

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1917)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XLVIII. The parting. The closed door.

It was Monday, the second day of April, and, unless some new complication should arise, some new hitch develop in the scheme of things, our last in Brussels. The trunks and the boxes that had been so long packed were waiting in the corridors ; and there was the confusion of the last hurried preparations, streams of callers, masses of flowers, and the weariness of the reaction after the long strain we could not yet realize as over. We of the Legation staff were twenty in all ; there were fifteen persons belonging to the Consulates, about forty men of the C.R.B., and about eighteen of the Chinese Legation. We were to have luncheon that day at the residence of Burgomaster Lemonnier in the Avenue Louise ; Villalobar was to be there, and van Vollenhoven, and the *échevins* of Brussels with their wives. The luncheon was to be at one o'clock ; we were to leave at 5.10 in the afternoon.

At ten o'clock in the morning I was passing through the lower hall of the Legation ; suddenly a German soldier stood before me at the salute ; he was, from his costume, an *estafette*, and he

showed the signs of having had a long ride on the motor-cycle that stood outside the door. He gave me a great envelope ; I opened it and read an invitation from the Governor-General to luncheon at Trois Fontaines, at one o'clock. I had not seen Baron von Bissing since his return from Wiesbaden; he had been ill ever since returning from his cure, and when I had asked von Moltke the day before when I might go to bid him farewell, he had not been sure that the Governor-General's health would permit him to receive me at all. And now, this invitation — for one o'clock, the very hour for which I had accepted at the Burgomaster's. The eternal complication, then, down to the very end !

The *estafette* was to await the response, and he stood there immobile, at attention. I thought an instant, then suddenly the solution flashed through my mind, the only advantage the complication of *l'heure belge* and *l'heure allemande* had ever presented ; one o'clock by the Governor-General's time was noon by the Burgomaster's and :

"*Present my compliments to His Excellency and say that I accept with pleasure*", I said.

Trois-Fontaines is, as perhaps I have made clear somewhere in this long narrative, on the other side of Vilvorde, ten miles from Brussels ; I consulted Eugene ; he said he could drive it in fifteen minutes — perhaps in less ... My wife was to go to the Burgomaster's and explain that I had been sent for by the Governor-General.

At five minutes before one o'clock, German time, I was halted by a balking ass on the bridge at Vilvorde ; a great crowd of laughing peasants tried to persuade him to make way, but he was obstinate ; finally the men picked him up bodily and set him to one side, and at one o'clock I drove into the great park at Trois-Fontaines, past the lodge where the squadron of Imperial Guards, muffled in great-coats, were sitting their horses there in the wind that blew out the horses' tails, and a moment later I was received by the Governor-General and the Baroness von Bissing.

The old Governor-General was feeble and haggard and looked much older ; he walked stiffly and with difficulty, but he and the frail little Baroness smiled and received me cordially. They had a young son, a lad of fifteen, wearing the cadet uniform of some military training school, and already clicking his heels with a sharp report and saluting with the best of them. Count Ortenberg and several other members of the General's staff were there, and two guests, one of whom it was whispered to me was a great doctor of divinity and famous German theologian, whose name I did not learn. He was an enormous superman with a bristling, belligerent pompadour, great spectacles, high yawning collar, a frock-coat that widened gradually from his narrow shoulders to its wide skirts below, the whole terminating at the floor in boots with glistening patent leather tips. The

famous theologian was seated at the Baroness's right at luncheon, and I at her left, the Governor-General in the seat opposite his wife. The luncheon was the modest repast served always at that table, and the talk was not animated. Once during the meal the Governor-General lifted his glass and solemnly drank to my health ; and once he looked up and said, in his heavy voice:

"*Vous partez, donc ?*"

"*Oui, Excellence*", I said.

And then in a kind of rage he almost roared :

"*Et pourquoi ?*"

As who should say, "*What nonsense for you to go to war !*" He said that he was sorry to see me go, that the *ravitaillement* would not go on so well.

And that was about all ; the Baroness said she regretted the necessity for the submarine war, but that the English would never learn otherwise.

