

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LXVII. Art and war.

I HAVE already in these pages spoken of the phenomenon that occurred when the Germans ordered down the Belgian flag ; everywhere a Belgian flag came down an American flag went up. It was a beautiful tribute to our ideals, and a pretty compliment besides, though not without its embarrassments and its dangers even, for while the Germans said nothing, they did not altogether like it, and when their quick intuition apprehended this the Belgians displayed American flags everywhere, more and more, until Brussels looked as though it had been decorated for the Fourth of July. Le Jeune, the barber, said to me one day, speaking his French slowly with the savoury Brussels accent :

"*I am going to buy me an American flag.*"

"*Why ?*" I asked.

"*To show in my window*", he said.

"*And why do you want to show the American flag in your window ?*"

"*Oh*", he said, "*to rile the Germans (pour embêter les Allemands).*"

Poor Le Jeune ! He was terrible against the Germans, yet for ever hopeful ; he always had the most important information ; the Cossacks were already overrunning Germany, the Allies were coming in the spring ; then he would have his revenge.

The Belgians at that time had rather vague notions of American holidays, though they know them all now, and hearing that February 14 was Valentine's Day they seemed not to have associated it with the amiable saint of that name, but to have concluded that it was the American national holiday. And so on the 13th the city blossomed forth in our colours, our flag was displayed in the windows and the people wore the red, white, and blue ; and another shower of cards fluttered down at the Legation door, with letters and flowers and all sorts of pretty souvenirs, poems, banners — Valentines indeed!

And then they learned that the day was not a national holiday. A week went by, and one morning, to my surprise, the *commissaire de police* came to ask what arrangements we desired him to make for the great festival on Monday.

"*ça sera quelque chose de colossal !*" he exclaimed.

I looked at the calendar ; and what with troubles about the Japanese Legation, and the English colony, and the arrest of British consuls, and the status of our own consuls, and the *ravitaillement*, and a merchant at Liège who had offended the Germans by printing a card with the American flag and the Belgian flag side by side with some appropriate sentiment, and difficulties incident to Germany's reply to the President's notes about the submarine blockade, and all the nervous feeling in the air, I had forgotten that Monday was Washington's birthday.

It was all very touching, and yet it made me nervous, for I feared the possible effect upon the situation, already made difficult enough by the exchange of notes between the American and German Governments, and so I asked Gibson to see M. Lemonnier and to explain the situation to him, and while assuring him of our entire and grateful appreciation, to ask that there be no demonstration. The Burgomaster made a public announcement of my desire * and Washington's birthday dawned — and almost the first thing I saw in the morning was the *commissaire de police*, in white gloves, very fine, with his sword, in front of the Legation, managing the crowds that came up the Rue de Trèves. They made a veritable procession on our side of the street ; there were scores of passers-by gazing on, men and women waiting patiently, to say nothing of German spies. The little leaf in the door kept clicking incessantly, and cards poured in, with masses of flowers, great bouquets knotted with our colours and the Belgian colours entwined, and letters from everybody, even from the little children in the schools. And there were crowds everywhere, along the boulevards and the Avenue Louise, in the brilliant sun, and every one wearing the American colours, and little children playing with American flags. There were German sentinels posted about, too, but that may have been because some prince was passing through, or for some other military reason. And the evening came, and the day ended with a visit from Madame Carton de Wiart and a band of children dressed as Red Indians, very charming !

The day, as we heard later, in the slow way in which news got about Belgium, had not passed off so quietly at Liège. A woman, who it seems had been authorized by the Germans to do so, appeared on the streets selling rosettes of the American colours and little American flags, and was met by a non-commissioned officer, who tore her colours from her and threw them on the ground. And immediately there was almost a riot, and the German troops were ordered out. They cleared the streets, made some arrests, and forbade the wearing of the American colours. Thereupon the Kommandant telephoned to Brussels and was told that he had made a terrible *gaffe* and that it must be atoned at once. Then the Kommandant sent for the Burgomaster, who, poor man, went to the Kommandantur thinking there was more trouble in store for him, but the Kommandant was exceptionally polite, was delighted to see him, called him "*My dear Burgomaster*", and, in a word, fawned where he had frowned. He asked the Burgomaster to return the letter he had written forbidding the wearing of the American flag, told him that he might now wear it, even pinned one on the breast of the Burgomaster himself, and then pinned one on his own breast ; and the officers went out and invited the woman who sold the flags to come in, and all members of the German staff adorned themselves with the American colours.

