

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XXVIII**. *Bankabteilung* and yegmen.

I LOOK back now on those autumn days at the *Orangerie* with gratitude for the seclusion that, when evening came, it gave from the depression, and sometimes the horror, of the days in town. It was not peace, but it was a semblance of peace, and we could pretend a peace even when we knew that peace existed nowhere in Europe. But as autumn advanced we had something more than a presentiment that peace was farther off from Europe than ever, and that before it came again to the earth our own country would be swept into the vortex of the war. The great conflict was growing more bitter, there was a lower, deeper note of savage hatred in the chorus of universal strife, the great tragedy seemed to be whelming to some awful doom. At evening we imagined a more portentous whir in the Zeppelins sailing low and passing directly over our roof on their far flight across the English Channel, monstrous birds of night, grim and black in the deep purple skies. At morning we would feel it again when we were awakened by the burst of the bombs the English and French aviators were hurling on the hangars of

those Zeppelins, and by the boom of the shrapnel the Germans were firing in their effort to bring them down, even if the efforts were unsuccessful ; the morose old men of the *Landsturm* were not very expert as marksmen. Then at night there was always the thud of the guns along the Somme, deep, distant, lugubrious ; the sound had come to have something of the permanence and persistence of the roar of some mighty waterfall, producing the appalling sense one has sometimes at Niagara, that almost insupportable impatience with the sound, a feeling that it must stop, if but for an instant's surcease in its mighty pain, and then the consciousness that it has gone on always, and will go on, forever and forever.

And yet there are impressions of mornings of pearly fogs, days of the glitter of the low September sun, and in the late afternoons the peasants digging potatoes, turning up the soft brown earth and burning the dead vines, the white smoke drifting off over the *château*. The whole world of Belgium was wearing the white scarf of those potato fires in those days, the children now and then roasting a potato in the coals, improvising a feast. Or perhaps the remembered impression is of Van Holder squinting at me from behind his easel, or the ride home from the Legation through the Bois (de la Cambre), long shafts of sunlight lighting the vivid green boles and gilding the fallen leaves. There were Corots everywhere in nature

those days, with the melancholy light of the world's sorrow in them, and if there were not Corots everywhere painting them, there were painters everywhere squatting at their easels, painters who either dared the *Kommandantur* or were unable to resist the temptation to ask its permission. I recall Sunday afternoons, talking with the Allard children in the garden behind the greenhouses — Collette with the lovely eyes and the grave expression, Antoine with the golden hair, and little Olivier with his funny sayings ...

"*Pourquoi as-tu mordu ta gouvernante, Olivier?*" I asked him.

"*Ah, elle m'ennuyait et — j'ai eu une crise de nerfs.*"

Alas ! we were all more or less subject to *crises de nerfs* in those days ; Brussels had not been so nervous and excited since the fall of Antwerp. The hopes raised by the battle of the Somme, the constant bombing of the aviators, the entry of Rumania in the war, the experience of the Mitilineus, something, I know not what, in the air, produced a curious psychology in the crowd ; the rumours were never so thick, and the people were persuaded that the Germans were about to retreat. They were at least sending every available man to the Front. There were no more sentinels at Quatre-Bras ; the bridges even were often unguarded. Several of the minor employees we were accustomed to see in civilian dress at the

Politische Abteilung wore faces that were long with Teutonic melancholy because they had been ordered to hold themselves in readiness to leave for the Front. In all the departments of the civil government there was a tremendous activity, everybody bustling about in the zeal of the functionary bent on justifying his existence and employment, trying to show how indispensable he was.

The bombing was a common occurrence. One warm evening we were dining at the Josse Allards' ; we were in the *salon* after dinner. We were standing, we men, somewhat aside, smoking. Suddenly there came three deep detonations. The evening was warm and we thought it was thunder, but the sound was followed by a veritable cannonade, and we all ran out on to the terrace, and there, in the clear, luminous sky, the moon hanging full and golden over the dark outline of the trees, the flashes of exploding shells, very faint at first glance, then awe-inspiring, then terrible, as all the implications rushed upon one — that daring lad flying up there in the moonlight. We watched in silence. Then a shell seemed to fall in the park. We went indoors. Madame Allard was pale and shaken, thinking perhaps of her brother in the flying corps. Her father was there ; perhaps he, too, was thinking of his boy, but he began playing at billiards with the Chevalier de Wouters, calmly knocking the balls about.

