

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Chapter II. The night of the (**Edith Cavell's**) execution.

At nine o'clock that Monday evening Maître de Leval appeared suddenly at the door of my chamber ; his face was deathly pallid. He said he had just heard from the nurses who were keeping him informed that the judgment had been confirmed and that the sentence of death had been pronounced on Miss Cavell at half-past four that afternoon, and that she was to be shot at two o'clock the next morning. It seemed impossible, especially the immediate execution of sentence ; there had always been time at least to prepare and to present a plea for mercy. To condemn a woman in the evening and then to hurry her out to be shot before another dawn! Preposterous !

But no ; Maître de Leval was certain. That evening he had gone home and was writing at his table when, about eight o'clock, two nurses were introduced. One was Miss Wilkinson, "*petite et nerveuse, toute en larmes*", the other "*plus grande et plus calme*". Miss Wilkinson said that she had just learned that the court had condemned Miss Cavell to death, that the judgment had been read to her in the cell of the prison at four-thirty that afternoon, and that the Germans were going to shoot her that night at two o'clock. Maître de Leval told her that it was difficult to believe such news since twice he had been told that the judgment had not been rendered and would not be rendered before the following day, but on her reiterating that she had this news from a source that was indisputable, de Leval left at once with her and her friend, and came to the Legation. And there he stood, pale and shaken. Even then I could not believe — it was too preposterous ; surely a stay of execution would be granted. Already in the afternoon, in some premonition, Maître de Leval had prepared for my signature a *recours en grâce* to be submitted to the Governor-General, and a letter of transmittal to present to the Baron von der Lancken. I asked Maître de Leval to bring me these documents and I signed them * ; then at the last minute, on the letter addressed to von der Lancken, I wrote these words :

Mon cher Baron : Je suis trop malade pour vous présenter ma requête moi-même, mais je fais appel à votre générosité de coeur pour l'appuyer et sauver de la mort cette malheureuse. Ayez pitié d'elle !

Votre bien dévoué, Brand Whitlock.

I told Maître de Leval to send Joseph at once to hunt up Gibson to present the plea, and if possible to find the Marquis de Villalobar and to ask him

to support it with the Baron von der Lancken. Gibson was dining somewhere ; we did not know where Villalobar was. The *Politische Abteilung*, the Ministry of Industry, where Baron von der Lancken lived, was only half a dozen blocks away. The Governor- General was in his château at Trois Fontaines, ten miles away, playing bridge that evening. Maître de Leval went . . .

The nurses from Miss Cavell's school were waiting in a lower room. Other nurses came for news ; they too had heard, but could not believe. Then the Reverend Mr. Gahan, pastor of the English church, came. He had a note from some one at the St.-Gilles prison — a note written in German saying simply : "*Come at once ; some one is about to die.*"

He went away to the prison ; his frail, delicate little wife remained at the Legation, and there my wife and Miss Larner sat with those women all that long evening, trying to comfort, to reassure them. Outside a cold rain was falling. Up in my chamber I waited ... A stay of execution would be granted, of course ; they always were granted. There was not in our time, anywhere, a court, even a German court-martial, that would condemn a woman to death at half-past four in the afternoon and hurry her out and shoot her before dawn.

Midnight came, and Gibson, with a dark face, and de Leval, paler than ever. There was nothing to be done. De Leval had gone to Gibson and together they went in search of the Marquis, whom they found at Baron Lambert's, where he had been dining ; he and Baron Lambert and M. Francqui were over their coffee. The Marquis, Gibson and de Leval, went to the Rue Lambermont. The Ministry was closed and dark ; no one was there. They rang, and rang again, and finally the concierge appeared — no one was there, he said. They insisted. The concierge at last found a German functionary, who came down, stood staring stupidly ; every one was gone ; His Excellency was at the theatre. At what theatre ? He did not know. They urged him to go and find out. He disappeared inside, went up and down the stairs two or three times, finally came out and said that he was at "*Le Bois Sacré.*" They explained that the presence of the Baron was urgent and asked the man to go for him ; they turned over the motor to him and he mounted on the box beside Eugene. They reached the little variety theatre there in the Rue d'Arenberg. The German functionary went in and found the Baron, who said he would come when the piece was over.

