

"BELGIAN PEOPLE HOLD YOU IN DETESTATION"

"One of Your Officers Ordered Bayonet Charge on Women," Cardinal Tells Baron von der Lancken—Spies Follow Belgian Primate

Explanatory Comment

TWO German officials—Von Woeller, and Von Sandt, commandant at Malines—were witnesses of the long and candid interview between the Cardinal and Von der Lancken. The latter, whose full title was Baron von der Lancken-Wakenitz, was admirably equipped for his post at the head of the political department of the government of occupation.

He was an adroit and experienced diplomat and had served for ten years as counselor of the German embassy in Paris. His French was impeccable and he was a master of several other languages, although he did not like to speak English. Personally he was a much more ingratiating man than Von Bisping, and he took an artistic delight in subtleties of argument, for which the Governor General had little taste.

The keen, blue-eyed, well-groomed, handsome Von der Lancken was, of course, thoroughly impregnated with Prussian standards of government and conduct. His rigidity of principles was unmodified by any sentimentality, but his acute mind was constantly prodding him to demonstrate what he regarded as the logic of the German contentions.

This penchant drew him into protracted discussions with the Cardinal, which sometimes widely departed from the immediate questions at issue. At one time the priest and the diplomat explored the pros and cons of Kantian philosophy.

Mercier was on familiar ground here. As a professor in Louvain University he had given much intellectual attention to Kant and long before the war he squarely opposed the teachings of the German philosophers which reached their mad maximum in Nietzsche's preposterous dictum "Be hard!"

In fairness to Von der Lancken, it should be said that he fully realized that his antagonist was a master of dialectics and possessor of one of the most brilliant minds in Europe. In the presence of the Baron the Cardinal always stood erect and with folded arms and Von der Lancken, by the rules of courtesy, was thus prevented from sitting down.

At their last session, just before the armistice, the diplomat came not as an argumentative commander, but as a humble suppliant. He urged the Cardinal to use his influence to soften the treatment of the German stragglers by the Belgians.

The primate promised help. Von der Lancken's sense of dramatic values rose to the situation. The Cardinal extended a hand withheld from his clever foe for more than four years. The Baron knelt and kissed the episcopal ring.

"Now I know," he reported at headquarters shortly afterward, "that Mercier is a great man."

my first pastoral, I repeat to you today. It is by giving our people the assurance that Belgium is and will remain a free country that we are able to preach patience and to see that it is practiced in spite of you.

"I believe I have thus met the first complaint drawn up against me by the Governor General and I have at the same time implicitly furnished an answer to the second.

"The Governor finds there is a lack of agreement between the language of my pastorals and the kindly disposition of which I gave him an assurance when he promised on his part to do all in his power to heal all our wounds."

"Yes; the Governor General complains of your pastorals, also of the commentaries, still more unrestrained, which certain members of the clergy made upon it."

That "Celebrated" Phrase

"I am pleased, Baron, that you call attention to the commentaries which you say the clergy have made on my pastoral letters. I am aware that in different circumstances you have repeated this assertion that the clergy talk politics in the pulpit, and you are wont to add: 'It is evident that in so doing the clergy obey an inspiration of the Cardinal's, since the same phrase, one of the Cardinal's phrases, is repeated by all the preachers.' Well, Baron, I should be delighted to learn what this celebrated phrase is. One day my secretary, M. Loncin, asked you for it in my name and you are said to have answered: 'Oh! that is an ancient story. I should have to refresh my memory to satisfy you.' Today, when I have the opportunity of seeing you in person, I ask you again, What is this oft-repeated phrase?"

After a pause the Baron answered: "Oh! that is past; I speak now of commentaries on your last pastoral."

"Be it so; I do not mind discussing them, but I would like to know all the same in what I have so gravely sinned in the past."

A fresh pause, and the Baron uttered never a word.

"I imagined it was understood that the Governor General would point out to the bishops the complaints he had against the clergy."

"Be good enough then to tell me who the priests of my diocese are that have made operations of a seditious nature; where, when, and in what terms did they make them?"

"I thought of bringing with me the dossiers which we have at the Governor General's office incriminating several priests, but at the last moment we thought it more advisable not to discuss them."

"You will pardon me, sir, for regarding this proceeding as strange. You incriminate the clergy in my presence, you come here for that purpose, and when I request you to bring forward definite charges you reply: 'I am not bringing forward these charges in detail, as I do not wish to discuss them.'"

"In that case, all that remains for me to do is to talk about myself, of my feelings toward the Governor General, and what I think of his attitude in dealing with our country."

