BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE **1**

Chapter **XLIV**. Our daily bread.

WHEN we got home that September evening from Louvain, Gibson and de Leval were waiting for me to say that during my absence word had come that there was at last no more four in Brussels. The situation as regards food had Brown more and more desperate, and now it had come to be acute. It was not a surprise ; ten days before we had made the first effort to meet the situation that was now upon us. Mr. Daniel Heineman, the American who had so efficiently organized the relief for the stranded Americans, had been in to confer with me, and — on September 12 to be exact, since the date is not without its interest — he and Mr. Millard K. Shaler, an American engineer resident in Brussels, had gone to see certain men in the German Administration to discuss possible means of providing food. A simple fact will express the whole difficulty of the situation. In normal times of peace Belgium must import from four-fifths to five-sixths of her total food-supply ; the most densely populated, the most intensively cultivated country in the world, this was the best she could do. Now, ravaged by war, with crops ungathered and industry dead, the need was even greater, and the ports of entry were closed by England on the sea. We had heard, however, that there were certain stores of wheat in Antwerp belonging to the Belgian Government, and Davignon, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, had contrived to get a letter through ta me saying that the wheat, or a part of it, would be sent through to Brussels if we could contrive the means. The excellent Heineman had been busily at work, and he assured us that the Pasha would consent to its coming in. Heineman, indeed, could work marvels. He had large financial interests in several countries, Germany among them ; he could speak German, and he could be addressed as a Herr Doktor himself, if necessary, since he had a degree of Ph.D., from a German university. He was a member of the *Comité Central d'Alimentation et Secours*, and he had worked untiringly to aid in that great work of charity.

There may have been in Brussels men in and out of that committee who suspected what a task it would be to feed Belgium, but I doubt if any one fully realized it ; I am sure that I did not. In my house breakfast was brought up punctually, luncheon and tea and dinner were announced at the usual hours ; that was the least of my concerns. I had never known what it was to be hungry in all my life — or perhaps I would better say, never known what it was to go hungry ; the appetite of the golf-links, of course, was but one of the many pleasures of the experience, and there was a waiting table in the country club. The words of the prayer, "*Give us this day our daily bread*", had never had for me, I fear, any other than a poetic meaning. My own attitude toward food was as insouciant as that of a lap-dog for whom nourishment is provided, though it was not as gracious or as grateful as that of a lap-dog, since I often grumbled if it were not prepared to my taste. I speak of my own attitude in this respect as a confession and as an illustration too, since it was the attitude of nearly every one that I knew, on both sides of the Atlantic. The war was soon to being us face to face with great elementary facts of human existence ; we were, as Kitchener said, to taste the salt of life. The old prayer was to acquire significance, it was to become the principal

concern of each moment, not only for us, but vicariously fôr seven millions, and ultimately for ten millions of people. So that now I never see any one idly crumbling bread at dinner without a shock.

But we had no notion then, and well it was that we had not ; if we had had, we never could have accomplished what we did — the monstrous task would have appalled us. Just then, that autumn evening, it meant merely that there were certain stores of wheat in Antwerp ; there were armies between us and Antwerp, but if we could get the wheat through all would go well — for those anonymous poor who were hungry. As for our being hungry, the thought was inconceivable I went, then, at once, that evening, to see von der Lancken. The question was how to communicate with the Belgian Government in the beleaguered City. Sitting there in that apartment in the Ministère de l'Agriculture, we talked across his great table. The question, as I say, was to communicate with Antwerp.

"*It is simple*", said Lancken.

"*How ?*"

"*Max can communicate with Antwerp*", he replied quietly.

"*How ?*" I repeated.

There was a shrug of the shoulders in the gilt epaulettes and the trace of a meaning smile ... But such a request to Max ? No, not that. Max's means of communication were, then, the important thing And I came away.

I saw von der Lancken the next morning ; he still thought that I should ask Max to communicate ; there were rumours of a secret telephone of some sort. But I refused to ask Max. The next afternoon I suggested that, inasmuch as we seemed unable to agree on Max, we compromise on Gibson and send him to Antwerp he knew the way ; and during several days the Baron and I tossed the two names back and forth with the most amiable persistence, and finally he agreed to Gibson's going. The journey as planned this time was not dangerous. The German army was investing Antwerp too closely and the battle was raging too fiercely for him to go directly ; he would have to turn, as it were, the German right flank from the rear—a thing that your military man would say could not be done—that is, go round by Maestricht into Holland and enter Antwerp from the north. And as he was going this way, my wife and I decided that it was best to take advantage of the opportunity and send out our two mothers with him. We had been concerned about them ; there was too ranch danger in the air ; no one ever knew. The recollection of the mother of Madame Poullet, who at eighty years of age had walked at night all the way from Louvain into Brussels, was ever present and too suggestive, and there were always those horrid tales of what happened whenever the Germans were checked anywhere — for Belgium not only suffered from German victories but paid the penalty of Allied victories too. We would be easier with the dear old ladies away, sad as we were ta see them go. They had been so fine, so brave, never a word of fear ; playing cards in their room, keeping away from the windows lest the Gare du Luxembourg (hall a block away) should be blown up by bombs from some aircraft and the pieces fly that way, taking their walks and drives — and, like the Germans, disappointed of their trip to Paris.

And so it was agreed that Gibson should go with them in the motor to The Hague and leave them there while he went to Antwerp to arrange for sending through the wheat, then rejoin them and escort them to London. We asked for the *Passierscheins*.

Brand WITHLOCK

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