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An eye-witness at Louvain.. 1914

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AN

EYE-WITNESS

AT

LOUVAIN.

LONDON :
EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE, LTD.

1914

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This narrative has been furnished through Father Thurston, S.J., of Farm Street. As stated in the text, for obvious reasons, the name of the narrator cannot yet be disclosed publicly. But Father Thurston knows him to be a man of high character and to possess the qualifications claimed by himself, and he is satisfied as to the good faith of the narrative.

It may be pointed out that the author of this account is responsible for the footnotes as well as for the text; also that the use of the term "Father" does not necessarily imply that all those so designated had received priest's orders but only that they were ecclesiastics preparing for ordination.

BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE EVENTS THAT TOOK
PLACE AT LOUVAIN ON THE 25TH, 26TH
AND 27TH AUGUST, 1914.

Except where stated to the contrary, I was an eye-witness of these events. I cannot guarantee the precise accuracy of the times given in the report, but they are certainly approximately correct. For reasons which will readily be understood, I am obliged for the time being to remain anonymous.

X,
Dr. of Physics and Mathematics.
Professor at Louvain.

Artillery firing audible to the north of the town. Suddenly
Tuesday, a brisk fusillade broke out in the town and
25th August, lasted three or four minutes.
6.30 p.m.

A rumour came that the French were approaching the town
7.0 p.m. from the south. Some German soldiers who
had come to the College to arrange for quarters
went off in a state of great excitement.

Desultory firing on the Boulevards; then a fusillade
8.0 p.m. increasing in volume in the streets in the
vicinity of the College. Bullets were whistling
in the garden.

The fusillade died down, to continue intermittently till
9.0 p.m. 11 o'clock at night.

Very violent fusillade in the town; the fire of a mitrailleuse
11.0 p.m. was heard for a few minutes. I went to sleep.

Awakened by the glare of burning houses. Went up to the
Wednesday, roof of the College. Several houses in suc-
26th August, cession broke into flames. By the Old Market
1 o'clock in Place, on which the University Library building
the morning. abuts, houses blazed up and collapsed one after
another. Watched the progress of the fire anxiously.

1.30 a.m. The houses next to the Library were on fire.

1.45 a.m. The first flames darted through the roof of
the Library.

The Library was entirely consumed. The building containing the archives of the University next to the Library caught fire. A fire engine, the only one permitted by the Germans, was protecting the approaches to the Hotel de Ville which were threatened by the flaming houses around.

2.15 a.m.

On the central belfry of the "Collégiale" of St. Peter a man with a torch was trying to set fire to the louvre-boards. He worked for half an hour without success.

3.30 a.m.

Left my post of observation.

Went back on to the roof. All the roof of the "Collégiale" was on fire and was falling in. In the town two fresh houses were alight.

7.15 a.m.

Morning quiet, apart from desultory firing. The German soldiers said that "civilistes" had been firing on the military the whole night.*

Noon.

5.0 p.m. Pretty quiet this afternoon. Desultory firing.

I saw seven German soldiers passing in front of the College, evidently drunk, bringing from the country three cows that they must have stolen or commandeered. They were amusing themselves by firing their rifles incessantly. The various sentries posted in the neighbourhood immediately fired their rifles with the intention, no doubt, of frightening the imaginary foe; gradually the shooting was taken up and spread throughout the whole town.†

6.0 p.m.

A similar occurrence took place. The German authorities had forbidden the ringing of church bells on the ground that they were signals to civilians to fire on the troops. At a quarter to nine, when the town was comparatively silent, the bell on the roof of the College sounded the curfew. Immediately two sentries posted not far from the College fired several shots in rapid succession, and, just as at 6 o'clock, the firing spread throughout the whole town.†

8.45 p.m.

The conflagration assumed even greater proportions than on the day before and lasted all night. Intermittent fusillades.

9.0 p.m.

* (a) It is possible that the firing at half-past six in the evening came from Belgian rifles.

(b) It seems certain—indeed it is practically proved—that the firing in the night was due entirely to the German soldiers who, in a state of great excitement, under the impression that the town was being attacked by the French, fired on one another in the darkness.

