

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XIII. The “*ravitaillement*” in danger.

By the middle of March our three envoys who had gone with the Governor General's assurances to London had passed over to the continent ; the Marquis had gone on to Madrid, and the Baron Lambert and M. Francqui were waiting in Paris for his return. Meanwhile, in the midst of all the rumours that flew about in the darkness of Brussels, Mr. Hoover came over from London with the news that the whole affair of the requisitions was practically settled. The Marquis, on his return, would bring the formal response of the British Government, but as Mr. Hoover had been privy to the preparation of this document, he could give me most reassuring information as to its character. So that we seemed to have got safely over another shoal, though in such stormy waves as those through which we were trying to navigate the bark that was freighted with the hopes of Belgium we could never be sure or take anything for granted, and, with the curious superstition that is revived in men by the excitement and anxiety of high enterprises, and grows more and more rife in time of war, we would have assumed no more that things would go well than we would have lighted three cigarettes with one match.

"All that I know", said Mr. Hoover, pausing and glancing at his watch, as he paced the floor of my room on a morning of heavy snow, *"is that at eleven o'clock on the morning of March 24, 1916, the ravitaillement is still going on."*



Mr. Hoover had come over to be on the ground when the discussions were in progress, and he could bring all the gossip, of which there was just then a great deal, of all the hazards and dangers resulting from all sorts of conflicting ambitions that threatened the great work into which he had poured all his enthusiasm, and for which he had made so many personal sacrifices. At one moment so intense were some of the conflicting ambitions involved that he had written to propose that the Americans withdraw in favour of some one else, but to this the British Government would not listen for an instant. The discouragements were many, and often of such a nature as to make us sick at heart. For my own part, I had long since placed above every other possible consideration the fate of the seven million Belgians whose lives depended on our feeding them, and I had only to turn my eyes toward them in any exigency to be able to put aside every other consideration ; I had them constantly before me — their sufferings, their sorrows, their great and tragic need. When Mr. Hoover came to Brussels he would go down and have a look at the line before the soup-kitchens and come back saying that we must find a way.

He was projecting a journey to Lille. "*Eating dogs down there*", he said laconically that morning, as we talked of the conditions in the city so near the front. Infant mortality had increased 25 per cent. It was difficult to secure sufficient allotments of food for Northern France, and Mr. Hoover wished to see for himself so that he could return and speak as one having

authority. Already many were being brought from there to Brussels hospitals, wholly demented.

While he was in Brussels he had many interviews, of course, with the German officers of the *Vermittlungsstellen*, who were being so constantly urged by *Messieurs les militaires* to inaugurate more rigid measure in regard to the *ravitaillement*, when that could be done without interfering with the food itself. The military men were growing almost savage in their insistence that the Belgians labour for them, and, while that was a matter that was outside the scope of the C.R.B., the delegates were constantly made to feel and to suffer, at least in their sympathies, the various pressures the German commanders sought to exercise.

But what did affect the C.R.B. was the intention, announced just at that time, to detail a German officer and attach him as a cicerone to each of the delegates. This system had always prevailed in the north of France, and it had been accepted by the C.R.B. as one of the necessities of the case, more excusable by the fact that the work there was carried on in the zone of actual military operations. There these cicerones, as I have said, never left the delegates alone for a second, day or night ; it was an intolerable relation ; it would have been an intolerable relation had the cicerones been very angels of light. At the end of a fortnight the delegates would return to Brussels nervous wrecks, so nervous and unstrung that they seemed likely to burst into tears. It had been impossible to secure older men to accept the posts ; none but young men, animated by a certain spirit

of adventure, would consent to do so. And now when the Germans proposed to inaugurate the same system in the *Occupationsgebiet*, Mr. Hoover promptly and determinedly said no ; to that he would never consent — rather than that the whole work might cease. The demand was not pressed. Mr. Hoover had learned, as others were to learn, that the only tone the Germans could comprehend was that which they employed themselves . . .

One day, late in the afternoon, two motors, piled high with baggage and flying the Spanish flag, rolled along the boulevard and inside were the Marquis and the Baron, lifting their hats to us as they passed. And the next day there was Villalobar again, smart in a morning-coat, come, after many moving accidents by field and flood, to tell me the news of the world outside. One who had come back into our narrow and stifling prison, after days spent at The Hague, London, Paris and Madrid, with the gossip of the dinner-tables and chancelleries of the capitals, who had seen Their Majesties in the austere simplicity of their villa in the sand-dunes, who had been the guest of the Empress Eugenie at Farnborough — she had had a deep interest in the Marquis from his youth — was sure to have much to tell ; and as Villalobar knew how to tell stories, enlivening them by his humour and by his power of minute observation, never a detail, never one of the thousand amusing, ridiculous or pathetic little incidents of the human comedy escaping him, there were, of course, long hours to bring up the arrears. He brought back the note containing the

favourable reply of the British Government of which Mr. Hoover had already told me, and to conclude that *histoire* there remained now only the formal interview with Baron von der Lancken.

