

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

**Brand WHITLOCK**

### Chapter **XX**. Some noble visitors.

It had been stupid to be housed up as I had been for weeks, unable to walk and permitted only to go for a drive when the weather was fine. And the weather was not often fine ; the rain fell dismally all the while — *le diable battait sa femme*, as the French say. I had been able to drive down to the old château of Seneffe one Sunday to see some friends, but that was the extent of my travels. Raymond Swing, the correspondent of the ***Chicago Daily News*** (1) had been in Brussels, and, like most newspaper men, could tell more news than he could print : the President's diplomacy had been a great victory, as the European Press, indeed, widely recognized, and he had at the same time helped the liberal element in Germany to a victory which seemed to give some hope to mankind ; the fiery von Tirpitz had been temporarily suppressed, and though the *Tubantia* had been torpedoed by the military party to avenge his downfall, the sinking of the *Sussex* had been a mistake, and the *Lusitania* itself would never have been torpedoed, they said, had not the Germans thought it impossible that she could sink so quickly. Mr. Swing had come to Brussels to

interview the Governor-General for his newspaper, and the interview was a remarkable one ; in it we learned many things that we seemed never before to have fully grasped.

*"The work of the Germans in Belgium", said General von Bissing to Mr. Swing, "is not appreciated at its full value by the Belgians, whose mind — and that is comprehensible — is enveloped in a cloud of patriotic sentiment. You yourself will have seen that the ravages in Belgium have not the extent claimed by a part of the foreign Press. Many things laid to the charge of the Germans and to my charge personally are highly exaggerated or wholly inexact. I can say that I can sleep with my conscience in peace."*

When Mr. Swing asked him if the attitude of the Belgian people toward the Germans had ameliorated, he replied :

*"It has considerably improved. Naturally, the country must be held by a firm hand, and in some cases — as, for example, where it is a question of obeying — rigorous punishments are imposed. I am forced to sign sentences of death — a grave responsibility that I have always sincerely regretted. But we find ourselves engaged in a war conducted on the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and the implacable obligation having been imposed on me, I have signed without trembling or hesitation."*

The Governor-General said, too, that the German civil functionaries had put in vigour a number of Belgian laws that had "*remained in the drawers.*"

*"This is particularly true", he said, "in regard to measures of social betterment (prévoyance sociale) in favour of the women and children of the working class. Compulsory education, which Belgium has known only in theory, has now become a reality. The Flemish people, for the first time, have been put on an equal footing before the law with the Walloons. We have accorded to them without obstruction the use of their own language, and given them their own schools ; the Flemish University will be erected at Ghent. To these measures of civil administration there have just been added numerous ordinances concerning public hygiene — a domain in which the Belgians have never particularly distinguished themselves."*

The Governor-General, speaking of the financial condition of Belgium and of the annual war contribution of 480.000.000 francs, said that he felt great reforms had been wrought in the system of taxation.

*"Everywhere", he explained, "we have introduced a direct tax on capital. It is probable that this will excite recrimination, but this new system will distribute for the first time in Belgium, and in an equitable way, the burden of public*

*finances, and compel the rich to contribute their just part."*

And then he went on to say :

*"I have applied myself especially to create progress in agriculture, that element indispensable to the economic life of a country of which the industries are practically dead. You will observe that the fields of Belgium are well cultivated and flourishing. Vast herds of cattle graze in the pastures. I have always made it a rule to order requisitions only within those limits which could not endanger the future of Belgian live stock. To the same end measures have been taken to protect the breeding of horses, and in maintaining a number of stallions and brood mares sufficient for reproduction. The statistics for this year show an increase of 49 per cent, in live stock compared with that of last year.*

*"Such have been the grand lines of my policy; the maintenance of agricultural industry, execution of the social laws, equal rights for the Flemish and the Walloons, sound financial administration on the basis of equal taxation."*

Thus von Bissing, the reformer. The interview was published in French in ***La Belgique***. We read it, and rubbed our eyes, and then we smiled. We smiled most, I think, about the one statement in the interview that was worthy of any attention or explanation, and that was the assertion that the

live stock in Belgium had increased 49 per cent, in a year. The "*statistics*" to which the Governor-General referred were based on the declarations of the peasants as to the amount of live stock they possessed. In 1915, when the Germans ordered them to make their declarations, they supposed that any live stock they declared would be seized, and made their declarations accordingly. In 1916 forage was rationed, and owners of live stock were ordered to declare the live stock that they had to feed, and again they made their declarations accordingly. Naturally there was a great increase in the quantity ; and the Governor-General was right in estimating it at 49 per cent ; the wonder is that the statistical increase was not more.

