

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LIV. The C.N. and the C.R.S.

MEANWHILE, in anxious impatience we were awaiting word of our envoys, and one morning, from the unexpected direction of Berlin, came a telegram from Mr. Gerard saying that the British Government had agreed to let food come into Belgium provided it was sent by the American Embassy in London to the American Legation in Brussels. Had their mission, therefore, so soon succeeded or had their prayers been granted even before they were made ? We waited a week ; then I had a bundle of telegrams that had come through. The Hague — another sign of amelioration, showing that communication by way of The Hague and Antwerp had been restored.

One of the telegrams was from our Ambassador in London, Dr. Page, who said that in pursuance of my request for aid, he had asked Mr. Herbert Clark Hoover to organize a committee to raise funds and to purchase food for the Belgian civil population. There was a telegram also from Mr. Hoover, known to me then only as the American who had been at the head of the committee formed in London to assist in repatriating Americans whom the flood of war had overwhelmed ; it was a sympathetic and heartening response. Mr. Hoover said that he had organized the committee, which would set up at once the machinery necessary to the purchase and shipment of the food ; that the organisation had been named "*The American Commission for Relief in Belgium*" ; that it would be composed exclusively of Americans ; and that, in accordance with the condition laid down by the British Government, the food would be shipped to me as American Minister at Brussels, under the American flag. I sent a telegram expressing the gratitude of the Belgian people, of the Comité National, and of myself for this most generous response to our appeal — a response in which I could have my own patriotic pride and satisfaction ; but I asked that my friend and colleague, the Marquis of Villalobar, be included as patron in a relation identical with my own, and called attention to the efforts he had made to aid the great work. And this was done.

There was another telegram, from Gibson, asking that a thousand labels in German, showing the authorization of the German Government, be sent at once to Rotterdam to be placed on the shipments of food about to be sent in. This had an encouraging and practical sound, and I went at once to bear the good news to the gentlemen of the Comité National.

The next afternoon, at last, to my delight, the Baron Lambert, well groomed and smart as ever, came in, just back from London with the good news, and far too modest over the success of his mission. Mr. Heineman, who had gone out to Holland on the same mission, and M. Francqui were to arrive in Brussels that evening ; Gibson was by way of staying on in England.

Then Mr. Millard K. Shaler, who weeks before had gone to London to buy food, returned with more details of the almost insuperable difficulties that lay in the way of the prodigious enterprise we had undertaken — difficulties which, had we been able to foresee them, might have deterred us from the attempt. We were still in a state of

innocence in those days, still living in the Western world as we had known it, that world of reason and helpfulness. We were soon to learn of another world, but we did not know it then. We thought that if we could procure enough food to last through the winter our troubles would be over !

However, on Saturday, October 3, there arrived at the Legation a good-looking young American just graduated from Harvard, a lad with clear eyes and a strong, square jaw — Mr. Edward Curtis, a grandson of_ George William Curtis. He came through from Rotterdam with letters from Captain Lucey saying that the first shipment of food had arrived. He was a welcome guest, this quiet, self-restrained boy, who, the first representative of the Commission to arrive in Belgium, was to be the last to leave when we had changed our neutrality for the belligerency that suited us so much better, and had to go. I remember his sitting there that autumn morning before the little fire in my room, and of my asking him the question that was so spontaneously on the lips of all of us in those days : "*How long is the war going to last ?*"

And I remember how he raised his eyes to mine and said : "*Mr. Hoover*" — he spoke with the respect that had been evident in his celebration of the many virtues of that gentleman — "*Mr. Hoover is making his arrangements on a basis of three years.*"

Three years ! It was what Kitchener had said. Could it be possible ? The thought gave me pause. And yet we were relieved because Curtis had come, and the lights that twinkled far down the boulevard burned more brightly that evening.