The aviator of that night, however, was another Brussels boy, and after dashing his bombs down on the hangar at Evere or on that at the Plaine de Manoeuvres, he flew over the city, very low, below the trajectory of the anti-aircraft guns, grazing the roofs of houses, performing daring evolutions over the Place de Brouckère, throwing out some coloured lights and a bundle of papers, a kind of proclamation, all to the wild delight of the frantically cheering and applauding crowd. The papers which the aviator threw down were addresses, printed in French and in Flemish, saying :

"Belges ! La fin approche ! ... Le moment de la délivrance approche ! Vivent les Alliés ! Vive la Belgique ! Vive le Roi !" *

Brussels was enthusiastic all the next day, but the escapade was not without its tragedy, for a shell fired over the city at the aviator fell in the Rue de l'Hôtel des Monnaies, and exploding, killed a poor shop girl, standing in the doorway of a house where she had just sought shelter in vain.

A few days later an *affiche* was posted announcing that as punishment for the cheers in the Place de Brouckère that evening, and for the signals that, as the *affiche* alleged, had been given, the people of Brussels, during eight days, must all be indoors by eight o'clock. But this was not all ; the burgomasters of the communes of the

agglomeration of Brussels were convoked by the German authorities and notified that at the next visit of aviators, accompanied by any demonstration on the part of the citizens, the city would be fined thirty million marks.

It was not a fortnight later that aviators came again, in the dawn, and I lay in bed and listened to the distant battle in the air. It is not a pleasant thing to be awakened out of sleep at dawn to hear the dull report of bombs thrown by aviators, even when one knows that they are come in pursuit of the Zeppelins one has heard whirring above one's roof at twilight on its evil westward mission across the Channel ! ...

Fifteen houses were demolished in that raid, thirteen persons killed, and twenty-eight wounded by the shells fired by the German anti-aircraft guns. The Belgians were all persuaded that the deaths were not due to accident, but that the German gunners had been instructed to train their guns, and to calculate the time of the explosion of their shells, so that they would fall in the city and work their havoc.

The Germans, in their *affiche* **, announced, not it seemed without satisfaction, the result of the raid in the killed and wounded among the Belgian population, and I was asked to make representations, not only to the Germans, but to the Allies, in an effort to induce them to cease to

send aviators over Brussels — a demarche which it was clearly not in my province to make.

Not many days passed on which I was not asked to make representations of some kind, and I did so when I could find any valid excuse for venturing where, considering the Germans' manner of receiving suggestions, even angels, unless they belonged to the very highest hierarchy, might have feared to tread. I recall one Saturday afternoon when I had gone to Ravenstein ; a man came there to ask me to intercede for a Belgian who was about to be condemned as a spy ; when I reached the *Orangerie* that evening another man came to ask me to help another Belgian ; then Madame L— came, on behalf of her husband, just then condemned to fourteen days' solitary confinement, and to pay a fine of five thousand marks for having in his possession a copy of ***La Libre Belgique***.

The same day I was informed that Professor Cattier, one of the leading intelligences of Belgium, had been seized the evening before, just as he got off a tramcar near his home, and was to be sent off at once to Germany as "*undesirable*". No reason was given for his arrest, no trial was allowed him. He was a lawyer, a professor in the university ; he had been once a judge of the International Court at Alexandria. He had taken no part in the political movements in Belgium under the occupation, but had quietly continued to occupy himself with his

own affairs. No one could imagine a reason, or even a pretext, for his arrest. It was supposed by the gossips that the deportation was in some way connected with the difficulties which the Banque Nationale was then having with the authorities, but that was due to a confusion of Professor Cattier with M. Cartier, a director of the Banque Nationale, who had just been arrested. I waited several days, and then one morning, a favourable opportunity presenting itself, I made an inquiry about him. He was accused of no military or political offense ; the fact was simply as I learned at the *Politische Abteilung* that at one time before the war, in a difference of opinion he had had with a German, he had written a letter which offended this German, who, just then occupying a post in the Government of Occupation, had used his position and the influence it gave him to take this unspeakably mean and cowardly revenge on one who had offended him. Professor Cattier had many friends in Brussels, and they were deeply concerned for him and his fate. He was taken to Germany, and there was nothing to be done, then or later. But long weeks afterward word came from a prominent German official at Berlin to the effect that if the American Minister were to ask the man who was responsible for this persecution of Professor Cattier, he would relent and have him restored to his home. In order to save myself the possibility of a rebuff I had a man who knew the official sound

