

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXIII. "Un paño de lágrimas."

ALL through the night the field-grey hosts wound through the city, an undulating stream of bayonets and grey helmets, and Brussels awoke to find on its walls great white *affiches* in French and German, signed by General Sixt von Armin, threatening reprisals if any overt act of hostility occurred. There was a demand, too, for a contribution of 50.000.000 francs, as well as immense quantities of supplies, and summoning the province of Brabant to deliver up 450.000.000 francs by September 1. For three days and three nights the grey stream flowed by, and Brussels was crushed by the sorrow and humiliation of an alien occupation. There was the same phenomenon of the brilliant sun, though there were no longer any Belgian flags to catch its wonderful light in their folds. Those cook-stoves were burning in the Grand' Place, and the Uhlans were at their sentinel-posts. There were no trains ; trams, it was said, were to stop ; there were no horses ; suddenly no *fiacres*, no taxis, no automobiles except those in which German officers raced about town, a soldier on the box with a rifle across his knees. There were no telegraphs and no telephones, and — strangest phenomenon of all — there were no newspapers. It was as though we had suddenly been plunged into darkness ; however inaccurate, newspapers would have served as a clearing-house for the wild and fearful rumours that set in on such a tide as might overwhelm one. Staid persons had heard firing, had seen the flash of cannons, and searchlights sweeping the eastern skies at night ; or the Germans were fortifying the cemetery at Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, just outside the town, or they had mounted cannons at Jette-Saint-Pierre in order to bombard Brussels if the tribute-money was not raised by Sunday morning ! The Emperor of Austria was dead ; England had declared war on Holland and the United States on Germany. And everybody came to the Legation to learn if the rumours were true. The flood of them, mounting an the day, seemed to be at full tide in the sombre hour of twilight.

Of a piece with them were those silly, romanticistic tales of my activities — tales that by their currency were to plague me for so many weeks. The first of those melodramatic stories, assigning to me a *rôle* for which I was never in any wise designed, was to the effect that I had gone out to the east of the town to meet the German army and had told the commanding officer, with I know not what theatrical flourish, that if one stone of Brussels was touched America would declare war on Germany. The ridiculous tale was spread about in Brussels and in Belgium and over the seas, to be published and wafted abroad to no purpose other than to afford one more superfluous proof of the place the cinema has in the affections of mankind and of that inveterate vice of reporters, who foolishly think that they can imagine something that is more interesting than the truth.

At the Legation there were numerous callers, American, English, Belgian, each with his peculiar personal problem, his little worry, his desire for comfort and reassurance ; and we were bedevilled all day with the difficulties of getting off dispatches. The Germans had been most amiable — had bowed, smiled, saluted, and assured us that the dispatches could go ; but they never did go, and when we went to inquire the reason why, we were sent from pillar to post and from Peter to Paul, with protestations, explanations, and apologies. But the dispatches remained undischpatched.

On Saturday morning at half-past seven o'clock I was awakened out of a deep sleep, and there was Gustave, very white and shaken, saying in a breathless voice :

" *Les Allemands sont là ! Deux généraux !* "

I put on a dressing-gown and went down, and there in my office were General von Jarotsky and a nice-looking aide-de-camp, politely come to return my call.

" *Je ne suis pas encore en uniforme*", I said, offering my excuses for my attire, and the General laughed heartily, slapping his yellow puttees with a little silver-headed riding-crop. He expressed his regret that the telegrams had not been sent, but he had arranged all with the Director of Telegraphs and I could now send them to the bureau.

When, the long day having slowly declined toward 10.30 a.m., Villalobar came and I could give him the good news about our dispatches, we drove to the Bureau des Télégraphes, where the non-commissioned officer was patient, stolid, and unmoved — and the dispatches were not sent. It was useless, and we gave up and drove away to the Hôtel de Ville. We found M. Max in his *cabinet*, acquainted him with the situation, and he sent for General von Jarotsky, who appeared, bowing, smiling, clicking his spurs. It was very strange, he said ; let them bring the Directeur des Télégraphes immediately before him, and he would issue instructions that should be final. One could not help feeling sorry for the Directeur des Télégraphes in view of what was about to happen to him.

