

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXVIII. The story of Louvain (Leuven).

THE story of Louvain will not be fully written in all its details of individual suffering until liberty comes to the earth again ; those who know it best are still " inside " — as the Belgians call their prison. And people "inside" do not lightly give testimony or write their experiences and impressions, even in private diaries. Father Dupierreux learned that ... But from time to time a corner of the dark veil was lifted, and we had glimpses of the vast and appalling tragedy that was being enacted by those sinister figures in lurid grey, with torch and axe and gun, there amid the rolling smoke and the infernal glare.

The world already knows the story in its essentials ; the truth, with its divine persistence, is never deterred by prisons or bayonets, or even by electrified barbed wire at a frontier. Strange that autocracy never learns ! So the story that I could construct out of ail those impressions, those glimpses, and those conversations with all sorts of people — the rich and the poor, the high and the lowly, the *haute bourgeoisie*, men of note in the community, educators, lawyers, priests, officials, men of serious and orderly minds accustomed to weighing evidence — will not be new ; it will resume what already in the main has been told.

The Belgians were in retreat, falling back on Antwerp but fighting as they went — contesting, with Belgian stubbornness, every step of the way. The German army had entered Louvain in force on the afternoon of Wednesday, August 15. Hostages were seized among the notables of the city — the Burgomaster, the Rector of the University, the Provincial Councillor, judges, aldermen, etc. An *affiche* was at once placarded announcing that "*in case a single arm be found, no matter in what house, or any act of hostility be committed against our troops, our transports, our telegraph lines, our railways, or if any one harbours francs-tireurs, the culpable and the hostages who are arrested in each village will be shot without pity. Besides, all the inhabitants of the villages in question will be driven out ; the villages and even cities will be demolished and burned. If this happens on the route of communication between two villages the same methods will be applied to the inhabitants of both.*" *

This sinister poster bore no date, no signature, no writer's name ; it had evidently been printed in Germany in advance and formed part of the equipment of the army, as bills and bill-posters are carried by a travelling circus. It seemed like a gratuitous menace, since ail the revolvers and fowling-pieces had been turned in at the Hôtel de Ville in response to the Burgomaster's appeal.

The troops, of course, were quartered on the inhabitants, with the usual incidents. Three soldiers raped a girl of fifteen, and, as happened generally all over Belgium whenever German soldiers were quartered in houses of delicacy or refinement, wardrobes were broken, drawers emptied out on the floor, the dainty *lingerie* soiled with filth in an unspeakable manner. The cash-boxes of at least two batiks were rifled, though, it is said, this money was later restored by the German authorities. Some stray shots seem to have been fired by German soldiers, who went into shops and " requisitioned " for their personal needs, giving in return *bons de réquisition*, "*To be paid for by the City of Louvain*" or "*To be paid for by the Belgian Government*". Some, with lugubrious humour, read : "*Good to be shot*" — in German, which the Louvainist shopkeepers could not read.

All the felons of German nationality had been released from the prisons ; there were already bands of half-savage vagrants following the army. On Monday, the 24th, the German wounded had been evacuated from Louvain, and that evening there were a few desultory shots in the Chaussée de Tirlemont and the Rue de la Station, the route along which Von Kluck's army day after day was pushing on toward the west.

However, things went well enough for the time, and the Louvainist could make a link *moue*, shrug his shoulders, and observe : "*C'est la guerre !*"

Then came Tuesday, the 25th, a sinister date in the annals of Louvain. An order was issued commanding all the inhabitants to be indoors at eight o'clock in the evening, and that all cafés and public places be closed ; doors were to be left unlocked and lights were to burn in the windows. All that afternoon heavy detachments of troops were arriving at the railway-station ; by evening it had been estimated that ten thousand soldiers were in town. They were quartered on the inhabitants ; the hotels about the Place de la Station were filled with officers. Late in the afternoon the sound of cannonading was heard from the west, in the direction of the village of Herent.

