

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter LII. HUNGER.

AN artist friend, discussing one day the paintings of the old Flemish school, those joyous canvases of Teniers and Jordaens, and how realistically they depict the feasting and the frolic and the fun that have gone on always in Flanders, advanced the interesting and touching theory that the Flemish people had suffered so much in their history that they had to take their fun where and when they could find it, and abandon themselves wholly to it. I cannot say as to that, but I do know that there is deep in the nature of the Belgians an incomparable spirit that bears them up in adversity, and so, even after Antwerp, with their wonderful resiliency they could find some light in darkness and take heart of grace. The disaster, they began to say, was not so irreparable.

It happens in the lives of nations, as in the lives of individuals, that a defeat which seems at the time crushing sometimes proves in the end to have been a victory of a sort. It requires a large faith and usually the perspective of history to reach these reassuring conclusions, but by some quick, spiritual apprehension the Belgians began to realize, dimly at first, that their army had, after all, executed a clever movement in withdrawing from Antwerp; had those troops remained in the fortress they would have been taken like rats in a trap, whereas now it was possible that they might join the Allies' left wing, or at least menace the German right wing — bent back, it was said, as far as Ypres. The Belgian Government had probably gone to Ostend, and there were rumours — silly enough, as we thought — that it would go to the Isle of Guernsey.

There is a story to the effect that General von Moltke, after the fall of Liège, implored the German authorities to send the army on into France and not to penetrate farther into Belgium, but that his plan was rejected or his advice unheeded because, it was said, Belgium must be punished for her resistance. Hence the savage descent upon the civil population of the land.

I know nothing of the ground for the Von Moltke legend, but it is not without verisimilitude when one analyses the series of monstrous deeds that have passed into history as the German atrocities in Belgium. The history of those times has not all been written, and to understand them mankind must wait until all the facts are known, until all the memoirs have been written, all the indiscretions committed, and the impartial judgment of history rendered. Civilians, of course, must not meddle with that which does not concern them or express their opinions about the high art of war, but it would seem that there is something, at any rate, in this theory.

For the ironic spirits have their fun with mortals ; their sardonic laughter rings for ever down the awful void ; what were thought to be victories prove to be defeats and defeats to have been triumphs. Major Langhorne, of our army, then a Military *Attaché* at Berlin, in Brussels, a day or so after Antwerp had been abandoned, said that Antwerp, if not a victory for the Belgians, was hardly a victory for the Germans, since in their haste to parade the boulevards of Brussels, to have the *éclat* of an entry in the grand style in the capital of the little nation they had

conquered, and to stagger mankind with their force and power, they had left the country open westward to the sea and allowed the Belgian army to escape to the immortal glory of the Yser.

But whatever minor consolation there may have been for the people of Brussels in the thought that the Germans had made a mistake of which history would calmly speak, there was an immediate and an intense preoccupation, destined thenceforth never to quit the mind for years : it was the thought of famine. The wheat had not come from Antwerp yet. It was even reported that the Belgians in leaving the citadel had destroyed the food-stuffs there, whereupon a German general remarked : "*If that is true the whole Belgian population may starve !*"

The Comité had made every effort to procure food-supplies. Mr. Millard K. Shaler, in his quality of American citizen, had gone to London on behalf of the Comité to buy grain. I obtained a *Passierschein* for him from the Germans authorizing him to leave and to re-enter Belgium. In those days travellers, to get out of the country, had to make a great detour by Maestricht, and on his way Mr. Shaler was arrested and held two days in the Kommandantur at Liège as a spy ; I secured his release, and he continued on his journey, arrived at London, bought wheat — but could not get permission to export it to Holland.

The situation, indeed, was rapidly growing serious ; the supplies in the country were sufficient only for a fortnight. Even on the table of the Legation there was the grey bread. It was not true that the supplies at Antwerp had been destroyed, and we could continue our efforts to find some basis on which we might contrive to get food in. Rich as the little country was, and as intelligently as its fertile acres were farmed, it could not produce, even in peace-times, more than one-fifth of what it consumed. For weeks committees composed of citizens of all the principal towns behind the German army — Louvain, Namur, Charleroi, Malines — had been coming to the Legation asking me to patronize committees of *ravitaillement* to be organized in those towns as I had patronized the committee in Brussels ; and one day, to enforce his arguments, a man came from Dinant and laid on my desk a loaf of mouldy black bread — all that the people of the stricken town had to eat. There were priests from Louvain who came to ask food for the *sinistrés* of their city ; then came a Liégeois to implore help for his town ; and there was a little girl asking bread for herself — that we could give her, but it only intensified the pang there always is in the thought of the utter impotence of personal charity in the world. It was, of course, evident that local committees could accomplish little good ; the task would have to be assumed, as I told these gentlemen, on a large national scale, and we began to consider the possibility of doing this. There was food somewhere in the world, there was plenty in the granaries of that land which loomed in such mystery far off there in the West — that land which this old Europe had never understood, and to which now it turned for succour and help and comfort. There were enormous obstacles, of course, in the way of getting it : there was the fleet of Britain blockading the sea ; there was the enmity between the Germans and the Belgians. I discussed the situation with Villalobar, with M. Francqui, with Mr. Heineman, and with many others. We had meetings and discussions in which opinion hung nebulously in solution for long hours, as opinion will in committees, until some one would lift his eyes hopefully and exclaim :

