

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Chapter VI. The von Sauberzweig regime.

The doctor had been there again that Wednesday morning with his *piqûres*. My motor, like every other institution in the world, was broken down, and I had not been out of doors. I had been working on a despatch, trying to inform Washington of all those complicated events. I was still under the horror of it all, and depressed, and after dinner that evening Miss Larner sent up word that a cipher cablegram had come. There is a certain nervous suspense about a cipher telegram, especially when one is used to receiving so much bad news ; the words, the phrases come forth so slowly, with such long and painful pauses, while the clerks rustle the leaves of the code, turning them over and scowling and finally writing down some absurd *non sequitur* . . .

There was a diplomat, a Minister I used to know, who received one night a cipher despatch, and one by one the words came forth :

"*You — are — promoted*"

His heart began beating wildly. . . .

"— *an — ambassador*"

He was all radiant; it was the moment for which he had been waiting and working for so many years, the supreme moment of his career. What would the next cipher groups say ? Would it be London or Paris or Rome or Washington ?

But I forgot ; the despatch, of course, was in French :

"Sa Majesté me donne pour ordre d'informer Votre Excellence qu'Elle est avancée au grade d'Ambassadeur"

And, as I was saying, he hung on the next word. When it came it was :

"*Honoraire*".

Only Honorary Ambassador, then ! And the calm groups disclosed their cruel fate :

"— *and retired from the service.*"

This night, then, with none but the most confused notions of what the world was thinking and saying of the Cavell case, we deciphered the despatch, and it proved to be from Mr. Lansing, and, like all his despatches, most thoughtful, generous and kind :

"The Department learns that your health is not good and realizing the responsibility and the strain under which you have been working, informs you that if you so desire you may take advantage of the leave of absence to which you are entitled and visit the United States. The manner in which you have discharged your duties is highly appreciated."

There are not many moments in a man's life like that ; far better than all the *piqûres* in the world !

I went up those three flights of stairs at the jump — and the doctors say that one should not do that after one is forty-five. But to see America ! That land where men know liberty and love truth and honour and respect women, where there are courts and laws and orderly

processes and the traditions of the liberties of a thousand years ; where the Dark Ages exist only in books to be read by the fire on winter nights, when one is weary of the manuscript on the table — that land where, in Ibsen's impressionistic and all-embracing phrase, "*a freer air blows over the people.*"

My Government had not learned from me that I was ill ; the news had got over into Holland and had been published at The Hague. I should never have asked for leave, and now, with that perversity that is implicit in human nature, when it had come unasked I could regret that I no longer felt the need of it.

And I could not leave just then. That very next morning there was another affiche on the walls, among les *Nouvelles Publiées par le Gouvernement Allemand*. It was an amazing affiche, in view of my interview with Baron von der Lancken, but we were beyond amazement by that time. This was the affiche :

Brussels, October 27 :

The Ambassador of the United States at London has placed at the disposition of the English Government papers relating to the Cavell affair. These papers include the correspondence on the subject of the trial exchanged between the Legation of the United States at Brussels and the German authorities in that city. The English Government immediately gave these documents to the Press and had them published by Reuter's Agency. They reported the most essential facts in an inexact manner. They made it appear, especially, that

the German authorities had, by false promises, put off the United States Minister and kept him ignorant of the fact that the death sentence had already been pronounced, and, by proceeding rapidly with the execution, to prevent him from intervening in favour of the accused.

*In the comments published at the same time on this subject. Sir Edward Grey considers particularly reprehensible the fact that the German authority did not respect its engagement to keep the United States Minister informed of the progress of the trial. Such a promise was never given by the German authority, which, consequently, could not have broken its word. The Minister of the United States in Brussels, in the course of an interview with the German authority, himself recognized that such was the case. The Ambassador of the United States in London has been misinformed ; he has been led into error by the report of a Belgian lawyer who, in his quality of legal adviser to the American Legation in Brussels, has played a certain part in this affair. The United States Minister has declared that the publication of the documents in question had greatly surprised him, and that without delay he would apprise his colleague in London and his Government of the differences existing between the actual facts and the story published in the report written by the Belgian lawyer. **