† It was probably this firing that the German officers took for the action of the "civilistes" firing on their troops, and which was the signal for giving free rein to pillage and arson.

News was brought that the town was to be evacuated ; it was going to be bombarded.

Thursday,
27th August,
9.0 a.m.

The populace was leaving the town. Heart-rending sights. Sick women were carried away on little carts drawn by dogs. The populace was calm and resigned. Few were in tears.

I went out with the crowd in the direction of Brussels. On the road we met German troops. Not a few German soldiers were in tears at the sight of this sad procession. An officer pointed to the crowd and shouted brutally to me, "The crime is yours, Messieurs les Curés."

After walking for three hours I reached Tervueren where a German post had been established. At the entrance to the village I heard cries ; as I drew nearer some soldiers rushed towards me shouting insults. They led me up to other ecclesiastics who had arrived before me and whom the soldiers were searching. All laymen were allowed to pass, the ecclesiastics alone being detained.*

Amidst insults and threats I was searched from head to foot. The soldier engaged in this task suddenly cried delightedly "cartridges" and pulled out of the pocket of my cloak—a half pound packet of chocolate. He handed it to an officer who examined it and turned it over suspiciously. I could not help laughing. I tore open the parcel with my fore-finger and revealed the supposed cartridges. The officer gave me back the packet. They took nothing from me. From my companions they took razors, pocket-knives, and notebooks, and from one of them twenty francs.

During this examination we were exposed to every sort of insult. Here are specimens of a few of these insults which I refrain from translating:—"Lauerer," "Halunken," "Hässliche Pfaffen," "Schweine," "Man wird Sie kastrieren Schweine."

This last pleasantry especially was repeated with every sort of variation. I was made to walk through the mud amid cries of "Durch die Scheisse die Schweine!"

This will suffice to show the filth to which we were subjected. I dare say it would be possible to find in every army dregs capable of such conduct, but the incredible thing is that this took place before three officers who did not interfere. One of them even accused us loudly of being responsible for the shooting and of having incited the people to fire on the soldiers. One of these three—a junior officer—seemed sickened at the scene. He looked at me as though he wished to apologise, but did not dare to say anything.

* M. Brants, however, Professor of the University, and M. X., Barrister, were detained ; they were searched as we were, and our expostulations only secured their release shortly before the execution of Father Dupiéreux.

I was then taken into a field with a fence around it where I found about 100 ecclesiastics drawn up in a quarter-circle on the grass under a guard of soldiers with rifles ready. I was tired out after two sleepless nights and I lay down on the grass and fell asleep.

Noon.

When I woke up there were about 140 ecclesiastics inside the fence. Amongst them were the Rector of the University, the Vice-Rectors, the President of the American College, an American Monsignor wearing the purple band on his cassock. There were also two nuns.

An officer took apart 26 ecclesiastics, of whom I was one, and lined us up against the fence as if we were going to be shot. The priests gave absolution. We waited seven or eight minutes. An officer came and told us that we had been taken as hostages and that we should have to follow the column until the end of the campaign.

This group of 26 was then led outside the fence and taken across a field towards a neighbouring wood. A non-commissioned officer walked beside me; we passed close to a soldier who said a few words to him that I did not catch. The non-commissioned officer muttered back, "Es wird einer geschossen" ("One of them is going to be shot").

Two hundred yards from the wood we were drawn up in two rows with our backs to the wood. At this moment Monsignor Willemson, an American (I am not sure of the spelling of his name), and the President of the American Seminary, Monsignor de Becker, stepped out of the line, handed their identification papers to an officer and tried to make an explanation. They were not listened to. "Nein, nein," roared the officer, and, turning on his heel, walked away.

We then saw, brought between two soldiers with fixed bayonets and accompanied by two officers, Father Eugène Dupiéreux. He held in his clasped hands his crucifix and rosary. We understood. Four yards from us the group halted. An officer asked us which of us understood German. Father Schill, a native of Luxemburg, stepped forward. With brutal threats of every description he was made to read in French, and then translate into German, the text of the paper found on Father Dupiéreux.