*"But The Hague Convention ! According to The Hague Convention it is the duty of the occupying Power to feed the population."*

And then, with that inveterate vice of the human mind which persists in the belief that a problem is solved as soon as it has been reduced to formula, they would sigh and sink back in their chairs as though the phrase sufficed for the deed.

But, as I reminded them, the Belgians could not eat Hague Conventions, though that seemed, alas, all that we had to offer them. And then one day — October 14, to be precise — I had a visit from the Baron von der Lancken and Herr Hellfrisch, whose name has since been tolerably well known in the German political, as it was then in the German commercial, world, though they are, in a way, much the same thing. Mr. Heinernan had known Herr Hellfrisch in that commercial world, and he had already brought him to me to aid in certain unofficial efforts I had been making to diminish the burden imposed upon the Brussels bankers by the excessive war contribution levied on the city. In the course of these efforts I had gone to see Herr von Lumm, a portly, blond, serious man whose closely shaven head was clasped by great round spectacles rimmed by tortoise-shell like those that the Chinese and very young Americans wear. He was a German banker who, some time before the war, had visited Brussels, been received everywhere, shown through the Banque Nationale, and a banquet and a decoration had been given to him. All of which indicated him, in the German administrative mind, as the very man to be appointed chief of the Bank *Abteilung*, and it was in that capacity that he had come to Brussels, where he was charged with the heavy task of collecting "contributions" of war. His instructions were rigid, it seemed, and he could not reduce the large sums demanded of the Bank. But the efforts, however, were not altogether lost, for, in talking about them with my two callers that day, they gave an occasion to open the discussion about food; if one could not effectively discuss money, one could discuss bread. In a world as illogical as the one in which we live, one always does something else than that which one sets out to do, and then persuades oneself that what is accomplished is what one intended from the beginning; we are not so candid or so wise as children who, beginning to draw a picture, will tell you that they do not know what it is going to represent until they get it done. And so, that afternoon, when Baron von der Lancken and Herr Hellfrisch came to see me, we fell to talking of other things, such as my having just then been charged with the protection of the interests of Lichtenstein, for instance. The Baron laughed; nothing had so amused him for a long time. Prussia, indeed, was still in a state of war with Lichtenstein, and had been ever since 1866; the little principality had sided with Austria and when the treaty of pence was signed Lichtenstein had been overlooked.

And then the question of bread came up. The problem was to get food not only for the poor of Brussels, but for the whole population of Belgium. The Baron said that the German Government was well disposed; that the German authorities were ready to give assurances that none of the food, if it could be brought in, would be requisitioned or seized or in any manner be utilized by the German forces, but that it would all go to the Belgian civil population. So much was won, then, and it was of fundamental importance. In the meantime — realizing, as I have said, the necessity of undertaking the work on a national scale — the Brussels Committee, le Comité Central de Secours et d'Alimentation, had expanded its organization. In the *bon mot* of M. Émile Francqui, a phenomenon in nature occurred — the child gave birth to the mother; the local committee brought forth a national committee, and the Comité became le Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation, of which Villalobar and I continued to act as patrons. It organized sub-committees

in each of the nine provinces of Belgium ; or, since the two Flanders were inaccessible, in seven of the nine provinces.

It was a fortunate circumstance that the organization was formed somewhat on the model of the Belgian Government, the system of which is based on the commune, the cell of the whole organization. Belgium is composed of 2.633 communes or municipalities, each free to govern itself in all local affairs. There is not a square inch of soil in Belgium that does not belong to a commune, not a citizen that does not form a part of a little city or community, and this whether it is in the country or in the town ; though, of course, in a country so densely populated every commune has a village as a nucleus.

