

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXXIII. "*Man hat geschossen !*"

THERE was a certain gruesome monotony in the stories after all ; they were alike, the same thing over and over again, everywhere in the land — the same details, the same characteristics, the same typical deeds. One comes almost to recognize it as the work of a certain type, as old detectives identify the work of yeggmen, and trappers, from the signs, tell whether Cheyennes or Sioux have passed that way.

The Germans enter a town, take hostages — the burgomaster, some councilmen, one or two notables ; they demand money, food, wine, and forage. All goes well enough for a few days. The army moves on. There is a reverse, and soldiers swarm back into the town crying, "*Man hat geschossen !*" Then murder, pillage, fire, rape, massacre. This happened again and again : at Herve, at Bligny, Battice, Retinne, Schaffen*, Charleroi, Hougaerde, at Monceau-sur-Sambre, at Goegnies, and at Termonde — occupied twice by the Germans, who, driven out the first time by the Belgian troops, returned and almost annihilated the town.**

The tale is unending ; horror piles on horror. We heard the stories every day all that autumn, all that winter ; every refugee who came to Brussels, every one who came in from the country, brought them ; and they will be told in Belgium for a century to come. At first we heard them and could not believe them ; and when, finally, we did believe them, because there was no doubting any more, we scarcely realized them in all their sheer and utter savagery. Scores and hundreds and thousands of such recitals were told by the refugees from all those doomed towns in Eastern Belgium ; myriad repetitions of individual instances, all essentially the same, until the mass of them overpowered the imagination and saturated the mind with their horror. Words lost their meaning, were unable longer to depict the sinister and tragic significance of the events they would describe, and became cold and bald, like statistics or terms of generalization. It all seemed too grotesque, too patently impossible, there, before one, in Brussels, in the midst of familiar things, in our own times — in the "*so-called twentieth century*", as the English parson said, with a humour that I trust was not unconscious.

I might have had hundreds of such tales, but I did not seek them ; I had those that were brought to me, and I have struck out all that seems like exaggeration. I was representing a neutral Power, and I made it a point of honour to respect that neutrality and to see that it was respected ; only in the case of Louvain did I seek information, and then I felt that I had the right to do so because it was reported that American interests were involved. Finally I ceased to listen to the stories and turned the relaters over to Gibson or to de Leval, and at last even they ceased to listen. Of what use ? It was all cumulative, corroborative. Any good trial judge would have said long since, "*I don't care to hear any more on that point.*"

And so I have left out of this account much that was told and have confined my statements to proved and admitted facts. I have not told about the old soldier in Brussels, un *vieux sabreur*, who used to tell his "group" in the *estaminet* when he sipped his *faro* of an afternoon how, walking along the road from Alost to Brussels on August 20, he saw a Uhlan stab a boy, a little *manneke*, with his lance, and how he, the *vieux sabreur*, had folded his arms and shouted "*Lâche*" three times to the Uhlan.

The reason I would not offer this in evidence is the fact, principally, of that

detail about the folded arms ; that is of the cinema, indubitably, and I have a constitutional dislike for romanticism, and one finds as much of it among soldiers, with their swanking, as among the novelists.

There are many such tales and there are many that I cannot bring myself to repeat ; they belong to the smoking-room, and even there one would be ashamed to repeat them ; they are more proper for pathological study than for the mere curiosity of the lay mind. Rape was common, and at certain places even nuns were not spared.***

One of the allegations that seems to have aroused an almost morbid curiosity is that which relates to the cutting off of hands of little children ; we used to hear the story often in Belgium, but never in a form that seemed to me wholly convincing. ****

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* The priest's story : "*The Germans led me into my garden and tied my hands behind my back. They ill-treated me in every possible way ; they prepared a gallows, saying that they were going to hang me ; one of them seized in turn my head, nose, and ears, going through the gestures of cutting off members. They forced me to gaze at the sun for a long time. They smashed the arms of the blacksmith and then killed him. Once they forced me into the burgomaster's burning house, then drew me out again. This sort of thing lasted all day. Toward evening they told me to look at the church, saying it would be for the last time. At a quarter to seven they let me go, striking me with their riding-crops. I was covered with blood and lay unconscious. Then an officer had me placed on my feet and ordered me to go on ; a few meters from them they fired on me. I fell and was considered dead. To this fact I owe my life. They claimed they had been fired on from the church tower, but this was false, for the church door wa's locked, and it was they who forced it open, without finding any one in the church.*"

** The atrocities have been made the subject of two serious investigations, that of the Belgian Commission, headed by M. Henri Carton de Wiart, the Belgian Minister of Justice, and that of the British Commission, presided over by Lord Bryce, formerly British Ambassador at Washington. Something of the sweep of these investigations may be gathered from the fact that the report of the Belgian Commission, the *Grey Book (Le Livre gris : Réponse au Livre blanc allemand, etc., 1916)*, forms an *in-quarto* volume of 525 pages. Many brochures have appeared that treat of these atrocities, and recently an excellent study, "*The German Army at Louvain, and the German White Book (L'Armée allemande à Louvain en août 1914 et le Livre blanc allemand du 10 mai 1915)*", has been published, which gives a sober and convincing account of the tragedy at Louvain, and contains an able analysis of the *White Book*. Many of the facts given in this work are borne out by my notes. The report of the British Commission, that is to say, the conclusions drawn from the evidence heard before the Commission, contains 38 *in-quarto* pages, while the evidence itself forms a 200-page volume of the same dimensions.

*** Cardinal Mercier's correspondence with the late Governor-General von Bissing on this delicate point is important.

**** In the report of the English Commission there is given the testimony of three witnesses who claim to have seen this thing at Malines. We had that story, too, immediately after the fall of Antwerp, but the testimony is excluded from the report of the Belgian Commission.