

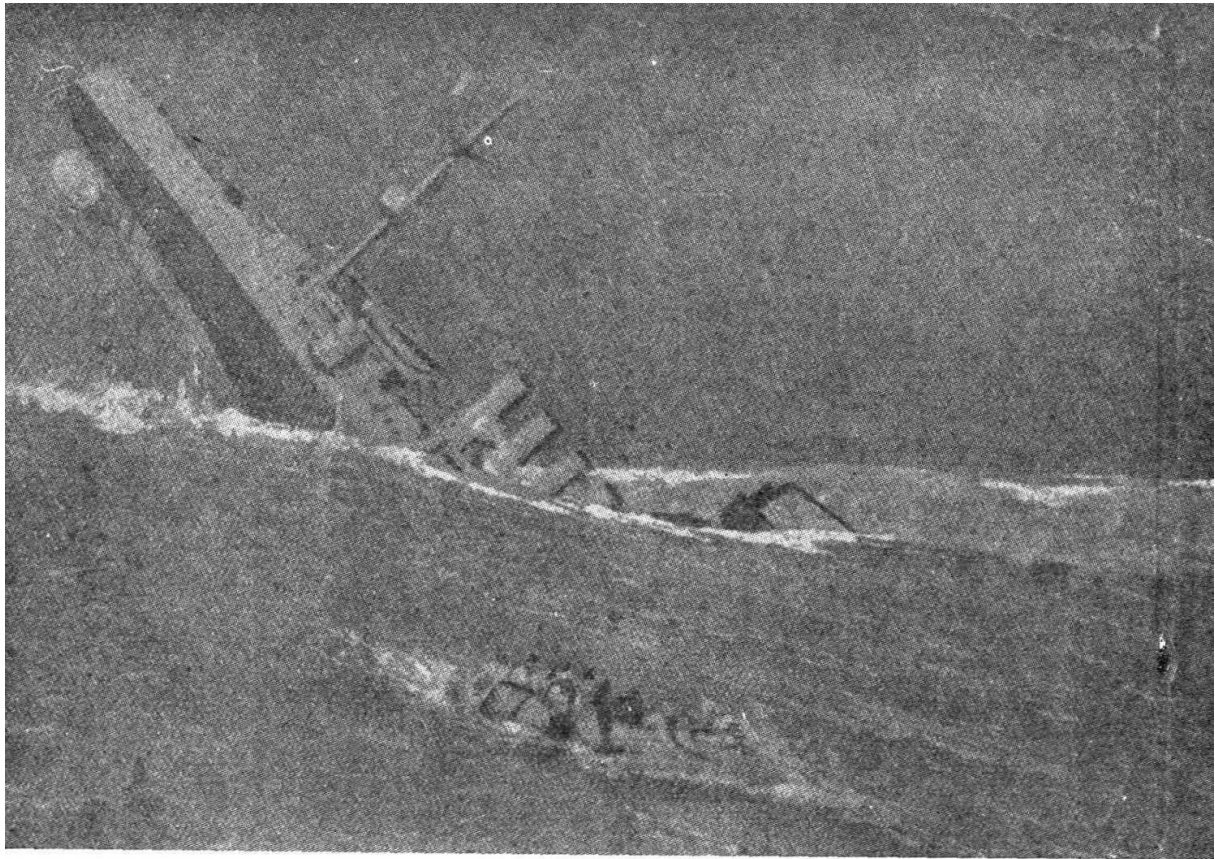
# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

**Brand WHITLOCK**

### Chapter **XXII**. Commerce and corruption.

Within two days the town had fully reassured itself as to the result of the naval battle in the North Sea (Battle of Jutland), and clearly discerned in it a great victory for the British. The more the Germans boasted the more were the Belgians convinced that they had sustained a defeat ; they proceeded on the assumption that the Germans never by any chance told the truth about anything. The news that Mr. Hoover brought was not so entirely reassuring, and while the Germans had the undoubted advantage there is in being the first to claim the victory, the naval battle remained for us, as it will remain perhaps for historians fifty years hence, a subject for discussion, if not of dispute. On its very heels, however, came the report of the loss of the *Hampshire* (5/6/1916), and of the tragic end of Lord Kitchener (1), and that event had the effect of depressing all spirits. It is much easier for the human imagination, which after all is a very weak and impotent thing, to envisage a single, personal, individual accident, than a large and general calamity. In the case of Kitchener there was something almost personal in the sense of loss that every one felt, because his fine figure,



THE SINKING OF H.M.S. "HAMPSHIRE," WITH LORD KITCHENER ON BOARD.

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worthy of the best English traditions, had so long held its romantic place in the public mind, and his sudden death, announced by the Germans in their *affiches* without one generous word of appreciation of his life or his character, without one tribute to a brave and chivalrous foeman who had fallen with his armour on, came to us as a calamity that for a moment brought something like despair.

