

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter **LXIX**. VEXATIONS.

THERE was but one Belgian at the concert at the Monnaie that evening, though there were enough Germans then in town to fill the theatre ; and if the Kaiser was not present, the Governor General was there to represent him, surrounded by a brilliant staff, and all the boxes were filled with officers. Le Jeune, the barber, who had an all-wise air of knowing everything, confided to me that they had committed all kinds of indecencies ; and though in this, of course, he was mistaken, he did represent the attitude of his class toward the auditors of that music which a year before all Brussels would have crowded to hear. The one Belgian who was present was a professor — curiously enough, of moral philosophy — a great lover of music who had perhaps forgetfully gone that night, and the day after paid for his thoughtlessness, if it were that, by having his position in a school instantly taken from him by the directors.

It was about that time that M. Lemonnier, the acting Burgomaster, was having some of that trouble which was so constantly his in the hard position he had to fill. He filled it gallantly, simply, and well, even if there were always, many to criticize those, numerous in all human agglomerations, who feel themselves better qualified to discharge public functions than those invested with them. It was difficult enough of itself to be the successor of M. Max, whose popularity grew each day of his absence, and at the same time successfully to resist the incessant encroachments of the Germans and to assure the continuance of that independent communal life which was the pride of every Belgian. But M. Lemonnier bore that unequal burden patiently and bravely — bore it for two years and a half, until, broken in health, he too joined that patriotic colony in German prisons.

The trouble M. Lemonnier was having just then had no relation to the concert ; it concerned the Belgian *émigrés*. The German authorities had imposed a special tax on all the Belgian citizens who had left the country, and the College of Echevins had protested against the measure. There was always in Belgium much talk and some criticism of those who had gone to England the *francs-tireurs*, some one called them. The Governor-General had just issued an order that they were to return or be heavily taxed.

The Germans, of course, would not yield, and had ordered the Burgomaster to prepare and to deliver to them a list of all the absent, which he had refused to do.*

Then, too, the question of the salute to be given by the policemen to the German officers had come up again. In ordinary times the Belgian policemen do not salute anybody except their own superior officers, not even the Burgomaster, though during the occupation they always saluted the American flag when it passed by. On the demand of the German authorities, as will be remembered, instructions had been given to them to salute German officers, but the Germans complained that when they did salute they did not salute properly — the hand was not held in the correct position, or something of the sort ; the policemen did not understand the technique of the matter at all.

Life indeed was made up of such vexations, whether one was Burgomaster or *agent de police* or Minister, and if one were Minister one could scarcely go to see a friend without being called out from one *salon*, where there was discussion of the troubles of the day before or those that were anticipated for the morrow, into another to hear the latest trouble of that very moment. It was usually some one who had just been arrested, and sought aid before he could be taken off to Germany. Perhaps it was a banker, as in the case of M. Goldschmidt, who was sent away without trial or any judgment — other than that which the secret police pronounced before they seized him ; or perhaps it was only the boy from Dinant who had his foot shot off during the horrors there, and had been arrested for telling what he had seen.

There was little, and in most cases nothing, that one could do, but in the endless succession of tragedies there was a constant call on the sympathy that I should like to think was not often failing. There were always delicate ladies whose country homes had been occupied ; their stories were chiefly a repetition of the same boorishness or nastiness, but there was one about that time whose husband had been arrested by the Germans for some petty offence and taken away ; alter many days of ignorance and uncertainty, they reported to her that he had committed suicide in prison, which she did not believe, but suspected a darker tragedy.

There was, too, the Chevalier van Z— standing there in the hall one morning, just released from the Kommandantur, where he had served a six weeks' sentence for having written letters to some one at Le Havre. He had come to thank me for the effort I had made in conjunction with Villalobar to have him released. The poor little Chevalier was much shaken by his experience, and he had had, from all accounts, a terrible time. He was confined in a room where there were no comforts or conveniences, with all sorts and conditions of men, many of them with loathsome diseases. After some weeks of this he complained, and was then confined with those who had what were called "*nervous diseases*", which he said meant that they were half mad ; and that was even worse, so that he nearly went mad himself.

" *Et tout ça,*" he said, "*pour une bêtise.*"

I was very sorry for the poor little fellow. The Kommandantur was a terrible place, and long years will not suffice to assemble and recount all its horrors and injustices ; some of them indeed will never be told, but be lost in that dark oblivion where it sent so many scores and hundreds of its victims.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* The Burgomaster's letter, refusing to give the names of the absent ;

CITY OF BRUSSELS, OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

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BRUSSELS, *March 10, 1915.*

MONSIEUR LE DIRECTEUR , — By its letter of January 29, 1955, the College of Aldermen of Brussels, in agreement with the Common Council and the administrations of the surrounding towns, protested to the German Governor-General against the establishment of a tax on the absent.

The German authorities replied to this protestation on February 20 by a letter which has not convinced us.

We continue to believe that such a law is against the law of Belgium and The Hague Convention and the agreements made with the City of Brussels and the provinces.

If taxes are deemed necessary to furnish means for the administration of the territory, Article 48 of The Hague Convention stipulates that the occupying Power must impose them as much as possible according to the tales of assessment and the existing apportionment.

It does not appear to us that the German authorities have been so situated that they could not understand the existing rules of taxation and apportionment which apply to them.

If, on the other hand, this tax is a measure of obstinacy, having for its object the punishment of Belgian citizens who went away, which they had the undeniable right to do, it is a restraint upon individual liberty, and we cannot co-operate in its execution.

And, moreover, since this concerns a tax on the STATE, we consider that it does not come within the province of the CITIES to participate in the negotiations relative to its collection.

Under these circumstances we regret that we are not able to assist in the preparation of the lists, of which we return to you the blank forms.

This letter is addressed in the name of the districts making up the city of Brussels.

Please accept, Monsieur le Directeur, the assurance of our high consideration.

MAURICE LEMONNIER, *Alderman, Acting Burgomaster.*

To Monsieur Maurice Maloens,

Directeur des Contributions, Entrepôt de Bruxelles.