

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LXXIX. The Belgian crop.

IN the midst of the excitement and the trying suspense over the *Lusitania* incident we took up, and all summer long discussed, one of the most difficult problems that ever threatened the relief work. We had had already an intimation of it in the letter from Mr. Hoover saying that the British Government would refuse to allow the *ravitaillement* to continue after August 15 unless the Germans gave guarantees not to requisition the new crop in Belgium. Then one evening, just as Hermancito was translating the President's note out of a German newspaper for us, and we were hearing of Mr. Bryan's resignation, Mr. Hoover arrived from London, and we were face to face with the problem. It was a question of exquisite delicacy and it was complicated by another quite as difficult, that of the intention, or if not the intention at least the desire, of the Germans to interfere in the work of the Comité National. At the time they had destroyed the Belgian Red Cross it was predicted that they would destroy the Comité National, or take over the charitable work it was doing, which would have destroyed it. There were, as I have said, suspicions in the German mind of the Committee's Activities, and fear of their results. I suggested that the questions be separated and discussed one at a time, and we were fortunate in that the first of them to be taken up concerned the disposition to be made of the Belgian crop. The Germans, of course, would not give way before threats or ultimata ; once their pride was engaged the situation would have been irremediably compromised, and the work at an end. Their original guarantees had bound them not to touch any imported food, and these guarantees had been respected by them, but they had requisitioned for their army such products as were still grown on Belgian soil, and this was not in contravention of any expressed engagement. But, as is always the case in any enterprise conducted by human beings, there were those difficulties and complications that are inherent in the mystery of personality ; there were those various susceptibilities, antipathies, and inexplicable antagonisms that exist wherever men of different races are brought together, and usually wherever human beings are brought together at all, so that in the long discussions that ensued, in making the delicate approaches to the Germans in the hope of winning their assurances as to the crops then ripening in the little fields that lay like rich carpets over Belgium, it was necessary to watch the expressions on a dozen countenances, to read the signals in a dozen eyes, to know what significance to attach to frowns, or lifted eyebrows, or sudden hardening of the lips. The atmosphere created by that torpedoing off the coast of Ireland was growing ever more tense, and surcharged with grave potentialities ; the Americans who had worked so hard, so faithfully, without recompense, purely for humanity, were smarting under the treatment the Germans had accorded them — suspicion, contempt, hatred, insult even ; and there were moments when they were tempted to throw over the task. But there in the shadowy background of the scene were always those helpless hungry Belgians who must be fed, and there seemed no one else to assume the responsibility.

Thus one morning Villalobar and I went to see Von der Lancken. He received us that day in the little room upstairs, where, overlooking the pleasant Park, he worked such long hours every day. No one ever worked as those Germans worked ; they were up and at it early in the morning and toiled far into the night, with no week-ends, no holidays, not even Sundays. We

presented the notes that we had prepared, identical in terms, concerning the disposition to be made of food-stuffs at the time the new crops were to be gathered. Villalobar had asked me to do the talking that morning, and after we had conversed a while about certain details I found a way of suggesting that we discuss principles and to intimate that the notes, in effect, raised the whole subject, which was, literally :

"What did the Germans propose to do with the new crop ?"

And Von der Lancken harked back to what I had once said about the difficulty of feeding a lamb in a cage with a lion and a tiger, and asked :

" Qui est le tigre et qui le lion ici, nous ou les Anglais ?"

"Ça dépend", I replied.

He laughed, and a laugh makes things simpler ; I said that it could all be put very simply.

"What proportion of the food stock required by the Belgians for a year will the new crop provide ?"

"Roughly speaking, about a fifth", he said.

"Very well", I said, *"I make you a proposal. The new crop is one-fifth of the supply for the coming year. You can do one of two things : you can leave that one-fifth to the Belgians and the Commission for Relief will provide the other four-fifths, and you will get in addition, and very cheaply, the credit for having been just and generous, or, you can take that one-fifth and then from Germany yourselves import the four-fifths necessary to make up the deficit."*

He thought a minute and said that while he could not speak for the Governor-General he thought it would be better to accept my first proposal. I told him that I thought so too, and the Marquis added an approval. But Von der Lancken returned with an additional thought :

"If we give you the one-fifth", he asked, *"what assurance have we that when the Belgians have eaten that up the English will continue to allow the four-fifths to come in ?"*

We came thus tentatively to terms on the principle, but the details, of course, were not so simple. Men talk much and importantly about principles, but they agree upon them much more readily than they do upon details because, perhaps, they hold theoretical principles so much more lightly than they hold practical details. I shall not recount the long and difficult negotiations that occupied us day and night for the better part of that summer, but perhaps I can convey some suggestion of what they meant, if I recall what seemed a remarkable experience, unique in the world in that pass to which man had succeeded, after twenty centuries, in bringing it. I heard one morning as I awoke a strange and beautiful sound, latterly unknown in our life, and coming with what rich suggestion of memories out of the world we had lost — the musical ring of a mason's trowel on a brick ! There had been no building, no industry, and this note of remote normal life was sweet to hear. And what longing it created ! I could imagine myself for an instant in a certain Ohio town on a summer morning, with peace around, and men working serenely. Would we ever know peace again, ever win our way back to a life in which the only price of bread should be honest work, and not ever tortuous, endless, distasteful, nerve-wracking negotiations, discussions, and arrangements ?

