

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1917)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XLVII. “Jamais plus” / Details of the departure.

The next morning I went to see Lancken. When I told him the news, there in that little room upstairs where the tiny stove was always going furiously, he looked grave for a moment, then said that there was nothing to be done but to bow to the inevitable. He expressed regret at my departure, and asked me to grant him a day or two in which to make arrangements for the passports ; there would be a sleeping-car for the Legation staff, the best he could contrive because of the difficulty in transportation just then on account of the movement of troops. As to the Consuls and the C.R.B., he would know more the following day, but he feared that it would be impossible to give us a special train so that we could all go out together. We chatted some time under the sobering influence of the thought of war between our countries.

"*Mon Dieu !*", he exclaimed, "*amis depuis le temps de Frédéric II !*"

He feared that the English would seize the occasion to stop the *ravitaillement* but I told him

that only the Germans could do that ; that if they continued to permit the abuses it would stop, but that it would all go on well if they put an end to them. He promised that the Governor-General would take drastic measures. He thought that we were nearing the end of the war because of the Russian Revolution ; there would soon be a separate peace with Petrograd, he said, and perhaps with another nation, though he did not vouchsafe its name.

The news flew at once over the town, in that mysterious way it always had in Brussels ; again our friends came to bid us farewell, and when I went for a last look at the corners of the old town I had grown to love so deeply, in every one of the familiar shops where I stopped the people were already sorrowfully aware that at last we were going. And in the afternoon of that long day, as I was having my tea alone, I received a letter from the *Comité National*, signed by M. Solvay and M. Francqui, a letter that I read not without emotion.*

Among my callers that afternoon was a German officer of reserves, a man for whom I had come to have much respect. He was highly educated and there was much good in him, such limitations as he had being essentially Teutonic. I had talked often with him ; he used to explain to me the well-known German conception of war as a biological struggle of the human species, destined to go on forever — that misunderstanding of

Darwinism with which they had dosed their muddled philosophy. Now that this struggle for life was on between his species and mine, he was deeply shocked and grieved, and yet not at all unfriendly. Sitting there holding his great helmet between his knees, his face grown dark and sad, he spoke very earnestly of the impending conflict. He had not expected war, he said, as though he had cause for grievance, and he assured me that all Germans felt very bitterly toward America ; America had been Germany's worst enemy ; for since the Allies were not ready Germany would have won the war if America had not furnished munitions, and enriched herself in so doing. He said that we had not been neutral, that we had not insisted on protecting our commerce with Germany — that is, had not insisted on England's allowing American ships to pass the blockade. I tried to explain to him the theory of a blockade, but there was no explanation that I could make understandable to him. He began then to talk about the submarines, carefully explained to me that the German Government could not accede to America's demand, could not observe the rules as to giving warning to a ship, because if a submarine showed itself, it could be instantly sunk.

"*You see*", he said, with an air of happy illumination, "*the submarine is a new invention ; it changes the conditions of warfare ; the old rules*

cannot be applied to it ; America should have seen this and governed herself accordingly."

"*But*", I said, "*do you think that you can change the rules of the game to your own advantage while the game is going on, just because you are losing ?*"

He stared at me. He did not see the point. They have, as I have said more than once, no sports in Germany. A disarmed foe, a handicapped adversary — so much the better.

It was plain from the manner of all the Germans that I met at this time that none of them had expected America to take up the challenge, and that the German Government had not expected it, for they, of course, were but reflecting the opinion of Berlin. "*Une protestation très forte, mais oui*", as Lancken had said, but no more. Their state of mind revealed the profound depths of cynicism to which their philosophy of life had sunk them. They did not understand America, of course; not many Europeans had ever understood her. Many have noted her superficial defects, as did Dickens and Mrs. Trollope and most of those who wrote books about us after a brief visit to our shores ; the only ones who apprehended the secret were Lord Bryce and, long before, the young de Tocqueville. But to the others she lay off there in the West, dim and mysterious ; and in reply to snobbish criticisms there was only the scornful laugh of the Genius of These States

echoing in sovereign indifference from his mountain-top afar in the West.

