

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XIV. RUMOUR.

BISMARCK says somewhere that never are rumours so rife as in time of war, and he was an authority on most things pertaining to the art or the science of war, if it is an art or a science. We could seldom trace the rumours to their origin ; I do not know that we ever tried, but on one occasion I was able to lay the ghost of one rumour that was constantly repeated and believed during those first tragic days when we were so new to the grim business. That rumour related to wireless telegraph installations ; when people were not seeing spies they were hearing the click of wireless instruments. One morning, at half-past eight o'clock, M. Carton de Wiart was announced on a matter of immediate importance, and I went down to find the tall, handsome Belgian Minister of Justice in my *cabinet*, haggard from sleepless nights but well groomed as ever, and elegant in high hat and frock-coat. He came to inform me that the Belgian Government had reliable information that there was a wireless-telegraph instrument on the roof of the German Legation ; the Garde Civique that had been detailed there at my request to protect the Legation had heard it working during the night. The Government, of course, wished to be correct, and as there were no precedents, he proposed that the Procureur du Roi and some of the justices of the Cour de Cassation institute an inquiry and in a regular, formal, and legal manner ascertain the facts.

" *Mais*," I said, " *il y a un moyen beaucoup plus pratique !* "

" *Lequel ?* "

" *Aller voir. Vous m'accompagnez, n'est-ce pas ? Allons.* "

He was surprised but pleased. I asked him to procure a wireless-telegraph expert, and said that I would go with him whenever he was ready. He went away, came back in half an hour with his expert — a lithe, agile young chap in rubber-soled shoes — and, with Gibson and de Leval ; we all went over to the German Legation. The members of the Garde Civique on duty there crowded up to assure us that the instrument could still be heard spluttering away, and we routed out the startled old Grabowsky and, with him to guide us, ascended to the *grenier*. He opened a trap-door in the roof, and the lovely morning light came through from the patch of blue sky above ; then he produced a frail little ladder and I invited M. Carton de Wiart to ascend. But the Minister of Justice is a large and heavy man, and he did not venture to ascend such a ladder and clamber on to that steep roof.

And so I went up and the expert came after me, and then Gibson, and we clambered about over the tiles and among the chimney-pots. Monsieur l'Expert went everywhere, clipped a few wires — telephone, no doubt — but shook his head ; no wireless to be found anywhere. And while we were looking about saw, to my surprise, almost at my feet, a trap-door slowly open ; then a head came forth, and presently there rose, like the morning sun, before my eyes a dark handsome face, hair carefully combed down, monocle in left astonished eye, high tight collar, butterfly cravat, smart coat, elegant hands, manicured nails, a cigarette — and there was Senhor Felix Cavalcanti de Lacerda, the secretary of the Brazilian Legation, the premises of which adjoined those of the German Legation. Cavalcanti was speechless with surprise, but I divined the situation, greeted him and said :

" If I'm violating Brazilian territory it's quite by mistake and unintentional, and I formally apologize."

He laughed and I explained, and he told me that his chief, beholding men on

the roof of his Legation, had sent him up to investigate.

And while we were talking, suddenly, a sound, a sharp rasping sound, broken into what might very well have been dots and dashes — zsszzt — zsszzt—zzt—zs—zt—zssssssttss — It was precisely like the wireless I had heard on steamships in the Atlantic ! Monsieur l'Expert cocked his head, pricked up his ears, and then we all fixed the place whence came the sound . . . and it was a rusty *girouette* squeaking in the wind ! And so that sensation ended — to the regret of the Gardes Civiques when we went down and informed them.

It was from M Carton de Wiart that morning that we had our first news of the horrors of Visé ; the Germans, after their check at Fléron, had burned the town and shot the inhabitants.

