

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XXIII**. Saving the golf links.

It was, therefore, not alone with pilfering soldiers that the work of the *ravitaillement* had to contend, it was with an army of brokers, speculators, smugglers, knaves of all sorts who were trafficking in the misery and suffering of the land. We did our best, but we could not overcome with any means at our command the wily efforts of such a band ; even old von Bissing, strive how he would, could not thwart them. On our constant and reiterated complaints, they were arrested and punished by the Germans ; they were arrested and prosecuted by the Belgian courts ; they were pursued by the Department of Inspection and Control of the Commission, under the direction of Mr. Joseph C. Green ; but it was like contending with the rising tide of the sea. For such dark, subterranean systems of corruption there is no cure anywhere but the illuminating influence of publicity, and with conditions as they were in Belgium it was impossible to let in the purifying, antiseptic light. We struggled in despair, but we could never obtain, so far as the native foods were concerned, the results we were so proud of in the case of the imported food products. The loss in

these was a small fraction of one per cent ; no business anywhere could show such a result, no Government could conduct its customs houses with such a near approach to perfection. That was due, of course, to the fact that the imported foods were always in the hands of the C.R.B. or the C.N. until they went into the Belgian stomachs, but we despaired of ever producing such ideal results with the native products, which we never touched and could not control.

Again and again we made representations as to the abuses to be attributed to the *Zentralen* ; there were in the German administration those who did not hesitate privately to recognize their evil, and in the limited circles where such things were known they became a scandal, but nothing was done, and under the *Zivilverwaltung* new *Zentralen* were constantly organized. There was always occult power, some real authority stronger than the apparent authority, some hidden spring of government, which we could not reach, much less dislodge.

That month of June brought a series of incidents varying in their importance from a discreet and tentative effort, quite unsuccessful, to secure the release of Professor Pirenne and Professor Fredericq, to an attempt, almost equally ineffectual, to protect the property of the Bell Telephone Company at Antwerp. It was in charge of Mr. Clayton, and the Germans had seized much

of it, giving their written engagement to pay its appraised value ; they paid a portion of the sum, and then whenever Mr. Clayton tried to secure payment of the rest, the German in charge of that business lashed himself into a fury, and fumed, and spluttered, and delivered a long harangue about Americans selling munitions to the Allies. Fond as they were of war, as devoted to it on principle, and as sure of the benefits it confers on the race, they seemed to prefer, as a condition for its exercise, an opponent without arms. One of the C.R.B. delegates for the north of France, who were always subjected to personal indignities, told me that a German officer struck an English officer, just made prisoner, across the face with his sword, and when the subject was discussed at the officers' mess that evening the Germans pressed the American to approve them when they insisted that the German officer had conducted himself as a gentleman.

A Belgian of my acquaintance was one day summoned by a German officer to one of the departments in Brussels and subjected to a painful and humiliating scene ; the German, in an unrestrained passion, abused him throughout a whole hour for a mistake for which, as the German well knew, another, and not he, was responsible. The Belgian gentleman endured it all in silence, and when the German's rage had worn itself out, said calmly :

"You are not generous, sir ; I am a prisoner here ; I must endure much that I would not endure in other circumstances."

It was in that month of June that soldiers under command of an officer of the Tervueren garrison entered the golf club at Ravenstein. They marched in one morning, and, perhaps imagining that the bunkers were trenches, began some sort of a drill in them. I spoke of the matter at the *Politische Abteilung* and orders were issued forbidding the soldiers to enter there. A week later German troops, under command of an officer, entered again, and drove mules all over the putting-greens. I appealed again and the orders were repeated. Not long afterward the soldiers were again on the course, under the command of an officer, making charges over the greens and practising raids in the bunkers. I went once more to the *Politische Abteilung*, carefully explained that a golf course was the result of long years of seeding, of planting, of constant care, that the work of years could be destroyed in an hour. There were in the environs of Brussels, besides the vast plains where the Belgian armies had been drilled and manoeuvred, many fields that could be used for drilling, and I asked once more that the golf club be protected ; I produced an effect, however, only when I was fortunate enough to remember the deeds of the suffragettes on the golf links of England, and as the Germans did not like the

comparison this had its impression. In the end, through the comprehension of Count von Moltke, who was acting in Baron von der Lancken's absence, I was fortunate in securing explicit orders that thereafter prevented a repetition of the offense, and one of the most beautiful golf courses on the continent, a gift of Leopold II, was spared.

They did not spare much, to be sure ; they were just then taking a census of the fish in the fish ponds in Belgium, in itself another complication because fish were, by analogy, covered by the food guaranties. Again, we were especially concerned just then about the babies ; it was partly in their interest that Mr. Hoover, following Dr. Lucas's visit, had just come again into Belgium. There was a difficulty about milk ; the C.N. had long maintained a model farm which provided milk for undernourished babies ; the herds had been imported from Holland, but this had long since been unequal to the demand, which was constantly increasing with the spread of misery. The Countess John d'Oultremont was carrying on almost unaided an excellent charity ; with the Germans' permission she would assemble hundreds of children and take them to Holland and there give them a fortnight's outing at Scheveningen-by-the-Sea. But charity under the best conditions can never keep pace with poverty in the world, even when the world is normal, and poverty in Belgium, and all its accompanying evils,

was increasing beyond the power of all efforts made to resist its ravages. Mr. Hoover succeeded in a measure in increasing the supply of milk, and just before he went away after that visit he told me with tears in his eyes that the peasants in Liège had said that since it was the Americans who asked it they would give their cows.