That afternoon the Belgian army had made a sortie from the defences of Antwerp. There had been, a sharp fight at Malines, and the Belgians had had the better of it, driving the Germans out of Malines and back along the road toward Louvain ; it was the noise of this battle that Louvain heard that afternoon from the direction of Herent. At seven o'clock that evening Herent was in flames. The Germans, retiring on Louvain, had reached the Porte de Malines ; night was falling, and German reinforcements, just then leaving Louvain, met them, and there in the twilight the two parties, each mistaking the other for Belgians, opened fire. There was instant panic, the usual cry, "*Man hat geschossen !*" riderless horses and terror-stricken soldiers streamed into the town, and then, and in that manner, the awful tragedy began. The officers of the staff were dining, and those who know something of the Belgian *cuisine* — before the war — and of the place their famous old Burgundy holds in the estimation of the people, can imagine what a *festin de géants* there would be when such trenchermen as those German officers sat themselves down at table in those restaurants. They were digesting their dinner when the alarm came to them, and Louvain was doomed.

There was a woman whose husband was away in the Belgian army. For a week two German officers had been quartered in her house. She had just given, as she said, "a very good dinner" to one of the officers. He had got up from the table ; it was about seven o'clock. Suddenly a bugle blew — the alert, the officer said, and he must go. As he went out of the house he said :

"Madame, you are here alone with your two daughters. I must go immediately and I should say nothing to you, but you have shown me a great deal of humanity, and so, confidentially, I warn you that if this night you hear in the city a rifle or a gun-shot take refuge at once in the cellars, for it is going to be terrible."

The officer went, the woman ran out, warned her neighbours, and hurried home again, to be indoors by eight o'clock. The town was still, the streets deserted, the doors closed ; no one was abroad. The order had been well obeyed.

At five minutes after eight the woman heard shots, fired in the Rue de Tirlemont. Others heard shots at about the same time, at other parts of the city. The first thought of the inhabitants was one that ran through the town with a thrill of joy ; they thought it meant deliverance, that the

English and the French had come. And then, all over the city, the soldiers began firing wildly at the façades of the closed houses. The people ran to their cellars in terror. The soldiers beat in the doors, turned the people into the street, shot them clown, set fire to the houses. There were riderless horses galloping about. A mad, blind, demoniac rage seemed to have laid hold on the Germans, and they went through the streets killing, slaying, burning, looting, torturing, and massacring, and for three terrible days the awful tragedy was enacted, with such scenes as appal the imagination.

It was not only in the Rue de Tirlemont, as the woman said, that the fusillade began, but, by a significant coincidence, other fusillades broke out simultaneously at various points in the city at the Porte de Bruxelles, in the Rue Léopold, in the Rue Marie-Thérèse, and in the Rue des Joyeuses-Entrées. In the Place de la Station, filled with troops just detrained and crowded with army wagons, there was a panic ; the soldiers began shooting right and left, doubtless wounding many of their own.

The Place de la Station is the square before the railway-station, and around it on three sides are hotels and cafés. These hotels from the day of the entry of the Germans into Louvain had been occupied by officers and soldiers ; they had been ransacked time and again from cellar to garret, to see that no one was in hiding and that there were no arms. The German officers spent their money freely. The *échauffourée* in the Place de la Station was the most intense of all those that suddenly broke out that evening ; there was another in the Place du Peuple — the quietest, most aristocratic square in the city, where German troops were waiting under the thick foliage of the chestnut trees. The madness spread to the Rue de Diest, and finally to the Grand' Place. The grey soldiers were running everywhere, firing right and left at random, through the streets that were so strangely illuminated for their own destruction. On the order of their chiefs the Germans set fire to the houses, spraying *salons* with inflammable liquid (using the apparatus they had for that purpose), lighting and flinging in their incendiary pastilles — breaking in windows with the butts of their rifles, that a draught might be provided for the flames. The inmates of the houses thus doomed ran out, only to be shot down at their own doors, or took refuge in their cellars, to be burned to death and buried beneath the ruins of their homes. Men trying to escape over the roofs were fired at by the soldiers in the streets ; women, their babies in their arms, hugging the walls, tried to reach some place of safety.

