

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LXXIII. Feeding the North of France.

Meanwhile the work of *ravitaillement* was going on with those various strains, accidents, and crises that marked its career to the end. M. Francqui had been permitted to make a journey to Paris, and had completed there certain of the details relative to the feeding of the north of France. Then Mr. Connett gave up the position as director of the C.R.B., and was succeeded by Mr. Oscar T. Crosby, who, like Mr. Connett, was an engineer by profession. He was a soldier too, which, as he was not fighting them, we felt would gain him the sympathy of the German officers, for he had been graduated from West Point, and had served in the Engineer Corps of the army for five years, had resigned, and later travelled extensively in China and the Far East. Glad as we were to have Mr. Crosby, we were ail sorry to see Mr. Connett go. He had quite won the hearts of the Belgians, as well as our own. He had accomplished many things ; he had perfected the organization that Captain Lucey had so well installed, and he had done it ail quietly and gently, with tact and intelligence, but, a phenomenon not uncommon among the men in the C.R.B., the atmosphere was too oppressive for him, the " odour of invasion " too strong ; he could not endure it. At the prospect of getting out he was a happy man, and as he and Mr. Crosby were dining with me the night before he went away, he said :

"The moment I cross the Holland border I shall take a long inhalation of free air."

The work of feeding Northern France was under way, the arrangements having been made directly, as I have said, between Mr. Hoover, for the C.R.B., and the German General Staff. The difficulty was in exercising the control ; several delegates of the C.R.S. had been detailed for that duty, and they had to go about in Northern France, at the very front, in the midst often of danger, and the Germans insisted that each one of them be accompanied constantly, day and night, by a German officer — their "*nurses*" the young men called them. Such a relation under the best of circumstances would be difficult ; under the conditions actually prevailing it was almost intolerable. The eyes of the German officers were never off the C.R.S. delegate ; they "*watched him when he rose to eat and when he knelt to pray*". The delegates were compelled, too, to lift their hats whenever a German officer passed, and they had to endure in silence the not always delicate expression of the instinctive dislike the Germans had for America and Americans. The Germans were for ever bringing up the question of the shipment of munitions, and their attitude toward the *ravitaillement* was one that implied a cynical suspicion of the motives of the Americans in undertaking the charitable work. It was common for them to ask bluntly:

"What are the Americans getting out of it ?"

But the delegates of the C.R.B. bore it all with an admirable patience, and as a result of their voluntary services and sacrifices three million French people had their daily bread. And that was all the Americans got out of it. But the experience told on the delegates. When they returned for a respite of a day or two their nerves would be so affected that they suffered greatly ; at best they could not endure it long. The unceasing and oftentimes insulting surveillance would be beyond human power to

endure. There have been many examples of courage and patience and devotion in a war that is the most hideous and savage mankind has known, but of all there are few more admirable than that of the young Americans of the C.R.S. who served in Northern France.

The difficulties accumulated, and on all sides. A German aeroplane dropped a bomb on one of the ships of the Commission — accidentally, the Germans afterwards explained — and as a result it became difficult to get ships or sailors to cross the North Sea. England would close the sea, or Germany would close the Dutch frontier, and rumour would run hot-foot with the news that one or the other was about to stop the *ravitaillement*, and all these complications had to be adjusted, arranged, compromised ; we lived with our hearts in our mouths. When a committee, formed in England to raise funds for the C.R.B., issued a statement calling attention to the deeds of the Germans in Belgium as responsible for the plight of those on behalf of whom the appeal was made, the Germans were angry and threatened to stop the *ravitaillement* ; when the Germans torpedoed relief ships the British were angry and threatened to stop it. There was, to be sure, a wide moral difference between the two provocations, but there was little difference in their reaction on us.

Then the Germans complained that Mr. Crosby had been for seven years, and until the outbreak of the war, in the service of the Russian Government, and that therefore they could not consent to his remaining. This was not exact ; Mr. Crosby had never served the Russian Government in his life, and had never served any public or private interest in that country ; he had indeed been in Russia but once, on his way to Tibet, when Count Cassine objected to his presence there or to his entrance into Tibet, and again in the summer of 1914, when, on a trip round the world, he was overtaken in Peking by the war, and hurried through Russia on his way to Stockholm, to England, and so home. I explained all this to the German authorities, and the objections were withdrawn. . .

The little Grand Duchy of Luxemburg was imploring us for food. The people there had foolishly sold all their supplies to the Germans, and Count d'Ansembourg, the *Chargé d'Affaires* for the Grand Duchy at Brussels, would come with citizens of the Grand Duchy, literally with tears in their eyes, to implore of us the aid we were so powerless to give.

These were but some of the many difficulties that each day produced ; there was always a larger question, one that went to the principle of the work.

