

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter XVI. A BIT OF HISTORY.

AN incident occurred in those early days of August which I may as well relate here, though for its sequence I shall have to anticipate the chronology of events.

In the early evening of Saturday, August 8, there came to me from Dr. van Dyke a message saying that he had been asked by his German colleague at The Hague to request me to present, on behalf of the Imperial Germans Government, a message to the Belgian Government. The message of the Imperial German Government was in German and *en clair*; de Leval translated it while we waited impatiently, It was this :

"The fortress of Liège has been taken by assault after a brave defence. The German Government must deeply regrets that bloody encounters should have resulted from the attitude of the Belgian Government ; it is only through the force of circumstances that, owing to the military measures of France, they had to take the grave decision of entering Belgium and occupying Liège as a base for further military operations. Now that the Belgian army has upheld the honour of its arms by its heroic resistance to a very superior force, the German Government beg the King of the Belgians and the Belgian Government to spare Belgium the further horrors of war. The German Government are ready for any compact with Belgium that can be reconciled with their arrangements with France. Germany once more gives her solemn assurance that it is not her intention to appropriate Belgian territory to herself, and that such an intention is far from her thoughts. Germany is still ready to evacuate Belgium as soon as the state of war will allow her to do so."

De Leval finished his translation and handed me the text, standing there with an inquiry in his brown eyes while I read it. I was standing there by Gibson's desk in the room of the secretaries. I read the dispatch over and over ; looked at Gibson, looked at de Leval, looked at Miss Larner, amazed beyond any word. I stood there with the telegram in my hand, looked at the English and then at the German words. What hand had written them ? What mentality had conceived them ? Were there, after ail, in this world no such things as honour and faith ? I let the dispatch fall to the table, one thing at least decided — namely, that no such offer should soil my hands.

But how to manage it ? After all, we were charged with the representation of German interests. And I began to think about a dispatch to Washington. I would point out what the President and Mr. Bryan, of course, must already realize — that this war was but the old struggle between democracy and autocracy in the world, and that little Belgium was just then holding this Thermopylean pass for democracy. And I sat down at Miss Larner's desk and began to write a dispatch in these terms, trying to make the view accord with our declared neutrality — a somewhat difficult task, as I found.

Gibson was standing by, still studying the telegram. After a while he said :

"There are no cipher groups here."

"Then, perhaps," I thought, " it is not authentic."

I thought it over a long while ; it was, after ail, strange that diplomacy should send such an amazing proposal *en clair*, for all the world to read. Perhaps one would be justified in giving the Imperial German Government the benefit of the doubt that gentlemen would

construe as generous. And so, not without a certain reluctance, I tore up the dispatch I was writing and wrote another telegram to Washington, pointing out that the remarkable message bore no cipher groups or other evidence of authenticity and asking for instructions. We were all night putting the messages into cipher.

Meanwhile the Belgians were holding on at Liège and perhaps the Allies were getting up. I told Gibson that he might tell Léo d'Ursel if he wished to do so — and he did. Count d'Ursel, he reported, was much impressed and had run at once to see Davignon and de Broqueville.

The beautiful dawn was breaking as I went to bed.

The following morning, Sunday, the 9th, I had a telegram from Dr. van Dyke at The Hague, whose sympathy and prompt friendly comprehension did so much during that trying time to make my task less heavy. The telegram was brief ; it said that the message from the Imperial German Government was authentic, which was about all that a neutral diplomatist could say of it, but he added one other consolatory word : "*Congratulations.*"

On Monday I had a telegram from Mr. Bryan reserving instructions until the genuineness of the message should be established. On Tuesday, the 11th, I learned that the message had been delivered by the German Minister at The Hague to M. London, the Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs, who was requested to hand it to Baron Fallon, the Belgian Minister at The Hague, which he did, and Baron Fallon sent it to Brussels.

Count Léo d'Ursel came over from the Foreign Office with word from M. Davignon that the Belgian Government was preparing a reply that would be a refusal to entertain the proposal.

This reply was sent to Baron Fallon to be delivered to the German Government through The Hague on Wednesday, and was as follows :

BRUSSELS, August 12, 1914.

Please communicate the following telegram to the Netherlands Minister for Foreign Affairs :

*The proposal made to us by the German Government repeats the proposal which was formulated in the ultimatum of August 2. Faithful to her international obligations, Belgium can only reiterate her reply to that ultimatum, the more so as since August 3 her neutrality has been violated, a distressing war has been waged on her territory, and the guarantors of her neutrality have responded loyally and without delay to her appeal.*

DAVIGNON.

Several days later I had a telegram from Washington asking if I had any further information as to the authenticity of the German proposal, and I could reply that while the message was indubitably genuine, it had been delivered through The Hague, and that the question had no longer any but an academic interest.

All of the notes of the Belgian Government were conceived in this lofty spirit. I had transmitted to it a day or so before a note from the German Government complaining that the Belgians were condemning as spies men who were innocent. The Belgian Government's reply to this complaint was beautiful in its dignity and calm, and as it seems to lose in translation I give it in the language in which it was written :

*La Belgique, terre classique du droit et de la liberté, traverse ces douloureux événements sans la moindre haine à l'endroit de ceux qui lui imposent les pires souffrances. Elle a trop le souci du droit et de la vie humaine pour condamner sans preuves et sans jugement régulier.*

The two dispatches, the one that opens and the one that closes this chapter, may stand as symbolic of the two nations whose diplomacy conceived them.

**Brand WITHLOCK**  
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