When we returned to the Legation the Germans, those frightened Germans who were then of Brussels, were crowding the halls, turning the Legation into a bedlam. The crowd inside increased as the day advanced, and as the news spread that we were charged with the protection of German interests, groups of the idle and curious gathered outside in the Rue de Trèves. And suddenly, late in the afternoon, over the pandemonium there was the horrid sound of strife and angry cries, and then blows at the outer doors ; the crowd had rushed upon some German entering the Legation, and when the door was closed behind him in the face of the crowd the throng began kicking on it. But the admirable de Levai went out and spoke to the crowd, while the German cowered behind a steel filing-case back in the *chancellerie*. We telephoned to the authorities, and in half an hour a detail of Gardes Civiques was posted at the Legation, patrolling the streets, and ail was quiet—and our frightened Germans waiting for the train that had been provided. Gibson and Mr. Roy Nasmith, the American Vice-Consul, were rounding up the Germans ; the original four hundred whom the Belgian priest had sheltered in the abbey had grown to four thousand, and to make doubly sure I went myself to see M. Carton de Wiart. I found him in his office, where there was a great portrait of Tolstoï on an easel — Tolstoï and this madness ! M. Carton de Wiart was very kind and not in the least bitter toward the Germans. All had been admirably organized : trains had been provided to carry 2.500 Germans to the Dutch frontier that night and we had telegraphed Dr. van Dyke, our Minister at The Hague, who was to have them met there by other trains, and so sent back to their homes in Germany. The Germans were to be assembled at the Cirque Royal, guarded by the gendarmes, and by them escorted to the station.

There was to be a meeting that evening of the diplomatic corps at the Papal Nunciature, and Senhor Barros-Moreira, the Brazilian Minister, came over after dinner that we might go together. As we went downstairs on our way out, there in the hall we saw a woman in tears ; her husband, a German, was with her, sitting in dumb Teutonic melancholy. They had with them a little boy with golden curls, one of the prettiest children I ever saw, with the face of one of Raphael's cherubs, who looked up inquiringly into his mother's sad countenance. I recognized the woman as an American who had been there the day before ; she had married her German husband, she said, in Iowa, where they had lived for years, he engaged successfully in business. But he had neglected to become naturalized, and that summer, in Europe on a visit home, had been overtaken by the tide of war. Now he said he must go back to Germany and enter the army. Before such a prospect they were all in terror, he sitting dumbly by the while.

At sight of me the woman sprang forward and seized my hand, as though I were her last refuge in the world, and, with such sobs and lamentations as might break a heart, fell on her knees, refusing to let go my hand and dragging

tragically toward me on her knees. Barros-Moreira was impressed by the scene, and by the figure of the little boy standing by, receiving his baptism in the misery of this world. I did not know what to do. I felt the embarrassment of one of our race in such a predicament, tore my hand away, picked up the pretty baby and kissed him, and left — we had to get to that meeting — the woman dragging after me all the way to the door . . .

Barros-Moreira and I drove over to the Nunciature, where, after the usual greetings, our colleagues assembled in a great circle in a lofty room hung ail in crimson. The Nuncio presided, sitting there on a divan leaning over a little table, his great gold pectoral cross clinking against the chain on the breast of his purple soutane as he made graceful gestures with the white delicate hand that wore an archbishop's ring. He was explaining that the Court would probably go to Antwerp in a day or two, and that in that event we should follow. It was a subject that had been discussed among the diplomatists for several days, ever since the *séance* of Tuesday. I was opposed to our going, that is, those of us who represented neutral nations — the belligerent, of course, in the event of the Germans coming, would be compelled to leave ; I felt, somehow, that there might be work for us to do at the capital. The Marquis of Villalobar was of the same opinion ; we had talked it over and agreed to oppose the exodus. We both made speeches against the project, and several others spoke, M. Klobukowski among them, saying that it was of no great moment since he knew the Allies would soon be at Brussels. Sir Francis, much to my disappointment, was not there. The talk flowed on interminably, French in ail the accents of this world, until footmen came bearing in wines and tea and cigars and cigarettes, and then the great red *salon* was filled with the haze of tobacco smoke and every one talked at once. It was decided finally by a vote to go, though there were certain mental reservations, and M. Djuvara, the Rumanian Minister, sat down at the Nuncio's table to write out the resolution, with Villalobar and Klobukowski and the Nuncio and Blancas and I giving him advice, until my friend, Ouang Yong Pao, the Chinese Minister, who honoured me often by coming to me for advice, drew me aside and asked me what it was all about. We finished the resolution, however, gossiped about the war, smoked, and came away . . .

When I reached home I learned that my wife and the mothers and Miss Lamer had taken the little boy upstairs and played with him all evening until Gibson took the little family away in the motor to the Cirque Royal, where they assembled the Germans who were to go out on the refugee train that night. I had a vision of that bright, pretty, innocent little child and the little family whirled away in the great whirlpool into darkness — to what fate ? We should never know, I said, never see any of them again . . .

But we did. A few days after the Germans had established themselves in Brussels the father of the pretty little boy took a room near Gibson's apartment in the Rue St.-Boniface, and in his quality of German spy watched Gibson's every movement.

Brand WITHLOCK

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