Each commune elects its common council, which governs the community as do the common councils of English and American towns ; indeed the municipal system of England and America is derived from Belgium. Out of the common council there are chosen a *bourgmestre*, or mayor, and a number of *échevins*, who serve as heads of departments, providing what is in effect a commission form of government. The communes are grouped into 223 cantons, the cantons into forty-one arrondissements, and the arrondissements are divided among the nine provinces. Perhaps it would be more exact to say that the provinces are divided into arrondissements, since the nine provinces are co-extensive with the historic principalities — the old duchies of Brabant, of Limbourg, of Luxembourg ; the counties of Flanders, of Hainaut and of Namur ; the old bishopric of Liège, etc. Without going further into detail, there are elective bodies for the regulation of the affairs of the cantons, of the arrondissements, and of the provinces, and finally of the nation, i.e. the parliament. The communal system is as old as the struggle of the city to be free, and it is to it that Belgium owes her genius for self-government, one with that love of freedom which has kept the nation alive and stubbornly determined to contest her right to liberty through successive dominations of Spaniards, Austrians, Dutchmen, and Germans. No country without some such fundamental organization for uniting the people in a common ideal, and for expressing and satisfying their daily wants and needs, could have survived such a calamity as the inundation of the German hordes.

Thus when we undertook the relief work in Belgium we found ready at hand an organization for distribution that simplified the task and took into account at once every needy person in the land. While constitutionally they despised the system, the Germans did not interfere with the communal organization as such. Here and there they arrested a burgomaster or members of the common councils but they respected the system as a system. Indeed, they could not have governed the country as easily in any other way, or, in the eyes of the unthinking, as cheaply acquired a reputation for efficiency by claiming as a result of their administration the comparative order that prevailed — a condition that was due entirely to the schooling in self-government that the Belgians had acquired in their communal system.,

M. Emile Francqui was chairman of the executive committee of the National Committee, and it was his genius that directed the Belgian organization. He is a stout, round man, but with the restlessness of a nervous temperament. He is dark, with black hair and black moustache, and his finely modelled features, whose sensitiveness is controlled by a trained and powerful will, are illuminated by a pair of handsome, glowing brown eyes. He is sociable and genial, but with dignified reserve. He is one of those men who, estimating the standards of the world at their proper value, with no illusions as to the motives

of most men and indifferent to personal distinction, nevertheless feel it as a necessity of their natures to rule, to dominate. This interest takes the place in their lives of a sport : they direct large enterprises ; if they are on juries they dominate them ; if they are on committees they dictate their action ; if they are in politics they manage their fellows.

M. Francqui was wholly fitted by nature, by experience, and by training for the heavy task. He was a director of the Société Générale, one of the largest Banks and financial organizations in Brussels. He had begun his career as an officer in the Belgian army ; he had been with Stanley in Africa, and later became the faithful lieutenant of the old King Léopold II in the Congo. He had represented in China the interests of that remarkable ruler and man of affairs, so greatly misunderstood in our Western world — a King who, had he ruled a larger domain, would have gone down in history as one of the great personalities of his age. M. Francqui was prominent in the financial world ; a man shrewd in his judgment of men, polished by extensive travel, trained in affairs, with a relentless will and untiring energy. And now he devoted all his talents and resources to the suffering people of his land. His tact, his wit, his good humour, his perseverance, solved many a delicate situation. Born in Brussels of Walloon extraction and full of Walloon wit as well as Walloon shrewdness he was the most delightful of companions. We became friends, and for the hard and trying task which it was our destiny to bear there is the compensation of those hours of camaraderie, when he would come to my home for a cup of tea in the afternoon, or we would meet in the drawing-room of his residence in the Avenue Louise, filled with the trophies of his travels ; he would tell me those droll and delightful stories of Léopold II, or with his keen observation comment on the great events that were passing, and the foibles of the little men who were being swept along by those events like leaves in the autumn wind.

We had arranged a meeting at the American Legation for Friday, October 16, 1914, to discuss and if possible to agree on some solution of the whole problem of *ravitaillement*. The first thing to do was to secure the consent of the British Government to the importation of food ; the second was to obtain guarantees that the food thus imported would be free from requisition by the Germans, and be reserved to the exclusive use of the civil population of Belgium. This done, the food could be distributed by the Comité National, under the patronage of the Spanish and American Ministers. The theory, like most theories, was adequate ; the great question was to realize it in practice, and with the two nations that held the experiment in their power just then grappled in a deadly war, that was a task to daunt the most resolutely optimistic.

Early in the morning the Baron von der Lancken came with Geheimrath Kaufman ; later we were joined by Mr. Heineman and Mr. Hulse, and for a long time we discussed the important question. It was necessary that some one go to London to lay the case of Belgium before the British Government, and already there had been the inevitable proposal of a large committee, to be composed of Belgians : some thought the committee should consist of fifteen members, and my heart sank, as would the heart of any man who had spent long hours, and even years, listening to the interminable and futile palaver of large committees ; I recalled Tom Johnson's saying that the best committee in the world is a committee of three, two of whose members are dead. But some one must go. I suggested Baron Lambert. Then Villalobar arrived and approved the choice of Baron Lambert, and sent his motor at once to bring the Baron, who came, screwing his monocle somewhat dubiously

into his eye at the mention of the difficult mission we had selected for him. Then M. Solvay, M. Francqui, and M. Emmanuel Janssen appeared.

