

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XIII. "*Horum omnium fortissime sunt Belgae*"

SCARCELY waiting for the-reply to the ultimatum, German troops had invaded Belgium on Tuesday morning at eleven o'clock. They crossed the frontier near Dolhain, and in the afternoon, about four o'clock, they had arrived in the region of the Fléron, one of the forts that encircle Liège.* Wednesday morning we heard that the guns of the forts at Liège were already booming. The army was already concentrated there, and the Liège deputies had gone home to aid in the defence of the old city, whose heroic traditions the King, in a stirring proclamation to his troops, could recall that day in reminding them of the noble resistance of the six hundred Franchimonts, as he could inspire the Flemish by invoking the memory of the Battle of the Golden Spurs. It was a noble and an eloquent appeal in which the King had the felicity to cite the phrase of Caesar's, familiar to every schoolboy the world over :

Horum omnium fortissime sunt Belgae. **

The moving words of the young King, who on that Wednesday morning had established his headquarters eastward at Louvain, near the field where he was to prove himself so much a man, had stirred Brussels. The city, in the brilliant sun of that Wednesday, thrilled with the emotions of patriotic fervour ; flags leaped to roofs and balconies all over the town and lolled luxuriously on the warm air. There was an exhilaration in the atmosphere ; every one was excited. Men met and shook hands ecstatically ; tears came suddenly to the eyes ; voices trembled. Every man that one met had a new rumour — the French army had entered Belgium or the English were debarking at Ostend ; there were exaltation and high hope in every heart.

All day the Legation was crowded with frightened Americans, who continued to pour into Brussels and remained there hesitant, undecided, bewildered, bath to brave the Channel crossing to England, hoping for some miracle that would arrest the war or spare them its discomforts.

" I suppose I am to come right here with my family in case of trouble ? " said a great lusty fellow, speaking in his strong German accent, who came one morning with a wife and five children, and planting himself there in the corridor that was crowded with Americans and Germans plucked at me insistently as I went by. Perhaps I did not instantly respond with the spontaneous gesture of hospitality that one, especially if one is an American diplomatist, would like to have instantly ready in all his relations with his friends and fellow-citizens, for the man grew impatient and shouted :

" I demand protection as an American citizen ! "

He used the word protection with that curious, baffling superstition which characterizes the type of mind that confuses words with acts, that considers problems solved when the word that defines them has been discovered and pronounced ...

We could laugh at him, he was so badly scared ; but I could have wept at the plight of a newly married pair — a youth and his bride, who sat near, patiently awaiting their turn. They had been school teachers in Iowa. They were on their bridal trip and for the first time in their lives in Europe, doubtless for the first time in their lives away from home. All

that the bridegroom had was à ticket which, as he unrolled it, revealed — yard on yard in almost interminable convolutions — a series of coupons : coupons for everything — steamships, railways, trams, omnibuses, hotels; in short, one of those tourist tickets that provide for every need of a determined voyage, themselves the itinerary and the means of following it. And now, in the universal cataclysm, the young couple found their coupons suddenly worthless ; no one would accept them — not a steamship, railway, bus, or hotel. And the bridegroom had no money ; all that he and his wife had was invested in that preternaturally elongated ticket, which was to have supplied every possible human want and to have spared them every tare and annoyance so long as they did not depart from the narrow, defined groove of travel it marked out for them. Held up there before me in the hand of the groom, and allowed to trail out its preposterous length in despairing impotence on the floor, it stood to me as the pathetic symbol of what long months of eager planning and consultation of guide-books and histories, of what conversations with obliging and persuasive agents, of what painful economy, of what heroic and stoical selfdenial, of what hopes and dreams ! I can see the bridegroom and the bride sitting there, the girl looking into the young husband's face with such utter confidence so far from that midwestern home, with its peace, its calm, its *naïveté*. The whole scene was vividly present — the little provincial town, the high school, the Sunday school, the Chautauqua, the faint apprehension of the thing called culture : my heart went out to them. It was another of life's little ironies for Mr. Thomas Hardy or a story for Maupassant, though Maupassant with four thousand naked words would have treated it with his cynical mockery, his bard, pitiless wit. *Sunt lacrimae rerum !* It was of a pathos beyond all tears, as is so much of life, alas !

There were all sorts and conditions of men in the throng that shifted in and out of the Legation. There were jockeys and clergymen, and actors and musicians, and physicians and tourists of all kinds. One man, a millionaire, whom I had known in Chicago, had once cornered the wheat market of the world ; he stood in the office while the patient Cruger was making out passports, as calm and game as when he stood in the wheat-pit, and he had not a cent in his pocket. He had a berth in the steerage on an outward-bound ship — he who had come over in a *cabine de luxe*. There was, indeed, in most of them something quite admirable, something of which one could be proud as pertaining to one's countrymen, even among the provincial and unsophisticated, for they had character, they were the bone and sinew of our nation. There was another type, more worldlywise, with manner and sophistication ; they had lived in Europe long years, and had not been reminded of their nationality until the income-tax summoned them ; now they came in eager haste for passports to establish an identity they had not always, perhaps cared to own.

