

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXI. The trenches at the Bois.

AND now it is Wednesday, August 19, a day of terrible tension, of extreme anxiety. Over the city a dreadful menace hangs ; the atmosphere is charged with portent, and every one is depressed. It is preternaturally still. The sun glitters on the white façades of the houses. One by one the Belgian flags are taken in and the shutters put up at the windows.

The Belgian General Staff has fallen back from Louvain to Malines. All day long crowds of peasants, in carts and on foot, pour into town from the east — a continuous stream with stolid, patient, sad faces, fleeing before the German advance.

A refugee lawyer who had escaped with his family from Francorchamps, near Malmedy, came into the Legation to see de Leval, and told of the horrors that were being committed in Luxemburg — villages burned, peasants shot down, massacres and unspeakable outrages. A troop of Belgian cavalry passed down the Rue de Trèves, weary, haggard men, unkempt, with grimy faces, their uniforms grey with dust ; a picture by Detaille there in the old Quartier Léopold.

And yet there was that strange phenomenon always to be observed in times of crises, the calm persistence with which life goes on in its normal and usual sequences ; for that morning my wife and I went with Madame Carton de Wiart, the wife of the Minister of Justice, to see the soup-kitchens that are maintained by the school system of Brussels for the children of the poor.

Madame Carton de Wiart had not gone with her husband to Antwerp but had remained behind with her children, living on in the Ministry in the Rue de la Loi, and was devoting herself, as ever, to charity. We went to a *soupe* in the poor quarter near the Quai au Bois-à-Brûler, the little ones marching in while we were there, bowing to us as they passed, to seat themselves at the long low tables to eat their soup and their *petits pains*, in the infinite pathos that attaches to childhood, especially to the childhood of the poor. Two little girls had been fighting as we entered, and the defeated one, stood leaning against a wall, hiding her face in her arms as she sobbed bitterly — her companions, with the savage stoicism of children, taking no notice of her pain.

When I got back to the Legation I found Villalobar there and very grave, with news that the Germans were at hand. He had no sooner gone than Sir Francis Villiers came, formally to turn over his Legation. He wore the British calm — this distinguished gentleman, whose hair was grown white in his King's service.

"A most frightful bore !" was his only comment on the impending *déménagement*.

There was little to do since his archives were already in my possession. We discussed the last details, deciding that between us no *procès-verbal* was necessary. He had made all his arrangements for departure.

"I shall lunch quietly," he said, "and motor over to Antwerp this afternoon."

There was no more to say. I disliked to see him go. We had been good friends. . . . When I was new at the post Sir Francis showed me many delicate attentions, rendered me many kindly services. I had grown to be fond of him and of his whole family. Sir Francis rose and held out his hand.

"I trust that it is only *au revoir*", he said.

We shook hands, bowed, and he went away.

After him came McCutcheon and Cobb, and with them Will Irwin, the latest correspondent to arrive. They were eager to get to the front.

" You have only to wait a few hours," I said, " and the front will come to you."

But they were impatient ; they started for Louvain, promising to be back to dine with me that night.

We were all rather grave at luncheon, but we tried not to let the mothers see. I could not get those Gardes Civiques and their little trenches in the Avenue Louise and in the Avenue de Tervueren out of my mind.

Villalobar came at three o'clock and I talked it over with him ; something must be done. And so we drove over to the Ministère de la Guerre, deserted now by Baron de Broqueville and occupied by Lieutenant-General Clooten, commanding the Gardes Civiques, a kind of military governor, or I know not what — at any rate, the ranking military authority left in the city.

We were admitted at once into his presence ; he was in M. de Broqueville's *cabinet*, at M. de Broqueville's desk, and had an *aide* with him. He received us standing, and we remained standing throughout the interview. The General was a big man, with dark, bronze skin and heavy moustaches. His *capote, képi*, and sword lay on a divan near by, all ready. His *aide* hovered solicitously near him.

We told him that we had come to pay our respects, and he bowed like a soldier and thanked us in his heavy voice. Then, as delicately as we could, we approached the question of the defence of the city, feeling our way to a footing that would permit us to give our counsel to attempt nothing with the means at his command.

" *J'ai bien peu d'hommes pour la défense de la ville*", he said finally.

