

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter V. **The *TE DEUM***

THE work at the Legation was light ; the morning drive through that noble forest into drowsy Brussels was itself a delight and in the afternoon there was the round of golf with George at Ravenstein, or a stroll along the country roads through that pleasant Brabant country to one of the little Flemish villages near by. We had as guest just then Mrs. Sarah M. Boyd, of Milwaukee, a friend of such long standing in our affections that she was " Aunt Sarah " to us, and I had as a private secretary Mr. George Ross, of Toledo. Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Sheppey had come for their usual summer outing in Europe ; those of my colleagues who were still in town used to come out for tea — Sir Francis Hyde Villiers, the British Minister, and Jonkheer de Weede, the Dutch Minister. And there was a day when Mr. Richard McGhee, over from London on some mission or other, came to luncheon ; he was full of news of the Home Rule struggle in Parliament. We were reading each day in the *Times* the progress of the Ulster " rebellion," looming large in the world just then—that is, when we read the papers. I used to let them lie many a morning unopened, until the trial of the Caillaux case came on at Paris ; we always read about that, with the interest and amusement French processes of justice always have for us who are grounded in the Common Law of England, though they come to about the same thing in the end as our own.

I can recall a day — a sinister one in the history of this world — when for a moment I was called back rudely to the realities of an existence that those days of blue and gold had removed far from my thoughts. I was sitting at my table, and through the open window there came the soft air of the late June morning, with the odours and the sounds of the country. I had the manuscript of my novel before me and I was far away, over seas and in that distant past, in a little Ohio town that was for the moment far more real to me than Brussels, and I was trying to make it as real to those who perhaps some day might idly peruse, on some such summer day as that, the book of which I was not yet sure. And yet it was somehow just beginning to take form, beginning to show some signs of life at times some of the characters in it gave evidence of being human and alive ; they were beginning to act now and then spontaneously, beginning to say and to do things after the manner of human beings. The long vista before me, the months of laborious drudging toil and pain, the long agony of effort necessary to write any book, even a poor one, were beginning to appear less weary, less futile; there was the first faint, glow of the joy of creative work. And then suddenly there came the jingling of an impatient bell, the imperative mandate of the telephone — that most irritating and impertinent of modern inventions, that insolent and inopportune contrivance that makes it possible and, what is worse, permissible for any one and every one in town to thrust his head into one's dining-room when one is at dinner, into one's bedroom when one is asleep, into one's closet when one is praying, and to bawl into one's ear whatever stupidity or *ineptie* he may have on his idle mind ! . . . It was, however, the gentle Omer, with whom one never could be impatient.

" Excellence, le prince héritier d'Autriche a été assassiné Sarajevo ! "

Who, and where ? By whom ? And why ? I had never heard of Sarajevo ; I had not the least idea where it was in this world, if it was

in this world. It was not half so real as that Ohio town which I was trying to evoke. And the Crown Prince of Austria was to me a most immaterial person — a kind of wraith wandering there in those nether regions to which have gone so many of that House of Habsburg which seems to have suffered in itself as much evil as it has caused others to suffer in this world. I confess that it seemed a rather unwarranted intrusion that morning. It meant for me putting aside Macochee and going to town at once ; doubtless there would be a book to sign at the Austrian Legation. . . .

Two or three days later there was the solemn requiem High Mass sung for the repose of the soul of the murdered prince at the church of St.- Jacques-sur-Caudenberg. There we were, the entire diplomatic corps, hurried back from the four corners of Europe to assemble again, in the church transformed into a *chapelle ardente* by the black velvet with silver broderies with which it was hung and the black catafalque with the Austrian arms, and the myriad candles crackling and the priests serving at the altar. The Nuncio officiated at the Mass ; and after the absolution and after we had ail filed up into the choir and each taken a candle and passed before the priest who held forth the paten to be kissed, and after we had expressed our condolences to our colleague, Count Clary und Aldringen, the Austrian Minister, we went out into the portico of the church and there a few moments loitered to gossip, to ask the news — with little thought, I fear, for the poor prince in whose honour the imposing ceremony had been held.

The motors were rolling up, and I rode away across the square in the rain and around by the drenched Park and then fin ally off through the forest, where the rain was dripping sadly on the thick mosses.

I read the papers more carefuly after that, but in a few days the world seemed to have forgotten and went on about its various affairs, and, as it had done so many times before, abandoned the fire smouldering there in the Balkans to the diplomatists, in the old assurance that they would smother it with their notes.

And June passed and July came. Aunt Sarah motored off to the Vosges to take the cure, and George vent for a holiday trip through Germany ; and the days went by — days of blue and gold — the lovely land drowsing, its fields ripening under the sun and settling in droning content. There was the pleasant drive in the morning through the green forest to the Legation, now and then a call at the Foreign Office, the cool, half-deserted *ministères* there in the Rue de la Loi—quite the sleepest places in town. There was golf in the afternoon at Ravenstein, where the larks were for ever raining down music from the skies, and in the adjoining fields the happy peasants at their picturesque labour. There was tea on the lawn that was so bright with the colours of the women's *toilettes*, and girls in white playing tennis in a bower of roses, and the long cool avenue of beech-trees ; and dinner, and coffee on the terrace. And then up te my room, when all the house was still and the night dreaming without, and the manuscript of my novel.