Early in November Gibson returned from the Odyssey that had taken him to Havre and to that little corner of Flanders left to Belgium where, in a summer cottage in the bleak sand-dunes by the sea, he had seen the King and the Queen, living in the midst of that austere scene, with cold November winds blowing and now and then a shell screaming over their roof, supporting their fate with royal fortitude. He brought back the kindest of messages from their Majesties and from Baron de Broqueville and from my colleagues at Havre, and he brought back the details of the great organization that Mr. Hoover was undertaking. We had been experiencing the first of those tremendous and complicated difficulties in carrying on the work of feeding the Belgians — difficulties that were destined to dog us with an almost maddening persistence during so many months and what, in their slow lapse, seemed so many years. The organization of an enterprise that had to devise ways and means of raising ten million dollars every month, of purchasing food-stuffs in the distant markets of the world — in Argentina, in Canada, in America — find the means of transport across troubled and dangerous seas, and distribute it to seven millions of people in a land where the whole machinery of common life had been dislocated, where there were none of the ordinary means of communication, and to do all this in the midst of armies in the field, was a task that would have seemed insuperable a few months before. The C.R.B., as we were soon calling the Commission for Relief in Belgium, had offices in London, in New York, and in Rotterdam, and now it was to establish an office in Brussels, and one of the first difficulties was to co-ordinate its relations with the gigantic organization of the C.N., as we were soon calling the Comité National. Under the conditions imposed by the British Government the food-stuffs were to be consigned to the American Minister at Brussels and to be distributed under his supervision ; he was to be the responsible witness of the fact that there had been strict observance on the part of the German soldiers of the

guarantees given by the Field-Marshal Baron von der Goltz Pasha, Governor-General in Belgium. But since the American Minister, even with the best will in the world, could not be ubiquitous, he had to have recourse to representation, and Mr. Hoover hit upon the happy device of securing the services of two score young Americans just then students at Oxford, young men who had proved their mettle by winning the Rhodes Scholarships. They volunteered for the work.

It would have been difficult to create such an organization in the ordinary times of peace, with everybody well disposed, but, in addition to the physical obstacles created by the chaos of war, there was an atmosphere highly charged with its various suspicions, envies, jealousies, hatreds, and all the meaner passions let loose in mad fury in the world, that made it almost impossible. That the stupendous organization, which gathered wheat from the pampas of Argentina, the prairies of Dakota, and the plains of Manitoba, found ships to carry it over the seas and to deliver it in Brussels, and, in addition, the money to pay for it, was so scientifically created, was due to the genius of Herbert Clark Hoover ; but the minor task of keeping peace in the family seemed, by some unkind fatality, to fall to the lot of the person who happened to be American Minister at Brussels, and seemed to offer a convenient human substance to absorb all the numerous shocks. Perhaps it was because that substance was of the very softness sometimes irritably attributed to it when it declined or failed to range itself promptly and belligerently on one or the other side of the disagreements that almost daily distressed us—I do not know ; all I know is that it seemed to be my *rôle* for a long time to induce men of various nationalities and widely separated points of view and different habits of thought to meet at the Legation and, over a cup of tea, notoriously an innocuous and soothing beverage, to compose or forget their differences and to allow those poor Belgians, who had had no quarrel with anybody, to go on eating.

The atmosphere in Brussels during those early days in November was not congenial to accords, and indeed it did not improve in this respect as time went on. The Germans were not often in conciliatory humour ; they were, in fact, just then distinctly difficult and irritable. The German Kaiser had come to town for a day and had installed himself in the dark old palace of the d'Arenbergs, there in the Petit Sablon. It was said that things were not going on well toward the sea and down near Calais and Dunkirk ; and, as I heard some time later, the Kaiser had come within fifteen minutes of his death by an English aviator's bomb at Thielt. He was in a château there, so a German officer told me. He was to lunch and then leave in the imperial motor at 1.30 ; the imperial luncheon, however, was finished earlier than had been expected, and the Kaiser left in the imperial motor at 1.15. At 1.30 the aviator was hovering overhead, and the bomb dropped and exploded in the château. We were not at that time, however, so expert in noting the reflex actions of such incidents as we became later. But, at any rate, the Belgian flag, and even the flag of Brussels, had been ordered down from the Hôtel de Ville, and because a Brussels policeman in a soufflé had struck a German secret agent the Germans fined the city of Brussels five million francs and demanded that all policemen be disarmed and that they salute the German officers.