However, a new decree was issued that evening ordering the entire civil population to go to bed at seven o'clock.

The Collège des Bourgmestre et Échevins of Louvain in a touching resolution declared that : "*In the new quarters of the city, raised from its ruins, three streets or squares shall receive the illustrious names of President Wilson, of General George Washington, and of the American nation.*"

"Not wishing to allow to pass any occasion for manifesting the imperishable gratitude that the whole population of Louvain, victim of an atrocious war, holds for the generous citizens of the great and free nation of the United States of America ; to those who contributed from afar, by their liberality, to relieve the frightful misery, and to those who,

in order still better to devote themselves to this great work of humanity, have not feared to expose themselves to many dangers, and who go so far as even voluntarily to share all the hardships of the destiny of a people martyred for their loyalty to their word of honour, decide solemnly to associate themselves, in the name of the ancient city, formerly so prosperous and overwhelmed for centuries with such precious liberties, with the fête that the noble American nation celebrates on February 22, in memory of the illustrious founder of its independence and its grandeur, General George Washington, who so justly merits the title of 'Father of his Country', the most glorious that a statesman can desire.

"The cradle of a university five hundred years old, and to-day partly ruined like herself, the town of Louvain cannot let pass the opportunity to associate with one of the greatest of soldiers the name of the learned professor, the brilliancy of whose teachings and the great value of whose political works, no less than the firmness of his character and the admirable dignity of his life, have borne him successively to the Presidency of the University of Princeton, to the Governorship of the State of New Jersey, and finally to the Presidency of the United States.

*"And finally, to perpetuate for future generations the testimony of its sentiments of fervent gratitude, the Collège des Bourgmestre et Echevins decides to-day that in the new quarters of the city, raised from its ruins, three streets or squares shall receive the illustrious names of President Wilson, of General George Washington, and of the American nation." ***

There was a graceful and a charming deed, what the French would call a *beau geste*, which was so nearly coincidental with the day that it had the effect of being a part of the celebration. It was the generous and spontaneous impulse of M. Charles Léon Cardon, the distinguished amateur and connoisseur of art in Brussels. In the curious old house where he lives alone, on the Quai au Bois-à-Brûler, near the Marché aux Poissons, there are the results of two generations of art collecting, for M. Cardon's father was a painter and a collector before him. In the elder Cardon's day the Quai au Bois-à-Brûler was a quay indeed, for the canal was there in those times, with its panorama of life and colour, its boats with the softly tinted sails, tempting the brush at any moment. The canal has been filled in, and now there is only a wide and vacant square, with no scenes such as used to charm the eyes of Alfred Stevens and Meissonier and the painters of those days. They were all friends of the elder Cardon, and during the war of 1870 many a Paris painter found a pleasant asylum in Brussels ; some of them lived in the Cardon home, where they could sketch, all day if they wished, those red and green and brown sails that drifted in the changing light along the smooth waters of the old canal. But the old house within remains much as it was, save for the treasures that M. Cardon has added to it. One enters a hall hung in tapestry and feels at once the atmosphere of the house, the furnishings and decorations of which are the result of two lifetimes of devoted, intelligent, and artistic care. It is filled, not crowded, with all sorts of *objets d'art*, paintings, bronzes, sketches, wood-carvings, brass, old furniture, even the doors and wainscotings and ceiling having their individuality and their relation to all the rest, and without confusion of styles. There is a beautiful spiral staircase that leads up to a nobly vaulted room where there are canvases of Rubens, of Van Dyck, and of Rembrandt, and all the masters of the Flemish school.

