

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXX. DINANT.

LOUVAIN will remain, perhaps, the classic instance of *Schrecklichkeit* ; it resumes and sums up in the general mind the sinister history of those terrible times. But it was not the worst : Visé was worse, and so was Dinant, and so was Aerschot ; and worst of all, perhaps, was Tamines. Visé was the first ; it was near there that on August 2 the Germans, wilfully violating their treaty, invaded the little land they had sworn to protect. Going from St.-Remy along the Road of the Three Chimneys, the route the Germans took from Aix-la-Chapelle to Visé, one comes to a turn in the highway where, in place of the fine old sixteenth-century house belonging to the de Borchgrave family, there stands now only a mass of blackened walls. And there, along the Meuse, below one lies a silent City, its empty chambers open to the sky it might be Pompeii. Those ruins might have lain there for centuries. There is not a living thing there. The devastation, the destruction are absolute, the silence complete ; it is the very abomination of desolation — a mass of brick and stone and charred beams, crumbling white façades, whose windows, their casements blackened by fire, stare like the hollow sockets of skulls. Of the four thousand inhabitants not one is there, not a house is standing, not a roof remains. The taverns, where the people used to go in joyous bands to eat of the famous roast goose, are heaps of cinders ; the very trees in their gardens, under whose boughs the youth of Liège used to dance the *cramignon*, have been burned. The scaling walls of the church tremble in the wind, the roof has fallen in ; the towers with their bells, the organ, the statues, have tumbled into bits. The work that would have required ages was accomplished by German organization in a night.

And my lawyer friend who was born there, when he saw it from the turn in the Road of the Three Chimneys and looked on the ruins lying before him along the highway to the Meuse, said :

"Since there is nothing left with which to begin life anew, let the City be preserved as it is — a holy necropolis and a shrine ; a monument to the implacable ferocity of German Kultur."

The German troops entered St.-Remy-sous-Argenteau on August 4 at ten o'clock in the morning ; they came in an endless stream that rolled on like a tide to the Meuse. Those firstcomers did no harm to the civilians ; it was not until they had been checked by the Belgian army that the civil population had to suffer. They fell back, and because Visé lay on the main road running from Germany to the Meuse, they put it to lire and sword, and whole families, threatened with shooting if they should leave their houses, were burned alive in their homes — men, women, and children.

The old Curé of the parish of St.-Remy, having buried a neighbouring priest, shot because the Belgian engineers had used the tower of his church for observations, remarked to a German officer that it was unjust ; that it was the military, and not the priest, that had set up the observation-post, and that the priest had no means of preventing them from doing so. And the officer replied

"Yes, all that is true ; but war is war, and they did right to shoot the priest".

All the old Curé could do was to go out of his parsonage and over the fields alone in the dark night ; he could not see two paces ahead of him, but to right and left he heard cries of pain and the groans of dying men.

And there, alone on that field, turning about, he made the sign of the Cross many times, giving a general absolution to all those unknown men who were dying there.

We had just begun to hear of the horror of Dinant when the horror of Louvain came upon us, and because that was nearer, more immediate, it dulled the impression of the other deed ; we could not realize that the charming little town, set like a jewel on the Meuse, with the picturesque rock of its citadel and the curiously Oriental spire of the old church of Notre-Dame, was no more. "*Dinant has been destroyed*", said some one almost casually ; it was but one more detail in the great cataclysm. It was September 1, when we were beginning to get the events of Louvain in order in our minds, that the two men came in from Dinant. I have since read the story many times and in many reports, but their account in all essentials was sufficient ; the others could but piece out the recital with shocking details until a long while afterwards we had the sinister necrology : the names and ages of the 596 victims of the massacre — old men of seventy and eighty and women and little children, and babies in their mothers' arms.

The Germans had entered Dinant on August 6. The townfolk had heard of the destruction of Visé, but they did not believe it. There were skirmishes in the country round between Uhlans, making *reconnaissances*, and Belgian and French troopers, but that was all. Then on the 15th the Germans tried to force their way across the Meuse, but they were repulsed, and fell back in retreat. The Dinantais thought that the French had definitely won the engagement and that they were among friends, but just at nightfall on the 21st a band of German soldiers, about 150 in all, dashed down the road from Ciney and along the Rue St.-Jacques shouting like savages, smashing street-lamps, firing into windows, throwing incendiary bombs into houses, terrorizing the population of the quarter of St.-Roch, "*shooting up*" the town, as they used to say in the Far West.

Then suddenly, early on the morning of the 23rd, German troops began pouring into the town from all four quarters ; they came by the Lisogne road, by the Ciney road, by the Froidevaux road, but principally by the Montagne de St.-Nicolas. And while the shells exchanged by the German artillery on the citadel with the French across the river were screaming overhead, the soldiers turned the inhabitants out of doors, set the dwellings on fire, herded the people in a mass and marched them, their hands above their heads, across the city to the Place d'Armes. The men were separated from the women and children, ranged in line, and from time to time during the day a few were selected, led out, and shot. In the Leffe quarter alone the Germans shot thus 140 ; and at evening they shot the **Argentine Consul** (*) and forty workmen in a factory. The terror lasted all that day and night. The Germans locked whole crowds of the people in barracks, in stables, in factories, surrounded by soldiers ready to fire at any moment ; and in the St.-Roch quarter they imprisoned a group in a building, placed bundles of straw all around the house, and set it on fire — but, by a fortunate chance, the Germans overlooked a cellar window, and the people crawled one by one out of this and escaped.