"My feelings have never varied, but you misunderstand them."

Desire to Spare Country

"Of course, I desire to spare my country fresh sufferings; and when the Governor General declares to me that it is his ambition to heal our wounds rather than to embitter them, of course I am ready to second him."

"But the Governor General's mistake, and yours too, begins the moment you imagine that you can treat us as submissive children. This you cannot do; Belgium is not a conquered country which you have the right to treat as your own; it is a belligerent nation which has preserved and hopes still to preserve her independence and her king."

"What you would like to say is: 'Put aside for the moment all the past and let us unite to work for the resurrection of the occupied country.' I know you have often used such language."

"But how can we forget the past, which is only of yesterday? The ruins of our towns and villages are still smoking, our churches have been gutted, our families are in mourning, our children in misery. But the present, in which we live, on account of which we suffer, springs from this past which your troops have created for us."

"I know, Baron, that in an interview with my secretary, Canon Loncin, you were good enough to acknowledge that not one of the priests shot by your armies at the time of invasion had been proved guilty. I am pleased with this overdue recognition of my innocence. But what has been proved in the case of our priests will be proved tomorrow, if you allow it, in the case of our massacred and imprisoned civilians. It is just this investigation we demand; and so long as our rights and the sincerity of our attitude have not had due recognition, between you and us no understanding is possible."

"Allegiance Goes Elsewhere"

"You would be quite wrong to doubt of the Governor General's kindly intentions. I, who am always near him and know him, can assure you that he has the sincerest desire to do all he can for the Belgians."

"I do not doubt the Governor General's sincerity. When I had the honor of seeing him, he spoke with an accent of sincerity which I believed then and believe still. But between him and us there is a fundamental misunderstanding. He would wish to see us submissive, and we claim the right to remain interiorly, in heart and soul, unconquered. We respect your external regulations in so far as they are requisite for the maintenance of public order; but our allegiance goes elsewhere."

"Moreover, Baron, there is a wide margin between intention and action. Facts badly correspond with the friendly sentiments of which you give us the assurance."

"I assure you, you misunderstand Baron von Bisping."

"But come; these condemnations, one after the other, of young men, of priests who have tried to cross the frontier or have assisted others in the attempt, these condemnations to death, these shootings, etc. * * * are these proofs of kindness?"

"Oh! it must be so; we cannot tolerate any breach of military regulations."

"Be it so; it is necessary to a certain extent, in a sense. That I understand and I do not blame you for it. But good-will, or mere equity, would demand a milder application of your regulations."

Attitude of German Army

"This is how we understand your position: You are a mighty power confronted with a very small country. You have trampled our soil under foot without any invitation from us; and your own heads have acted as spokesmen in declaring that you were sorry to have to invade our territory against your will, from necessity, and that you were desirous to repair as soon as possible the wrong done us."

"Remembering the conditions under which you have taken possession of the greater part of our soil, you ought logically to have said to yourselves: 'We will make Belgium suffer as little as we can; we will show her all such consideration as is consistent with the needs entailed by our occupation of the country; for when we come to think of it, she was not our enemy, and after all it is we who have brought upon her the necessity of opposing our passage across her territory.'"

"Why then bar the road so roughly against a few young men who are burning with a desire to fulfill their patriotic duty at their comrades' side?"

"But they would all go!"

"And if they did all go, where is the great evil? You boast of having 8,000,000 soldiers! What can a few hundreds, or let us say a few thousands, more or less, do against you?"

"It is not that; believe me, we are not afraid of them."

"Very well then, we are agreed. You need not be afraid of them. In that case let them pass. They will be practicing a virtue which you Germans prize above all others, namely, military patriotism. It will, therefore, be a good thing. Then you will rid Belgium of youths disgruntled, humbled and without work, who at a given moment—I look at it from your own point of view—may become turbulent and dangerous to public order, which you wish and ought to preserve. Look, for example, at those young men from our universities who are champing the bit in forced inaction. Would it not be a thousand times better for them to be at the front? Or at least, if you will not let them go, if you think you ought to apply your military regulations in their case, let it be so; arrest all you may succeed in catching; prevent them from beginning their pranks again, but I beg you not to treat them as criminals."

"And if a brave priest gives these dear young fellows, of whom, after all, Belgium is legitimately proud, some friendly advice, or puts them on their road, or in general affords them help, is this sufficient reason to imprison him, consign him to a dungeon, or deport him?"

"Flame of Patriotism Alive"

"You admit yourself, then, that the clergy is in favor of stirring up the young people."