"*What !*" said one policeman, "*salute them — after they killed my father and mother !*"

But whatever the cause may have been, the authorities were difficult, even those who desired to be otherwise. We began to encounter the phenomenon, not new in the world, of the tyranny of a phrase. As

Socialists, for instance, speak of class consciousness, or economic determinism, so the German officers spoke of "*military necessity*." We would ask that something be done, something that seemed innocent and harmless, but no, it could not be done ; and when we asked why, the words "*military necessity*" were pronounced. Often in one of the civil departments they would shrug their shoulders and add, "*Les militaires n'en veulent pas*," and that was an end on't — no need of further discussion ; it was as though a prophet of old had cried, "*Thus saith the Lord*."

The guarantees of the Pasha seemed clear enough, until *messieurs les militaires* pronounced the magic formula, "*Une nécessité militaire*" ; then they would become something else. If one was so dull as not to understand the subtle change that had been wrought when the phrase was pronounced the first time, it was pronounced a second time, more loudly, as though reasons, like cannonades, gained force by reiteration and arguments potency by being shouted. We had the guarantees of the Governor-General permitting the food to enter and protecting it from seizure, but this document was as yet a lifeless thing ; it had to be vivified by construction and by application. To render it practical there was implied the right of communication and free circulation for the delegates of the C.R.B. I may as well say now that, as to all the food imported into Belgium by the C.R.B., during all the time we were there, the German guarantee was enforced and respected. But there were always ancillary difficulties ; things were done, but seldom done graciously, or in the grand manner. If the Germans did justice they did it as though they were granting a favour, and if they granted a favour they did it with a gesture that absolved the recipient of the obligation of gratitude. Our right to circulate, for instance, to come and go, was not disputed, was indeed admitted, but it seemed to be impossible to procure *Passierscheins*, which, when shown to stolid sentinels, would let one by. The authorities would shake their heads, shrug their shoulders, and say : "*Ce sont les militaires !*"

We discussed *Passierscheins* for months. We had to have *Passierscheins* for Curtis, who was to come and go between Rotterdam and Brussels bearing the C.R.B. dispatches ; we had to have *Passierscheins* for the delegates of the C.R.B. who were to travel about in Belgium ; we — that is, Villalobar and I — had to have a courier of our own, with diplomatic immunities ; and we had to have *Passierscheins* for ourselves.

One morning the Marquis came saying that he had just been told that the privileges of the diplomatists were to be restricted, and that they were to have no *Passierscheins* at all ! There was a week of wearisome, irritating discussion, then *Passierscheins* were promised. They were prepared, and then it was found that we were to be permitted to go only into certain parts of Belgium, our petrol to be subject to requisition at all times ; in fact, our covering substance of diplomatic privileges and immunities seemed to be wasting to a thin garment that would leave us ultimately as naked as other mortals. I said that if such a *Passierschein* were sent to me I should return it with my compliments.

Then a few days later this was changed ; Villalobar saw a sample of the new document and reported it satisfactory. But when it came, permitting us to go in automobile in all parts of Belgium east of a line drawn from Mons to Antwerp, it was *for the purpose of inspecting ravitaillement*. I refused, of course, to accept it, and the Marquis, when it was given to him, said :

" Monsieur, je ne suis pas un marchand de farine ; je ne l'accepterai pas."

Finally, however, to make a long story short, after telegrams had gone to Berlin, we received *Passierscheins* compatible with our dignity and our rights. When they were turned over to us and we read that we were authorized to travel where and as we liked in Belgium, Villalobar looked up and said : "*Sans farine.*" He never allowed the Germans to forget that unfortunate phrase permitting diplomats to travel for the purpose of "*inspecting*" the *ravitaillement*.

" Oh, pour mes petites affaires je ne dérangerais pas un personnage aussi haut et éminent que vous," he said the next morning when Baron von der Lancken asked him if he could be of any service ; *" moi, un pauvre petit boulanger !*

" Cependant vous nous faites beaucoup d'honneur. Pendant la Révolution française ces républicains appelaient Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette et le Dauphin : le boulanger, la boulangère et le petit mitron."