But there was work, that best of all antidotes to depression, to be done, and I could count myself fortunate that there had just come to Belgium a friend, in whose society I was to find the sympathy and comradeship of a countryman whom I could be proud of and grateful for every day during the long



LORD KITCHENER.

hard months remaining before me in Belgium. That friend was Vernon Kellogg. He had been in Belgium as one of the officials of the Commission for Relief for a few weeks during the preceding autumn, and then had been called home by his duties as professor of biology in Leland Stanford University. But now he had returned, having left his classes and his lectures, sacrificing the book he was writing and all his personal interests, to assume the post of Director of the Commission. He came at the moment when his varied and various talents were needed most. Not only did this university professor, this student of biology, distinguished for his scholarly attainments and the services he had rendered to science, manage the details of a vast enterprise that distributed ten million dollars' worth of food every month, but, by his tact, his discretion, his fine and noble spirit, and his simple, honest manner, the charm of which was expressed in his winning smile, he maintained a harmonious equilibrium in all the complex relations of the work. Others in that work were sometimes criticized when they were not present ; Mr. Hoover was, M. Francqui was, Villalobar was, and more than any I am sure, and with more reason than any, I was, but no one ever had any but kindly words for Vernon Kellogg, and the character that was his is an honour not only to himself and to his country, at whose service he placed an intelligent patriotism, but to the university system of America,

among whose elite he was so conspicuous. Dr. Barrows, Dr. Angell, Dr. Lucas, the Oxford students, and many others who came and went, gave the proof of its practical value ; they were the exemplars of its high ideals, and in their work one could behold, almost in the very making, a standard and a tradition that should make one feel reassured as to the future of the Republic which in the trying ordeal of this gigantic and appalling war came to have a new meaning, and to inspire a deeper and more tender love. As though it were nothing at all, these men, unused to the counting-house and the market, turned their hands to the management of a vast and complicated business, one of the biggest, in the mere volume of its transactions alone, in the world of our day, and in its objects the most sacred of all.

Vernon Kellogg was the product of that university system, and he had continued his studies afterwards in German schools. He knew German, therefore, as he knew French, perhaps better than he knew French, and he could talk to the Germans in their own tongue, which was of great advantage to him and to the work. He had an innate sense of diplomacy ; he was on good terms with everybody, and, what is more interesting, whether in the museum of the Solvay Institute, where I took him to see the skeletons of the score of iguanodons and the ichthyosauria and other animals of the epoch toward which the world was

so enthusiastically reverting, or in the *salon*, or in a council of the Powers that were in Brussels, he was at home. He came, as I have said, at a critical time, and he remained throughout all the storms we were to weather until the climax came in that greater storm which swept us into the war itself, and even then he turned back from England to help us at the very end. His services in the feeding not only of Belgium, but of the north of France, I should say especially in the north of France, were of a nature incalculable. He actually saved the situation in France. I think it is not an exaggeration to say that the work there would have broken down and the people have been left to starve, had it not been for his devotion and his perseverance and his tact, and yet he did it all so quietly and so modestly that he never had half the credit he deserved.(2)

Of course he did not care for credit ; it was not that for which he was working and sacrificing himself and his career. He and the other men of the C.R.B. had in themselves their sufficient reward. When Professor Kellogg came we were in despair as to the continued and persistent seizures of the indigenous foods which the German soldiers persisted in making in despite, sometimes we were forced to believe in very defiance, of the assurances on that score which by such pains and efforts we had secured from the Governor-General. Von Bissing himself had explained to me that it was difficult to restrain the appetites of the soldiers

when they came back from the trenches, and doubtless that was true, especially since the officers in immediate command over them did not care whether they were restrained or not. The Governor-General had promised me, after Villalobar's dinner that night, to put a stop to this, and he did issue more stringent orders, even going so far as to threaten, no doubt as the heaviest punishment he could think of, to send to the Front all officers who permitted these seizures.

But we were learning ; it was not altogether the fault of those soldiers, half crazed by the inferno of Verdun, nor of their complaisant officers. There was, back in the labyrinth of the German organization, farther back behind even the military clique itself, a system, dark, mysterious, sinister, well *camouflé*, working silently and remorselessly, through the *Zentralen*.

