BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE **2**

Chapter **VII**. Homeward bound.

One morning in the Rue de Trèves, there before the Legation, I saw Horace Fletcher, in a great buif overcoat, cream-coloured hat on his white hair, and a large yellow autumn-leaf in his mouth. He was methodically fletcherizing the stem of the brilliant autumn leaf, deriving therefrom I know not what sustenance, but at sight of me he removed it from his mouth, having come for a talk. He was very enthusiastic about the feeding of Belgium and anxious to go back to America to create sentiment for another Christmas ship for the children. He had found himself in Brussels at the beginning of the war and had worked as a member of the C. R. B. as an expert in food values, and while I should hardly be justified in saying that he had convinced the Belgians that if they would fletcherize their food they would make it go farther, he had rendered the C. R. B. many valuable services. The Belgians preferred to hooverize their food — to use the verb which has been made of the name of another American. However, his visit put in my mind again the thought that had been lurking there ever since that kindly cablegram had been deciphered that night when I had felt that I could go no further.

There was still much to do, and the situation had this difficult character : that one incident was hardly

disposed of before another had developed. We were all near the breaking-point; Villalobar was just then having a terrible time trying to save the lives of a Spaniard and a French woman condemned to death at Liege. Those dark days of soft, fine rain were surcharged with sorrow; I have the memory of the crowds of humble faces in the black of the universal mourning, streaming along the roadside under the dripping poplars toward the cemetery in the edge of the town on All Saints' Day. But I have happier memories, too, as of that evening when Dr. Derscheid said that since I could not go to Mont Doré for the cure, as in other circumstances he would have advised, he would prescribe music, and he himself provided it in the most delightful form by bringing the Quatuor Zimmer to the Legation to play for us. We made an intimate little group, and had a satisfaction almost royal in the situation while they played such things as ***Beethoven's Quatuor Op. 18, N°6, Si b majeur*** (*), and the ***scherzo and the andante of Debussy's Premier quatuor*** (**), and a bit by the Russian Borodine.

Indeed, the kindness of those Belgian friends seemed ever to increase in the proportion that their own sorrows increased. Their gratitude was almost embarrassing at times ; once I admired a painting in a gentleman's salon — the next day it arrived at the Legation with the gentleman's compliments ! And it seemed almost a desertion to go away, even for a little holiday, when the others could have no holiday. When I spoke of it to Villalobar he said at once :

"*Go*"; and then he shook his head sadly, and said : "*Life is hard*."

I speak of these little personal things in the effort to make clear how very close suffering brought us ; it made of Belgium almost a nation of comrades.

Finally there came a telegram from Washington approving of my suggestion in regard to de Leval's difficulties, and I arranged the passports that permitted him to go to Holland, whence he was to cross to England.

It was of the inveterate irony of things that newspapers outside should have chosen that very moment to print sensational statements that the Germans wished to have me out of Belgium and away from Brussels. The Baron von der Lancken showed them to me and added that he wished to state officially that there was no ground for such statements ; and when I told him that I was going home for a little vacation he hesitated a moment, then asked frankly if my going had anything to do with the little difficulty of a few days before. It had not, as I told him. Then a few days later, my passes and *au revoir*.

Even if one does not need a vacation, and prepares to take one, one will need it after the ordeal of getting ready to go. Those November days were full of preparations, but a morning came — grey, overcast and cold —, when, after the farewells of the *chers collègues*, we drove away from the Legation and out of Brussels and to Vilvorde, between fields obscured by the silvery fog that rolled over them, and along the familiar road to

Malines and to Antwerp, halted by sentinels at each town. After Antwerp, the flat, monotonous Campine *anversoise* — sand and stunted pine-woods recalling on every hand pictures by Courtens — and on to Campenhout, the first outpost of the frontier. We were halted and our papers examined and vised ; a few rods further on we were halted again by the familiar red flag and a bar across the road, the first of the controls. The bar was raised and a soldier waved us on, the bar was let down behind us and another let down before, and thus imprisoned, a red-headed sous-officier took our papers, went into a little shack, like those in the Far West, of wood and tarred paper ; he was gone a long time, telephoning, signing, and otherwise regulating and regimentating. But when he came out he smiled and saluted ; the telephone from von der Lancken at the *Politische Abteilung* had been before us and worked its wonders. We turned then down a lonely broken road in a barren, sandy, tragic waste of country, overgrown with scrubby pines, and drove along the frontier with its three high fences of wire — the two outer barriers of barbed wire, but the middle higher than the others, far more forbidding, with its gleaming wires stretched taut on insulators, wires that had dealt their deadly bolts to many a brave Belgian lad. The grey soldiers patrolling the long lines of wire looked at us with their usual suspicion until we turned northward again toward the frontier, to be halted at the wires in a lonely wood where the sentinel was building himself a little rustic *guérite* of the branches of pine-trees. On the electric wires beside

the double gates of this barrier there was a sign, with a zig-zagging symbol of lightning over the warnings it gave in German, Dutch, Flemish and French, that the wires were charged with electricity — "*haute tension*" — and then, with the lack of humour that distinguishes the Germans, unless it were a humour as grim as the warriors who employed it, the words "danger de mort"…

The sentinel gave us back our papers, opened the gates, and we drove through, a young officer in puttees smoking a cigarette saluting us from the door of a little cottage in the woods. Surely this was all — we must be in Holland, but no, we were halted again at Esschen, where there was a custom-house and German sentinels and the German flag, and across the line the Dutch flag, and two Dutch soldiers in their dark grey uniforms chatting with the German sentry across the line. When at last the *sous-officier* brought out our papers and saluted stiffly, and when I had distributed the last of my cigars to the German and Dutch soldiers, we rolled across the line and into Holland.

And then, suddenly, out of that grey, lowering sky, the sun burst forth and bathed all that lovely Holland scene in golden light. We were strangely moved. It was with a sense of calm, of peace, of repose, such as I had never known, that we rolled over the smooth roads along the dykes, with the windmills and the pretty homesteads, and Dutch soldiers on bicycles or walking with girls, joking, laughing, having a prodigious holiday. We loitered over our luncheon in the little inn

at Roosendaal ; every one was interested in Mieke, my wife's faithful little Pekinese dog, and a Dutch maid, astounded as Marie talked to the intelligent little thing, said in all seriousness :

"*Kan zij praten ?*" ("Can she talk ?")

The sun was going down across the low fields and stars were gleaming in the clear sky as we drove onto the ferry at Moerdijk to cross the Hollandsch Diep to Dordrecht, and so at last to reach Rotterdam, strange and bewildering, with its streets ablaze with electric lights, its shops all open, and tram cars and taxis and happy people, engaged in homely, common tasks of thronging the sidewalks in careless freedom, laughing and singing, coming and going and doing as they pleased, just as if there were no Germans in the world. It quite overwhelmed us for a moment ; it was so strange, so wonderful, to see a city full of free people, living normal lives. And I realized with a shock how soon and easily one loses the use and habit of liberty ; and then I inhaled rapturously that air of Holland, heavy, moist, with the odours of shipping and the sea, but free — for three centuries and a half, free !

It was too late and we were too tired to drive on that night to The Hague, where Dr. van Dyke was awaiting us. We went to a hotel, and all that night and far into the next morning I slept, and slept, and slept.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Départ* » 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 291-293.

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

(*) BEETHOVEN / QUATUOR A CORDES N°6, ALLEGRO CON BRIO, OP 18 :
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VKlAm2oGc8

(**) DEBUSSY / String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10 – Scherzo :
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUs967RQcQM