

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LX. New Year's day.

I HAD asked that there be no manifestation in America's honour that New Year's Day, for, since assemblages were forbidden, it could only result in embarrassment for the officials of Brussels and difficulties for the people ; the Belgians had understood instantly, and the word had gone out over the city that the demonstration before the Legation was not to take place. And then a strange thing happened. In the morning, there before the door of the Legation were two or three officers of the Brussels police in their blue uniforms, smart *képis*, great blue capes, white gloves, and their straight swords. And there on a table in the hall was a blank book, bound handsomely in morocco, lying open at the 'first of its white pages, with the inscription "*1^{er} janvier 1915*". When I asked Gustave about it he smiled and shook his head discreetly, and when I went out for a walk the *agents de police* merely raised their white-gloved hands in salute.

And then, all day long, the people came quietly down the Rue de Trèves in pairs or in little groups, a constant procession. Those of the Quartier Léopold were in formal dress, frock-coats and high hats ; the others were *endimanchés*, wearing little American flags as *bouttonnières*, some of them buttons with portraits of the President or of his Minister at Brussels. They came, signed their names in the book, left their cards, and went away, lifting their high hats without a word. Those that had not time to sign left their cards ; the little latch in the street door was clicking all day long. There were all sorts of cards : the engraved cards of princes and noblemen, bearing the names of old families ; there were cards of tradespeople, and even bits of cardboard on which *blanchisseuses* had traced their names. And on the cards were written all sorts of sentiments : the formal "*p.f.*" (*pour féliciter*) or "*Félicitations et remerciements*" — expressions of gratitude in all possible ways ; now and then, in some honest workman's hand, in Flemish, the simple, touching word "*Dank*". All day long the silent procession streamed by, all day long the latch in the street door clicked, and by night the book was filled with names and there were whole baskets full of cards, literally thousands of them.

There were letters too, and flowers — great bouquets and baskets that filled the whole Legation, turning it into a bower of roses and of those lovely orchids of which Belgium is so prodigal. Late in the night they were still coming, the latch was still clicking, the cards were still falling through that slit in the outer door — a beautiful expression of the gratitude of a whole city, a whole nation, for what America had tried to do for them in their distress.

There were many callers, too. All afternoon the drawing-rooms were filled, all the Americans in town and many English and many Belgians besides, with, of course, Villalobar and the secretaries of Legation and the other Ministers left in Brussels.

And in the midst of the reception a footman brought up the card of a German officer ! I went downstairs, and there was a pale little officer in full uniform — sword and helmet. He came to tell me that his wife wished

to help to re-establish the lace industry in Belgium ; that she would open a shop or a depot, buy the lace from the Belgians and send the lace to America — and he wished me to have the tariff taken off lace ! I could tell him, as an old though somewhat disillusioned, if not discouraged free-trader, that the American Congress would hardly go as far as he wished in aiding his industry, however tender its infancy. I went back upstairs, and the Belgians had all fled as from a pestilence — not one was left ; and Villalobar, standing there with that humorous expression of his, heaved a heavy sigh and said : "*We are saved !*"

That New Year's Day, so full of meaning for us at the Legation because of the outpouring of a nation's heart in gratitude, produced the curious amelioration that high days and holidays everywhere bring to men. In one of those currents of feeling that so mysteriously make themselves felt in whole populations there was something like a breath of fresh vital air ; because it was a new year there was a new hope, a sensation of relief that an old and evil year was dead. That amazing phenomenon, which found its springs in the deep wells of the Belgian nature, that everlasting and never-tiring resiliency, lifted them up, and they felt that better times were ahead ; with the spring the Allies would advance, the Germans would go, the war would end. The feeling pervaded all classes. And then an event occurred that sent a thrill of patriotism pulsing through every heart, an event that was the expression of a single great man — one of those pre-eminent personalities, those moral heroes, that somehow miraculously appear upon the earth in times of great stress and trial and sum up and express their people and their times. Belgium, for so small a nation, was rich in two such transcendent characters : King Albert was one, then at that moment on the flooded reaches of the Yser, the symbol of a nation's unsullied honour and of his people's force and resistance; and now, suddenly, a second was revealed who resumed in his great character the moral courage of his race. On Christmas Day he had sat in his austere study in the grey old ecclesiastical palace in Malines, its roof fallen in from the shells that had rained upon it during the fierce battles of August and September, penning in sorrow, but in the lofty valiance of an indomitable will, a pastoral letter to his bruised and scattered and tortured flock. It was that great prince of the Church, the power and clarity of whose intellect, like the rigid austerity of his almost monastic life, recalled the early fathers of Christianity — Désiré Joseph, Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines. He was proud of being a Walloon. He had been born in Braine-l'Alleud, there near the field of Waterloo, in 1851 ; he had been educated at Louvain, in the same university that had given Father Damien to history ; and now he was the Primate of Belgium. He was called to Rome at the outbreak of the war to render the last homages to the late Pius X, and to participate in the election of the new Pope ; he had returned to Belgium to find his land laid waste by the sword, his Alma Mater destroyed, his see-city in ruins, and the roof of his own palace open to the sky. And during the months of that autumn and early winter he had been quietly visiting the devastated pastures of his flock.

