BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE **1**

Chapter **XLI**. The plight of the Baron.

PERHAPS I can convey the impression of those restless rainy days — for the good weather was done — days of various s glooms and fears and cares, no better than by extracting from the notes I made at the time of some of the typical incidents. I had never kept a journal in my life ; such things seemed to belong to that far-off Victorian age before 'the art, like the art of correspondence, had declined, before the newly invented expedients of a more eager and nervous day, with its telegraphs and telephones and its hideous coloured post cards. We had none of those conveniences, of course, and I used to jot down notes at the close of days that were so full of care and annoyance that they left one too fatigued to write them out, except in a fragmentary way that could net catch or retain their flavour, so that their interest oft-times evaporated overnight. There were incidents that seem casual enough in the retrospect and wholly unrelated, though they were all related to the colossal tragedy that had overwhelmed the world. They were often mere beginnings of smaller tragedies, and I did not always know their *dénouements ;* the thread of them got lest in the amazing skein in which ah events were tangled.

I fend, for instance, under the date of September 7, that as I came downstairs there rose from a chair in the hall a man who made a very solemn military bow, a rather forlorn Belgian in a blue coat with its double row of globular brass buttons, the light blue breeches, and the little *bonnet de police* that proclaimed him an officer of the Belgian Lancers.

In the hall, likewise, was a young German officer in a grey uniform, with an enormous cartridge-belt terribly filled with cartridges, and in its holster a small revolver — rather inadequate, it seemed to me, for all the desperate deeds those cartridges portended. This German was Dr. Georg Berghausen, a somewhat too affable young man, the medical officer who has already appeared on the lurid scene of Louvain. When I asked him to enter my room he said he had come to arrange an exchange of prisoners. Then he thrust his head out of the door and called loudly *"Mon camarade ! "* and the Belgian came in and was introduced as Baron de Menten de Horne, whom Berghausen said he should like to exchange for a certain German officer, then a prisoner in Antwerp.

The German, with a gesture that bespoke the most generous and flattering confidence in my integrity, then withdrew and left me with the Belgian, who told me his story. Near Louvain he had been sent out to make a reconnaissance, but was cut off and found himself with only a non-commissioned officer and a trumpeter, surrounded by two hundred Germans ; the noncommissioned officer was killed but the Baron and the trumpeter crawled away on their hands and knees and hid in a field of asparagus. Lying there in the soft, feathery bushes of asparagus, de Menten and the trumpeter saw, not far off, a peasant, who held up two fingers and then pointed to the place where they were hiding, and they knew that their position had been betrayed to the German soldiers. Thus they were made prisoners and taken to the château of Steenbeck, the residence of M. Maurice Despret, which had been taken by the Germans, and there de Menten had been confined in a small room guarded by two sentinels. Then Berghausen had appeared and brought him to Brussels, to be exchanged, as he was told. I was touched by his plight

and wished to help him, but a transfer of prisoners seemed to me to be a military matter with which I should not be concerned.

I heard no more of the officer in the Lancers for four days, and then another German officer asked me if I could pot arrange an exchange for him ; he wished me to write a letter which de Menten could bear to Antwerp — a journey which, he said, the German authorities would be glad to facilitate for him. Such solicitude for prisoners was not usual with the Germans, and I began to have certain suspicious, unworthy no doubt, though not of the Baron. I had looked at him and that was enough ; what I had seen was good. Two days passed and Berghausen came again, most affable and delighted with the new Iron Cross he was wearing ; he touched its black-and-white ribbon with pride and reverently said, " *Mon Empereur me l'a donnée"*. I congratulated him, of course, though it seemed to me that the action, however well intentioned, had deprived him of the distinction he had had of being the only German officer ever seen in Brussels who did not wear that decoration. He wished me te write a letter to the Belgian Government which de Menten was to take to Antwerp — a letter setting forth the facts in the affair as I understood them — and he argued so long and so earnestly that I decided not to do so. He went away then, and soon after came de Menten himself and said that he had already been to Antwerp, that Berghausen had conducted him through the lines, and that at Antwerp he had been taken before the whole staff, in the presence of the American Consul, and there had been severely rebuked by his general for having come through the lines at all. The general then ordered him to be blindfolded and returned as a prisoner within the German lines. I felt a great pity for the man ; his distress was so evident, but there seemed to be nothing that I could do to aid him. In the afternoon he returned, in bourgeois this time, and, speaking of the suspicions his own brother officers must have of him, he said that nothing remained for him to do but to go back to the army and to prove his loyalty by being killed in battle ; even though I were to write the letter, he said, he would not carry it to Antwerp. He sat there in the discomfort of a soldier out of uniform in time of war, and while I was wondering what I might say to lighten the load he bore, Berghausen. appeared, and standing before us said, in a formal, proclamatory way :

"*I declare that the Baron de Menten, Captain of Lancers, is now at liberty !*"

He asked me if I would certify to the fact, and I said that of course I should be willing to certify to the fact that he had made such a declaration in my presence.

Berghausen left then, and soon thereafter de Menten. went away. I gave him a letter to Davignon and did not see him again.