It was out of all these treasures that M. Cardon chose, as a gift to express the gratitude of Belgium to America, Van Dyck's sketch of his great painting, *Le Manteau de St. Martin*. It is one of the finest canvases from the brush of the master, and in his grand style, glowing with all the colours of his brilliant palette. It had often been sought after by American connoisseurs, and the late J. Pierpont Morgan tried to persuade M. Cardon to part with it. It was one of the most beautiful of the many evidences of the warmth of the Belgian heart, that simple little ceremony at the Legation when M. Cardon came to present it. He had asked M. Lemonnier, the Burgomaster, to make the presentation on behalf of the city of Brussels, and there, in the presence of the *échevins* and of the Legation staff, M. Lemonnier made a graceful little speech, in which, in thus presenting M. Cardon's gift, he compared America to St. Martin, and his own city to the jay in La Fontaine's fable of "*Le Geai qui s'est paré des plumes du Paon*". M. Cardon read a letter as a deed of gift, in which he stipulated that the painting was to be hung in the Art Museum of my own city of Toledo.

M. Cardon is a gentleman of taste and culture and a charming companion. We used to go now and then to the little restaurant "Le Vieux-Sabot" on the quay near his house, he and Devreese the sculptor and I, and later Alfred Madoux, the editor of *L'Étoile Belge*, who found his distraction in painting. He had a great talent for the art, and I used to tell him that it was too bad that he had not been obliged to make his living by practising it. I came eventually to know nearly all the painters and sculptors of Brussels. Victor Gilsoul, who with his vigorous brush and broad manner has rendered the poetry of the Flemish scene in his landscapes, was in his studio in Paris when the war came on and remained there, of course ; Alfred Bastien was in the army, and Jean Gouweloos in Holland. Old Jan Stobbaerts, in some ways the greatest of Belgian painters, died shortly after the war began ; and Strobbant, the oldest of them all — he had seen the revolution of 1830 — died before the war ended, and the fate that had overwhelmed his country was, by a kindly conspiracy of his friends, mercifully kept from him. There was the landscape painter Franz Courtens, the dean of Belgian artists, and Léon Frédéric, who has concentrated in his canvases the pathos of the lives of the peasants, the labourers, and all the poor. There was Franz van Holder, the portrait painter, in whose studio, deep in the charming garden of his home, I spent many pleasant hours. There was Ferdinand Khnopff, delicate enigmatic, indubitably of the school of the Pre-Raphaelites, who lived in a house near the Bois that made one think of Burne-Jones. And there was Henri Thomas, with his pictures of *grisettes* and *cocottes*, painting those terrible subjects of Felicien Rops with the brush of Alfred Stevens. There were Count Jacques de Lalaing, the portraitist and sculptor, and Thomas Vinçotte, the sculptor, who belong to a somewhat earlier day. I spent pleasant moments in the studio of Guillaume Charlier and in the studio of Charles Samuel, the sculptor, who made the De Coster memorial with its figure of *Eulenspiegel* there at the ponds of Ixelles. Then there is Marcette, who has done the Yser and the Belgian littoral in such broad, dashing style ; Géo. Bernier, the animalist, and Van Zevenbergen and Philippe Swyncop, and Henry van Haelen, another portrait painter ; René Janssens, who does such charming interiors, and Lucien Wolles, whose portraits in pastel have such an original and delicate charm ; Joseph François, who lived and painted in the Forêt, and Firmin Baes, whose pictures came to have such a vogue during the war ; Pinot, and C. J. Watelet, the portraitist ; Madame Cailteux, the sculptor, and Jules van den Leene, and Lefebvre and Herman Richir, and L. Titz and Toussaint, A. Crespin, A. Lynen, Ramah, Leempoels, Taelemans, Omer Coppens, G. M. Stevens,

Laermans, Mathieu, and many another. I cannot give them all ; there are about two thousand painters in Brussels, and they produce thirty-eight thousand paintings a year — not all of them, perhaps, great works of art. I used to go to see them, or some of them, in their studios with Gustave van Zype, the critic, or with Fernand Wicheler, the playwright, and we would go now and then to see the paintings that old Jan Stobbaerts at his death had left in the studio of his little house in the Rue Vifquin. Stobbaerts was a great painter, and an interesting, pungent, and original personality, whose genre works for colour and facture will one day have a high rank.