I had not seen him at that time ; it was not until weeks after that New Year's Day that I had the privilege of making his acquaintance, and the ultimate honour of claiming him among my friends. He came, in the simplicity that was an integral element of his greatness, one February morning to express his gratitude for what America had done for his nation, and to give me an autographed copy of his *Pastoral*, which at that moment had somehow got out of Belgium and gone around the world and made him famous.

He entered, advanced, tall and strong and spare, in the long black *soutane* with the red piping and the sash, not with the stately, measured

pace that one associates with the red hat, but with long, quick strides, kicking out with impatience the skirt of his *soutane* before him as he walked, as though it impeded his movements. He was impressive in his great height and he bent slightly forward with an effect of swooping on, like an avenging justice. But his hand was outheld, and in his mobile countenance and kindly eyes there was a smile, as of sweetness and light, that illumined the long, lean visage.

When he had laid off the low black beaver hat, with its cord and tassels of red and gold, and seated himself in one of the Government's ugly leather chairs, he adjusted the little red *calotte* that covered the poll whereon the grey hair had long been thinning, drew off his red gloves, and as he sat his long fingers played for an instant with the gold pectoral cross and chain that hung before him, then found a pair of common steel rimmed eyeglasses and played with them instead. The detail seemed to lie expressive of the utter simplicity of the man in all that concerned him personally ; for if in all that pertained to his high office as a prince of the Church he was correct, punctilious even, in all purely personal ways he was as simple, as unpretentious, as modest as one of those rugged primeval natures to which one instantly compared him. His hands were large and powerful and of the weathered aspect of his face. It was a countenance full of serene light, with little of the typically ecclesiastical about it : a high brow, a long nose, Jean cheeks, strong jaw, and a large mobile mouth, humorous and sensitive — the mouth of the orator, with thin lips that could close in impenetrable silence. The eyes were blue, and they twinkled with a lively intelligence and kindly humour. Perhaps I could do no better, in the effort to give some impression of him, than to say that had it not been for those touches of red in his black garb he would have recalled some tall, gaunt, simple, affectionate Irish priest, whose life was passed in obscure toil among the poor, in humble homes, amid lowly lives whose every care and preoccupation he knew and sympathized with, going about at night alone in all weathers, unsparing of himself, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, forgetting to eat, accustomed to long, weary vigils, and of an independence that needed none of the reliances or approvals of this earth.

There was something primal, original about him, a man out of the people yet above them — one of those rare and lofty personalities who give the common man hope because they are like him and yet better, greater than he, who create in him new aspirations and, higher hopes because they demonstrate in their sufficient selves what a common man may become if only he have the will by devotion, by abnegation, by sacrifice, and by love. In his mere presence one felt all little things shrivel up, and wondered why small annoyances should fret and irritate ; and when he had gone the impalpable influences of his lofty spirit hung for hours about one in the air. He was the incarnation of the principle that is the antithesis of that upon which the nation that had overrun his country is founded, and because of this, all its armies and all its guns and bayonets and Kommandanturs were powerless ; its minions, who had not hesitated to destroy whole cities and communities, did not dare even so much as to touch a hair of his head. Ultimate history, written at that hour when mankind shall have emerged out of the darkness and savagery of these times into the light of those better days that must come if there is any meaning or order in the universe, will celebrate the astonishing coincidence that, in the little nation which the most ruthless power of all times chose as the first and most tragic of its many victims, there was a man whose personality, alone and of itself, proved the superiority of moral over physical force.

