

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XIX. Dr. Bull.

There was just then a season of Wagnerian opera at la Monnaie under official German patronage. Two years before, the *Ring* and all the other operas had been seen on the same stage — *Parsifal* a score of times — and all Brussels had been there ; the town was enthusiastic ; a medallion designed by De Vreese had been struck in commemoration. Now not a single Belgian would go near, and most of them would declare to you that they would never again consent to listen to so much as a leitmotiv of Wagner. They were thinking of another drama, far more representative of Germany as they had come to know it, just then playing out its tragic *dénouement* in the Senate chamber. These trials were secret, and for that reason the interest in them was all the more morbid and perverted ; but one morning the news was whispered about that thirteen had been condemned to death, and many more to various penalties and forfeitures.

The accused were tried as spies, and it was alleged against them that they belonged to a large organization that furnished to the Allies information concerning the Zeppelins, the hangars where they

were housed, and the movement of troops by rail — "*counted trains*", as the phrase was. The leader was said to be Charles Parenté, a telegraph lineman of Anderlecht, near Brussels, a patriot evidently of force and character. It was said that during his trial there in the Senate chamber, worn out and perhaps weary of the long session, he fell asleep in his chair. One of the judges observing him was indignant and had him aroused, and then said :

- "*Vous dormez, monsieur !*"
- "*Oui*", said Parenté calmly, "*il faut que j'aie la conscience bien tranquille pour pouvoir dormir quand j'ai déjà un pied dans la tombe.*"

They had no illusions as to the fate awaiting them, those obscure heroes of liberty in Belgium. Parenté and nine of his fellow-patriots were condemned to death, and nineteen others were condemned to hard labour in German prisons. And then immediately the stricken relatives and friends of the condemned came to the Legation to implore me to intercede, and day and night their pitiable appeals lay on my heart. At the end of one of these hard days Villalobar was there, sitting on the other side of my table. He was weary and showed the strain ; he, too, had been besieged by all those suppliants.

- "*My dear friend*", he said, looking up at me, "*don't you think it is very long ?*"

It was very long, and there seemed to be no sign of its end. There was so little that we could do. These were all Belgians : there was no official ground on which we could base pleas for mercy ; it was a matter of the greatest delicacy even to approach the subject. But we did what we could ; we made unofficial and informal representations, and a few days later we had the satisfaction of hearing that the Governor-General would commute some of the death sentences. He did commute seven of them to hard labour for life, but three of the condemned — Parenté, Lefèvre and Krické —, were shot by the firing squad that was assembled at the coming of almost every dawn. *

This sort of thing was going on all the while, as though Alva's Blood Council were sitting again in Belgium. If every trial did not bring its tragedy it brought its injustice and the very weather itself was in the mood of the times ; cold and bitter rains were falling on the dull, drab city, the rains that come with *les saints de glace*, as the French call their cold days in the middle of May — *die drei strengen Herren* of the Germans. It was at that time that Brussels had another sensation in the arrest of one of her most prominent citizens, the venerable M. Armand Bloch, who for twenty-five years, by the unanimous choice of the Israelite communities, had been Grand Rabbi of Belgium. At Easter time he had preached in the synagogue of Brussels ; scattered through the congregation were about

forty German soldiers, and the following day the Grand Rabbi was arrested, charged with having offended their patriotic sentiments.

Now it happened that the sermon the Grand Rabbi had read that morning had not been prepared for the occasion but was, in fact, a sermon he had preached years before, in 1908 ; it had been published, and he read it from the printed copy. It did not contain, and by no possible means could have contained, any reference to the war, since it had been written six years before the war began, and had not been changed ; and it made no allusion to the Germans. What the German soldiers present took umbrage at was the somewhat emphatic tone of certain texts read by the Grand Rabbi, texts which the Germans did not recognize as quoted denunciations of the old Hebrew prophets ; they thought them original observations of the Grand Rabbi addressed directly to them and stigmatizing their deeds and those of their comrades. Perhaps common soldiers might be excused for having found the texts entirely apposite in their case and the boot so well fitting that they at once drew it on, but more discrimination might have been expected of the magistrate who presided at the trial. Rabbi Bloch submitted the printed copy of the sermon with the proof of its date, and expected that to establish his innocence, but, with characteristic lack of humour, the German magistrate failed to see in this any

extenuating circumstance and condemned the Grand Rabbi to six months' imprisonment, and sent him forthwith to the prison of Saint-Gilles, where, the gaol being already overcrowded, he was confined in a cell with two other prisoners.

