

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LVIII. von BISSING.

ONE afternoon the Marquis of Villalobar, whose pretty red-and-yellow flag, with the royal arms of Spain, fluttered so gaily about Brussels on its various errands, came in with an important gazette. Von der Goltz had gone to Constantinople and was to be superseded. For days Turkish princes had been in Brussels, and there had been wonderful dinners, and, in the dining-halls of the Belgian Ministries, *fêtes* at which the Pasha spoke Turkish with the best of them. General von Lüttwitz had gone too. It was always that way ; we had no sooner got used to Von Jarotsky than he left, and now that we knew Von Lüttwitz he was going. Baron Freys was leaving too, and we regretted that ; he had made things much easier. But the Pasha departed unwept of all, I fear, without even sympathy for the wound he had received in the check while at his favourite sport of watching battles in Flanders, and his successor duly arrived, as the latest *affiche* announced :

AVIS

Sa Majesté l'Empereur et Roi, ayant désigné un nouveau gouvernement général en Belgique, j'ai pris aujourd'hui la direction des affaires.

BARON VON BISSING, *Général de cavalerie.*

BRUXELLES, le 3 décembre 1914.

A few days later then, we went up the grand staircase of the Ministère des Arts in the Rue de la Loi, the Marquis of Villalobar, M. van Vollenhoven, and I, and by the Baron von der Lancken were presented to the new Governor-General, a man whose name, justly or unjustly, was destined to stand forth to the world as the symbol of one of the darkest, cruellest, and most sinister pages of its miserable history.

General Baron von Bissing, standing there in the lofty *salon* of the residence of the Belgian Minister of the Arts and Sciences, in the early twilight of that short December afternoon, was a man over seventy years of age, old and thin, with thick greying black hair brushed straight back from his forehead, and plastered down as with water or with oil on the curiously shaped head that was so straight and sheer behind. His face was hard, and its leathern skin, wrinkled and old and weather-beaten, was remorselessly shaved as to chin and throat and high lean cheeks, leaving the thick heavy moustaches of a Prussian *Reiter* to hide somewhat the thin lips of the stem mouth and then flow on, growing across his checks to bristle up fiercely by his ears.

He was scrupulously clean one might almost say scrubbed ; one might imagine him smelling of soap and leather like an old sergeant-major in a regiment of Guards. His brow was high and the lean face tapered to the wedge of a very firm jaw ; the visage of an old Prussian dragoon of the school and mentality of Bismarck. But out of it there gleamed a pair of piercing dark eyes that seemed black until one saw that they were blue ; they were keen, shrewd eyes, not wholly unkind. He wore, ceremoniously, a great heavy sabre that clanked against his thin legs as he walked stiffly into the *salon*, until, as by an habitual gesture, he grasped its hilt in his aged hand.

He had on a well-worn uniform ; his thin legs, on which he walked so slowly and so stiffly, as with automatic movements, were encased in tight blue trousers, caught with straps below the long, pointed boots that were made of soft leather and furnished with great silver spurs. His tunic was light grey and short, and its shabbiness was somehow accentuated by the Iron Cross of the first class that he wore, and by the enamelled star of the Order of the Black Eagle, fastened by 'a cravat about his collar and dangling heavily out at his wrinkled old throat.

Though he spoke French he did not like to do so, and in this audience he expressed himself with a rough voice in German, which the Baron von der Lancken, standing on his left, translated into French for us. He shook hands with me first and thanked me for what I had done on behalf of German interests, and spoke of certain American Consuls in Germany with whom he had recently had relations. He spoke then to the Marquis, expressing his regret for an incident that had occurred at Namur a few days before, when Villalobar had been insulted by a Kommandant. And then he had a few words for Van Vollenhoven, to whom he spoke in German, something or other pertaining to Holland. He seemed to have prepared, or more likely Baron von der Lancken had suggested to him, something personal to each of us to say, and this said, the brief audience, which had been invested with the formality of a private presentation at Court, ended, and we drove back in the bleak afternoon, with its lowering clouds and gusty winds, under the impression of a strong and possibly a hard personality. We knew at any rate that the new Governor General in Belgium was *quelqu'un*, as the French say.

Two days later General Baron von Bissing came to return my call, accompanied by Baron von der Lancken and an *aide*, and by General von Kraewel, who had succeeded General von Lüttwitz as Governor of Brussels, all of them in full uniform with decorations. General von Kraewel was a little man with closely cropped hair, and a small brush of white moustache, and the complexion of a man who loves the open air. He had lived in England and was something of a sporting man, I imagine, or else he thought that I was, for he talked of horses and jockeys.

They stayed only long enough for a cup of tea and a cigarette, and were gone in their grey motors. I never saw General von Kraewel again, for after that, at the request of the Governor General, we were to have our relations with the Département Politique (*Politische Abteilung*) at whose head the Baron von der Lancken was to be detailed.

The first important act of the new Governor-General was to impose on the population of Belgium, by a decree of December 10, a contribution of war amounting to 480.000.000 francs *. Another decree, dated December 8, convened the Provincial Councils of Belgium in extraordinary session for December 19. The session was to be opened and closed in the name of the German Governor General ; it was not to last longer than one day ; its session was to be held in secret committee, and the sole object of the deliberation was to be the method of raising the contribution of war levied on the Belgian population. And, furthermore, a quorum was not necessary to the validity of its acts. **

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* ORDRE

Il est imposé à la population de Belgique une contribution de guerre s'élevant à 40 millions de francs à payer mensuellement pendant la durée d'une année.

Le paiement de ces montants est à la charge des neuf provinces qui en sont tenues comme débitrices solidaires.

Les deux premières mensualités sont à réaliser au plus tard le 15 janvier 1915, les mensualités suivantes au plus tard le 10 de chaque mois suivant à la caisse de l'armée en campagne du gouvernement général impérial de Bruxelles.

Dans le cas où les provinces devraient recourir à l'émission d'obligations à l'effet de se procurer les fonds nécessaires, la forme et la teneur de ces titres seront déterminées par le commissaire général impérial pour les banques en Belgique.

Le Gouverneur général en Belgique, BARON VON BISSING,

BRUXELLES, le 10 décembre 1914.

Général de cavalerie.

ARRÊTE

Concernant la Convocation des Conseils provinciaux en session extraordinaire

Article I. Les conseils provinciaux des provinces belges sont convoqués, par les présentes, en session extraordinaire pour samedi, 19 décembre, à midi (heure allemande) aux chefs-lieux des provinces.

Art. 2.— Ces sessions extraordinaires ne seront annoncées que par le *Gesetz- und Verordnungsblatt* du gouvernement allemand (*Bulletin officiel des Lois et Arrêtés pour le territoire belge occupé*).

Art. 3.— Les convocations des membres des conseils sont faites par les députations permanentes.

La présence du gouverneur de la province n'est pas obligatoire. La députation permanente nommera celui des membres de la députation par qui la session du conseil sera ouverte et close. La session sera ouverte et close au nom du gouverneur général allemand impérial.

Art. 4.— La durée de la session ne dépassera pas un jour. La séance se fait en comité secret.

L'objet unique de la délibération dont l'assemblée est tenue de s'occuper exclusivement est : "*le mode visant l'accomplissement de l'imposition de guerre mise à la charge de la population belge.*"

Art. 5.— La délibération se fait en toute validité, sans égard au nombre des membres présents.

Le Gouverneur général en Belgique, BARON VON BISSING,

Général de cavalerie.

BRUXELLES, le 8 décembre 1914.