

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LXX. The "ravitaillement".

IT would be an ungrateful task, savouring no doubt of querulousness, to attempt to recount all the difficulties and all the obstacles that the great work of relief encountered, then and always, for the trouble was never at an end ; no sooner was one problem solved, one difficulty overcome, one complication untangled, than a new one promptly took its place. It could not, of course, in the nature of things, have been otherwise. To attempt to rear such a structure when the world was in chaos all around, with all its machinery and all its functions quite broken was a piece of temerity that no one but a set of God's own fools would ever have undertaken, and the atmosphere then prevailing in the world, the hatred, the suspicion that had darkened men's minds everywhere, produced such effects as would have made any others despair. Captain Lucey, as I have said, was the first director of the C.R.B. after its more formal organization. He had accepted the position with some reluctance, for his own affairs at home, neglected while he had been working so untiringly at Rotterdam, were calling to him to return to America, but at the insistence of Mr. Hoover and of myself — Captain Lucey and I found that we had many old friends in common in Ohio — he consented to remain long enough to effect an organization.

The morning when he at last consented to make this additional sacrifice remains very vivid in my memory, not only because of the strong personality of Captain Lucey himself, but because of what I could be proud of as his American way of going at the task.

"*Very well*", he said, rising to his splendid height of six feet. "*I'm going now ; one week from to-morrow I shall return and report to you that the organization is accomplished.*"

Comforting words, after all the difficulties and endless debates ! The Captain went, and I did not see him for a week. He tut all the tangled knots at once, and on the day and at the hour he had named he returned and said :

"*I've come to report that the organization is complete ; will you come and look it over ?*"

Captain Lucey had installed the organization of the C.R.B. in its offices in the Rue des Colonies ; it might have been the general offices of a transcontinental railway, with its departments and sub-departments, its directors and chiefs, and corps of clerks ; it had the aspect of American corporate organization in most ways. Captain Lucey laid the foundations of what became an almost perfect organization, and, setting the machinery at work, went back, to our great regret, to America. He was succeeded by Mr. A. N. Connett, another one of those splendid executives whom Mr. Hoover seemed to have a genius for discovering.

The new Governor-General had not only reaffirmed all the assurances given by Von der Goltz Pasha, but when the Baron von der Lancken returned from a visit to Berlin he brought welcome news. On the day of his return he told me that the Governor-General would enlarge the

assurances given by his predecessor. Not only would none of the imported food-stuffs be seized, but no food-stuffs of any kind that would have to be replaced by imports would be requisitioned, even for their horses and cattle. The Governor-General had already issued orders to that effect ; he was ready to put it all in writing for us, and the Baron concluded, spreading his hands wide in a gesture that seemed to offer every facility :

"You may establish any sort of control you desire."

I said, of course, that the word of the Governor-General would be sufficient, without any written engagement.

The new assurances came at a fortunate moment, for there was criticism of the work outside, and constantly reiterated statements that the Germans were seizing all the food brought in, and that the work ought to be stopped. Over in London, as the telegraph was constantly informing us, Mr. Hoover was having as great difficulties as we in Brussels. There were those who thought that it was inexpedient to feed the starving Belgians, because if they were allowed to go hungry long enough they would revolt against the Germans, and they were saying that it was an unneutral act on America's part to feed them, since by so doing we were rendering a service to Germany, not only by removing the danger of Belgian revolt, but by relieving Germany of the responsibility imposed by the Conventions of The Hague.

If the Germans considered the relief work as in any wise an aid or comfort to them, they never said so ; in fact they, or many of them, seemed to hold to the view that in some way it was a great favour to the Americans to let them do the work at all.