The leading members of the community petitioned for his release, but all to no avail ; the German authorities were obdurate, and the Grand Rabbi remained in his cell at Saint-Gilles for having cited a text of some Hebrew prophet that characterised in terms too explicit the deeds of modern Germans.

It was a few days later that the trial of Dr. Telemachus Bull was held. I had been very anxious as to his fate ; in speaking of it the Germans had shaken their heads sadly and spoken of it as very grave, very grave, so that I was troubled about the possibilities. Dr. Bull was charged, of course, with treason, under the sinister clause of Article 90 of the *German Penal Code* and 58 of the *German Military Penal Code*, the penalty for which was death. And then — an aggravating circumstance — Dr. Bull was English. His offense consisted in having tried to send recruits across the Dutch frontier to the Belgian army. He had been betrayed by some of his accomplices. With nearly a score of other accused he was tried by a court-martial at Antwerp on May 19, 1916. I had engaged the services of Maître A. Dorff, of the Brussels Bar, to defend him, and he appeared with

Maîtres G. Vaes and E. van den Bosch, of the Antwerp Bar. The court also appointed the Herr Dr. Lappenberg to aid in the defense, and, as Dr. Bull was charged with a capital offense, Dr. Lappenberg was instructed to plead especially for him. There was, indeed, less haste and more respect for the form and substance of justice in this trial — the result, perhaps, of tardy reflection on the procedure in the case of Miss Cavell. The lawyers were allowed to examine the dossiers and to converse with their clients before the trial. And besides the lawyers themselves there was another innovation — the brother of one of the accused was allowed to attend the hearing.

The old doctor was very fine and dignified, and the influence of his strong personality affected the court. He stood up, faced his judges and at once admitted having furnished two young Belgian medical students with the address of a person who he believed made a practice of clandestinely conducting young men to the frontier. He admitted also having given to the person in question a photograph of one of the students which had been employed in making a false card of identity for the young Belgian. When the prosecutor asked him to give the name of the person to whom he had sent the two youths, he refused to do so ; he said that he wished himself to assume the entire responsibility for the deed.

And then, out of the throng of prisoners on trial, there arose a man in the black soutane of a priest, who bowed and said :

"I should like to thank Dr. Bull most heartily for his generous attitude, but I cannot let him assume alone the responsibility ; it was I to whom he sent the students."

And Dr. Bull, bowing in his turn, said :

"I thank Monsieur l'Abbé, but I can not consent to his making this sacrifice ; I alone am responsible."

The priest was the Abbé de Vogel ; he protested again, and the doctor protested ; there was a veritable *duel d'élégance* between them.

The attitude of Dr. Bull produced a favourable impression on the court — won him, indeed, some sympathy ; and this, together with another fact educed in evidence, worked a change in his favour. The two young medical students, who were among the accused, testified that they had had no intention to enlist as *combattants* in the Belgian army ; one of them had intended to place himself at the disposition of the Red Cross, the other to finish his studies in a university in Holland and then to enter the medical service of the Belgian army. On this the *auditeur militaire* amended his information so as to charge Dr. Bull with having violated only Article 2 of the Governor-General's decree of July 11, 1915, punishing with imprisonment for not more than five years and a

fine of not more than ten thousand marks those who aided the clandestine departure of Belgians between the ages of sixteen and forty years. On this charge, then, he asked that Dr. Bull be condemned to one year, and for having aided in preparing the false card of identity, to six months in prison. But the Court was even more lenient ; it condemned him to three months' imprisonment and to pay a fine of five thousand marks. This judgment was confirmed on May 23, 1916. Dr. Bull had been in prison since the sixth of April, most of the time in solitary confinement, and to a man sixty-nine years of age this was in itself a hardship. The doctor insisted on this point and asked that the time he had already been in prison be included in his term of imprisonment, and this the court allowed.

