

# **BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)**

## **A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2**

**Brand WHITLOCK**

### **Chapter IX. Stripping Belgium.**

Our discussions for a time, however, were interrupted because the King of Bavaria had come to town, and all the Excellencies in the German Government must be on hand to do him homage and to assist at the festivities given in the various ministries in his honour. The King was incognito, at least so far as the Belgians were concerned, for none of them ever saw him, or cared to, perhaps. We were always hearing of some great German personage in town, but we never saw him, though on this occasion one of the King's entourage, some Royal Highness or other, a Prince

with a name of his own.

And a certain use in the world, no doubt,

called on Villalobar and told him that they were all sick of the war.

My own callers just at that time were Belgian personalities who happened to have English nurses or governesses in their families, and they were all excited and concerned by the latest rumour that had gone through the town — namely, that all English women

were to leave at once. Inasmuch as this rumour touched that most acute of all sensitive spots in the social organism, to wit, the servant problem, the Quartier Leopold was almost in revolution. For a long time we had been sending to Holland by special trains, and under the escort of a representative of the Legation, such English women as desired to leave Belgium. Not all of them cared to go, for many who had good homes and good employment in Brussels had no homes in England. Then during my absence an English woman had gone to the Legation and asked Gibson, who was in charge, whether she should go to England or not. Like many others, she did not like to solve her problems herself and insisted on some one else's taking the responsibility, and in the end asked Gibson to write to London and ask for advice. He did so, and the reply, naturally, was that all English women who could do so should leave Brussels. The women thereupon spread the alarm and all the English women decided to go. The news not only alarmed the Quartier Leopold, but it reached the Germans and alarmed them ; they saw menaces of attacks, offensives, bombardments, and I know not what else of the dreadful in a military way, and refused to allow any more trains to depart. This only increased the panic. From the first we had observed an interesting psychological phenomenon : most women were anxious to leave until we procured their passports and trains ; then most of them decided not to go, having lost the desire to depart as soon as they were sure they could do so. When it was understood that there were to be no

more trains they were unanimous in their decision to leave, and we had a trying time for weeks. It was more than weeks, it was months before we could get permission for any of them to go ; even then it was only in isolated cases.

One evening very late the bell rang, and there came into the hall a little English woman, lugging an enormous valise and dragging two very sleepy children after her. She had come that day from Lille, where her husband had been a teacher until the Germans sent him to Ruhleben with other Englishmen, leaving her alone in the strange city. Finally the *Kommandantur* at Lille gave her a *laissez-passer* to go to England, and, happy in the thought of seeing her home once more, she had started out and, arriving at Brussels that night, had been told that her *laissez-passer* would not be honoured. We provided for her and for the sleepy children, poor little things ; but, try as I would, I could never succeed in obtaining permission for that woman to leave. We did all we could for her, and the pretty children in new clothes went bravely to school and were soon speaking French ; while for the mother, a quiet and competent little woman, we procured some pupils to whom she gave lessons in English. Nearly every Belgian who could not already do so was learning to speak English in those days, and the basic resemblance of the Flemish to our own language made it rather easy for them.

Such little dramas, oftentimes with more tragic *dénouements*, were of daily occurrence in our lives ; and

yet there were romances, too. The whole story of the C. R. B. is, in its way, a romance, and, as I have said, I often used to wish that Frank Norris had lived to write it as the third of his unfinished trilogy of the wheat. The young men — the Rhodes scholars and the other university men who came after the Rhodes scholars when these went back to Oxford, all reflected great credit on America and on the American universities, and Mr. Hoover wrought them into an organization that had all the *esprit de corps* of a crack regiment of Guards. They were received enthusiastically by every one, and the delegates were very popular among the Belgians, who did all they could to lighten the task the delegates had voluntarily assumed.

