

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LIII. REFLECTIONS.

OUR envoys were off in a motor-car at dawn, going by way of Rosendael, and if we were not quite sure of their success we had, at least, the hope of it to hold out as comfort to those who continued to come daily to the Legation not only with appeals for bread, but with their sad tales of personal trouble and distress.

There was among the number an old *curé*, threatened with seizure as a hostage ; another was a scientist who had been in South Africa when the war broke out and had just arrived home, to find his house closed and his wife gone, no one knew where. There was an old country doctor — I see him still ; he wore a black frock-coat, black gloves, and a tall bat, in the old formal professional style. His son had been arrested as a spy ; the boy, out of mere foolish curiosity, had taken notes near Ghent of passing regiments. The doctor could not stay to hear his boy's fate, he had to hurry back because the sick in his part of the country were without attendance. He was heart-broken ; his boy was at the Kommandantur, and every time the old father mentioned the number of the cell he broke out into fresh sobs.

And there was the teacher of diction, like most teachers, without pupils ; little use just then for learning in the world, and culture, as we understand it, no longer à *la mode* — the only audible voice, indeed, the voice of cannon. There was the nervous French countess who fluttered continually between the Spanish Legation and the American Legation, to be reassured that Brussels was not to be bombarded ; and the old gentleman interested in a Christian mission—and incidentally in a glassworks.

M. Lemonnier, the *Bourgmestre faisant fonctions*, was having the first of those troubles he was to bear so patiently and so bravely until at last he was sent as a prisoner to Germany. He had been ordered to furnish a list of Belgian youths fiable to military service, that is, the *Garde Civique*, and when he refused the general into whose presence he had been haled raged like a lion, throwing his *képi* and his gloves on the floor. Poor Lemonnier was between two fires — Germans before, local politicians behind.

"You know how it is with them", he said. "No matter what I do, they could have done better. *Il y en a toujours un qui est plus pur, un qui est plus royaliste que le roi.*"

I know that old and contemptible trick of human nature, and pitied the poor man, but the affair turned out well enough ; the Germans gave assurances that the members of the Guard would not be troubled and the list was furnished.

But the life of the city was being somehow resumed. The shops were reopening ; there were pedlars in the streets, men shuffling along the Boulevard Anspach offering Griffon puppies for sale ; in the window-ledge around the Grand' Place roasted chestnuts were exposed, and women from carts sold fresh walnuts — signs of autumn all, like the brown and russet in the Bois and the leaves of Venetian gold fluttering slowly down.

" *Comme elles tombent bien !* " as Cyrano said.

But the aspect of the city was changed by the presence of the invaders : officers swanking along the boulevards, their grey mantles bellying in the autumn wind ; a German band playing in front of the Bourse ; the Iron Cross on every hand, and stolid soldiers everywhere. Occasionally they would stop and try to play with some passing baby — whose mother would draw it away in fear and loathing.

The soldiers seemed to be inoffensive enough, though now and then I had trouble in passing sentinels at one or other of the Ministries, and when I asked Lancken why the sentinels had been so ugly he said that it was because they had mistaken me for an Englishman.

There were disadvantages just then in being mistaken for an Englishman, as Stevens learned — young Stevens the artist, about whom we had been worrying ever since he left with Gerbeault in August. He returned to Brussels in October after terrible adventures as a prisoner within the German lines. The Germans took him for an Englishman too, although he spoke with a perfect Middle-West accent ; he was tried twice and condemned to death, and finally, when his grave was dug and he was standing before it, he was released.

We knew little of what was going on "*outside*", as we were already beginning to call the world without. The *Times* newspaper was selling for 200 francs a copy, and we heard of a restaurant-keeper who bought one at that price and rented it, to be read at his establishment, to his customers at ten francs the perusal, making a good profit.

It was hard to escape the awful depression that is perhaps the worst part of war, even by reading Cyrano or by watching the sunset from the Rue des Colonies, the Montagne du Parc and the roof of the Maison du Roi against the rosy sky, the Hôtel de Ville with its steeple floating as in a golden mist shot through with fire, and St. Michael high in the grey clouds that came down half-way across the western sky. How lovely was Brussels in those days, and how sad — like a beautiful woman in tears ! What would be the effect of such depression on children born and reared under its influence ? What darkling influence would it have on the mentality of the next generation of men ?