This paper, which was a private note written on a half sheet of note-paper, inadvertently placed in his pocket amongst other papers in the hurry of departure, ran in substance as follows:—

"At the beginning of the war we laughed when French newspapers spoke of the invasion of barbarian hordes. Those who, like us, have seen the conduct of the Germans at Louvain, now know what to expect. Genseric's methods were no different. After the burning of the Library and the University, the barbarians can no longer

have a word to say against Khalif Omar for burning the Library at Alexandria. And all in the name of German culture!"

When the paper had been read and translated there was silence for a moment. Father Dupiéreux asked to be allowed to receive absolution. "Absolution! What is that?" was the brutal reply. He answered "To see a priest." They assented. A priest advanced. Father Dupiéreux knelt down, and the priest heard his confession and give him absolution. When the Father arose his confessor grasped him by the hand, and after a few words had been exchanged, Father Dupiéreux advanced alone in the direction of the wood. He was pale but quite calm.

At this time we all had our backs to the wood. In order to force us to witness the execution, the order was given for us to turn round, and soldiers were placed behind us with the order "If anyone moves, shoot him."

Thirty yards from us Father Dupiéreux was ordered to halt. Four soldiers came and lined up ten yards in front of us. The order to fire was given by a non-commissioned officer. Father Dupiéreux fell. There was silence for two minutes. The Father's arm still moved. We were made to turn round. The victim was despatched by a bullet in the temple and buried.*

We do not know whether Father Dupiéreux was tried. In any case, it may be calculated that the trial cannot have lasted ten minutes. Moreover, the officers present had an imperfect knowledge of French and Father Dupiéreux did not know German. Nobody can have helped him in his defence.

While this was going on it was explained to us that we were hostages and that if anyone fired on the troops we should all be shot.

They made us get into carts. Some of the drivers allowed us to sit beside them on the seat. Others insisted on our sitting on sacks of potatoes or hay, or whatever the carts happened to be loaded with.

We started. We were taken through Brussels by the main thoroughfares, la Chaussée d'Anderghem, la rue de la Loi, les Boulevardes. Then we went on in the direction of Hal.

It was dark; we were 8 kilometres from Brussels; we had had nothing to eat since 7 o'clock that morning.

* Amongst the 26 ecclesiastics who were forced to witness the execution of Father Dupiéreux were about 16 of his fellow students, and in particular his twin brother, Father Robert Dupiéreux. The Germans were unaware of this fact. Father Eugène Dupiéreux was 23 years of age. He had become an ecclesiastical student after having studied classics at the Faculty of Philosophy and Science at Namur. He had just finished his first year's study of philosophy at Louvain.

An officer came to inform us—politely I admit—that we were free. This was the result of influence brought to bear on the foreign representatives at Brussels by the indignant crowd who had seen us passing through Brussels on our carts.

Other bodies of captured ecclesiastics suffered similar experiences. Some were released before we were; others only 30 hours later, and had also to undergo every kind of hardship.

The following account of the flight from Louvain and the execution of Father Dupiéreux written by Father Schill, the priest who was made to read the document found on Father Dupiéreux, is reprinted from the "Catholic Herald of India" of November 25th:—

About 8 o'clock, as I was cleaning my room, a voice rang through the corridor: "Everybody at the door: in an hour the town must be evacuated." Half an hour later we took the road to Brussels. It was a heartrending sight; crowds of people were streaming out of the town, some carrying bundles, others fleeing without anything but the clothes on their body, others carrying invalids and little children: I myself was carrying a bare-footed little mite. At intervals we came across German sentries, and as we approached with uplifted arms and waving handkerchiefs, they received us with insults: Schweinepriester! Hallunken! (Swine! rascals!) You excite the people to shoot at us!—Das Sind die Richtigen! other soldiers apologised. "Die unschuldigen müssen mit den Schüldigen leiden!" (The innocent must suffer with the guilty.) After two hours' tramping, and getting safe through several outposts, we at last reached Tervueren. But we had rejoiced too soon: we suddenly stumbled on a number of soldiers blocking the road. They stopped us, and ordered us to empty our pockets and spread the contents on the ground in the mud. We were all placed in a file, the soldiers standing in front of us, and uttering the usual insults: Schweine! &c. The officer had ordered them to keep at a distance, but no sooner did he turn his back, than they rushed upon us. The officer sprang upon them, revolver in hand. We were then searched. I unbuttoned my soutane at the top, thinking that much would do, but the soldier violently tore it open, tearing off all the buttons but one. As he searched me he tried to introduce a cartridge into one of my pockets; fortunately Fr. P. noticed the manoeuvre and warned the officer. I don't know whether the soldier was punished.