He was born in Antwerp and had studied with de Braeckelaer under the great Lys there. "*Il y avait en Belgique,*" he used to say, speaking French slowly with his broad Flemish accent, "*trois peintres, Lys, de Braeckelaer et moi. Et Lys et de Braeckelaer sont morts.*" He and de Braeckelaer, early in the sixties, had revolted from the schools and gone into the open air to paint, and for the last forty years of his life Stobbaerts sat in the barn-yard of a farm at Woluwe, there on the outskirts of Brussels, painting cows and pigs and the mysterious interiors of stables. But such pigs ! Such cows ! Such colours, such lights and shadows !

But what has painting to do with the German occupation of Belgium ? For the first six months after the war none of the artists could work ; their spirits were overwhelmed, beaten down by the great calamity that had befallen their land. Then slowly, a little at a time, they took up their brushes and went to work again ; perhaps it was the spring that wrought its miracle in their souls. And then, to their disappointment, when the spring came they could not go out of doors in its pursuit, for the Germans would allow no one to sketch out of doors unless he had written permission from the Kommandantur, and that the painters scorned to ask. What, demand of a German Oberleutnant permission to sketch those lovely and familiar scenes of their own Brabant ? Not they ! And so they did their part, spontaneously, in the passive resistance.

One painter, however, a Frenchman, one afternoon, unable to resist the temptation of the country, went out near Uccle and set up his easel. A German sentinel appeared, and the painter thought he had come to take him to the Kommandantur ; but the sentinel stood silently by and over his shoulder watched him paint. Finally the sentinel sighed and said in French:

"I should like to see the interior of a studio once more".

The Frenchman looked up suddenly.

"I am a painter in times of peace", the German said. And ere long they had forgotten that they were enemies, and were mere citizens in the great democracy of art, whose influences, because they are not of this but of another and a better world, pervaded the hearts of the Frenchman and the German ; and when the German said that he would be off duty in a quarter of an hour, and that he should like to visit the Frenchman's studio, the Frenchman promised to wait. They went and talked a long time there in the atmosphere of the studio, littered with sketches and studies and easels and palettes, until the German sighed again and said that it was a shame that there should be a war thus to derange men's plans.

"Yes", replied the Frenchman, *"the Kaiser has much to answer for."*

And then instantly they were back in this world once more, and because they were in this world they began to quarrel and to squabble, and came near to blows.

Brussels, contrary to her experience in the war of 1870, was no refuge for painters during this latest war that Germany forced on the world, despite what the German who was only a sentinel, when he might possibly have been a painter, may have said. There were many who suffered, though in their pride they were ashamed to reveal their suffering, though there was a committee, of which M. Khnopff was the head, to seek them out and, discreetly and without any one knowing, to help them over the road that had grown so rough.

It was not, perhaps, at the first, the very poor who suffered most ; they were as well nourished as they had been in former times, perhaps better, or at least more regularly and scientifically nourished. It was the middle class — or the lower middle class, if one wishes to refine upon the distinctions we make, even when we try not to make them, in our society. It was the clerks and small tradesmen who suffered most, and those of the *pauvres honteux*, who were required, or thought they were required, to keep up a certain appearance. There were many obscure and touching tragedies beneath frock-coats that were growing shabby. It was a greater mystery than ever as to how the other half lived, and as savings and economies were used, the situation of large numbers became desperate. A young man working with one of the departments of the Comité National one day, in the midst of his labours for the very organism that was directing the feeding of the country, fell in a faint from lack of food — a condition he was too proud to confess to those who so gladly would have helped him ; he was of that class who were ashamed to go into the soup line. I recall a pathetic picture drawn for me by an *employé* of a large company. The clerks all brought their lunches to the office to eat at noon, and they had been used to eat there in company ; little by little, one after another of the clerks withdrew at noon and ate his luncheon alone — it was too meagre to be displayed to the others. To meet this most delicate situation two charities were organized, both affiliated with the Comité National but receiving private donations as well ; the one of them was known as "*Les Pauvres Honteux*", the other as "*L'Assistance Discrète*", whose motto was "*Donne, et tais-toi*". Many persons who had never known want, and many too proud to expose their condition. to the world, would have perished had it not been for that society, so efficiently organized.