And every morning, leaving headquarters, he would say to Conrad :

" Je vous prie de présenter mes compliments au Baron, en lui demandant combien de sacs de farine il veut avoir aujourd'hui."

It was on November 5, after many consultations, that we gathered at last around the long oaken table, there in my cabinet at the American Legation, and had the first of those sessions that were to be so often repeated in the history of the *ravitaillement* of Belgium. There was the Marquis of Villalobar ; M. Solvay, whose snowy hair and beard framed the kindly face of the humanitarian ; M. Francqui, with his energy, his will, his executive force and vigour, his black eyes flashing determination or sparkling humorously in the constant sallies of his wit ; the Baron Lambert, the grave banker of the old house of the Rothschilds, scrupulously elegant in attire, polished in manner, particular in little things as in big (he would never have a letter written on a typewriter, for instance ; he had them all written out by hand in a script that looked as though it had been from an engraved plate) ; and M. Emmanuel Janssen, a grandson by marriage of M. Solvay.

M. Francqui read a *projet* in which had been outlined with order and particularity the whole organization : first of the C.R.B., with its committees and headquarters in London, New York, and Brussels, its shipping station at Rotterdam ; then of the C.N., with its seat in Brussels, a sub-committee in each province and in each commune, and all the vast system of exchange for the finance of the enterprise — arranged, I believe, by Mr. Heineman and the Geheimrath Kaufman. Thus slowly and with infinite pains the vast structure was reared, with as many complications and difficulties, as it seemed at the time, as there were at the Tower of Babel. The ambitious enterprise, indeed, seemed almost as presumptuous as that earlier effort, undertaken in another period of chaos in the world. There was the same confusion of tongues, which constantly produced its misunderstandings and frictions ; there were the usual heartburnings over questions of precedence and honour and credit, which no doubt contributed to the failure of the soaring project on the plain of Shinar, though these feelings were suppressed in the larger hope of making our enterprise a success. One American, for instance, was offended because, he said, a Belgian had written him a letter in French "*insisting*" on this, "*demanding*" that, "*ignoring*" the other thing. The letter was the politest letter one could imagine, but, as was at once

evident, it had been translated into English — by a Dutchman who evidently knew little of either language. The recipient, however, was mollified when I carefully explained to him that Latin derivatives did not always have the same value in French and English, and that "*insist*", "*demand*", "*ignore*", in French do not possess quite the peremptory significance that they do in English.

Aside from the larger physical difficulties and the political difficulties, there were those perplexing problems that arise out of the insoluble mystery of human personality ; there were antipathies for which the possessors themselves could have given no reason. I shall always recall with something like horror the long hours of discussion with a certain fellow-citizen who wished everything to be done by everybody in his way and in no other ; he was not quite sure just how it should be done himself, and when in despair I told him to proceed at once and carry out his plan of organization with a free hand, it seemed that he had no plan. He would sit for hours at the Legation trying to convince me, and I never could be sure of what he was trying to convince me. The worst of him was that he used long sentences without verbs, which was maddening. Finally, when every one else refused to have more to do with him, I said that he might be attached to me, which did not seem to be such a sacrifice since he was' already that ; but when Mr. Hoover came, he cut that Gordian knot in his efficient, executive manner and ordered the man back to London, where, shortly afterwards, it was discovered that the poor fellow's mind was affected.

There were troubles with stubborn Dutch skippers (four of them brought lawsuits against me personally), and the appalling intricacies of bills of lading ; and when all these difficulties were composed there would be articles in the Press in England and America to answer — sensational stories to the effect that the food to be sent in would be confiscated by German troops, and they wellnigh wrecked the work ! That the great organization, the one constructive organization left in the world, was got into such perfect and efficient order at last was due to the union of such efficient minds and wills as those of Émile Francqui and Herbert C. Hoover, though each of the others contributed his share of real ability, of patience, of goodwill, and of a desire to serve humanity. And it was worth all its cost of pain and effort when one evening a telegram came from Rotterdam saying that grain was being sent to Liège in charge of Captain Sutherland, Military *Attaché* at The Hague, and we could say that food was at last coming into Belgium !

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.