

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

**Brand WHITLOCK**

Chapter **XV**. The *ravitaillement* goes on.

I HAD a letter from my colleague, Dr. van Dyke, at The Hague, saying that the news with regard to our relations with Germany was disquieting, that the tension was very great, that the President would not yield on the questions raised by the torpedoing of the **Sussex** (24031916), and that a rupture of diplomatic relations seemed inevitable. The volcano on which we had been sitting for eleven months seemed therefore at last on the point of eruption. It was in the midst of such uncertainty that we were about to take up the final discussion of the guarantees concerning the protection of the Belgian cattle from seizure by the German troops. My own feelings, had I cared to show them — and as an Anglo-Saxon I tried not to do that — were somehow expressed for me one afternoon at that very time by J— , the painter. We were in his studio, and I was looking at some of those quiet interiors he paints so well, evoking the sentiment and charm of little corners of peaceful *salons*, or cool dining-rooms with windows open on a garden — a kind of still life, in its way — when something was said about the war. J— resented it as a tremendous

and stupid interruption of the serious and vital affairs of life, and suddenly, as though he had had a seizure of some sort, he tugged at his hair with both hands, whirled round and cried out :

" *Et moi ! Le peintre de la tranquillité !* "

As for me, however, a certain tranquillity was immediately enforced upon me in a trifling accident ; I sprained my foot and was immobilized for weeks. It was unfortunate to be confined so stupidly to the house just when the spring was coming on, the woods all green, and their floor sprinkled with anemones as with snow. There were no regulations as to the spring as yet, unless the latest rule about dogs might be construed as having some relation to that subject. The Germans had decreed that all dogs be muzzled lest they bite somebody ! *O Mores !*

One woman, we heard, had been fined a thousand marks for having a Griffon unmuzzled, and the thousand marks not being immediately forthcoming, her furniture was seized.

It was during those days too that I had a call from an elderly gentleman from Bruges, with snowy hair and beard, dressed scrupulously in black, even to black kid gloves, which he wore throughout the interview, speaking the most formal French with meticulous politeness, addressing me always in the third person. He had come to ask some little service, and somehow in the course of

the conversation the name of Menten de Horne was mentioned, and I remembered the lieutenant of chasseurs who in the autumn of 1914 had sat there in that very chair, tired and downcast, in his dusty uniform of blue, and told me of the little drama that had been played in the asparagus-field near Malines — the peasant with uplifted fingers betraying him ; then Dr. Georg Berghausen, and the effort at exchange. I asked my visitor from Bruges if he knew the Baron, if he could give me any news of him.

"Ah", he said, "*son colonel l'a fort blâmé*".

And then he told me how, when released by the Germans, Menten de Horne had gone to Bruges, whence he had fled away, somehow got across the frontier, reached the army, and had fought most bravely and had been decorated by the King for gallant conduct in action\*. The news did me good ; it is reassuring always, and like a moral tonic, to have evidence that there is still justice in the world, and it was especially reassuring during those days in Belgium when one lived in the daily shadow of a great injustice.

The Marquis had come back from London, as I have said, with a memorandum of the English conditions in the matter of the requisitions, and stiff as they were, the Germans, after much discussion, had virtually accepted them, and we were relieved on that score, when suddenly one day we learned that, while they would indeed accept them in

principle, they would not admit the clause that bound them to recognize the C.N. and the C.R.B. as free from interference on their part ; their response to our demands was prepared, but it had an unfortunate paragraph refusing any recognition of the two organizations. The Political Department was willing enough, but it seemed that there was constant friction between that department and other departments of the General Government, and especially with the *Zivilverwaltung* — even German efficiency and organization not being altogether exempt from human envy and jealousy.

Only another conference with the Baron von der Lancken could dispose of the problem, and if the General Government should refuse to recede, then — the *ravitaillement* would be disposed of altogether ; for without recognition the C.R.B. would not remain. As Mahomet could not go to the mountain just then the mountain generously agreed to come to Mahomet, and one afternoon the Baron von der Lancken, Dr. Reith, Dr. Brohn, and a fourth man — a little round, blue-eyed German, and no doubt highly educated, since his ruddy face was terribly scarred by duels — came to the Legation, and there we met with Villalobar, van Vollenhoven and M. Francqui. The Baron von der Lancken made a little speech thanking us all for our pains, and especially Villalobar and M. Francqui for having undertaken their journey to London, and told us something of the opposition

he himself had encountered in Brussels and in Berlin in reaching an understanding. I replied, thanking the Baron for all the skill and patience by which he had given proof of his interest, saying that I realized how very difficult it all had been, as indeed it had, thanking Villalobar and Francqui too, on behalf of von Vollenhoven and of myself, and then, the amenities having been observed, we settled ourselves in our chairs to listen to the reading of the note in which the Governor-General set forth the new guarantees.

We listened while Dr. Reith read the note in French, waiting, with not a little nervous apprehension, for him to come to the fatal paragraph about the C.N. and the C.R.B., preparing for a battle on that point. Dr. Reith read on, drawing near to the paragraph, came to it at last, but there it was, all perfect, with the recognition duly set forth, all we could ask, and we were all greatly relieved. There were felicitations all round, and — the *ravitaillement* of Belgium went on. A few days later we had the notes all duly signed, as I could telegraph to Dr. Page and Mr. Hoover at London, so that they might have the satisfaction the good news would cause them.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

### Footnotes.

\* When I came out of Belgium I had the confirmation of this story at the Belgian front. The baron had displayed such gallantry in action that he had been awarded the Order of Leopold and la Croix de Guerre with palm. — **B. W.**

See chapter **41** (1914), « *The plight of the baron* »:

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/BRAND%20WHITLOCK%20BELGIUM%20UNDER%20GERMAN%20OCCUPATION%201%20CHAPTER%2041.pdf>

French translation : « *Le ravitaillement continue* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre VIII (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 317-319.

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)

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>