him in order to see if it were true that he was so disposed, and I learned that far from welcoming such a request from the American Minister he would resent it, and that there was no prospect of rescuing Professor Cattier from the German's wild and implacable resentment.

It was only what might be expected anywhere when there were in force no principles other than that of autocracy, which always works by favour, interest, influence, or terror. Every deed was coloured by the personality of the official concerned in its commission, and this was why the rule in Brussels was not so terrible under some Governors as under others ; this was why life was more endurable in the Hainaut, where a man of reason, and even of mildness, was governor. And this fact may explain, too, why the word Hasselt came to possess under the occupation a sinister connotation and a reputation which the quiet little provincial town of Limbourg, on the edge of the desolate Campine, had never done anything to deserve. There sat, almost constantly, in that town, a court martial whose bloody assizes seemed to be without end ; to hear that some one had been sent to Hasselt was to shiver with dread and apprehension, for most people who were taken to Hasselt never returned.

There, during the latter part of that month of September, a great court martial was in progress, trying over sixty persons for spying or for treason in

time of war ; and that meant, in the Legation, women in tears, pleading in a confidence that was pathetic enough to break the heart they naively thought to be the only one it was necessary to touch, yet never sufficient to move the heart whose dictates alone could have availed. Before the month was over seventeen had been condemned to death, many of the others to imprisonment at hard labour for life, and most of the remaining to some rigid penalty in those German prisons whose horrid secrets are never revealed, whose pains are never even temporarily mitigated by those revulsions of public sentiment which now and then make for some reform in our own.

A woman came all the way from Luxembourg to ask my aid ; her son and her daughter, too, were among the accused in that trial, as were others of her family ; besides, she had sons in the Belgian army at the Front. She had had no illusions as to the fate reserved for her boy ; it would be death, she felt, and she had not waited for the sentence to be pronounced. Accompanied by a sister and a niece she had set out on what, under the conditions that prevailed in Belgium, was a long pilgrimage to Brussels to plead for her son. At Brussels a lawyer told her that not only her son but her daughter had been condemned to death and were about to be shot, and the mother collapsed. Thus it was her sister who came, and she and her daughter sat there in their black garb, weeping,

begging, pleading, imploring — and I, who would have done so much, quite powerless in the midst of all that welter of woe in which the world had been plunged.

Among those condemned to death in that trial was the Burgomaster of Namur, M. **Gedenvaux** (**Golenvaux**). He was fifty years old ; he had a wife and five children ; he had toiled incessantly, early and late, from the beginning of the war, in the terrible situation in which those times placed the mayor of a Belgian town, with the German authorities on the one side ordering him to adopt one course, and his own population on the other clamouring for him to adopt another. Two persons among the accused had informed the Germans that the Burgomaster had acted as a spy for the Belgian Government ; the Burgomaster denied this, but said that on three occasions he had received in his office a *courrier* of the Belgian Government at Le Havre, and that he had given him reports on the conditions of the city of Namur, not of military value, but merely concerning the *ravitaillement*.

I made an appeal for mercy on behalf of the condemned. The Nonce did the same, and so did Villalobar — not long back from Madrid and San Sebastian, full of the gossip of all the European capitals — and we did what we could, hoping for some good effect of our pleas.