We rushed into the opening, recalling to him that as an open city Brussels could not, under the laws of war, be bombarded unless a defence were attempted.

But the General drew himself up and said

" *Je ferai mon devoir ! Je défendrai la ville jusqu'au bout !* "

After leaving the General we sat there in the motor in the Rue de la Loi, talked over the situation, and determined to go to M. Max, the Burgomaster ; he was a highly intelligent and reasonable man. There lay the last and only hope. The old *huissier* showed us gravely to the chambers of the Burgomaster. The last time I had been in that stately apartment was when the Chinese Ambassador and his suite were signing the Golden Book of the city. Other guests expected now !

M. Max, smiling as ever and, as always, very alert, smart in attire and elegant in manner, rose from his imposing desk, where he had been studying some paper.

" *La situation est extrêmement grave !* " he said, in a tone that accorded well with the facts.

We sat clown in the two chairs that had been placed for us. He told us that the Germans were moving on the city, and that he had made a resolution to defend it, We asked him what he intended to defend it with, and he said, of course, with the Garde Civique. I permitted myself the liberty of pointing out to him the futility of such a course, saying that as an open city Brussels was protected from assault or bombardment by the conventions and rides of war, but that the firing of a single shot in defence would take it out of this category, and that, wholly insufficient as the Garde Civique was, that would mean not only the sacrifice of their lives but of the lives of citizens as well, and the destruction of the beautiful monuments of the city. The Marquis added his representations to mine and we made them as strongly as we could, Villalobar and I speaking

alternately — sometimes, I fear, in concert. M. Max listened sympathetically, acquiescing in all that we said ; he knew it all, indeed, as well as we, but he sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and raised both hands in a gesture of despair.

" *C'est une, question d'honneur,*" he said.

My hopes fell, but we repeated our arguments.

I asked him to consider another interest that seemed to be involved. Brussels, like all beautiful and historical cities, is in essence one of the assets of civilization, and I spoke of its works of art, and of how the whole world was interested in them and of those who, in Europe, in America, everywhere, either had seen them or hoped to see them. Thus in a certain sense we seemed to speak for the interests of humanity. I felt that the words impressed him. The Marquis gave his assent, and the Burgomaster listened sympathetically, but still held to his resolve and said :

" *Que voulez-vous que je fasse ?*"

We pressed the point, but received no formal assurance that he would do what we suggested. He said it had been decided to defend the city as far as the inner boulevards, and I smiled, thinking of those Gardes Civiques ; their defence could not last as far as the ring of inner boulevards which enclose the old city. Both Villalobar's and my Legation would be outside that charmed circle. I thought of that, and M. Max evidently thought of it at the same moment, for he said he would place at our disposal houses within these boulevards. Small comfort in that

" *Non, merci*", I answered at once, "*je resterai dans ma Légation.*"

" *Et moi aussi*", said Villalobar.

There was nothing more to say, but we could not leave without repeating what we had said, without renewing again our earnest entreaties.

While we were talking, M. Jacquemain, one of the *échevins*, came into the room, very dark and grave and worried, and asked M. Max solicitously if there was anything more he could do for him, and M. Max said "*No*" and told him to go. They were intimate friends, those two, and M. Jacquemain's devotion and loyalty to his chief were good to see in a world where that kind of loyalty is rare.

The Burgomaster thanked us again and said that he would consider our words. We asked him if he was going home.

" *Non*" he said "*je dormirai ici. Je ne quitterai pas mon Hôtel de Ville.*"

He spoke the "*mon*" affectionately, in the spirit of the old free cities, and we came away very sober, not much reassured by the result of our mission but drawing what hopes we could from M. Max's promise to consider our words. We came away, too, with admiration for a man who found himself suddenly in an excessively difficult position.

We read in the evening newspapers :

" *La grande bataille, semble commencée en Belgique. Rien n'est venu déranger les plans de l'État-major général, au point de vue stratégique. On nous certifie qu'aujourd'hui chacun est à sa place. Il faut faire confiance au Grand État-major que dirige le roi Albert. D'après les renseignements recueillis auprès d'officiers, l'opinion dans les hautes sphères est excellente et la confiance absolue.*"

I sent a cablegram to Washington reporting my refusal to remove the Legation and announcing that the Germans were just east of the city. And then we sat down to await their coming.

Brand WITHLOCK