

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

**Brand WHITLOCK**

### Chapter **XXI**. Luncheons and dinners.

The position of the diplomats at Brussels, as I have frequently indicated, was wholly anomalous, and continued to be so to the end. Most of our colleagues were at Le Havre, near the Belgian Government, and the Germans, especially those of the military clique, frequently wished us all there.

"*What are you doing here ?*" asked a German officer one day of Villalobar, in blunt intimation of a feeling that we were all *de trop*.

The Marquis measured him with his haughtiest glance from head to foot, and said :

"*And what are you doing here ?*"

During the occupation the Austrian Legation at Brussels was occupied by the Baron von und zu Franckenstein, designated as *Commissaire auprès du gouvernement d'occupation*, and Turkey, too, had a *commissaire*, so I heard, though I never saw him. Among the neutrals, Mahmoud Khan, the Persian Minister, was still in Brussels, as were Mr. Albert Blancas, the Argentine Minister (1) ; the Count d'Ansembourg, *Chargé d'Affaires* for the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg ; Mr. J. Lemoyne, the Bolivian *Chargé d'Affaires* ; Mr. Cavalcanti, the Brazilian *Chargé d'Affaires* ; Mr. Sven Poussette,

the Swedish *Chargé d'Affaires* ; Mr. Portellas, the Cuban *Chargé d'Affaires*, and Mr. Mitilineu, the Rumanian *Chargé d'Affaires* ; and Mr. Jules Borel, the Swiss Consul-General and diplomatic agent. Bulle, though serving in the C.R.B., still had the Mexican escutcheon on his house and on occasions flew the Mexican flag ; but his diplomatic work went no farther.

Ouang Yung Pan, the Chinese Minister, lived on quietly in his pretty little Legation in the Boulevard Militaire. The Dutch Legation was under the direction of M. van Vollenhoven, as *Chargé d'Affaires*, and was very busy, as there were many thousand Dutch subjects in Brussels. There was the Papal Nunciature, and there were the Spanish and the American Legations. And that was all that was left of the corps that had been so large, so representative. The other neutrals, as though discouraged, as well they might be, with the state of things in the mad world, had withdrawn their envoys and closed up their Legations. The protocol had fallen into general disuse ; we remembered, all of us, or tried to remember, to leave cards on one another on the various national *fête*-days, and we met occasionally, but never as a diplomatic corps, unless it was one morning when we all went to have our photograph taken in a rather sorry group.

And now it was June ; the Nonce was going away, and we were sorry to have him go. I had

come to have great respect for Monseigneur Tacci; he was so fine, so distinguished, so intellectual. He was a modest man who in the most delicate of positions had rendered in the discreetest way possible many little personal services during those trying times. He seldom went out of the Nunciature that stood darkly in the Chaussée de Wavre, but the door bell was always clamouring tragically, and night after night he was trying to save the life of some condemned person whose friends could appeal to him in his sacerdotal if not in his diplomatic capacity. Now that he was to go there was no one left to take the initiative in showing him the courtesies due his rank as the only ambassador at the Belgian Court and dean of the corps. But Cardinal Mercier came to the rescue and gave a luncheon in the archepiscopal palace at Malines (11/06/1916). It seemed something of an adventure, for no one could be sure just how the Germans would view it, none of them, of course, being included in the invitations. Villalobar and I drove up in the clear, sharp air and brilliant sun of the perfect day that ushered in that month of June, and just as we were going into Malines we saw M. Becqo, the Governor of Brabant, Baron Capelle and Count Leo d'Ursel, both of the Belgian Foreign Office, who had gone all the way on foot in the dust of the highway, far otherwise than it had been the wont of Belgian officials to travel in the

days when Belgium was not under the rude heel of modern *Kultur*.

The walls of the plain, severely ecclesiastical building were riddled by the balls that had spattered there in those August days nearly two years before, but in the courtyard there was a pretty garden in bloom, and from the entrance we went up the long staircase and into a reception hall, large, light, but plain, severe, monastic, like the building itself and the life of its occupant. There were old portraits of former cardinals about the walls, and a new painting, just finished, of the present Primate of Belgium. The Cardinal's secretary received us, and there were standing about the room six or seven priests in black cassocks, wearing the magenta-coloured *ceintures* of *Monseigneurs*. Almost immediately His Eminence came in, tall, vigorous, splendidly alive and alert, the little red *calotte* on his head, a long cape of red silk floating from his broad shoulders and falling to the heels of his buckled shoes. He came forward with that long, eager stride, a smile hovering about the humourous mouth and clear blue eyes of the ascetic yet strong visage, reaching out both hands in welcome. He was a distinguished presence, his personality filling all the palace, very natural, simple, sincere, warm and generous of impulse, putting every one at ease.