There had been several conceptions of us, current in novel or cinema, the millionaire of the liberal *pourboire*, or the cowboy in evening dress nonchalantly chewing a cigar, and now and then, when in a tight pinch, calmly drawing his six-shooter. A charming lady at Brussels one evening remarked to me at dinner that it must be more uncomfortable to live in those sky-scrapers and to be known by a number.

But the most unflattering conception was that of the Germans, who thought us as grossly materialistic as themselves, and great hypocrites in the bargain, pretending to a morality in which we did not believe. Of the essential idealism of America they had literally no notion. Their view of human society in general was indeed no more generous than that of Talleyrand, who carried disillusion to the point of an extravagant and utter negation, though they lacked the wit, so abundant in Talleyrand, that makes cynicism and pessimism agreeable. They were so imbued with the cynicism that had prevailed in European Chancelleries for decades that they considered President Wilson's exposition of principles and ideals merely as some new and rather clever political camouflage. It never occurred to them to take it seriously ; it never occurred to them that any public man anywhere took such things seriously ; and, failing to see in

the notes and speeches in which that exposition had been made, the careful, patient, orderly pleadings on which the great Liberal leader was preparing to try the cause of humanity before the bar of history, unable to see the point where the issues at last were joined, they supposed that he would go on with the ideal exposition and leave them to continue the realistic work of the submarines.

The days that followed were filled with good-byes. I went one afternoon for tea with a charming old lady in her house in the Rue Royale, at the corner of the Rue Belliard, a fine old mansion, pure Louis XIV ; once the palace of a bishop. From the window of the salon I looked down on that spot where once stood the Pensionnat Heger, with its memories of Charlotte Brontë. In her day it was reached by the stairs that descend there behind the statue of Count Belliard, but it is all gone now, to make place for the great central railway station that was a part of the vast design Léopold II had for beautifying Brussels. And gazing down there, thinking of Charlotte Brontë and of her affection for the master of the school, I had that sadness which one feels in leaving a place where one has lived, and the regret of not having hunted out all the old literary landmarks of Brussels ; on that very spot before my eyes the impressionable Irish girl had lived and suffered ; beneath the slender, delicate spire of the Hôtel de Ville, hung like a scarf of

lovely lace in the pale spring sky there on the Grand'Place, was the house where Victor Hugo had lived while he was making his studies for the description of the battle of Waterloo ; just across the Park was the home where Byron once stayed ; not far away was the building where there had been "*the sound of revelry by night*", whence George Osborne (or Selby) had gone forth to the battle on the field where he was found the next morning, as Thackeray had put it in one of those rare dramatic climaxes in fiction that make one gasp, "*lying on his face, dead*". Baudelaire, rolling his splenetic eye on the crowds of that humanity which he hated in his sick heart, had roamed those very streets and lived under some of those huddled roofs ; and John Lathrop Motley, Secretary of the American Legation long ago, had delved here for his great history of William the Silent. I had intended to hunt all this out and to write it down, and now it was too late ; the task could only be added to that great mass of unfulfilled intentions now never to be realized, the mass that grows so great and intensifies its reproach as we grow old. "*Jamais plus ! Jamais plus !*"

I went the next morning to talk with von Moltke about the train ; there was hemming and hawing ; it would be impossible to get a special train, all of us could not go at once.

"*Very well*", I said, "*if there are several trains, I shall go out last.*"

"Why ?"

"Why ? Because when the ship goes down the captain goes over the side last."

Thus to the old uncertainties so long endured, as to when and how we should go, there came a new uncertainty as to whether we should go at all. I had asked for a special train in which to take the Legation staff, the Consuls and their families, the C.R.B., and the Chinese Legation, for the Chinese Government had broken off diplomatic relations with Germany, and Sven Poussette, then charged with the representation of Chinese interests, had officially renewed the request of our Chinese colleagues that I take them with my party. But as von Moltke had intimated, it was proposed that the Legation go one day, the Consuls a few days later, and last of all the men of the C.R.B. It was told me that Lancken had been seen very dark of visage, very much worried, and that he had said that Berlin had ordered that we be sent out by Denmark, there to take ship for America, a petty reluctance to recognize the Belgian Government in exile at Havre, or its existence ! He had telephoned to Berlin, however, and had that order revoked.