I could not follow in all their sequences and to their *dénouements* all of the incidents that were so constantly coming up in our experiences ; they happened as things happen in life and not in books, in that casual, detached, and unrelated way in which life weaves its mysterious romance, without that regard for the unities which enslaves conscious art — largely because, I suppose, the plot of life is of so vast a scope that our vision is not broad enough to embrace it. In romances the war is an incident in the life of the individual ; in life itself the individual is but an incident, and a most insignificant and pitiable incident, of the war, or whatever the calamity may be.

Indeed difficulties came so swiftly one on the other that there was not always time to follow them to their end. If it was not a woman in trouble, there seemed to be always a British Red Cross ambulance to be concerned about. No sooner had the Duchess of Sutherland been

released than three young Englishmen, belonging to the ambulance then serving at the railway station at Schaerbeek, disappeared. We found them eventually where most of those who disappeared during all the time in Belgium were to be found — at the Kommandantur. The three young men, of course, were charged with spying. The Red Cross ambulance had remained in Brussels and had nursed German wounded, under the assurance that they would be respected in accordance with The Hague Conventions. The phrase, however, was beginning to lose some of its magic, and when the three were arrested I tried to arrange not only for their release but for their departure by way of Holland. The German physician who was then at the head of the Red Cross, a Dr. Sturtz, wished to send them to Liège ; when objection was made — Liège being more directly in the route to Germany than to Holland — the Doctor produced a paper written in German and signed by Dr. Wyatt, the young Englishman at the head of the ambulance, in which Wyatt expressed his willingness to go to Liège ; Dr. Sturtz insisted on this. Wyatt was young and in a difficult position ; he could not read German, and not only had he not known what he was signing, but lie had signed it under threats of the Germans. I pointed all this out to the authorities, and argued that it was not only unfair, but in most countries illegal, to hold a man to a signature obtained under duress. The point escaped the German mind, and for the time I could obtain no decision.

The Germans, indeed, had a policy — not unpractical, one must admit — of preferring to discuss the shortcomings of others rather than their own. When I went to see them they always introduced some other disagreeable topic before I could selfishly mention my own ; they always had some complaint at hand, usually about an American or one of our English *protégés*.

At that moment it was the visit of the secretaries of Legation to Louvain that they preferred to discuss. The Germans were beginning to feel the reaction from the monstrous horror they had committed then, though they were slow to realize it as a monstrous horror themselves. One young officer, then tempo rarily in Brussels, remarked to me that the affair was not of great importance, and that he .failed to see why so much ado was being made about it. "*After all*", he said, "*nothing of great value was destroyed*". I spoke of the Library — I had always the vision of the old priest bursting into sobs as he tried to articulate the word *bibliothèque* — but he said that there was little of real importance in that.

I do not mean to write unkindly about that officer ; he was in reality not bad at heart, but always ready and even anxious to do favours and little helpful deeds. He had come to see me in an effort to get Gibson and Poussette and Bulle to testify that they had seen civilians firing at Louvain. Several other officers called on the same mission, among them Von S— who in civil life was a banker, and he was so much a civilian always that even his uniform did not militarize him. He was a man of education, and he felt the stigma that the Louvain atrocity had indelibly placed on his land. The younger military men among them did not have much concern about it; they were forgetting it and sweeping on to others like it. As Talleyrand said : "*On peut militariser un civil, mais on ne peut pas civiliser un militaire.*"

I had not the slightest intention, as have already intimated in the account given of the sack of Louvain, of helping to adduce any such

evidence as the German. authorities were seeking, and when I told them that in any event I should have to ask instructions of the Government at Washington, Von der Lancken, with his knowledge of the ways of diplomatists, trained and untrained, remarked that in making the request I would probably so word it as to suggest the answer desired. I should not wonder if he were correct in that suspicion ; at any rate, the testimony was not forthcoming.

And yet, not all of the visits we received were so prolific in difficulties. When they had not to do with some flagrant and exasperating injustice or some revolting cruelty, they might be of that minor quality that was amusing in a cynical way. A typical instance was that recounted to me by an American lady who conducted a fashionable school for girls in Brussels, and came in alarm one day to ask my advice and protection. One morning in September two young Ger-man officers had appeared at the *pensionnat* and asked if Fräulein Olga von Somebody was there. She had been there as a student, but had not returned that year. Then they demanded her photograph, which the preceptress, very much perplexed and deeply troubled, refused. The officers insisted, forced her to find and produce a picture of Olga — and the young officer snatched it from her hand, tore it into bits, threw the pieces in the lady's face, and stamped out of the house.

Some Frenchman —Talleyrand, I suppose, since all the witty French sayings of the last century are attributed to him — has said of some deed that had been referred to as a crime, "*It is worse than a crime, it is an indelicacy*". Thus we had the story of a certain châtelaine near Brussels who tried to be polite to the German general who had quartered himself and his staff in her château ; thinking to make the best of it, she asked the general :

"*At what time will you have dinner ?*"

"*Never mind about that*", he said, "*I have already given orders*."

And its pendant, that of the *gouvernante* in a château in the Ardennes where German officers were quartered. One morning an officer drew his revolver and said to the *gouvernante* :

"I have a notion to shoot you."

"*Why ?*" she asked.

"*Oh, simply because I feel like shooting someone today*."

Then she replied calmly :

"*Why don't you shoot yourself ?*"

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.