

# **BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)**

## **A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2**

**Brand WHITLOCK**

### **Chapter XXXI. Fear / The monstrous thing.**

And now there was a new phenomenon in Brussels, theretofore unknown, one of those amorphous expressions of the psychology of the crowd, a thing indefinable, instinctive, atavistic, evoked out of the mysterious and unfathomable depths of human consciousness. No one identified it, it went unnamed, unrecognized ; men entered into a tacit and spontaneous conspiracy not to mention it, yet each felt it and was himself its helpless victim. That vague, unnamed thing was fear, a monstrous, cruel, odious fear under the dominion of which men felt all the sensations that are ascribed to those who have seen ghosts, or hideous apparitions, vague, spectral emergences beyond the common experience of man. It was not that natural and human shrinking from danger which courage overcomes, it was not mere cowardice, it was deeper, more subtle and terrible, the instinctive dread that animals and savages know, a thing of human instinct that lay beyond the jurisdiction of the reason, from which there was no escape ; it was not to be conjured or dismissed. The invasion of the German hordes, the long reign of terror, the persecutions and plottings, the spies

and secret agents, the summary trials, the drumhead courts martial, the firing squads, all the enginery of a soulless military despotism, scorning all the restraints that men of honour have devised, had never been able to produce that sensation, but now the gangs of slavers stealing through the land, appearing suddenly at night, tearing men from their beds, from their wives and children, to send them off into that shameful bondage, benumbed the very currents of the soul, destroyed the few of life's satisfactions that were left ; men dreaded the coming of the night, and the dawn brought them no surcease or hope.

Brussels had not as yet witnessed any of the shameful scenes, but the great round-up, the man hunt, was closing in. One day it was announced that the *chômeurs* of Tervueren had been summoned, three hundred and seventy of them ; they were to report on a certain day at a given hour. The day came, but not one reported. And nothing happened. Had the Germans abandoned their intention, recoiled before the flood of a moral indignation so overwhelming that it could daunt and change the purpose even of German militarism ?

But no ; they were insensible to moral influence — and the Burgomaster of Brussels had been summoned to give up the lists of *chômeurs*. The stout Lemonnier had refused, point-blank —

let the consequences be what they might. And a little handbill was circulating through the city :

### WE WILL NOT GO! \*

The order for the men of Antwerp to report had been posted early in November ; a similar order was expected to appear on the walls of Brussels at any moment. Harrowing tales were brought to town and told and retold ; every one had the story of some friend, some acquaintance, in some village he knew ; it made the terror personal, brought it within the limits of the imagination.

"*Do you think they will take men of our class?*", a young nobleman asked me one day. He repeated the question a dozen times, and put it to me for days every time that I met him. When a man left his home he never knew, his family did not know, that it was not for the last time ; there, ever before all eyes, was the vision, the slave pen, the long ride in open freight wagons in that bitter cold to Germany, the mines, the quarries, or perhaps the Front and the trenches. For it was known that the men taken from Tournai had been sent to dig trenches ; it was known by the German *affiche* commanding the men of Tournai (Antoing, October 20) to report. "*Ils ne seront pas exposés au feu continu*" that order concluded.

Written appeals poured into the Legation ; pathetic notes and letters in French, in Flemish, looking to America in the latest hour of agony. Women came in person, often tramping in from distant villages, to tell of husbands and sons torn from their homes, boxed like cattle in freight trains, and sent off — they knew not where.

I received hundreds of letters, pleading, imploring protection ; men wished to be attached to the Legation so that they might have diplomatic immunity ; women came to ask that I take their sons into my home and give them asylum ; there were innumerable requests for the cards issued by the C.R.B. testifying that the bearer was employed in the *ravitaillement*, and therefore immune. I even had anonymous letters threatening me if I did not, or if America did not, intervene and stop the press-gangs. Men were quite beside themselves with fear.

