

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XXXVI**. The dying year. Christmas Eve

The year was dying ; the beets had been gathered from the wide lawn at the Orangerie, and it lay a yellow upturned field ; the leafless trees widened the horizon of the sky that hung low and grey over the Low Countries, where the winter days are short and dark and where the cold rain falls almost incessantly. The Allards had returned to their own town house, and the *château* was closed, left in the care of the concierge and the great savage Groenendael, who barked so fiercely in his kennel under the tower. But still we lingered on there ; the Legation had become intolerably depressing. And there is sanity in the country, there is charm in its every mood, even when that mood is melancholy. We looked on the sad countenance of that scene with the consciousness that it was for the last time ; we felt that we should not see the spring come to shut us once more within the green of those lofty trees of the noble park and the grass of those lovely slopes. The guns thumped on unremittingly ; often in the

watches of the night I would listen to their regular throb — like the slow beating of the sad heart of a world that had grown very old, and cynical, and mean, in an age without illusions or ideals.

There were no more smiles in the once all-radiant city, unless, grotesque touch by which the sardonic spirits must mar even tragedy, they were those of the German soldiers in the Bois (de la Cambre) playing at hide-and-seek behind the noble beeches.

The press-gang had not come to Brussels yet. The capital, some said, was being reserved until the last, while others thought that it was to be spared entirely, though one versed by experience in the implacable persistence of German intention knew that the visit was only postponed. In fact, as an official whispered to me one day, it was fixed for a date in January. The terror was perhaps no less and the rage had not abated, but they had grown less acute ; there was in them that pathetic quality of fatalistic acquiescence, and events that once had inspired indignation passed now almost unnoticed, as when the new *contribution de guerre* was forced on the people by a decree of the Governor-General * ; the provincial councils of the

provinces of Antwerp, Brabant, Luxembourg, Liège and Namur having refused to comply with the German order to make the levy.

But there was no diminution in the tales of horror. At Namur, the men who had been seized were herded into cattle cars and left there, without food or water, in the bitter cold, for a day and a night. Mr. Phil Potter, coming up from the north of France, told me that he with his own eyes had seen sixty *chômeurs* who had refused to work tied to stakes, like the victims of Red Indians, their hands fastened behind them with wires ; and they were left there for hours.

At our regular meetings to consider the questions of the *ravitaillement* we discussed little else than the deportations, and we discussed them hopelessly every day, despite the assurances, despite the cards of exemption that had been issued, we had reports that men connected with the C.N. and the C.R.B. had been seized, two hundred and fifty of them in the province of Luxembourg alone. Protests were becoming almost ludicrous. And when we were not discussing the seizures of men we were discussing the seizures of cattle and protesting against that,

for the illicit traders were running them across the frontier at Welkenraedt with more and more impunity. Our protests finally brought a letter from the Germans promising to put an end to the cattle running ; they even made some arrests, but the practice was never wholly stopped, and our concern merged itself ere long in a larger concern to keep the *ravitaillement* in operation at all ...

Bukarest had fallen, the latest disappointment, and, as an evidence of German organization, no sooner was the news announced than men in Brussels who had interests in the Rumanian oil-fields received orders to report at once their holdings to the German officials.

There was sadness everywhere. I have now in my eyes the vision, evoked by a note in my journal, of a woman, the wife of that barber in the Rue Belliard who had been imprisoned in Saint-Gilles for having had in his possession a copy of ***L'Illustration***. The man had been a month in prison, he had served his time and she was expecting him home the next day. But she herself had been fined fifty marks, for complicity, I suppose, in the possession of that pictorial journal which brought them perhaps some hint of home,

for they were French ; that was a grief easily assuaged, and she had gone away, drying her tears ; she and the staring, half-developed boy of hers ; her husband was coming home on the morrow. She was back the next day ; her husband had not been released ; instead, she had a note saying that he was to be taken to Germany. Why, or for what, she did not know ; there was no charge against him, he had had no hearing ; all she knew was that he had been sent away, and had left a note for her, which concluded :

"Courage, et pas de larmes !"

But there were tears a-plenty, soiling the thin face that was twitching in anguish as she sat there in the hall of the Legation, her dumb, half-witted boy with her, the child who stared and stared at a life he could not understand, and perhaps was less miserable so.

