

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XXXV**. At Marche, Nivelles and Wavre.
Calvary.

I HAVE told these stories, selected almost at random from the mass that were related at the Legation, as nearly as possible as they were told to me, even with the occasional repetitions they may imply. They were told badly, with no effort at effect, and I have no doubt that the reader will have experienced, as I have experienced in reading them over again, a certain disappointment, or if not that, a vague regret that there were not more details. But to tell a story with details, to reproduce a tragic scene in all its poignancy, requires a rare talent that was wholly beyond the powers of those who related these incidents ; they told them in quite a matter of fact, prosaic way, without the embellishment of conscious art. And I myself, in those dark and terrible days, had heard too many tales of suffering to have any more the courage to intensify their reality by drawing out their narrators with questions. To confess the fact, I used to try to

harden my own heart, to keep down my emotions, to say *chômeurs* instead of men, "*deportation*" instead of slavery, and oftentimes, I fear, to seek to have done with it as quickly as possible, else I should not have been able to get through the days that were made so much harder by the appeals that implied the faith that I could stop it all if I would.

"Excellence, nous comptons sur vous !"

One day there was a great stalwart miner from Charleroi, president of his labour union, who, in the French he spoke with the Walloon accent, and under the influence of that vague notion of diplomatic powers and responsibilities that prevails rather generally on this planet, said :

"Je vous signale ces faits. Excellence, afin que vous, en votre qualité de Ministre protecteur de la Belgique, puissiez le mieux remplir votre devoir."

But as the dread thing drew nearer the tales were more circumstantial, we had them in more abundant detail, and sometimes from several sources, so that it was possible to have a more vivid picture of the events that were still, in the early days of December, almost beyond belief. For instance, the levy made at Marche on the

thirteenth of December. Marche is a Walloon village down in the province of Luxembourg east of Dinant ; on the eighth of December little red placards posted about the town informed the population that on the thirteenth all men between the ages of seventeen and fifty-five were to assemble in the market-place, having with them food for two days and a bag of warm clothing ; the same little red placards were posted in all the villages around Marche. During the days intervening before the thirteenth the *Kreischef* allowed it to become known that he would exempt certain classes, such as lawyers, doctors, and clergymen, from appearing personally. Many men belonging to the well-to-do classes and some of those who had helped the officers or the non-commissioned officers of the occupying force to comforts in the way of food, also contrived to have their cards stamped with the envied seal of exemption without appearing on the day appointed. And, too, there were rumours in the town to the effect that certain feminine influences were active, and in several cases successful.

On the morning of the thirteenth, then, about four thousand men appeared in the market-place. Many had to tramp all through the night to get

there, and they all had heavy bags, like rucksacks, on their backs. At nine o'clock the officers who were to conduct the work arrived on the scene. These officers had not been quartered at Marche ; they were indeed strangers to the place and it was understood that they were to perform the same duty for the whole of the province of Luxembourg. The *Kreischef* and the local Kommandant, however, were present as onlookers.

The men were ordered to group themselves by communes, and each of these groups was called up in turn, and in single file, each man holding his cap in one hand and his *carte d'identité* in the other, made to march past an officer by the side of whom stood the burgomaster of the commune under inspection. Then began that fateful "*Rechts links*" ; those who went to the left were free, those who went to the right were slaves. If a man appeared to be over forty, or unfit for physical work, he was ordered to the left. "*Nach Hause !*" the officer would say, without looking at the *carte d'identité*. But in the case of younger men the officer took the card and glanced at the occupation; a railway man, for instance, was promptly ordered to the right, the officer simply saying "*Eisenbahner !*" and he was turned toward the waiting train. A

farmer or agricultural labourer was generally asked how many hectares he cultivated ; if they proved to be many the man was generally released, otherwise he was taken. "*Rechts, Eisenbahner !*" When there were doubts the officer asked, "*Are you married ?*" and if the answer was in the affirmative, "*How many children?*" If there were children the man was set free. But in no case was a man asked whether he was employed or unemployed. Youths between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two were always taken ; men of means were generally released.

