

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter X. The fate of Louis Bril.

Life in Brussels became a little more difficult and a little more drear each day. Misery crept everywhere. Potatoes, under the *Kartoffelzentrale*, were more and more scarce ; there were incipient riots in the commune of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, women fiercely assailing the *maison communale* until the police and even the pompiers had to be called to disperse them. And misery reacting on character in the way it has, added to the cruelty and insensibility in which life so abounds. The herders of the cattle lowing down the Rue Belliard would carelessly beat them over the muzzles with their clubs and the beasts would close their eyes and toss their heads away to escape the pain of those blows.

I was walking one day at noon in the *Vieux Marché* in the Place du Jeu de Balle, where all the rubbish of the town, the unclean and disgusting *débris* of broken and unsuccessful lives, was assorted and exposed for sale ; the clatter of the wooden shoes on the cobble-stones had been stilled by the noon hour, and the market-women in their flimsy booths were drinking their coffee from great bowls and gossiping. And I saw a little girl crying bitterly as she watched her portly mother, indiff'erent to the child's appeals, slowly munch the *tartine* she would not share ; the child watched it

disappear bite by bite down the selfish maternal throat, and at last, when there was but one bite left, the mother gave her that.

Mr. Casper Whitney, of the C.R.B., had just returned with Mr. Walcott from a visit to Poland with sickening stories of the suffering there, and in Servia, ravaged by the Bulgarians ; black misery, famine, pestilence everywhere, all the symptoms of martial glory and world-empire. And that was a situation which the C.R.B. could not help, much as it tried to do so ; there were too many military or political difficulties in the way. And Germany, Mr. Walcott said, was preparing to begin a vast offensive in the West — three million bayonets already on the line, and the German General Staff, as a German officer had confided to him, prepared to sacrifice 500.000 of them. It sounded mathematically and scientifically military as long as one spoke of them as bayonets ; it sounded less so when one abandoned that professional euphemism and spoke of soldiers, and if one resorted to human terms and spoke of them as men — one would be growing soft and sentimental.

The dark influences of the times lay heavily on all spirits in an universal depression from which there was no escape. There were not only such little scenes as those I have noted to illustrate the pain and tragedy of life. Now and then a spring day, straying too far in advance of the slowly advancing march of spring itself, would find itself the prisoner of February, and on the morning of such a day — the sunlight streaming, the

ground damp from the constant rain, its drops glistening on the trees — the Belgian wounded prisoners brought in from the front were allowed to promenade in the park of the Palais des Académies, the great classical structure where the Belgian Academiés of Letters and Beaux-Arts, of Science and of Medicine, have their seat — turned now by the Germans into a military hospital. The invalids wore the long gabardines of striped ticking which make the wounded in German hospitals look like zanies, but they had on their jaunty *bonnets de police*, with the tassels of yellow or of red or of blue, and they hobbled up and down on their crutches and smoked and laughed — glad, no doubt, of the respite that *la bonne blessure* gave them, and happy even in this strange home-coming.

"*Les bons diables !*" cried one man in the throng that pressed up to the high iron fence around the yard to stare at them. The Belgian soldiers were not allowed to approach the *grille* and no one was permitted to speak to them, but men and women and children went up to the high *grille* and peered between the iron bars, German sentinels glowering ill-humoredly at them. Those in the crowd were very serious ; they were trying to recognize among the prisoners some loved one. I saw a woman turn away from the crowd in anguish, her face drawn with the pain of a great grief and stained by tears. It had been less than two years since from that very spot I had seen those same boys, no doubt, and thousands of others like them, parading down the boulevard, hale, hearty,

happy, with flags and trumpets and drums, celebrating the *fête* of their King.

The wounded were being brought in increasing numbers to Brussels ; our *courrier* had not been allowed to go out for days, and the frontier was closed. Mitilieu's brother, who was a diplomat at The Hague, had come to Brussels with his wife to visit the Roumanian Legation, and was no sooner arrived and retired for the night than he was routed out by a German officer and told that he and his wife must depart by train in the morning — which they did, and at seven o'clock were away in a coach of which the blinds were drawn.

The town was pulsating with the news of the heavy movement of troops, and suddenly hope was high once more, since another great offensive had begun. The only way Brussels could get news was by deduction — a process that was oftentimes exaggerated in its results. I noted in my journal at the end of a trying day at about that time the rumours that I had heard that afternoon alone : America had broken off diplomatic relations with Germany ; the American Legation was packing up and about to leave ; there had been a revolt of troops at Ghent and the Military Governor there had been assassinated ; there had been a naval battle in the North Sea and twenty German men-o'-war had been sunk ; the Crown Prince of Turkey had not committed suicide, but had been put to death because he was pro-Ally ; Tino, the King of Greece, had abdicated ; there was a revolution in Bulgaria ; all English women in Belgium were to be interned in a camp near Antwerp ; a diplomat

had arrived from Berlin with positive, but confidential information that the Germans were to make one last desperate effort to reach Calais, and failing that would retire to the Meuse.

