

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XVI. Visitors.

The suspense created by the uncertainty in the relations between America and Germany was accentuated by our lack of news. When the London newspapers arrived they were a week old, and when the American newspapers arrived they were a month old, and filled with sensations long since stale. The sheets that were printed in Brussels made no reference, or made very little reference, to the long sequel of events that were slowly drawing us into the maelstrom of the war. We had the Dutch newspapers when the Germans permitted them to cross the border ; for the most part we depended on the ***Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant***, which would have a paragraph or two each day about the *duikboot oorlog*, on the development of which the fate of civilization seemed to be more or less depending. The Dutch language was omitted from my imperfect education, but by dint of puzzling over the broad columns of the ***Rotterdamsche Courant*** I came to have a vague and shadowy apprehension of its meaning when it dealt with subjects relating to the war, especially if those subjects were sensational enough, though I never was quite certain as to how

the sensations had turned out in the end. I had, of course, official news from Washington from time to time, but what was lacking was the sense of the atmosphere of any given political situation, which only a thousand and one hints, personalities, references, incidents, bits of gossip, kindly or malicious — and especially the malicious — can provide. To be sure, there were the German newspapers, but one might as well have read nothing at all ; to read them was to know as little about the war as the German people themselves.

Our conviction was that it would end by our leaving Brussels, for in the political conflict then going on in Berlin between the civils and the *militaires*, the *militaires*, if they were like the *militaires* in Brussels, would have the last word, and they were always for more and ever more war. We kept our trunks packed and were ready to go on the short notice we felt would be all that would be vouchsafed us, and if we were not precisely sitting on our boxes, we had the impermanent sensation of those in that cramped and benumbing posture.

We tried, however, to appear permanent. The subject was never mentioned in my visits to the *Politische Abteilung*, which may have been because just at that time I did not go to the *Politische Abteilung*, for walking was then impossible. But the spring had come once more and I could drive out to look at it, through the Forêt

(de Soignes) to Overijse or La Hulpe, the countryside all a tender green and the woods in soft colours. One can not live in Belgium without wishing that one had been born a painter ; the moist atmosphere blurs all sharp edges and rigid outlines with a halo as of radiant and delicate mist, and the cottages with their red tiles and old walls are all an indigenous part of the landscape in which they nestle. And yet it is a bad habit, I am sure, always to be looking at nature as the stuff for art, and at life itself as literature. Canvas and copy! One is never happy so!

When Easter (23041916) came I had a despatch giving the President's message, in its solemnity and its strength, conceived in that strain which was proper to the leader of the liberal thought of the world. The ***Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*** that day said — in my clumsy reading of it at least — that Count Bernstorff, after an interview with Mr. Lansing, did not seem to be so optimistic as he had been the day before. There was nothing to be done, of course, so my wife and I drove out through Laeken to Meise, where, behind its high walls, is the gloomy *château* of the Empress Charlotte, who lives on there in the perpetual shadow of the tragedy that ended the imperial Mexican adventure of half a century ago. We drove out that way often, and always, I fear, rather craned our necks in an indiscreet if human curiosity, thinking to get a fugitive view of the

former Empress. But we never saw her ; we could see the *façade* of the *château*, the windows staring baldly and sometimes flashing back the sun, when there was a sun. We felt, or perhaps we only imagined, that the place wore the melancholy air of the life that had prolonged itself there, amidst the faded glories of a court that always kept up its imperial pretense — though perhaps there was no more pretense than in other imperial courts, which are all based on pretense, even where crowds of snobs and flunkies sustain them by a gaping approval and truckling acquiescence. We wondered what news of the present dark tragedy of the world had found its way behind those bleak walls. I was brought into material contact with it when I was asked to arrange for the *ravitaillement* of the *château*, which I did. But that was all ; aside from that it ever remained a mystery that found an appropriate setting behind the foliage of the great trees in the park.