Meanwhile, in the midst of all these uncertainties and the anxieties they created, the Legation continued to be thronged with callers who came to bid us farewell, the expression of that Belgian gratitude which was so real, so overwhelming, and so constantly expressed that I

was often embarrassed by it. All the officials, all the notables of the city, all our friends, came, and it was beautiful and touching, but no expression was more so than the call of Cardinal Mercier.

He came Thursday afternoon at tea-time, tall, majestic, with the simplicity of the truly great — such blue eyes of virtue and lofty courage ! He was accompanied by the Révérend Père Rutten, who wore the white robe of a Dominican father, back in Belgium again after many adventures. I had crossed the sea with him on my return from America in 1915. His Eminence expressed sorrow, and showed sorrow, at our going. He spoke with beautiful appreciation of America and what America had done for Belgium, and said that Belgium had lost her "*stay and support*" — "*L'Amérique — la force, l'autorité, d'une grande nation*". His voice was vibrant with emotion ; he was still a moment, and bowed his grey head ...

I told him that after the war he would have to make a voyage to America where he was so much loved and admired, and when I related how Protestant clergymen and Jewish Rabbis had united with the priests of his own faith to praise his courage and to extol his patriotism, he looked at me in the astonishment that was the product of his modesty. He feared that he was too old to undertake the voyage, there was the question of sea-sickness, but I assured him that in summer the

ocean for him would be as smooth as les *étangs d'Ixelles*.

Over and over again he thanked me for what, as he was generous enough to say, I had done for Belgium. I wish that I might give all the conversation, and I wish more than all that I might give some sense of the charm and *puissance* of his personality. The effect of his visit was most uplifting. He is one of those great beings that in a world crowded with little men lift themselves far above the mass and by the sheer force of moral *grandeur* radiate sweetness and light. In his presence all cares, all petty feelings, and all haunting fears fade away ; one is before eternal verities, and we felt that night as though we had had a prophet in the house. Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked with us by the way ?

On Friday morning — we counted those last days as a prisoner might — Gregory arrived early to say that Reith had told him that the C.R.B. could not go out until April 6, a week hence. I sent Ruddock at once to tell von Moltke that if the C.R.B. did not go on Monday I should not go ; that they might do as they pleased, send me as prisoner to Germany, or shoot me in the Grand' Place. I would not go before the C.R.B. ...

Lancken sent to know if I could receive him at eleven o'clock ; then he postponed the visit until afternoon, and something, some prescience, I know not what, told me that he was leaving on one

of those trips to Berlin. At five o'clock that afternoon then, scrupulously groomed as ever, and smart in the light bluish-grey uniform that so well set off his handsome figure, wearing side-arms, he came to make his *adieux* ; and my presentiment was correct — he was going to Berlin that night — to be gone a week. We had tea, and when he and my wife and I had chatted for a while he began to discuss the plans for our departure, beginning with the statement that Sherman, our Vice-Consul at Antwerp, might be detained as having been too pro-English, but I was able to persuade him out of that notion and to induce him to forego that measure. Then he said that my train would be ready for Monday, but — there it was, the familiar "*but*" for which I was waiting — the C.R.B. could not go until the 6th, because Gregory had fixed that day.

"*Very well*", I said, "*then I shall not go until the 6th.*"

He looked up in surprise ; that would make trouble, he said ; he could not be responsible for the military — they might do anything.

"*Very well, let them do anything*", I replied ; "*I will not go first, but last.*"

He said that it would be very difficult to change the arrangements and to send the C.R.B. Monday ; the military might insist on their going into quarantine ; there were difficulties of all sorts.

