

# **BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1917)**

## **A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2**

**Brand WHITLOCK**

### **Chapter XLVI. War at last.**

#### **Instructions to depart.**

Such was the ambient element of our life during those strange days of waiting and of worry, while that fatal ankylosis perpetuated the uncertainty in the reorganization of the *ravitaillement*. It had been plain, I think, to most of us, that with Germany and America at war, the Americans, even if they desired, could not remain long in Belgium, travelling about at their will and pleasure, inspecting the distribution of food and reporting on German interferences and abuses. But there were some who clung to the illusion that it might be, and clung to it almost to the last, and no argument seemed powerful enough to shake their fatal infatuation.

It is not a safe rule to go by, and I should hesitate to recommend it to any one, but there are moments of complication in life when it seems that there is but one thing to do, and that is to sit down and wait, in the hope, too often illusory and vain, that opposing tendencies by their mutual reaction will neutralize their own contradictions. The wires that lay under three thousand miles of troubled

seas seemed for awhile to be as hopelessly crossed and entangled as the purposes they were endeavoring to harmonize. I shall not set myself the tiresome and tedious task of describing how our problem was complicated by their conflicting expressions, oftentimes ludicrous enough to laugh at had we not been so worn by the nervous strain that we felt like weeping over them.

And so all the while, as in almost endless and futile conferences the matter was discussed, over and over, in a hopeless, vicious circle, and the two nations were drifting into the inevitable clash of war, Mr. Gregory and I could only continue to urge that provision be made for replacing the Americans.

Our meetings once so interesting, had become dull ; the break in diplomatic relations, the coming separation, the impending change, the uncertainty as to the future, the ever-present thought that we were gathered perhaps for the last time, dispirited and discouraged us all, and the weariness of the long strain was apparent in every one. M. Francqui seemed to have no more of those jokes, those flashes of wit that had once enlivened us and kept up our spirits. We discussed the reports of abuses, heard that cattle were still being shipped in hundreds, had private information that the authorities were powerless to prevent it — but these things, once so momentous in the trouble they occasioned, seemed now to be small in

comparison with the larger problems. There were utter weariness, long pauses, and silences.

"*Well, my dear Minister*", said Baron Lambert, rising one day after we had been in discussion for an hour, "*I have a feeling that some one should be the first to go, and I'll be that one.*"

Mr. Gregory produced some effect by his announcement, early in March, that in the event of war he felt that all the Americans should leave at once.

"*I know that I shall*", he said. "*In war a civilian's place is in his own country, or at least not in the enemy's country — if he can avoid it.*"

But would he be able to avoid it, and would all those other Americans be able to avoid it, if we did nothing ?

I urged again and again that the Dutch and Spanish delegates be brought in and distributed over Belgium. Villalobar had approved, as had van Vollenhoven, but Holland was nearer Belgium than Spain, and Dutchmen more accessible than Spaniards, and the Marquis could not so easily or so promptly produce his own countrymen. It is not, I trust, too chauvinistic to say that it was not easy to find men of the character of those who had served as volunteers in the Commission for Relief in Belgium. As the Marquis himself once remarked, they were gentlemen and business men. Gentlemen could be found elsewhere, and business men as well, "*but*", said the Marquis, "*the*

*gentlemen are not always business men and the business men are not always gentlemen !"*

Then we had what was always to me good news — Kellogg was coming and we decided to postpone our discussion until he arrived. I had not as yet sent any answer to von der Lancken's letter; I had been hoping that we could reach some solution that would enable me to write definitely, but I could leave it no longer unanswered, and I sent my temporizing reply.\*

And then, like a thunderbolt, came the exposure in America of Zimmermann's plot in Mexico, with its generous offer to Mexico of the States of Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico if she would go to war with America. Nothing in the whole course of the war had more accurately revealed the German mentality, and at the *Politische Abteilung* there was real chagrin, if not at the miserable trick at least at the disclosure of it, and Villalobar, chaffing them there about it, said :

*"Quand on veut faire ces choses-là, il faut savoir les faire."*

The news reached us just as we were waiting for the President's second inaugural and were beginning to hear rumours of an extraordinary session of Congress, and we could imagine how the revelation would act on national sentiment at such a time. The German newspapers were sputtering with splenetic rage over the exposure of the plot, and complaining of the President, saying

that it was unfair of him to expose Zimmermann ; and we suffered the reaction of all this feeling.

And I was more than ever anxious to get the C.R.B. men out of Belgium, for when Kellogg came, having crossed from Harwich to the Hook of Holland in a despatch boat, convoyed by destroyers, he brought news that because of the *lourde gaffe* war was inevitable and would come within a fortnight. My long residence in Belgium under German rule had taught me what they might expect when that two weeks had expired ; I had constant visions of their being deported to Ruhleben, or some such place.

In the many conferences that followed I urged again and again the one possible solution which under the circumstances would insure the continuance of the *ravitaillement* — the replacement of the American delegates by Dutchmen and Spaniards, and at last the plan was endorsed by Mr. Hoover and assented to by all. The agreement came when we were almost in despair. The Germans had not yet given the promised guarantees for the immunity of the men of the C.R.B. , and were threatening to hold them in quarantine at Spa, or at Baden-Baden, or somewhere in Germany, and Kellogg hurried out through the closed frontier with our plan, and Mr. Gregory arranged to substitute the new delegates as soon as they came in. Even then there were more difficulties and delays ; the proportion of

Spaniards to Dutch was of long discussion, and Kellogg stopped in Holland until this problem could be solved.

