

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XXXVII**. Herman Bulle / Hermancito.

My wife had invited the men of the C.R.B. to the Orangerie for Christmas afternoon at tea-time, and she asked Hermancito, whose kindness was so constantly at the disposal of every one, to let her know for how many she would have to prepare. She had had a note from him on Christmas Eve telling her of the approximate number, though he could not be quite sure, for they had not all as yet come in from the provinces. "*I can be certain of but one thing*", he had written, "*and that is that I shall be there, the first to arrive.*"

They came, a host of them, and by some tacit recognition of the season they would not speak of all the heart-rending scenes they had been witnessing, but talked of other things, of America principally, and of Christmas at home. There were laughing groups in the salon and in the dining-room, and after a while some one said :

"*Where is Bulle ?*"

No one had seen him that day ... The talk and the laughter went on.

"*Where is Hermancito ?*" I asked each newcomer — but no one knew. Then some one came, late ; there was a whisper, then a hush, and

silence. Bulle was very ill, taken suddenly on Christmas Eve ...

My wife and I went to see him the next morning at his home in the Rue Joseph II. The Mexican flag which he had kept bravely flying was on the staff. It was still within. The concierge whispered with me in the hall ; he must be kept very quiet. Christmas Eve he had dined at Baron Lambert's ; he had walked homeward along the Boulevard with Count van der Straaten Ponthos, of the Belgian Foreign Office, and at the corner of the Rue Joseph II the Count had suddenly noticed an incoherence in his speech. He got him home ; they put him to bed, and now his life was hanging by a slender thread ... Two days later he was dead.

"*La belle humeur*", says an old French proverb, "*est une des plus jolies formes du courage*". Hermancito had good-humour, and he had courage, too, such Spartan courage as it is the fortune of few to possess. He had seen his career broken just when it was coming to fruition, and at first, without resources, with his country in agony, its government in collapse, he was starting off to America to become an American citizen and to begin life anew, when I thought of him for the *ravitaillement*. He filled a delicate position in that important work with such entire acceptability that every one was delighted, and he was a favourite with all the men. He was the sort of favourite with whom every one takes affectionate liberties. When

the American expedition was sent to Mexico he was as delighted as anybody ; he had always said that he looked to America to restore order there, and when, in the etiquette of belligerency, which the young men of the C.R.B. had so many opportunities of studying, they pretended for a day that they must not recognize him or take his hand, he told me of it with that infectious laughter he had for every amusing circumstance in a life that latterly had not been amusing for him. He had served at Madrid, at Vienna, at London, at Washington, and he was full of good reminiscence. Nothing amused him more, however, than the office-boy at the C.R.B. He was the son of an American woman who had married a German baron, long since dead ; but the boy was Baron, too, and the young Americans of the C.R.B. had a constant and inexhaustible delight in saying :

"Baron, get me a match", or "Baron, my hat."

But we, all of us, called on Bulle oftener than on any baron for many services, and there seemed to be nothing he could not do. Many a delicate mission he accomplished for me, many a little tangle he unravelled, many a little miracle he wrought for which I guiltily accepted the gratitude of some one in trouble.

And all that time he had been mortally ill. He referred to it in talking with me just once, and then almost casually, and never mentioned it again. There are not many men with that indomitable

courage, and I should like to pay my tribute to it, and to him, who was a true and loyal and unselfish friend in a world where, as one learns more and more as one lives on in it, friends are rare, and hard to get, and harder still to keep.

We buried him on a cold, dark winter morning, the last but one in the old year. In his little house in the Rue Joseph II he lay under flowers and the Mexican flag, in a room all black, amid the bewildering crackling of candles, with the concierge's two little children behind a curtain in the hall, broken-heartedly sobbing over the friend they had lost. Bulle's father and mother were in London, but a sister had come, and Señor Bestegue, who had been Mexican Minister at Berlin, was there to represent his prostrate nation. But in the streets outside there was, I thought, every one I knew in Brussels ; members of the Belgian Government who were left in the town, the remnants of the diplomatic corps, representatives of the C.N. and the C.R.B., and a half dozen German officers. For one morning the war and its divisions were laid aside ; for one morning even Belgians and Germans could meet in the community of affection and respect that one simple, modest, obscure life could inspire, and in the commonalty of sorrow that that kindly nature had left this earth. We followed the hearse on foot, a great crowd in black, to the church of Saint-Josse at the bottom of the Rue des deux Eglises. There,

amid the tolling bells, with the chant of a single voice in the choir, while an old priest was celebrating the Mass – strange expression of this strange life of ours ! – a wedding was going on at the same moment before another altar in the vast and gloomy pile.

Every one that knew him loved Herman Bulle, though not every one knew how brave and strong a man he was. For not every one knows – very few indeed, in this torn and distracted world know –, that gentleness is the one great force.

Brand WITHLOCK

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Herman Bulle* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XXX (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 403-405.

<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