They were shown into another room. They came formally to request me to act in the matter, but as I was already occupied with it we brushed formalities aside, and, since Belgians and Germans did not meet, we carried on the discussion by passing back and forth, the Marquis and I, from one room to another. Finally it was agreed that the Baron Lambert and M. Francqui should go to London to present their country's case there, and that Gibson should go bearing letters from Villalobar and me to our respective colleagues in London, acquainting them with the situation and requesting them to use their good offices. There were letters and telegrams to be prepared, and we spent the rest of the day in writing them, for they had to be in four languages, French, German, Spanish, and English, and all say the same thing — no simple task. There were letters from Villalobar and me respectively to the Spanish and American Ambassadors in London, and telegrams to our Governments. Then we prepared for Field-Marshal von der Goltz's signature the letter addressed to the Comité Central \* — the national organization not having been fully consummated — in which he guaranteed that the food to be imported should be free from requisition and be reserved exclusively for the Belgians. It was, as it were, the constitution of our organization, the corner-stone of the edifice we were trying to rear, perhaps the most important of all the documents. It was written in German, and then translated into French and English, and finally, at tea-time, the work was done.

And then we decided to appeal to the world through the President and through the King of Spain. Villalobar, telegraphing to his sovereign, raised, "*a los Reales pies de vuestra Majestad,*" his beautiful appeal. My telegram to the President was in the following words :

*THE PRESIDENT, Washington.*

*In two weeks the civil population of Belgium, already in misery, will face starvation. In view of this fact, and at the request of the Relief Committee, I venture to call your attention to my telegram to the Department, dated October 16, in the conviction that your great heart will find some way by which America may help to provide food for these hungry ones in the dark days of the terrible winter that is coming on.*

WHITLOCK.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

**\* GENERAL GOUVERNEMENT IN BELGIEN**

Brüssel, den 16 Oktober 1914.

Auf die gefällige Zuschrift vom heutigen Tage beehre ich mich ganz ergebenst zu erwidern, dass ich das Unternehmen des Comité Central de Secours et d'Alimentation mit lebhafter Genugtuung begrüße und kein Bedenken trage, hiermit ausdrücklich und förmlich die Versicherung zu geben, dass die zur Ernährung der Zivilbevölkerung von Belgien seitens des Komitees eingeführten Lebensmittel aller Art, ausschliesslich für die Bedürfnisse der Bevölkerung Belgiens vorbehalten sind, dass dieselben demnach von der Requisition seitens der Militärbehörden frei sein sollen und endlich, dass dieselben zur ausschliesslichen Verfügung des Comitées verbleiben.

FRH. VON DER GOLTZ, *General Feldmarschall.*

An das Comité de Secours et d'Alimentation, Brüssel.

**GOVERNEMENT GÉNÉRAL EN BELGIQUE**

BRUXELLES, *le 16 octobre 1914.*

Comme suite à l'estimée lettre de ce jour, j'ai l'honneur de confirmer que j'approuve avec une vive satisfaction l'oeuvre du Comité Central de Secours et d'Alimentation, et que je n'hésite pas à donner formellement et expressément par la présente, l'assurance que les vivres de tous genres importés par le Comité pour l'alimentation de la population civile, sont réservés exclusivement pour les besoins de la population de la Belgique, que par conséquent ces vivres sont exempts de réquisition de la part des autorités militaires et qu'ils restent à la disposition exclusive du Comité.

BARON von DER GOLTZ, *Général Feld-maréchal.*

Au Comité de Secours et d'Alimentation, Bruxelles.

**GENERAL GOVERNMENT IN BELGIUM**

BRUSSELS, *October 16, 1914.*

In accordance with your esteemed letter of this date, I have the honour to confirm that I approve with a lively satisfaction the work of the Comité Central de Secours et d'Alimentation, and that I do not hesitate to give formally and expressly by these presents the assurance that food-stuffs of all kinds imported by the Comité for the feeding of the civil population will be reserved exclusively for the needs of the population of Belgium, that consequently these food-stuffs are exempt from requisition on the part of the military authorities, and that they remain at the exclusive disposition of the Comité.

BARON VON DER Goltz, *Field-Marshal General.*

To the Comité de Secours et d'Alimentation, Brussels.