He looked somewhat older, and his hair seemed somewhat greyer than when I had seen

him last, though that may have been of my own imagining, for despite a recent arduous journey to Rome, and an illness while there, he was hale and strong. I had not seen him for months ; the journey to Rome had been fatiguing at best, and for him, in the circumstances of war, what with the everlasting question of *Passierscheins*, the reluctance of the Germans to have him go, his heroic struggle with von Bissing, and the extreme delicacy of his position, it had been doubly so. He had endured much and had before him in that dark and unknown future much still to endure. The Germans were always tempted to arrest him, and the German newspapers insulted him continually with coarse caricatures, but nothing ever daunted this splendid patriot and real shepherd of his people.

The Nonce arrived that day accompanied by his *auditeur*, and he in his violet and the Cardinal in his flaming scarlet made a picture better than any Vibert ever painted, though since Vibert could not paint very well that is not saying all that I should like to say about the impression I had of the two prelates.

We went out to luncheon in the large, barren refectory, its high ceiling broken, leaving a great, ragged hole gaping over our heads, showing the new rafters that had been put in to restore the roof. The barren windows were broken, too — all tokens of *Kultur* in the autumn of 1914 — and the Cardinal waved his hand carelessly and eloquently at all the

wreckage, and said that he would have to apologize for the state of his house, but — and he laughed — he was not responsible, and it was the best he had to offer his guests.

He had his seat, according to the Belgian custom, in the middle of the table, with the Nonce as his *vis-à-vis*, and Villalobar and me on his right and left respectively. He said grace in Latin, and there were responses in Latin, and twenty of us sat down to a simple luncheon, waited on by two old serving-men in black.

His Eminence talked much to me throughout the meal ; he was full of appreciation for all that America had done for his land and his people, and was cherishing a hope of going there after the war personally to thank the nation. Mr. Hoover had called on him, as had many of the delegates of the C.R.B. ; he was deeply impressed, he said, by Mr. Hoover's force of character, and had formed an excellent opinion of the American delegates. He told me, too, much of interest concerning the visit he had just made to Rome ...

When the meal was over the Cardinal arose and made a graceful and touching little speech about the Nuncio, expressing his sorrow at having him go, but felicitating him also, and paying a tribute to the services the Nonce had rendered Belgium. He spoke in the most flattering terms, too, of Villalobar and of me, and then went on to say that the Nonce had been called to a new post in

the Vatican, as major-domo of the household, and in his humorous way recalled the saying that if the majordomo's of the Pope's household, who is always in the presence of the Pope, can not become a Cardinal, nobody can. The Nuncio replied in a pretty speech which gained a charm from the fact that he speaks French with a trace of Italian accent. Then we all arose, the Cardinal returned thanks in Latin, there were responses in Latin, and we went back to the great reception room.

In speaking of the Nonce's new post His Eminence had divulged a secret ; we knew, or some of us knew, that he was leaving, but he had not told us where he was going, and as we stood about with our coffee and cigarettes we could congratulate the Nuncio all the more because of his prospects for the red hat.

We went at once after the Nonce had taken his leave, and the last glimpse I had of the Cardinal was of the tall figure in scarlet standing in the little entry-way to the reception hall, a young priest who was there that day from Holland falling suddenly to his knees before him, and in an access of fervent emotion kissing the Cardinal's ring. And Villalobar and I raced back to Brussels, Jan, the Marquis's beautiful shepherd dog, twisting nervously on his seat beside the chauffeur ; there were bright new red tiles on some of the roofs of Eppegghem (2), and at Trois-Fontaines there was the black and red

flag showing through the green foliage with its reminder, its tragic connotations of the state of things in the world.