The Abbé Vogel was condemned to twelve years' imprisonment at hard labour.

It was with a feeling of great relief that I heard of the result of the trial so far as Dr. Bull was concerned. According to German standards the punishment was light ; there was, after all, some sense of justice in them ! Arrangements were made to pay the doctor's fine, and with his British courage and fortitude he settled down to make the best of his confinement until that July day when he should be free.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

Avis

Par jugement du 8 mai, confirmé le 10 mai 1916, le tribunal de campagne a condamné à mort pour espionnage :

- 1. Charles Parenté, ouvrier du télégraphe à Anderlecht ;*
- 2. Arthur Devaleriola, employé du télégraphe à Berchem-Sainte-Agathe ;*
- 3. Louis Lefèvre, employé du télégraphe à La Louvière ;*
- 4. Gérard Hubert, employé du télégraphe à Schaerbeek ;*
- 5. Théodore Fisch, marchand de cigares à Malines ;*
- 6. Prosper Krické, inspecteur d'assurances à Gand ;*
- 7. Martin Bastiaensen, employé du télégraphe à Molenbeek ;*
- 8. Jules Deblander, ouvrier du télégraphe à Nimy ;*
- 9. Gustave Dallemagne, secrétaire des fortifications à Liège ;*
- 10. Antoine Lechat, contremaître du télégraphe à Nimy.*

Parenté, Lefèvre et Krické ont été exécutés.

La peine de mort prononcée contre les autres condamnés à mort a été commuée en travaux forcés à perpétuité, en vertu du droit de grâce de Son Excellence le Gouverneur général.

19 autres accusés ont été condamnés à de fortes peines de travaux forcés pour espionnage ou pour avoir prêté aide à l'ennemi.

Les personnes condamnées appartenaient à une grande organisation qui avait pour mission de se procurer des renseignements sur nos hangars à dirigeables, nos transports par chemin de fer et autres points d'ordre militaire et de transmettre ces renseignements à l'ennemi.

Bruxelles, le 15 mai 1916.

(Translation :)

Notice

By judgment of May 8, confirmed May 10, 1916, the court martial has condemned to death for espionage :

Charles Parenté, telegraph workman, of Anderlecht ;

Arthur Devaleriola, telegraph employé, of Berchem-Sainte-Agathe ;

Louis Lefèvre, telegraph employé, of La Louvière ;

Gérard Hubert, telegraph employé, of Schaerbeek ;

Théodore Fisch, cigar merchant, of Malines ;

Prosper Krické, insurance agent, of Ghent ;

Martin Bastiaensen, telegraph employé, of Molenbeek ;

Jules Deblander, telegraph workman, of Nimy ;

Gustave Dallemagne, secretary of the fortifications, of Liège ;

Antoine Lechat, telegraph foreman, of Nimy.

Parenté, Lefèvre and Krické have been executed.

The death penalty pronounced against the others condemned to death has been commuted to hard labour for life, by virtue of the right of pardon of His Excellency the Governor-General.

Nineteen other accused have been condemned to severe penalties of hard labour for espionage or for having given aid to the enemy.

The persons condemned belong to a large organization which has for its object to procure information concerning our dirigible hangars, our railroad transports, and other things of a military nature, and to transmit this information to the enemy.

Brussels, May 15, 1916.

French translation : « *Le docteur Bull* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XII (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 330-334.

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>

Especially 15/5/1916 (19160515).

For doctor **Telemachus Bull**, consult :

« *Edith Cavell 3: the constant Threat* »

<https://firstworldwarhiddenhistory.wordpress.com/?s=Telemachus&search=Go>