The Germans were already beginning to show feeling against the Americans ; they resented the selling of munitions by Americans, which they always insisted upon representing as the sale of munitions by America; and they did not hesitate to bring up the subject with almost any American they met, although none of the Americans in Belgium then were, so far as I know, manufacturing any munitions. If this feeling against the Americans was not allowed to show itself in the attitude of the diplomats, it was shown by others to the delegates of the C.R.B. ; if they were not treated as spies, they were often made to feel that they were suspected of being spies, or at least potential spies. The German officers with whom they were oftenest brought into contact seemed not to understand or not to appreciate the work America was doing ; perhaps it was because they had an obscure feeling that somewhere in the vast scheme there was involved a certain reflection on them, some vague reproach, though the Americans, in their carefully guarded neutrality, tried to let no such sentiment appear. Mr. Hoover, in one of those visits he made to Belgium, went to see the Governor General himself, and came away outraged in feeling, threatening to withdraw from the work and to leave the onus on the Germans. That interview concerned passports — it was before the question was settled — and about the same time he had an interview with a certain captain of the *Pass-Zentrale*, who said to him, pointblank :

"What do you Americans get out of this, I should like to know ?"

Mr. Hoover looked at him an instant, and his eyes flashed, but he said only this :

"It is absolutely impossible for you Germans to understand that one does anything with pure, disinterested, humanitarian motives, so I shall not attempt to explain it to you."

There was nothing to be done, of course, but to try to realize somehow, and if possible to ignore, the vast gulf that yawned between two irreconcilable points of view, two antipathetic attitudes toward life, and to keep on with the work of feeding the Belgians.

The control which the Governor-General had so generously offered to permit us to establish as we pleased was to be exercised by the delegates of the C.R.B., who, under the original theory, were delegates of the American Minister for that purpose, but they could not make their inspections without the *Passierscheins* necessary to enable them to travel about.

The trouble about the *Passierscheins* seemed likely never to end, and one of the men of the C.R.B., having occasion to meet the Governor-General, took advantage of the opportunity to raise the subject, saying that the passes given them were often disregarded. The old General pooh-poohed the idea, said it could not be possible ; his *Passierscheins* must be and were respected.

"Very well", said the American, *"I am going to Bergen-op-Zoom tomorrow ; if your Excellency would send a man with me to see."*

His Excellency would be glad to do so, of course, and the learned Herr Doktor P— was detailed to go in civilian clothes. The American and the Herr Doktor were furnished with the latest thing in passports, and near the frontier they were promptly halted by soldiers, who ordered them out of the car, and began to search it. The Herr Doktor protested, showed the *Passierschein*, but the officer only said :

"Halt dein Mund !"

The Herr Doktor protested more strongly, and told the officer in more explicit detail who he was, but the only effect of this was to cause the officer to strike the Herr Doktor in the face with his fist. Then the Herr Doktor was arrested, and when at the Kommandantur he began once more those explanations, the officer in charge there shouted :

"Heraus !"

The Herr Doktor was sent into Antwerp, where after more explanations and more insults he was finally forwarded to Brussels, where at last he was not compelled to hold his mouth. The authorities threatened all kinds of courts martial and punishments. I never heard whether the courts martial were held or not, or what was done to the truculent officers, but things did go better after this illuminating if trying experience of the poor Herr Doktor. Every one in the C.R.B. was ultimately provided with great passes of the Governor-General himself — "G-G's" they were called, and they were much sought after for the sedative effect they exercised on sentinels.

Ere long we learned that it was not enough to feed the Belgians ; the French in the invaded portions of their own land were in a condition worse than that of the Belgians. One day a gentleman dressed in black, with white hair and a squarely trimmed grey beard, came to the Legation to tell me of their pitiable condition. The gentleman was M. Louis Guérin, a prominent citizen of Lille. He sat there at my table with a dignified

sadness in his face, speaking with sympathy of the sorrows of his people, and now and then leaning forward in his eagerness to aid them ; they were near starvation in his city. Could we help them to obtain food ?

It seemed impossible ; the task of feeding Belgium was almost beyond human power, and that work seemed to be hanging by very slender threads, with almost insuperable difficulties surrounding it, Even the C.R.B. could not follow in the wake of the German army as it passed over the earth, and victual the citizens left behind it I And yet — there was this dignified, saddened gentleman pleading for his people ! I could promise no more just then than to discuss the question with the others, and I advised him to see the Marquis and M. Francqui and Mr. Connett, of the C.R.B. I spoke to them all myself, and they all, of course, were most sympathetic, but the problem seemed at first insuperable.