It was only a few evenings after that Villalobar gave a formal dinner in honour of the Governor-General and of the Baroness von Bissing. The question of social relations with the Germans had been of an exquisite delicacy ; accredited as we were to the Belgian Government on the one hand, and yet neutrals at peace with Germany on the other, and compelled, if we would aid the Belgians, to be in constant touch with the Germans, we had long been uncomfortable on the horns of a social dilemma. The Belgians were in mourning ; they participated in no formal social functions, but a recognition of the mourning was in the nature of an offense to the Germans, who were not in mourning, but finding the war fresh and joyous, *der fröhliche Krieg*. There was no reason known to them why they should not dine out if any one would ask them, and we heard now and then of complaints on the part of some of them that the Belgians were not hospitable, were not willing to forgive and forget, to let bygones be bygones. During my absence on leave in America the Governor-General had given a formal dinner at Trois-Fontaines, the Baroness had come from Germany to preside at the table, and the neutral diplomats had been of the company. Now the Baroness was back in Brussels, and for that, and



for other sufficient reasons, the Marquis had decided to give a dinner in their honour.

I used to tell Villalobar that if, instead of a Don and a Spanish grandee, it had been his fate to be born in America, and poor, compelled to make his own living and his own way in the world, he might have been anything he chose, lawyer, journalist, politician, artist, financier, so many and so varied were his talents, but that with his exquisite taste and his eye for effect and sense of the dramatic he would have made as great a stage-manager as Irving or David Belasco.

"*Life is a comedy and we are all actors*", he said. "*How does your Shakespeare put it ?*"

His house in the Rue Archimède was a charming proof of his discreet and perfect taste. It expressed, as a house should, and as, in some instances unfortunately, all houses do, the personality of its occupant. It was filled with the spoils of all his travels, the souvenirs of his services at many posts, London, Paris, Washington, Lisbon. There were gifts from Kings and Presidents and rulers and prime ministers and artists in all these capitals ; there were old Spanish paintings and cabinets filled with *objets d'art* and family heirlooms. There hung in the air a subtle perfume ; there was a finished and ultimate effect in everything. The room in which he worked was always in perfect order ; not a paper was out of place on the table where he toiled indefatigably

until the small hours of the night ; each of its numerous and curious little silver boxes at its post, his seals set out at his hand, every detail noticed by his penetrating eye. The aesthetic effect of it used to fill me with envy. Sitting there chatting with him I would think of my own desk with loathing and despair. But then, to begin with, thought I to myself one day, I never had a chance to get such a desk.

"*Where did you find that table ?*" I suddenly asked him, looking at its delicate legs, its lovely lines ; it was pure Louis XVI.

"*In Toledo*", he said, "*in a second-hand shop.*"

"*Ah*", I replied, "*one must rummage about in these old European cities ...*"

He checked me.

"*Oh, it wasn't in my Toledo, in Spain*", he said, "*it was in your Toledo, in Ohio. That time I was there, you remember, for the carnival ; I was going down that street — what's its name ? ...*"

Having decided to do a thing he would, of course, do it well, and for the first time since the war began we were in full evening dress that night, and the festal effect of unwonted white waistcoats. All his footmen were in their royal scarlet liveries, with knee breeches and powdered wigs, and Olivo, the man who had been for so many years attached to his service, in black with satin breeches, quietly directing them in their tasks. The Germans had put on all their decorations ; the Governor-General had a row of them across his breast. The Baroness

was a slight, frail little woman, with a mild, somehow appealing face, very intelligent, speaking English in preference to French, for her mother, or perhaps her grandmother, was English. Besides her and my wife, whom Villalobar had asked to preside, there were only two other women, a Spanish marquise with snowy hair and great dark eyes, who lived in a country house in Belgium, and Madame Mitilineu, the wife of the Rumanian *Chargé*. Von der Lancken was there, and a good looking young *aide* of von Bissing's, and Harrach, and von Marx, of the *Pass-Zentrale*, and a German prince whose name I forgot — studious-looking person with a black beard — and Poussette, the Swedish *Chargé*, and Caro, secretary of the Spanish Legation, and Villalobar's military attaché.

As we sat down to dine the Governor-General said :

*"We are to be congratulated to-night on our great victory."*

The *affiche* of the day had claimed a glorious triumph for the German Navy in the North Sea (5/6/1916), in the battle of **Dogger Bank** (battle of **Jutland**), and the Germans that evening were all in high feather and very proud and happy, though I do not remember that any one congratulated them, unless they congratulated each other.