The sun was shining that Easter day and the fields were sweet in their tender green or brown, with the new plowed earth that gave forth its goodly odours, and there were anemones in the grasses and great masses of the yellow flowers in the fields of rape, and here and there along the wayside old walls over which the boughs of peach-trees were falling. It was that ever lovely Belgian scene, with the windmills and the church spires in the distance, and the peasants winding slowly

along a sunken road homeward from vespers. They came slowly and sadly because of the persistent sense of tragedy in the atmosphere, for the loathed uniform of field-grey and the crude red of the ugly little caps were never long out of their sight ...

The Germans had celebrated Good Friday by posting on all the walls of Brussels a great affiche in red announcing the latest condemnations for "*treason in time of war*", thirteen victims in all, four of them sentenced to death and the others to hard labour, some for life, some for fifteen years, some for ten years. Three of those condemned to death had already been shot ; the sentence of the other had been commuted to imprisonment at hard labour for life.*

The day before the execution an *échevin* of the commune of Ixelles had been summoned to the prison of Saint-Gilles, the high walls of which enclosed so many tragedies, to perform a marriage ceremony. One of the condemned men wished before he died to wed his *fiancée*. The *échevin* had taken his books and paraphernalia and had gone to the prison where the bride was waiting. The ceremony was performed, and in the place of the usual felicitations the echevin could only say to the bridegroom :

"*Ayez du courage !*"

"*Je l'aurai*", he replied.

He embraced his wife and kissed her, and she was led away. And the next morning at dawn she was a widow.

Tragedy was all about us, and sometimes touched us, or threatened to touch us, even more closely. Early in the month I had news of two arrests that gave me concern for a long while. One of them was that of Senator Halot, a Belgian who had been honorary consul in Brussels for Japan, and since Japanese interests had been committed to my charge, I tried to help him, even though the Germans long since had officially notified all governments that they would not recognize honorary consuls. Senator Halot was implicated in a movement to assist young Belgians to cross the frontier, and since, according to the German rule, patriotism on the part of a citizen of another nation is treason against Germany, and Senator Halot was charged with this high crime and misdemeanour, and since the *Politische Abteilung* in informing me that nothing could be done referred to the case as "*cette malheureuse affaire*" it was evident that it was very serious.

The other arrest was that of Dr. Telemachus Bull, an Englishman, who was also charged with treason for having aided Belgian youths to cross the border to Holland. Dr. Bull was a man of seventy, very tall, and he wore a long beard that was said to give him a resemblance to the late

King Leopold II. He was a dentist by occupation, and had professionally served the King whom he was said to resemble. He had been arrested early in the month with a Belgian priest said to have been associated with him in his treasonable action against Germany, and I had at once made representations and engaged a lawyer to defend him.

There was, too, just at that time another incident, which involved the arrest, not of one, but of many persons — an entire young ladies' school, indeed. The girls had refused any longer to take music lessons of a German professor, and the gallant professor at once complaining, the *Polizei* descended on the *pensionnat*, arrested all the girls and imprisoned them at Saint-Gilles. I suppose that was some kind of treason, too, but the young girls were not shot for it, and after a few days' confinement were released and allowed to return home to their distracted parents.

The signs of spring and of the mysterious awakening in nature were not confined to the woods and fields ; they were evident in man as well. The Zeppelins, for one thing, were active again. Now and then they could be seen sailing over the city, like some great silvern fish swimming in the ethereal element. They would come out in the morning, as though for their exercise, hover hideously over the city for an hour, then go back to their lairs. Then one evening — it was the Tuesday

(25041916) after Easter, I think — they all left and, pointing their noses westward, sailed away and disappeared. The next morning they were back, and two days later we read in the *communiqué* that they, or some Zeppelins, had flown over London and thrown their bombs in the city.