The Governor-General's opinion that the work of the Germans in Belgium was not appreciated by the Belgians seemed to be generally shared by the officers in his reform administration. With the coming of summer many Belgians were trying to secure permits to go away to Holland or to Switzerland. A young lady of our acquaintance went to the *Pass Zentrale* in the Place Royale to apply for a *Passierschein* to go to Holland, and the officer in charge asked her if she could not arrange some tennis-sets for the young German officers ; they found life so dull in Brussels ! The spirited girl replied, "*No ! never !*" told him frankly that Belgians would hate Germans so long as there was one

Belgian and one German left in the world, and went away.

The women indeed were all splendid, and I might give many instances of their spirit. When German policemen were searching the house of Madame E... at Brussels, seeking copper, they saw an old Turkish pistol lying on a table in the *fumoir*, where it was doing duty as an *objet d'art*.

"*Mais, Madame, vous avez des armes chez vous ?*"

"*Oui, mais ce n'est qu'un pistolet turc, et comme vous le savez tres bien, une arme turque ne vaut rien.*"

Such stories were infinite in number and variety.

There is not a *châtelaine* in Belgium or in the north of France who has not her adventure to relate ; and she is apt to relate it with considerable feeling, born of her impotence to express the indignity of it all. It would be difficult to say whether the minor incidents that reveal a mere lack of taste are the more affecting, or those of a gross brutality. They range the whole gamut of impoliteness in the human species from that incident in which a German officer, having forced himself and his staff on a household for dinner, announced afterwards that when the war was over he would return and bring his wife, to the more exaggerated conduct of the royal prince of whom de C. told me. At the beginning of the war he found himself with his

sister in their *château* south of Mons. They had established a Red Cross Hospital and had been nursing wounded soldiers, British for the most part, for the British army was then fighting in that region. Indeed, on the August 24 General Sir John French stopped at the *château*. The next afternoon C. and his sister, after a fatiguing day, had seated themselves for a cup of tea and a moment's rest when, glancing out of the window, C. saw a group of German officers approaching. They proved to be General von Kluck and his staff on their way, they said, to Paris. Von Kluck was correct, so C. told me, gravely, reserved and silent. But about the same time they had another guest, of much more exalted rank, no less a personage indeed than the Duke of S.-H., who had with him his nephew S.-M. They entered, clicking their heels, and with their hands held at the salute bowed again and again in the stiff German way, announced their names, and asked for a cup of tea. The Duke at first showed a determination to be exceedingly pleasant ; there was a certain loud affability in his manner, but, seating himself at the tea-table he leaned across to C's sister and said :

*"You know that you Belgians have treated us very badly. We came to you as friends, and see what you did."*

C's sister resented this, but without bringing on any difficulties at the moment. There were several wounded English soldiers, in the house

and these the Germans wished to see. A German doctor roughly pulled the bandages off the legs of one of the men to see if he really was wounded, saying that they were all probably shamming. And the Duke, taking the knife of one of the soldiers held it close to his face — the lad was half dead with double pneumonia — and said :

*"You use these knives to kill German prisoners."*

The imputation of dishonour roused the boy to protest, and indeed seemed to imbue him with some life for he recovered from that moment.

While the Duke was searching the *château* for hidden English soldiers, concealed arms, and what not, S.-M. approached C.'s sister and asked her if she would not come to dinner with them that night — at her own table. She said that, of course, she would not.

*"You are our enemies ; you have invaded our land. We did not invite you here, we do not want you here, and you should understand that I can not, with propriety, take a seat at table with you."*

Young S.-M. understood, and was indeed sympathetic, but when his uncle heard of the refusal he marched into the hall and began upbraiding C. and his sister, creating a scene, and making a spectacle of himself.