M. Guérin returned to Brussels later, accompanied by two citizens from Lille, and with M. Francqui, Mr. Connett, and me discussed the situation again, and he enlisted the sympathy of Villalobar, who was charged with French interests. We discussed it in all its difficult phases ; it demanded not only a new series of guarantees from the Germans, not from the Governor-General this time, for his jurisdiction did not extend down into the north of France — that was the *Operationsgebiet*, where the *Hauptquartier-General*, the Great General Staff, ruled supreme — it demanded new assents from the British Government, and the money to buy the food, and the machinery to distribute it. Mr. Hoover was already interested, and while we were at our discussions there came a telegram from him saying that "*certain charitably inclined persons*" were ready to assure the *ravitaillement* of Northern France. M. Francqui and Mr. Heineman came, and again we discussed it, M. Francqui with that optimism of his which always kept our spirits up, saying that now that the funds were forthcoming it would be mere child's play ("*simple comme un jeu d'enfant*") to extend the work of the organization to Northern France under Mr. Connett.

There were numerous discussions of the subject there at the Legation, and around the long green table at the Société Générale where the National Committee met, and in the pretty little Ministère de l'Industrie et du Travail, at the corner of the Rue Lambermont and the Rue Ducale, overlooking the Park, where the *Politische Abteilung* was just installing itself. It had just then succeeded in detaching itself from the *Zivilverwaltung* and in setting up as an independent department and governmental entity, no longer responsible to any *Zivilverwaltungschef* or *Excellenz* whatsoever, save Excellenz von Bissing, and no longer subject to external influence of *Geheimraths*, Herr Professors, and Doktors. One morning while it was leaving the Ministry of Agriculture to settle itself more comfortably and more permanently in the Ministry of Industry, Villalobar and I were in the old Ministry which they were just leaving, and while Villalobar was talking to some one I wandered over to the end of the room and looked at some rather fine English prints that were there on the walls, and Villalobar said :

"*Are you taking a look round before the general **déménagement** ?*"

"*I am admiring the English prints*", I said, though it was not diplomatic to admire anything English, and then one of the German officers said, rather bitterly :

"*If we were the barbarians they say we are, I should take them away with me.*"

The Ministry of Industry is an old residence, built in the middle of the last century, in that broad and elegant style then in vogue, with wide,

hospitable doors and large windows, its smooth walls coloured a cream white. It occupies a corner of the great grounds around the Palais des Académies, and it has a little courtyard with verandas enclosed in glass.

The charming old house, in the days of its first occupant, had been the scene of a tragedy, some long-forgotten suicide, and later it became the residence of the Belgian Minister of Industry, in turn to be taken over by such strange, uninvited guests. In the bright little Louis XVI *salon*, done in yellow, satin, we were destined to hold numerous sessions, and to watch through the broad windows the seasons work their miraculous changes in the Park across the way, without changing the sad condition of the world.

The discussions in that yellow *salon* were not *facile*. One had the persistent impression that the representatives of Germany had been moved to study Machiavelli as a textbook, and that in any given exigency they paused and sought out from "*The Prince*" the maxim appropriate to the present moment and to the complication then in hand. Only it was not given quite the Latin touch of delicacy and spontaneity that Machiavelli would have his pupils give to their works.

One never went to see them with a complaint that they did not have a complaint also, a Roland for an Oliver, and this they would produce before one could advance his own.

When, for instance, I went, on second thought, to have the assurances lately given by the Governor-General made precise and reduced to writing, it was to learn that there was some difference of opinion as to just what those assurances were. The Governor-General had been offended because Mr. Hoover had himself gone to Berlin, and hence was not disposed to give official recognition to the Commission for Relief ; he recognized only the *Comité National de Secours* and the patronage of Villalobar and myself. Furthermore, he wished me to know that a ship called the *Aymeric*, flying the American flag, bound from New York to Rotterdam with a cargo of food for the *ravitaillement*, had put into a British port and there discharged arms and munitions, that the wife and daughter of our Consul-General at Brussels, Mr. Watts, had made statements against the Germans, in consequence of which Mr. Watts, just then in Holland, would not be allowed to re-enter Belgium ; and, as if this were not enough, that the Commission for Relief in Belgium cars were flying too many American flags in the faces of German soldiers.