In principle, then, we were agreed ; and Von der Lancken, sitting there at the little marble-topped table in the Louis XVI *salon* of the old Ministry of Industry, furnished for the polite uses of society, one day officially informed us that the Governor-General had agreed that the new crop should go to the Belgians ; that much was gained. But — one used to official discussions learns, before drawing the long and happy sigh of relief, to await the adversative conjunction that connotes new difficulties — but the Governor-General wished to put into effect his pet project of organizing the distribution of the crop on the lines already prevailing in Germany.

General von Bissing was a man of force, and no doubt had many virtues, but he had lived in Barmen, Prussia, and he had this prejudice he thought that everything should be done in the way that it is done in Barmen, Prussia. It is not, perhaps, a rare prejudice ; every man has his Barmen, Prussia, and there were many Barmens represented round that table, Belgian Barmens, and Dutch Barmens, and Spanish Barmens, and California Barmens, and Ohio Barmens, all widely separated in space and time. Von Bissing oft-times thought, no doubt, that the Belgians were unreasonable and at fault in not appreciating the advantages of Barmen and of doing things in the Barmen way. The notion of introducing the Barmen system of distributing crops was an old and darling project of his. We, of course, could object on numerous grounds, and Von der Lancken said it would be difficult to get the General to change his mind ; that was a thing he seldom did, as we well knew, alas ! And so for a long time we discussed the difficulty of convincing England, where there were yet other Barmens, and, like a convention in deadlock, met and adjourned, and met and adjourned.

And they went on for a month, those meetings in an atmosphere that had become so familiar to me, so inseparable from the discussions of men ! I had been living in that atmosphere for a quarter of a century, and I may as well own that I detested it ; a room full of men all smoking, and all talking at once, all with more or less vague and nebulous ideas of what ought to be done or what they wished to do, and finally, when it came to writing it down, each anxious to have it set down in his own words ; the infinite difficulty of reaching a common understanding, of discovering the agent that will cause the muddy element of discussion to precipitate. It is bad enough when it is done in one language, but here it was necessary that it be done in three, sometimes in four. One of those sessions comes back to me. It is a hot, sultry, summer day ; one of the Herr Professors, of the type that removes its glasses when it wishes to read, is bent over the table, very red in the face, with perspiring brow, writing ; impossible to get him to see a thing or to change a single line. Another, his face scarred like a Kaffir warrior's, is reading a copy of the *Manchester Guardian* — with what sensations, I wonder ! There is a sputtering discussion, every one talking at once, endless palaver, incredibly barren and stupid. I go over to the window and look out into the Park, waiting for the futile discussion to wear itself out. C— comes to me and tells me that F— is doing too much of the talking, spoiling everything in fact. Then F— comes over and confides to me that C— really talks too much and will inevitably min the whole business . . . When it is over for that day I go away with a nervous headache, and drive off to the fields where the poppies and the *bluets* are blooming in the ripening yellow corn, the very crops whose distribution we were squabbling over.

However, we had the assurance that the whole Belgian crop would be reserved for the Belgian civilian population, and it was agreed that the C.N. and the C.R.B. should continue to function as before, and that was the principal thing. It was the desire of the C.N. and the C.R.B. that the principle of distribution by regions be adopted — first, because the two

organizations were established on that principle ; and, second, because such a method facilitated the work and was more economical. Mr. Hoover demonstrated in an able memorandum, that the production of bread-stuffs was of irregular proportions in various districts ; the province of Limbourg could produce enough to supply the people of that province during the entire year, while the agglomeration of Brussels obviously produced none at all. If the wheat in each province were reserved for the people of that province, then the Commission could confine its shipments to the various districts as required by the exhaustion of their local supplies. Such a system would simplify the work of distribution as it would diminish the number of centres into which it would be necessary to transport imported food ; whereas, if the harvest were distributed to the entire population for immediate consumption, a large amount of railway stock would have to be employed to move it about, and much money spent in transportation.