"Ayez la grâce, Excellence", the woman said over and over, *"de faire quelque chose pour mon mari !"*

She sat there not knowing what to do, only one of the long train of poor innocent victims of German ruthlessness that had passed through those corridors during those years. She sat quietly

weeping, yet giving after all so much more than she could take away, in the story she told me of the kindness and helpfulness that one finds everywhere among the poor. The day before, during her absence from the rooms she rented, the German *Polizei* had been there to collect the fine of fifty marks, and as she was gone they began to tear up the rooms and to remove the few miserable sticks of furniture. The landlord had pleaded and protested, but, of course, in vain. There was a girl who had a room in the house, a singer in the cheap concert halls, and she, by scraping together all she had, produced the fifty marks. It took her last *sou*, but the insatiable *Polizei* were paid, and the furniture was left. I tried to have the barber released and brought back to Brussels, but the only reply I had from the authorities was that "*a trip to Germany would do him good*" ("*Un voyage en Allemagne lui fera du bien*"). Later I heard the reason for his deportation ; German officers now and then frequented the shop where he was employed. He was French and he made remarks. "*C'est un blagueur*", it was explained to me. And I understood — those German officers and *la blague française*.

The one bit of good news was in the word I had had from Mr. Hoover in London to the reassuring effect that the British Government would not put an end to the *ravitaillement* because of the deportations. "*We have weathered that storm*", he wrote, and the time seemed to be auspicious to attempt to produce some amelioration, and to have sent back to Belgium those who were not *chômeurs*. The President had sent to Berlin a protest against the impressing of workingmen in Belgium, expressing the deep interest the American Government took in the Belgian civil population, and, by some unusual liberality, this protest was allowed to appear in the newspapers at Brussels **, with the response of the General Government.

With this as a basis, and considering the conversation I had had with the Baron von der Lancken in which he had said that the authorities would redress any "*injustices*", as the deportation of those who were not *chômeurs* seemed to be considered even in the German mind, we thought to organize a bureau where requests for repatriation might be filed by the families of those deported ; where there seemed to be some reason that might appeal to the authorities, these might be

forwarded to the Governor-General in the hope that some of them at least might be rescued from the slave compounds in Germany and brought back home. Thousands of requests for such action had come to the Legation and we had been at a loss what to do with them ; thousands, doubtless the same thousands, had been sent to the Spanish and to the Dutch Legations and to the Nunciature, and working thus separately I felt that we should be at cross purposes, and that by the consequent duplication of demands the very end of the work might be frustrated. I undertook then to have the three Legations act in concert, and to establish one bureau where all the requests might be sorted out by clerks and acted upon, but I failed, and there was a Spanish bureau and a Dutch bureau and other bureaus under other neutral flags. We organized a bureau of our own, and the requests were so numerous that I had to rent a house across the street from the Legation and install there a corps of clerks. There were no means of publicity in Belgium, as I trust I have shown, but the news spread and the requests came pouring in, and we did what we could, though the effort proved very ineffective.

Baron von der Lancken had returned from Berlin with the news that at last it had been decided, in principle, that the English women might leave Belgium, but that the matter yet waited the approval of Hindenburg, a bit of information that was not reassuring, for with the eclipse of von Bissing — whose reported opposition to the slave-drive won him no credit in Brussels, since men everywhere said that if he was opposed to it he should have resigned when his objection was overruled — it showed that the German *Reiters* were indeed in the saddle.

Von Bissing himself was very ill, and his wife had been sent for. M. Francqui had gone to Paris by way of Switzerland, spending ten days in quarantine at Frankfurt. At the same time Villalobar went to Berlin for a day or two, and then on to Paris and Madrid, and the rumour of peace spread abroad again. Peace was often talked of in Brussels, and more than once it was intimated that the Germans were disposed to restore Belgium, which they were merely holding, it would be explained, as a "*pawn*"; and the fact that the pawn had been stolen, did not, in the view of the pawnholder, seem in the least to affect his title to it. All that the Germans desired, they would generously

hint, was a "*guarantee*" — though what that guarantee was, was not very clear ; they wished, they said, to be assured against any further attacks from Belgium, and to be certain that Belgium would resume trade relations with them after the war.