After the search was over, we were all taken to a meadow lying alongside the road and told to sit down on the wet grass, whilst the soldiers mounted guard. We remained there for about an hour, and were joined by religious, priests and even nuns, as they arrived from Louvain; then we were placed in two rows along a palisade which ran across the meadow; it looked as though we were going to be shot, so we hung our rosaries round our necks, took our crucifixes in our hands, and received absolution from a priest. Two individuals with sinister-looking faces had somehow got mixed up with us. However, as one of us asked the officer what was going to happen, he reassured us and told us we had nothing to fear. We were then distributed into batches of twenty; mine was told off behind the palisade into the other half of the meadow, and left to the care of an honest and kind soldier, who at once allowed some of us to withdraw for a minute. But as soon as the officer noticed this, he rushed up with his revolver and abused the soldier in violent terms: "What did I tell you? If anybody moves he will be shot. Is this the way you obey my orders?" The soldier

grew indignant and without a word looked the officer straight into the eyes. I was standing by and watched the whole scene.

EXECUTION OF FR. EUGENE DUPIÉREUX.

After some time, I forget how long it was, we saw Fr. Dupiéreux coming towards us guarded by two soldiers, a third following with a paper in his hand. The latter asked to whom the writing belonged; Fr. Dupiéreux declared it was his; as the soldier asked for an interpreter, I was pointed out. But what do I see? The Father had a big cross chalked on his back; he was holding his crucifix in his hand, and gazed at it steadily. The soldier handed me the paper and the officer said: "Look here, you will first read this paper in French, and then translate it into German. If you omit or add a single word, you will be shot with him." My heart was beating violently: the poor Father was condemned already! What to do? If I refused to read the paper, there would be two victims; if I read it, the Father would be shot at once! The drift of these notes was as follows: "The Germans have invaded Belgium with fire and sword; that horde of barbarians laid the whole country waste. When Omar destroyed the library of Alexandria, none believed that such vandalism would ever be repeated. It was repeated in Louvain, the library was destroyed. Such is the 'Germanische kultur' of which they boasted so much."

As I read these words, the officer stopped me: "Genug,—Ab" (that will do), and as some tried to pacify him: "Kein wort mehr"! (not another word!) Then the Father, who had listened to the reading with perfect calm and self-possession, asked to receive absolution. This was explained to the officer and leave was granted. After his confession, the Father rose. The officer gave the command: "Vorwärts for die front!" Without a moment's hesitation the Father stepped forward, his eyes fixed on the crucifix. At about 15 yards away from us the Father halted at the officer's command. Then four soldiers were summoned and placed between the victim and ourselves. The command rang: "Legt an! Feuer!" We heard but one report; the Father fell on his back. A last quiver ran through his arms. Then the spectators were told to turn round; among them was the victim's twin-brother. The officer bent over the body, and discharged his gun into the ear, the bullet issuing from the eye.

The officer then made me translate a proclamation: "You will come away with us on our carts. When we reach a village, two or three will be chosen to go and warn the burgomaster that he is responsible for his people's behaviour. If any shot is fired from a house, the whole village will be burned; you and the inhabitants will be shot."

After this we got on to the carts trying to find what place we could on planks, sacks of grain, &c. We had among us Mgr. Ladeuze, Rector of the Louvain University, and Mgr. de Becker, President of the American Seminary. As we passed through Brussels, anxious crowds gathered on the boulevards wondering what all this meant. It was not till 8 o'clock we were released owing to Fr. Provincial's intervention.

27th August 1914.

SCHILL, S.J.