The German administration had no sooner taken over the Red Cross than it was intimated that it was about to take over the Department of Charity of the Comité National. At the time the work was organized it had been agreed by the German authorities that the C.N. might receive and distribute certain sums in the form of direct aid as charity. The details had been discussed by representatives of the two sides, and an understanding reached, Villalobar and I having had nothing to do with the arrangement. There were in Belgium vast numbers of *employés* of the Belgian Government, all the men who worked for the State railways, telegraph and postal services, etc., and these, refusing to work for the Germans, were paid their wages by the C.N. ; they were the *chômeurs*, or unemployed. The sums dispensed were of course enormous, and it all excited the suspicion, if not the_ cupidity, of the military influence which was always paramount.

The apprehension of interference was not groundless. One day the Comité National received a letter from Dr. von Sandt, chief of the

Zivilverwaltung, complaining of two incidents that had occurred in the Department of Charities ; that, first, the section of agriculture had sent out a circular in which there was some covert criticism or, if not criticism, a phrase that might be construed as criticism of the Germans. The other complaint was of the department which furnished aid to the wives and children of officers in the Belgian army ; Dr. von Sandt said that this aid could be given henceforth in kind, not in money.

In an organization so thorough and so complicated as that of the Germans it was not surprising that the *Zivilverwaltung* should not have known that the section of agriculture had been organized by General von Bissing himself, and that it had sent out the offending circular itself in December, before the section was taken over by the Comité National, and that the Comité therefore could not be held responsible for its criticisms ; and as to the wives of Belgian officers, "*We can't say*", remarked M. Francqui, of the Comité National, "*to the wife of a Belgian general, Madame, if you need a chemise you need only to come and ask us*".

We did not, however, go into these details ; it had been understood that communications should be addressed to the Committee through the intermediary of Villalobar and me, and this fact was called to the attention of Dr. von Sandt with the observation that evidently some mistake had been made. This had the effect of limiting the discussion of all such questions thereafter to the Baron von der Lancken on the one hand, and the two patron Ministers on the other — that is, theoretically it had this effect ; there was always some one somewhere in the amazing labyrinth of the German organization who wished to have a finger in the pie.

The work was a beautiful one and the organization superb, as the Germans indeed, privately, though I think never publicly, admitted. The National Committee had taken all the existing charitable organizations in Belgium and united them under its agis, and this seemed to excite the suspicion of the Germans, or of some of them, who said that these charitable organizations were political organizations in disguise. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth, but there was no way of arguing with those who had this idea once in their heads, and no way of dislodging it. The Germans were always haunted by a fear that the Comité National might develop into a rival, become a Government within a Government, wielding a powerful influence all over Belgium. They made no objection whatever to the *ravitaillement*. This they found satisfactory, and were prepared "*loyally and honestly*" to respect all assurances given in that regard. But what the Governor-General wished to do, apparently, was to take over this *secours* as he had taken over the Red Cross, and to this Villalobar and I objected, reminding them of the various assurances they had given. There was much discussion as to the extent of the engagements the Germans had taken as to the funds to be used by the Comité National. They had indeed been negotiated chiefly, as I believe, by Mr. Heineman with the Geheimrath Kaufman, and they seemed ample to cover all forms of *secours*, but when the subject was again under discussion and these assurances were recalled, the Geheimrath Kaufman cited as applicable to the situation the old, and it would seem very characteristic, German proverb :

"You never eat your food as hot as you cook it".

It was a critical moment, and the problem bristled with difficulties. There were endless conferences and interminable discussions that lasted

over a month — conferences at our Legation with the Belgians, who asked only to be permitted to use their own money to succour the woes of the women and children of the poor and homeless of their own stricken land ; conferences in the yellow *salon* of the Ministère de l'Industrie, overlooking the Park, where the sun was golden among the trees then all green with spring, with the Baron von der Lancken, Count Harrach, and usually one of the Herr Doktors or Herr Professors.

When the Governor-General went to Berlin for a few days, the atmosphere seemed somehow conducive to compromise and settlement, and it was arranged that the German authorities should have the right to be informed as to what was done by the Department of Secours.

We had the impression, indeed, at that time, that the Governor-General did not wholly understand the work of relief ; certainly he did not understand the organization and the work of the C.R.B., for just as we were beginning to draw a sigh of relief over the settlement of the difficulties in the C.N. there came a long telegram from Mr. Hoover saying that an interview with Von Bissing had been printed in the *Staats Zeitung*, of New York, saying that the work of America in Belgium was not a charity at all, but a business, if not something worse : Mr. Hoover threatened to stop the whole enterprise — unless I could see the old satrap and have a denial made.

We had only extracts of the offending interview of the Governor-General, and when the newspapers from home had time to get across the sea to Belgium nearly a month had elapsed. A month can accomplish wonders in the way of allaying anger and irritation, and when at last we had the amazing statement in its fullness before us, we were rather glad that we had had only extracts, and that, after several conversations with the Baron von der Lancken, I had been able to obtain a satisfactory expression from the Governor-General, so that the incident was already closed. What had offended Mr. Hoover was the reference to the C.R.B.