In the meantime Brussels was shaken by another sensation, which came as the *dénouement* of all those difficulties with the Banque Nationale. The *Bank Abteilung*, which had been so long trying to induce the Banque Nationale to deposit in the *Reichsbank* at Berlin its accumulation of German paper marks, and had invariably been told that if it wished this money it could have it only at the point of a gun, had at last hit on an expedient that impressed it as gracefully avoiding the crude methods sanctioned by bandits. In August it had written to the bank ordering that the pledges which all banks in Brussels, in order to continue in business, were required to give the *Bank Abteilung*, either by the deposit of approved securities or by bonds with the names of Brussels's wealthy men on them, be paid in actual cash in German marks at Berlin. And by a happy coincidence the amount of security required was precisely the amount of German marks in the bank! The bank protested, and after three weeks of discussion and correspondence the Germans threatened to sequester and liquidate the Société Générale, another large bank in Brussels, which had no other than the ordinary business relations with the Banque Nationale. The threat that the Société Générale was to be liquidated swelled into a rumour that it had been liquidated, and there were the beginnings of a panic. The directors of the Banque Nationale, not wishing to involve the

other institutions, then met with the directors of the Société Générale ; the conferences lasted throughout several days, and the directors of the Banque Nationale decided finally that rather than involve another organization, they, under these threats, would cede. The only question was as to how it should be done. There were, as in all groups, two wings, the right and the left, the more conservative urging that inasmuch as they were compelled to yield to superior force a formal refusal was sufficient, the more radical insisting on actual physical resistance so that the Germans would be forced to take violent measures and to march in their soldiers with fixed bayonets. The final decision, I believe, was that the distinction was scarcely worth discussion, and in the end the Germans came accompanied by a dozen armed soldiers and took from the vaults of the Banque Nationale 600.000.000 marks (\$120.000.000) and from the Société Générale 200.000.000 marks.

There were those in Brussels who thought that the banks had allowed the marks to accumulate in their vaults because it was not considered good form in Brussels to pay anybody in German money. The German mark, under a decree of von Bissing, circulated at 1.25 francs in Brussels ; it was a crime to refuse German money at that rate. If one entered a shop and gave a 20-franc note, the proprietor in giving the change would say :

"*Pardon, Monsieur, est-ce que Monsieur veut bien accepter l'argent allemand ? C'est tout ce que j'ai pour le moment.*"

And as it was not good form to offer it, so it was not good form to refuse it. But the Banque Nationale had been permitted to pay out over its counters the notes that the Société Générale was authorized to issue, the notes that bore the picture of Rubens or of Queen Marie-Louise, the Germans having refused to permit the notes to be adorned by the portrait of the reigning monarch, or by the Belgian arms, or by any emblem of Belgian sovereignty, or indeed anything that touched more nearly the patriotic sentiment of the people.

When the complicated financial transaction was finally understood, there was indignation all over Brussels. The effect of the mechanism devised by the *Bank Abteilung* was to compel Belgium to pay its war contribution twice, first in marks by purchasing the provincial bonds, then in Belgian bank-notes which they were compelled to substitute for the marks or deposit those marks which the Bank Nationale was not allowed to use, and which were "*transferred*" as the euphemism of the *Bank Abteilung* would have it, to the *Reichsbank* at Berlin. Men of affairs could scarcely discuss the spoliation calmly. The *Bank Abteilung*, I believe, had a theory which justified it in seizing this money *** ; it was designed to reduce the cover of the *Reichsbank* at Berlin, and the

Germans referred to it as a loan and offered to pay interest on it, but the interest was indignantly refused.

It may be that terminology can change the quality of a deed and make it something less or something more than it is. I do not know. I used to know a man years ago, of whom I drew a picture as accurately as I could in the character of the yeggman Curley, in "***The Turn of the Balance***" (1). Curley had a theory, too ; he expounded it to me many times, sometimes in his cell during those long hours in which I used to talk to him that time I defended him for murder. He would have scorned to pick a pocket, even if he could have done so ; he would not steal from the poor, he would not commit burglary, because he held that it was unfair to frighten people out of their sleep at night, and anyhow, that was not in his line. He would not harm women or children, and if a farmer had given him a meal at his home that farmer and all that he had was sacred in his sight and he would protect him from other thieves. (He always referred to himself baldly as a *thief*.) But he held that, for him at least — he would not impose his morals on others — it was justifiable to rob post offices, the Standard Oil Company, railroads, and banks.