"No, I do not admit that; but I praise the clergy for keeping the flame of patriotism alive and for not refusing paternal assistance to a parishioner, a university man, or a workman who has the courage to risk his life to go and join our army. And, as we happen to be talking about the clergy, will you allow me to speak to you in confidence?"

"Yes, I am listening to you."

"I could be more precise in what I am about to say by mentioning names, but discretion will not allow me to reveal them to you. I refer to a personage, and no one less than a member of your own entourage. To a priest who expressed himself surprised at the frequency of arrests among priests and religious, this politician answered: 'They are revenging themselves on the priests for the attitude taken up by the Cardinal.' Is that good-will? Is that justice?"

"Dear me; who can have said that?"

"You may ignore my confidence if you like; I have no wish to impose on your credulity. But I assert that I know the person we are talking about, and that the priest to whom he spoke, and who himself related this to me is absolutely a trustworthy witness."

"You were saying, Baron, that his Excellency the Governor General finds it difficult to reconcile my habitual attitude with my frequent appeals to him in favor of my countrymen. You have not, I believe, uttered the word ingratitude, but it is the one which would sum up this fresh complaint. Well, I am going to astonish you and, I fear, hurt your feelings."

"Not at all; say what you think."

"Note—The personage referred to here is Trimborn, a Deputy of the Centre; and the priest he spoke to is the Superior of the 'Aumoniers du Travail,' the Abbe Reyx."

In a note signed with his own hand, the Abbe Reyx asserts that in the course of a conversation he had with Trimborn, he heard the latter declare that the heavy penalties inflicted on Belgian priests were the German Government's reply to the Cardinal's activities."

To the Superior of the 'Aumoniers du Travail,' who asked for a reprieve for one of his priests who was ill and half blind and who had been condemned to three years' imprisonment, Trimborn replied that the Cardinal could only obtain this favor, besides many others, if he would only go to Canossa and promise for the future to act differently vis-a-vis of the German Government."

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

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Cardinal Mercier's Story

Including his correspondence with the German authorities in Belgium during the war, 1914 to 1918, edited by Professor Fernand Mayence of Louvain University and translated by the Benedictine Monks of St. Augustine's, Ramsgate, England.

[Continuation of interview between Cardinal Mercier and Baron von der Lancken.]

"AND if I were a seditious monger, Baron, what a splendid game I might have played! What a lovely subject for a sensational pamphlet to appear at Paris or in London! In it I might have narrated the antics at Malines and your preposterous repression of the episcopal blessing and the mild gesture of my private secretary. But I refrained; and just as you found me unbending in carrying out my pastoral duties, so did I desire to pass over merely personal incidents. I deemed it prudent to retire for some days to l'Hermitage in order to withdraw from any likely manifestations of public sympathy. With your preconceived ideas regarding me, you imagined my retreat could have no other motive than revolutionary projects."

"Oh! revolutionary, no."

"Substitute seditious. See, then, Baron, how the alleged manipulation of the Belgian people's ill-will toward you existed only in your imagination, and the indications of ferment are merely the intrigues of your spies and the fess made by your inquisitors."

"The Belgian people are calm and patient, abiding their time. There were no franc-tireurs when your armies invaded our territory. I trust there will be none

when you beat your retreat. Only lately I had occasion to address all the clergy of my diocese assembled at Malines for the clergy retreat, and I urged them to say to the people: The defense of our country must be left to our army; it is not your task to make irregular assaults on the enemy. Do not by your rashness justify the reproach that slanderous tongues brought against you at the outbreak of hostilities."

"Why, Baron, as to the heart of the Belgian people, know that you have not captured it, nor will you ever do so. Let me say with full freedom and be not ruffled by the apparent rudeness of my words, the Belgians do you no evil and never will; but in their hearts they hold your rule in detestation. That is the truth, and after a whole year's experience, strange to say, you do not seem to grasp it."

"Not rarely strangers, neutrals, Americans, Swiss, pass through here, and then naturally the war and the German occupation become the topic of discourse. Would you like to know the unanimous opinion of foreigners regarding you? The Germans, they say, have their points assuredly, but they lack psychology."

"Is that the case? You believe the world to be governed by abstract formulas?"

"But We Are Patient"

"You imagine that your method of ruling, successful as it may be in Germany, must needs succeed in my life in teaching. In so doing I have learned that in a young man's education you must first learn to know him before applying formulas. To make laws and to apply them are two different matters. You seem to be ignorant of these primary truths; hence your mistake. We keep our hearts unsubdued, but we are patient. And what I said in the month of January to those who came to complain in the Governor General's name of

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