Then the General and the Burgomaster discussed the conditions in the city, growing hourly more desperate. M. Max announced that there was no food, no forage for the horses, and finally, reserving the worst for the last, that there was no money in the banks — so that he could not pay the levy. At this revelation the General started from his scat and demanded explanations, and M. Max went on to tell him that the treasure in the Banque Nationale, upon which the whole of the financial system of Belgium is based, had all been transferred to Antwerp.

" *Ils ont eu tort ! Ce n'est pas correct, ça !* " said the General, growing red.

M. Max shrugged his shoulders, and the General reflected. Finally he said that he would accept cheques, notes, or some written evidence of indebtedness, and then he went away and left us. And when he had gone M. Max explained that he had taken advantage of our presence to mention to the General the difficult point about the 50.000.000 francs ; he was glad of our company and countenance as he broke the news to the peppery little man.

The Burgomaster, expecting some one, asked us to wait in the Salle du Collège, where the *échevins* meet — the room with the great oak table and the high-backed chairs and the tapestries of the time of Charles V, their various coats of arms all open books to Villalobar. M. Max made many apologies, for the apartment had been turned into a chamber for him ; and it was given a somewhat more modern and contemporary note by the little iron cot where the brave Burgomaster slept those troubled nights, and by the valise and toilet-case with a little mirror on a table and the change of clothes hung over a chair.

Finally the Directeur des Télégraphes came — a miserable little man with the dismal air of one in Sunday blacks, a typical *rond de cuir*, who could accumulate difficulties and be prodigal of excuses, like functionaries the world over, whether at Nashapur or Babylon, whether at Brussels or Toledo, much more fertile in reasons why a given thing cannot be done than in expedients to get it accomplished. When the Burgomaster came in, he wrote out an order designed to overcome the official reluctance of the Directeur, went out, and returned presently flourishing the order triumphantly, for it had the General's signature.

As Count Bottaro-Costa had said the morning the Germans entered Brussels, our position was delicate : diplomatic representatives accredited to the King of the Belgians, our place was near the Court and the Government, which had retired to Antwerp. I realized this fact, of course, and had discussed and settled the point of etiquette with M. Davignon, the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The situation was unprecedented. Never before, save when the Germans entered Paris in 1870, had diplomats remained when a Court and Government had gone, and the cases were not precisely on all fours, as the lawyers say. The Germans had shown us personally every courtesy and yet we were not in communication with our Governments ; between us and the telegraph-wires in Antwerp were hostile armies, and it was not difficult to imagine that there might be uneasiness in those far capitals where the Governments were waiting for word from us. And then on that Sunday — a day of dull and rainy skies, as if the fine weather were weary at last — a man somehow got through the limes from Ghent, riding as though he had been in Browning's poem, with a letter from our Consul, Mr. Johnson, bearing two telegrams for me from Washington, one approving my course and the other raising the question of whether the Legation should not be removed to Antwerp to keep in communication with the Belgian Government. I still had a feeling, hourly growing stronger, that my place was in Brussels.

Indeed, on Sunday morning, after the entry of the Germans, an official of the Foreign Office had come to the Legation formally to express, "*on behalf of the King and his people*", gratitude and appreciation of my attitude toward Belgium in having advised the Burgomaster not to offer futile resistance to the German army ; he was generous enough to say that this action had saved the city.

I had no vision of what the future field in store, of course, but I had a strong impression that for the moment there was work to be done there. There were people in trouble ; they were coming to the Legation at all hours of the day and night ; and white in most cases sympathy was all that I could give them, it seemed in many of those cases to be what they most needed and desired.

There were Americans and American interests to be looked after, and I had assumed, as well, the protection of British interests in the land. And then the mere presence of diplomatic representatives of neutral Powers was itself a kind of restraint, and especially the presence of representatives of America, whose public opinion almost immediately became the jury before which the world tried its great cause.