There were not only interviews, but pictures of Von Bissing benevolently standing in the Art Museum beside a marble statue of Hercules and the Hermes of Praxiteles, or sitting in the Belgian Senate, piously listening to the preaching of some German pastor. In the interview he told how he was ruling Belgium, referring to it as a country that had been *badly governed* — Belgium, with its communal system, its democracy, its liberty, its peace, contentment, and prosperity ! — and he spoke of his efforts to "*revive*" the country, to open the museums, to encourage agriculture, etc.

The museums had been opened, it was true, but by German order and against the will of their directors. The Musée Moderne was open the first three, and the Musée des Beaux-Arts the last three days of the week ; German sentinels with guns and bayonets were at every door, and the vast halls were empty, for never a self-respecting Belgian would enter them so long as he had to pass German sentinels and rub elbows with German soldiers within the museum. What was more remarkable was the reference in the interview to the resumption of life in Belgium. But there was no resumption of life in Belgium. The people would long since have starved if America had not organized the Commission and got food over the seas to them. Von Bissing had very little to do with that ; he had not greatly helped it, save as he confirmed and enlarged the former guarantees, and at that time he did not seem even to understand it. Indeed, while he was absent in Berlin and being interviewed, his staff officers were preparing a statement to lay before him so that he might know what the *ravitaillement* consisted of, and what was being done by it.

He had printed *affiches* urging that industry be revived, and the interview stated that it had been revived ; but there was no industry in the country. The Germans, indeed, were having ail the machinery taken out of; the factories and sent to Germany. There could be no imports because of the blockade, and nothing could be exported unless it went to Germany. Industry was literally impossible because there were no raw materials. Forty thousand men employed in the gun factories at Liège had refused to work ; the mines had been seized by the German authorities because they wanted the coal. Belgium, in fact, had tacitly declared a general strike as a protest against German aggression.

As for agriculture, Belgium was already the most densely populated country in the world, and the most intensely and scientifically cultivated ; there was nothing that Von Bissing or any one could teach the Belgians in that department. The seeds that were being used were sent by the American Commission. They were planted by the patient peasants in their fields, and, after the order of Nature spring had come, these seeds were bursting, unconscious apparently that an elderly German general of cavalry was the cause of the phenomenon. The sap was pulsing in the trees ; Nature, in her august indifference to forms of government and the quarrels of men, was serenely carrying on her mysterious processes.

The Germans were cutting down the trees, denuding the forests, using the wood to make roads for cannons and covers for trenches and stocks for rifles. Even the boughs of the fir-trees were utilized ; they made, it was said, an excellent camouflage. The Germans had taken much of the live stock in the country, most of the fine horses and the fine breeds of dogs, and sent them to Germany.

We were all relieved, and, if it were a word with a place any more in this world, I should add that we were happy, in the receipt of a telegram from Mr. Hoover bearing the good news that there was enough food to last until August 15. We were not happy long, however, for when the explanatory letter that follows ail telegrams arrived, it informed us that August 15 was fixed as a period when the *ravitaillement* would come to an end, unless the Germans should yield to a demand about to be made by the English Government that the forthcoming harvest in Belgium be not seized by the Germans. We felt like applying to the countess of our acquaintance whose château near Brussels had been requisitioned and transformed into a hospital for neurasthenic German officers just out of the trenches.

But then there was a dispatch from Washington, with a touching letter that the Belgian Minister there, M. Havenith, had handed to Mr. Bryan, expressing the gratitude of the Belgian Government to the American Minister at Brussels*, and a group of women from Laeken had come in tears to present to me one of the flour-sacks that had brought them wheat from America, a flour-sack on which, with their own hands, they had embroidered expressions of their appreciation. And so some way would have to be found to save the crop to the Belgians who had planted it.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* The letter delivered by M. Havenith, the Belgian Minister at Washington, to the State Department was as follows :

LÉGATION DE BELGIQUE,

WASHINGTON, D.C., *March 17, 1915.*

EXCELLENCY, — I have been directed by the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs to forward to your Excellency the expression of deep gratitude which my Government owes to His Excellency Brand Whitlock, American Minister to Belgium, for the repeated efforts he has made in order to alleviate the heavy burden laid upon Belgium, and especially upon Brussels, as a consequence of the German occupation. The Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs has already extended to Mr. Brand Whitlock his sincerest thanks for the precious help he was able to give to the unfortunate Belgian population.

My Government has instructed me to inform your Excellency that Mr. Brand Whitlock's activities, under difficult conditions, have been beyond all praise. On many occasions the firm attitude adopted by him reminded the occupying authorities of the respect due to international conventions.

The Belgian Government wishes me to associate the staff of the American Legation in its official expression of gratitude toward the American representative in Brussels, His Excellency Mr. Brand Whitlock.

Accept, sir, the renewed assurances of my highest consideration.

E. HAVENITH

His Excellency W. J. Bryan, Secretary of State.