

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XXV. *Fête*-days.

I HAD gone to see von der Lancken that day to present to him Mr. Albert Billings Ruddock, the new Secretary of Legation, whose coming was such a relief to me. He had been a secretary in our Embassy at Berlin, and his acquaintance with the German language, his knowledge of German ways, no less than his various abilities, made him an invaluable aid. He and his charming wife made life less difficult in a thousand ways, and it was our good fortune, too, just at that time, to be able to welcome Mrs. Vernon Kellogg to Brussels. She had come to join her husband, and it was her distinction to be the only woman ever officially connected with the C.R.B. She made an especial study of the charity that was being done by the women of Belgium, and she devoted herself unsparingly to furthering it, and to work among the children, and in her Belgium found a devoted friend whose tireless efforts for Belgium have never ceased, and have produced the largest results in gaining sympathy for Belgium's cause. These good friends did much to sustain our spirits, drooping then, as spirits must in such an atmosphere, without respite or relief or holiday of any kind.

July brought our national holiday, and we had our celebration of the Fourth with the same ceremonies that had marked that of the preceding year. All day the people of Brussels came and left cards and flowers, and signed the book. M. Lemonnier, the Burgomaster, and his echevins, came and the Burgomaster with tears in his eyes made a little speech of felicitation, speaking with deep feeling of the work of the Commission and of what America had done. These days were full of the excitement and the hope created by the battle of the Somme (**Note** : 1/7-18/11/1916) ; we could hear the thunder of the mighty guns, and Brussels was anxious to believe that they were sounding her deliverance.

Anniversaries, however, were acquiring a significance that was saddening, since they served to remind us that the war was lasting long : "*ça dure*" the Belgians would say.

We had all the men of the C.R.B. to luncheon again on that Fourth of July, and in the little speech they insisted on my making I expressed to them the pleasure I felt in these annual gatherings, and when I said that as we gathered there year after year, the bonds that united us, etc., they gave a groan, and, as determined and neutral optimists, insisted that the war would soon be over.

The delegate from Liège, Mr. Arrowsmith, brought word to me of the terrible plight of the Russian prisoners, two thousand of them, whom

the Germans had taken into the Province of Liège to work on the railroad. The story was told in revolting detail, how the German taskmasters beat them, kicked them, flogged them, fed them on miserable and insufficient rations, so that, when weak from exhaustion and all the brutality they had endured they sank on the ground, they were left to die. Belgians, and Russians in Belgium, tried to aid them, but the Germans, who had no charity for them themselves, refused to allow them to profit by the charity of others.

I returned to the Legation late that afternoon to learn from my colleague, Mahmoud Khan, the Persian Minister, that Senator Halot was to be condemned on the following morning, and probably to death. I had had no means of knowing that the matter was so serious, though Baron von der Lancken, in discussing it with me, had referred to it as "*cette malheureuse affaire*". Mahmoud Khan and I made an effort to save the Senator, who was a friend of Mahmoud's ; we drew up a requite en grace, had it signed by all the diplomats, and presented it to the authorities. Four days later we were informed that Senator Halot had been condemned to fourteen years' imprisonment in Germany, and I should like to think that our efforts had had some effect in softening the hearts of his judges. *

That Fourth of July was filled with incidents. In the morning, at the very moment when M.

Lemonnier was making his little speech of felicitation in the *salon* of the American Legation, the German *Polizei* were making a search at his residence, and, after causing her to pass *un mauvais quart d'heure*, had arrested Madame Lemonnier.

And there was an occurrence at Antwerp which, though it fell on the day before the Fourth, associated that city with the celebration of the day. The banks of Antwerp had all announced that in honour of the anniversary of American independence they would close on the Fourth of July. At this announcement Herr Fuchs, delegate of the *Bank Abteilung*, summoned a prominent banker of Antwerp and said that inasmuch as political demonstrations were not permitted, the banks of Antwerp, if they closed on the Fourth of July as a tribute to American independence, would no longer be treated with moderation. The Belgian bankers said that they would not give way before any menace, that the banks of Antwerp had determined to close as a testimony, the only kind which under the circumstances they were permitted to give, of their gratitude to "*the noble American people and their Government*", and that if the Germans tried to prevent such a testimony it would be because of a secret hostility against the American people.