It made its sensation. There were some who came to see me about it, and they added to the difficulty of the

situation because they wished me to begin issuing statements and placarding affiches myself, to "*opposer le démenti le plus formel*" on the walls of Brussels. I trust that I was patient with them and recognized them as belonging to that order of mentality which thinks that the truth is affected by statements concerning it, and that only he is in the right who has the last and the loudest word. An old bit of epigrammatic philosophy came to my mind ; I used to keep it on the wall of my office when I was mayor, to show to reporters : Elbert Hubbard wrote it, or found it somewhere ; it sounds like a modern version of Emerson's advice about apologies :

Never explain; your friends do not require it and your enemies will not believe you anyway.

Perhaps my friends did not quite understand it, because it does not adapt itself any more readily to translation into their language than it seemed to accord with their customs — which still embrace the *code d'honneur*. What I kept uppermost in my mind and before my eyes then, as during all those months and years in Belgium, was the *ravitaillement*. Explanations, and especially denials of German statements, could wait, but not the seven million hungry mouths.

"*Mais*", they would say, "*de Leval ? ...*"

They were troubled about the reflections the Germans had made on de Leval's veracity. It would seem that German official statements should have been estimated at their proper value in Belgium in that time, and by the vast majority of people they were — by nearly all, indeed, except the few fatuous *naïfs*. The

Germans had tried to make the world believe, and by innuendoes and suggestions they had tried to make it appear that I had said — when I had refused to make and had not made any statement whatever — that de Leval had misled me, that the published report was inexact ; whereas it would seem quite needless to say that de Leval had not misled me and that the report was wholly and meticulously accurate, and that if it erred at all it was on the side of generosity. I do not know who was responsible for the *affiche* ; Lancken had gone to Munich. And I was troubled about something more important in de Leval's case just then — namely, his liberty — perhaps, as was conceivable, his very life. The Germans had concentrated all their anger on him ; there were threats of arrest, of imprisonment, of deportation. The Maître himself took it all calmly enough, but I felt that it would not be safe for him to remain in Belgium. I longed to see him away, and so reported to Washington.

It was a difficult moment in which to adjust such delicate matters. A thick cloud of terror, of hate, the emanation of the abominable deed, had settled over the town. Von Sauberzweig had a new *affiche* on the walls before which groups of people stood aghast.

On the Sunday before that awful Monday of the tragedy an aeroplane of the Allies had flown over Brussels. Marie had come up to my sick room to tell me. She had seen the aeroplane ; there had been *un grand monde* on the Avenue de Tervueren : "*Il filait à travers les coups de feu ; il payait d'audace mais on ne*

l'a pas atteint ; il s'est échappé — tout petit, tout petit, comme un moineau !"

Then on that Monday another aviator, it was said, had dropped bombs on (Sint-Agatha-)Berchem, where there was a hangar for the Zeppelins, though some said it was at Jette near by, where asphyxiating-bombs were said to be manufactured. The city was excited until the tragedy of the Cavell case overwhelmed all other thoughts, and thus the aviators were forgotten by the Belgians, but not by the Germans, and the new *affiche* recalled to the Belgians those aerial visitors. The *affiche* menaced the population with reprisals if the Allies' aviators threw any more bombs near Brussels, urged people to spy on each other, and threatened to lodge troops on the inhabitants, to escape which inconvenience the city of Brussels had to pay so many million francs the year before. The *affiche* announced that the promise not to quarter troops would be "*annulled*." * *

The population, as it had been at all times, was dignified, self-possessed, and calm, under this new affront. As a result of the *affiche* of the twelfth of October Belgian soldiers and French soldiers presented themselves by the hundreds at the Rue de Méridien, and were sent off to Germany. Many of them had been *réformés* after having been wounded, and had returned to Belgium in response to the invitation of von Bissing ; many of the French had set up little shops, were in business in a small way, trying to reorganize their lives.

And thus there was another broken vow, another promise "*annulled*."