Another sign of the coming of spring was that the tables were all out again on the sidewalks before the *estaminets*, as they call the public-houses in Brussels, and those who were of that taste could once more sit in the open air and sip their beer or coffee and watch the passing show. It had been an old custom in Brussels, but when the Germans came the municipal authorities ordered all tables indoors to prevent disturbance and as in some sort an expression of the mourning Brussels had put on. The Germans, always sensitive to criticism, even when it was only implied, were not pleased, but the municipal authorities would not revoke their order, and the tables remained indoors until the Germans themselves ordered them out again, and instructed the proprietors of the *cabarets* to serve their *patrons* at them, and could thereafter point to them as an evidence of their assertion that Brussels was normal under German rule.

Indeed, one of the most exacerbating of the little irritations that filled all the interstices of the larger pains and troubles of the time was the inconsidered and recklessly misleading statements

that were published abroad in England and in America by those who made flying visits into Belgium, and then went away and wrote their impressions. Some of them, in what seemed like resentment at not finding the whole Belgian population fainting and dying of hunger in the streets, would say :

"But I thought the people were starving !"

I used to point to the wonderful organizations of the C.N. and the C.R.B. as the reasons why they were not, but even so they would go away and, as though they had been deceived, describe the state of affairs as normal. The display of the last poor remnants of a stock of tinned food in a shop-window convinced them that there was no need of carrying on the ravitaillement, and to see people calmly coming and going in the streets instead of lifting their hands to heaven and crying out in anguish and despair was enough to cause them to conclude that the population did not feel the heel of the conqueror. I recall one man who came to Belgium in that April of 1916 accompanied by a German officer, who showed him such sights as he cared to have him see, and then went away to write a series of articles in which he said that since the Germans had "*taken charge in Belgium*" there had been a complete cessation of contagious diseases, and that they had done wonders in reducing infant mortality. The fact was that there were before the war no more contagious diseases

in Belgium than elsewhere, and during the war they increased to an alarming extent. This was especially true of tuberculosis, as of other diseases due to malnutrition. At the very moment the man I have in mind was inspecting Brussels under the tutelage of his German guide, philosopher and friend, meetings of physicians and city officials were being held in the Hotel de Ville to devise methods of combating the spread of tuberculosis. The work among the babies that was shown to the peripatetic student was that of les *Petites Abeilles*, to which I have already made reference — a work organized by Belgian women long years before the war, and under the auspices of the Comité National enlarged during the occupation. These errors were perhaps excusable, but what was beyond all imagining was the attitude assumed by some of these visitors toward the occupation, or toward the fact of the occupation itself. They either were insensible to its basic injustice or had the illusion that if things were not hopelessly evil under it, it was somehow justifiable. What few of them seemed to realize was that even though the country, since the Germans had "*taken charge*", was ruled with the united wisdom of a Moses, a Solon and a Justinian, it could not be justified. They seemed to be lacking in that culture which would have enabled them to imagine and to sympathize with the bitterness and anguish of soul, the humiliation and degradation of spirit felt by a

proud, free and sensitive people, compelled thus to live under the domination of an invading host.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Visiteurs* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre IX (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 319-322.

*** Avis**

Ont été condamnés par jugement des 11 et 12 avril 1916, du tribunal de campagne :

(a) Pour trahison commise pendant l'état de guerre en pratiquant l'espionnage et en y prêtant aide, à la peine de mort :

- 1. Oscar Hernalsteens, dessinateur à Bruxelles ;*
- 2. François Van Aerde, dessinateur industriel, à Anvers ;*
- 3. Jules Mohr, inspecteur d'assurances, à Valenciennes ;*
- 4. Emile Gressier, inspecteur des ponts et chaussées à Saint-Amand.*

(b) Pour avoir prêté aide à l'espionnage :