The burgomaster was rarely allowed to intervene. A gentleman I know well, Mr. H—, prominent in the region, was there to help his neighbors if he could. The burgomaster of his commune was too old to be present, and Mr. H— (he is still inside) took his place. He managed to get a hearing from the officer on behalf of six men from his own village, three of whom were released; but his attempt to intervene a seventh time was stopped and he was ordered to keep quiet ; he did not obey, and the officer said he would have him forcibly removed, and later threatened to arrest him.

Four thousand men were marched past the two officers in four hours ; each officer, therefore, had to examine two thousand men in that length of time — seven seconds and a fraction to decide whether a man should be free or slave, in December, 1916 !

The fact is that the number of men to be taken was fixed arbitrarily and in advance for each commune, although the officers could have had no idea of the proportion of able-bodied men they would find among the population. The town of Aye, for instance, with eleven hundred people, had about the same number of men taken as Marche, with four thousand inhabitants.

When the march past was finished the officers announced that they would hear complaints from the burgomasters about specially "*deserving*" cases, and to hear these they adjourned to the back room of a small *café*. The little *estaminet* was at once invaded by an excited group of protesting notables from the different villages, burgomasters, notaries, *curés* in their black cassocks, local politicians, or men of affairs, all shouting, clamouring, gesticulating — and the officer sitting at a table in the middle of the room. This went on

for three-quarters of an hour, but after the most pushing burgomasters had managed to shoulder their way up to the table and to be heard more or less patiently, the officers declared that they had had enough, that the proceedings were at an end, that all the men who had been taken would be sent to Germany, and that any further complaints would have to be made in writing.

H— managed to get a hearing before the session was concluded. With the *curé* of his village he pleaded for four men who had been taken and had left large families at home. After listening for a minute or two the officer declared that he would free two of these four men ; H— and the *curé* were to choose them themselves. They chose, of course, those having the most children. H— then pleaded earnestly for an old man alone in the world, save an only son who had been taken, and, thanks to the intervention of the local *Kreischef*, who seemed to know something of the case, this boy was also freed.

He then brought up the case of a poor widow of Aye whose three sons had all been taken. The officer shook his head, declared that it was impossible ; three men of the same name were

never taken in the same commune. H— explained that these boys, on account of their employment, lived in different communes, and that therefore they had appeared separately. The officer replied that if they lived in three different communes they did not live with their mother ; therefore, whether they worked away from their mother in Germany or in Belgium, it did not greatly matter ; they would be sent away ; and they were.

Thus chance ruled, when favouritism or spite were not in play. The clerk in a local bank had passed the officer and had been declared free ; he had gone home in joy and was eating his dinner when a soldier came, arrested him and took him back to the market-place. According to village gossip a German officer had been an unsuccessful suitor for the favours of a village beauty who was the bank clerk's sweetheart, and through the influence of this officer the clerk, who had been released, was retaken and sent off to Germany.

The cards of exemption which, under our express and formal arrangement with the German authorities, had been delivered to the employees of the C.N. and C.R.B., signed by the American delegate, Mr. Osborn, Were in most cases of no

avail. The officer would take one of these cards, show it to another officer standing by, and this officer, evidently in authority, would shake his head, and his companion would put the card in his pocket and order the man to be deported.

When the operation had ceased the men were at once marched off to the railway station, embarked on a train in waiting, and sent, it was said, to Alten Grabow.

Then it was the turn of Nivelles, the charming old town of about twelve thousand inhabitants a few miles south of Waterloo. On the fourth of November a notice was posted on the walls of Nivelles ordering all men over seventeen years old to report on the eighth of November at nine o'clock in the morning, eight o'clock Belgian time, in the Place Saint-Paul. They must have their *cartes d'identité* and the card issued by the *Meldeamt*, and, sinister portent, they might bring small hand-baggage. Similar notices had been posted in all the communes near-by. The entire region was stricken with terror. Two days later German troops appeared in Nivelles, filling all the streets ; sentinels were posted on all the highways, roads and footpaths ; none could leave the town without

written permission from the *Kommandantur* ; there was a veritable state of siege, to which fear added its anguish. On the morning of the eighth a cold dismal rain was falling, and from dawn on to eight o'clock miserable processions from all the neighbouring villages came wending into town, old hobbling men, some ill, drenched to the skin, carrying their poor pathetic little bundles, until thousands were crowded in the Place Saint-Paul, with its beautiful entrance to the old cloistered nunnery there under the shadow of the church of Sainte-Gertrude, its two round grey towers and the statue of Jacques Nivelles looking down from the eleventh century on a scene of such barbarity as he had never beheld. There were old men of seventy and eighty standing there in the cold, driving rain, and they stood thus for hours. Finally, as their cards were examined, first those between seventy and eighty, then those between sixty and seventy, were allowed to go, and they plodded off homeward. This took a long time. The others who remained were then marched in columns of sixes between lines of soldiers behind whose hedge of bayonets the women were pressed closely, shawls over their heads, sobbing, their eyes wide, their faces drawn with terror and despair, to the

Delacroix factories a mile away. They were marching thus until noon in the pitiless rain. Then the examination was begun and continued until five o'clock in the evening. The Delacroix factories were connected by a spur with the railway station at Baulers, and on this spur freight cars stood, the little goods-wagons of continental railways. Each man as he was chosen was hustled into one of these cars, and when it was full the car was at once hauled out and another empty car brought to take its place. The men were selected, as seemed now to be the rule everywhere, according to their physical appearance, the strong taken, the weak left. Once taken a man was not allowed to communicate with his family ; he was hauled away in that crowded little goods-wagon, in the rain and darkness and cold of the night, while wife and children waited in the little cottage. Night came down on Nivelles ; the rain was still falling, and the waiting ones in all those homes only knew that those they loved had been taken away when the German soldiers, their work done, came marching back from Baulers and into Nivelles, singing through the dark streets of the little town where there were only tears.

It was on the morning of the fourteenth of November that the decree which convoked the male population of twenty-two villages was posted at Wavre, the *chef-lieu* of the canton. The *affiche* said :

AVIS

Tous les hommes de plus de 17 ans jusqu'à 55 ans inclusivement de la Commune de— sont tenus de se présenter le 15 novembre 1916, à 8h (heure allemande) sur la place du Marché à Wavre.

Le Bourgmestre devra être présent. Les intéressés devront être porteurs de leur certificat d'identité et, le cas échéant, de leur carte de contrôle (Meldekarte). Il est permis d'apporter de petits bagages a main. Ceux qui manqueront au contrôle seront immédiatement transportés, sans délai et par voie de contrainte, aux lieux où ils devront travailler. En outre, on pourra leur appliquer de fortes peines d'emprisonnement et des amendes élevées.

Les ecclésiastiques, les médecins, les avocats, les instituteurs et les professeurs ne doivent pas venir au dit contrôle.

De Kaiserliche Kreischef von Nivelles.

(S.) Graf von Schwerin.

Ottignies, le 3 novembre 1916.

Translation :

NOTICE

All men of from seventeen to fifty-five years, inclusive, of the commune of — will report on November 15, 1916, at 8 o'clock (German time) at Place du Marché at Wavre.

The Burgomaster must be present and interested parties must have their certificates of identity and, if necessary, their card of control (Meldekarte). They will be permitted to carry small hand baggage. Those who fail to report will be immediately transported, without delay, and by force, to the place where they must work. Besides, there may be applied to them heavy penalties of imprisonment and heavy fines.

Priests, doctors, lawyers, teachers and professors do not have to report.

Der Kaiserliche Kreischef von Nivelles,

Graf von Schwerin.

Ottignies, November 3, 1916.