The gossips of the town would have it just then that von Bissing was no longer the real power in Belgium, and that he had gone to Berlin to have von Sauberzweig removed. The gossips knew no more than gossips usually do, but if they were not well informed the same might be said of the Germans, who depended upon their spies for what they knew. I suppose it would do no very great injustice to the spies and informers in any service to say that they find what they think their employers wish them to find, and the German ranks were recruited from German *apaches*, who obtained most of their information from Belgian *apaches*. The Germans in authority, always obsessed by the fear of spies and plots and conspiracies, did not understand the Belgians, their life, or their character. They could not understand the communal organization of Belgium, or the communal pride. I was told, for instance, that when M. Lemonnier, the Burgomaster, went to see General von Sauberzweig he was ordered to speak in German, a language M. Lemonnier did not know. In such circumstances the regime that seemed to be established coincidentally with the arrival of General von Sauberzweig, whose debut was the Cavell case, and with these new and harsh measures following on, caused many to fear that the population might be pushed to the verge of revolt.

I never met General von Sauberzweig, and I would not do him an injustice. He was described to me

as a tall, very powerful, and very handsome man, agreeable to meet and quite human. Perhaps he was as good as he looked. I say only that these things were coincidental with his advent to the tremendously influential post of Military Governor in Brussels. Whoever may have been responsible, the terror and gloom of his regime affected the whole atmosphere of Brussels.

The Germans were just then in that nervous state that always accompanied any important military movement. The great autumn offensive had its reaction on their nerves. There were not so many officers as there had been swanking along the boulevards, and there were none dashing about the city in snorting motor-cars. They were all at the front, and petrol and rubber were growing scarce. The war was not the joy-ride it had been a year before.

Those still at the comfortable rear — and Brussels was a post much sought after — were justifying their employment by redoubled activity. They made perquisitions everywhere ; even the delegates of the C. R. B. were not spared. One afternoon two German spies made a raid on the apartment of Mr. Lewis Richards and Mr. Robinson Smith in the Rue St. Boniface. The two men were away and the concierge was forced by the two spies to open the apartment. The concierge sent word to the Legation, and Gibson went with Richards, told the agents what he thought of them, and then urged them to search. They turned everything upside down and, to their evident regret, found nothing. The indignities to

which the Germans from time to time subjected our delegates were very great, and yet not one of all the scores who had been there had ever been detected, by Americans or Germans, doing a wrong or incorrect thing.

I have spoken of the theatres, those of the lower order, that had sprung up to afford entertainment for the Germans — for no self-respecting Belgian would attend. They gave for the most part low revues that appealed to the underworld and to those who mentally and morally were of the underworld. But even the miserable actors — who, poor things, had to make a living some way — were ill-treated for their efforts to entertain their oppressors. At the Winter Palace two *soi-disant* comedians were giving impersonations : one of them put a red handkerchief to his throat as though it were a cravat, to impersonate Lebargy, of the *Comédie Française* ; this done, he threw his red handkerchief on the floor and began to thrust a white napkin up his sleeve after the fashion of André Brulé, then tossed the napkin on the stage ; then he took off his black coat and threw that on the floor ; and then he and his partner boxed, and as they did so they stepped, of course, on the three articles, black, white and red, thus discarded. German officers complained at headquarters, that they had trampled the German colours under foot, and the actors were duly punished.

At the *Théâtre des Galeries* a little theatrical company was playing a French detective piece, a dramatization of that poor French imitation of Sherlock

Holmes known as Arsène Lupin. The action of the play was supposed to be contemporaneous, and the actors wore such costumes as they could procure, those of the style — if it could be called a style — of 1917. In a trial scene the judge asks :

"Quand est-ce que le premier vol a été commis ?"

And one of the personages answers :

"Il y a trois ans, au mois d'août, 1905."

The actor who was playing this part thought that to be dressed in costumes of 1917 and to say "*three years ago, in 1905*" involved a solecism that offended his artistic sensibilities, and he had a brilliant idea. One night he replied spontaneously :

"Il y a trois ans, au mois d'août 1914."

There were Germans present, of course, and as a result the play was suspended, the actors fined, and the theatre dark.