The Halles of the University, erected in 1317 by the Clothworkes as the Cloth Hall (Halle aux Draps), which in 1431 became the principal seat of the University, had come to be devoted almost exclusively to the libraries of the University. Therein were stored incomparable riches — more than 230.000 volumes, besides 750 manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages, and perhaps the finest collection of *incunabula* extant, more than a thousand of them. The whole library, with all its riches, was deliberately and systematically burned ; only the naked walls of the old Hall could resist the fury of the flames. No wonder the old scholar broke down and wept !

The ancient church of St. Peter was set on fire. The flames of the holocaust lighted up the sky ; the glare could be seen at Tervueren, fifteen kilometres away.

Early in the evening the Rev. Father Parys, a Dominican, Dr. Meulemans, and the druggist de Coninck had gone to the Hôtel de Ville to ask for permits to go about the City during the night for the service of the Dominican ambulance in the Rue Juste-Lipse. Major von Manteuffel, who was in command, was about to make out the passports

when the firing began. Von Manteuffel at once ordered their arrest as hostages, as well as that of Alderman Schmidt. Out of the score or more hostages held by the Germans two or more were selected each day, and the others, provisionally, for that day relieved, so that they took turns in serving. The two official hostages for that day were Monseigneur Coenraets, Vice-Rector of the University, and M. Maes ; they were, of course, already in the Hôtel de Ville. These six hostages, then, were made to stand at the open windows with their backs to the street, so that they would be the first to be shot if any balls were fired into the room.

Later General von Boehn arrived from the front, and through an interpreter harangued the hostages, telling them that if the shooting continued they would all be hanged, and the City bombarded and forced to pay a levy of twenty million francs. Finally, Monseigneur Coenraets and Father Parys were ordered to proclaim this menace to the people, to exhort them to be calm and to cease fixing on the German troops. They went, accompanied by Von Manteuffel and a platoon of soldiers, on their ungrateful and impossible mission.

Monseigneur Coenraets was a man over sixty and already aged by toil and constant study. Broken by emotion and by the horrors that were going on about him, he was forced by the score of soldiers who surrounded him, and by the two officers who cocked their revolvers always at his head, to march through those streets, followed by women and children who had known and revered him all their lives, lifting their hands, weeping, praying, swearing to him that they would do all they could to save him, and the town. His voice was choked with smoke and dust, he was ready to faint, yet hour after hour he must march about, the dignified Vice-Rector of the old University, with the Dominican friar, halt at every street corner and recite the proclamation in French and in Flemish — as though he had already judged his fellow-citizens ! as though he were imploring his own to desist from crimes of which they were only the victims !

Near the statue of Juste Lipse, there in the Rue de la Station, there appeared a figure that flits across the scene of the Louvain tragedy like some actor in the cinema — Dr. Georg Berghausen, a young surgeon in the Landsturm. He came running in wild excitement, and as he met the company of hostages, cried out that a German soldier had just been killed by a shot fired from the residence of David Fishbach, and he shouted to the soldiers : "*The blood of the entire population of Louvain is not worth a drop of the blood of one German soldier.*"

They went on. One man says that one of the German soldiers threw an inflammable pastille into the house of David Fishbach, and that it flared into flames ; I do not know. But a moment later, there at the foot of the statue of Juste Lipse, lay the body of David Fishbach, an old man of eighty-two, beside that of his son. The old coachman, Joseph Vandermosten, had entered the house to try to save the life of his master, but he did not return ; his body was found the next day amidst the ruins.

Nearly three hundred persons were gathered in the Place de la Station ; "most were weeping". In the midst of this inferno, amid the roar and glare of flames, with the crackling of rifle-shots, the steady cluck-cluck-cluck of machine-guns, making a noise like a riveter, and that most hideous of all sounds, the ululations of a mob, dominating all the rest, the massacre and the incendiarism went on.

It continued all through the night ; toward morning the great tower of St. Peter's Church burst into flames, but the soldiers would not allow the people to enter the church to save it. The great bell fell with a crash. And dawn came, and another day, but the horror went on.