"*That is a grave decision*", he said solemnly. "*Would you accept all the consequences of it ?*"

"*I do not know what you mean by 'the consequences'* ", I replied, "*but let them be as grave as they will, I accept them. I will not be the first, but the last, to leave.*"

He gazed intently at me for a moment and then said that he would do all in his power to adjust the difficulty. There was little more to say ; he glanced at the watch on his wrist, again expressed regret at seeing me go, and said that as the war was probably nearly over he felt we should meet again soon.

"*Peut-être au congrès de la paix*", he added, shook hands, said *au revoir*, and was gone.

Gregory was waiting to see me, and I told him the unfavourable news, the complication of the last moment which all the while, deep in our hearts, we had expected. He remembered then that some days before it had been suggested by some one at the *Vermittlungsstelle* that the members of the C.R.B. leave on the 6th, but it had been a suggestion merely, not an order. In the midst of this uncertainty a cablegram came from Washington, an urgent cablegram, instructing me to leave at once.

The next morning early there was a call on the telephone ; von Moltke wished to speak to me, to tell me that the train would be ready for Monday at five o'clock. For whom ? I asked. And he

answered, for the C.R.B., the Consuls, even for the Chinese, who would go out with us. The seven men of the C.R.B. who had served in the north of France had left the evening before, and our going seemed now certain enough to warrant us leaving the "*p.p.c.*" cards that had been so long prepared.

The day had its note of tragedy, for the night had brought the shocking news from Liège that poor Albert Heingartner, our Consul there, had died suddenly of heart failure, falling thus at his post at the very moment in which his services ended. His death cast its shadow over the Legation. He had been long in the Consular Service ; he came from my own state of Ohio. I could only send Cruger to close the Consulate and to render what aid he could to the stricken family in such an hour ...

The day was crowded then with farewells. There was a *grand déjeuner* at the Taverne Royale, given by the Comité National to the departing Americans of the C.R.B. M. Francqui made a touching speech and I responded, and with much genuine regret and sorrow we bade *adieu* to the dear friends with whom we had laboured so long. The remaining hours until evening were taken up with receiving at the Legation those who came to bid us *adieu*. Burgomaster Lemonnier and the *échevins*, to present an address from the city of Brussels **, and the Governor and the directors of the Banque

Nationale. On Sunday, it was the same, people came all day long, among them Burgomaster Franck, on behalf of the city of Antwerp. And late in the afternoon, when they all were gone, I went with my wife for a last walk along the boulevards in the soft spring rain, in the strange sense of realizing one's self as still of a familiar and beloved scene, yet saying sadly all the while within, "*To-morrow I shall behold all this no more.*"

Brand WITHLOCK

* Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation

Bruxelles, le 26 mars 1917
Montagne du Parc, 3

Cher Ministre :

Parmi toutes les heures graves qu'a vécues le Comité National celle que marque votre départ est l'une des plus émouvantes.

Depuis près de deux ans et demi, les Belges qui, avec le concours de la *Commission for Relief in Belgium*, ont assumé la lourde tâche de faire vivre, quand même, leurs compatriotes se sentaient soutenus dans leur effort par votre sympathie et par votre aide constante. Votre présence parmi eux, la certitude qu'ils avaient de pouvoir, en toute circonstance, faire appel à votre

intervention, à votre appui, à votre amitié ardente, étaient pour eux une force précieuse. Ils en étaient arrivés à compter sur vous comme sur un compatriote. Il semblait presque en votre esprit généreux deux patriotismes vécussent : l'un pour votre grande nation, l'autre pour le petit pays que sa détresse et sa passion du droit, qui conduit votre carrière, vous avaient fait aimer.

Et nous n'étions pas seuls, nous qui pouvions mesurer l'entendue du service par vous rendu en demeurant en Belgique, nous n'étions pas seuls à éprouver cette impression. Vous avez, cher Ministre, pu vous rendre compte de la profondeur des sentiments de respect et de reconnaissance dont vous entourait toute la population belge. Au moment où l'on a appris en Belgique la rupture des relations diplomatiques entre les Etats-Unis et l'Allemagne, ce qui a le plus frappé, ce qui a profondément ému, c'est la pensée de votre départ.