But there were instances of nobler suffering. I heard of two French officers, in an aeroplane, who had to descend in the province of Limbourg. They went to the home of a teacher, from him borrowed civilian clothes, and in them made their way to the Holland frontier, near Maestricht ; there they were arrested by the Germans and taken before the Kommandant. He would have them shot as spies, but they told him that they had come within the enemy's lines not as spies, but as officers in uniform, described the accident to their aeroplane, and offered — if he would give his word of honour not to punish the man who had helped them — to take him to the school and there show him their

uniforms. The Kommandant gave his word of honour not to do anything to the professor, and went with them. They showed their uniforms and made their case — and the professor was condemned by the Germans to ten years at hard labour.

Not one of those autumn days, with their thick fog, that did not bring forth its instance of injustice suffered, sometimes quick and dramatic, sometimes slow and in agony long endured.

It was so with Le Jeune, the barber. They came one morning to tell me of his end. He had come a short while before to sell me some engravings, almost the last of his possessions. Then a little later he came to say that the Germans were pursuing him. I had sent him away with a word of reassurance — rather casually, I fear now. They told me that he had had a *crise de folie* a few nights before. For some time he had had the illusion of persecution ; he thought every man's hand was against him and that the Germans were about to take him to the Kommandantur. Then suddenly one night he sat up in bed, with burning, staring eyes, and pointing his finger into the darkness where he beheld some horror, he cried:

"Oui, oui ! Sont là ! Ils commencent ! Ils commencent !"

"Quoi ?" asked his wife.

"L'échafaud ! L'échafaud ! Ils ne peuvent pas me tuer ! Il faut chercher le Ministre ; Qu'il me protège !"

The startled wife got up, called a policeman, a kindly Belgian, who assured Le Jeune that he would go with him to find me, and so took him to l'Hôpital Saint-

Jean. The physicians the next day said that his condition was hopeless and he was taken to an asylum.

Poor Le Jeune ! His case was obscure enough, and with nothing of the heroic in it, save as there was a touching heroism in the cases of all those Belgians who anonymously suffered. He was no less a victim of the war, one of those countless thousands whose lives were brought prematurely to an end by the sheer horror of it. It was another instance of war's extravagant waste of human life. And who shall compute the waste of life even among those who lived on, and yet who saw life slipping by all unfulfilled? But then it seems that such things must be in this world, in order that Emperors may have glory and their dynasties immortality in printed books called histories.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* The French text :

Bruxelles, 27 octobre :

L'ambassadeur des Etats-Unis à Londres a mis à la disposition du gouvernement anglais des pièces relatives à l'affaire Cavell. Ces pièces se rapportent à la correspondance échangée au sujet de ce procès entre la légation des Etats-Unis à Bruxelles et les autorités allemandes de cette ville. Le gouvernement anglais a livré aussitôt ces documents à la presse et les a fait publier par l'agence Reuter. Ils reproduisent les faits les plus essentiels d'une manière inexacte. Ils font surtout supposer que les autorités allemandes ont, par de

vaines promesses, fait patienter le ministre des Etats-Unis pour lui laisser ignorer que la condamnation à mort avait été déjà prononcée et, en procédant rapidement à l'exécution, l'empêcher d'intervenir en faveur des condamnés.

Dans les commentaires publics également à ce sujet, sir Edouard Grey considère comme particulièrement répréhensible le fait que l'autorité allemande n'a pas respecté son engagement de tenir le ministre des Etats-Unis au courant de la marche du procès. Une telle promesse n'a jamais été donnée par l'autorité allemande qui, par conséquent, n'a pu manquer à sa parole. Le ministre des Etats-Unis à Bruxelles, au cours d'un entretien avec l'autorité allemande, a reconnu lui-même qu'il en était ainsi. L'ambassadeur des Etats-Unis à Londres a été mal informé ; il a été induit en erreur par les rapports d'un jurisconsulte belge qui, en sa qualité d'avocat-conseil de la légation américaine à Bruxelles, a joué un certain rôle dans cette affaire. Le ministre des Etats-Unis a déclaré que la publication des documents en question l'avait fort surpris et qu'il instruirait sans retard son collègue de Londres et son gouvernement des différences existant entre les faits réels et leur exposé dans le rapport écrit de l'avocat belge.

