

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXVII. Monseigneur and the library.

All that next day the panic-stricken people continued to pour into the city from Louvain, with their tales of horror. The mind was stunned; the event was too enormous to be grasped. It seemed to have the inevitable and fatalistic quality of some great catastrophe in nature; it had happened, that was all. It was not to be escaped; it was there before one, in the world, like an earthquake or a conflagration or a tornado, ail of which in its effect it so much resembled. Those who came told their stories calmly, sitting there with blank impassive faces, though in the eyes that had looked on those horrors the terror of it all was still reflected. One was struck by their lack of rancour; they seemed to have suffered too deeply for that.

Indeed, all through that experience, then and afterwards, I was impressed by the lack of passion displayed by all those who had so terribly suffered. I seldom heard any of them express hatred of the Germans or any desire for revenge; they never even spoke of them as *Boche*, and were by no means in such a fury of rage and hate as I have observed in persons safe in luxurious drawing-rooms thousands of miles away. None of them, so far as I could observe or learn, ever acted in the tragic manner; there were no heroics and no histrionics; they did not demean themselves as do people in the cinema or in the romanticistic novels. I have read somewhere a psychological explanation of this phenomenon by the late Professor William James, who observed it and made interesting notes of it at the time of the San Francisco earthquake. In moments of great danger, of great strain and tragedy, people are simple and natural; they do not act, in the theatrical sense of the word.

It was thus with the young woman who on that Tuesday, about eight o'clock in the evening, when German soldiers suddenly beat on the door of her home in Louvain and her father and brother ran to open it, heard shots and had not seen her father or brother since. She took her eight-weeks-old baby in her arms, and climbing the garden wall found refuge in the home of a friend for a night and a day, while on all sides the houses were in flames, and finally, carrying her child, she dodged from street to street, holding up one arm and waving a white handkerchief, and so reached the village of Leefdael and from there Tervueren, and at last Brussels.

It was so with the widow of sixty: German soldiers at five o'clock on Wednesday morning turned her and her niece, a young woman about to become a mother, out of her house half clad, and drove them from place to place — the guard-house at St. Martin's Barracks, the Place du Peuple, the Hôtel de Ville, and finally to the infantry barracks in the Rue de Tirlemont. They were forced every now and then to kneel on the ground and to raise their arms above their heads, while the Germans pressed the muzzles of guns against their breasts or kicked them or struck them; then, holding them as prisoners in the barracks until Thursday, the Germans allowed them to return home, to find their house burned to the ground and all that the widow had in the world — shares of the value of 135,000 francs contained in an iron box in a valise, her jewellery and diamonds in a little hand-satchel which she had buried in the garden — gone.

It was so with a young Louvain abbot I know, one of the group in that tragic scene there in the square before the railway-station — but I shall tell his story later on.

I might go on indefinitely recounting experiences such as these; they would fill a volume. But of all those I heard, of all those that were written out for me, there is one that remains more vivid in my memory

than all the rest. There was another priest, Monseigneur de Becker, Rector of the American College, a scholar and an educator. He was one of those priests whose liberation I had secured on Thursday night, and in the morning he came with two others to thank me. He had left Louvain when the exodus was ordered on Thursday ; he had gone to Tervueren with other priests ; there he was arrested. He had witnessed the murder of Father Dupierreux ; he had been put into a filthy cart as a postage, and sent into Brussels ; and seen thus, the story had been brought to our Legation — "*et vous m'avez sauvé la vie !*"

He sat there at my table, a striking figure — the delicate face, dignified and sad, the silver hair, the long black *soutane* and the scarlet sash, in his white hand a well-worn breviary. There were two other figures, dark, grave, and solemn — two Jesuit fathers who had come with him, sitting by in silent sympathy. They had come to express their gratitude. Monseigneur described the experience. He told it calmly, logically, connectedly, his trained mind unfolding the events in orderly sequence : the sound of firing from Herent, the sudden uprising of the German soldiers, the murder, the lust, the loot, the fires, the pillage, the evacuation and the destruction of the city, and all that.

The home of his father had been burned and the home of his brother ; his friends and his colleagues had been murdered before his eyes, and their bodies thrown into a cistern ; long lines of his townspeople, confined in the railway-station, had been taken out and shot clown ; the church of St. Peter was destroyed, the Hôtel de Ville — the finest example of late Gothic extant — was doomed, and the Halles of the University had been consumed. And he had told it all calmly. But there in the Halles of the University was the Library ; its hundreds of thousands of volumes, its rare and ancient manuscripts, its unique collection of *incunabula* — all had been burned deliberately, to the last scrap. Monseigneur had reached this point in his recital ; he had begun to pronounce the word *bibliothèque* — he had said "*la biblio . . .*" and he stopped suddenly and bit his quivering lip. "*La bib ...*" he went on — and then, spreading his arms on the table before him, he bowed his head upon them and wept aloud.

We sat there silent, the two priests and I — *le coeur gros*, as the French say — and our own eyes something more than moist.

They did not remain long after that, and when they went away Monseigneur forgot his breviary and left it lying on my table. And I let it lie there.

Brand WITHLOCK

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