

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter LXXXVI. The resumption of work.

DURING those late days of September, so depressing because each one brought forth its tragedy of Belgian men and women and boys shot down by firing-squads as spies or traitors, Mr. Hoover came over from London to discuss several questions connected with the *ravitaillement*. One of them was the seizure by the Germans of the crops in the north of France and in the *Etappengebiet* in Belgium. These crops were not covered by the guarantees that we had secured earlier in the summer as to the crops of the *Occupationgebiet*, and after we had those guarantees the British Government refused, unless the Germans relaxed their seizures, to allow the C.R.S. to send any more food to the *Etappengebiet*, where the crop was all raised by the Belgian peasants. As to the north of France, there was presented a somewhat different and hardly less difficult question, for there the Germans provided the seed themselves, and put their Russian prisoners to work in the fields. The peasants, in their stubborn and pathetic attachment to the land, continued to till their soil. As the war grew more ferocious along the front the civilian populations were in danger and the Germans were criticized for not evacuating them.

"*But they do not wish to be evacuated*", said a German officer to an official of the C.R.B. "*Try yourself to make them leave.*"

The C.R.B. delegates in the north of France, or some of them, were detailed to question the peasants. They offered them the chance of leaving, but they would not go ; they preferred to stay in their homes as long as their positions were at all tenable, and to face the known dangers there rather than to confront the unknown dangers of the mysterious world outside. Peasants ploughed while an occasional shell fell in the fields about them, and old peasant-women, driven from their homes by bombardment, crawled back at night to seek some shelter in the ruins that still had some air of familiarity.

The other problem, long a subject of inconclusive consideration, was known to us as *la reprise du travail*. Industry in Belgium was prostrate. There were no importations and no exportations. Factories were closed and, with the deliberate and systematic purpose of ruining Belgian industry and impeding its resumption after the war, the machinery in them was being taken and shipped to Germany. There were thousands of idle men. The Governor-General had considered means of getting them to go to work, but as they would not work for the Germans, and as no one else had any employment to offer, there seemed no way to do that. The sight of others idling away their time, always distressing to the self-satisfied and superior element of mankind, induced many conversations on the subject ; but no solution had ever been reached.

We were beginning to hear that Bulgaria was about to enter the war — not, as every one fondly supposed, on the side of the Allies, but on the side of the Central Powers ; and when Mr. Hoover arrived he brought the news of rumblings of revolution in Russia, so that there were likely to be in the world more idle men than ever. Many men had studied the problem of unemployment — men like M. Paul Otlet, the Belgian publicist, and Mr. Edward A. Filene of Boston, who, coming to Brussels (accompanied by Colonel Buxton, of the *Providence Journal*) on other errands, had become greatly interested in the subject. None of them, however, had succeeded in devising a solution that would be acceptable to the various groups and

interests concerned : and when Mr. Hoover, who might have evolved some practicable scheme, came to study it, he had to begin at the point fixed by the British Government — namely, that no German, directly or indirectly, should profit by the resumption of industry. Mr. Hoover was not, therefore, very sanguine of success. There were, indeed, Belgians who were opposed to the plan ; they feared that if industry were resumed Belgium might appear prosperous under German rule, and that the Germans therefore could claim credit and point with pride to the record of their administration. Mr. Hoover disposed of this objection by remarking dryly that the English would impose such conditions as to prevent any very flourishing prosperity, and we talked it all over and continued to talk it over, with the prospect of talking it over for days and days thereafter.

It was indeed a perplexing problem. Certain Dutchmen, with an eye to the main chance, had already attempted to organize trade in Belgium, and had failed. Finally Villalobar and I decided to go to the Baron von der Lancken and, since Von Bissing professed to be so anxious to have work resumed, to offer our services. But we decided at the same time to keep it separate and distinct from the *ravitaillement*, with which we wished no complications. Destitution was increasing to an alarming extent, and suffering was certain to be very great in the winter that was drawing near, and, of course, if the people could get to work and produce something the financial strain in that respect would be relieved.

We talked it over with the Baron von der Lancken accordingly, and he said that the Governor-General would view the project with a friendly eye, and thought it might be arranged if the British Government could be brought into agreement. The task of reinvigorating and reviving an enormous industry like that of Belgium, then thoroughly prostrate, was, of course, appalling, and the details infinite in number and complication. In order not to endanger the *ravitaillement* it was decided to create another committee, of which Villalobar and I were to be patrons. The broad lines had been laid out and agreed upon, and the conferences were being held, when an incident occurred that caused all my own interest in the scheme to evaporate. It was intimated at the *Politische Abteilung* that, while the assistance of the American Government and the patronage of the American Minister were desired, the C.R.B. was to have nothing to do with it. The observation was not made directly to me, but it reached me promptly through the ever open ear and mouth of one of those persons, common to all lands, who esteem it a friendly office and a duty to tell one unpleasant things they have heard ; and thereafter I gave myself no further concern about the matter. It was in a way a relief : my instinct had been against it ; I had foreseen a difficulty that would be inevitable in the development of such a scheme — namely, the monopoly to which it would necessarily lead, and the favouritism and injustice that would have been inseparable from the monopoly. And as far as the working men whom it was proposed to benefit were concerned, I could not see what they would gain, aside from the moral discipline that labour cultivates. In their cases I felt that the moral discipline would very likely be all that they would receive ; they were at that moment eating their bread in idleness, to be sure, but under the scheme of *la reprise du travail* they would receive no more than the bread they were already receiving, the only difference being that they would have to work for it. My associates were duly shocked and scandalized by these economical heresies, but I left them after that to their conferences, which continued for a long time ; and nothing, so far as I know, ever came of the sublime project — until it was solved by the Germans themselves, more than a year later, in one of the most sinister and tragic events that ever darkened human history.

I do not know that anything would have come of it even if the Americans had not so thoroughly washed their hands of it, and I think that it was part of the luck that attended them that they were led to abandon it when they did. Late in September Mr. Hoover went back to London, not very much concerned over the fact that his valuable assistance was not desired ; and he was followed soon after by Mr. Crosby, who, after having served long months most efficiently as Director of the C.R.S., had been called home to America by the demands of his own affairs. He was succeeded by Professor Vernon Kellogg, of Leland Stanford University, who arrived in that month of October.

END OF VOL. 1

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

**Footnotes.**

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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