

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XX. The Government leaves.

THE retirement of the Government within the fortified place of Antwerp, while understood and calmly accepted by the population of Brussels, nevertheless had that depressing effect which such an event cannot fail to produce. The event was almost casually announced in the newspapers of Tuesday, the 18th, and its importance minimized. The impression that the fortified place of Antwerp was impregnable was encouraged and strengthened by an official announcement communicated to the Press by the General Staff.*

All that morning, in the lovely miracle of that persistent sunlight, I drove about town with my old friends among the correspondents, going to the Grand' Place, the charm of which could recall to John McCutcheon those days so long before when he and George Ade made their first trip to Europe, and Ade wrote those bright studies illustrated by McCutcheon's sketches and published in the old *Chicago News* as "*Stories of the Streets and of the Town.*" We went round to see the Manneken and so on through the narrow, charming streets, invested with a greater charm perhaps because of the premonition of change.

We drove out the Avenue Louise, that those who did not know it might see the lovely Bois de la Cambre. And there, at the head of the broad avenue, where it widens to form the entrance to the noble Park, we saw a scene that was to preoccupy my thoughts for long anxious hours. A strip of paving extending across the avenue was tom up and a trench had been dug, hardly wide enough or deep enough for a gas-main ; the earth and the paving-stones that had been removed were heaped along the edge, and before this slightest of barricades barbed wire was loosely string. And, standing knee-deep in the trench, was a company of the Garde Civique, insouciant, smiling — waiting for the advance of the German army.

They stood there ; those untrained boys and young men-clerks, students, *petits bourgeois* — in their improvised uniforms, bowler hats decorated with cords and nodding tassels ; armed, to be sure, with rifles, but with no more training than that they had received in Sunday afternoon marches through the pleasant Forêt, or a parade on some fête-day — that rudimentary organization, that City Guard, all that was left of the *Burgerwacht* of olden time, the stock butt of Brussels wit, the standing joke of music-halls and *revues* ; sternly courageous, no doubt, fired with the best patriotic impulses and filled with the spirit of the stout burgers of the old free cities, but only a welcome incentive and excuse to the grey oncoming hordes. It required no very lively imagination to picture the scene that would ensue if a column of German soldiers should debouch out of the shades of the stately Bois—one whiff of *mitraille*, one volley, and lovely Brussels doomed

That afternoon Villalobar and I agreed that as a diplomatic courtesy we should call on Burgomaster Max, the highest authority then left in Brussels. We went to the Hôtel de Ville, where all was confusion, and were asked if the Burgomaster might receive us in the Salle de Garde, that is, Police Headquarters, an office that wore the air and had the atmosphere of all police-stations the world over. M. Max, smiling, calm, and master of himself, carefully dressed as usual, with the alert air to which his stiff upstanding hair, great moustaches *en croc*, and pointed beard somehow contributed, came down and received our visit.

But we came away somewhat depressed, not by anything that the Burgomaster had said, but by our prescience of what was impending ; for those barricades at the entrance of the Bois, those Gardes Civiques so ridiculously inadequate, were ever in my mind. I asked the Marquis to go with me to the Bois ; I wished to show them to him. We drove out the avenue — and there were the Gardes Civiques in their little trench. They halted us at the entrance to the Bois with as much martial importance as though they had been Life Guards guarding the person of an emperor, but after scrutinizing our passes they let us go on, and we made the circuit of the lovely Park.

There is always something to laugh at in life, even if it is only to keep from weeping, as Figaro said, and, depressed as we were by the not wholly reassuring spectacle of that pitiable defence, as we came away and drove down the avenue in the early evening there was a sardonic smile on the handsome Spanish countenance of the Marquis of Villalobar.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* L'État-major de la position fortifiée d'Anvers communique à la presse la note suivante :

« Nous sommes autorisés à déclarer que, grâce à l'activité déployée, grâce au dévouement de nos admirables troupes, formées pour la plupart de soldats appartenant aux anciennes classes rappelées, ANVERS ATTAQUÉ SERAIT IMPRENABLE. »

The Government issued the following note :

« Le Gouvernement part pour Anvers. Ce n'est pas que les événements soient plus graves qu'ils ne l'ont été jusqu'ici. Nous enregistrons au contraire un nouveau succès de nos troupes secondées par la cavalerie française. Mais comme il est nécessaire que le transfert se fasse normalement et qu'il n'y ait pas la moindre interruption dans l'exercice de la souveraineté, le gouvernement a estimé qu'il était préférable de commencer le transfert des services des différents ministères. Alors que leurs familles resteront dans la capitale, certains ministres vont donc résider à Anvers où les services de la guerre seront mieux à leur place pendant que l'armée est en campagne. »