

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XLIII. Ruined Louvain.

ONE might have the illusion that there was no war in the world — the countryside was so beautiful, the fields so sweet, so lovely, spreading out on either hand, with men and women working in them and peasants peacefully ploughing — had it not been that now and then one met army wagons with cavalry escorts, or sentinels who demanded the *Passierscheins* that had become one of the fundamentally important elements in life. Occasionally one met the great vans that had replaced the railways, filled with people talking and gossiping, exchanging their experiences — somehow recalling Mr. Thomas Hardy's stories of the vans that used to lumber through old Wessex, with their tragic or comic histories. All these were tragic, doubtless, though the faces were not tragic ; indeed, it is strange with what *sang-froid* the people endured the misery of those times. There were, of course, the rude marks of the war in the reins of houses by the roadside or far off across the fields, or in some lovely and abandoned *château* at the end of its long avenue, its white façade blackened and spattered by bullets.

The narrow twisting streets of Louvain, for instance, had ruins on every side, as though an earthquake had shaken down the houses and fire had consumed them all ; within they were burnt black, in some places the walls about to fall. But at the American College, with its old wall and its linden-trees, the old garden with its terraces where strawberries were still ripening in the late September sun, there was a peace almost classic, untouched by the fury that had swept away so much of the town.

A strange silence, indeed, filled the whole city ; amid the ruins that cumbered the streets the people stood about, idle and curious, with sad, solemn faces, and as our motor passed they uncovered in mute salute of the flag that had somehow come to express for them what had been expressed by their own, which they might no longer fly.

The Hôtel de Ville was intact, and workmen mounted on a scaffolding were cleaning the stains from its Gothic façade. Across the street the ruins of the cathedral stood, the lofty nave and transept blackened and charred and filled with rubbish, and the sunlight pouring through the great windows from which the stained glass was broken, and through the wide aperture in the roof through which the great bell had fallen when the tower gave way. The doors had been battered in, the marks of the axes were there on lock and panel, and within on every door, even in the coffers where the treasures of the old pile had been kept the marks of like blows were visible ; and every one of the side chapels had been deliberately burned out, for the thick walls between them, still standing, had resisted the flames. And though nearly a month had passed, the sack of the city was still going steadily on, though in a more orderly and organized manner, for soldiers were bearing forth from the houses great baskets of wine.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.