BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1917)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE **2**

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XLII**. **Problems of position.**

A difficult position.

The cold weather moderated, and under the more characteristic downpour of rain Brussels might have worn its normal external air were it not for the fact that the complexion of the world about us is but the reflection of our own. I had not known, even in Belgium, such days of black care and anxiety. The whole question of my own unpleasant position aside, I was almost desperately concerned over the fate of the *ravitaillement* and weighed by my responsibility for the safety of those forty or fifty men of the C.R.B. I had asked for written assurances that they could leave the country at any time without molestation, and while these were promised they were not forthcoming ; oral assurances, it is true, had been given at the *Politische Abteilung* and at the *Vermittlungsstellen* but — with the Germans one never knew ; from every interview with them, even when the most express and formal understanding and agreement had been reached, one came away with an uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty, wondering if, after all.

Brussels just then of course could not have been normal in any event or in any weather. Gradually during those months and years the physiognomy of the city had changed, like the slow and for a long while imperceptible ravages made by some disease on the visage of a friend. The town, once so gay and blithe and charming, had grown gradually sadder ; now it seemed morose. We walked or drove about as of old, avid of last glimpses of the scenes we loved ; in the Grand'Place on Ash Wednesday, where the women of the flower market through all vicissitudes had clung somehow to their trade, the colours did not seem so bright. The woman whom we patronized was seated in the fog and rain beside great masses of white and mauve lilacs, and her smile was only a polite adumbration of what it once had been. She used to be so buxom, so lively, so gay, so full of instant repartee ! One day early in the war as de Leval and I, loitering in the Grand'Place, had noted a great Flemish brooch at her throat, and, recalling the visit of the German Emperor and Empress to Brussels, on which occasion the Empress had economically given a breast pin to one of the delegation of flower women who came to present her flowers, de Leval had asked :

"*Est-ce la médaille que l'Impératrice d'Allemagne vous a décernée ?*"

And the flower woman had retorted, in the sing-song tone that marks the true Brussels accent:

"*Humph ! Si elle m'avait donné quoi que ce soit il y a longtemps que je le lui aurait renvoyé, et moi avec deux frères à l'armée belge !*"

Now she was gay no more, but sad, depressed, and her hollow cough echoed all over the Square.

The shops were closed, the people were in rags, the lines at the soup kitchens trailed their squalid miseries farther and farther down the street; the doors of the *ouvroirs*, those posts of charity where sewing was given out, were besieged by throngs of pale and patient women. The Germans had left their mark on everything in the city ; its physical grace and beauty had been marred by the signs in German which they had put up at all the *aubettes* ; only German newspapers and German books were sold there then, and illustrated journals with their crude and brutal cartoons with never a touch of humour, in which they were then caricaturing the President and Mr. Taft and Colonel Roosevelt. The city was crowded with soldiers *en route* for an impending butchery, being sent to the shambles like the cattle that went lowing down the Rue Belliard. And there were officers, pink and fat, racing by in motors, or insolently swaggering along the boulevard with an arrogance that had all the vulgarity of the *parvenu*,

consciously acting parts in the inveterate *cabotinage* of the military. It was even rumoured that Brussels was to be placed in the *Etape*.

There was still no coal to be had, and because of the lack of it the schools were closed… One of the common sights in Brussels during the severe cold weather was the long line of great rumbling carts filled with coal, jolting heavily along the Rue Belliard. The carts were guarded by German soldiers, for the coal was being put to German uses. But running behind there was always a bevy of little children with baskets picking up the lumps that fell from the carts. Usually the German soldiers paid no attention to them, but one afternoon from my window I saw a soldier seize some lumps of coal from his cart ; I thought he was going to give them to the children, but instead he threw them viciously at a little girl, who ran away in terror and cowered in a doorway ; the soldier leaped down from his cart and caught the little girl, and the little boy with her, and soundly cuffed them both.

We hesitated often to go to see our friends ; with such a spy system as prevailed in Brussels, we could only draw suspicion on them, perhaps involve them in difficulties after we had gone. And yet our friends came to see us ; they came indeed in great numbers, especially after that blunder of a servant who promptly began distributing the "p.p.c." cards I had ordered prepared, to have

them ready for the emergency that might come at any moment. They came in a kind of panic, and were relieved when they learned that the Americans were not gone.

In certain of my wanderings, in my favourite bookstalls, some of the antiquarians and shops along the Montagne de la Cour, I would be implored by the people to say that it was not true that we were going ; for the report had got abroad that we were to remain, and the city was partially reassured that the *ravitaillement* was not going to collapse. And I knew that it was only a postponement ; I had not the heart to tell them. Our trunks were indeed all packed, and in our normal attitude of sitting on our boxes ; there was no official work to do after we had finished all the accounting and turned over the representation of British interests to the Dutch Legation, and that of Japanese, Servian, Danish and Lichtenstein interests to the Marquis of Villalobar. I had formally transferred to him as well the representation and protection of American interests, and the flag was no longer on the staff.

Cavalcanti, too, was wandering aimlessly about in the rain those days, and his belongings were packed as well, for he expected Brazil to follow soon in the way of honour America had set. And Shu Tze, the Secretary of the Chinese Legation, came to see me ; he had a despatch from Peking, all very confidential, saying that China

likewise would follow America's example and break off diplomatic relations with Germans ; the Chinese wished to go with me when I went, and to do in all things as I did — another expression of the confidence that China has in America as a result of John Hay's honest diplomacy.

And new problems had arisen, with myriad new complications ; first of all there was the problem, vital in the circumstances, as to how the ships were to get through the submarine zone to Rotterdam. Nothing could be done until that *route* had been agreed upon, and to bring the German Government and the British Government into harmony on this essential point was more than difficult. Lancken had been to Berlin several times, and he came back on Washington's Birthday reporting that the German Government had refused to yield the point. There was another and ancillary problem ; there were eighty-five thousand tons of food stuffs belonging to the C.R.B. in English ports, waiting on this decision ; the Germans refused to give these ships safe conduct across the North Sea, and the British were threatening to unload the ships and seize the food. When we told the Germans that they were foolish not to allow this food to cross the infested seas there were only shrugs of shoulders and :

"*Ce sont les militaires !*"

The only suggestion they could offer was that the eighty-five thousand tons be shipped to

Holland in the regular Dutch packets that plied the North Sea, a task that would have taken years.

Alternatives were proposed ; that the whole work of the C.R.B. be turned over to the Dutch Government ; that it be turned over to the Swiss Government ; that a new inter-Allied commission be formed ; and to each of these there was some insuperable obstacle or objection, inherent in the delicacies of the situation. And so, argument and discussion, and telegrams and cablegrams for days and days, interminable, and no conclusion — the solution would not precipitate, and my own position was intolerable and beyond definition.

"*Vous restez donc comme — chose ?* " said the Nonce one day, sitting there in his black and violet, with the vaguest of notions of how the whole matter stood.

"*Oui*", I replied, "*comme chose*".

Brand WITHLOCK

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Une position difficile* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre IV (1917) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 427-430.

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