

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXVI. LOUVAIN.

It had been raining during the night but it cleared partly. Davis expected to leave at one o'clock with Gerald Morgan and Miss Boyle O'Reilly on a troop train for Aix-la-Chapelle.

"*I told them*", Davis said at parting, "*that in four days the American Minister would begin to inquire about me ; that is the way they always do it on the stage.*" He said this with his humorous mouth twitching, fumbling with the broad black ribbon of his eyeglass. I bade him good-bye and watched him drive away in a *fiacre* ; it was drawn by the sorriest pair of nags I ever saw, and yet he sat there as calm and distinguished as if he were driving up Fifth Avenue. And I thought of Van Bibber, and of how the Avenue looks in the late afternoon when the throngs are going up Murray Hill. Ah me ! Did that gay insouciance still exist anywhere in the world ? I stood and watched him out of sight, regretting his departure. And I never saw him again.

The horror of Louvain was on us like a nightmare, all the more terrible because it was vague, undefined, a kind of nameless, formless thing that sent a shudder — as perhaps it was intended to do — through Brussels, where the like might happen at any hour. The city was filled with foreboding and vague apprehension ; miserable refugees, with dumb expressions and eyes that had looked on terrible things, came plodding wearily into town.

Late in the afternoon it was reported at the Legation that at Louvain the Germans at that moment were massacring the people, that the town was burning, and the tragedy complete : hundreds had been shot down ; the Cathedral, the Library, the Hôtel de Ville were in flames. Forty priests, some of them from the American College, had been seized as hostages, and were even then being driven in carts along the road to Brussels.

What was to be done ? As I was thinking, Villalobar came, he too with that face of horror ; there were Spanish priests in that band of hostages as well. We decided to go at once to General von Lüttwitz. Villalobar's car was at the door and we drove away. it was seven o'clock. There was a heavy guard at the Ministries and the sentinels were ugly ; one of them impudently mounted on the foot-board of the car, At the Foreign Office we were told that we could not see the General. We insisted on sending in our cards, and sat there waiting — sensible, in the movements of the officers who were constantly passing through, of an evil atmosphere. The windows were open and the Marquis and I stood there looking out into the little Place before the Palais de la Nation. There were groups of grey soldiers on the steps of the Palace, their arms stacked on the pavement. Two ugly machine-guns were mounted to sweep the Park.

" They vomit death ! " said Villalobar, as though speaking to himself. We turned away from the window. Finally Major Hans von Herwaerts, who had once been Military Attaché at the German Embassy at Washington, and was then on the staff of General von Lüttwitz, wearing a great pair of tortoise-shell-reading-glasses, came out to receive us. To him I made my protests about the treatment of the priests and the professors of the American College, and indeed such treatment of priests in general, and Villalobar made similar representations on behalf of the Spanish priests. Major von Herwaerts understood, rushed into the room where, behind the closed door, was General von Lüttwitz. He came out and assured us that the release of the priests would be immediately ordered, and while he was telling us this two

tall dark figures, priests, swept out in their long black soutanes. Then we all went with the General into his — or into Davignon's — room. He was serious, and instantly instructed Major von Herwaerts to give orders liberating the priests ; told him to give them by telegraph, by telephone, and in addition to send out mounted orderlies to meet the columns on the road and to liberate the priests at once.

There was no more that we could do, but we sat and talked a while with the General. He told us that the Germans everywhere were victorious and that they would soon be in Paris; and he said that Burgomaster Max had received an official telegram from the French Government saying that it could give Belgium no further aid on the battlefield. He spoke of M. Max with admiration.

"A brave man", he said, "and patriotic. I admire him ; he stands up and doesn't crawl when he comes into my presence."

I did not know why anybody should crawl . . .

When I returned to the Legation, I found Madame Poulet, the wife of the Belgian Minister of Arts and Sciences, with two of her children — little girls with golden curls, their upturned faces filled with that distress and wonder and despair which children know when their parents weep, for then their little world tumbles in ruins about them and there is nowhere to go . . .

The world seemed very much like that that evening to all of us, who were as helpless as children. Madame Poulet's home was in Louvain, and that afternoon her mother, a woman eighty years old, had walked all the way from the doomed city, a distance of twenty-four kilometers. Madame Poulet told me something of the awful tale as she knew it — but it seemed better, ultimately, to talk of the two little girls standing by, and as she did so she gathered them into her arms, folding them in an embrace like that of countless other mothers in Belgium that night, and finally led them away, their curls bobbing down the long corridor, somewhat comforted, I could hope, for there was — strange miracle in those days ! — a smile.

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