I had little notion of what interest the world outside was taking in us until one day Dr. Reith sent to me to ask that in view of the alarming rumours that were being published, I give a statement to be telegraphed to American newspapers testifying that the Germans had done nothing inimical to the interests of the C.R.B. men and their work. I replied that it would be time enough to give such a statement when we had the promised assurances, and we got them then in writing, but they provided that before they could be released the men of the C.R.B. should be held in quarantine for a month ! Inasmuch as the situation in its then unsettled state seemed likely to endure that long, Mr. Gregory and I asked the Germans to let the men pass this period of purification in Brussels, where they were then assembled waiting anxiously from day to day some news as to their fate ; we pointed out that in all civilized countries some allowance was made, even in the case of criminals, for the period they had passed in gaol awaiting trial, and Lancken agreed that this be done, in the case of the delegates in Belgium, at least ; and a few days later we induced them to reduce by a fortnight the duration of the quarantine.

Then I found that I had another problem on my hands, a problem growing out of the situation of the Chinese, depicted for me by Tchao Itao, the Chinese *chargé*, and Shu Tze, the Secretary of the Legation, who came one day for advice. When their Minister, M. Ouang, had gone away in the summer he had left behind a little son, a boy of six; they had asked for passports for the boy and his tutor, to join Ouang in Switzerland ; the passports had been given, and then suddenly withdrawn, and a passport was issued only for the boy — a lad of six in a strange world, expected to start out on such a journey alone ! And, moreover, a rupture in their diplomatic relations with Germany was imminent.

But the Spaniards and the Dutchmen arrived at last, and on March 22 Mr. Gregory began to install them in place of the Americans. He made the first changes in the north of France, where there were seven of our men, and these were to be sent at once by the Germans to Baden-Baden to be quarantined for a fortnight ; we had induced the Germans to shorten the period of cleansing in their case as well to that length of time. In order to instruct the new men Mr. Prentiss Gray had volunteered to remain after Mr. Gregory's departure, if Mr. Gregory ever got away, which sometimes we doubted. The news that crept in between the shining wires at the frontier was to the effect that all America was in vast excitement. The

delegates were waiting in Brussels, confined to the limits of the city on *parole*, and there is little doubt that all the time when the delivery of the promised guarantees of immunity were from day to day delayed, the Germans intended to hold them as hostages ; I had it from an excellent source, and the Germans explained their delay by alleging a fear that the Americans might mistreat Germans in America. It was with such possibilities suspended over them that they waited — and I waited ...

It came at last on Sunday, March 25, a telegram from the President himself. At tea-time Villalobar was announced ; his face was very grave. Mr. Gregory happened to be with me. The Marquis had a telegram from his colleague at The Hague. It was this :

"Le représentant des Etats-Unis demande que Votre Excellence transmette au Ministre d'Amérique dans cette capitale le câble suivant, daté de Washington 23 mars et venant du Secrétaire d'Etat :

« A la demande du Président, je vous transmets l'instruction de quitter la Belgique immédiatement, accompagné par le personnel de votre Légation, par les officiers consulaires américains et par les membres de la Commission for Relief in Belgium. Le Département vous prie de télégraphier la date probable de votre départ de Belgique, ainsi que la route que vous suivrez, et vos projets. » \*\*



It was a distinct relief, and Mr. Gregory sprang up at once to send the Dutch and Spanish delegates that night into the provinces.

Brand WITHLOCK

\* (Translation :)

To His Excellency  
The Baron von der Lancken-Wakenitz,  
etc., etc., etc.,  
Brussels  
Legation of the United States of America,

Brussels, 26 February, 1917

My dear Baron :

I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of your kind letter of even date, in which you reiterate the desire, which you had already expressed in your letter of the 10 February to His Excellency the Marquis of Villalobar, to see the work of the Commission for Relief in Belgium continue, and my association with it. As I have written to His Excellency the Marquis of Villalobar in acknowledging receipt of a copy of your letter, the American gentlemen of the Commission for Relief in Belgium are always ready to continue their work in Belgium, as I myself should be happy to remain associated with that work under conditions

compatible with the position which I have the honour to occupy in the diplomatic service of the Government of the United States of America.

You are good enough also to remind me of the conversation which I had the pleasure of having with you and during the course of which I told you that if we found means of reconciling the demands of an unprecedented situation, I should gladly prolong my stay in Belgium in order to look after the continuation of the proper functioning of the Commission for Relief in Belgium.

I thank you again for the honour you do me in urging me, under the present circumstances, to remain in Brussels, and I shall postpone my departure until the questions still in dispute concerning the *ravitaillement* are settled ; because I am certain that we all have the same desire to spare no pains in bringing about the accomplishment of this humanitarian work, to which your efforts and your kindness have always been so precious.

Pray accept, my dear Baron, the assurance of my sincerely devoted sentiments / my sentiments of sincere respect.

(Signed) Brand Whitlock

## **\*\* (Translation :)**

The United States representative begs that Your Excellency transmit to the American Minister at that capital the following cablegram dated at Washington, March 23, and coming from the Secretary of State :

“At the request of the President I transmit instructions to you to leave Belgium immediately, accompanied by the personnel of your Legation, by the American consular officers and by the members of the Commission for Relief in Belgium. The Department begs you to telegraph the probable date of your departure as well as the route which you will follow, and your plans.”

### **Footnotes.**

French translation : « *La guerre enfin !* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre VIII (1917) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 440-443.

<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)