*"You have poisoned the food !"* he cried, quite beside himself with rage, *"You have poisoned the food !"*



Young S.-M. suffered from the vicarious shame of it, and taking C. aside, implored him to do something to placate his uncle. C. said then :

*"Inasmuch as you charge us with having poisoned the food I shall go to table and taste it before you"*. And so he did.

The Germans had expected to spend the night at the *château*, but suddenly, without explanation, at nine o'clock they left and moved on to a country house not far away that had been abandoned by its occupants. It was a beautiful old mansion, full of artistic treasures, and a day or so after, when the Duke and his Germans had gone, C, visiting the house, found *objets d'arts* destroyed, tapestries and paintings ruined, and the bed chambers the scene of unspeakable bestial indecencies.

They did not all behave that badly. It was not long thereafter that the Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz came along and was quartered in the *château*. He apologized for what he said was an intrusion he was powerless to avoid, acting as he was under a soldier's orders. He visited the British wounded, sat by their bedsides, talked to them in excellent English, kindly and sympathetically. \*

The German officers were arrogant enough in Brussels, but the capital was spared many of the indignities that they visited upon the provinces. In the smaller towns civilians were required to salute German officers by raising their hats, and in some

places in the *Etappengebiet* and in the *Operationsgebiet* the men not only had to lift their hats, but men and women both had to step off the sidewalks when the officers passed.

While in some cases indecencies were committed in the *châteaux* occupied by the officers, as, for instance, in the King's summer palace at Laeken, and, of course, often by the soldiers, there were officers who thought to show their good breeding by leaving their cards when they went, to thank the owner for what they seemed to consider as hospitality. Sometimes they did more. A friend of mine had a *château* that was seized and occupied by German officers. At Christmas time they had themselves photographed by flashlight as they sat at dinner in his house, drinking his wine. Then they wrote a letter presenting their compliments and thanks, telling him how much they had enjoyed themselves in his charming home, and enclosing one of the photographs. My friend was at a loss what to do. The latter was evidently a sincere effort to be polite, and he wrote back, thanking the officers and saying that he hoped that ere long he might have the pleasure of returning the visit in their own country, and in the same manner.

The one thing that affected the Germans, the one thing they respected, was force, power in some form, military power first of all, but power, whether of wealth, station or rank, a name, a

position, perhaps even a frock-coat — for they were tremendous snobs. They were much impressed by Villalobar's servants when they had on their royal liveries and powdered wigs ; I used to wish that he would have them dressed that way always, and go about with us.

They displayed all the familiar phenomena of the new rich. I can see a certain Baron at luncheon in a diplomat's house ; the scars of his students' duels were so disposed on his face that they gave it a worried and anxious expression. He went about turning up the plates to look on the bottoms, peering here and there in all the corners at the relics of centuries of culture, and asking where the like could be found.

The German officers indeed were always going to the Rue de l'Empereur to the antiquarians, and the Belgians shamelessly traded on their ignorance, sold them all the false and spurious pieces they had, and before long were manufacturing more to take their places. Le Jeune, the barber, sold as old engravings, and for a large sum, some prints on the walls of his barber shop.

It was not hard for a pretty girl to obtain a *Passierschein* ; for men, even men of advanced years, it was difficult. A friend of mine was anxious to go to Switzerland ; he applied for a pass, giving his reasons for wishing to go, and stating his willingness to deposit any sum as a guarantee of his return. The application was returned as

refused; the refusal was in the form of a printed card with the blanks filled in, and with the one polite word in it crossed out, thus, the words and figures written in are in italics :

*Ihrem Gesuch vom 10.2 um Reise-erlaubnis  
nach der Schweiz kann **leider** keine Folge  
gegeben werden.  
Pass Zentrale Brüssel.  
v. Marx  
Rittmeister*

The word "*leider*" printed in the blank form, was crossed out with the stroke of a pen.

These things are trivial, to be sure, but in their aggregate they were great enough to produce their indelible impression and to furnish their evidence of what Brussels folk were never weary of discussing as *la mentalité allemande*, the phrase used in despair when they wished to account for some such attitude as that of the German officer who stepped out of the Astoria Hotel one evening, looked up into the serene, clear sky, in the profound depths of which a lovely moon was rising, and remarked to an American journalist :

*"Ah ! Fine night for the Zeppelins !"*

Whatever it was, it led some of them to do shameful things, as when, finding Brussels too dull, they installed women for their pleasure in the

homes of refinement which they had taken over in the city.

