

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

**Brand WHITLOCK**

### Chapter **XXXVIII**. The coming change.

There is an amiable custom in Belgium of observing two holidays where one is noted on the calendar ; a frank recognition, I suppose, prompted by universal experience, of the fact that one good holiday deserves another in order that one may recover from its effects. The day after Christmas, when all the town was closed and wore the air, if not of a holiday, at least of a *dimanche*, as the Belgians call all their holidays, an event happened that created something like a panic in our midst. We had word from Liège to the effect that the Germans had posted an *affiche* announcing that because of the evil deeds of England the *ravitaillement* was discontinued, the Comité National dissolved, the functions of the Commission for Relief suspended, and that the feeding of the population would thenceforward be carried on under German authority. The *affiche*, with German thoroughness, contained a long series of paragraphs directing in the minutest detail just how the work should be done. I made inquiry at once and after they had telephoned from the *Politische Abteilung* to Liège, where the Geheimrath Kauffmann was then Civil Governor,

the authorities reported to me that it was all a mistake, that the orders had been prepared to be used only in a certain eventuality, and that by a blunder they had been published, and then only in one commune, that of Saint Nicolas. The incident's only importance, then, after we had recovered from the shock it caused us and were breathing freely again, lay in the testimony it gave to German foresight ; there was no exigency which the German mind could imagine for which it was not prepared.

The old year died to the infernal chorus of the cannon, and the new was introduced by the Allies' response to the peace proposals, which gave little hope of peace, and we turned again to the endless round of our familiar difficulties. There was a phenomenon noted throughout the war ; with the coming on of winter what, in those scientific terms which the least scientific of us like to employ, was called the "*curve of peace*" was rising ; it went steadily up, and then in January it dropped to zero once more, ready to begin its slow and painful gradation upward with the hopes of a weary and disheartened world.

In a long conversation with Baron von der Lancken on New Year's Day I told him again of the universal reprobation excited by the deportation of the working men, and he said that the policy was to be abandoned, though gradually, so that the adversaries of Germany could not say that it had

been given up under pressure. I had had a despatch from Washington saying that the interest in the revolting procedure was "*inconceivable*" in America, as well it might be, and I was glad to be able to say in the report I was then preparing that there were indications that it was to be discontinued. It was not discontinued just then, however, and it has not been wholly discontinued since, despite announcements by the German Government giving an official tenor to what Lancken had told me as gossip behind the scenes. The Germans were just then preparing the levy that was to be made at Malines on January 4, and Lancken told me that if I desired I might send a representative of the Legation to witness the scene. I told him that I should not officially send a representative or be in any way identified with the proceeding, but that if he could go as a mere spectator I should permit Christian Herter, an *attaché*, detailed for a while from the Embassy at Berlin to assist us in the Legation, to look on. Lancken agreed, and going himself to witness the seizures took Herter as his guest. Herter was a young man just out of Harvard and animated with all the enthusiasm of an intelligent liberalism, and he returned from Malines, after a day spent in the cold, full of the horror of the scenes he had witnessed. They were no different from the scenes that were being enacted in that sombre tragedy all over Belgium, and I have already described them

to such an extent that it would be merely piling horror on horror to repeat them, but they were made all the more, odious in Herter's eyes by the fact that the officers in charge, evidently because a neutral representative was present, tried to invest their cruelties with a solicitude that only deepened the young man's disgust. They asked him to taste the soup provided for the poor fellows they were enslaving, and as he was in the act, his tall, slender form bent over the steaming kettle, they snapped cameras at him, until he had disturbing visions of himself appearing in illustrated weeklies as an approving witness of the gentleness and propriety of German methods.

The Germans complained to me afterwards that he had not been "correct" — because he had protested against this photographing, and because he had asked some embarrassing questions during the arbitrary division of the men into *links* and *rechts* ; but then the Germans were always protesting, as though on principle, against the action of some one connected with the American Legation, and two years and a half of this mild form of frightfulness had hardened me and left me indifferent.

I had my usual daily stream of callers, each with his individual trouble, or danger, or despair. I had not been out of the city for a year any farther than Malines or Mariemont, and the want of change of air and of scene had had the worst

effect on my health. But a change was coming ; we had many premonitions of it, though we did not know just how soon it would be upon us ...

In the meantime, however, those days had to be lived, and they brought in a kind of monotony the same troubles with each morning. I remember an Englishman, a resident of Brussels, sixty-eight years of age, who forty-two years before had resigned a commission in the English Territorial forces. Hearing of this, the Germans classified him as an officer in the English Army and ordered him deported to Germany. He came to ask my aid, concerned for the wife he would have to leave.

*"If I go", he said pathetically, "I shall never see her again."*

He did not say it with any sense of pathos, or to be pathetic ; he was very calm, very British. I put in a plea for him, and two days later he was there again ; he had been ordered to report that night at ten o'clock. It meant, he thought — and rightly — Germany and Ruhleben the next morning.

