File of "La Libre Belgique" Now in New York

Banker Has Bought It from a Priest Whom the German Invaders Could Not Prevent from Collecting Copies of Secretly Issued Newspaper

By RICHARD BARRY.

THOMAS W. LAMONT, of J. P. Morgan & Co. has acquired possession of the "La Libre Belgique," a newspaper published in Belgium, and has purchased all the copies of it that have been published, almost weekly, "under fire in Belgium," in defiance of the Germans and despite their vigorous and persistent efforts to suppress it. No publishers have not been caught, though hundreds of arrests have been made and "an expiation," huge fines have been imposed and long terms in jail imposed by those governments in whose possession, but the sense of its being, the pressies from which it emanates, the "free and imperishable," in which it is published, and the daring spirits who first gave it life and who have maintained it under ever-increasing danger are still as free as when the enterprise began in February, 1915.

Through the courtesy of Mr. Lamont an examination and digest of La Libre Belgique will have been permitted. At various times and in various publications this country and have been partially reproduced and commented on, but this is the first time a complete copy is available. The handsome sum realized for the unique publication has been donated to one of the rescuing agencies in France, the Rev. Father De Ville, and the buyer, to the Belgian Relief Fund. It is quite possible that some copies before hand may be republished in book form and sold for the benefit of one of the Belgian relief.

The story of the smuggling of the paper, or, rather, papers, for there are several, in Belgium is quite as interesting as the paper itself. Father Jean Baptiste De Ville, now on a lecture tour through the United States, which he has accomplished the feat, at times in danger of his life and always in danger of arrest.

Father De Ville is an Inoa-Aoutre-Belgian-American Catholic priest. He is Cardinal Mercier's personal representative in America. Before the entrance of the United States into the war he was pastor of the Belgian mission of St. Augustin. Then Belgium, Belgium Relief Society and the Church organization in Belgium. Well equipped consecrated to no cause but the welfare of God's universe, the Belgians who, as a people, are now being forced out of Belgium, for more than two years. Born in the Austrian Tyrol of a Belgian mother and educated at a Belgian university, he became a Belgian citizen of the United States. Previous to 1914 he had been engaged in assisting Belgian immigrants to settle on Catholic lands in the West. This experience naturally suggested to him the one of being chased through the United States, in 1914, to go to the country of his mother for the Belgian American National Alliance. Through 1915 and 1916 and until the beginning of May, 1917, he was most of the time in Belgium, making five trips through Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, children, and old men. Get his military passed in Berlin, through the influence of the Belgian Consul-General and the American embassy, and for the year before the United States declaration of war as a courier for the American Legation. With the Germans to travel close behind the lines in Northern France.

It happens that Father De Ville is something of a semi-professional traveler, and during the war has managed to pick up, here and there, various old books of interest to him, under conditions, but of no present military or political significance. During his trips through Belgium and Northern France he would send these to his quarters in the Palace Hotel, Brussels, and when he left the country, in charge of his stock, would carry the old missals and tomes with him across the frontier. Of course, each script and volume would have to be thoroughly examined by the German authorities before it was allowed through, but more than two years of this casual activity, always innocent in appearance as in actuality, established a confidence in him among the higher authorities in Brussels.

As he came into intimate touch with the distressed population, Father De Ville, however, gradually became involved with the fever of clandestine publication which no amount of German vigilance could allay. He found that in the bitter hardships of war there was no welcome to get foreign news that it was not uncommon for men to pay 15 francs for the privilege of looking at a smuggled copy of the Paris Figaro or The London Times for fifteen minutes; these and all other foreign papers were interdicted from circulation in Belgium. Poor men would not only give such amounts from their slender store, but they would, in addition, subject themselves to the risk of fine and imprisonment, which invariably accompanied detection. As the smuggling of the foreign papers in considerable numbers was so difficult, a clandestine publication was established to reproduce important leading articles from abroad, and was called Heberdisant de la Presse Francaise. A partial list of this important publication Mr. Lamont has also obtained from Father De Ville, and, while its historical and literary value is high, it is not so interesting as the other paper, La Libre Belgique, which became, as its sub-title says, "a bulletin of patriotic propaganda."

The German, promptly on the first appearance of La Libre Belgique, testified to their appreciation of its peculiar value by making the possession of it a crime punishable with a fine of from 5,000 to 75,000 francs and imprisonment from ninety days to one year. From time to time they raised this measure of appreciation, until, in 1917, a Belgian citizen apprehended with a copy of it was subject to a fine of 75,000 francs and imprisonment up to ten years, either or both. If any one could have been convicted of its publication, the sentence would have been death, and late in 1916 the German Government, von Bissing, issued a military order naming it the offense of a spy to carry a copy of La Libre Belgique across the frontier. Therefore, any one caught in that act would doubtless have been shot. As a result of these illegal measures, de Ville says it is generally believed in Belgium that between 5,000 and 10,000 copies of each number are issued. The method of circulation is precise and without any system. On the top of the first blank was printed: "Price of privilege from zero to the infinite:
   "vendors will please not go beyond that limit."