I often thought in those days of Curley, and of the Singer, and of Old Sam, and others of his pals. I used to see their forms behind those bars and wonder why they could not have thought of

organizing a *Bank Abteilung*. But, no, they could not have done that either ; lawless as they were, and abandoned, there were certain laws they would not break ; the laws of hospitality, for instance.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

* Belges !

La fin approche.

Devant Verdun, l'admirable et héroïque résistance de l'armée française a brisé la formidable offensive allemande.

Sur la Somme, les armées françaises avancent victorieusement.

En Volhynie et en Galicie, l'armée autrichienne est mise en déroute par l'armée russe et ses débris, soutenus par des corps d'Allemands et Turcs, ne parviennent pas à enrayer la poussée continue de nos alliés.

Les Italiens ont rejeté l'invasion du Trentin, et ont enlevé, après des efforts magnifiques, les positions inexpugnables de Görz.

Enfin, la Roumanie s'est rangée du côté du droit.

Belges, vous ne resterez plus longtemps sous le joug de l'envahisseur.

Votre courage, votre dignité, votre fierté indomptable font l'admiration du monde.

Votre vaillante armée vous rejoindra bientôt ;
avec l'aide de nos puissants alliés, elle chassera
l'ennemi du sol natal.

Le moment de la délivrance approche.

Vivent les Alliés !

Vive la Belgique !

Vive le Roi !

(Translation :)

BELGIANS !

The end is near.

Before Verdun, the splendid and heroic
resistance of the French army has broken the
formidable German offensive.

On the Somme, the French armies are
advancing victoriously.

In Volhynia and in Galicia, the Austrian army
has been put to flight by the Russian army, and its
remnants, supported by the German and Turkish
troops, do not succeed in checking the continued
advance of our allies.

The Italians have checked the invasion of the
Trentino, and have carried, after magnificent
efforts, the impregnable positions of Goritz.

And lastly, Roumania has ranged herself on
the side of right.

Belgians, you will not remain much longer
under the yoke of the invader.

Your courage, your dignity, your indomitable pride, are the admiration of the world.
Your valiant army will soon rejoin you ; with the aid of our powerful allies, it will chase the enemy from the natal soil.

The moment of deliverance approaches.

Long live the Allies !

Long live Belgium !

Long live the King !

**** Avis**

Dans la nuit du 6 au 7 de ce mois, il a été constaté que de différentes parties du centre de la ville on a donné des signaux lumineux à un aviateur ennemi. En outre, à cette occasion, des manifestations se sont produites dans les rues.

Pour la partie de la ville de Bruxelles située entre le boulevard de l'Entrepôt, le boulevard Barthélemy, le boulevard de Waterloo, le boulevard du Régent, le boulevard Bischoffsheim, le boulevard du Jardin Botanique, le boulevard d'Anvers et le square Sainctelette.

Pour la partie de Molenbeek-Saint-Jean située à l'est de la gare de l'Allée-Verte et pour tout le territoire de la commune de Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, j'ordonne ce qui suit :

1° — Du 12 au 18 de ce mois (ces deux jours y compris), tous les établissements publics servant aux divertissements, tels que les théâtres,

cinémas, concerts, etc., tous les restaurants, cafés, magasins, maisons de commerce, devront être fermés à 9 heures du soir. Il ne sera fait exception que pour les restaurants, etc., qui auront obtenu de la Kommandantur la permission de rester ouverts plus longtemps ;

2° — De 9h30 du soir à 4 heures du matin, seules pourront circuler dans les rues les personnes qui en auront obtenu la permission écrite d'une autorité allemande.

La dite interdiction n'est pas applicable aux personnes de nationalité allemande et aux ressortissants des pays alliés ou neutres. Ces personnes devront prouver leur nationalité en montrant leurs certificats d'identité.

La dite interdiction n'est pas non plus applicable aux fonctionnaires de la police communale portant leur uniforme, aux employés de tramways et des sociétés de veilleurs de nuit et d'autres entreprises analogues, à la condition qu'ils portent l'uniforme de leurs sociétés et prouvent leur qualité d'employé.

Les infractions aux présentes dispositions seront punies soit d'une amende pouvant atteindre 10.000 marks et d'une peine d'emprisonnement de trois mois au plus, soit d'une de ces deux peines à l'exclusion de l'autre. En outre, on pourra prononcer la fermeture, pour une période de temps plus ou moins longue, des établissements publics

servant aux divertissements, des restaurants, cafés et magasins, etc.