- 5. Georges Hernalsteens, serrurier à Bruxelles-Boitsfort, aux travaux forcés à perpétuité ;*
- 6. Gustave Desmul, ouvrier du chemin de fer, à Gand, à 15 ans de travaux forcés ;*
- 7. Albert Liénard, entrepreneur à Valenciennes, à 10 ans de travaux forcés ;*
- 8. Oscar Delnatte, directeur de cinématographe, à Roubaix, à 15 ans de travaux forcés ;*
- 9. Constant Pattyn, terrassier à Lille, à 12 ans de travaux forcés ;*
- 10. Jacques Drouillon, marchand de volaille, à La Plaigne, à 10 ans de travaux forcés ;*
- 11. Lucien Cabuy, peintre à Bruxelles, à 15 ans de travaux forcés ;*
- 12. Joseph Vermeulen, propriétaire de briqueterie a Merelbeke, près de Gand, à 10 ans de travaux forcés ;*
- 13. Joseph Goosenaerts, professeur à Gand, à 10 ans de travaux forcés.*

Alfred Gaudefroy, marchand de diamants à Bruxelles, a été acquitté.

Les condamnés à mort avaient consenti, moyennant paiement, à pratiquer l'espionnage pour compte du service d'information de l'ennemi. Longtemps, conformément aux instructions qui leur

avaient été remises, ils ont observés nos troupes, mouvements de troupes, transports par chemin de fer, autos, etc., et transmis ou fait transmettre les renseignements ainsi obtenus au service d'information de l'ennemi.

Les autres condamnés ont pratiqué l'espionnage ou y ont prêté aide de la même manière, mais dans une moindre mesure.

Les condamnés à mort Hernalsteens, Mohr et Gressier ont été exécutés.

En vertu du droit de grâce, la peine de mort prononcée contre Van Aerde a été commuée en travaux forcés à perpétuité.

Bruxelles, le 19 avril 1916.

(Translation :)

Notice

The following have been condemned by judgment, 1916, of the court-martial of the 11th and 12th April :

(a) For treason committed during a state of war by practicing espionage and by giving aid to its practice, to the pain of death :

- 1. Oscar Hernalsteens, draughtsman, of Brussels ;*
- 2. Francois Van Aerde, industrial draughtsman, of Antwerp ;*
- 3. Jules Mohr, insurance agent, of Valenciennes ;*
- 4. Emile Gressier, inspector of bridges and highways, of Saint-Amand.*

(b) For having aided in espionage :

- 5. Georges Hernalsteens, locksmith, of Brussels-Boitsfort, to hard labour for life ;*
- 6. Gustave Desmul, railroad workman, of Ghent, to 15 years at hard labour ;*
- 7. Albert Liénard, contractor, of Valenciennes, to 10 years at hard labour ;*
- 8. Oscar Delnatte, cinema director, of Roubaix, to 15 years at hard labour ;*
- 9. Constant Pattyn, navy, of Lille, to 12 years at hard labour ;*
- 10. Jacques Drouillon, poulterer, of La Plaigne, to 10 years at hard labour ;*
- 11. Lucien Cabuy, painter, of Brussels, to 15 years at hard labour ;*
- 12. Joseph Vermeulen, proprietor of a brick-yard, of Meirelbeke, near Ghent, to 10 years at hard labour ;*
- 13. Joseph Goosenaerts, professor, of Ghent, to 10 years at hard labour.*

Alfred Gaudefroy, diamond merchant, of Brussels, has been acquitted.

Those condemned to death had consented, in return for payment, to practise espionage for the benefit of the intelligence service of the

enemy. For a long time, in conformity with the instructions that had been given them, they have observed our troops, the movement of troops, transports by railroad, automobile, etc., and have transmitted or caused to be transmitted the information thus obtained to the intelligence service of the enemy.

The others condemned have practised espionage or have given it aid in the same manner, but in a less degree.

The men condemned to death, Hernalsteens, Mohr and Gressier, have been executed.

By virtue of the right of pardon, the penalty of death pronounced against Van Aerde has been commuted to hard labour for life.

Brussels, April 19, 1916.

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>