

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Chapter IV. Miss Cavell's last night.

Our rector, Mr. Gahan, whose services and sacrifices during all those sad and brutal times were consoling to so many, was the last representative of her own people to see Miss Cavell. He had gone from the Legation to the prison of St.-Gilles, and his wife was among the waiting women on that night at the Legation. Mr. Gahan was with Miss Cavell all that evening, and though they would not let him be with her at the very last, it is the one ameliorating circumstance of the tragedy that the German chaplain was kind.

When Mr. Gahan arrived at the prison that night, Miss Cavell was lying on the narrow cot in her cell ; she arose, drew on a dressing-gown, folded it about her thin form, and received him calmly. She had never expected such an end to the trial, but she was brave and was not afraid to die. The judgment had been read to her that afternoon there in her cell. She had written letters to her mother in England and to certain of her friends, and entrusted them to the German authorities.

She did not complain of her trial ; she had avowed all, she said — and it is one of the saddest, bitterest ironies of the whole tragedy that she seems not to have known that all she had avowed was not sufficient, even under German law, to justify the judgment passed upon her. The German chaplain had been kind and she was

willing for him to be with her at the last, if Mr. Gahan could not be. Life had not been all happy for her, she said, and she was glad to die for her country. Life had been hurried, and she was grateful for those weeks of rest in prison.

She had no hatred for any one, and she had no regrets ; she received the sacrament.

"*Patriotism is not enough*", she said, "*I must have no hatred and no bitterness toward any one.*"

Those, so far as we know, were her last words. She had been told that she would be called at five o'clock.

. . . At six they came and the black van conveyed her and the architect Baucq to the Tir National — where they were shot. Miss Cavell was brave and calm at the last, and she died facing the firing squad — another martyr in the old cause of human liberty.

In the touching report that Mr. Gahan made there is a statement — one of the last that Edith Cavell ever made — which in its exquisite pathos illuminates the whole of that life of stern duty, of human service and martyrdom. *

She said that she was grateful for the six weeks of rest she had just before the end. During those weeks she had read and reflected ; her companions and her solace were her *Bible*, her *Prayer Book* and the *Imitation of Christ*. The notes she made in these books reveal her thoughts in that time and will touch the uttermost depths of any nature nourished in that beautiful faith which is at once so tender and so austere.

The *Prayer Book*, with those laconic entries on its fly-leaf in which she set down the sad and eloquent chronology of her fate, the copy of the Imitation which she had read and marked during those weeks in prison — weeks which, as she so pathetically said, had given her rest and quiet and time to think in a life that had been "*so hurried*" —and the passages noted in her firm hand, all have a deep and appealing pathos.

Just before the end she wrote a number of letters ; she forgot no one. Among the letters that she left was one addressed to the nurses of her school, and there was a message for a girl who was trying to break herself of the morphine habit. Miss Cavell had been trying to help her, and she sent word telling her to be brave, and that if God would permit she would continue to try to help her. It was on October 10, 1915, already doomed to death, that Miss Cavell wrote the letter to her nurses.

The letter was in French, for all the nurses were Belgian girls, and in it, after expressing the sorrow she felt in bidding *adieu* to her pupils, she wrote of the joy she had had in being called on September 17, 1907, to organize at Brussels the first school of graduate nurses in Belgium. At that time nursing had not been made a science in Belgium as it had been in England and in America ; the graduate nurse was unknown. Dr. Depage, one of the leading physicians in Belgium — one of the leading physicians, indeed, in the world — had been anxious that such a school be founded, and it was through his inspiration and that of his wife that the school was made possible. They succeeded in

interesting in the project a number of influential men and women in Brussels, Antwerp, Bruges, Liège and Mons ; a society was formed, and Madame Ernest Solvay gave to the school the sum of 300,000 francs, with which was built the model hospital and training school for nurses that stands now in the Rue de Bruxelles in Uccle. The building had fifty rooms for nurses and thirty rooms for patients, study halls, theatres for operations, and represented the ideas of Dr. Depage, of Madame Depage, and of Miss Cavell. The building was completed in the month of May, 1915 — the very month that Madame Depage went down on the Lusitania, and five months before Miss Cavell was killed — and by the operation of the old ironic rule of life, neither of the two women most concerned ever saw established in it the school they had founded. Miss Cavell, in organizing and establishing this school, encountered very real difficulties in those first years, for, as she says in her letter, "*tout était nouveau dans cette profession pour la Belgique.*" She was evidently a woman of great force of will and of nervous energy ; she had a high intelligence and a profound character, and she succeeded. She established the school, she established nursing in Belgium, and her name and that of Madame Depage, both victims of German frightfulness, will ever be associated with the institution at Brussels.

