

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXIV. RICHARD HARDING DAVIS.

It was as quiet as a Sunday morning in an Ohio village ; there were few vehicles in the streets — unless a cannon may be called a vehicle — for motors and horses had been commandeered, and those that had escaped this fate were hidden away lest it overtake them. The breweries, always scrupulously respected by the Germans, continued in operation and their long wagons rumbled by, still drawn by their superb *Brabançon* horses.

There remained one other institution — the old *cocher* who sat just outside my window in the Rue Belliard. I had watched him all the spring, a red-faced old man with a stern and really fine Roman profile, who at a certain hour every morning drove up on his *fiacre*, took a place in the shade and then followed the sun in its course, like the martial airs of England, though at a discreeter distance, keeping always in the shade. Perhaps he preceded the sun, but whichever of the two it was, astronomically, he was always there when his fares would permit him to be ; if he went away he returned at noon, put the nose-bag on his horse, and while the horse ate the *cocher* took out from under the seat his own lunch wrapped in a piece of paper, seated himself in his *fiacre* and ate too ; then he would light his pipe and smoke peacefully. His old horse was evidently too poor to be commandeered either by Belgian or German troops and so it was left to him, and he came every morning at the same hour and sat there unmoved and undisturbed, while war and tumult raged about him — a kind of rock in the midst of the universal chaos and welter of worlds, and a sight comforting to behold.

I was standing in my window that Tuesday morning, looking at him and ruminating on the hopelessness of the human race and the vanity of things in general, when I heard cries as of glad welcome in the next room. I went in, and there sat Richard Harding Davis. He was extended in one of the Government's big leather chairs, with an air of having collapsed in it. He was sunburned and unshaven, powdered grey from head to foot with dust, and beside him on the floor lay his bundle, a khaki bag, part of his correspondent's kit. Despite his good looks, his indubitable distinction in any emergency, he looked like a weary tramp, and he lifted his tired eyes drolly, humorously, to me.

He had had an adventure, a perilous experience, in his attempt to get through the German lines to the south. On Sunday he had got down as far as Enghien, where he was arrested by German soldiers as a spy and taken on to Ligne, on the way tearing up and eating an autograph letter from Colonel Roosevelt presenting him to President Poincaré of the French Republic — he had shown me the letter in pride a few days before. At Ligne he was locked up in an outhouse with a guard over him while his fate was under discussion. At intervals all night he was visited by German officers, among them a major who gave him a realistic demonstration of how he was to be shot "through the stummick", as Davis told it. He kept his courage up, however, and persuaded the officers that he was both a "damn fool" and a "gentleman" in spite of the uniform in the photograph on the passport. It was his passport, or the photograph on it, that was the cause of the trouble. The photograph represented Davis in his war correspondent's costume, and as this was of khaki, with a Sam Browne belt and decorations, he did look enough like an English officer to create suspicions in German company.

He gave us a humorous account of his experience, and he wrote it

afterwards in the book he dedicated to King Albert.

He could laugh then, tired though he was. They had tried in a thousand ways to trap him ; asked him if he did not wish to see some English prisoners.

" No," he said, " I wish to see the Palace Hotel in Brussels."

Finally the officer said he feared the prisoner would have to be shot at sunrise. Perhaps he would have been, but he proposed to send a note to me, and agreed that if I did not come for him within the time therein specified they might shoot him. He addressed a little note to me, and that gave them pause ; and after much discussion he was released and given definite instructions to proceed, along a specified route indicated on his pass, back to Brussels, to report to the military commander there within forty-eight hours, and to establish satisfactorily his identity. He set out on foot for Enghien ; walked half the night and then induced a German officer to let him ride with him in his motor. And so he came to Brussels. I proposed that we go at once to the Hôtel de Ville to report, and we drove down there. But my good General von Jarotsky was not to be seen ; to my infinite regret, I was told that he was even then turning over his command to another general ; the two generals were at luncheon. I declined to wait, and had an officer endorse on Davis's pass a statement to the effect that he was well known to me, that he was no spy, and that, having complied with the order to report, he was to be released.

When Davis, restored by a bath and luncheon, came back at four o'clock, we went again to the Hôtel de Ville and waited, there in the Escalier d'Honneur, where on the landing are ranged the busts of former burgomasters, on the lovely white marble pedestals of which German sentinels were sticking the ends of their finished cigarettes. Finally we were shown into a room, passing great trays with the remnants of the luncheon of the two generals — the *débris* of a feast of giants. M. Max and M Jacquemain were at a long table. and VillaIobar was there too, but no General von Jarotsky. Instead, General the Baron Arthur von Lüttwitz, his successor — a broad-shouldered, grey-haired, remarkably handsome man, very big and impressive, with blue eyes, pink, healthy skin, and a strong jaw — was present, presiding, dominating, at that table. He was in a bluish-grey uniform, with the black-and-white ribbon of the Iron Cross and the white Maltese Cross of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem on his left breast. When we asked him for news he laid his hand on the white cross and said :

" Notre Dieu nous a été très gracieux."

Then he told us of German victories everywhere.

I presented Davis, easily arranged his release, and we came away.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.