Les tribunaux et commandants militaires sont compétents pour juger les dites infractions,

Der Gouverneur von Brüssel und Brabant,
Hurt, Generalleutnant.
Bruxelles, le 11 septembre 1916.

(Translation:)

NOTICE

During the night of the 6th-7th of this month it has been established that in different parts of the centre of the city luminous signals were given to an enemy aviator. In addition, on this occasion there were manifestations in the streets.

For that part of the city of Brussels situated between the Boulevard de l'Entrepôt, the Boulevard Barthélemy, the Boulevard de Waterloo, the Boulevard du Régent, the Boulevard Bischoffsheim, the Boulevard du Jardin Botanique, the Boulevard d'Anvers, and the Square Sainctelette ;

For that part of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean situated east of the station of the Allée-Verte," and for the entire territory of the commune of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, I order as follows :

1. — From the 12th to the 18th of this month inclusive, all the public establishments of amusement, such as theatres, cinemas, concerts, etc., all restaurants, cafés, shops, houses of commerce, must be closed at 9 o'clock in the evening. The only exception made will be for those restaurants, etc., which obtain from the Kommandantur permission to remain open for a longer time.

2. — From 9.30 in the evening to 4 o'clock in the morning only those persons can be in the streets who have obtained for that purpose the written permission of a German authority.

The said interdiction is not applicable to persons of German nationality or citizens of allied or neutral countries. These persons must prove their nationality by showing their certificate of identity.

The said interdiction does not apply either to functionaries of the communal police in uniform, to employees of the tramways and of the societies of nightwatchers and other similar enterprises, on condition that they wear the uniform of their societies or prove their quality of employees.

Infractions to the present order will be punished either by a fine which may be as high as 10.000 marks and imprisonment of no more than three weeks, or one of these penalties to the exclusion of the other. Besides the establishments used for amusement, restaurants, cafés, shops, etc., may be closed for a period more or less long.

The military tribunals and commandants are competent to try the said infractions.

The Governor of Brussels and Brabant,
Hurt, Lieutenant-General.

Brussels, September 11, 1916.

Bruxelles, 15 septembre 1916.

Quoique les Alliés poursuivent impitoyablement contre l'Allemagne une guerre économique contraire à tous les principes du droit international, sur le terrain des affaires, l'Empire allemand ne traite pas la Belgique en ennemie ; il n'a jamais été question de défendre d'effectuer des paiements à la Belgique et dès les premiers jours de l'année 1915, on a levé le séquestre pesant sur l'actif des banques belges en Allemagne, actif s'élevant à plus de 200 millions de francs. Les contributions de guerre imposées à la Belgique ont été si mesurées jusqu'ici, que le pays peut facilement les produire, sans nuire à sa vie économique ; d'autre part, les dépenses des troupes allemandes dépassent sensiblement la contribution de guerre à fournir par la population belge. L'argent allemand coule largement dans le pays et a permis de rétablir normalement la circulation des valeurs. Les avantages de cette politique économique ont largement profité à la Belgique.

On ne pouvait cependant, à la longue, laisser à la *Reichsbank* la charge d'assurer la circulation fiduciaire en Belgique. C'est pour cette raison qu'à fin 1914 la Société Générale obtint le privilège d'émission jadis conféré à la Banque Nationale, pour la raison que cette dernière ayant transféré à Londres à peu près tout son actif, y compris son encaisse d'or et de métal, n'était plus en état de fonctionner comme Banque d'Emission. La Société Générale de Belgique fut autorisée, sur la base de ses statuts, à émettre des billets jusqu'à concurrence de trois fois la valeur de son avoir : en or — barres ou monnaies —, en monnaies de métal coursables en Belgique, en billets de la *Reichsbank* allemande, en billets des caisses d'Etat et des caisses de prêts allemandes, aussi bien qu'en crédits sur les banques étrangères.