Such rumours spread whenever Villalobar left the occupied territory, and were not to be taken much more seriously than other rumours that circulated so prodigiously in the darkness of little Belgium, but late in that month of darkness an event occurred that created something more than a rumour. Christmas was coming on, the season when men's thoughts turned instinctively and of old habit to peace, though the only reason we in Brussels had for being reminded of Christmas was the fact that parties of German soldiers were cutting out firtrees in the Forêt (de Soignes) with which to celebrate the festival that for some odd, satirical reason seemed to mean so much to them about their camp fires.

If peace was not in men's hearts it was in their mouths at least, for in the middle of the month the German Chancellor made his peace speech in the Reichstag ; it was called a peace speech by the Germans, though it was not a peaceful speech,

and was couched in such terms and expressed so much in the usual bellicose German tone that it produced everywhere else in the world a very warlike effect. It was the last, almost desperate effort of the Chancellor to save his Government, then tottering to its fall, from the hands of the military party, but like every other German pronouncement, it was rated in Belgium as but one more piece of insincerity and hypocrisy. In the German camp, however, it was received, like all such pronouncements from on high, as though it were from Mount Sinai itself ; the soldiers supposed that as the War Lord could declare war, so, when wearied of it, he could decree peace. And down on the front in northern France there was an instant celebration of the joyous news. Mr. Prentiss Gray, of the C.R.B., just then back from a visit to Valenciennes, told me of the enthusiastic scenes that had been produced when the Emperor's announcement was read at the head of 200.000 troops ; the soldiers cheered frantically, and that night the officers had a great banquet that lasted until four o'clock in the morning, and around the board, in the rich *Bourgogne* of all the neighboring *châteaux*, the officers toasted peace, and, the night following, they had another drinking bout to *fête* a

report that President Poincaré had been assassinated.

In Brussels, at la Monnaie, *Parsifal* was being sung by the Stuttgart Company, and, as though to bring in an era of good feeling, the Germans were publishing in *Le Bruxellois* what purported to be letters from *chômeurs* in Germany, telling what a happy time they were having there. No one believed for a moment in the authenticity of these letters, or in their sincerity ; they, the people said, were merely scraps of paper of another kind, either fabricated by the Germans or wrung by some sort of blackmail from those confined in the slave compounds in Germany. But there are other cards and letters written from Germany that I know are genuine, and all the more remarkable, for they were submitted to and passed by the German censor. Even their guarded terms show what the men were suffering ; the frequent reference to the presence of "Monsieur G. Fein" seems not to have been seized by the dull minds of the German guards in all its importance as a cryptic allusion to the hunger from which they were all suffering, "G. Fein" being merely a phonetic way of writing the French "*j'ai faim*". ***

The people's thoughts were not, therefore, very long distracted by the talk of peace from the absorbing actuality of those deeds by which Belgians were everywhere being carried off into slavery. But on the evening of December 22 a little note in the *Belgische Kurrier*, a newspaper in the German language then published in Brussels, announced that the President had sent a joint Note to the Powers extending his good offices. It had been for me one of those hard day on which the twilight closed its gloomy curtain ; there had been a long session to discuss the *ravitaillement*, with its interminable complications ; terrible stories of the sufferings of the *chômeurs* ; one woman to ask me to intercede for her husband, just transported to Germany as "*undesirable*" ; another just returned from prison in Hasselt to tell me of her experiences there — the cruelty of one German nurse who seemed to take a malign pleasure in announcing to women that their husbands were to be shot, the kindness of another German nurse who helped her in many ways, the sound of the firing squad in the early morning — "*un coup, net*" she said, with a quick horizontal gesture of her black-gloved hand, and another life gone ; and the awful music of two thousand men singing the "*Lion of Flanders*" —

chômeurs en route to Germany. Then the ***Kurrier*** with its announcement, as I said ; a thrill of new life ran through the town ; had the day come at last when the world could awake from its long nightmare ? Dared one hope ?

The President's Note, though not the full text of it, was published in the Brussels newspapers the next day. One had to be wary of translations — *traduttore traditore* — but the following day we had the full text of the noble document, that was already beginning to suffer from that misunderstanding which was to be its fate, the fate for a while of the pronouncements of all great statesmen of vision who look beyond the present hour.