July 21 is the Belgian national holiday, and on that day a *Te Deum* is always sung at Ste.-Gudule in honour of the august founder of the dynasty, Léopold I. The whole city was *en fête*, the black, yellow, and red flag of Belgium — the old flag of that Belgium which for one short year at the time of the French Revolution was a republic, *Les États Belges Unis*, modelled after the young United States of America — was flying everywhere. The boulevards were thronged and the streets of the lower town were filled with the Brussels crowd that is at most times so spontaneously, se almost naively, gay. From early morning long queues had stretched away clown the streets before the theatres, that day opened freely to the public. The trains

were crowded with people seeking the shade of the Bois de la Cambre or the Forêt de Soignes, or *en route* to the great field at Stockel where the aviation meet was in progress that week. There, too, were great crowds in the Place du Parvis, before Ste.-Gudule, waiting for a glimpse of the royal family. "Uniforms and decorations", the Minister for Foreign Affairs had said, which meant for me the trying ordeal of evening clothes in the bright glare of noonday.

The old cathedral, or, to be more exact — since Brussels is not the seat of a bishopric — the old church, the collegial of St.-Michel and Ste.-Gudule, was crowded again for one of those scenes it had been witnessing for eight centuries. The soft light that fell into the nave that morning touched the brilliant uniforms of the representatives of the Army, the Government, the diplomatic corps. There were judges in their scarlet robes and priests and bishops in their sacerdotal garments, there were tonsured monks, and here and there the white robe of a Dominican friar or the brown of a Franciscan monk, his bare feet in sandals. From the entrance to the transept in the Treurenberg there was a double hedge of grenadiers in their tall bearskins, and a broad crimson carpet that led up to the altar, and at all the grey old pillars of nave and transept there were trophies of flags and banners. There was the stir and rustle of a happy throng, elated by all the light and colour — a pleasant exhilaration, suppressed to a gravity by the place and the scene. Not only were all the personalities of the town there, but there were the mysterious presences of those historic characters that in other days had trailed their fleeting glories there.

We had taken our appointed places in the choir. There were the usual greetings, smiles, hand-clasps, the customary gossip. Then suddenly the drums began to roll, the trumpets blew, and through the lofty arches there rang a voice in military command, hard, like steel :

" *Présentez armes !* "

There was the sharp rattle of the muskets as the grenadiers came to present arms ; and then the unisonant cry :

" *Vive le Roi .1* "

Their Majesties, accompanied by their suites, came slowly forward and up the steps into the choir, pausing for the reverence at the altar, then for the ceremonial bow to the representatives of the nations of the world, then to the representatives of Belgium, and passed to the two thrones placed for them on the right of the altar. The great organ began to roll ; the three priests at the altar, in their gold copes, began to chant the *Te Deum*.

The royal family made an interesting picture. The King, tall, broad-shouldered, tanned somewhat from his outing by the sea — he had just come from Ostend — was in the lieutenant-general's uniform he always wears ; behind the thick lenses of his pince-nez his intelligent eyes were taking in the scene, noting who were there. The Queen, frail, delicate, with the unconscious appeal of sweet, girlish eyes and the delicate, sensitive mouth, had the three royal children beside her : the two princes, Léopold, the Duke of Brabant, and Charles, the Count of Flanders, grave, fair, slender boys in broad batiste collars and grey satin suits, and the Princess Marie José, with her pretty, mischievous, little face and elfish tangle of crisply curling golden hair — the child that all the painters and all the sculptors of Belgium have portrayed over and over. . . .

I stood there and watched that most interesting family — a very model, in its affection and in the sober good sense of the young parents, of all the domestic virtues. And I thought of the other kings and queens and princes and princesses that had stood in that very spot — the two Léopolds, father and son, the first of this short dynasty, so

unlike each other, so unlike the King who stood there on that July morning.

The Duchess of Parma had knelt at that high altar, William I of Holland had been crowned there, and Peter the Great had marvelled at the strangely carved pulpit of Verbrugghen, the sumptuous chape' of the Holy Sacrament, the precious windows painted by Rozier, the statues of the twelve apostles. There Philip II had caused to be celebrated the funeral service of Charles V ; there the Dukes of Brabant and the Dukes of Burgundy lie buried ; there was held the funeral of Frédéric de Mérode, the patriot who fell mortally wounded at Berchem ; and there had been observed the stately ceremonies of two chapters of the Order of the Golden Fleece.

I looked at that grave, slender lad, His Royal Highness Prince Léopold Philippe Charles Albert Meinrad Hubertus Marie Miguel, Duke of Brabant, Prince of Belgium, Duke of Saxe, Prince of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, gazing out of those wide, boyish eyes at that scene of splendour. What were the thoughts just then in that child's mind ? Were there any conceptions of the tragic mutations of Belgian history ? Would lie one day in other scenes like this, when others should have taken our places, stand there where his father stood, while priests sang *Te Deums* in his honour ?

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.