What they gave was given discreetly ; no one ever knew.

The food imported by the C.R.B. — the "Cey Air Bay", as the Belgians pronounced it — was delivered to the C.N., and by the C.N., through its provincial and communal committees, sold to the communes ; and if the communes had not the means to buy it the C.N. loaned them the money to do so. The communes sold the food through communal stores, and to the poor who had no money they gave food gratis, either in rations or at the *soupes communales*. Those who had money, therefore, had to buy their food as in ordinary times, and they had to pay a profit which paid for the food consumed by the poor. Naturally, there were always certain delicacies of indigenous production which the rich could procure by paying large prices, and there were certain articles that were imported from Holland ; and, so, after all, it was the poor who were at a disadvantage and, as usual, suffered in the end.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

*** PAS DE MANIFESTATION !**

M. Maurice Lemonnier, f.f. de bourgmestre, a adressé la circulaire suivante aux gardes bourgeois de Bruxelles : "*Des manifestations en l'honneur des Etats-Unis d'Amérique se préparent pour lundi prochain, 22 février, jour anniversaire de la naissance de Washington.*"

"Cette date n'est pas celle de la fête nationale des États-Unis, qui se célèbre le 4 juillet.

"M. le Ministre des États-Unis est très touché des sentiments de reconnaissance que nos compatriotes expriment pour son pays, Il *demande instamment* qu'aucune manifestation ne soit organisée dans les circonstances actuelles, et surtout lundi prochain : ni cartes de visite, ni drapeaux, ni insigne américain.

"Je suis convaincu que nos concitoyens voudront bien déférer à ce désir, qu'ils ne manifesteront pas personnellement et déconseilleront toute manifestation. Ils rendront ainsi service aux États-Unis et à la Belgique elle-même." — **La Belgique**, February 22, 1915.

** Voulant ne laisser échapper aucune occasion de manifester la reconnaissance impérissable que toute la population louvaniste, victime d'une guerre atroce, gardera aux généreux citoyens de la grande et libre nation des États-Unis d'Amérique à ceux qui contribuent de loin, par leurs largesses, à soulager son affreuse misère, et à ceux qui, pour mieux se dévouer encore à cette grande oeuvre d'humanité, n'ont pas craint de s'exposer à maints dangers et vont même jusqu'à partager volontairement toutes les rigueurs du sort d'un peuple martyrisé pour la fidélité de sa parole d'honneur décide de s'associer solennellement, au nom de l'antique cité, autrefois si florissante et comblée depuis des siècles de si précieuses libertés, à la fête que la noble nation américaine célèbre le 22 février, en mémoire de l'illustre fondateur de son indépendance et de grandeur, le général George Washington, qui mérita si justement le titre de "*Père de la Patrie*", le plus glorieux qu'un homme d'état puisse envier.

Berceau d'une université cinq fois séculaire et aujourd'hui en partie ruinée comme elle-même, la ville de Louvain ne peut manquer d'associer au souvenir d'un des plus grands capitaines le nom du savant professeur que l'éclat de son enseignement et la haute valeur de ses études politiques, non moins que la fermeté de son caractère et l'admirable dignité de sa vie, portèrent successivement à la présidence de l'université de Princeton, au gouvernement de l'État de New-Jersey, et enfin à la présidence des États-Unis.

Et afin de perpétuer pour les générations futures le témoignage de ces sentiments de gratitude ardente, le Collège des Bourgmestre et Echevins décide aujourd'hui même que, dans les quartiers nouveaux de la cité relevée de ses ruines, trois rues ou places recevront les noms illustres du Président Wilson, de général George Washington et de la nation américaine. — **La Belgique**, February 22, 1915,