Then it was charged that the steamship *Doria*, of the Commission for Relief, *en route* from Halifax to Rotterdam, had debarked arms and ammunition in England. Also the steamship *Calcutta*, likewise from Halifax to Rotterdam, had stopped at an English port and there discharged arms and munitions. These were a few of the obstacles in the way of a precision of the new guarantees. I had the conviction even then that these reports were all erroneous, but I assured Lancken that my Government would make an investigation, and observed that it would be easier to feed a lamb confined in a cage with a lion and a tiger than to try to feed the Belgians with the Germans and the English supervising the task. I told Lancken also that I should not be surprised at any moment to hear that the English had stopped the *ravitaillement* altogether.

"Why ?" I was asked.

"Because", I said, and I put it bluntly, "*because there are these who say that it is your duty, under The Hague Conventions, to feed the Belgians, and that if you allow them to go hungry they will revolt and rise against you, and thus make your task all the harder.*"

The Baron raised his hands in horror :

"Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, quelle sauvagerie !"

I said no more, but left him with this thought to mull over.

In the end, however, the matter of feeding the north of France was arranged, very largely without our direct mediation. M. Guérin had been allowed to make the long journey round from Lille to Paris, and the *ravitaillement* for the north of France had been arranged. Mr. Hoover had been to Berlin, and an agreement was secured directly with the General Staff, which as the ruling power in Germany could discuss questions with authority and settle them promptly. The details were arranged by the C.R.B. in its new international capacity of a treating Power with a flag of its own, and it was to carry on the work alone.

The C.R.B., rapidly growing into the amazing institution it later became, almost the one international organization in working order left in the world, soon had its own flag flying on the seven seas, and Mr. Connett put this flag on the motors, and thereby settled one point of delicacy, though I was able to arrange that the American flag continue to fly on the provincial depots of the Commission.

And, despite all the difficulties, the food was coming in, and now and then some American, whom it was a pleasure and a comfort to see, came with it. One of those who brought us most cheer was Mr. William C. Edgar, of Minnesota, publisher of the *The Bellman* who had brought over a shipload of provisions he had collected, and could tell stories of his perilous passage among the mines of the North Sea, and of the old skipper, nearly seventy years of age, who, after having turned over the navigation of the ship to the river pilot, came down into the cabin and poured out his glass of grog, lighted his pipe, and began to talk about his wife's vegetable garden, as if there was nothing in the world more exciting — quite worthy of Joseph Conrad.

Mr. Edgar made a tour through Belgium with Mr. Connett, saw Dinant and Tamines, and the crosses in the churchyard with the date of August 22, 1914, and went back home to do excellent service in the cause of the brave people who were only three weeks from starvation, and in the cause of liberty in the world.

And there was a noble woman, Dr. Caroline Hedger, of Chicago, who, with her secretary, Miss Hall, to aid her, did such heroic work among the poor, stamping out a typhoid plague in the village of Willebroek, near Antwerp, and contributing so much to the saving of the babies. She had the usual difficulty of the times — the Germans at Antwerp thought that her charts showing the typhoid infection were some sort of cipher maps destined to the Allies.

"They are all abnormal", she said, speaking of the Germans. "In dealing with them I always remember that I am dealing with the insane ; their suspicion kills me ; I begin to feel like a criminal myself, and now I know how the neighbours feel when the police are after them."

She said it wistfully. *"The neighbours !"* I could see all those poor in Chicago among whom she had laboured so long and so devotedly.

There proved to be, as I had anticipated, no foundation for the belief that the Commission skips were carrying munitions ; investigation soon cleared up

that point ; and the members of our Consul's family were duly exonerated of the charge of speaking against the Germans, whatever they may inwardly have felt, and Consul-General Watts could return to Brussels to resume the duties he so bravely and ably discharged in the midst of such trying circumstances.