It was the morning of Wednesday, the 26th. German soldiers, drunk,

black with the soot of their incendiarism, were going through the streets and bursting into houses, crying "*Heraus !*" turning the cowering inmates into the streets with such blows and brutalities as made the experience of each person a calvary. Often in these irruptions, obsessed by the idea of *francs-tireurs*, they would shout, "*Man hat geschossen !*" The people were thus assembled in tragic groups between the tottering walls of burning houses ; marched through choking, suffocating streets that were strewn with the dead bodies of men and of horses — the women and children weeping, screaming, imploring, and the soldiers compelling them to walk with their hands up, or making them kneel or run, or kicking them or striking them with their fists or with the butts of their guns, herding them through the streets in the midst of the smoking ruins ; while other soldiers, with wine-bottles under their arms, went reeling past crying out at the captives : "*Hund ! Schwein ! Schweinehund !*"

Now and then the soldiers would tell the people that the place of execution had been reached ; then they would change their minds and seek another place — a species of torture that was practised all over Belgium. And now and then German soldiers fired at them from the upper windows of the houses which they were sacking.

Finally, however, after having been marched all over town — one group was marched to Herent and back — they were assembled in the Place de la Station ; old men and old women and young women and little children : they were bound hand and foot, then tied up in a great human packet by a long rope, so that they could not move. There were by evening more than a thousand persons huddled there in the square. A drizzling rain was falling, soaking them to the skin. They had nothing to eat or to drink. Now and then a man would be shot ; oftener the soldiers would lead some one off, a volley would be fired, and those in the square would be told that the man had been killed and that a like fate awaited them. One man, bound round and round by cords, was struck by an officer several times, knocked down, made to stand up, then knocked down again ; he was hung by the waist to a lamp-post ; finally, after all this torture, he was hung by the neck.

The young abbot whom I mentioned had been given a safe conduct to leave the city, and on Thursday morning had gone along the Chaussée d'Aerschot as far as Rotselaer ; there he encountered a group of soldiers, who refused to look at his papers but arrested him and took him back to Louvain with other prisoners, and finally, toward evening, to the Place de la Station. He had been kicked, cuffed, spat upon, struck with the butts of guns ; his hands were tied behind him with barbed wire, and there at the Place de la Station he was forced to remain standing all night, not even allowed to lean against the wall and this for hours, with repeated insults and personal outrage, while his townsmen one by one were led out and shot, there at the side of the square, "near the house of Mr. Hemaide".

They witnessed many executions and heard those volleys which, as they assumed, meant many more. Toward morning they saw a priest shot, and were then told that their time had come. The young abbot pronounced a collective absolution for all those about him — "*Ego vos absolvo a peccatis vestris. In nomine ...*"

But no ; soon after his hands were loosened he was allowed to go into the waiting-room of the station, where he was held until Saturday, and then a German sergeant took pity on him and told him that he could go.

And so for another day and another night the madness went on — the

murder, the looting, the sacking, the riot, the burning, and the lust ; with soldiers pillaging the houses, bearing the wine in great baskets out of the cellars, to be guzzled in the street, while men and women and children were shot down and their bodies left to lie in gutters or on the smoking ruins, or thrown into foul cesspools.

Then on Thursday morning, August 27, at five o'clock, the Germans announced that it was necessary to bombard the city, and they issued an order to all the inhabitants to leave at once. It was but another *comédie*, for there was no bombardment, and probably no intention of any ; a gun was fired two or three times, that was all. But again the soldiers went from house to house ordering the inhabitants to leave, giving them no time to prepare, refusing them permission to take anything with them. And then began that awful exodus. On all the roads leading from Louvain the people went — old men, women, children, nuns, priests, the sick, even women just risen from childbirth — driven like cattle. Ten thousand of them in one body were forced to march to Tirlemont, eighteen kilometers from Louvain ; perhaps as many found their way to Brussels. It was a tragic Hegira. Many fell by the roadside ; some went mad ; some wandered for days in the fields and woods around ; some drowned themselves in streams. The members of the Garde Civique and hundreds of women and children were sent to a prison camp at Münster, in Germany, and kept there for months, exhibited as specimens of the Belgian *francs-tireurs*. No one was spared unless it were the occupants of the houses in the demesne of the Duc d'Arenberg of the old German family of that name at Heverlee-ter-Bank, where the Duke has a *château*. Many of these houses were marked in chalk : "*Nicht plündern*" (" Don't pillage ").