But we must get into communication with Washington and with civilization again, and since our dispatches would not be forwarded from Brussels — the Directeur never sent one of them — and since the nearest telegraph station was Antwerp, it was necessary to go to Antwerp. For this service Gibson volunteered, and Mr. Blount, an American, offered to drive him in his car.

I found my General, with an *aide* and an orderly, just dismounted from sweating steeds, on the steps of the Escalier d'Honneur in the court of the Hôtel de Ville, brandishing his riding-crop, very red, shouting to a group of Brussels trades people, come to present their *bons* for commandeered goods and to implore payment. One after the other the General snatched the little papers from the uplifted suppliant hands, and one by one returned them with a gruff "*Nicht gut !*" and then, seeing me, rushed forward smiling, with outstretched hands and a welcoming "*Ah, mon Ministre !*" We went up through the noble halls, already transformed by signs that had been put up for the convenience of Brussels folk having dealings there — although with some lack of

imagination they were all in German — and with a smile he gave me a *laissez-passer* permitting Gibson and Blount to pass through the lines to Antwerp and to return ; and after luncheon they started on their dangerous mission with the cipher telegrams that I had prepared for Washington.

There was nothing to do then but to wait, and I could not resist the temptation to remain out of doors all the afternoon in the sweet air's anodyne, to drive in the Bois once more — though, somewhat to my dismay, I found that our motor, with its little flag, attracted an attention that was apt to prove embarrassing ; the assembled crowds uncovered as the tiny flag went fluttering by and cried " *Vive l'Amérique !* "

Brussels showed, after all, few outward signs of change save an occasional body of tired German soldiers marching along, now and then a motor filled with officers whizzing by, and the folded vans of the kermess-making *tziganes*, going to I know not what retreat. There were few vehicles in the streets and much sadness and humiliation. The Red Cross flag, however, still floated from the tower of the Hôtel de Ville, and high on Sainte-Gudule the Belgian flag remained. The Rue de Namur looked more like old times ; the shops were peeping out one by one, beginning to resume business. I had gone there to my barber, and even there one could not escape tragedy, for one of the barbers, a German, was weeping because he had to leave his Belgian wife and return to Germany to enter the army. Le Jeune, the *coiffeur*, expatiated with tonsorial volubility on the state of the modern world.

" *Je suis un penseur profond,*" he said, analysing his thoughts with such a flourish of scissors that I feared for my cars, "*je pense toujours au fond de tous les problèmes de la vie*", and the ultimate result of this profound thinking was the not wholly original opinion that a republic is the safest form of government in the world.

When I could no longer postpone my return to the Legation, trouble, ever punctual, was waiting on the door-sill, where there was a throng of frightened women. The first of them to accost me was a charming Russian, very, pretty, who might have stepped out of one of Turgenev's novels. When I asked her why she had not gone to the American Committee, so near her house in the Rue de Naples, she replied :

" *Parce qu'il vaut mieux s'adresser à Dieu qu'à ses saints !* " She had heard that all the inhabitants of Brussels had been ordered to leave the city within fifteen minutes.

It was like that every evening, when the day's rumours and alarms reached high tide and overflowed into the Legation. One said that the Germans had been routed and were falling back, intending to bombard Brussels ; another had heard of soldiers at Nivelles killed in such numbers that they had net room to fall, but remained standing dead before the French trenches in mass formation ; and then there was that wild story to the effect that Belgians were to leave Brussels in fifteen minutes. And when I told them there was no truth in the rumour and that they might go safely home, they said :

" *On vous brûlera une grande chandelle !* "

It was, perhaps, some consolation for being what Bulle called " *un paño de lágrimas.*"

We had news, however, of our correspondents. McCutcheon and Cobb and Irwin and Dorch had come back from Louvain, but had left immediately for the front, going toward the south. The news was brought by Will Irwin, who had turned back from his advance, overcome by illness, but McCutcheon, Cobb, and the others had gone on, hoping to get to Nivelles. As for Davis, he had disappeared, no one

knew where. Admirable men, nothing daunted, always cool, gay, and debonair ! But one worried about them.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.