Il se produisit peu à peu d'extraordinaires disponibilités en Belgique, de telle façon que des quantités considérables d'argent allemand et principalement de billets de la *Reichsbank*, superflues dans la circulation, s'amassèrent dans les caisses du Département d'émission de la Société Générale et de la Banque Nationale de Belgique. Pour faciliter aux banques l'utilisation des billets allemands qu'elles recevaient, l'on avait introduit dans les statuts du département d'émission de la Société Générale une clause disant que l'avoir à l'étranger et par conséquent dans les banques allemandes également, pourrait

servir, tout comme les billets de la *Reichsbank* eux-mêmes, à couvrir les émissions de billets belges jusqu'à concurrence de trois fois leur valeur. L'intérêt financier bien entendu de la Banque Nationale et du Département d'émission de la Société Générale semblait leur commander d'employer leur encaisse, toujours plus considérable, de billets allemands et de billets de caisses, à se créer des crédits sur les banques allemandes.

On ne saurait trop dire quelles ont bien pu être les raisons qui ont déterminé les chefs des deux Banques à ne pas faire usage de cette possibilité.

Ce qui est certain, c'est que l'intérêt de la *Reichsbank* ne permettait d'aucune façon que des centaines de millions de billets s'entassent dans ces deux établissements d'émission. C'était amener une élévation du chiffre de la circulation de la *Reichsbank*, qu'aucune raison économique ne justifiait. C'est pour cette raison que l'administration allemande en Belgique a demandé que les encaisses de ces banques, en billets de la *Reichsbank* et en billets de caisses allemandes, inutiles à la circulation, soient employés à la création de crédits sur les Banques allemandes. Les conseils généraux des deux banques belges ont décidé de se rendre à cette demande. Ils ont pris cette décision pour le motif qu'elle ne heurte en rien les intérêts de leurs établissements, tandis

qu'un refus de satisfaire au désir de l'administration allemande eut montré clairement que la gestion des deux banques était de nature à porter préjudice aux intérêts nationaux de l'Empire allemand, ce qui eut infailliblement amené la mise sous séquestre des deux banques.

Il est regrettable qu'il se rencontre en Belgique des gens qui n'hésitent pas à répandre à ce sujet des bruits mensongers, ne reposant sur rien et qui sont de nature à nuire aux intérêts de leur propre pays.

Il est inutile d'insister sur ces mensonges, qui ont naturellement été accueillis par la Presse favorable à l'Entente. Ce qui doit être dit expressément, c'est que d'aucune façon il n'a été question d'une mainmise sur l'argent ou sur les valeurs, c'est qu'en second lieu l'arrestation des sieurs Carlier et Cattier, à qui dans certains milieux on voudrait décerner l'auréole du martyr, n'a aucune espèce de rapport avec toute cette affaire.

(Translation:)

Brussels, September 15, 1916.

While the Allies pursue pitilessly against Germany an economic war contrary to all the principles of international law, in the world of affairs the German Empire does not treat Belgium as an enemy. There has never been any idea of

prohibiting payments to Belgium, and since the first days of the year 1915 the sequestration placed on the assets of Belgian banks in Germany has been lifted, assets amounting to more than two hundred millions of francs. The contributions of war imposed on Belgium have thus far been so moderate that the country could easily produce them without harming its economic life ; besides, the expenditure of the German troops exceeds sensibly the contribution of war the Belgian population has to furnish. German money flows largely in the country, and has permitted the re-establishment of the normal circulation of values. Belgium has greatly profited by the advantages of this economic policy.

However, it is impossible in the end to leave to the *Reichsbank* the burden of assuring the note-circulation in Belgium. It is for this reason that at the end of 1914 the Société Générale obtained the privilege of emission theretofore conferred on the Banque Nationale, for the reason that the latter having transferred to London nearly all of its assets, including its gold and metal, was no longer able to function as a bank of emission. The Société Générale de Belgique was authorized, on the basis of its statutes, to issue bills to the extent of three times the value of its possessions in gold — either in bars or money — in money that was legally current in Belgium, in bills of the German *Reichsbank*, in bills of the State Treasury or the

Treasury of German Loans, as well as in credits on foreign banks.