The visit with which the Cardinal honoured me that February morning was coincidental with the hour when, in his long struggle with the German authorities, he had challenged them to submit to an impartial tribunal their evidence concerning the atrocities ; he had publicly proposed a court to be composed of three German and three Belgian judges, to be presided over by the American Minister at Brussels. The suggestion had not as yet been acted upon, and I thought from the twinkle in his eyes that morning that he had not much hope that it ever would be.

That, however, was in February, six weeks after the incident of the pastoral letter. We had no sooner learned of that letter than we heard that the Cardinal had been arrested. The news spread through Brussels on a Monday morning. The letter, written at Christmas, had been appointed to be read in all the churches on the first Sunday in January, and that was done. No synopsis of the letter could give any notion of its strength, its dauntless courage, its serene and lofty spirit. It breathed patriotism, and yet it counselled patience and even obedience to the authorities. But His Eminence made it plain that the authorities then in the land were not there by right, and that their authority was but passing and temporary, and that they were to be obeyed only in their efforts to execute the laws of the country as an occupying Power. And it closed in a strain of great eloquence and great sorrow — a strain that resumed all the anguish of his people and his land. Even in translation it loses little of its force.

"I realize better than any one, perhaps, what our poor country has suffered", he wrote ; "and no Belgian will doubt, I hope, that my citizen's and cardinal's soul has been tortured by the thought of all these afflictions. The last four months seem to have been a century.

"By thousands our brave ones have been slaughtered ; wives and mothers weep for the absent they will never see again ; homes are broken up ; misery is spreading and anguish is poignant. At Malines, at Antwerp, I have known the population of two large cities, to be subjected, one during six hours and the other during thirty-four, to a continuous bombardment and to have been in the throes of death. I have visited the most devastated regions of my diocese — Duffel, Lierre, Berlaer, St.-Rombaut, Konings-Hoyckt, Mortsel, Waelhem, Muysen, Wavre-Ste.-Catherine, Wavre-Notre-Dame, Sempst, Weerde, Eppenheim, Hofstade, Elewyt, Rymenam, Boortmeerbeek, Wespelaer, Haecht, Werchter-Wackerzeel, Rotselaer, Tremeloo, Louvain, and the suburban agglomerations [of Malines] ; Blauwput, Kessel-Loo, Boven-Loo, Linden, Herent, Thildonck, Bueken, Relst, Aerschot, Wesemael, Hersselst, Diest, Schaffen, Molenstede, Rillaer, Gelrode — and what I saw of ruins and ashes exceeds anything I could have imagined. Certain parts of my diocese which I have not yet had time to visit — i.e. Haekendover, Roosbeck, Boutersem, Budingen, Neer-Linter, Ottignies, Mousty, Wavre, Beyghem, Capelle-au-Bois, Humbeek, Blaeveld — experienced the same ravages. Churches, schools, asylums, hospitals, convents, in considerable numbers, are almost entirely destroyed or in ruins. Entire villages have practically disappeared. At Werchter-Wackerzeel, for instance, out of 380 homes 130 remain ; at Tremeloo, two-thirds of the community has been razed ; at Bueken out of 100 houses 20 are left ; at Schaffen, a village of 200 dwellings, 189 have disappeared ; at Louvain one-third of the town has been destroyed, 1074 buildings have disappeared ; within the city limits, and including the suburbs of Kessel-Loo and Herent and Heverlé, there is a total of 1823 houses burned.

"In that beloved city of Louvain, from which I cannot succeed in detaching my thoughts, the superb collegiate of St. Peter will never recover its splendour ; the old college of St. Ives ; the Institute of Fine Arts of the city ; the commercial and consular school attached to the University ; the venerable 'Halles' or market buildings ; our substantial Library with its collections, its incunabula, its original manuscripts, its archives, the gallery of its illustrious men from the first days of its foundation, portraits of the rectors, chancellors, and famous professors, at the sight of which masters and students of to-day became imbued with traditional nobility of character and went at their work with renewed ardour ; all this accumulation of intellectual, historic, and artistic riches, the fruit of five centuries of toil, everything, has been destroyed.

"Many parishes were deprived of their curate. I hear again the plaintive voice of an old man whom I asked if Mass had been celebrated in his dismantled church the past Sunday.

"It is now two months since we have had a priest", said he. The curate and the vicar were in a concentration camp at Münster, not far from Hanover.

"Thousands of Belgian citizens have thus been deported to German prisons — to Münster, to Celle, to Magdeburg. Münster alone held 3.100 civilian prisoners. History will tell the story of the physical and moral torture they endured.

"Thousands of innocent ones were shot ; I do not possess the sinister necrology, but I know that at Aerschot ninety-one were killed and that there — under the menace of death — their fellow-citizens were compelled to dig the burial-trenches. In the agglomeration of Louvain and near-by communes, one hundred and seventy-six persons — men and women, old men, and women with children at breast, rich and poor, the strong and the weak — were shot down or burned.

"In my diocese alone I know that thirteen priests were executed. One of them, the curate of Gelrode, fell undoubtedly like a martyr. I made a pilgrimage to his tomb, and, surrounded by the flock that he had pastured only yesterday with the zeal of an apostle, I asked him to safeguard from on high his parish, the diocese, and the country.

"We can neither count our dead nor measure the extent of our ruins. What would it be if we undertook to visit the regions of Liège, Namur, Andenne, Dinant, Tamines, Charleroi, and then toward Virton and the valley of the Semois River, all the provinces of Luxemburg toward Termonde, Dixmude, and out two Flanders ?"

The letter was read in all the pulpits, and within a few hours many of the priests in the provinces who had read the letter had been arrested, as well as several priests in Brussels, among them the doyen of the collegiale of Ste.-Gudule. And at six o'clock on Monday morning there were soldiers before the episcopal palace at Malines. The Cardinal was saying Mass in his chapel when a priest came saying that a German officer was waiting, to see him.

"Tell him that I am saying Mass", said the Cardinal.

The priest retired and returned to report that the officer said that the Cardinal must come at once. The Cardinal took off his vestments and went out, and the officer handed him, a letter from General von Bissing covering eight pages and demanding an immediate answer. The Cardinal

explained that since the letter was in German he would need time to reflect ; he would send a reply. But the officer said that he would have to insist that the order be carried out.

"*But I give you my word of honour not to leave my palace*". This would not satisfy the officer ; he would have to remain with him.

"*You mean in the room with me ?*" asked the astonished Cardinal.

The officer, abashed by the glance in the fearless eyes, said that he would wait in the courtyard of the palace. It was raining, and the officer waited all day while His Eminence, in no hurry, prepared his reply. General von Bissing in his letter put six questions to the Cardinal. He began by saying that the Cardinal had presumed too far upon what Bissing was pleased to call their "*personal*" relations, and the Cardinal, replying to this proposition, said that His Excellency had evidently misunderstood, or had not sufficiently understood, their relations, which were not at all personal but wholly official ; aside from this he added — no doubt with a touch of the Walloon sense of humour — their relations were simply those of Christians. The Cardinal said that he was a Belgian, with Belgian sentiments, prejudices, feelings, and loyalty ; that he had written his letter out of those feelings and that he could not retract it ; and he concluded, "*This answer will suffice as an answer equally to all the other five questions.*"

Freiherr von Bissing was not a patient nor always a diplomatic man, and when he read the letter which the officer, after waiting there all day in the rain, brought back to Brussels .in the evening, he might have gone to forcible extremes had not the counsels of Baron von der Lancken prevailed. Lancken motored up to Malines the next morning and waited on the Cardinal. The conversation was long and courteous. The Cardinal insisted that it was unjust to punish his priests for reading a letter that he had prepared, and he refused to retract or to modify the statement in his pastoral, and the incident was assumed to be closed.*

The next day, however, the Governor-General sent an order to the priests of the diocese of Malines in which he said that the Cardinal "*. . . on my representation as to the trouble and irritation caused by his pastoral letter among the population, has declared to me at Malines, verbally and in writing, that he had no intention whatever to provoke such an action and had expected no such result. He had merely tried to convince the population of the necessity of obeying the occupying Power, even in the case of the Belgian patriots who felt internally in opposition with the German administration ! In the event of my fearing any such irritating effect the Cardinal would not persist in desiring on the part of his clergy, and in accordance with the provisions of the conclusion of his pastoral letter, a repetition of its public reading on following Sundays, or that it be any further spread.*

"*Now this hypothesis has arisen, and therefore I repeat my prohibition of January 2 concerning the public reading and propagation of the pastoral letter. I remind the clergy that they will place themselves in opposition to the desire which their Cardinal has expressed to me if they act in opposition to my prohibition.*" *

The clergy were, for a moment, uncertain, but not for long. Monseigneur Evrard, doyen of Brussels, went to Malines, and on his return sent each *curé* a note, which I translate : **

MONSIEUR LE CURÉ,—I have just returned from Malines.