*"Is there any hope for me ?" he asked.*

There was something touching to me in this elderly Englishman standing there, with such a cruel fate hanging over him, sixty-eight, and ill, long a resident of Brussels in that exile which so many Englishmen had known in the old city. I got up at once and went to Lancken, and after I had talked for a while he promised me, as a personal

favour, he said, that the man would not be deported.

The next morning the Englishman came to the Legation again ; he did not look sixty-eight that morning ; he was much younger in the joy he tried to hide, as he had tried to hide his pain. He had gone, as ordered, to the Kommandantur the night before at ten o'clock, trembling, fearing, and a German in broken French had said :

*"Pas aller en Allemagne ! Vous avez des amis ! Vous êtes libre ! A la maison !"*

There was another caller on those days, a funny little Frenchman with a wizened, dwarfish face, who said that he was pastor of a mission in Brussels ; he belonged to some evangelical sect that had its headquarters in Cincinnati, which was so near my home that I took an unusual interest in him, though he had never been to Cincinnati and accepted it all on faith. He had been haled before the German tribunals on a charge of having read to his congregation anti-German literature, as all propagandists call their printed matter. He was fifty years old, but, as though the fact might testify to the wider experience of a still more advanced age, he explained that he had a wife who was seventy-one. I told him that as he was French he should go to Villalobar, who had charge of French interests, but no, he said, he was pastor of an American church and would place himself under the American aegis. I told him that, as was the case

with Paul and the Germans of his day, the Germans had power only over his physical, and not his spiritual body, and that therefore he must go to the Spanish Legation. He laughed and did so, but I did what I could to aid him, and he did not suffer.

There were not many of my visitors who could laugh at any phase of their predicaments. There was an old man who had read that morning in the Dutch newspapers that his son had fallen on the Belgian front ; those outside sometimes communicated with those inside by inserting advertisements in the Rotterdam dailies, and there was nothing that I or anybody could do to aid this man in his trouble.

Then one evening just at tea-time who should appear, to our joy, but Vernon Kellogg, back in Belgium on a mission for the north of France. He had got as far as London on his homeward way, and there Mr. Hoover had prevailed on him to remain and to undertake another of those errands with which he was always so successful. He had been to Paris and to Havre, and reported that M. Francqui and Mr. Hoover had solved their problems, and that Mr. Hoover had gone to America to arrange a loan to carry on the *ravitaillement*, which had long since outgrown the charity on which it had once lived. Then M. Francqui returned, and the next day Villalobar, with the news of the world outside, and the Grand

Cordon de Saint-Grégoire le Grand, which the Pope had given him. Baron von der Lancken returned, too, from Berlin, and when I saw him at luncheon at the Marquis's house he said in the course of our gossip, first, that he had been unable to arrange for the train for the English women because of the hatred of everything English at Berlin, and then that the effect of the response of the Allied Governments to the President's Note on peace had been to strengthen the military party, who were just then *pour la guerre à outrance*. He hoped, he said, that the submarine warfare would not be renewed, but that Berlin thought America would not go to war if it was. I changed the subject, but from that moment whatever doubts I may have had were dispelled and I knew what was before us.

The German Chancellor might cynically refer to Belgium as a "*pawn*" in the "imperial", hands, but to us, who saw it all and lived it, she was a suffering, sentient being, quivering and bleeding under hoof and pistol butt. Von Bissing, sick at Wiesbaden, was practically eliminated, and the military were having their own way unmolested. They had ordered all the copper seized, and Belgian housewives, proud of their shining *batteries de cuisine*, were in tears at the thought of losing their precious heirlooms ; all walnut-trees and poplar-trees were ordered cut down — the lovely tall poplars that are, or were, so characteristic a mark of the landscape of Brabant.



We ourselves had the visit at the Orangerie of a bandy-legged German, long a resident of Brussels, and then serving his country as a member of the Secret Police ; he came stalking into the house and began shouting uncouth orders to me to fell the two poplar-trees that formed so charming a part of the skyline at the bottom of our lawn, and when, as who should say "*Woodman, spare that tree*", I began to protest, he interrupted me and said in his miserable guttural French that I had nothing to do but to obey. I could have brained him where he stood — so promptly do evil communications corrupt good manners — and when I mentioned the *Politische Abteilung* and the exemptions it had ordered, he said he cared nothing for the *Politische Abteilung*. I got him out of the house at last, and was angry for an hour afterward. I saved the trees, or von Moltke kindly saved them for me, but I had a slight, a very slight experience of what every household in Belgium endured during those evil times.

Brand WITHLOCK

### Footnotes.

French translation : « *Un changement se prépare* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XXXI (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 405-408.

<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](http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de%20guerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf)