

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LXVI. Resistance.

YES, this was Germany, after forty-four short years of blood and iron — Germany's iron, and Europe's and, in the end, America's blood. For the aims of, modern Germany, the nation founded on the lie of the dispatch of Ems, and the ideals of America, a nation founded on the truth of the Declaration of Philadelphia, could not long abide in a world as small as this had been made by steam and gas and electricity and steel.

Strange, too, as Golden Rule Jones used to say, they are all people, "*just folks*". Occasionally, in those passing troops, if one looked closely one did see fine faces, ruddy old visages crowned with white hair and adorned with majestic beards, something patriarchal and dignified about them. But the goosestep seemed to degrade them. Now and then, too, there was a sad face among them ; they did not all relish the glory of war.

A Belgian once made a curious confession to me. In the early days of the occupation, half mad with hate and hot for revenge, he used to imagine himself some day killing a German soldier ; he said that he did not allow himself to go to the length of forming any such intention, but he used to find a peculiar satisfaction as he strolled along the streets in dramatizing himself in the act of killing one of the men in field-grey. In his walks, playing with this dangerous idea, he would select his victim, say to himself, "*Suppose that I were to decide to kill one of them, which one of them would it be ?*" He would see one, but on coming up, on looking closely, he would say to himself, "*No, not that one ; I couldn't kill him*". He would meet another, but no, he would say, "*I couldn't kill him*". And so on ; it was always thus, always something in each one of them with its human appeal, something that moved him to pity if not to forgiveness, and in this odd psychological experience he never once saw one whom he could have brought himself to slay, never saw the victim of his desperate imagining.

The olden Germany had meant so much that was good and pleasant to think upon — all the various connotations of such names as Beethoven, Mozart, Handel, Wagner, Schiller, and Goethe. There had been Carlyle's vast enthusiasm, too, his translation of Schiller's works and his tremendous book on the Great Frederick. Then the Rhine, the legends, the songs, and all that, and the traditions of 1848, Carl Schurz, Franz Siegel, and their like. All this had passed away. There comes an hour, as Signor Guglielmo Ferrero has said, in the lives of nations as of men, when a choice must be made between moral and material success. Germany had made the choice, and the old Germany was gone, never to return.

But in Belgium resistance was mounting steadily ; not the foolish and impotent resistance of blind force, the *franc-tireur*, the concealed assassin, and the flaming revolt, but, what is so much stronger, so wholly irresistible, baffling to bayonets and *mitrailleuse*, the moral resistance of a whole united people. Belgium had forgotten the old quarrels, the old divisions of politics and race, even those more acerbic differences of religion. The old saying that "*Walloon and Flemish are but given names, the family name is Belgian*", had become a verity, testified by a thousand acts a day. The old social cleavage was not so wide ; men of all ranks worked together. Despite the prohibition, many little patriotic medals were being sold. The

numismatic art is carried further in Belgium than in any country in the world, save France ; the whole history of the land is told in *médailleurs*. There were portraits of the King and Queen ; one of them bore the profile of the King and on the reverse the words "*Belge toujours !*"

Even the children resisted. There is a word, considered highly improper in the French language, which, in the human need for human expression, began to have a tremendous vogue ; a gentleman inadvertently uttered it in the presence of Cardinal Mercier one day, and then instantly begged his pardon. But the sensitive face of the great man lighted up with its sweet, humorous smile, and he said :

" *C'est un mot qui vole de bouche en bouche maintenant, et tout le monde s'en sert.*"

It does not sound so terrible in the English ear. One afternoon a little girl of six years, the daughter of a noble family, was in the tram with her nurse, and seeing a German soldier eating a sausage, remarked :

" *Voilà un cochon qui en mange un autre.*"

Thereupon a German officer who was in the tram leaned over and said to her very seriously and severely that he could speak French, English, Italian, and Spanish, and the child gravely looked up at him and said :

" *Ah ! Comme ça doit être commode pour voyager !*"

When toward the middle of January orders were issued to the effect that all foreigners — except Germans — should report at the École Militaire to be enrolled, and the turn of the English women, for the most part governesses or nurses, came, they did not forget the splendid injunction to "*be British*" and sang "*Rule Britannia !*" in the face of the officers.

There were always "incidents". Down in the Place Sainte-Catherine, near the church of that name, there was a statue of Ferrer, placed there, I believe, by the Socialists, a great bronze figure in the nude, a man holding aloft a flaming torch. Suddenly one day the city authorities received a letter from the Military Governor of Brussels, saying that he had been told that the statue had been "*soiled in a grievous manner by a malevolent hand*". ("*Ainsi qu'on me l'annonce, le monument Ferrer a été sali, en des proportions fâcheuses, par une main malveillante.*") Therefore the city authorities must, at once remove the monument. The city authorities, Catholics, Independents, Liberals, Socialists, unanimously refused ; there was a long correspondence, and excitement for a week ; the local authorities refused to move in the matter, and finally the Germans sent soldiers down to the Place Sainte-Catherine, built a scaffold and took down the bronze statue, while a number of curious Belgians, held at discreet distance by armed guards, looked on in amusement. The statue was removed with the greatest difficulty ; they had to use flaming chemical lamps to melt the poor man's feet in order to get him off his stone, and then the bare pedestal stood there, a much more eloquent monument to liberty of conscience in the world than the statue had ever been. And then the Germans took away the pedestal, and levelled and smoothed over the spot where it had been, and thousands who had never thought of Ferrer gazing on the vacant scene might erect in fancy a monument as high as they pleased.

The Cardinal's pastoral was read Sunday after Sunday in the churches ; and it was in the churches that the patriotic fervour more often broke out. Each Sunday, for instance, at St.-Jacques-sur-Coudenberg, one might witness a beautiful and touching scene if one chanced to be there just at noon. My memory goes back to a cold Sunday in January ; the church was crowded, the portico was filled with a great mass ; men, women, and children standing there, leaning forward, straining their ears as if to catch some sweet and significant sound. I stood there in the cold ; beggars were gathered in the Place Royale waiting for the congregation to come out ; far over the heads of the worshippers I could see the priests at the altar, the elevation of the host, and hear the sound of the sacring-bells. But this was not why all the people were there ; many of them were not Catholics. For still they leaned forward ... Presently the Mass was over and the great organ of the church rolled out its deep tones, and all those faces suddenly lighted up. The organ was playing "*Vers l'Avenir*", one of the patriotic hymns of Belgium. The faces were expectant ; but that was not what the people were waiting for ; that was not then prohibited. And then, from the last chord of "*Vers l'Avenir*", the organ rolled very softly into the strains of "*La Brabançonne*", the proscribed Belgian national air, and an expression of delight, of some sweet and comforting reassurance, instantly informed all, those eager faces. The organ played it once very softly, then played it again peal on peal, in loud, triumphant, stately tones. Every man had uncovered ; I glanced at all those faces, rapt, or drawn with intense emotion, or pathetic with quivering lips, and then all wet with a sudden rain of tears. The strains of "*La Brabançonne*" ceased, and all the agony, all the sorrow, all the patriotic longing and the strange nostalgia from which they suffered was in the instant, agonizing cry of

" *Vive la Belgique !* "

Brand WITHLOCK

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