Little by little there were thus produced amounts of money in Belgium to such an extent that considerable quantity of German money, and principally bills of the *Reichsbank*, superfluous in the circulation, were piled up in the safes of the Department of Emission of the Société Générale and of the Banque Nationale de Belgique. In order to aid the banks to use the German bills that they received, there was introduced in the statute of the Department of Emission of the Société Générale a clause saying that their foreign credits, and consequently those as well in German banks, could serve, like the bank-bills of the *Reichsbank* themselves, to cover the emissions of Belgian bills to the extent of three times their value. The well-understood financial interest of the Banque Nationale and of the Department of Emission of the Société Générale seemed to require them to use their own funds of German bills and bank-notes, increasing all the time, in the creation of credits in German banks.

It is impossible to say what could have been the reasons which determined the heads of the two banks not to make use of such a possibility.

What is certain is that it is the interest of the *Reichsbank* not to permit by any way hundreds of millions of bank-notes to pile up in the Departments of Emission. Such a course would

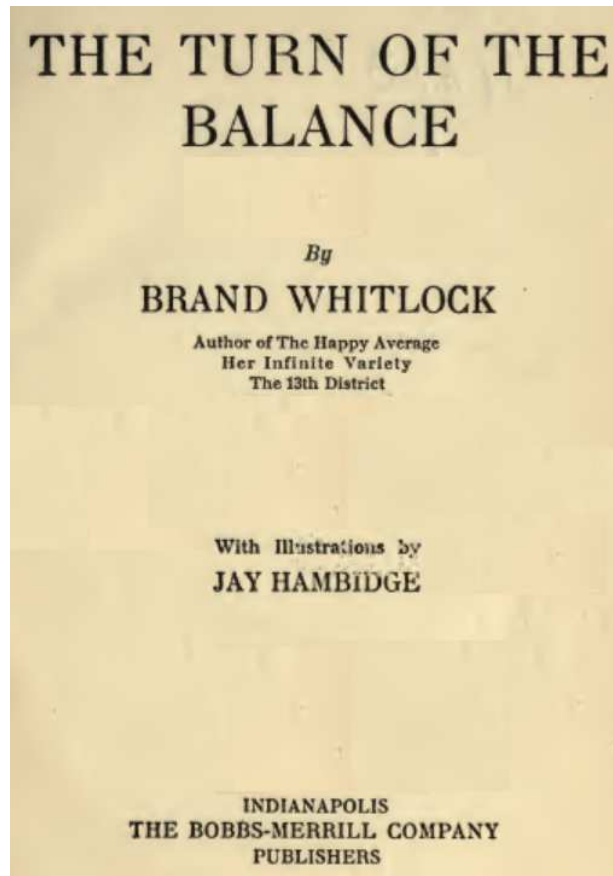
elevate the circulation of the *Reichsbank*, which no economical reason would justify. For this reason the German administration in Belgium has demanded that the funds of these banks in *Reichsbank* bills and in German bank-notes useless in circulation shall be employed to create credits in German banks. The directors of the two Belgian banks have decided to accede to this request. They have reached this decision because it will nowise injure the situation of their establishments, while the refusal to satisfy the desire of the German administration would have shown clearly that the direction of the two banks was in the nature to injure the interests of the German Empire, which would instantly have brought about the sequestration of the two banks.

It is to be regretted that it should be found in Belgium persons that should not hesitate to spread on this subject lying rumours which repose on nothing and which are of the nature to injure the interest of their own country.

It is useless to insist on these lies, which are naturally being welcomed by the Press devoted to the Entente. What should be expressly said is that in no way has there been a question of seizing money or values, and, in the second place, that the arrest of Messieurs Carlier and Cattier, to whom in certain circles the aureola of martyrs has been given, has nothing whatever to do with this affair.

(1) WHITLOCK, Brand ; ***The Turn of the Balance***;
Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company ; 1907,
622 pages :

<https://ia802705.us.archive.org/11/items/turnofbalance00whitrich/turnofbalance00whitrich.pdf>



French translation : « *Bank Abteilung et cambrioleurs de coffres-forts* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XXI (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 363-369.

It would be interesting compare with what **Paul MAX** (cousin of the *bourgmestre Adolphe MAX*) told about the same day in his ***Journal de guerre*** (*Notes d'un Bruxellois pendant l'Occupation 1914-1918*) :

http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de%20guerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.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>