

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter LXXVIII. "*La Libre Belgique*".

THE centenary of the Battle of Waterloo, falling in June of that year, was not observed by the great celebration that had been planned in Belgium. The poetic imagination might figure to itself Napoleon and Wellington sitting in the shades of twilight before the ugly mound, exchanging reflections on the progress of the species and the improvements mankind has wrought since their day, when submarines and asphyxiating-gas bombs had not yet been invented, and women and children and helpless non-combatants had not become *chair à canon* as well as men. Perhaps old Blücher would have been there too, smoking his long pipe, though perhaps he would have felt his place rather to be in Brussels with Von Bissing, just then haranguing a regiment of Imperial Guards drawn up in the sun before the Palace in their *opéra-bouffe* costumes of white and red, in celebration of the day and the event.

At any moment, indeed, the reflective mind could find in Brussels scenes and subjects to moralize. Strolling out of a morning, there were always to be observed, for instance, the strings of horses going down the Rue Belliard, led by a cavalry under-officer who rode arrogantly along ; they went by every day in an endless procession, every one of the patient beasts the symbol of a little tragedy in some life of toil, of sadness in the humble peasant home from which it had been taken. Every day at noon there was a guard mount before the Houses of Parliament. A battalion marched from the Palais de justice, which had been turned into a barracks, down the Rue Royale to the Place de la Nation ; they were led by a band that brayed "*Die Wacht am Rhein*" and other German patriotic tunes.

The Belgians in the street affected generally not to see them ; even the familiar spectacle of small boys trotting along beside the bandsmen was lacking. Frequently, too, there was a morning parade of troops in the Avenue Louise and along the boulevard ; the troops had music at their head when they did not have a *mitrailleuse*. Standing on the sidewalk one morning was a young man who, looking at the soldiers, laughed ; instantly two soldiers sprang out of the column and seized him. The poor lad wildly protested in terror :

" *Je n'ai rien fait ! Je n'ai rien fait !* " he cried.

One of the soldiers significantly touched his gun, and they dragged him off behind the soldiers.

There were always such morally sickening scenes to be witnessed, and always the latest *affiche* giving the names of the victims of the firing-squad : "*Ont été fusillés aujourd'hui en vertu de l'arrêt du Conseil de Guerre . . .*" And then the tragic list, half a dozen or more, of those martyrs to liberty whose only monument was the red *affiche* that recorded their sacrifice — the *affiche* so soon to be saturated by the rains and torn and tattered by the winds, until it was covered over with another just like it, save that the names were of

other martyrs who had helped boys across the frontier or "*counted trains*", or in some other way resisted or offended the Germans. There were the names of women as well as of men, and no distinctions were made in applying the last penalty. And they had their effect in the hatred which they intensified in every heart ; they must have had their effect on unborn children as well. I shall never forget the expression of the face, nor the tone of the voice, nor even the peculiar contour of the lips, of one of the scholars of Belgium, an eminent critic in letters and in art, who one day, at some such sight, burst forth :

*" Que Dieu me prête encore la vie pour savourer la revanche ! "*

God, whose ways are past finding out, did not lend him the life to relish the revenge he so confidently anticipated, for he died soon after, as did so many others whose hearts could not endure the strain daily put upon them ; and were overwhelmed at last by the preposterous injustice that poisoned all the air ...

The hatred grew as the terror grew, and the resistance with both. It was a resistance that was kept up in countless ways, difficult to describe ; there was something occult and mysterious about it ; it was all about in the very air. There was the blood of the martyrs, and the courageous denunciations and appeals of patriots like the Cardinal and Maître Théodor. But the only organ it had was that remarkable publication *La Libre Belgique*, a little sheet that people found in their letter-boxes from time to time ; they knew not how it got there ; Von Bissing himself did not know how it got to him, but there it was punctually, without missing a number, so it was said, on his table at each publication. He tried by all the means at his command to find out, but he never succeeded. It was a small sheet of four pages, with three or four columns of observations that the Governor-General could not have liked to read. No one knew who edited or published it, no one knew where or by whom it was printed. It was, as its announcement said, "*A Bulletin of Patriotic Propaganda, irregularly regular*" in appearance ; the price of a number was "*elastic, from zero to infinity*", and those who resold it were "*requested not to go beyond this limit*". As to its editorial rooms it was stated that as it had been unable to find a "*peaceful location*" it was "*installed in an automobile cellar*". And as to advertisements, "*Business being dead under the German domination, we have suppressed the advertising page, and we advise our clients to save their money for better times*". Its telegraph address was "*Kommandantur, Brussels*".

All that I knew, or ever learned of it, was that it mysteriously appeared in the letter-box at the Legation. Then for a long time it would come no more ; after a while the clandestine distribution would be renewed. While prudence advised every one to show no familiarity with it, people used to discuss its contents and applaud the temerity of its unknown editor, who

*had a dauntless spirit - and a press.*

The German police tried every device known to them ; they made raids and perquisitions ; they offered rewards ; but they never discovered the editors and publishers, and *La Libre Belgique* continued to appear with its announced irregular regularity on Von Bissing's table. Probably nothing in all that the Belgians did irritated the Germans more, and they were incapable of seeing the humour of it, of course, or of understanding that their desperate and intense resentment only made the sheet the more powerful, determined, and influential. Now and then they did succeed in arresting some luckless person who was distributing it, or had a copy of it, but even those who had it could not tell whence it came. Women spies, dressed as nuns, were sent

about soliciting subscriptions ; they went to every door behind which they suspected the presence of some one knowing about the paper, and asked for odd numbers to complete their files, but all to no avail ; neither editor nor printer was ever discovered.

*La Libre Belgique* was not the only patriotic paper clandestinely published in Belgium. There was *De Vlaamsche Leeuw*, (The Flemish Lion), published in the Flemish language, and circulated in the two Flanders. It was in the same note as *La Libre Belgique*, and bore at the head of its columns the statement : "*In these times of sorrow and trial we Flemish place ourselves without reservation beside our brethren, the Walloons, around the Belgian tricolour, and we share the same misery and the same dangers. We are convinced that on the day when the final victory is won we shall also participate in the same rights*". It announced that its office was in Brussels across the street from the offices of *La Libre Belgique*. There were other publications, too, giving extracts or *résumés* of the news ; such as the *Weekly French Press*, but these did not circulate at Brussels — or at least never got in our letter-box.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

### Footnotes.

It would be interesting read what **Roberto J. Payró** told about the clandestine Belgian press (several occurrences) and about "*Die Wacht am Rhein*" in his *Diario de un testigo* (*La guerra vista desde Bruselas*) :

French version :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>

Original Spanish version for "*Die Wacht am Schwein*" in *Diario de un testigo* (26-27), in *La Nación* (Buenos Aires) ; 12-13/04/1915 :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19141009%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO.pdf>

French version for "*Die Wacht am Schwein*" :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19141009%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO%20FR.pdf>

Grâce à l'admirable travail de Benoît Majerus et Sven Soupart, nous pouvons aussi découvrir le *Journal de*

**guerre** (*Notes d'un Bruxellois pendant l'Occupation 1914-1918*) de Paul MAX (cousin du bourgmestre Adolphe MAX) était accessible sur INTERNET – qui a été publié aux Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles / Archief van de Stad Brussel en 2006 –, où il évoque, au fil des jours, la situation de la presse clandestine (forme de résistance) en Belgique :

[http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications/Fichier\\_PDF/Fonte/Journal de %20guerre de Paul Max bdef.pdf](http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de%20guerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf)