

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1917)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XLV. Spring.

Rags and old bones.

And while all this was going on we watched the spring come once more to Belgium, with pale, melancholy days that would have seemed wholly without hope had it not been for the thought that the great Republic in the West was organizing a newer and larger Commission for Relief in Belgium. Our trunks and boxes were all packed and we were ready to leave on a moment's notice, and yet we lived on, as we had lived so long, and had we but known were destined still to live, *sur la branche*.

"Shall we have war ?" said Count von Gersky when I encountered him one morning in the Montagne de la Cour.

I answered his question with a diplomatic shrug of the shoulders and as careless an "As you please" as I could command ... Count von Gersky was what might have been called an *officier de liaison* between the General Staff in the north of France and the C.R.B. in its work in that region, and he had rendered loyal service to the cause. Mr. Hoover and Dr. Kellogg had always spoken of

him with respect. He was a big, fine-looking man who, after his twelve years' residence in London, wore a monocle and had a manner that was distinctly English. He was smiling and pleasant.

We talked a while there in the street ; the Count said that if we were to abandon the *ravitaillement*, or not contrive somehow to keep it going, the people in the north of France would have to starve, for the Germans had only enough food for themselves.

And the people of Belgium were in the same plight. Just then down at the Gare du Luxembourg there were daily long lines of women surrendering up to the Germans their copper batteries, those pots and kettles which they had polished through so many years, which had been furbished and polished by their mothers and grand-mothers before them, to make shining masses of gold in Flemish kitchens, taken from them now to be made into munitions of war with which to kill the husbands and brothers of those women. In the Bois (**Note** : de la Cambre), where the bright new greens were stealing, there were no smart equipages, no bright toilettes any more, no ladies and gentlemen riding spirited horses, and no lovers courting there ; only ragged men in broken sabots, and children, their fingers blue with cold, picking up twigs to make a little fire at home.

One morning coming back from the Bois along the avenue Louise, there near the Place

Stéphanie, I met de Sinçay who remarked, almost casually :

"The Tsar has abdicated ; the Grand Duke Nicholas Alexandrovitch is regent ; there will be a constitutional Government."

We stood there and discussed the historical event, the latest of all the prodigious sequels to the French Revolution, in that almost indifferent calm which historical events had bred in us ... How the world had changed ! Revolutions, the fall of dynasties, the crash of empires, these were but stuff for small talk. An event had to be either very immense or very small to interest us. One heard a big story, as the journalists say, every hour or two, and yet, strange and inscrutable irony in things, the very moment in which there was so much news was the one in which censors appeared and a shortage of that paper on which the journalists would have loved to print it all !

I walked on, thinking of revolutions ; would they come everywhere after the war, as so many were saying ! "*Gare à la démocratie après la guerre !*" exclaimed, one evening after dinner, a man who did not much believe in democracy, shaking a warning finger at the company. Every one, since the war began, had been predicting a revolution in Germany, but it had not come, nor would it, said I to myself — unless the Government ordered it ... There they went, those men in field grey, with the sheer occiputs and narrow craniums,

têtes carrées, their ears thrust out like those of fauns, under their little round skull-caps, trudging along the boulevard with stupid, docile, bovine expressions. There was no spirit, no revolt in them; theirs was the only country that had not, at some time in its history, had a revolution — not that revolutions in and of themselves were always good things, but they did at least show spirit and independence. All good countries had had them, as all good dogs have had the distemper ; they had only a little *échauffourée* in 1848, immediately put down. They were tame, doubly mastered and enslaved, yet capable of monstrous brutalities and sanguinary cruelties on the weak — unarmed civilians, women, and children.