"And you wish it to appear as if we shared your hostility ? Never ! The banks will close tomorrow, whatever you say or do."

And the delegate of the *Bank Abteilung* yielded, and said :

"Well, let it be as if I had said nothing."

It was evident from many indications, indeed, that the hostility to America was growing. During that summer Belgian merchants received in the letters written them by German merchants little cards on which was printed :

*Gedenket der unzähligen Opfer
die an Amerikas Granaten
verbluten.*

There were no felicitations from the Germans on our national *fête*-day that year ; it may have been mere oversight, though oversights in diplomacy are not excused. I wondered if it could be because the Germans could not felicitate a people on their birthday as they could felicitate a King. On the *fête*-day of the King of Spain the Governor-General in full uniform, accompanied by his aide, had gone to the Spanish Legation expressly to pay his compliments, but it was doubtless a mere oversight in our case, and of no consequence in any event. The sentinels seemed to be growing uglier in their manner with every day,

and that was only a reflection of their environment, or perhaps the war, not so joyous as it had been, was getting on their nerves ; they never had a kind word from their own officers nor from the Belgians about them, and I can still see the gloomy face of the old man of the *Landsturm* on guard at Quatre Bras, and how his face lighted up one day when, as he came up to look at my *Passierschein*, I spoke a few words of German to wish him good afternoon, and he looked up with open, astonished mouth that widened into a smile, the only one I ever saw on the face of a German soldier, as he exclaimed :

"*Ach ! Ich danke Ihnen !*"

And I rode on my way thinking that if the question of wars were left to the people, untroubled by generals, ministers, excellencies and editors, wars would not last long in our world.

We had noted on the agenda at the Legation that Dr. Bull (1) was to be released on the Fourth of July, and after three months' imprisonment we felt that he would be in a humour to appreciate liberty and to celebrate it with us. The Fourth came, but no Dr. Bull, and when I went to the *Politische Abteilung* to ask why he had not been released, Count von Moltke said that he would inquire. He called up the *Kommandantur* on the telephone that stood on his desk, spoke a few moments, hung up the apparatus, turned to me, and said :

"He is implicated in another affair and is being held pending an investigation."

I had drawn my sigh of relief prematurely ; and here that anxiety was to be lived all over again! And there at the *Kommandantur* I had to leave Dr. Bull and resume the familiar discussions as to the *ravitaillement*.

Dr. Reith, who represented the *Politische Abteilung* in the *Vermittlungsstellen*, had been to see me on behalf of the Governor-General, who asked my opinion on several questions that had arisen ; the Governor-General wished to know whether it would be proper to send to Germany linseed oil that was the product of seed grown by the Germans themselves on Belgian soil ; whether or not German soldiers might eat fish caught in Belgian waters ; what attitude would be assumed with reference to the purchase of cattle made by the Germans before the recent convention : what to do in the case of a Belgian peasant who insisted that the Germans buy his cattle, which, he claimed, were contaminated with disease by contact with German cattle ; whether an officer's wife who had bought some hares would be permitted to take them with her to Germany. I said that if some old man of the *Landsturm* went fishing on Sunday and caught a carp he might eat it, but as for draining the fish ponds and whipping streams of Belgium, and as for seining the rivers, that would never do ; I consented, too, that the Belgian whose cattle had

been contaminated by disease might be paid for them ; but officers' wives might take too many hares to Germany, and as to recognition of contracts made before the convention was signed, it would open such a breach in the guaranties that all the cattle in Belgium might be driven through it. It was the linseed oil that was most difficult, and I referred that to the experts of the C.N. for their advice.

The month of July seems to have been prolific in births of free nations ; we had celebrated our own national holiday, and on the fourteenth the French *fête* was observed by many merchants closing their shops, and, two days later we were reminded of the approach of the Belgian national anniversary (2) by the posting of an *affiche* prohibiting any demonstration by the Belgians on that day. Von Sauberzweig had gone, having been sent to the Front in the north of France, and his functions as Military Governor of Brussels were then being discharged by General Hurt, Governor of Brabant. General Hurt, having been reminded no doubt of the celebration of the year before, included in his proclamation a prohibition of the closing of shops at unusual hours as well as the laying of flowers on public monuments, and the penalty of disobedience this year was increased to six months' imprisonment and a fine of 20.000 marks. **

Once more then Brussels set itself to the congenial task of outwitting the Germans. By one of those mysterious and tacit understandings that no one could trace to their source, everybody that day appeared wearing a green ribbon, green being the colour of hope, and while it was no doubt discouraged it was not yet forbidden the Belgians to hope. And so the colour was everywhere. Plants stripped of their flowers, and only their green leaves, were shown in shop windows, and the colour was worn in great knots of ribbon by the little griffons that went trotting with their mistresses along the boulevard, where the frock-coat and the high hat, the classic symbols everywhere of impeccable respectability, were to be seen. The weather was fine, and great crowds were already preparing to spend the day in the leafy Bois (de la Cambre) when I drove through there in the morning on my way to see Franz van Holder, the painter, in the studio hidden away in the pretty garden of his home in the Avenue Montjoie. The people, in the satisfaction of the plan they had hit upon to celebrate their *fête*, were all in smiles. The shops were not closed, but they were empty ; it was made a point of honour not to enter them, and most of the proprietors had given their clerks a holiday so that in none of them was there any one to wait upon any intending customers who were not privy to the universal conspiracy, and if any

one wished to make a purchase he found the prices of articles outrageously and impossibly high.

"*How much is that hat ?*" a man asked in a shop in the Rue de Namur.

"*Fifty thousand francs*", replied the patron.

Many shop windows had been emptied for the day, and in others there were significant allegorical arrangements of stock. In one shop in the Boulevard du Nord the proprietor displayed the portraits of the King and the Queen of the Belgians; he was at once arrested and shop closed, and a little *affiche* put in the window giving the reason, and when a crowd gathered to read the *affiche* the *Polizei* charged them, clubbing the people, men, women and children, with the butts of their guns.

There were many little scuffles. An officer at the head of a troop of the Guards rode into the Place de Brouckère and began to harangue the crowd in German. He raged and fumed in his gutturals, and was met by a great shout of derisive laughter ; he grew red with rage, but the crowd only laughed the more loudly, and the Place de Brouckère was finally closed, and the Place des Martyrs roped off, but the people passed there in great throngs, and as they passed the men reverently lifted their tall hats. Many people wore combinations of the Belgian colours ; one woman promenaded in the *boulevards* with her three

daughters, one dressed in black, one in yellow and one in red.

At high noon the church of Sainte-Gudule was filled with throngs that invaded every corner of the stately old church. M. Lemonnier and the *échevins* of the city were there, with senators and deputies, investing the scene with the distinction of official presence. But there was a vibrant quality in the atmosphere, a palpitation of expectancy ; men with eager faces stood on tiptoes and strained their eyes, awaiting an impressive scene ; the Cardinal (Mercier) was expected. After the Evangel the throngs were suddenly agitated with excitement, and there he was, a striking figure, in a gold cope, his extraordinary height accentuated by the *mitre* on his brow. He came out of the sacristy, through the choir, bearing his crozier, preceded by a procession of priests. He came down into the aisle, and half-way down the nave moved on to the famous pulpit of carved oak, made by Henri Verbruggen in 1699, in the bizarre style that has become classic in Belgian churches ; he ascended into the pulpit and there, amid the silence that fell upon the throng, he began his *sermon*.

"*Jerusalem facta est habitatio exterorum ; dies festi ejus conversi sunt in luctum.*" He recalled the fact that it was the eighty-fifth anniversary of the national independence and looked forward to that day when, in the restored cathedrals and the rebuilt churches of Belgium, crowds like this, with

their King and Queen and the royal princes, amid the sound of the bells, hand in hand, would renew their oaths to God, to their sovereign and to their liberties, while bishops and priests in a communion of gratitude and joy would intone a triumphal *Te Deum*. But that day the hymns of joy expired on their lips ; they were like the captives in Babylon who hung their harps upon the willow trees. But whatever their sorrows, he did not wish them to hate those who inflicted them. National concord among the Belgians united them to universal fraternity, and yet above this sentiment he placed the respect for right, without which no communion was possible either between individuals or nations. Violations of justice must be repressed. The conscience is given over to torture so long as the culpable is not put in his place, and to do this, to establish order, to restore equilibrium, peace must be founded on a basis of justice. St. Thomas Aquinas had proclaimed public vengeance as a virtue ; how can one love order without hating disorder, how wish intelligently for peace without expelling that which troubles it ? It was from these summits that one must consider the war in order to comprehend its amplitude.

He gave homage to the King and to his soldiers, the artisans of the moral *grandeur* of the nation. He asked the Belgians to pray for those who were no more, to exclude no one from their commiseration — the blood of Christ had flowed

for all. The hour of deliverance was drawing near but it had not yet come. He urged them to be patient, not to weaken in courage, and to leave to divine providence the perfection of their national education. He adjured them to allow the great law of the austerity of life to penetrate them, and he concluded :

"And just as at the Front our heroes present the admirable and consoling image of that indissoluble union of a military fraternity which nothing can impair, so in our ranks, less serried and of a more fluctuating discipline, we should heartily observe the same patriotic concord. We will respect the truce imposed on our quarrels by the great cause which alone should employ and absorb all of our means of attack and of combat ; and if the impious and vile, not understanding the urgency and the beauty of this national prescription, obstinately determine, in spite of all, to feed and to inflame those passions which separate us elsewhere, let us turn away our heads and, without replying to them, remain faithful to the pact of solidarity, of friendship, of good and loyal confidence which we, under the great impulsion of the war, have concluded with them despite themselves. The approaching day of the first centenary of our independence must find us stronger, more intrepid, more united than ever. Let us prepare ourselves for it in labour, in patience, in fraternity, and when, in 1930, we shall remember

the dark days from 1914 to 1916 they will appear to us the most luminous, the most majestic, and, on condition that we henceforth know how to will it, the happiest and most fecund of our national history. Per Crucem ad lucem — out of sacrifice, the light."

The tall Cardinal went down out of the oaken pulpit. The strains of "*La Brabançonne*" filled the arches of the church. The cry of "*Vive le Roi ! Vive la Belgique !*" rang above it, and the great wish of the Cardinal was realized in a kind of miracle of national reconciliation.

I had gone in the afternoon with my wife to the country place of the Madoux, hidden in the edge of the forest beyond Woluwe, and when we returned to the Legation I found awaiting me two men and a woman. The man was in high hat and frock coat, with a ribbon in his buttonhole ; the woman wore a large knot of green ribbon, while the other man had an effect of effacing himself as a kind of first citizen, to applaud what the rest said in the little colloquy that resulted. The elder man acted as spokesman, and removing his high hat, revealing a mass of hair as white as his snowy beard, he said that he had come to report to me that the *Polizei* were "*brutalizing*" (*brutaliser*) the crowd on the Boulevard du Nord he reported this, and then stood as if awaiting some instant action on my part. I explained as sympathetically as I

could the limitation of my powers and, when I had done the man stood there, his face grew long, a look almost of despair came to his eyes, and, as though his last hope were swept from him, he said pitifully :

"Mais Excellence, nous comptons sur vous !"

It was a constant source of poignant and unavailing regret with me that I could not perform the prodigies that those poor harried folk so touchingly expected ; such was the unlimited confidence in the great Republic across the sea. Sometimes I had the uncomfortable feeling of being a kind of impostor, the pitiably little I could accomplish being so very small in comparison with all that I should have liked to do to help them in their sorrow and their pain.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

* Senator Halot has since been released and is in France. — B. W.

See also : Brand Whitlock ; « *Visitors* », in ***Belgium under the German Occupation : A Personal Narrative*** ; London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919, volume 2 :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/BRAND%20WHITLOCK%20BELGIUM%20UNDER%20GERMAN%20OCCUPATION%202%20CHAPTER%2016.pdf>

**** Avis**

Il est défendu de célébrer d'une manière quelconque la fête nationale belge du 21 juillet 1916, déclarée jour férié légal par la loi belge du 27 mai 1890.