We supposed that the military authorities would prefer not to be troubled with this constant shifting of goods. But no, that was not the German way : a German organization must be created and everything squeezed into it, everything poured into the German mould or hammered on their anvil. It seemed to be a principle with them not to turn the crop of the Belgians over to the Belgian or even to the American organization, which would have seemed to be the simple and logical method ; while agreeing that the crop should go to the Belgians and be, eaten by them, the Germans were determined to keep it in their own hands as long as possible, and to dole it out from time to time. Then we suggested that it be distributed by the communal or regional authorities, and when this idea was rejected we suggested that the wonderful co-operative institution of Belgium known as the *Boerenbond* be utilized. But no, this would not do either : there must be a *Zentrale*, and for weeks the form of the *Zentrale* was discussed ; they would elaborate its bewildering and complex organism day after day. The Herr Doktor who had the details in hand, or in head, might have been a plenipotentiary at a peace conference charged with fixing the status of all the nations and regulating the affairs of the world for all time ; it must be that way and no other, because that was organization, and it was doctrinal that everything must be organized. We discussed it, learnedly and solemnly for days on end, and the marvellous and unprecedented phenomenon of organization was at last evolved. Then one afternoon, by an innocent question of one of us, it was suddenly discovered that none of the Herr Doktors or Herr Professors, or I know, not what gowned and hooded experts, had ever once thought of such questions as insurance, transportation, demurrage, freight charges, and, above all, the fluctuation of the wheat market and the desirability of buying as cheaply as possible. None of these things had entered into their consideration. They looked up in amazement and put on their glasses, as they always did when they did not wish to see anything.

Finally, however, we reached an agreement by which the Commission was to continue to import into Belgium the food necessary to the support of the population, and the German Administration to hold the native crop, used in making bread, at the disposition of the Belgian people, the details of the distribution to be decided on later by the Governor-General.*

Mr. Hoover could then return to London with the desired assurances as to the disposition of the new crop ; they came just in time, for on the very evening when we were all relieved by the solution a telegram came from

our Embassy at London saying that the British Government was about to make some announcement affecting the work unless we could assure an immediate solution. As to the method of distribution of the indigenous crop, the Germans finally organized a new *Zentrale* called the *Zentrale Ernte Kommission*, composed of five Germans — one representing the *Politische Abteilung*, one the *Zivilverwaltung*, one the *Bank Abteilung*, and two others, who seemed to represent the Empire at large. But as a proof of their liberality and fairness they made a concession and allowed two more members, with full powers to vote, on the committee, one representing the C.N. and one the C.R.B. The sessions were formal, and every proposal made by the Germans was carried by the same vote — 5 to 2 ; every proposal made by the Belgian or the American was lost by the same vote — 2 to 5. And, in addition to this, inasmuch as Mr. Hoover's direct American way had offended the Germans, a new organism attached to the *Politische Abteilung* was created, the *Vermittlungstelle*, through which contact was established thenceforth between the German Administration and the C.R.B.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

* The agreement was as follows :

Le Comité National et la Commission for Relief in Belgium, sous le patronage de Messieurs les Ministres d'Espagne et des Etats-Unis d'Amérique et du Chargé d'Affaires des Pays-Bas, continueront à importer en Belgique, jusqu'à la récolte de 1916, les denrées nécessaires à l'alimentation de la population civile dans le territoire occupé, placé sous les ordres du Gouverneur général en Belgique.

Le Gouverneur général en Belgique de son côté tiendra à la disposition de la population civile belge du territoire placé sous ses ordres le produit de la récolte de blé de 1915 servant à la fabrication du pain (froment et seigle).

Aussitôt que Monsieur le Gouverneur général aura pris une décision au sujet de la répartition de la récolte, que celle-ci soit répartie dans tout le pays ou bien qu'elle le soit dans les régions productrices, ou bien encore suivant tout autre système, la décision prise sera communiquée à Messieurs les Ministres d'Espagne et des Etats-Unis d'Amérique et à M. le Chargé d'Affaires des Pays-Bas pour être transmise au Comité National et à la Commission for Relief in Belgium, afin que ceux-ci puissent prendre leurs mesures en conséquence.

Translation

The Comité National and the Commission for Relief in Belgium, under the patronage of the Ministers of Spain and of the United States of America and of the Chargé d'Affaires of Holland, will continue to import into Belgium, until the harvest of 1916, the provisions necessary to the support of the civil population in the occupied territory under the orders of the Governor-General in Belgium.

The Governor-General in Belgium, on his side, will hold at the disposition of the Belgian civil population in the territory under his command the harvest of grain of 1915 used in the making of bread (wheat and rye).

As soon as the Governor-General shall have come to a decision on the question of the distribution of the harvest, whether it be distributed throughout the entire country or whether it be distributed in the regions producing it, or whether, according to some altogether different system, the decision taken will be communicated to the Ministers of Spain and of the United States of America and to the Chargé d'Affaires of Holland to be transmitted to the Comité National and the Commission for Relief in Belgium, in order that they may take measures in accordance therewith.

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