

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XLVIII. The summons.

WE would fall asleep at night to the lugubrious booming of those heavy siege-guns that the Austrians had so ostentatiously dragged along the boulevards on their way to Antwerp ; and we would awaken to the same sound in wan mornings of care. Now and then there would be the drumming of those iron heels on the pavement and the exultant music of a military band, adding irony to despair.

"*Ah ! ils sont très gais, ils sont contents !*" said one of the servants one morning bitterly.

The incessant thud and rumble shook the house so that it trembled and rattled the windows in their casements ; and it got on the nerves. The doom of Antwerp was not far away. One evening Baron von der Lancken said that the Germans had again taken Malines and that they could no more be dislodged. Then another day of heavy detonations, and another and another. One by one the outer forts were falling, and then one morning the Baron came to say that the bombardment of the city itself was about to begin, and would I be so kind as to say to the Belgian Government that if the Belgians would promise not to use the towers of the cathedral and other monuments for military purposes they, the Germans, would promise not to bombard them ?

"*We do not wish a repetition of the affair of Reims*", Von der Lancken said, "*and we are tired of being called barbarians*".

For the diplomatic representative of a neutral Government it was a delicate question, for we were not to take any action that might have relation to military operations without instructions. The German authorities were most eager that the arrangement be made, and their interesting and original opinion was that this was not a military operation. They knew, certainly, far more than I about military movements, and I could only say to them that if the bombardment of Antwerp was not a military operation I should like them to do me the honour, when they had a real military operation on hand, to let me know.

I was, of course, anxious to aid in sparing those monuments and yet, so readily does doubt poison even the most credulous mind in a world where agreements had a way of transmuting themselves into *chiffons de papier*, that I was a prey to unworthy suspicions, and so sent a dispatch to Washington saying that if the Government desired, Gibson, then at Antwerp, could be instructed to bring the indications of the buildings back to Brussels.

Then one morning — it was October 6 ; we were getting off the English nurses, 120 of them, that day, and the doctors as well, including Wyatt, for all of which we were duly grateful — came Hermancito, always a very mine of gossip, and told me that the presence of military attachés proved that the Kaiser was in Belgium, perhaps in Brussels. Antwerp was to fall on the morrow ; the city had been summoned to surrender, and the time had expired at six o'clock that very day. The news spread abroad, in the way it used to do in

those dumb days without a Press. The city settled under a sodden melancholy ; as the troops marched down the streets men stood on the corners and watched them in despair.

The next morning — Wednesday, October 7 — Villalobar being at my house, at ten o'clock the Baron von der Lancken and a Colonel von Leipsig arrived ; they came to ask us to inform the Government at Antwerp of the 'Germans' intention to bombard the city unless they surrendered. They came officially, wearing their swords and bearing official documents — The Hague Conventions, no less, or what was left of them, and on these they squarely placed themselves. Article 26 was the rock that yet projected from the welter of chaos about us ; they said that according to Article 26 it was their duty to use all means to notify the town, and inasmuch as the Belgians refused to receive any *parlementaires*, they had to have recourse to us. Curiously and luckily, almost at that very moment I had a dispatch from Washington about the preservation of historic monuments at Antwerp. It had all been arranged nicely, and we set to work on a letter citing the premonitory Article 26 and communicating to the local authorities at Antwerp the request made to us by the Germans. We decided finally to send the letter by Señor Sorela, Villalobar's white-bearded Naval *Attaché*. He was to go in my motor, with Adrien — one of our chauffeurs — to drive him and Baron von der Lancken to see him safely through the lines. I wrote a letter to Davignon and one to our Consul-General, M. Diederich, setting forth the facts ; and Colonel Sorela departed in state under the Spanish and American flags, with a white flag to use at the lines.

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