Despite the prohibition received yesterday, H.E. the Cardinal wishes his letter read.

This written prohibition is clever and false.

"Neither verbally nor in writing have I withdrawn any, and I do not now withdraw any, of my former instructions, and I protest against the violence done to the liberty of my pastoral ministry."

That is what the Cardinal *dictated to me*.

He added : *"They have tried everything to make me sign some attenuations to my letter ; I have not signed. Now they seek to separate my clergy from me by preventing them from reading it."*

"I have done my duty ; my clergy must know whether they are going to do theirs."

I beg you to accept, Monsieur le Curé, the homage of my respect.

BRUSSELS, January 9.

E. EVRARD, Doyen.

The curés thereupon read the letter again the following Sunday, and it was not long before the world was reading. It intensified and stiffened that moral resistance which on the part of the Belgians has never weakened or slackened.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* During that discussion this telegram, addressed "Cardinal Mercier, Brussels", came from the Associated Press in America : *"Is it true that you have been arrested and are now a prisoner ?"*

To this telegram the Cardinal prepared a reply, saying : *"Some of my priests have been arrested because of the letter I wrote; others have been menaced with threats of prison and deportation to Germany, while others have been fined. As for me, they have done nothing more than to forbid me to leave my palace."*

The Germans did not send this reply. The next day there came an officer saying that since the incident was closed it was desired that the Cardinal modify the telegram, and he wrote one which, in effect, said : *"You will understand that in the circumstances in which I am placed it is difficult for me to reply to your telegram. Please acknowledge receipt of this."*

But the Cardinal never received a response.

* **GOVERNEMENT GÉNÉRAL DE BELGIQUE**

Section Oa N°. 3796

BRUXELLES, le 7 janvier 1915.

Aux ECCLÉSIASTIQUES DU DIOCESE DE MALINES,

Sur mes représentations au sujet de l'action irritante et troublante de sa lettre pastorale parmi la population, le Cardinal Mercier, à Malines, m'a déclaré par écrit et verbalement qu'il n'avait eu aucunement l'intention de provoquer une telle action et qu'il ne s'attendait pas à tels effets. Il s'était précisément attaché surtout à convaincre la population de la nécessité de l'obéissance à la Puissance occupante, même chez le patriote belge, qui se sentirait intérieurement en opposition avec l'Administration allemande. Au cas où je craindrais des effets irritants, le Cardinal ne persisterait pas à désirer, de la part de son Clergé, et selon les provisions de la conclusion de sa lettre pastorale, la lecture publique réitérée, aux prochains dimanches, et la propagation ultérieure de cette lettre.

Or, cette hypothèse se réalise.

C'est pourquoi je réitère ma défense du 2 janvier de cette année concernant la lecture publique et la propagation de la lettre pastorale. Je fais remarquer aux Ecclésiastiques qu'ils se mettraient dès lors en contradiction avec la volonté que leur Cardinal a exprimée vis-à-vis de moi, s'ils agissaient à l'encontre de ma présente défense.

BARON VON BISSING, *Generalmajor*,

Gouverneur général en Belgique.

** Monsieur le Curé, — Je rentre de Malines.

Malgré l'écrit de défense reçu hier soir, S.E. le Cardinal veut qu'on fasse la lecture de sa lettre.

Cet écrit de défense est habile et faux.

"Ni verbalement ni par écrit, je n'ai rien retiré et je ne retire rien de mes instructions antérieures, et je proteste contre la violence qui est faite à la liberté de mon ministère pastoral."

Voilà ce que le Cardinal *m'a dicté*,

Il a ajouté *"On a tout fait pour me faire signer des atténuations à ma lettre ; je n'ai pas signé. Maintenant on cherche à séparer mon clergé de moi en l'empêchant de lire."*

"J'ai fait mon devoir ; mon clergé doit savoir s'il va faire le sien."

Agréez, Monsieur le Curé, l'hommage de mes respects.

BRUXELLES, le 9 janvier.

E. EVRARD, Doyen.