And yet its influences and its hope lingered in the heart that Christmas Eve. The cold had suddenly abated ; it had been a mild, sunny day, and before tea my wife and I took the dogs and went for a cross-country walk over the fields behind Uccle, by the mill and down the avenue of tall poplars to lovely Droogenbosche (Drogenbos)... In a distant field there was a shepherd and a flock of sheep, their fleece touched to silver by the slanting rays of the sun that was

going down behind the old church. The dogs raced off, of course, to chase the sheep, and I had to run to put them on the leash again. The shepherd's dog, surprised at such foolish commotion, looked up, and the shepherd, without moving, spoke, so softly, so calmly, one word — "*ici !*" and the dog went straight to him and sat down by his side. There was something very significant in it all ; the quiet confidence of the shepherd, wrapped in his cloak, leaning on his crook, his slow, gentle movements, the almost imperceptible advance he made across the field, the flock scattering out behind him, feeding ; then, at a single soft word, gathering about him again. Christmas Eve, and shepherds kept their watch by night, as of old ! We stopped and listened ; even the dogs were silent in that holy peace.

Peace ! ... But there was the dull, distant throb of the guns. And poor humanity, as sheep scattered abroad, having no shepherd !

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>

Translation :

The Provincial Councils

Decree of the Governor-General in Belgium under date December 3, 1916, concerning the execution of the order of November 20, 1916, imposing a contribution of war.

In their extraordinary session of December 2, 1916, the Provincial Councils of the Provinces of Antwerp, of Brabant, of Limbourg, of Liège, and of Namur having refused to co-operate in the settlement of the contribution of war imposed on the Belgian population by the order of November 20, 1916, and the Provincial Council of the Province of Luxembourg having consented to do so only conditionally, the resolution in that regard of the said Councils are annulled in conformity with article 89 of the Provincial Law of April 30, 1836, because they are contrary to general interest.

At the same time the military governors of the Provinces of Brabant, Limbourg, Liège, Luxembourg, and Namur, as well as the military governor of the Province of Antwerp and the Governor of the fortified place of Antwerp, are authorized, in accord with the competent

Presidents of the Civil Administrations (*Präsidenten der Zivilverwaltungen*) to take, for each one of their provinces, the measures hereinafter designated, which shall be obligatory in each of the said provinces :

(1) To conclude jointly with the other provinces the necessary contracts in order to assure for six months the payment of the contribution of war imposed on the Belgian population and payable after December 10, 1916, and if necessary, to contract loans for the same.

(2) To conclude the necessary arrangements in order to assure the payment of the interest and the reimbursement of this loan, as well as the securities for the provincial obligations, falling due on January 15, 1917, and the payment of the interest on the loan for the contribution of war contracted in December, 1915.

(3) To take steps with the German administration so that the sums necessary to pay the interest and the amortization of these loans may be included in the Belgian budget as communal subsidies.

(4) To conclude jointly with the other provinces a loan to cover the expenses of the interest and of

the amortization if a favourable action is not taken on the demand mentioned in paragraph 3.

(5) To sign the necessary documents.

* * *

Decrees of a similar tenor have been issued with regard to the province of East Flanders, another with regard to the Province of Hainaut, the Provincial Councils of which have in their session of December 2, 1916, decided as follows : To refuse the co-operation of the province. These two decrees are signed by the Governor-General in Belgium and the Baron von Falkenhausen, Commander-in-chief of the Sixth Army.

** A translation of the article on the President's note is as follows :

The Transfer of the “*chômeurs*”

The Note of the United States and Germany's Answer

Berlin, December 11.

The *Gazette de l'Allemagne du Nord* publishes the text of the communication sent by the Government of the United States to Berlin regarding the transportation of Belgian workmen to Germany :

"The Government of the United States has learned with distress and with great regret the decision taken by the German Government to force a part of the Belgian civil population to work in Germany. It feels that it must protest in a spirit of friendship, but in the most solemn manner, against such a procedure, which is in contradiction to all tradition and to the principles of humanity which are the foundation of international usage and which are followed at all times by civilized nations in the treatment of non-combatants in occupied territories. The Government of the United States is convinced that the effects of such a policy, if continued, will in all probability be prejudicial to the work, conceived in a spirit of humanity, which has for its object the assistance of the Belgians — a result that would be universally regretted and that might place the German Government in an embarrassing situation."

A response to this note, which was sent to the United States, is given herewith :

"The Government of the United States has protested against the transfer to Germany of Belgian workmen, and the obligation imposed upon them of working there, and is of the opinion that

such measures are not reconcilable with the principles of humanity and of international usage in the treatment of the population in an occupied territory. The German Government feels that the Government of the United States is not sufficiently informed as to the motives for, and the manner of execution of this measure, and for this reason it finds it necessary to set forth the actual state of affairs.

For a long time scarcity of work has prevailed in Belgium to an alarming extent, to the detriment of the industrial workers. The increase in the number of unemployed men there is due to the English blockade, which prevents Belgian industries from importing materials necessary for manufacturing and from exporting manufactured articles, and it is likewise due to this blockade that the cultivation of the land has ceased to a large extent.

All means of gaining a livelihood having been taken away from nearly half of the Belgian factory workers, of which the total number is about 1.200.000, it has been necessary for over half a million Belgians who formerly earned their living in industrial enterprises to seek public assistance. If

one includes the families of the workmen the number is increased threefold — one and one-half million persons, in round numbers. Both from the point of view of Belgian political economy, upon which the unemployed workmen impose an intolerable burden, and from that of order and public morals, the menace of a general cessation of labour, with its consequences, became very grave and it was necessary to take radical steps to put an end to such a condition. This necessity had been for a long time recognized and talked about by clear thinking Belgians.

It was under these conditions that the Governor-General at Brussels issued a decree on the 15th of May, 1916, threatening with imprisonment or forced labour all persons who, while receiving public assistance without sufficient reason, refused to accept employment or continue to work according to their abilities. On account of the cessation of industry in Belgium it has not been found possible to employ all those who were out of work or to find suitable occupations for them. There remained only the alternative of finding work for them in Germany, where already a large number of Belgian workmen had voluntarily sought employment, and where they were perfectly

contented because of the high pay they received and the liberty of movement that was accorded them.

To the chômeurs who refused to follow their example the obligation to work has been presented. This measure conforms in every way to international law, for according to Article 43 of the Convention of The Hague relative to war on land, it devolves upon the occupying Power to maintain order in the occupied territories, and the right is conferred upon it to take the measures necessary to this end in case the laws of the country are not adequate. Now without any doubt the maintenance of public order demands that every measure possible be taken to prevent those persons capable of working from becoming public charges, that idleness should not make of them a veritable plague for the country, and that they should be made to work.

In everything concerning the execution of this measure the procedure has been without severity, and all possible respect has been shown for those concerned. If mistakes have been made in isolated cases in sending persons to Germany, notably in including persons to whom the conditions

mentioned in the decree of the May 15, 1916, are not applicable, this must be attributed to the fact that a number of the Belgian authorities have refused to lend their assistance in preparing the lists of chômeurs or have furnished inexact information. Measures have been taken to remedy errors of this sort as promptly as possible. A careful watch is being kept to see that only those persons are being sent to Germany who are receiving public assistance, and who, not finding work in Belgium, refuse that which is offered to them in Germany. The unemployed transferred to Germany are sent to points of concentration established at Alten Grabow, Guben, Cassel, Meschede, Münster, Soldau (**Note**) and Wittenberg, near the regions where there is work for them, whether it be in agricultural or in industrial enterprises. The classes of labour in which an enemy population cannot be forced to work, by virtue of the rights of people, are evidently here excluded.

If the American Government considers it worth while, a delegate from its Embassy at Berlin will be authorized to examine, by a personal visit, the condition of the persons concerned. The German Government infinitely regrets that owing to the

misrepresentations in the enemy Press the situation has been so completely distorted in the United States. At the same time it regrets, especially in the interest of the Belgian population, that these misrepresentations should prejudice in any manner the beneficial work of the Relief Commission.

And finally, the German Government cannot restrain itself from drawing attention to the fact that the transfer of the German population in places outside of Germany and in its colonies occupied by enemy troops, notably the evacuation of women, children and aged persons from Prussian colonies in Siberia, has not inspired the neutral States, as far as it knows, with the idea of taking toward the Government concerned steps similar to those actually taken toward the German Government. There cannot be the slightest doubt that these measures constitute a gross violation of the laws of humanity and of the rights of people, while the measures explained above which have been taken by Germany conform absolutely to these principles."

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