Such a vein of humor is in all the announcements. The date line says, "regularly irregular." As a matter of fact, the paper was published fifty-six times in 1915, forty-eight times in 1916, and eleven times in the first three months of 1917. This makes a total of 141 numbers now in Mr. Lamont's hands. In addition he holds fifteen numbers of the second issue, published in 1914 in the French of "J'Accuse." The book first published in Geneva by an ex-officer of Marshal Joffre's forces and since published in England, France, and America.

The telegraphic address is given as "Kamouraskoot, Brussels." That means the Governor General, and to bear out the sardonic audacity of the announce ment it is said that the first copy of each issue is always found by the Governor General on his breakfast table.

Despite every effort he has made to prevent this, each new issue, according to the record, reaches the editor in the same manner. The paper is open to contributions from all patriotic citizens and soldiers, and its managing editor is so roundabout, and goes through so many hands, that it usually reaches him after it has been to Brussels before it can reach its destination. There are no advertisements, and a note in the first issue from Father De Ville to the German domination, we have suppressed the advertising pages, and we are taking all possible steps to keep their money for better days."

Under the heading "Offices and Administration," however, it is impossible for us to have theirs in a place of complete security, they are loaded in a cave automobile." That announcement came in the first issue. Almost a year later the obliging editor of Father De Ville promised to send us a front page, so that the Governor General and others interested might easily identify the picture of the "automobile." It was a commodious and most ingenious publishing plant, arranged on the most modern lines and equipped, apparently, with traction. Its appearance was so distinguished that it is difficult to imagine how meeting it on the highway could have misfired for a war engine. Still, it had not been long before the German espionage system was overestimated.

The notice in the first issue has guided the entire publication. This notice said:

"The idea of this bureau, in sum should consider it as a proof of the readiness of the foreigner to place his patriotism at the disposal of this authority. He will be entertained, if he will not transact it to others without any interference.

The number of papers, forcibly limited, will be the occasion of a considerably effectual public opinion in this country. This is the only object to consolidate a majority of our citizens, Belgium believe anything else. La Libre Belgique will be printed only when under its influence, it will be printed in another. It will not be done in the office. The entire labor shall be voluntary, the publication, for the maintenance of this office, and its equipment which will make our enemies to feel pale and shudder."

No! La Libre Belgique will live in a cave automobile, until the Fourth of July, with all its publications, only in the catacombs. It will live in spite of all obstacles. Failure shall show the German that the Ghetto shall tell the truth, and be engaged in the publication of issues might, stronger than Kultur, something new. The idea of Belgium is the soul of truth and liberty. German statesmen will be taken aback. This is the national and humbly unselfish, mother of the lyre, and freedom. La Libre Belgique will establish that superiority.

La Libre Belgique will be killed before anything else. But it will not be extinguished, for Belgium in the national fire and respect the value of this legend. Therefore, La Libre Belgique will be published without aid, and we are willing to pay any amount.

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For two months later, in the fourteenth number, was printed a leading editorial headed, "Flemish and Wallonia," which was the last of the paper. Note the restraint of the language and the precision of the utterance:

"In this week's edition, attention will be directed to the mainfests of the Government, and the protests of the Flemish and Walloons. The latter have already made clear their determination to keep the money for better days."
should bring closer together the Flemish and the Germans, who are, so they claim, brothers meeting each other after centuries of separation.

This pre-occupation has inspired certain of their publicists to establish the project of an autonomous régime for the Flemish territory. At the same time, curiously, it is observed that the invader installs himself here especially and organizes his administration as if he were to remain there indefinitely.

At the same time much is being done to convince the northern population that the abominable violences characterizing the conquest of Belgium were mere accidents, and that the responsibility for them must fall upon our King and his Government, which sacrificed the country to personal interest.

The thesis elaborated by our northern conqueror is this: The Flemish people by reason of its remote Germanic origin is closely related with the German people and can realize its national aspirations only with the help of the German power, the natural protector of everything German. As a part of Great Germany the Flemings would find the position to which they are entitled, just as have the Bavarians and the Saxons. It is even boldly asserted that this would serve in addition the selfish German purpose of opening the road to the west, and of assuring to Germany an access to the North Sea, facing England.

With all of this campaign we note that Germany does not care to annex the Walloon provinces, with their populations of French origin and language, because they do not want to create a new Alsace-Lorraine at the flanks of the empire. Rather, they would hold them as “exchange money” in the final peace bargaining. Yet they do plainly purpose to retain the Flemish regions, namely, half of the provinces of Limburg and Brabant, Antwerp and the two Flanders.

We content ourselves with reminding our readers of these obvious facts. We will remind them again and again. That is sufficient!

The numbers of La Libre Belgique published since May, 1917, are being collected in Holland for Mr. Lamont and held there for him until after the war.

So La Libre Belgique continues its mysterious career, a constant puzzle and irritation to the German invaders.