Nothing else was talked of, and when men spoke of the Germans it was with deeper hatred in their tone. The story of the seizures took form and detail ; men were herded into rooms, under-officers told them off, pronouncing two words that came to have a sinister and fatal meaning :

*"Links, rechts."*

Those to whom the word "*links*" was spoken passed out one door ; those to whom "*rechts*" was spoken passed out another ; the first meant slavery, the second liberty — at least for the time

being ; sometimes the slave gang came a second time to the village. Then, wives wailing and screaming, dragging themselves on their knees to the feet of the Uhlans, who, with their crops, whipped them off like dogs. Men and women shuddered at the mere phrase "*envoyé en Allemagne*". To complete the horror the weather grew more and more bitterly cold. Every day trainloads of men swept by, the men crowded like cattle in open cars, without overcoats, without food, seized and taken off before they had had time to provide themselves for the dreadful journey. And yet invariably they went singing "*La Brabançonne*" or "*La Marseillaise*", and shouting :

*"Nous ne signerons pas !"*

Living in this constant fear, this implacable terror of the morrow, men went heavily clothed, for those taken had to leave with what they had on their backs. Many carried large sums on their persons to be used in bribing the soldiers so that they would release them or connive at their escape after they had been taken.

For the net indeed seemed to be closing in ; one day in the middle of November it had been said that the impressments were to begin the following day in the *banlieues* of Brussels — in the communes of Auderghem, Forest, and Uccle.

Sometimes there were rumours, born no doubt of the need of hope ; one of them was that President Wilson had sent an ultimatum to

Germany saying that if the policy of enslaving Belgians was not abandoned, and the men returned to their homes within twenty-four hours, America would break off diplomatic relations with Germany, that there was nothing to be gained by equivocation, that the President had all the facts from his Minister in Brussels.

"*Qu'est-ce que l'Amérique fabrique ?*" every one asked.

Herbert Spencer says somewhere that in every rumour there is some basis in fact, though the rule did not seem to be without its exception with our experience in Brussels, and there was truth in so much of that rumour as said that the President had all the facts from his Minister in Brussels, who had a cablegram from Washington approving the course he had followed, and saying that Mr. Grew had been instructed to make representations on the basis of the keen interest that the American Government felt in the Belgian civil population, and that the German Government had promised an explanation.

Then hope, for a space, returned again. The brave Lemonnier, having once refused to give up the lists of the *chômeurs* in Brussels, had been arrested for his resistance, but when the Germans could not daunt him, he had been released again. He with his *échevins* had come to see Villalobar and me, not for himself — he never asked anything for himself — but to ask if we could not do

something to lighten the lot of M. Max, who, the report was, had been transferred to the cell of a common felon at Berlin.

Days passed ; the hope grew. But German purpose is as inflexible as German patience is limitless. A plan once formed is never abandoned, and one day suddenly the Burgomasters of Greater Brussels and of Brabant received an identical circular. It was not posted on the walls, but it was no secret ; it was the first explicit declaration that the turn of Brussels had come. The brutal letter ordered the communes "*to be ready to hand over the unemployed to be taken away*". \*\*

There was no hesitation, just time enough to meet in joint session, and the Burgomasters of the fifteen communes of Greater Brussels sent a reply, saying that they could not deliver to the German authorities the names of fellow-citizens to be torn from their families and constrained to forced labour in Germany without violating their consciences and their duty to their country.\*\*\*

And Brussels waited in that agony of fear, the shadow of which lay on every home, even the most luxurious. I recall one of them ; there were pictures by Rubens and van Dyck on the wall, and an exquisite refinement of taste in the *objets d'art* all about. We sat in silence after dinner ; there was no expression for this monstrous thing, beyond that of one of the gentlemen present, who sat gazing

vacantly before him and, from time to time, all unconsciously, saying as if to himself :

*"Quelle horreur ! Quelle horreur !"*

Brand WITHLOCK

Footnotes.

\* The hand bill was as follows. **Translation :**

**We will not go !**

The people of Brussels are agreed. They do not obey the summons of the Germans. They are not going to allow themselves to be led like sheep to the slaughter.

In a large number of communes many men have not presented themselves ; they have not been disturbed. Only those who have handed themselves over have been sent away.

Shame on those who present themselves out of selfishness, because they have a certificate of compliance or because they are certain to be given their liberty.

All for each ! each for all !

A Belgian who works for the Germans fights against his country.

Let them organize the man-hunt ; we shall hide ourselves.

**No one will present himself.**

The people of Brussels will remember Max !

The honour of the country is in their hands.

**Long Live the Country ! Long Live the King !**

**We will not go ! ! !**



**\*\* Translation :**

Government of Brussels and of Brabant  
N°2766, 1 b. Brussels, November 12, 1916.

**NOTICE  
TO ALL THE MAYORS OF GREATER BRUSSELS  
AND OF BRABANT**

It is not the Belgian population that will profit the least by the order issued by the Governor-General to transport to Germany the unemployed and those who refuse to work, and are a charge on public charity. The working classes, reduced to idleness for years, will find in Germany remunerative wages, which, principally because of the lack of raw materials, they cannot find in Belgium.

It is the duty of all the Belgian communal administrations to lend their aid to the execution of these measures. All the burgomasters must immediately transmit to the *Kreischef* — in the case of Greater Brussels to the *Kommandantur* — the required lists of workingmen not having sufficient employment. The communes, from this date, must be ready from day to day to prepare their unemployed for departure.

In the communes where the lists are not furnished within the required time, the German administration itself will choose the men to be

transported to Germany. However it has neither the time nor the means to inquire into the situation of each person. If then, when the choice is made, there should be unfortunate cases, or errors, the responsibility for them will fall on those burgomasters who refuse to aid the German administration. I call attention to the fact that, once transported to Germany, workmen will be able to return to Belgium only in exceptional cases of extreme urgency, or those justified by irrefutable reasons.

I shall proceed with the most extreme rigour against those burgomasters who do not draw up lists, or who draw them up negligently, and that not only because of disobedience to the German orders, but also for having failed in their duty toward the population committed to their care.

Governor Hurt, Lieutenant-General.

**\* \* \* Translation :**

**Communal Administration of Brussels  
Office of the Mayor**

To the Commanding Officer of the City of Brussels

U. 7831 Brussels, November 16, 1916.

Mr. Commander :

Following the meeting of November 14, 1916, the Mayors of Greater Brussels have authorized us to inform you in their name as well as in our own,

that we are of the opinion that we can not accept the invitation made to us to prepare lists of workmen without employment to be remitted to the German authorities.

We can but refer again to the different reasons which have already been cited in support of this decision. First and foremost, we think that we could not deliver to the German authorities the names of fellow-citizens who are to be torn from their families, to be constrained to forced labour in Germany, without misinterpreting the voice of our conscience and our duties to our country.

In expressing ourselves thus we are convinced that we are voicing the unanimous sentiments of the entire population.

Accept, Mr. Commander, the assurances of our high consideration.

Secretary of Council,  
M. Vauthier.

The Council of Aldermen,  
Maurice Lemonnier.

### **Translation :**

#### **Communal Administration of Brussels Office of the Mayor**

His Excellency Mr. Brand Whitlock,  
Minister of the United States, Brussels

U 7698

Brussels, October 27, 1916.

Excellency :

I have the honour to transmit herewith to Your Excellency a copy of the letter which the Council of Aldermen of Brussels has addressed to the German authorities regarding the lists of unemployed.

I beg Your Excellency to accept the renewed assurances of my high consideration.

Acting Mayor,  
Maurice Lemonnier.

### **Translation :**

#### **Communal Administration of Brussels**

U 7682.

October 26, 1916.

#### **To the Military Commandant of Brussels.**

Mr. Commandant :

We have the honour to reply to your letter of October 20th, 1916, N°11 M.P. 2515, by which you asked us to send up a list of workers at the present time without employ. We do not possess a list of this nature and we could not, for that reason, furnish you with it.

You call our attention to the fact that the statement of unemployed workmen is made necessary by considerations of general interest. As the population has not ceased to be perfectly calm we must suppose that the circumstances which you invoke are exclusively of a political nature. We think that the communal administrations could not

be obliged to lend their assistance to the occupying Power to carry out all the measures that the latter deems necessary through circumstances of this nature.

We could not forget, above all, that promises had been given by the German authorities occupying Belgium. These promises guaranteed to our fellow-citizens, on the part of the German Government, a complete liberty of work. These promises have inspired us with complete confidence.

You will find enclosed the replies of the fifteen communes of Greater Brussels.

We are, Sir, etc.

## The Council of Aldermen of Brussels.

French translation : « *La peur* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XXV (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 380-383.

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](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>

It would also be interesting compare with what Charles TYTGAT told about the same days in ***Journal d'un journaliste. Bruxelles sous la botte allemande*** :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>