M. Francqui had arrived home, too, and there were other hours with him in which he could describe in his witty way, and even enact from time to time, the human comedy as he saw it — a comedy which even in those tragic moments lent itself to much that was ridiculous in the antics of the jiggling men who were playing it.

Mr. Hoover went down to Lille with Mr. Poland, and he came back sick with what he had seen and with plans for increasing the importations of food to aid the suffering French. And he had done another thing that to me was an immense relief. When our problems seemed for the moment all to have been solved I broached another question that had long been on my heart ; it concerned the great, patient draft-dogs, those that the Germans had not requisitioned. They turned such pathetic eyes on me from under their carts, in what I could imagine as a dumb appeal :

"Ce qu'il y a de meilleur en l'homme c'est le chien"

I had a suspicion that those dogs had not enough to eat : I could share my own rations with my own dog, but what of those dogs of the street that worked so hard, leading a dog's life indeed, with no trade union, no *syndicat*, nothing to represent them, but trusting wholly to the capricious generosity of man ?

"Oh", said Mr. Hoover, to my joy, "*I've already thought of that. We are organizing a department to issue biscuits to chiens de service, but chiens de liuve must depend on the crumbs that fall from their masters' tables.*"

So the C.R.B. did not forget even the dogs of Belgium. Mr. Hoover, in speaking during one of those days of the work of the Commission, summed it all up under three heads. It had organized an almost perfect machine for securing justice and equality in the distribution of food, so that the poor had thereby been fed and kept up to the normal physical standard, enabling them to offer spiritual resistance to the invasion ; it had provided a moral rallying-point to the communes ; its delegates as eye-witnesses had acted as a constant restraint on *Kreischefs* and so prevented much brutality. Of the one hundred and fifty men who had thus far entered the Commission's service in Belgium, two were in asylums for the insane and thirty were suffering from nervous breakdowns. And in addition to the one hundred and fifty in Belgium there were one hundred in the offices of the Commission in London, Rotterdam and New York, and five thousand local committees in America and elsewhere in the world. To all this he might have added that the indirect effect on the cause of the Allies of the appeals these committees were constantly making was by no means inconsiderable.

It was then that, feeling that our other troubles were settled, we devised the plan of a fortnightly

meeting of the representatives of the C.N. and the C.R.B. with the Protecting Ministers, to avoid in the future the repetition of certain misunderstandings that had sometimes threatened to arise, as misunderstandings will arise whenever men meet, even when they all speak the same language ; when they speak different languages they are more apt to arise than ever, and we wished to avoid any misunderstandings between such good friends as Belgians and Americans had come to be. We felt, I should not say happy, for that is a word that had fled the vocabulary of our world since that terrible August of 1914, but relieved by the solutions we had found for our difficulties.

We settled it all there in the American Legation in a meeting at which the countless details were discussed — a meeting that lasted all morning and far afternoon, until M. Francqui, drawing out his watch, sprang to his feet and startled us by exclaiming :

"Mais mon Dieu ! Est-ce que ces Messieurs déjeunent ?"

Then all the afternoon we discussed it again, and at tea-time, just as we were drawing a long breath, startling news came from Holland — the Dutch army was remobilizing ! There were panic and excitement everywhere ! Troops were massing along the frontier because, as we were assured, England had sent an ultimatum to Holland and was about to invade the kingdom ! And as if that were not enough, we had the news also that the Germans had blown up the *Sussex* and that diplomatic relations between Washington and

Berlin were now about to be broken off. Mr. Hoover hurried off that night to London.

And then, when the men of the C.R.B. came to the Legation that evening for the reception my wife was holding in their honour, René Janssen, the young Dane who acted as courier for the Commission, came in from the frontier with the news that the excitement was all over ; there was word from Marshall Langhorne at The Hague saying that the crisis was past. Perhaps it was because it was All Fool's Day, and, as Villalobar had just been saying, everybody in the world had gone crazy.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

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Footnotes.

French translation : « *Le ravitaillement en danger* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre VI (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 310-313.

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>

Francisco LEZCANO :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ca4wWR8V4E>