Women and children were forced to stand by and witness the murder of husbands or fathers ; one woman, Madame Alnin, who had given birth to a child three days before, was borne forth on a mattress by German soldiers, who said they would compel her to look on while they shot her husband, but her cries and supplications finally moved the soldiers to spare the husband's life.

The soldiers "*stood by laughing*" while the executions were going on.

During all that night of the 23rd they marched about the city, setting fire to such buildings as had escaped and when the fires slackened somewhat they systematically pillaged everywhere — in the famous wine-cellars, of course ; in banks, the safes of which they blew open ; and in jewellery shops, whence they bore off silver and plate ; and wherever there was property to be taken they placed guards to protect it from all but their own robbery !

And when their rage was spent, out of 1.400 houses but 400 remained. The old church of Notre-Dame, that had survived the wars of seven hundred years, was destroyed, the picturesque tower no longer reared itself under the rock of the citadel ; the College and the Hôtel de Ville — all were in ruins.

Four hundred and sixteen Dinantais, arrested — no one knew why — on the night of the 23rd, were taken to the plateau of Herbuchenne, on the heights overlooking Dinant, where they were camped in the open air without food or drink. Some of the soldiers who guarded them told them that they would be shot at daybreak ; others that they would be transferred to Coblenz.

Their escort was commanded by a captain of the 100th Infantry, who, while they were waiting (**), saw a superb stallion in a field and wantonly shot it dead ; a while later he shot a mare and her colt, Finally the prisoners were marched toward Ciney. They were continually threatened with death ; soldiers spat in their faces, threw *ordure* at them, and officers struck them with their riding-crops. From time to time the captain in command, who was mounted, would turn in his saddle to shout at them, " *Vous êtes des bêtes !* " Thus they were taken to the prison-camp at Cassel in Germany.

One scene remains to be described — a scene that in its unsurpassed and shameful cruelty has no counterpart even in the dark annals of savage tribes. It was on that Sunday morning of the 23rd. The Germans who swarmed down the Froidevaux road entered the quarter of Penant, arrested the inhabitants and took them to the Rocher Bayard, the famous and picturesque rock that, split off from the cliff and overlooking the lovely Meuse, is associated in romantic legend with the *filz* Aymon and their famous horse Bayard. The people were held there, evidently as a screen, while the Germans began to construct a temporary bridge over the river. The French were on the other side, and no' and then they shot at the soldiers working there. The Germans, annoyed by the spitting irregular fire, sent a citizen of Dinant, one of the prisoners, in a boat across the river to inform the French that unless they ceased firing the civilians would be shot. M. Bourdon made his dangerous voyage, accomplished his mission, and returned to take his place among his fellows. But a few stray bullets still sped across the river.

Then was committed the atrocious crime. The prisoners were massed together, nearly ninety of them — old men and young women, girls and boys, little children, and babies in their mothers' arms. A platoon was called up ; the colonel in command gave the word to fire, and the grey soldiers in cold blood shot down those ninety persons as they stood huddled there together. Among them were twelve children under the age of six years, six of whom were little babies whose mothers, as they stood up to face their pitiless murderers, held them in their arms.

The six babies were :

The child Flévet, three weeks old ;

Maurice Bétamps, eleven months old ;

Nelly Pollet, eleven months old ;

Gilda Genen, eighteen months old ;
Gilda Marchot, two years old ;
Clara Struvay, two years old.

Evening came. The grey soldiers were fumbling in the mass of prostrate bodies, whose contorted limbs were still at last — fixed in the final attitude of agony, of resignation or despair. They thought them all dead, but no ; some were living, some by a miracle were uninjured. And these were dragged from the pile of bodies and made to dig a pit and to tumble. into it the bodies of the victims of the tragedy — their relatives, their neighbours, and their friends.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* Roberto Jorge PAYRO ; « *Dos representantes argentinos muertos en la guerra* », in *LA NACION* ; Buenos Aires ; 17/11/1914.

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19141004%20PAYRO%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

There are French and Dutch versions of the article on the same website www.idesetautres.be

** Testimony of M. Tschoffen. Procureur du Roi de Dinant (Crown Prosecutor of Dinant).

M. TSCHOFFEN
PROCUHEUR DU ROI DE L'ARRONDISSEMENT
DE DINANT

LE SAC DE DINANT

ET

LES LÉGENDES

DU LIVRE BLANC ALLEMAND

DU 10 MAI 1915



PRO JUSTITIA !

1917

PRIX : 5 Francs.

S. A. FUTURA, LEYDE (HOLLANDE)