

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter L. "*Antwerp has fallen !*"

THERE was no sound of firing the next day, and we had grown so used to the sound that the stillness left us vaguely uneasy, as though some normal thing were missing : we were like the women to whom Villalobar gave refuge in his Legation during the bombardment at Lisbon at the time of the revolution ; at every report of the cannon they screamed, until he had them sent to the cellar, and then, in a little while, they came up to complain that they could no longer hear the guns. It was a strange, silent, portentous day. In the afternoon Madame Davignon came to inquire after the health of her husband : "*He was well, was he not ? And safe, was he not ?*" And I did not have the heart to tell her that as a result of his responsibilities and perplexities and worries he had just had a stroke of apoplexy.

The German Headquarters was deserted ; for once they were not working there. There was an unwonted air of sombre quiet, as though life and its affairs were in suspense ; no one was to be seen until Conrad, the good-natured, serviceable, kindly clerk, saw me and said :

"*Anvers est tombé*", and he added diplomatically, "*officieusement.*"

I went back to the Legation ; de Leval was there.

"*Antwerp has fallen*", he said. He said no more, too much depressed to comment on the fact.

Later in the evening came Madame W—, lovely in her mourning.

"*Anvers est tombé ! Je suis tout à fait ruinée !*" she said. She had large factories in and near Antwerp, and German soldiers, she had heard, were taking away all they contained, though later I was able to save something for her.

And then came Villalobar with a long face, and the same note. Antwerp fallen ! The news was not only all over town, it was all over the world, for he had had a telegram from Madrid.

Another caller arrived, M. J—, a Brussels lawyer.

"*Is it true that Antwerp has fallen ?*" he demanded. "*Yes*", I said.

And then a curious phenomenon occurred — an eccentric reaction of human nerves to a long-dreaded catastrophe at last arrived. He grew instantly livid with rage, his eyes blazed, he advanced with clenched fists.

"*How dare you !*", he said. "*How dare you_ tell me that ! It is not true ! It is not true !*"

He was furious, indignant, as though I had insulted him wantonly, impiously sullied some point of honour.

"It is impossible ! It is impossible ! Those forts were built to be impregnable ! Nothing could overthrow them ! Not, the Germans, not any one !" And he sank forward on to my table and beat it convulsively with his fists.

Down the long corridor there were voices and, strange in that moment, the gay sound of women's laughter. Denys was there — Denys of the Belgian Foreign Office. *"What is the news ?"* I heard him ask. *"Tombé!"* said a voice. The laughter ceased ; there was a hush, then silence.

Gibson came. He had seen the Germans ; they had told him, and added : *"And now push the Belgian Government into the sea."*

I had one more visitor that evening quite late — Von S— a German officer. He came in from the field, cold and wet and weary. He sat down in a chair before the little open fire that burned in my room. He threw back his greyish-blue overcoat, took off his cap, revealing his grey hair, arranged his long sabre between his knees, and was for a moment silent. He was a distinguished man in appearance, and not all the mire and dirt of war could bide a certain elegance that was implicit in his attire. He had lived long years in London, long years in France ; he spoke all the European languages as well as he spoke German. He sat there a moment and stretched out a white hand toward the grateful blaze ; a gold bracelet that he wore glistened in its warm light. Then, suddenly, with an impulsive gesture, as though the fire had burned his fingers, he withdrew his hand, passed it wearily over his face, and then covered his eyes with his palm.

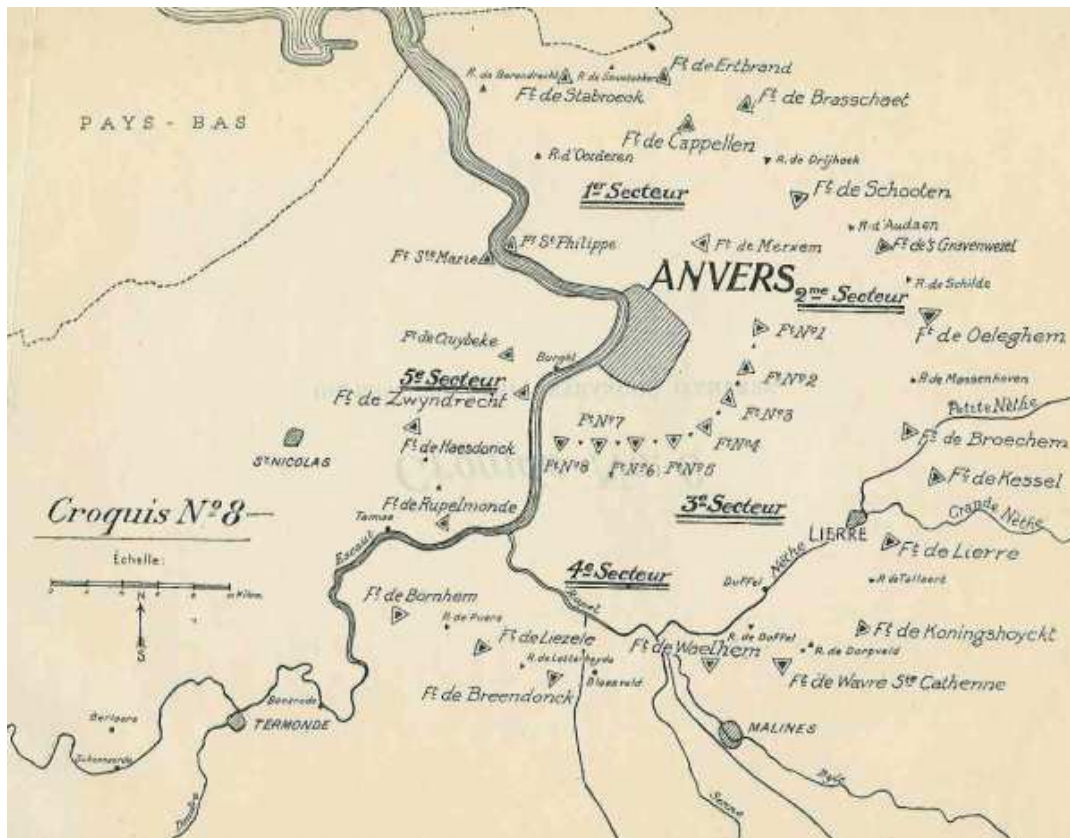
"Are you tired ?" I asked.

He took away his hand and looked up ; looked at me with an expression in his blue eyes that was terrible to see. He did not answer my question ; perhaps he had not heard it.

"This thing", he began, *"this thing of standing old peasants up against the wall — well, it's no business for a gentleman !"*

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.



Concernant les forts d'Anvers, vous pouvez consulter

http://www.sambre-marne-yser.be/article=6.php3?id_article=77