One grey, dismal Sunday, a day of terrible depression, in the afternoon I had a note from a *religieuse*, a sister of some contemplative order of nuns who lived in a convent in the Rue de la Source. She was an American, of a family whose name is famous in our history, and she was greatly alarmed. I went there, was shown into a little room bare save for a few religious prints on the wall, and sat down before an iron grill that bristled with spikes. There was another iron grill behind this, and after ten minutes there was a rattling of keys, a tumbling of bolts, and then a dim light behind a curtain ; finally the curtain was withdrawn, revealing two nuns — one the sister of whom I have spoken, and the other the reverend mother superior. They were full of all the rumours that had been current in Brussels ; thought the convent would be bombarded, wished to place themselves under my protection. I told them they might do so, that they might consider themselves under my protection at once ; assured them that the convent would not be bombarded, that nothing could befall them, and left the simple souls quite happy.

" *Qu'est-ce que nous pouvons faire pour vous, tellement nous sommes reconnaissantes ?*" they asked. The American had almost forgotten her English.

" *Souvenez-vous de moi dans vos prières,*" I replied.

And I went home and read the beautiful last letter in Golden Rule Jones's book — so simple, so clear, like the Scriptures ; and I thought how far we were from the realization of his dream. Of what use all the effort, ail the study and toil to bring sweetness and light into the world, if, after ail, this drilling foolery, as Mr. Wells called it, were to prevail ; if, in the end, the standard of life, the standard of achievement, in a nation were to be that German one which, had it been practised by an individual in a Western mining camp would have caused him to be tarred and feathered and ridden out on a rail ?

A scene comes back to me out of the dismal October. We were at St.-Jacques-sur-Caudenberg for the solemn requiem High Mass sung for the repose of the soul of the late King Carlos of Rumania. The old church was in heavy black, as on the fast occasion when I had been there, that other rainy day early in the summer when a Mass was sung for the repose of the soul of the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria — that heir to the Habsburg throne whose murder had made an eternal difference in the life of the world. The difference was marked even in this Mass, for while the words were the same, chanted in a quavering voice, by an ancient, tottering priest, the very atmosphere of the church was changed. There were no brilliant uniforms, no one in the chancel beside the priests and the secretary of the Nunciature ; Mitilineu, the Rumanian *Chargé*, was the chief mourner, and the little remnant of the diplomatic corps assembled on the right of the great catafalque, with the bright little flames of the candies quivering overhead. In front were the Comte de Mérode, Grand Maréchal, and the Comte d'Aerschot, of the King's household, and on the left the Comtesse Hemricourt de Grunne, the Grande Maîtresse of the Court. But yes, there were uniforms after all — those of the German officers over on the right of the church, General von Lüttwitz and the Baron Freys and other officers of the staff, standing rigidly, grasping their great sabres.

But there is another Mass that I recall, on another morning — a mass at Ste.-Gudule, sung for the repose of the soul of a son of a friend. The boy, only nineteen, had been a *brigadier* in the First Regiment of the Guides ; he had been killed in battle, and his mother had gone to fetch his body from under the bridge where it had lain for a week. There was a catafalque on which was laid the Belgian flag, its colours softened by the *crêpe* that was over it. I was listening to the beautiful music when suddenly, there in the radiant aureole of the tall, white, crackling candies, I was smitten by the tear-stained, anguished face of the lad's father. And then I had a kind of rage at those who deliberately make war and bring about all this hideous waste of youth, this wanton cruelty to the aged ... In the midst of the accents of the sweet singing of the choir the old church seemed to say : "*Peace, little man. I have stood here for all these ages and witnessed occupation after occupation ; I was standing here before Columbus went to America. It was then as it is now — men quarrelling and suffering and bowing here at my altars with tear-stained faces. The light fell through these windows as softly then as now : nothing changes, not even man.*"

Brand WITHLOCK (London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919).