The atmosphere of the city under their occupancy during those spring days was more and more suffocating ; there seemed to be no grace, no beauty, no dignity left in life. And yet there was the inspiration of the hope and endurance of the Belgians, a neverending marvel. They were already planning for the reconstruction of the ruined villages scattered all over the land. At one time, as I have already said, the Germans themselves had proposed to undertake this task ; they had even proposed to have German architects plan the reconstruction, which would have been a calamity even worse than the invasion. To imagine the lovely Belgian scene, with its low nestling cots of the red roofs, its churches in the Flemish Gothic, marred by the intrusion of those baroque structures that are found all over Germany, was to prefer that the ruins be left as they were. But this idea was happily abandoned, and the Belgians were already studying the question in the spirit of the town-planning movement.

A committee was formed and prizes offered to the competition of architects, who were asked to submit drawings for the restoration of villages and of farms that had been destroyed. The work was to be a restoration as far as that was possible ; when there was nothing left to restore the construction

was to be undertaken in the spirit of what had been. In the case of reconstructed farm-houses the style for ages in use in that province was to be preserved and followed ; modern improvements were to be in the interior, not on the exterior, and thus Brabant and Liège and the two Flanders were to be to the eye, and to the artist's eye, what they had been in happier days.

In May the committees held an exposition of the plans submitted, in the new Hôtel de Ville of the commune of Schaerbeek, and Villalobar and I went to open it. The Hôtel de Ville of Schaerbeek, itself a beautiful structure in the style of the old Hôtel de Ville that had been burned, was barely finished when the war began. It stands at the end of the vista of the Rue Royale at the opposite end from the church of Sainte-Marie. The communal pride is such that each commune, even in the agglomeration of Brussels, must have its *maison communale*. Ixelles adapted for the purpose the lovely old residence of Malibran, whose tomb is in the church at Laeken, and Saint-Gilles has a new Hôtel de Ville which I had formerly visited at about that time, to be received in State by the Burgomaster and the *échevins* ; the Burgomaster read an address and two little girls in white recited some verses, and my wife and I signed the golden book, and we went through the stately halls and looked at the paintings by Brussels artists with which the walls are adorned.

There was something inspiring as well as instructive about the exposition of the town-planning committee, something hopeful, too, the first sign of construction after so much destruction.

One of the promoters of the movement was Emile Vinck, a socialist senator (Ixelles), and when I felicitated him he told me of an experience that showed that the appreciation of the aesthetic value of the movement was not altogether unanimous even in Belgium. He had gone a few days before, with the other members of his committee, to a certain village, and as they were standing with the Burgomaster looking down the main street of the town, its houses in ruins on both sides, the Burgomaster, pointing dramatically, said :

*"Ah, Messieurs, pour vous montrer que nous sommes à la hauteur du progrès ici, je vais vous dire que toutes les maisons dans cette rue auront chacune un étage de plus — au moins !"*

Mr. Hoover was in Brussels for a few days ; he had come to discuss with M. Francqui certain of those misunderstandings that would arise now and then as to the details of the work which the two great organizations were carrying on. Dr. Lucas, too, had just come to study child-welfare conditions, to be able to report intelligently on his return to America, where a campaign was to be undertaken for the Belgian children ; and M. Francqui gave a dinner to the officials of the C.R.B.

at that long table in his English dining-room, where from time to time the men of the C.R.B. met all the distinguished personalities of Brussels. I look back upon those occasions with the greatest pleasure, for M. Francqui was a good host, and the talk was always of the best.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

\* The Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz committed suicide in the spring of 1918.

French translation : « *Quelques nobles visiteurs* » 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 334-337.

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>

Raymond Swing, correspondent of the **Chicago Daily News** and Governor-General von Bissing.

See :

“*De huichelaar von Bissing*” in **Ons vaderland**, 22/07/1916 :

[http://archivesenligne.pasdecalais.fr/cache/serie\\_pg\\_pg\\_062\\_0001\\_pg\\_062\\_0001-0195.pdf](http://archivesenligne.pasdecalais.fr/cache/serie_pg_pg_062_0001_pg_062_0001-0195.pdf)