The letter, with its stern command of emotion and feeling, though all the while deep down there is an affection that somehow fears to express itself, sounds

the profound depths of the Anglo-Saxon nature, and it somehow sums up the character that made a noble and devoted life. When one thinks that there in her cell behind the grim walls of the prison of St.-Gilles this frail woman sat down and in a firm hand, and in a foreign language, almost without a fault, wrote such a letter as this, one understands something of her nature. She gives a glimpse of the difficulties she had to overcome in order to found her school in a peculiarly conservative milieu where all was new and strange. She remembers some of the obscure but tragic conflicts that were going on in the souls of those whom she was directing. She had been a strong disciplinarian, a self-contained nature, which she had completely mastered, sternest always with herself ; and in asking those girls, who may not always have understood her, to forgive what they may have considered her severity, she ends with the touching confession that she loved them more than they knew. **

She left several other letters, one for her mother in England, that were turned over to the German authorities to be delivered, but they were never delivered. Again and again I asked for them, begging to be allowed to send them to England to comfort the aged and sorrowing mother, but they refused to give them over. They said that if I were to send them to England they would be published abroad and another sensation created that would react against the German cause. I was able later to give them my word that they would not be published, that they would remain the sacred secret

of the mother for whom they were intended, but no, they would not give them up — the military would not consent. But the officer in whose keeping they were did have the grace to say to me finally :

"I wish I might give them to you ; they are a very sad and uncomfortable charge for me to keep."

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

*** *Report by Mr. Gahan, British Chaplain in Brussels.***

On Monday evening, the 11th October, I was admitted by special passport from the German authorities to the prison of St.-Gilles, where Miss Edith Cavell had been confined for ten weeks. The final sentence had been given early that afternoon.

To my astonishment and relief I found my friend perfectly calm and resigned. But this could not lessen the tenderness and intensity of feeling on either part during that last interview of almost an hour.

Her first words to me were upon a matter concerning herself personally, but the solemn asseveration which accompanied them was made expressly in the light of God and eternity. She then added that she wished all her friends to know that she willingly gave her life for her country, and said : *"I have no fear nor shrinking; I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me."* She further said : *"I thank God for this ten weeks' quiet before the end."* *"Life has always been hurried and full of difficulty."* *"This time of rest has been a great mercy."* *"They have*

all been very kind to me here. But this I would say, standing as I do in view of God and eternity : I realize that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards any one."

We partook of the Holy Communion together, and she received the Gospel message of consolation with all her heart. At the close of the little service I began to repeat the words "*Abide with me*" and she joined softly in the end.

We sat quietly talking until it was time for me to go. She gave me parting messages for relations and friends. She spoke of her soul's needs at the moment and she received the assurance of God's Word as only the Christian can do.

Then I said "*Good-bye*" and she smiled and said "*We shall meet again.*"

The German military chaplain was with her at the end and afterwards gave her Christian burial. He told me : "*She was brave and bright to the last. She professed her Christian faith and that she was glad to die for her country.*"

"She died like a heroine."

H. Stirling T. Gahan, British Chaplain, Brussels.

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Prison de St. Gilles

Mes chères Nurses :

C'est un moment très triste pour moi quand je vous écris pour vous faire mes adieux. Il me fait rappeler que le 17 septembre a vu la fin des huit ans de

mon direction de l'Ecole. J'étais si heureuse d'être appelée à aider dans l'organisation de l'oeuvre que notre comité venait de fonder. Le 1^{er} octobre de l'année 1907 il n'y avait que 4 jeunes élèves ; maintenant vous êtes déjà nombreuses, en tout entre 50 et 60, je pense, comptant eelles qui sont diplômées et qui ont quittées l'Ecole.

Je vous ai raconté à différents reprises ces premiers jours et les difficultés que nous avons rencontré, jusque dans le choix des mots pour vos heures "de service" et "hors de service," etc. ; tout était nouveau dans la profession pour la Belgique.

Peu à peu un service après l'autre a été établi — les infirmières diplômées pour soigner dans les maisons particulières — les infirmières scolaires — l'hôpital St.-Gilles. Nous avons desservi L'Institut du Dr. Depage, le sanatorium de Buyssingham, le clinique du Dr. Mayer et maintenant beaucoup sont appelées (comme vous serez peut-être plus tard) à soigner les braves blessés de la guerre.

Si cette dernière année notre ouvrage a diminué, la cause se trouve dans le triste temps par lequel nous passons, dans les jours meilleurs notre oeuvre reprendra sa croissance et toute sa puissance pour faire du bien. Si je vous parle du passé c'est parce qu'il est bien quelque fois de s'arrêter pour contempler le chemin que nous avons traversé et pour nous rendre compte de nos erreurs et de notre progrès.

Dans votre belle maison vous aurez plus de malades et vous aurez tout ce qu'il faut pour leur confort et le vôtre.

A mon regret je n'ai pas pu toujours vous parler beaucoup en particulier ; vous savez que j'ai eu assez d'occupations, mais j'espère que vous n'oublierez pas nos causeries du soir. Je vous ai dit que le dévouement vous rendrez un vrai bonheur — et la pensée que vous avez fait devant Dieu et vous-mêmes votre devoir entièrement et de bon coeur sera votre plus grand soutien dans les mauvais moments de la vie et en face de la mort.

