

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LXXX. A Crisis.

WE had no sooner disposed of the question of the indigenous crop than the Germans proposed to take up the discussion of the second point into which we had divided the problem under notice — namely, the status of the C.N., and we received from the Governor-General a letter that created something like consternation. It was a remarkable letter, evidently the sequel of all the dissatisfaction with the Comité National, and it demanded a *quid pro quo* for the concessions made as to the new crop. Though it was written in diplomatic phraseology and plainly a product of careful collaboration, it was autocratic, Prussian ; it laid down the law as to what the C.N. might and might not do. Some time before, the Germans had appointed Dr. Reith and Dr. Schacht as representatives to consult with M. Francqui as to the work and the status of the C.N. ; for weeks they had been examining the matter, and had come to an agreement which we supposed was satisfactory. It had also been suggested that were the Governor-General to have a personal interview and a frank discussion with M. Solvay and M. Francqui a better understanding might be reached. We were delighted, and General von Bissing sent for M. Solvay and M. Francqui, who accordingly went one morning at the hour fixed to the Ministère des Sciences et des Arts, and were ushered into a drawing-room ; and presently Von Bissing entered in state, in full uniform, booted, spurred, and surrounded by his staff. Von Bissing stood there, his hands crossed on the hilt of his sabre, and, the presentations concluded, drew from his pocket a paper and read a formal address to M. Solvay and M. Francqui — the Prussian notion of frank discussion !

The exigent letter which so concerned us was addressed to Villalobar, to Van Vollenhoven, and to me as protecting Ministers (M. van Vollenhoven, the Dutch *Chargé d'Affaires*, was then acting with us — his chief, the jonkheer de Weede, Dutch Minister to Belgium, who was with the Belgian Government at Havre, having been named a patron of the C.N. and C.R.B.). We were informed by the letter that "*while the protection and favour which the Governor-General had never ceased to accord to the C.N. gave proof of the interest he had in the work, it appeared that the sphere of activity of the C.N. had taken on an extension that had not been foreseen when it had been created.*" The Governor-General esteemed it necessary that the action of the C.N. be clearly determined so that friction would not be produced. To this end, in order to enable the authorities to have a deeper knowledge of the work of the Committee, and to facilitate its task, the Governor-General had decided to instruct the German authorities in the country to maintain closer contact with the sub-committees of the C.N., and, in short, to attend the meetings of these sub-committees and take part in the proceedings. There was much else in the letter, which concluded by saying that all this was in accordance with international law. But even international law could not make German Kreischefs *persona grata* at a meeting of a Belgian committee, and if that were insisted upon it meant, of course, the collapse of the work.

And so again those long, wearying discussions, opened by a preliminary meeting between Villalobar, Van Vollenhoven, and me, on the one hand, and Von der Lancken and one of his assistants, Dr. Reith, on the other. We told of the fears and reluctance of the Belgians. I asked the Baron to picture to himself a meeting of a Belgian committee with a German officer seated at the table ; they protested that they had meant no such thing. It seemed that it had never occurred to the Governor-General that the presence of his subordinates at the meetings of men at Dinant or at Louvain could in any way be objectionable to those men. From just what quarter the suggestion had come we did not know : up to that time, notwithstanding the fact, as we had been assured, that Baron von der Lancken was responsible in matters of that sort, there had been some confusion ; orders had emanated from Von Sandt, from Von Lumm, and from others, and we had the impression that there had been differences, jealousies, no doubt, and perhaps quarrels among the German officials, with the military always in the background. There seemed, indeed, to be a continual desperate struggle in Von Bissing's entourage to secure the ascendancy over him, to get in his good graces, to be near the fountain of privilege and of power, and to make drafts on it from time to time — an interesting example of what irresponsible personal government may be.

We obtained again an agreement that thereafter only Baron von der Lancken was to issue orders in reference to the *ravitaillement*. Our discussions lasted for days. In Von Bissing's letter, or in the French translation of it which we had before us, the paragraph that foreshadowed the grim figures of the *Kreischefs* at the committee-meetings was written in the conditional mood, as though it were merely a suggestion, a possibility, and Villalobar and I had seized on this fact to calm the Belgians, saying that the matter was not yet wholly settled. But when the objections were set forth Von der Lancken said that he saw no way out of it since the Governor-General had stated that it was necessary to do this ; the orders had already been prepared instructing the *Kreischefs* to attend the committee-meetings. We called his attention to those conditional phrases, and he said that in the original German which the Governor-General had seen and signed, they were in the indicative ; it was only in the French translation given to us that they were in the conditional . . .

We urged him to try another plan which would permit the *Kreischefs* to receive a report of the proceedings of those meetings, and, thus informed, to continue to " favour and protect the work."

" *Ne forcez pas le mariage, Monsieur le Ministre*", said M. Francqui to the Baron von der Lancken at one of our final meetings, "*je vous prie ; sinon vous aurez un divorce deux semaines après.*"

Von der Lancken consented, and said the orders already prepared would not be put into execution.

The next morning, in the vast relief I felt, I had gone to the studio of the painter Watelet. We were talking of something quite important — values, I think — when there was a knock at the door and de Leval burst in, saying that I must come at once ; that the Germans had ordered their *Kreischefs* or the commissioners of the *Kreischefs* to attend all committee-meetings, that the thirty thousand Belgians working for the C.N. had given their resignations, that the *ravitaillement* was at last and definitively at an end, and that Villalobar and Francqui and Lambert were waiting for me at the Legation to decide what steps were to be taken. We rushed back to the Legation then, and there they were, though calmer than I had expected to find them in such a crisis. On inquiry I learned that the order had indeed

gone out to the *Kreischefs*, either after or before Von der Lancken had said on Wednesday that he would suspend execution and change the method, and that several Belgians had either resigned or had signified their intention of resigning.

Villalobar and I went at once to Von der Lancken and explained to him the gravity of the situation. It was all a mistake, he said ; there had been *trop de zèle* on the part of some of the *Kreischefs*. He would arrange all as we had agreed ; the presidents of the committees would see the commissioners before the meetings and discuss with them and furnish them with *procès-verbaux* afterward. He said that he did not wish any one outside to say that the *barbares* had seized the crop and that the Governor-General was eating it all up himself.

" *Ne faisons pas en sorte que cette belle lumière*", I said, "*la seule qui existe au monde aujourd'hui, soit éteinte.*"

And so when Mr. Hoover came back to Brussels in a few days and M. Francqui gave a dinner in his honour, with the wide doors of the dining-room opening upon the garden, lovely, in its mysterious purple shadows and the cool dark greens, we could all feel that the *ravitaillement* was assured for a time, at least.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnote.

It would be interesting compare with what **Paul MAX** (cousin of the *bourgmestre Adolphe MAX*) told about the same day in his *Journal de guerre* (*Notes d'un Bruxellois pendant l'Occupation 1914-1918*) :

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