All this while Villalobar, Gibson and de Leval were in the salon at the Ministry, the room of which I have spoken so often as the yellow salon because of the satin upholstery of its Louis XVI furniture of white lacquer — that bright, almost laughing little *salon*, all done in the gayest, lightest tones, where so many little dramas were played. All three of them were deeply moved and very anxious — the eternal contrast, as de Leval said, between sentiments and things. Lancken entered at last, very much surprised to find them ; he was accompanied by Count Harrach and by the young Baron von Falkenhausen.

"*What is it, gentlemen ?*", he said. "*Has something serious happened ?*"
("*Qu'y a-t-il, messieurs ? Est-il arrive quelque chose ?*")

They told him why they were there, and Lancken, raising his hands, said:

"Impossible !"

He had vaguely heard that afternoon of a condemnation for "spying" (sic), but he did not know that it had anything to do with the case of Miss Cavell, and in any event it was impossible that they would put a woman to death that night.

"Who has given you this information? For, really, to come and disturb me at such an hour you must have information from serious and trustworthy sources."
("Qui vous a donné ces renseignements ? Car, enfin, pour venir me déranger à pareille heure, il faut que vous ayez des renseignements sérieux.")

De Leval replied :

"Without doubt, I consider my information trustworthy, but I must refuse to tell you from whom I received it. Besides, what difference does it make ? If the information is true, our presence at this hour is justified; if it is not true I am ready to take the consequences of my mistake."

("Sans doute, je les considère comme tout à fait sérieux, mais je dois me refuser à vous en indiquer la source ; qu'importe d'ailleurs ? Si ces renseignements sont vrais, notre présence à cette heure se justifie ; s'ils ne sont pas vrais, je supporterai toutes les conséquences de mon erreur.")

The Baron showed irritation.

"What !" he said, "it is because 'they say' that you come and disturb me at such an hour, me and these gentlemen? No, no, gentlemen this news cannot be true. Orders are never executed with such precipitation, especially when a woman is concerned. Come to see me to-morrow."

("Comment ! C'est sur des 'on dit' que vous venez me déranger à pareille heure, moi et ces messieurs ? Non, non, messieurs, cette nouvelle ne peut pas être vraie. Jamais on n'exécute avec une pareille précipitation, surtout pas une femme. Venez me voir demain.")

He paused, and then added :

"Besides, how do you think that at this hour I can obtain any information ? The Governor-General must certainly be sleeping."

("D'ailleurs, comment voulez-vous qu'à cette heure je puisse me renseigner ? Le Gouverneur-Général doit certainement dormir.")

Gibson, or one of them, suggested to him that a very simple way of finding out would be to telephone to the prison.

"Quite right", he said, "I had not thought of that."

("En effet ; je n'y pensais pas.")

He went out, was gone a few minutes, and came back embarrassed, so they said, even a little bit ashamed, for he said :

"You are right, gentlemen ; I have learned by telephone that Miss Cavell has been condemned, and that she will be shot to-night."

("Vous avez raison, messieurs ; on me téléphone que Miss Cavell a été condamnée et qu'elle sera fusillée cette nuit.")

Then de Leval drew out the letter that I had written to the Baron, and gave it to him, and he read it in an undertone — with a little sarcastic smile, so de Leval said — and when he had finished he handed it back to de Leval, and said :

"But it is necessary to have a plea for mercy at the same time . . ."

("Mais il faudrait une requête en grâce en même temps...")

"Here it is" (*"La voici"*), said de Leval, and he gave him the document. Then they all sat down.

I could see the scene — as it was described to me by Villalobar, by Gibson, by de Leval, in that pretty little *salon Louis XVI* that I knew so well — Lancken giving way to an outburst of feeling against "*that spy*", as he called Miss Cavell, and Gibson and de Leval by turns pleading with him, the Marquis sitting by. It was not a question of spying, as they pointed out ; it was a question of the life of a woman — a life that had been devoted to charity, to the service of others. She had nursed wounded soldiers, she had even nursed German wounded at the beginning of the war, and now she was accused of but one thing : of having helped British soldiers make their way toward Holland. She may have been imprudent, she may have acted against the laws of the occupying Power but she was not a spy ; she was not even accused of being a spy, she had not been convicted of spying, and she did not merit the death of a spy. They sat there pleading, Gibson and de Leval, bringing forth all the arguments that would occur to men of sense and sensibility. Gibson called Lancken's attention to their failure to inform the Legation of the sentence, of their failure to keep the word that Conrad had given. He argued that the offense charged against Miss Cavell had long since been accomplished, that as she had been for some weeks in prison a slight delay in carrying out the sentence could not endanger the German cause ; he even pointed out the effect such a deed as the summary execution of the death sentence against a woman would have upon public opinion, not only in Belgium but in America and elsewhere ; he even spoke of the possibility of reprisals.