**** The French text :**

AVIS

1. Presque journellement, dans les divers quartiers de la ville, on découvre des armes et des munitions, bien que les habitants aient, à différentes reprises, reçu l'ordre de les remettre à l'autorité allemande. J'ordonne encore une fois que toutes les armes et toutes les munitions désignées dans l'avis du 10 Janvier 1915, de Son Excellence le gouverneur général, soient remises aux autorités compétentes, à moins que leurs détenteurs n'aient reçu une dispense spéciale des autorités allemandes.

Si, après le 25 octobre 1915, des habitants sont encore trouvés en possession d'armes ou de munitions du genre susmentionné, je serai porté à croire qu'elles sont destinées à être employées contre les autorités et les troupes allemandes. Si la conduite du détenteur est considérée comme trahison commise pendant l'état de guerre, il sera passible de la peine de mort ou de 10 ans au moins de travaux forcés, On appliquera aussi l'arrêté du 1^{er} octobre de Son Excellence le gouverneur général concernant la défense de cacher des explosifs. En outre, toute commune dans le territoire de laquelle on trouvera, après le 25 octobre 1915, des armes ou des munitions prohibées, se verra imposer une contribution de guerre pouvant aller jusqu'à 10.000 mark pour chaque cas.

2. Dans les derniers temps, des aviateurs ennemis ont, à diverses reprises, choisi comme but de leurs attaques des bâtiments occupés par des soldats allemands. Il est

hors de doute que l'emplacement de ces bâtiments et leur occupation par des soldats allemands ont été signalés à l'ennemi par des habitants. Toute la population est responsable d'une telle manière d'agir, car, ne fût-ce que dans leur propre intérêt, les habitants ont l'obligation de se surveiller les uns les autres. Si donc les aviateurs ennemis attaquent encore des bâtiments occupés, ainsi que les soldats qui les occupent, je serai obligé afin de surveiller de plus près les habitants de l'agglomération bruxelloise et d'empêcher l'espionnage, de loger des troupes allemandes dans des maisons particulières. Dans ce cas, la promesse, faite autrefois, de ne pas loger d'officiers ni de soldats allemands chez des particuliers sera annulée.

Cette promesse sera également retirée si, après le 25 octobre 1915, des armes ou des munitions prohibées (voir premier alinéa) sont encore trouvées en possession de certains habitants de l'agglomération bruxelloise.

Bruxelles, le 16 octobre, 1915.

VON Sauberzweig,
Général-major.

(Translation :)

Notice

1. Almost daily in various quarters of the city there are discovered arms and ammunition, although the inhabitants have on different occasions been ordered to

turn them in to the German authorities. Once more I order that all arms and ammunition designated in His Excellency the Governor-General's notice of the 10th January be handed in to competent authorities, unless their holders have received a special permit from the German authorities.

If, after October 25, 1915, any inhabitants are still in possession of arms and ammunition of the kind above mentioned I shall be forced to believe that they are intended to be used against the German authorities and troops. If the conduct of the holder is considered to be treason in time of war he will be punished with the pain of death or with at least 10 years at hard labour. His Excellency the Governor-General's warning of October 1st concerning the prohibition of hiding explosives will also be enforced. Furthermore, each commune in whose territory is found, after October 25, 1915, prohibited arms or ammunition, will have imposed upon it a contribution of war of not more than 10.000 marks in each case.

2. Enemy aviators have recently on several occasions chosen as the object of their attack buildings occupied by German soldiers. There is no doubt that the location of these buildings and the fact of their occupation by German soldiers is signalled to the enemy by the inhabitants. The entire population is responsible for such conduct because the inhabitants are under obligation to watch one another, if only in their own interest. Therefore, if the enemy aviators attack the occupied buildings again, or the soldiers who occupy

them, I shall be obliged, in order to watch more closely the inhabitants of Greater Brussels and to prevent espionage, to lodge German troops in private houses. In this case the promise made before not to lodge German officers or soldiers in private houses will be annulled.

This promise will be similarly annulled if, after the 25th October, 1915, forbidden arms or munitions (see statement above) are still found in the possession of certain inhabitants of Greater Brussels.

Brussels, October 16, 1915.
von Sauberzweig,
Major-General.

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Le régime von Sauberzweig* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XXVIII (1915) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 286-291.

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