Aujourd'hui cette pensée nous secoue tous. Nous ne voulons pas tenter de vous dire ici toute notre reconnaissance et toute celle du peuple belge ; il faudra, pour l'exprimer, des formes solennelles, possibles seulement lorsque la nation vivra de sa vie normale. Alors seulement la Belgique pourra montrer qu'elle sait ce qu'elle doit à la grande république.

Aujourd'hui nous venons dire à l'homme qui l'a si noblement représentée parmi nous, à

l'homme de grand coeur et d'esprit élevé, le respect qu'il nous inspire, la gratitude que nous lui gardons, la tristesse que nous cause son départ et notre espoir ardent de le revoir en des jours meilleurs qu'il aura puissamment contribué à nous rendre.

Nous vous prions, Cher Ministre et ami, de transmettre à Madame Brand Whitlock l'expression de notre respect, de lui dire que nous garderons le souvenir de son intelligente bonté, de remercier pour nous les membres du personnel de votre légation qui ont secondé vos efforts avec tant de zèle, de passion, d'affectueux élan, et de croire à nos sentiments d'inaltérable dévouement.

E. Francqui
E. Solvay

**** VILLE DE BRUXELLES**

Cabinet du Bourgmestre.

Bruxelles, le 30 mars 1917

Excellence :

A l'heure où vous allez vous éloigner momentanément de la capitale de la Belgique, permettez à l'Administration communale de la Ville de Bruxelles de vous présenter, une fois de plus, l'expression de sa profonde sympathie.

Nul n'ignore l'aide admirable que les Etats-Unis d'Amérique n'ont cessé d'apporter à la population belge

depuis deux ans et demi. Nous sommes convaincus que, dans un avenir peu éloigné, l'héroïsme de votre grande Nation apportera à la Belgique et à ses alliés un concours encore plus puissant et plus généreux. L'affection et la gratitude de nos compatriotes survivront aux événements actuels et feront désormais partie de l'âme même de notre Patrie.

A cet hommage qu'il nous sera toujours agréable d'adresser à la grande République d'outremer, nous ne pourrons nous empêcher d'associer le nom du diplomate éminent, de l'homme d'un si grand cœur qui, au cours d'une période remplie de difficultés sans exemple, a été parmi nous le digne interprète de la politique et des sentiments de son pays.

La population bruxelloise ne saurait oublier combien, dans une foule d'occasions, votre intervention a été bienveillante et efficace. La respectueuse affection qu'elle a pour Votre Excellence n'est pas faite uniquement de gratitude.

Il s'y joint un sentiment d'un caractère plus intime : Nos concitoyens ont conscience de ce que vous éprouvez pour eux une sympathie sincère et réfléchie.

Ils savent que vous rendez justice à ce qu'il y a de noble et de touchant dans leur courage muet, dans leur endurance inlassable, dans leur patriotisme.

Toutes les fois qu'il est question de votre bonté et de votre dévouement, il est impossible de séparer de votre nom celui de Madame Brand Whitlock. La population Bruxelloise ne perdra jamais le souvenir de ce qu'elle lui doit. Nous savons que le cœur de Madame Brand Whitlock a battu bien souvent au récit ou à la vue de nos misères et de nos douleurs présentes.

Vous nous quittez, Excellence ; nous avons le ferme espoir que votre absence ne sera pas de longue durée.

Lorsque vous reviendrez, vous retrouverez une Belgique affranchie, ayant repris sa vie normale, à l'abri de ses libres institutions.

Souvent alors, votre mémoire vous reportera à la période sombre et affligeante, durant laquelle la présence à Bruxelles du Ministre des Etats-Unis a été, pour notre population et pour nos Administrations communales, une consolation et un réconfort.

Nous vous prions de recevoir, Excellence, ainsi que Madame Brand Whitlock, l'expression de notre haute considération.

Le Secrétaire,
M. Vauthier.

Le Collège des Bourgmestre et Echevins de la Ville de
Bruxelles :
Maurice Lemonnier,
Steens,
E. Jacquain,
Max Hallet,
Léon Pladet

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Jamais plus* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre IX (1917) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 443-451.

<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