Miss Larner about this time was called home to her duties in the Department of State at Washington, and her going made the work in the Legation harder. She had been in the Legation for nearly two years ; she had competently filled the post of a second secretary, and we all regretted her departure. I had had no Secretary of Legation since Gibson went away, and now I had to attend personally to all the details of the Legation work. Villalobar had gone on another journey to Madrid, and the Baron Lambert, deeply affected and concerned by the sudden news that the Baroness had fallen ill in Paris, was able to obtain a *laissez-passer* and to go to Paris. War gives a new meaning to partings and adds to the loneliness of those who remain behind. Belgium, as I think I have made clear, was like a prison in its atmosphere ; love it how we would, and loath as we were all of us to leave, we nevertheless looked with envy on those who went away because to us it seemed that all on the other side of the line must be brighter than on our side ; our friends there, as we supposed, knew more of events, they had news

and information, much to encourage them, and above all they breathed the atmosphere of liberty. Slowly and reluctantly we were beginning to adjust ourselves to the idea of a long war ; for a long while we would indulge ourselves in the illusion that it would soon end ; we would fix a date, generously in the future, saying this winter will be the last, it will end in the spring ; in the spring we would say it will end in the autumn, it cannot last another winter ; for tasks are lighter and difficulties easier to bear when there is a definite term fixed for them. But we had been often deceived, and difficult as it is for human beings in this world to learn from experience, we were beginning to admit that it was impossible to see, to foretell, the end.

The Belgians were somewhat encouraged by the reports of the Russian advance that summer, and when the Germans would not permit the Dutch newspapers to enter they were more than ever persuaded that it was "serious"; but in Belgium nothing changed ; the dull, almost hopeless existence dragged on as before. There were the usual court martials and condemnations and shootings. Yet the Bruxellois were persistently hopeful ; one of them, when I asked him one day what the news was, remarked, with a twinkle in his eye that showed his humorous appreciation of the amiable optimism of the town :

"Oh, les nouvelles sont tellement bonnes qu'on n'ose pas en parler !"

It was curious to note how deeply all the Germans were impregnated with the spirit of hatred ; even the individual soldiers seemed to be affected by it ; they were generally morose and melancholy, they smiled seldom, but strode along with sullen or sad expressions, and at sight of the little flag on my motor scowled, and now and then, if they were in companies, even jeered. I was seldom, indeed almost never, personally made to feel this hatred by those with whom I had dealings ; there was always the correctness of the diplomatic attitude ; but it made the daily task more difficult to know that the feeling was nevertheless there, and that Americans were rapidly succeeding the English as the objects of German animosity, and the latest subjects of the German prayer : "*Gott strafe Amerika.*" ...

One Sunday I had gone to the country for the day, and while there two Belgians came to see me. They were dressed in their Sunday blacks, and they revealed their mission with formal phrases, and with many apologies for disturbing me in my selfish outing, and yet they were in an agony of distress which all their careful manners and all their formal phrases would not conceal. Poor souls ! I felt a great pity for them. It was for their brother that they came ; he was at that moment under sentence of death. The case was that of Hervé Ameels, condemned for *trahison de guerre*, and a more desperate case could not be imagined. The

young man had been in Holland and safe, and he came to the frontier to try by some means to send word to a friend in Belgium. At the frontier he spoke with a German sentinel who seemed friendly; the German, learning from Ameels his desire, told him to go into his booth and telephone. Ameels stepped across the frontier, and there, on Belgian soil, was at once arrested by the sentinel and sent to Antwerp. On his person the Germans found documents, the plan of an aviation field at Ghent, some statistics as to troops, and the names of two conspirators at Ghent. The supreme folly of Ameels made his fate no easier for his friends to bear, and they came in numbers to implore my aid. And while I did, of course, ask mercy for him, it was, of course, refused and the sentence executed.

These were not the only tragedies. I have the memory of a sweet-faced English woman, married long before the war to a German who, at the time of the romance, was prospering in business in England. They had a home in the country and were getting on well. The husband was an officer in the reserves in the German army, and when the war came on he was ordered to Belgium, and took his wife and children with him. It was not long before the husband neglected his wife, began to hate her, he said, because she was English. The children, two little boys, were placed in one of the German schools which the Germans opened in Belgium,

and there they were tortured by the German boys who taunted them with their English birth. Then the husband abandoned his wife, and she had but one hope, one desire, and that was to regain her lost England with her boys and have them reared as English. I tried to obtain permission for her to return to England, but failed in that, too, as in so much else in those times so sadly out of joint. The Germans would not permit her to leave Belgium because she was English, and the English would not permit her to enter England because she was German ... Day after day she came to the Legation, and the two boys leaned against her knees while the tears kept ever welling to her eyes....

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Le sauvetage du golf* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XVI (1916) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 342-345.

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) :

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