The *affiche* had been posted at seven o'clock in the morning. It had been expected, feared, and yet there had been the vague, unreasoning hope

that somehow it would not happen, but now there it was, on the walls. Twenty-four hours' notice given to leave home, family, friends, and to go off in the night and the cold to that dark and sinister Germany ! The women had to warn those who were working and did not yet know. They had to warn them so that they might have time to prepare, so that they might pass with them that day, the last perhaps, and take such poor, pitiful measures of foresight as were possible. The women went to search and bring them home. And then there were poignant scenes, not alone the sorrow there is in all parting, but the anguish of such a parting as this. Those were poor homes. Two years of war, of high prices and rationing, had stripped them almost bare. In their cupboards there was little food, only that which was strictly necessary for each one, and on the morrow, if the father or the son were taken, there would be no other resource left. They made up their bundles, putting in them all they had, the last bit of clothing, the last piece of covering, the piece of the loaf of bread that remained, everything. "*No matter*", said one, "*to-morrow we shall not care to eat.*"

They had to be at Wavre at eight o'clock, and in order to reach the town in time they must start

early and be an hour or two on the road. There were no vehicles ; they had to walk, carrying their luggage. At six o'clock the interminable and lamentable processions set forth out of all those communes on all those roads, on the bleak morning of November in the bitter cold, in the biting wind, for Nature, almost as cruel as man, was full of menace. Most of the men would not allow their wives or children to go with them ; the way was long and their presence would only make the parting harder. And so they trudged along, alone or in groups, walking in heavy silence over those well-known roads of happy memories. But there were some women who were not to be deterred, and they dragged themselves along behind, weeping.

The town of Wavre — a pretty place, or a place that was pretty before the Germans burned so many of its houses — was all grey and shivering that morning. It was surrounded by troops, and the processions entering by all the *chaussées* took the narrow streets that led to the Place du Marché, the square of old houses whose façades, blackened by fire and pierced by bullets in the earlier days of the invasion, stood gaunt and irresolute in the wind. The Germans had barred all the streets ; access to the Square was forbidden to all but the men, and

the crowd pressed against the barriers. The men were parked like animals according to their communes, and stood waiting with hanging heads, powerless, humiliated. From time to time one cried out a name, some word of encouragement — and farewell.

Then began the work of separation, of selecting those who were to go. A thousand at a time the men were marched into a school where the slavers sat. To get there the groups followed a street along the Dyle ; it is a picturesque quarter of Wavre, one which in happier times the artists used to paint. That morning at the windows of all the houses there were faces of anguish — women, children, old men, in tears. There were even people on the roofs looking down on the sad cortege that passed along, their eyes seeking out a father or a husband, a son, a brother or a lover. They waited four hours there in the Square before being marched to the school.

"I observed them", a man from one of the villages told me. "I knew many of them. I saw many whose faces had suddenly grown pale. They walked with firm steps, but they were ashen white. I felt that anxiety had stopped the blood in their

veins. They were the married men, those who had just left their wives and their children and were wondering whether they would see them soon again, whether it would be a long time, or never. The young unmarried men walked holding their heads high, something of defiance in their glance."

As they drew near to the school they looked up, suddenly attentive. There was a sound that swelled, gradually grew louder, and the faces lighted up. Yes, it was "*la Brabançonne*". There at the end of the courtyard was a group of men already marked for deportation, singing as loudly as they could the Belgian hymn. When they saw the others coming they cried out : "*Don't sign ! don't sign !*" They held themselves erect, full of courage, pride and manly will. There was not a complaint. When one of the men saw a friend go by he asked him to inform his family, to tell them that he had been taken, and then he resumed his defiant song.

The men from each commune were taken first into a room where a doctor examined those who had provided themselves with physician's certificates stating that they were unfit for work. This German physician was indulgent, almost

generous ; now and then he pronounced liberations ; but there was a second room, and here the fate of each man was decided brusquely, mechanically, in a few seconds and without appeal. It all depended on which one of the two words was pronounced by the German officer, those two banal words that had suddenly acquired a new and appalling significance ; one of them set him at liberty, the other doomed him to slavery. There were several men in uniform, the *kreischef*, the civil commissioner, and some officers with the rigid, inflexible, arbitrary attitude of military authority which tolerates no discussion. The burgomaster, an *échevin* and the secretary of the commune were there too, authorized to assist at the examination of their constituents, but there was nothing they could do. The officers would not listen to any of their appeals. The decisions were made by two officers, one on each side of the room ; they examined the men rapidly, beginning with the lads between seventeen and twenty-five years. They glanced at the card of identity which told who the bearer was, gave his trade if he had one, or his civil position ; the officers looked him over rapidly, as dealers might examine a horse. They asked but one question : "*Were you a chômeur ?*" and then