I think we talked more of the retreat of the German army in the north of France than of any other contemporary event, though no one was quite sure it was a retreat. Brussels insisted that it was, because Brussels liked to think of it as a retreat, but the only results noted were the hordes of refugees from evacuated villages in the north of France who came pouring into the Hainaut. They had fled on two hours' notice in fear and terror, leaving their homes, which were in flames before they could pause for a last look at them. They were streaming into Charleroi with bleeding feet, grandfathers and grandmothers bearing frightened children with wild, haunted, haggard eyes. Mr. Gregory told me that there were fifty thousand of

them, another vast Hegira of that civilian population that was scattered in tribal wanderings by the besom of destruction. The Belgian villagers received them with Belgian hospitality ; villages of only five hundred inhabitants found means of lodging a thousand, and the C.R.B. fed them. And the vast armies swayed back and forth in that unending struggle.

And yet life went on, in some of its aspects quite normal ; M. Francqui was married during that month, as was his lieutenant, M. Emmanuel Janssen, and we all went to the ceremony in the Eglise de Sainte-Croix, near the Etangs d'Ixelles, one bright spring morning. But the wedding over, the sun, as though it had appeared for that event alone, went under the grey clouds and it was almost winter again, with the cold, the *giboulées de mars*, though when the 21st, the first day of spring, came, and the ground was all covered with snow, a charming thing befell. In ***Le Quotidien***, one of the censored sheets (**Note**), there appeared a little article that filled Brussels with amazement and delight, and in the immense monotony of stupendous events gave us a theme for conversation far more lively and interesting than battles and revolutions. It was this :

*Lui ...**

Le printemps n'est pas encore là, en dépit de la date fatidique du 21 mars. Une ou deux fois déjà nos espoirs ont été trompés. Qu'importe ? ... L'astronomie est une science exacte, et il est des certitudes mathématiques.

Son retour à Lui aussi est écrit au cadran éternel des temps, et lorsqu'il fera son entrée triomphale dans sa bonne ville de Bruxelles, de l'avoir entendu si longtemps, si impatientement, notre joie sera plus grande encore. Ce sera la fête du soleil, la fête des fleurs, et l'âme de tout un peuple communiera avec Lui ...

What unknown writer in that meretricious inspired Press had still the patriotism in his soul to write a little poem so cleverly that the German censor never saw the allusion that made all Brussels for the moment happy by its pretty conceit, and buoyed up the hope and reaffirmed that faith, of which there was imperative need if man was to continue to believe in justice in the universe, in the inevitable coming of that day when the King would return ? Whoever he was, he had his secret satisfaction, atoning somewhat for the treason his necessities tempted him to commit in writing for that Press at all, and the literal, unimaginative German censor never suspected until the spies, listening at every key hole in town, got some inkling of the fact that it was an *articulet à double entente*, and when it was at last explained to the censor the newspaper was suspended for its audacity.

But the spring was as tardy as the victory, the smiles faded, and the people in the dismal streets wore again the old moody, preoccupied expression of sadness.

"*Vodden en beenen !*" called the old woman in her shrill pipe down the Rue de Trèves every morning under my window. Ah, yes ! Rags and old bones ! To this had German materialism brought down a world that once was lovely in the springtime and full of new hope each morning.

Brand WITHLOCK

Translation

*Him ... **

Spring is not yet here, despite the fatidical date of the 21st March. Once or twice already our hopes have been disappointed. What matter ? ... Astronomy is an exact science, and it is mathematically certain.

His return also is written on the eternal dial of time, and when he makes his triumphal entry into his good city of Brussels, after having waited so long, so impatiently, our joy will be all the greater. That will be the feast of the sun, the feast of the flowers, and the soul of a whole people will commune with Him ...

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Printemps* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre VII (1917) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 437-440.

<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

About, **censored sheets** read :

Roberto J. **Payró** ; « *Los alemanes en Bélgica. La prensa durante la Ocupación* », in **La Nación** ; 13/06/1919. Original Spanish-speaking text. Ver :

[http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/PAYRO%20PR
ENSA%20DURANTE%20OCUPACION%2019190
613.pdf](http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/PAYRO%20PR
ENSA%20DURANTE%20OCUPACION%2019190
613.pdf)

French Translation :

Roberto J. **Payró** ; « *Les Allemands en Belgique. La presse durant l'Occupation* » :

[http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/PAYRO%20PR
ENSA%20DURANTE%20OCUPACION%20FR%2
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