The priests whom Villalobar and I succeeded in liberating that same night were in the throng that had been driven out along the road to the west of Louvain, toward Tervueren. They were nearly ninety, among them the Rector, the Vice-Rector, and the professors of the University, and the Rector of the American College ; and there were about seventy members of a Jesuit community at Louvain, which for days had given food and lodging to German officers, had nursed the wounded — German and Belgian — and buried the dead. Some of them wore the brassard of the Red Cross bearing the German seal. They set out, on foot of course, for Brussels ; they had reached Tervueren. There the soldiers halted them, searched them, taking away everything they had (including their papers of identity), and tore the Red Cross brassards from their arms. The soldiers, who were in masses, mocked, insulted, and menaced them — with, empty bottles, with guns, and with bayonets ; one soldier tried to slip a cartridge into the pocket of the cassock of one of the priests, and two of the priests were pushed into a ditch by an angry Oberleutnant and ordered to remain there.

"*From that moment*", said the Jesuit father who, calmly and in his stately French, told me of his experiences — I translate his words almost literally — "*we had the impression, which was not denied by the events, that it was the rule of the arbitrary and that the officers were abandoning the clerics to the invective and hatred of the soldiers. The latter indulged themselves in such arts, attitudes, and conduct as, from the point of discipline alone, seemed very strange on the part of subordinates in the presence of their chiefs. The officers did not make a gesture or a sign that would put an end to it, and their attitude was equal to an approval or an encouragement ; several of them even joined their invectives to those of their subordinates.*"

The priests were assembled in a field and made to sit back to back on the grass, while the passing soldiers constantly menaced them with death. An hour passed, and an officer came, counted the prisoners, divided them into groups, and ordered the first group to stand in line.

"All the members of this group are hostages", said that officer, "and will accompany a column of supplies. If a single shot is fired against the column all will be shot."

While they were waiting for the column to arrive the Oberleutnant suddenly remembered the two priests whom he had thrown into the ditch. One of them was Father Dupierreux, young ecclesiastic student. The soldiers, in searching him, found a private diary. He still had his Red Cross brassard, and this was violently torn from his arm, and the Oberleutnant, gesticulating wildly and shouting insults, cried out in German :

"A Red Cross ! A Red Cross ! We will give him a Red Cross !"

And he ordered that a large cross be traced in red chalk on Father Dupierreux' back and, when it was done, he said :

"His case is settled" ("*Son affaire est réglée* ")

And so it was. Two soldiers led Father Dupierreux forward. He was pale but he was calm ; he held a crucifix in his hands. An officer and a non-commissioned officer followed. A priest with a knowledge of German was called upon to translate from Father Dupierreux' diary.

"If you omit or change the sense of a single word, you will be shot too !" said the Oberleutnant. The priest read a few lines referring to the burning of the University of Louvain and of the Library as acts worthy of the Vandals, and then the Oberleutnant stopped the reading.

Father Dupierreux was told to step a few paces in advance ; a firing-squad was detailed ; the priests were ordered to fix their eyes upon the young priest as he stood there, crucifix in hand ; the order was given to fire ; the volley flashed ; and Father Dupierreux fell to the ground, dead.

It was about two o'clock. The priests were loaded into great filthy carts, used ordinarily for transporting swine, or on to transport-wagons. There were five groups of them ... The procession started, and for six hours, from two to eight, from Tervueren to Hal, passing through the suburbs of Brussels, the carts rumbled — the priests, as one of them said, shown "*like criminals to the population*". They were given nothing to eat, not allowed even a drink of water. As they passed through Brussels they were seen and recognized ; and two men, their faces blanched with horror, came to the Legation to report it. Near Hal they were overtaken by General von Lüttwitz's orders and released ...