the inexorable decision, that one of the two words which here was fatal — “*links*”. The man was lost, his fate had thus been decided by the will of a single man in less than ten seconds.

To leave the hall they had to pass through a door which had been divided by a barrier of wood into two narrow ways. Two soldiers guarded this barrier. The corridor to the left led to a hall where those who were to be sent to Germany, those on whom had been pronounced the laconic sentence of that word “*links*” had to pass. Those who passed to the right went out past non-commissioned officer who stamped a seal on the card of identity, stating that their holders were set free ; this right-hand corridor led to an open window before which there was a table ; on the ground outside there was another table, and the man set free sprang on to the table inside, through the open window to the table outside, and so on to the ground. It looked as though he were running away. In his breast there was the vast, almost selfish relief, and then his heart would close again at the thought of the others who had not been so lucky. In the large hall the examination went on all day — “*links, rechts; links, rechts*”.

At the end of a little street not far from the school a crowd had gathered, a crowd that grew larger as the day advanced ; the anxiety had been too great, they could not wait. The women, mothers, wives, sweethearts, had come from all the villages they buttonholed everybody who came out, asking news of their own, "*Is he taken ?*" "*Has his case been passed on yet ?*" Oftentimes those who had been released did not know, they could not tell, and struggled to escape a second time from the importunities of these imploring women. They all sobbed, my friend told me, and those who could strain a released husband or son to their breasts sobbed more than the others.

Those who had been passed out "*links*" were gathered in a large hall and there each man was asked if he would sign a contract agreeing to work for the Germans for large wages. If he consented he gave his name and his address and was authorized to go home for the few days' grace which his complaisance gained for him. If he refused he was immediately subjected to all sorts of menaces, told of pains and penalties that would befall him, and led away to join that agitated group of those who like him would not submit, to be received with cheers as though he had won a

victory, as indeed he had. Very few of them signed, very few consented, almost all refused. They had to wait a while, wait until the group was sufficiently large, and when it had grown to a size worth while it was surrounded by soldiers with fixed bayonets, and by mounted Uhlans and marched to the railway station. Two officers walked beside with whips in their hands — *der Schlag*, the old emblem of the slave-driver, the new of modern Germany. Sometimes as they passed through the streets a woman in tears dodged under the barrier, threw herself on one of the men in the crowd for a last farewell, only to be lashed back by the soldiers.

In the street that led to the station there were others waiting at the windows, waving handkerchiefs to those who were going away. The men in the street marched with heads up, now and then they threw their caps in the air, and they sang as they had sung in the courtyard of the school — to defy the Germans, and perhaps to keep up their own courage in such an hour. At each street corner there would be a little fracas, one of the prisoners would try to run away, but always he would be lashed back into the line by the *Schlag* or pursued by a Uhlan and prodded back into the ranks with a lance. Some of the men had to pass by their own

homes, and they broke from the ranks to seize a child or a wife in a last embrace, to snatch a last kiss ; then again the *Schlag* and the lance and they were back in line, quiet for a little while — then singing again. Finally the column disappeared in the station. No one saw them any more, but there could be heard still coming from the station those shouts of defiance, those songs, "*la Brabançonne*" and "*la Marseillaise*". It lasted into the night, then the singing could be heard no more, for suddenly there was the blare of a brass band, the band of one of the regiments, taken there to drown those cries and those patriotic songs under the grotesque gaiety of German military music. Before morning the train had borne them away to Germany.

Brand WITHLOCK

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Marche, Nivelles, Wavre* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XXVIII (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 392-399.
<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>

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>

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