Among the Americans was a young doctor from Chicago whom the war had overtaken in Germany, where he had been studying. He had come through from Verviers to Liège that night on a German military train that was labelled " *Schnellzug nach Paris.*" The train, however, had been stopped, and at the frontier the passengers had got out and walked. Some of the women had ridden part way in a peasant's cart ; trees felled across the road and barbed-wire entanglements had stopped their progress, and they struggled on foot, lugging their dressing-cases. The night was clear and warm, and they had seen the German cavalry at rest along the roadside ; the horses were picketed and the troopers were lying on the ground smoking. One of the soldiers waved his hand at the party as it struggled along. They got to Liège, and thence came through to Brussels by train.

The young man was not only an American, but a German-American, and

for that reason some of those at the Legation insisted that he was a German spy. Thus early even we were affected by that peculiar suggestion which produced its phenomenon everywhere during those early days of the war. Perhaps it was not so strange : the Legation halls were already crowded with Germans ; there were thousands of them in Brussels, and many of them were spies, of course. The system maintained in Belgium had been extensive — as extensive as the Russian third section. But they were there, and German, and, whether spies or not, badly frightened.

" *Voilà un espion,*" some one would cry, and the human pack would instantly give chase No one, however, was hurt. The Brussels police were tactful, kindly, and efficient. But suspicions were ripe even in the mildest breasts. There was, as it happened, that very morning a Belgian priest who came to see me, an abbot from the country. He came accompanied by another priest, old, grey and withered, who, as I had the' abbot shown in, was left sitting rather disconsolately in the hall. I spoke of this, and asked the abbot if he did not wish his colleague to come in, but the abbot, leaning toward me, confidentially said, " *No ; I think he is a German spy.*"

The abbot had come to tell me that he had given refuge to four hundred Germans in his abbey and he wished me to take steps to have them repatriated.

"I don't like Germans," he said, "but," and he relented, "I feel sorry for these poor folk."

I entrusted the four hundred refugees to Gibson, who vent at once to arrange for trains to take them out to Holland, whence they might regain the Fatherland. The Americans, who had so much farther to go to regain their Motherland, had been increasing in such numbers that some organization beyond that which the inadequate resources of the Legation could provide was necessary, and it was then that I had recourse to a rather remarkable American who happened to be resident in Brussels, an engineer, interested in several tramway enterprises in Europe and in South America — Mr. Daniel Heineman. I invited him, with Mr. Millard K. Shaler and Mr. William Hulse — American citizens likewise, and resident in Brussels — to meet me at the Legation, and we organized a committee, with Mr. Heineman at its head, to undertake the relief of our fellow-citizens who had been overwhelmed by the war. Funds were raised, a house was rented where Americans might find shelter, and thus, by the admirable and efficient efforts of these gentlemen, all the Americans who wished to go home were enabled to go to England and eventually to find their way to their own land.

One evening at dinner-time came the confirmation of the news of the superb resistance of the Belgians at Liège. The hopes of the town were high; every one was expecting the French and the English to come to the support. The lower town was all excitement. A warm and gentle rain was falling, but the streets were brilliant and gay and the throngs drifted through them singing " *La Brabançonne* " and " *La Marseillaise*", and everywhere were the Belgian and the French colours. The little tables on the sidewalks before the cafés were all surrounded, and passing slowly clown the Boulevard Anspach, blazing with its electricity, one heard now and then the crash of broken glass ; the crowds were breaking the *vitrines* of German shops, or shops with German names. Over the door of " *Chez Fritz*", the great café in the Boulevard Anspach, was the appealing placard :

Fritz est bon Luxembourgeois, mais la maison est belge !

The night was so warm, the fine misty rain so gentle and refreshing ! There was a kind of gaiety abroad ; even the showers of glass from those shattered German windows fell with a merry tinkle, and the crowd laughed joyously, expecting the French and the English to arrive any

moment, expecting the " big battle " in which the combined Belgian, French, and English forces were to annihilate the Germans.

And then at midnight a new rumour shuddered through the town. Men were going along the streets ringing all the doorbells and shouting :

" *L'eau de la ville est empoisonnée ! L'eau de la ville est empoisonnée !* "

They said that the German Uhlans had poisoned the sources of the water of Brussels.

There was no truth in the tale, of course. We were destined to become rather well acquainted with the phenomenon of rumour. But no matter how stupid, nor how often disproved, there were always some to believe, and in this instance there were many poor folk who, in their credulity and fear, went thirsty for days.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* The following was the first proclamation posted by the German troops. It was posted at Spa.

