greets His Majesty is quickly hushed by the universal adjuration of silence :

" *Sh ! Sh !* "

The doyen's gavel falls on the green table. The stillness in the chamber is the stillness of poignant, nervous tension. The Ministers in the front benches with their portfolios know what is coming, no doubt ; but the others strain forward — the old Count Woeste, for instance, with his hand behind his deaf ear — to hear the fateful words.

The King is somewhat short-sighted ; he puts on his pince-nez, holds the narrow little strips of paper rather close to his eyes, and begins to read :

" *Quand je vois cette assemblée frémissante dans laquelle il n'y a plus qu'un seul parti . . .* "

The emotions break, cries ring forth ; then " *Sh Sh* " again, and silence.

And the King goes on :

" *celui de la Patrie, où tous les coeurs battent en ce moment à l'unisson,*

mes souvenirs se reportent au Congrès de 1830, et je vous demande, messieurs : Êtes-vous décidés inébranlablement à maintenir intact le patrimoine sacré de nos ancêtres ?"

The deputies spring to their feet, raise their hands as though swearing to an oath, and cry :

" *Oui ! Oui ! Oui !* "

The King continues ; he strikes out emphatic gestures with his free hand . . . Below him the little Duke of Brabant looks up intently into his father's face, never takes his eyes off him. What are the thoughts in that boy's mind ? Will that scene come back to him in after-years ? And how ? when ? under what circumstances ?

The silence is intense, too intense to be borne, and now and then exclamations break forth, to be smothered immediately by that imperative " *Sh ! Sh !* " The King heeds not but reads on, finishing with that moving phrase :

" *J'ai foi dans nos destinées. Un pays qui se défend s'impose au respect de tous ; ce pays ne périt pas. Dieu sera avec nous dans cette cause juste ! Vive la Belgique indépendante !* "

The mad, passionate applause breaks, all unrestrained now ; handkerchiefs are waved, then pressed to weeping eyes . . . The King seizes his *képi*, the Queen and the little princes rise, and the King stalks out, sword clanking ; away on stern business now !

And I find myself leaning over the balcony rail, a catch in my throat, my eyes moist.

Then that stillness again in the chamber, intense, vibrant with emotion, the thrill of patriotism, the sense of tragedy, the consciousness of assisting at an historic scene. The deputies remain standing, and the Queen makes her sweeping curtsies again right and left, then, with the royal children and her suite, retires.

Then there is a universal inhalation in the chamber, a long breath. Contrary to their custom when the King reads a speech from the throne, the Senate and Chamber of Deputies do not separate but remain in joint session. Baron de Broqueville, the Minister of War and Premier, is opening his portfolio, taking out the notes of his speech, standing up.

" *A la tribune ! A la tribune !* " the senators and deputies cry.

And he marches down, climbs up into the tribune, stands there, looks about him, bows. A handsome man, M. de Broqueville, a striking figure there in the tribune in that moment — tall, *svelte*, distinguished — in black frock-coat, slightly waving hair, smart moustache, the ribbon of the Order of Léopold in his *boutonnière*. He speaks dramatically, reading the German ultimatum, the Belgian reply ; asks almost peremptorily for a vote of supplies ; and at the end, smiting the tribune, his seal-ring striking sharply on the hard wood, he concludes with :

" *La parole est aux armes !* "

The session is over, though the senators and deputies are to hold formal sessions to ratify the Government's acts and to vote supplies. But the dramatic *tableau* is done, and we turn to speak to one another, and then drift out of the gallery. And as we go the Prince Koudacheff comes up to me, takes me aside, and asks me to take over his Legation in case he has to go away. I tell him that I shall be honoured to do so, of course...

On our way out the word went about that the Papal Nuncio wished us to remain and meet him a moment in an ante-room. Monseigneur Tacci, the Nuncio, as the only Ambassador at the Belgian Court, was the doyen of the corps, though the Count Clary, who had been at Brussels longer than any of us, usually acted in that capacity. We gathered about him, then, in one of the ante-chambers, and he stood there in the midst of us in his violet robes, very distinguished with his dark aristocratic features, as

finely cut as a cameo, and his delicate hands that were so expressive, speaking to us in his soft Italian voice that lent its accent to his French. He hinted at the possibility of the Court and Government going to Antwerp, and said that in such an eventuality we should have to accompany them.

Then the sunshine once more, and the motors rolling up into the paved court before the Parliament buildings, and the colleagues lifting their tall hats to each other and then rolling away in the crowded, agitated, brilliant streets.

When I got back to the Legation I found a telegram from Washington authorizing me to take over the French interests, providing such action would not prevent my taking over any other legations, the chiefs of which might ask me to do so. And on the heels of this, word came from Herr von Bülow that he was leaving in the afternoon and would ask me to accept the representation of German interests.

At two o'clock, then, Herr von Strum, the secretary of the German Legation, came, very much excited, and formally delivered Herr von Bülow's request.

" But I've agreed to act for the French interests," I said.

Herr von Strum looked at me an instant as though he could not believe me. I asked him to tell Herr von Bülow of that fact, supposing that in such a case Herr von Bülow would not wish me to act for German interests. Herr von Strum was nervous, agitated, and unstrung ; I suppose that he too had been without sleep for nights on end. Tears were continually welling into his eyes, and suddenly he covered his face with his hands and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, in an attitude of despair. Presently he looked up.

" Oh, these poor, stupid Belgians ! " he said " Why don't they get out of the way ! Why don't they get out of the way ! I know what it will be. I know the German army. It will be like laying a baby on the track before a locomotive ! "

He bent over, stretching his hands towards the floor as though to illustrate the cruel deed.

" I know the German army," he repeated. " It will go across Belgium like a steam-roller ; like a steam-roller."

He liked the phrase, which he must have picked up in America — he had an American wife — and kept on repeating it.

He went away and late in the afternoon came back, saying that Herr von Bülow asked me as a special favour to him to take over his Legation, and I consented. I sent word that I should go to the German Legation at five o'clock, and asked Maître de Leval meanwhile to draw very carefully a *procès-verbal*. The German Legation is across the street from the American, in the Rue Belliard, and at the hour appointed we went over there — Gibson, de Leval, and I.

We found Herr von Bülow alone in his chancelry, stretched out in a low chair, a cup of tea on the little *tabouret* at his side. He was smoking a cigarette — his short mission at Brussels ended. When I had seen him last, the night of his formal dinner, he had been so happily looking forward to a peaceful, idle summer. At sight of me he flung up his hands, shrugged his shoulders and made a little *moue*, as though he too remembered, as though words were unnecessary — or inadequate. Herr von Bülow had had a *procès-verbal* already prepared, but I preferred mine, and we signed and sealed that. Then in that room of gloomy oak, the two white-haired German functionaries — the old Grabowsky, *conseiller aulique*, and another, bureaucratic and formal, bearing a tall white candle and a long stick of red sealing-wax, proceeded slowly and solemnly around the room, sealing the oaken cupboards where the archives were. We stood about in silence while this was being done. Then the strained farewells ; Herr von Bülow was

leaving at seven o'clock for Berlin, via Holland.

Half an hour later Maître de Leval and I drove over to the Foreign Office. In the Rue de la Loi we met a line of automobiles, half a dozen of them, spinning at high speed toward the Cinquantenaire. They were filled with officers, in the *bonnets de police* that the Belgian soldiers wear in memory of the Revolution of 1830, and they gave a gala air to the scene.

" *Le Roi !* " said de Leval.

It was he and his staff, going to the front.

Brand WITHLOCK

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