I was glad when the luncheon was over and glad that the coffee and cigarettes were served at the table. When we arose the Governor-General, as we chatted for a moment, said that he knew how hurried I was, and I took advantage of the remark to make my compliments and *adieux* at once. The famous theologian left, too, immediately after me, and as I went out of the hall I saw him drop to one knee before the Governor-General, the representative of the Imperial power and majesty, and heard the concussion of the loud moist kiss

which the reverend one planted on the hand of His Excellency.

We raced back to town and I arrived at the Burgomaster's just after they had sat down to table, and sighed with relief to be among my good friends once more — and did my diplomatic best to eat another luncheon.

Villalobar came to us at half-past four that afternoon, and he and my wife and I had tea together in the sadness of those last moments. His motor, with the pretty red and yellow flag, the colours thenceforth to fly over the American Legation, was at the door to take us to the Gare du Nord ; the motor of the Dutch Legation, with its orange flag, was there as well ; and presently, bidding good-bye to those of the servants who had been so faithful during those trying days, we drove away from the Legation amid their tears ...

In the Place Rogier at the entrance to the Gare du Nord a great crowd was gathered, a crowd that filled all the space within the station. There had been, of course, no public announcement of our going, the hour was not known, yet the word had gone about in Brussels. And there outside, and in larger numbers inside, the crowd stood in silence. As we left the motors to enter the station the men gravely uncovered, and the women were in tears. It was very still ; there was not a word, not a sound. I went through the crowd ; now and then a child was held out to me,

its little hand outstretched, and low voices beside said :

"Au revoir — à bientôt."

The crowd was massed inside the station, and the words were repeated over and over in that most affectionate and touching of farewells :

"Au revoir — à bientôt."

All our friends were there, come to bid us us good-bye, and friends of the members of the C.R.B., all the remaining members of the diplomatic corps, the city officials, representatives of the Comité National (**Note** : de Secours et d'Alimentation) ; and when old M. Solvay, his eyes filled with tears, and M. Francqui and M. Emmanuel Janssen came together to shake my hand — I could no longer speak.

Mr. Prentiss Gray, who had not only courageously volunteered to remain, but had insisted on remaining, to instruct the new delegates and to install his successor, was there to see us off.

The long train was drawn up under the sheds. Count von Moltke himself was at the turnstile ; Baron von Falkenhausen, who was to escort us across Germany to the Swiss frontier at Schaffhausen, was there ; we went out on to the platform.

Then the long farewells and the banalities with which the last moments are filled ; finally the men of the C.R.B., the Consuls, the Chinese, got

aboard. The masses of flowers were carried into the coach. Then some one said that Josse Allard was there, that he could not get through the stile. I ran back, caught his eager face in the crowd, waved to him, and the crowd cheered. It was the only sound they had made, and, for their sakes, fearing a demonstration, I hastily withdrew and ran back to the carriage. I bade Lambert and then, the last, Villalobar, good-bye. He presented my wife with the *bouquet* of forget-me-nots he had brought, and handed her into the coach. The Baron von Falkenhausen mounted the steps ; von Moltke, who had been so kind, who had so admirably made all the perfect arrangements, stood at the salute. I climbed aboard. The train was moving.

As we drew out of the city I looked out of the window of our coach. Far across the expanse of rails, at the end of a street which came down to the edge of the wide way, at the barrier of a grade crossing in Schaerbeek, a great crowd was gathered, and as the train passed, above the mass of faces blurred by the distance, there burst a white cloud of fluttered handkerchiefs ...

I went into a compartment alone and shut the door.

Brand WITHLOCK

THE END

Notes Bernard Goorden.

French translation : « *Le départ* » 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 451-455.

<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>

See **continuation** in Allan NEVINS editor, ***Letters and Journal of Brand Whitlock*** (chosen and edited with a biographical introduction ; New-York-London, D. Appleton-Century Company; 1936, XV-732 p.), pages 372-724 :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>

with references

“BRAND WHITLOCK LETTER JOURNAL”

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 3 : 1917) :

<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 also 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