AU PEUPLE BELGE

C'est à mon grand regret que les troupes allemandes se voient forcées de franchir la frontière de la Belgique. Elles agissent sous la contrainte d'une nécessité inévitable, la neutralité de la Belgique ayant été déjà violée par des officiers français qui, sous un déguisement, ont traversé le territoire belge en automobile pour pénétrer en Allemagne.

Belges ! C'est notre plus grand désir qu'il y ait encore moyen d'éviter un combat entre deux peuples qui étaient amis jusqu'à présent, jadis même alliés. Souvenez-vous du glorieux jour de Waterloo où c'étaient les armes allemandes qui ont contribué à fonder et établir l'indépendance de votre patrie.

Mais il nous faut le chemin libre. Des destructions de ponts, de tunnels, de voies ferrées devront être regardées comme des actions hostiles.

Belges, vous avez à choisir.

J'espère donc que l'armée allemande ne sera pas contrainte de vous combattre. Un chemin libre pour attaquer celui qui voulait nous attaquer, c'est tout ce que nous désirons ... Je donne des garanties formelles à la population belge qu'elle n'aura rien à souffrir des horreurs de la guerre, que nous paierons en or monnayé les vivres qu'il faudra prendre du pays, que nos soldats se montreront les meilleurs amis d'un peuple pour lequel nous éprouvons la plus haute estime, la plus grande sympathie.

C'est de votre sagesse et d'un patriotisme bien compris qu'il dépend d'éviter à votre pays les horreurs de la guerre.

Le Général Commandant en Chef de l'Armée de la Meuse,
Von EMMICH

This *affiche*, on **red paper**, was posted in various villages :

AUX HABITANTS DE LA BELGIQUE

Les événements des derniers jours ont prouvé que les habitants de la Belgique ne se rendent pas assez compte des tristes conséquences que les violations des lois de la guerre doivent entraîner pour eux-mêmes et pour tout le pays. Je leur recommande de lire attentivement la publication suivante :

1. Seront punis de mort tous les habitants qui tirent sur nos soldats sans appartenir à l'armée organisée et entreprennent de nuire à nos troupes ou d'aider les troupes belges ou alliées et qui se rendent coupables d'un acte quelconque apte à mettre en péril la vie ou la santé de nos soldats, enfin particulièrement qui commettent des actes d'espionnage.

Des perquisitions seront ordonnées dans les villages.

Qui sera attrapé ayant des armes dans sa maison subira une sévère punition, dans les cas graves *la punition de mort*.

Les villages où des actes d'hostilité seront commis par les habitants contre nos troupes *seront brûlés*.

2. Seront tenus responsables de toutes les destructions de routes, chemins de fer, ponts, etc., les villages dans la proximité des points de destruction.

Les mesures les plus rigoureuses seront prises pour garantir la prompte réparation et pour éviter de semblables méfaits.

3. Chaque personne qui s'approchera d'une place d'atterrissage d'aéroplanes ou de ballons jusqu'à 200 mètres sera *fusillée sur place*.

Pour la sauvegarde des intérêts supérieurs dont je suis chargé, je suis fermement résolu d'employer *chaque moyen possible* pour forcer le respect des lois de la guerre et pour protéger nos troupes contre les attaques d'une population hostile. Les punitions annoncées ci-dessus seront exécutées sévèrement et sans grâce. *La totalité sera tenue responsable. Les otages seront pris largement.*

Les plus graves contributions de guerre seront infligées.

Par contre, si les lois de la guerre seront respectées et si tout acte d'hostilité sera évité, je garantis aux habitants de la Belgique la protection absolue de leur personne et de leur propriété.

LE COMMANDANT EN CHEF DE L'ARMÉE.

** This is the King's proclamation :

À L'ARMÉE DE LA NATION.

SOLDATS ! Sans la moindre provocation de notre part, un voisin orgueilleux de sa force a déchiré les traités qui portent sa signature, et violé le territoire de nos pères.

Parce que nous avons été dignes de nous-mêmes, parce que nous avons refusé de forfaire à l'honneur, il nous a attaqués. Mais le monde entier est émerveillé de notre attitude loyale. Que son respect et son estime vous réconfortent en ces moments suprêmes !

Voyant son indépendance menacée, la Nation a frémi, et ses enfants ont bondi à la frontière. Vaillants soldats d'une cause sacrée, j'ai confiance en votre bravoure tenace, et je vous salue au nom de la Belgique. Vos concitoyens sont fiers de vous. Vous triompherez, car vous êtes la force mise au service du droit.

César a dit de Vos ancêtres : " De tous les peuples de la Gaule, les Belges sont les plus braves."

Gloire à vous, armée du peuple belge. Souvenez-vous devant l'ennemi que vous combattez pour la liberté et pour vos foyers menacés. Souvenez-vous, Flamands, de la bataille des Eperons d'Or, et vous, Wallons, qui êtes en ce moment à l'honneur, des 600 Franebimontois.

SOLDATS ! je pars de Bruxelles pour me mettre à votre tête.

ALBERT. Fait au Palais de Bruxelles ce 5 août 1914.