

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXXIX. The adventure of the Duchess.

THE Baron von der Lancken had dropped in that evening to inquire about Gibson, who two days before had gone to Antwerp with dispatches. Gibson had been accompanied by the old Count Woeste, a distinguished Belgian statesman just then, experiencing among his Belgian fellow-citizens the unpopularity of the pacifist in times of war. He had asked for a seat in our motor, and we had granted the request without asking why he wished to go to Antwerp ; and when a little red-haired German soldier, with his front teeth all gone and a great gun on his back, had come in the rain bearing Gibson's *Passierschein*, the name of the Count was on it, as was also that of the Marquis of Faura, secretary of the Spanish Legation, whom Gibson was to bring back from Antwerp that he might be at the bedside of a dying son. Gibson, excited with the prospect of adventure, had departed with his elderly companion, and the Pasha had arranged an *entr'acte*, agreeing to leave off firing for a time to allow them to pass through the lines ; and they went bearing a napkin to use as a white flag — like Napoleon III and his table-cloth.

The Count had gone, as the event proved, to inquire whether his Government would be disposed to consider some means, if they could be found, of discussing terms. It was said by the gossips that there were those who felt that Belgium had done her duty and that some sort of truce was not impossible. Indeed, I had had a call from three gentlemen, Belgians, one of whom was connected with the Brussels branch of the Deutsche Bank, who came to me one afternoon — it was Wednesday, September 2 — with some tentative suggestion of conference and armistice. M. D— told me that the Germans had summoned the forts of Antwerp to surrender, and with great hesitation, and with evident appreciation of the fact that he was venturing on most dangerous ground, suggested that some sort of truce be arranged by the President. I could, of course, have nothing to do with such a delicate business. I could only explain very carefully the neutral position of my country and that I could make no *démarche* on unofficial representations, or without authority from Washington. And M. D— wheeled into the discussion those famous cannon — a formidable argument, to be sure !

Gibson was back in a day or two with Count Woeste, who, however much a pacifist, had shown no fear of the military movements they were compelled to drive through on their return journey, but was as unconcerned under fire as though he had been a militarist. His mission, whatever it was, had been wholly a failure, and any proposal of discussion or arrangement he may have made at Antwerp had been coldly received and instantly refused.

It was a relief, but worry was never absent long and it promptly came in its protean form as a note from the Duchess of Sutherland, written from the Hôtel Astoria — a hostelry which the Germans had taken over, as they had the classic Hôtel de Bellevue et Flandre and most of the other hotels in Brussels, to be used as a club for officers.

The note of the Duchess was urgent, and I went at once, not altogether unprepared to find her under arrest, since one of the physicians attached to her ambulance had been in several times from Namur to report the various difficulties the Germans were already causing them there. She, and the nurses with her, had remained in Namur throughout the bombardment of August 23, and during the days of the dreadful week that followed. Afterwards the Duchess had taken her Red Cross establishment to Maubeuge. But now Maubeuge had fallen ; we had had that news

from James Barnes and from Commander Gherardi of our Navy, who had returned after witnessing the reduction of the city.

The Astoria had an empty air, and the porter in his uniform was somewhat subdued in manner by the new guests installed there, but he sent me up at once to the apartments of the Duchess, and at her door I found two unshaven and unkempt sentinels, who, while doubtless not barbarians, smelled very much like barbarians. They denied me entrance, of course. I sent for an under-officer who was there, but he was powerless, and then I found an obliging Oberleutnant who spoke French ; he went at once to the Kommandantur and returned with Major Bayer, who apologized for the delay, scolded the two sentinels, and gave orders that I was to see the Duchess at once.

She was indisposed and reclining, but sprightly in her smart English speech, recounting her experiences since leaving Namur with her Red Cross ambulance. German officers had promised her accommodation in a train to Holland via Aix-la-Chapelle, but she was suspicious and feared that she might be taken to Germany and held for ransom. I assured her that there was little likelihood of that and that I should try to arrange for her to go to Holland. But she did not wish to start for several days ; she was not feeling quite up to the journey, and was willing to give her word of honour that she would keep to her room and her bed. She was enjoying her adventure with the relish that our realist Anglo-Saxon race has in all that savours of the romantic, but I was just then for speeding all parting guests of that race. The fact that she was not quite ready to go was, however, an excellent argument to employ on the German mentality, and I spent futile hours trying to see Major Bayer to ask him to permit the Duchess to remain. But I could not find him ; the world had changed into a pandemonium of grey motors, grey uniforms, unshaven sentries, and, no doubt, swarming spies, in which it was growing more and more difficult to find one's way about. But at the close of the day, as Villalobar and I were telling each other our experiences, Baron von der Lancken suddenly appeared ; he was just in from the field of battle near Louvain, and in his great flowing cape of light bluish-grey, with its upturned white collar, and his silver helmet he looked like Lohengrin, but a Lohengrin whose swan had overturned in his frail bark, for he was quite wet through and worn with fatigue. I gave him a glass of wine and took advantage of the moment to arrange for the departure of the Duchess, nurses, and doctors Von der Lancken obtained a motor, or two motors, for them and the necessary papers, and I asked James Barnes to escort them to Holland. Two days later the Duchess was out again, interesting 'in her nurse's garb, and at the Legation she asked to see the *Times* newspaper. There were some old copies, and she settled herself in a corner of the *salon* to go carefully over the long list of dead and wounded. And when she had done she quietly folded the paper, laid down her eyeglass, and looking up with an expression from which all the zest of adventure had gone, said :

"This is probably the end of the world ; there will be none living after the war. I dread going back to England, where there will always be a newspaper with its 'roll of honour'."

We were only beginning to learn what the war would do to us ; just beginning to apprehend that the world could never again be what it had been — that all those who survived would be themselves *mutilés*, with wounds that would never heal.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.