Up to that time, I may as well confess, I had never understood the *Zentralen*. I do not fully understand them now, but I know more about them than I did, enough to feel, at any rate, that they were infinitely more pernicious than the worst of our trusts as viewed by the popular eye, and without any of their practical features. I had supposed at first that the *Zentrale* was simply another expression of what has been so widely extolled in the English-speaking world as German efficiency and genius for organization, but as time went on I learned more about them. Apparently a

mere adaptation of the German theory of mechanical distribution of product — militarism, socialism and plutocracy working hand in hand — they were in reality limited companies to which the Government of occupation granted monopolies. That is, the *Butterzentrale* had a monopoly of butter, the *Kartoffelzentrale* had a monopoly of potatoes, when it could get any, and so on, as to all sorts of products. The *Zentralen* multiplied ; there was a *Zentrale* for everything, in the end even one for jam. These *Zentralen*, each with its monopoly, had behind them in every case decrees of the Governor-General forbidding all trading by others in the article in question. In some quarters it was said that half the profits they made went to the German army, in other quarters it was asserted that they went elsewhere. I know nothing as to the fact, only I used to suspect that if muckraking had not gone out of style, occupied Belgium might have afforded a good ground for adventure of this sort. It used to be one of our most cherished superstitions, a part indeed of our very stock in trade, in the old days of municipal reform in America, that German cities were ideally governed. I had accepted all that was written about them and never had any doubts, until, myself making certain studies in Germany, I was told at the *Rathaus* in Dresden, when I innocently inquired what salary the mayor was paid, that my question was indiscreet. I found some police scandals in Berlin of the familiar kind,



and in another city some speculation, but I assured myself that these incidents must be exceptional, and, determined to be orthodox in reform, went on believing as before. But if there is any analogy between the methods employed in German cities and those that I observed on the part of certain *Geheimraths* in Belgium, I think they might be better muckraked than our own. I suppose now that German methods impressed us because they were foreign and mysterious, and we knew so little about them. Any machine in an American city will gladly govern the city, and govern it with more or less efficiency, on the same terms. We do not always put our best foot forward. The slightest irregularity, the least mistake, is published from the house-tops and cried abroad. Sometimes, during those dark days in Belgium, reading the newspapers from home when they were a month old and their current interest had evaporated, I would frequently derive the impression that the welkin was always, ringing with denunciations of some one, and the atmosphere darkened by the flying missiles of the universal and recriminatory accusation, charge and indictment that is always going on. No doubt it all has its effect as a police measure and proves us to be a very virtuous people, searching out with a remorseless and implacable conscience the sins of our neighbours. There was none of this in German cities, and there was none, and could be none, in occupied

Belgium, and so the *Zentralen* had pretty much their own way.

The managers of any given *Zentrale*, holding as they did the monopoly, would buy the products of the producers, and, to justify its existence, would lay aside from 5 to 20 per cent, of it for Belgian consumption. The local brokers, sometimes renegade Belgians, sometimes Germans who came into the country to profit by the situation, would buy that product from the *Zentrale*, but it was openly said that in order to obtain a stock of any commodity it was necessary to bribe certain *employés* of the *Zentrale*. The brokers were always willing to pay large commissions — a thousand marks for a stock of sugar was said not to be unusual. The brokers could easily afford to pay this because, having a monopoly, they could extract from the consumers, who were among the easier class in Belgium, what prices they pleased, and I was told that brokers and the corrupt officials of the *Zentralen* in this way built up considerable fortunes. Certain of the *Boerenbonds*, the Catholic co-operative societies organized generally in the rural districts in competition with the co-operatives of the socialists, were not able to obtain coal, though they made application again and again at the *Kohlenzentrale*, because they would not offer bribes or commissions.

The German army was victualled through the central office at Brussels known as the *Proviant*

*Amt*, and the *Zentralen* worked in close harmony with it, as did the brokers who were always to be found in the cafés around the Bourse. It was not only the brokers who profited, but certain tradesmen, too. There were, for instance, butcher's assistants who set up for themselves, and though they did not sell one pig a week bought fifty on market day. It was not a violent assumption to conclude that the forty-nine pigs went to the *Proviand Amt*, and so to the German army. The *Proviand Amt*, too, could exercise a great influence on the price, simply by instructing its agents to cease buying ; the price, of course, would go down and then the brokers would obtain corners on the products thus affected, whether pork or sugar or coffee, beans or peas. Snug fortunes were undoubtedly made in sugar and in coffee as in the clandestine manufacture of soap ; so that a man who got rich during the war came to be called "*Baron Zeep*" (3) — a soap baron. The brokers who met, early in the morning and late in the afternoon, not in the Bourse, but on the kerbstone near the Bourse, were for the most part professional speculators, men who had followed the race-tracks, *habitués* of the *paris mutuel*, and the like. There were among them, too, professional thieves, and waiters in *cafés*, and the profits they made went the way such profits generally go, in jewels or to women. These brokers bought not only of the *Zentralen* but they bought for awhile from

stocks that had been hidden away in the early days of the war, and later from stocks of food that were made up either from small quantities smuggled across the frontier from Holland, or from bits of food purchased from the communal shops, or even, in some instances, the rations of the poor, as for instance, rice. There was for a time in operation what almost amounted to a system for the purchase of rice. The Belgians had not generally eaten rice before the war ; they did not like it ; and when the C.R.B. imported it and the C.N. distributed it, they sold their minute rations to agents who went about the country and small towns. And thus patiently the agents collected, as one might say, a grain at a time, and made up stocks which they sold to the brokers. They would have the stocks smuggled into Brussels, sold more or less clandestinely on the kerb, and the broker would send a cart to their hiding place at night and fetch them.