But it was all in vain. Baron von der Lancken explained to them that the Military Governor — that is, General von Sauberzweig — was the supreme authority (*Gerichtsherr*) in matters of this sort, that the Governor-General himself had no authority to intervene in such cases, and that under the provisions of German martial law it lay within the discretion of the Military Governor whether he would accept or refuse an appeal for clemency. And then Villalobar suddenly cried out :

"Oh, come now ! It's a woman, you can't shoot a woman like that !"

("C'est une femme, voyons, vous ne pouvez pas fusiller une femme comme cela !")

The Baron paused, was evidently moved.

"Gentlemen, it is past eleven o'clock ; what can be done?"

("Messieurs, il est onze heures passées ; comment faire?")

It was only von Sauberzweig who could act, he said, and they urged the Baron to go to see von Sauberzweig. Finally he consented. While he was gone, Villalobar, Gibson and de Leval repeated to Harrach and von Falkenhausen all the arguments that might move them. Von Falkenhausen was young, he had been to Cambridge in England, and he was touched, though of course he was powerless. And de Leval says that when he gave signs of showing pity Harrach cast a glance at him, so that he said nothing more, and that then Harrach said :

"The life of one German soldier seems to us much more important than that of all the old English nurses ..."

("La vie du moindre soldat allemand nous paraît bien plus importante que celles de toutes ces vieilles nurses anglaises ...")

At last Lancken returned and standing there, announced :

"I am exceedingly sorry, but the Governor tells me that it is after due reflection that the execution was decided upon, and that he will not change his decision ... Making use of his prerogative he even refuses to receive the plea for mercy . . . Therefore, no one, not even the Emperor, can do anything for you."

("Je suis désolé, mais le Gouverneur m'a répondu que c'est après mûre réflexion que l'exécution a été décidée et qu'il n'y a rien à y changer ... Usant de son droit, il refuse même de recevoir le recours en grâce ... Donc, personne, même l'Empereur, ne pourrait rien pour vous.")

With this he handed my letter and the *requête en grâce* to Gibson. There was a moment of silence in the yellow salon. Then Villalobar sprang up and seizing Lancken by the shoulder said to him in an energetic tone:

"Baron, I insist on speaking to you !"

("Baron, je veux vous parler !")

"C'est inutile . . ." began Lancken.

"Je veux vous parler !" the Marquis replied, giving categorical emphasis to the harsh imperative.

The old Spanish pride had been mounting in the Marquis, and he literally dragged the tall von der Lancken into the little room near by ; then voices were heard in sharp discussion, and even through the partition the voice of Villalobar :

"It is idiotic, this thing you are going to do ; you will have another Louvain !"

("C'est fou ce que vous allez faire ; vous allez avoir un autre Louvain !")

A few moments later they came back — Villalobar in silent rage, Lancken very red. And, as de Leval said, without another word, dumb, in consternation, filled with an immense despair, they came away.

I heard the report, and they withdrew. A little while and I heard the street-door open. The women who had waited all that night went out into the rain.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* (Translation :)

My dear Baron :

I am too ill to present my request to you in person, but I appeal to the generosity of your heart to support it and to save this unfortunate woman from death. Have pity on her !

Yours sincerely, Brand Whitlock.

*Mr. Whitlock, American Minister in Brussels,
to Baron von Bissing, Governor-General in Belgium*

Bruxelles, le 11 octobre, 1915.

Excellence, — Je viens d'apprendre que Miss Cavell, sujette anglaise, et par conséquent sous la protection de ma Légation, a été condamnée à mort ce matin par le conseil de guerre.