Il y a deux ou trois de vous qui rappellerez les petits entretiens que nous avons eu ensemble ; ne les oubliez pas. Etant déjà si loin dans la vie j'ai pu voir peut être plus claire que vous et vous montrer le chemin droit. Un mot encore. Méfiez-vous du médisance ! Puis-je vous dire — aimant votre pays de tout coeur — que c'est la grand faute ici. J'ai vu tant de malheurs depuis ces 8 ans qu'on aurait pu éviter ou amoindrir si on n'avez pas soufflé un petit mot par ci par là, sans peut être mauvaise intention — mais qui a ruiné la réputation, le bonheur, même la vie de quelqu'un. Mes neurses ont toutes besoin de penser de cela et de cultiver parmi elles la loyauté et l'esprit de corps.

S'il y a une de vous qui a un grief contre moi je vous prie de le me pardonner; j'ai été peut-être quelque fois trop sévère mais jamais volontiers injuste, et je vous ai aimé toutes beaucoup, plus que vous ne croyez.

Mes souhaits pour le bonheur de toutes mes jeunes filles autant à celles qui ont quitté l'Ecole qu'à celles qui s'y trouvent encore et merci pour la gentillesse que vous m'avez toujours témoigné.

Votre directrice dévouée, Edith Cavell.

10 Oct., 1915

(Translation :)

Prison of St.-Gilles

My dear Nurses :

It is a very sad moment for me when I write to make my adieus to you. It calls to my mind the fact that the 17th September was the end of eight years of my direction of the school. I was so happy to be called to aid in the organization of the work that our committee had just founded. The 1st October of the year 1907 there were only four young students ; now we are already, numerous — between 50 and 60 in all, I believe, counting those who have received their diplomas and have already left the school.

I have told you on various occasions of those first days and of the difficulties that we encountered, even in the choice of words for your hours "on duty" and "off duty," etc.; all was new in the profession in Belgium.

Bit by bit one service after another was established — graduate nurses to nurse in private houses, student nurses, the St.-Gilles Hospital. We

helped in the Institute of Dr. Depage, the sanatorium of Buyssingham (Buysinghen), the clinic of Dr. Mayer, and now many are called (as perhaps you will be later) to nurse the brave men wounded in the war.

If in this last year our work has diminished, the cause is found in the sad time in which we live. In better days our work will resume its growth and all its power to do good. If I speak of the past it is because it is well sometimes to stop and look over the road that we have traversed and to take account of our mistakes and of our progress.

In your beautiful house you will have more patients and you will have all that is necessary for their comfort and your own.

To my regret I have not been able always to speak very much with you personally ; you know that I have had a good many occupations, but I hope that you will not forget our evening chats. I told you that devotion would give you real happiness — and the thought that before God and yourselves you have done your entire duty with a good heart will be your greatest comfort in the hard moments of life and in the face of death.

There are two or three of you who will recall the little interviews that we have had together ; do not forget them. Being already so far along in life, I have been able perhaps more clearly than you to show you the straight path. One word more. Beware of gossip ! And may I say to you — loving your country with all my heart — that that is the great fault here. I have seen so much evil during these 8 years that could have been

avoided or lessened if there had not been a little word whispered here and there, perhaps not with bad intention — but it ruined the reputation and happiness, even the life of some one. My nurses should think of that and cultivate among themselves loyalty and esprit de corps.

If there is one among you whom I have wronged I beg you to forgive me ; I have been perhaps too severe sometimes but never voluntarily unjust, and I have loved you all much more than you thought.

My best wishes for the happiness of all my girls, those who have left the school as well as those who are there still, and thank you for the kindness that you have always shown me.

*Your devoted directress, Edith Cavell.
10 Oct., 1915.*

Footnotes.

It would be interesting compare with what **Paul MAX** (cousin of the *bourgmestre Adolphe MAX*) told about the same day in his *Journal de guerre* (*Notes d'un Bruxellois pendant l'Occupation 1914-1918*) :

http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier PDF/Fonte/Journal de %20guerre de Paul Max bdef.pdf

The Argentine journalist **Roberto J. Payró**, having been arrested on September 22, 1915 :

« *Roberto J. Payró : son arrestation à Bruxelles* » a été, à l'origine, publié dans ***La Nación*** du 15/12/1915 :

French version :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTATION%20PAYRO%20A%20BRUXELLES%20LA%20NACION%2019151215.pdf>

Original **Spanish** version:

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTO%20PAYRO%20EN%20BRUSELAS%20LA%20NACION%2019151215.pdf>

Fac-simile :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTO%20PAYRO%20EN%20BRUSELAS%20LA%20NACION%2019151215.JPG>

« *Une primeur pour nos lecteurs. Sous l'Occupation : M. Roberto J. Payró* », est paru dans ***Le Cri de Belgique*** (organe hebdomadaire des intérêts belges dans l'Amérique du sud) ; Buenos Aires ; 17 janvier 1920, numéro 223 :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTATION%20PAYRO%20CRI%20DE%20BELGIQUE%2019200117.pdf>

Fac-simile :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTATION%20PAYRO%20CRI%20DE%20BELGIQUE%2019200117.JPG>

Roberto J. Payró could not react about Edith Cavell's arrestation, as he used to do in his ***Diario de un testigo*** (*La guerra vista desde Bruselas*) :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>

Original **Spanish** version: www.idesetautres.be