Mr. Carstairs, for instance, the delegate down in the Hainaut, lived in the great château at Mariemont as the guest of Raoul Warocqué, the last of a line of men noted for their public spirit. They had been burgomasters for generations, and Warocqué was the representative of the *Comité National* in his region. Mr. Carstairs had won the hand of Mademoiselle. Hélène Guinotte, one of those two charming and beautiful sisters whom I had met in the *salons* of the Baroness Lambert before the war, and one day in January a great company of us went down to Mariemont for the wedding. There was a dinner in the old château attended by the family and by a few members of the C. R. B. ; the ironic fates were at the dinner too, as a matter of course, for the master of the house sat there, the last of his race with no heirs, amidst the guests he was so

touchingly happy to have about him in honour of an alliance between Belgium and America — dying before our eyes. The wedding was solemnized the next morning, first in the town hall where the civil ceremony was conducted by the Burgomaster *faisant fonction*. He was an old peasant in his Sunday blacks and white cravat, with the black, yellow and red sash about his middle, and he drew out a pair of steel bowed spectacles and read a little address in which he referred most movingly to what America had done for his country. He read it with the dignity with which an honest, simple, unaffected good man invests any ceremony in which he takes part. And then we all drove to the little church in the village, where the priest — a tall, gaunt, awkward young Walloon — celebrated the Mass and pronounced the religious ceremony, his Latin in the Walloon accent sounding strange in our ears. There was the wedding-breakfast at The Pashy, the country home of the Guinottes, and then the bride and groom drove away for their honeymoon in Holland — their *passierscheins* all in order.

We could almost forget the war in scenes so normal, until back at Brussels that evening Mr. Poland, the Director of the C. R. B., came to report that he had just had a telegram from Mr. Hoover saying that the British Government had received word from its agents to the effect that the Belgian Committee at Antwerp had sold eighteen hundred tons of rice to the Germans ! The further importation of rice had been forbidden — and, in

short, we had another incident to deal with. The event proved that the agents were mistaken ; the Committee at Antwerp had sold no rice, of course, though some of the peasants about Antwerp had either sold or traded their little rations of rice. The Belgians had never eaten rice, and did not like it when the Americans introduced it to them ; and I could not blame them much, for I do not like rice myself, even when French *chefs* disguise it with all their cunning art. They did not like corn-meal either — *maïs*, they called it — and considered it fit only for cattle to eat ; but that was because, unlike some dusky Kentucky cooks of my acquaintance, they did not know how to transform it into corn pone or johnnycake, or spoon-bread. The amount of rice they had disposed of was insignificant, and the incident proved not to be serious after all.

But there were new difficulties in securing from the Germans the promise not to requisition any more cattle. The old and never-conquered problem of the *chômeurs* had arisen again ; it would not down. The Germans wished to attach, as a condition to the guaranties, that the *chômeurs* be compelled to work, which meant they must work for the Germans, or else cease to receive their allotments from the *Comité National*. Von Sauberzweig was reported to have said that the diplomats had no right to be in Belgium, and that they should be sent away. The difficulties came, like most difficulties in the world as it was then and as it is now organized, from *Messieurs les militaires*, but they did not wholly have their way just then, for at the

end of January Baron von der Lancken authorized us to say that the Governor-General had decided to give the guarantees, and that no more requisitions of cattle would be made.

However, if the Germans were willing to forgo their seizures of cattle they were just beginning to requisition all the *noyers* in Belgium — those stately walnut-trees, the pride of many an estate, and, in those cases in which they belonged to peasants, the support of whole families. There was nothing that we could do to prevent that because the Germans wished to make stocks for their rifles, and as this was purely a military use it was no affair of neutral diplomats. Governor-General von Bissing, so the story ran, had been opposed to cutting down the trees and on a recent visit to Berlin had been reproached by the military authorities with the fact, and in the discussion that ensued had been outdone by *Messieurs les militaires*, as every one is in Germany, and had been forced to yield. And so the beautiful tall trees, many of them centuries old, were cut down, and not one ultimately was spared — not even those on the estate of the Prince de Ligne at Beloeil, nor those of the Prince Napoléon.

The Germans were seizing other things, too — the rails of the vicinal tramways, the metal in houses, rubber, wool, everything that could aid or comfort an army while it went about its systematic and scientific destruction of all that which centuries had been required to build or produce. Even the machinery in the factories was being shipped off to Germany, and Belgium faced a

future in which she would find herself stripped naked of all she had.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

**Footnotes.**

French translation : « *On dépouille la Belgique* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre II (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 299-301.

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)