Sans examiner les causes qui ont motivé une condamnation aussi sévère, et qui, si les renseignements qu'on me donne sont exacts, est plus sévère dans le cas actuel que dans tous les autres cas de même espèce qui ont été jugés par le même tribunal, je crois pouvoir faire appel aux sentiments d'humanité et de générosité de Votre Excellence en faveur de Miss Cavell, afin que la peine de mort prononcée contre elle soit commuée et que cette malheureuse femme ne soit pas passée par les armes.

Miss Cavell en effet est la principale nurse de l'Institut Chirurgical de Bruxelles, Elle a passé sa vie à soigner la souffrance des autres, et, à son école, se sont formées de nombreuses infirmières qui ont, dans le monde entier, en Allemagne comme en Belgique, veillé au chevet des malades. Au début de la guerre Miss Cavell a prodigué ses soins aux soldats allemands comme aux autres. A défaut d'autres raisons, sa carrière humanitaire est de nature à inspirer toutes les pitiés et à promouvoir tous les pardons. Si les informations qui me sont données sont exactes. Miss Cavell, loin de se cacher, a, avec une louable franchise, avoué tous les faits qui étaient à sa charge, et ce seraient même des renseignements fournis par elle seule, et qu'elle seule pouvait fournir, qui ont causé l'aggravation de la peine prononcée contre elle.

C'est donc avec confiance, et avec l'espoir de la voir favorablement accueillie, que j'ai l'honneur de présenter à Votre Excellence ma requête en grâce en faveur de Miss Cavell.

Je saisis, etc.,

Brand Whitlock.

(Translation :)

Brussels, October 11, 1915.

Your Excellency, — I have just heard that Miss Cavell, a British subject and consequently under the protection of my Legation, was this morning condemned to death by court martial.

If my information is correct, the sentence in the present case is more severe than all the others that have been passed in similar cases tried by the same court, and, without going into the reasons for such a drastic sentence, I feel that I can appeal to Your Excellency's feelings of humanity and generosity in Miss Cavell's favour, and to ask that the death penalty passed on Miss Cavell be commuted, and that this unfortunate woman be not executed.

Miss Cavell is the head of the Brussels Surgical Institute. She has spent her life in alleviating the sufferings of others, and her school has turned out many nurses who have watched at the bedside of the sick all the world over, in Germany as in Belgium. At the beginning of the war Miss Cavell bestowed her care as freely on the German soldiers as on others. Even in default of all other reasons, her career as a servant of humanity is such as to inspire the greatest sympathy and to call for pardon. If the information in my possession is correct. Miss Cavell, far from shielding herself, has, with commendable straightforwardness admitted the truth of all the charges against her, and it is the very information which she herself has furnished and which she alone was in a position to furnish, that has aggravated the severity of the sentence passed against her.

It is then with confidence and in the hope of its favourable reception that I have the honour to present to Your Excellency my request for pardon on Miss Cavell's behalf.

I avail, etc.,

Brand Whitlock.

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*) :

[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)

The Argentine journalist **Roberto J. Payró**, having been arrested on September 22, 1915 :

« *Roberto J. Payró : son arrestation à Bruxelles* » a été, à l'origine, publié dans *La Nación* du 15/12/1915 :

French version :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTATION%20PAYRO%20A%20BRUXELLES%20LA%20NACION%2019151215.pdf>

Original **Spanish** version:

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTO%20PAYRO%20EN%20BRUSELAS%20LA%20NACION%2019151215.pdf>

Fac-simile :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTO%20PAYRO%20EN%20BRUSELAS%20LA%20NACION%2019151215.JPG>

« *Une primeur pour nos lecteurs. Sous l'Occupation : M. Roberto J. Payró* », est paru dans *Le Cri de Belgique* (organe hebdomadaire des intérêts belges dans l'Amérique du sud) ; Buenos Aires ; 17 janvier 1920, numéro 223 :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTATION%20PAYRO%20CRI%20DE%20BELGIQUE%2019200117.pdf>

Fac-simile :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTATION%20PAYRO%20CRI%20DE%20BELGIQUE%2019200117.JPG>

Roberto J. Payró could not react about Edith Cavell's arrestation, as he used to do in his *Diario de un testigo* (*La guerra vista desde Bruselas*) :

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

Original **Spanish** version:

www.idesetautres.be