These rumours served as topics for conversation at dinner when one had exhausted the subject of potatoes — as food for discussion merely ; and it was a phenomenon attested or confessed by everybody, now that potatoes were no more to be had, that they had suddenly grown delicious ; there was one displayed in the window of an antiquarian in the Rue d'Assaut, labeled :

"AUTHENTIQUE — VENDUE"

I was constantly appealed to as a diplomat — and therefore as an informed, or at least as an informing person — to say whether such reports as these were true or not. I knew no more about most of them than any one else, and, as a conscientious realist, never believed any news but bad news. Poor Brussels never had any good news, which was doubtless the reason — since necessity, as the copy-book says, is the mother of invention — that it was invented now and then. Herbert Spencer might have explained the phenomenon. But to us the rumours did serve as topics for conversation, as I said, for the dinner-table was growing dull — and it was not in good taste to deny them. One no longer heard the sprightly talk about the war, the speculation as to its duration, the discussion of world-politics, and the

probable changes that were to be produced in the surface of the habitable globe, as one heard it when all was thrilling excitement and emotion in those first days of the honeymoon of the war. The war had taken on its true colours as a hideous, an ugly, and a squalid thing, as all abundantly recognized. Even in the piping times of peace those who talk of ideals are few, very few indeed, and those who discuss ideas not much more numerous. Most people talk of other people ; and though there are, perhaps, other people who are more interesting than ideas or ideals, that is not the reason why people talk of them. But most subjects seemed to have been exhausted in Brussels, save perhaps that of *la mentalite allemande*, and the principle of that had been grasped rather generally. We could be aroused from our after-dinner gloom only by being plunged into the deeper gloom of some new and concrete horror or injustice.

No one made an effort ; the people one met seemed to have aged and grown careless and seedy and not good-looking any more. The women, poor things, never had any new gowns, and were all in black. I can recall an evening in February — the 10th, my journal says — when, after a dinner at a house where once there had been only gaiety and light and sprightly talk, I was sitting and smoking a last cigarette and waiting for the old butler to come in and announce my motor. He came at last, but instead of the formula there was a whispered consultation with the master of the house, who beckoned to me, and we left the room and went to the

dim *salon*, where a man was waiting for me ; he had a white, drawn face — another had been condemned, was to be shot that night; could I do anything ?

The name of the condemned man, Louis Bril, suggested nothing to me other than one more vague form among that host of wraiths whom German firing squads had hurried into the darkness and the silence, but in the first of the confused explanations that were made the name of Edith Cavell was mentioned. Then I had the story.

Louis Bril was a waiter in a restaurant in Brussels, and he had been tried and condemned to death that very day for having shot down that recreant son of the retired army officer, who was said to have betrayed Miss Cavell. The swarming spies and the secret agents, with inexorable patience, had prowled the mysterious underworld of Brussels until they had found the man who shot the traitor down in the street, and now he too was to die. I cannot pretend to know the whole story ; it will be told some day, I suppose, with many another like it, when the history of those dark times is all revealed. Perhaps it was but an element of the romanticism in which, since war itself is so wholly an expression of romanticism, all stories of war must be invested, that linked the dark event to the immortal name of the English nurse. There were those who said that Bril did not shoot him to avenge Miss Cavell, but to avenge those of his comrades whom the recreant Belgian had offered to guide when they wished to leave the country, and, luring them thus to the Holland border, had there

miserably betrayed them to the Germans. He may in this way have learned of the group with which Miss Cavell was associated — I do not know ; but it was for his treachery in one or the other instance that Brill dogged him, patiently, remorselessly, tracking him down until the night when, as he stepped from his own door into the street. Brill shot him down and left his body lying there on the sidewalk.

From that hour Brill, having been the hunter, became the hunted, and for weeks eluded German spies and German *Polizei*, until he too was at last tracked down and captured.

The man who came to me that night wished to know how to present the *recours en grâce* that Brill's mother had signed, and I could tell him to whom to present it, at any rate. It had no effect, of course, and Brill was shot the next morning, as we were informed by the usual affiche. *

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

* This is the affiche :

AVIS

Par jugement du 8-9 février 1916, le tribunal de campagne a, indépendamment d'autres personnes condamnées à des peines diverses, condamné

Louis Brill,
garçon de café à Bruxelles,
à la peine de mort
pour assassinat commis à l'aide d'une arme à feu.

Le jugement a été confirmé et exécuté.

Bruxelles, le 11 février, 1916.
Le Gouvernement de Bruxelles.

(Translation :)

Notice

By judgment of February 8 and 9, 1916, the military tribunal has, independently of other persons condemned to various punishments, condemned

Louis Bril,

waiter in a restaurant in Brussels,

to the death penalty

for an assassination committed with firearms.

The judgment has been confirmed and executed.

Brussels, February 11, 1916.

The Government of Brussels.

French translation : « *Le destin de Louis Bril* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre III (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 302-304.

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

It would also be interesting compare with what [Louis GILLE](#), [Alphonse OOMS](#) et [Paul DELANDSHEERE](#) told about the same days in ***50 mois d'occupation allemande*** (Volume 2 : 1916) :

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