Je préviens la population qu'elle devra s'abstenir de toutes démonstrations, telles que : Réunions publiques, cortèges, rassemblements, harangues et discours, fêtes scolaires, déposition de fleurs devant certains monuments, etc., pavoisement d'édifices publics, ou privés ; Fermeture des magasins, cafés, etc., à des heures exceptionnelles.

Les infractions seront punies soit d'une peine d'emprisonnement de 6 mois au plus et d'une amende pouvant atteindre 20.000 marks, soit d'une de ces deux peines à l'exclusion de l'autre ; seront passibles de ces peines non seulement les auteurs de ces infractions, mais aussi les fauteurs et les complices.

J'attire, en outre, l'attention du public sur ce qu'il est défendu de répandre des écrits non censurés ou de porter des insignes d'une manière provocatrice.

*Der Gouverneur von Brüssel und Brabant,
Bruxelles, le 12 juillet, 1916. Hurt, Generalleutnant.*

(Translation :)

Notice

It is forbidden to celebrate in any manner whatsoever the Belgian national holiday of the 21st July, 1916, declared a legal holiday by the Belgian law of the 27th May, 1890.

I warn the population that it must refrain from all demonstrations such as :

Public reunions, parades, assemblies, harangues and speeches, academic ceremonies, the placing of flowers before certain monuments, etc., the decoration of public or private buildings ;

The closing of stores, cafés, etc., at unusual hours.

Infringements will be punished either by imprisonment for not exceeding 6 months and a fine of not more than 20.000 marks, or by one of these two penalties to the exclusion of the other ; not only the originators of the infringements will be liable to these penalties, but also the abettors and the accomplices.

Furthermore, I draw the attention of the public to the fact that it is forbidden to circulate uncensored writings, and to wear insignia in a provocative manner.

*The Governor of Brussels and of Brabant,
Brussels, July 12, 1916. Hurt, Lieutenant-General.*

Avis

Mon interdiction de célébrer la fête nationale belge a déterminé un petit groupe de personnes irréfléchies à engager le public à résister à l'application de mon arrêté.

Afin d'éviter tout incident désagréable, je mets formellement les habitants en garde contre ces excitations, qui ne peuvent que nuire aux intérêts de la population paisible du pays.

*La peine prévue sera appliquée avec la plus grande rigueur et sans indulgence à toute personne qui, le 21 juillet, 1916, ou **ultérieurement**, participera à une démonstration quelconque, y compris la cessation du travail.*

*Der Gouverneur von Brüssel und Brabant,
Bruxelles, le 20 juillet, 1916. Hurt, Generalleutnant.*

(Translation :)

Notice

My prescription against the celebration of the Belgian national holiday has caused a small group of unthinking persons to arouse the public to resistance against the application of my order.

In order to avoid any disagreeable incidents, I formally put the inhabitants on guard against these excitations, which can only harm the interests of the peaceable population of the country.

*The penalty provided will be applied with the greatest rigour and without indulgence to every person who, the 21st July or **afterward**, participates in any demonstration whatsoever, including the cessation of work.*

*The Governor of Brussels and of Brabant,
Brussels, July 20, 1916. Hurt, Lieutenant General.*

French translation : « *Jours de fête* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XVIII (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 353-358.

(1) « *Dr. Bull* ». See : in **Brand Whitlock ; Belgium under the German Occupation : A Personal Narrative** ; London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919, volume 2, pages 135-140 :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/BRAND%20WHITLOCK%20BELGIUM%20UNDER%20GERMAN%20OCCUPATION%20%20CHAPTER%2019.pdf>

« *Belgian national anniversary* ». See :

Roberto J. **Payró** ; “*Procedimientos alemanes*” in **La Nación** ; 4/9/1919 :

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/PAYRO%20PROCEDIMIENTOS%20ALEMANES%20191506%20191606.pdf>

<http://idesetautres.be/upload/PAYRO%20PROCEDIMIENTOS%20ALEMANES%20FR%20191506%20191606.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>