Brussels had been very much downcast over the report of the victory ; and for two days I had been tormented by the failure of my efforts to

secure permission for Mr. Alexander J. Hemphill, the New York banker, and honorary treasurer of the C.R.B., to enter Belgium. He was waiting at the frontier, and Mr. Hoover, who was to meet him, and come on with him, had not arrived, detained, as we learned a day or so later when they were at last admitted, by the naval engagements which made the North Sea for the moment difficult to cross.

Von Bissing and von der Lancken were going to Berlin for Pentecost but the Governor-General told me that evening after dinner that on his return he would give still more stringent orders to remedy the ever-recurrent evil of the seizure of food by German soldiers, and he explained that it was difficult to prevent the soldiers from pilfering, especially when they came back from the front to rest in Belgium ; they found the chickens and pigs irresistible.

Having given one dinner, Villalobar promptly gave another, two evenings later, this time in honour of the Cardinal. The Nuncio was there, and Burgomaster Lemonnier, and M. Francqui, and the Baron Lambert, and the Baron Janssens, and the Count de Mérode, the Grand Maréchal, and numbers of other gentlemen in the *ravitaillement*, and the table was done in white and yellow, the colours of the Holy See. Villalobar wore his latest decoration, the *Grand Cordon* of the Order of Leopold, which the King of the Belgians had

bestowed upon him on the occasion of his recent visit to La Panne.

After dinner that evening we were having coffee and cigarettes in one of the salons, the one where was hung the new portrait the Baroness Lambert had just painted of the Marquis. M. Francqui and I were standing apart, and I was leaning against the old sedan chair which had belonged to Villalobar's grandmother. M. Francqui was in his humorous mood that evening. He examined the sedan chair an instant, and then said to me :

*"Est-ce que vous pouvez vous imaginer qu'un de vos ancêtres est allé dans 'un machin' comme ça ?"*

Before I could reply he went on :

*"Je le puis, moi ; seulement"* — and he paused and stepped around and took his place between the brancards " — *le mien était ici."*

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

#### **Footnotes.**

French translation : « *Déjeuners et dîners* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XIV (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 337-340.

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>

(1) About **Albert Blancas**, the Argentine Minister, it would also be interesting read :

Roberto J. **Payró** ; “*La actuación del Doctor Blancas*” in **La Nación** ; 17/2/1919 :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/PAYRO%20ACTUACION%20DOCTOR%20BLANCAS%201914-.pdf>

**French** version :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/PAYRO%20ACTION%20DOCTEUR%20BLANCAS%201914-.pdf>

BERT ; « *Une primeur pour nos lecteurs. Sous l'Occupation : M. Roberto J. Payró* », in **Le Cri de Belgique** (organe hebdomadaire des intérêts belges dans l'Amérique du sud) ; Buenos Aires ; 17 janvier 1920, numéro 223.

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19150922%20ARRESTATION%20PAYRO%20CRI%20DE%20BELGIQUE%2019200117.pdf>

(2) About **Eppeghem** (Eppegem) :

Roberto J. Payró ; « *La guerra vista desde Bruselas. Diario de un testigo* (19) », in **La Nación**; 5/04/1915.

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140929%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140929%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO%20FR.pdf>

Roberto J. Payró ; « *La Guerra vista desde Bruselas ; diario de un incomunicado* » (03) ; in **La Nación** ; 20/11/1914 :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141120%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO.pdf>

**French** version :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141120%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO%20FR.pdf>

Roberto J. Payró ; « *Episodios de la ocupación alemana (3-6)* » ; in **La Nación** ; 19-22/03/1915 :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/19140804-19140911%20PAYRO%20EPISODIOS%20OCUPACION%20ALEMANA.pdf>

**French** version :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140804-19140911%20PAYRO%20EPISODIOS%20OCUPACION%20ALEMANA%20FR.pdf>

Roberto J. Payró ; « *La Guerra vista desde Bruselas ; diario de un testigo ; habló de su peregrinación a las ruinas (17-19)* » in **La Nación** ; 04-6/12/1914 :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/191412J%20PAYRO%20PEREGRINACION%20A%20LAS%20RUINAS.pdf>

**French** version :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/191412J%20PAYRO%20PEREGRINACION%20A%20LAS%20RUINAS%20FR.pdf>