Back in Louvain, however, the rage was abating. Friday, the 28th, there was, if not calm, such a diminution of the storm that it seemed, after all the horror, like calm. It was then that Gibson and Bulle, Sven Poussette, the Swedish Chargé d'Affaires, and Blount drove out to Louvain in Blount's little car. They found evidences of the fury of the destruction — houses still blazing and soldiers pillaging them. While they were standing in the Rue de la Station talking to a German officer, shots were suddenly fired, and the German officer led them to the railway-station, where for half an hour they took refuge in the freight depot. During all that time they could hear firing outside. The Germans claimed that they were being fired upon. by Belgian civilians from the upper windows of houses in the Rue de la Station, but the Belgians of Louvain always insisted that the firing from the upper windows was done by German soldiers placed there for the purpose of impressing the diplomatic representatives of neutral Powers.

I do not know who it was that fired. German soldiers for three days had been firing from the upper windows of houses they were looting, and they did it afterwards. If after three days of such horrors, of such murderous destruction, any Belgians could have been found in the upper stories of houses and were still armed and firing, of that the Germans have never produced any evidence, and they made no

arrests, did not even shoot any one, at that time, on such a charge.

The town, indeed, was almost deserted, though the shooting and the burning and the pillage continued until August 30, when Professor Nerinx, of the University of Louvain, entered into negotiations with Major von Manteuffel, organized a temporary communal administration, and succeeded in re-establishing some sort of authority. Instructions were issued to the troops by Major von Manteuffel to cease firing, and order was restored. It was forbidden to burn homes any more ; placards were posted on them, or on certain of them, bearing these words :

Dieses Haus ist zu schützen. Es ist streng verboten, ohne Genehmigung der Kommandantur. Häuser zu betreten oder in Brand zu setzen.—DIE ETAPPEN-KOMMANDANTUR.

(This house must be protected. It is strictly forbidden to enter the houses or to burn them without the consent of the Kommandantur.) **

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* PROCLAMATION

HABITANTS !

Nous ne faisons pas la guerre contre les citoyens mais seulement contre l'armée ennemie. Malgré cela les troupes allemandes ont été attaquées en grand nombre par des personnes qui n'appartiennent pas à l'armée. On a commis des *actes de la plus lugubre cruauté* non seulement contre les combattants mais aussi contre nos blessés et nos médecins qui se trouvent sous l'abri de la Croix Rouge.

Pour empêcher ces brutalités à l'avenir j'ordonne ce qui suit :

1. Toute personne qui n'appartienne pas à l'armée et qui soit trouvée les armes entre les mains sera fusillée à l'instant ; elle sera considérée hors du droit des gens.

2. Tous les armes, fusils, pistolets, brownings, sabres, poignards, etc., et toute matière explosible doivent être délivrés par le maire de tout village ou ville au commandant des troupes allemandes.

En cas qu'une seule arme soit trouvée dans n'importe quelle maison ou que quelque acte d'hostilité soit commis contre nos troupes, nos transports, nos lignes télégraphiques, nos chemins de fer ou qu'on donne l'asile aux francs-tireurs, les coupables et les otages qui sont arrêtés dans chaque village seront fusillés sans pitié.

Or cela tous les habitants des villages, etc., en question seront chassés, les villages et les villes mêmes seront démolis et brûlés. Si cela arrive sur la route de communication entre deux villages ou entre deux villages on agira de la même manière contre les habitants des deux villages.

J'attends que les maires ainsi que la population voudront assurer par leur prudente surveillance et conduite la sûreté de nos troupes ainsi que la leur.

Dans le cas contraire les mesures indiquées ci-dessus entreront en vigueur . — On ne donnera aucun pardon !

LE GENERAL COMMANDANT EN CHEF.

** The number of citizens of Louvain slain was 210 of both sexes and all ages, from infants of three months to persons of eighty years. Several thousand were taken prisoner ; over 600, of whom 100 were women and children, were deported to Germany. The Germans report that 5 officers, 23 men and 95 horses were killed or wounded. Two thousand houses were burned, together with the buildings of the University, the Library with its precious manuscripts, and the church of St. Peter.