German soldiers aided in the smuggling that went on at the frontier, as it goes on at all frontiers. There were certain inns and out-of-the-way cabarets where the smugglers and the soldiers and the renegades of all sorts met in comradeship, with the cigars or other luxuries that had been brought through the electric wires by the connivance of the soldiers, and there divided the spoils. Soldiers, too, used to go to the farms with large baskets and try to buy eggs or chickens, and the peasants were

afraid to send them away empty-handed. There was an additional incentive to smuggling in the fact that it was forbidden by the Germans to transport food from one commune to another ; it was always going on, with Brussels or Antwerp as the goal and final market. Women and young girls from the Quartier des Marolles used to go out into the country and slip back into town at night with baskets of various farm produce — butter, potatoes or flour. They passed the soldiers on sentry duty by giving them a few marks, and sometimes, so the gossips said, the sentries exacted a payment of a nature more indelicate and indiscreet.

With the German army seizing so many horses Belgium was for a long time a paradise for horse traders, who, with the versatile adaptability that seemed to distinguish the horse trader everywhere in the world, profited by the situation. For a long time they worked in conjunction with certain German officers said to be susceptible to bribes, and when a farmer's horse had been seized or requisitioned by the Germans the traders went to console the proprietor by selling him another.

It is not a pretty story, and its incidents were made possible by the complexity and intricacy of the German system that strangled all trades and commerce, and by the evil inherent in the times. Not all the Germans, by any means, nor all the

German soldiers, were corrupt ; sentinels, as I have shown, were constantly stalking smugglers in the Forêt de Soignes, stopping the trams at Quatre Bras, searching the women for potatoes and various products, herding them off to prison, now and then shooting down dead in his tracks a wildly fleeing carrier of contraband.

The young men of the C.R.B. could tell the story in more enlightening detail than I can, for they were in daily contact with its unfolding. They came to have a greater understanding of German methods, too, and they must have expressed it in their gay, youthful way in the song they composed in that affectionate fun they were always having with Hermancito (Herman Bulle), the chorus of which ran :

*When Bulle is the King of Mexico,  
We'll all have good positions  
And live on requisitions,  
When Bulle is the King of Mexico.*

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

**Footnotes.**

French translation : « *Commerce et corruption* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XV (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 340-342.

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 the loss of the *Hampshire* and of the tragic end of Lord Kitchener (5/6/1916) :

<http://www.nmrn.org.uk/HMS-Hampshire>

Phillips, William Charles ; ***The loss of HMS Hampshire and the death of Lord Kitchener*** ; London; Printed by Hepworth and Co. ; 56 pages. (We reproduce fotos on pages 1 and 35) :

<http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/90355>

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RpYS85NDU4NDQ=.pdf

(2) Mr. Kellogg's little volume, "***Headquarters Night***" (*a record of conversations and experiences at the headquarters of the german army in France and Belgium* ; Boston, The Atlantic Monthly Press ; 1917, 116 pages), is the best book that I know dealing with the conditions in Northern France, and the mentality that directed the hideous and atrocious deeds committed there and in Belgium. In the few pages of this remarkable book, which for sheer literary style alone is fascinating, Mr. Kellogg has compressed all the agony of those times.

<https://ia801409.us.archive.org/18/items/headquartersnigh00kell/headquartersnigh00kell.pdf>

### **(3) Baron zeep :**

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« *L'insulte après 1918, c'est d'être un baron Zeep, le baron savon, ceux qui ont réussi à construire une fortune sur la misère des autres* ». Voir :

BALACE, Francis ; « *La situation belge à l'issue de la guerre et au démarrage de la paix* » in **Actes de la Journée de l'Histoire. 1918-1920 : Fin d'une guerre, début de la paix dans nos régions** (27 novembre 2010) ; Verviers, Société verviétoise d'Archéologie et d'Histoire en collaboration avec la Société royale «Les Archives Verviétoises» et la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie du Plateau de Herve ; page 6.

<http://www.svah.be/Publications/Histoire2010.pdf>

Roberto J. **Payró** ; « *Zeep* » (texto de ficción) in **La Nación** ; 14/03/1920 :

**Spanish** version :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/PAYRO%20ZEEP%20SP.pdf>

**French** version :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/PAYRO%20ZEEP%20FR.pdf>

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