The Commission even added another to the list of services it was rendering. Lace in Belgium means lace, "real" lace, as we have to say in lands where there are cheap imitations made by machinery ; most of the real lace of the world was made in Belgium, and before the war Queen Elisabeth had interested herself in the plight of the lacemakers. They were Flemish women who worked at home in odd hours, each wearing out her eyes in repeating monotonously over and over the same design or part of a design — a single star or a leaf. These parts of designs were collected and assembled by the patron who exploited these women. These *dentellières* made, perhaps, a franc a day, and when the war came on and no more thread could be obtained, and no lace could be shipped out, there were forty-four thousand lace-workers nearing starvation. The Queen was gone, and the ladies of the committee Her Majesty had organized asked my wife to accept the honorary presidency ; assurances were obtained from the Germans, the C.R.B. was authorized to import thread and to export the lace, and the industry was placed on a basis it had never known before. It not only saved the lace-workers from their immediate plight, but it released them from their old thralldom to the patrons. The artists of Brussels, under the inspiration of the Comtesse Elisabeth d'Oultremont, the Vicomtesse de Beughem, and Madame Josse Allard, who directed the large enterprise, made new designs, prettier than any lace known before, and each woman was allowed to make a whole piece — which meant emancipation. And not only were the *dentellières* given employment, but, what was not less important in its ultimate result, a new aesthetic appreciation of this rare and beautiful art was created in America.

. . . Yes, the food was coming in, and that was all-sufficient.

Down on the docks there were vast fleets of barges and lighters from Holland, and the Dutch and Flemish canal boats, aboard which whole families lived in the neat little cabins, with pretty curtains at the windows and children recklessly playing about the decks in the wooden shoes which one feared were ever going to send them floundering into the water, though by some grace they were preserved, and those charming little *dogs* — *schipperkes*, as the Flemish call them— "little skippers", who lost their tails by sitting down on them so often on the decks of the canal boats. And there were the vast warehouses stacked high with bags of flour and boxes of bacon, condensed milk, even peanuts and candy, which American children had sent for the little Belgians, who had never heard of peanuts and did not know what to do with them. They found them almost as strange as their elders found the maize, as they always called our Indian corn, or as the cowboy who for a while was in charge of, the docks, delighting them with his theatricals, as though he had come out of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*, as perhaps he had.

Mr. Gifford Pinchot was coming to be director of the work in Northern France. We had been expecting him for days, and one evening, wondering what had befallen him, I learned that he had arrived. Count Harrach came in, wearing his hussar uniform with the ribbon of the Iron Cross knotted on one of the frogs. He came on the part of the Governor-General, whose compliments he duly bore, to say that Mr. Pinchot had been detained at the frontier.

The Governor-General, as the Count had come to do me the honour to report, regretted that Mr. Pinchot could not come into Belgium because he was the brother-in-law of Sir Alan Johnstone, the British Minister at The Hague, and

that while at The Hague he had been Sir Alan's guest at the Legation. I suddenly recalled this relationship. None of us had ever thought of it when Mr. Pinchot was proposed for the work in Northern France. Under the circumstances, the Count said, we would of course appreciate General von Bissing's inability to permit Mr. Pinchot to come into Belgium and to travel at large over the country, but inasmuch as Dr. van Dyke had asked for the pass, and as it had been issued for Antwerp, the Governor-General had given orders that Mr. Pinchot should go to Antwerp, but that thence he should return at once to The Hague. I explained that Mr. Pinchot was a distinguished personality and a gentleman of irreproachable honour, but the Count said it was not a question of his personality or of his position ; the German authorities had decided that he could not come here because of his relationship to Sir Alan. There was nothing to be done whenever it was a question involving the English, and it was my unpleasant and ungrateful task to inform Mr. Pinchot, in a note which I had to send through the German authorities, of the regrettable decision of the Governor-General. Thus we were deprived of the services of Mr. Pinchot, and the work of directing the distribution of the food in Northern France was therefore devolved on Mr. Connett, the Director of the Commission.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.