

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 a complete file of La Libre Belgique, believed to be the only one in America. Since the beginning of 1915 this small four-page sheet has been published, almost weekly, "somewhere in Belgium," in defiance of the Germans and despite their vigorous and persistent efforts to suppress it. Its publishers have not been caught, though hundreds of arrests have been made "on suspicion." Huge fines have been imposed and long terms in jail endured by those apprehended with it in their possession, but the source of its being, the presses from which it emanates, the "cave automobile" 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 has been permitted. At various times odd numbers have reached this country and have been partially reproduced and commented on, but this is the first time a complete file has been obtainable. The handsome sum realized for the unique publication has been donated, with the mutual consent of the seller, the Rev. Father De Ville, and the buyer, to the Belgian Milk Fund. It is quite possible that before long the entire file will be republished in book form and sold for the benefit of one of the Belgian relief funds.

The story of the smuggling of the paper, or, rather, papers, for there are 115 numbers, out of Belgium is quite as interesting as the paper itself. Father Jean Baptiste De Ville, now on a lecture tour through the Middle West and soon due here, accomplished the feat, at times in danger of his life and always in danger of arrest.

Father De Ville is an Italo-Austro-Belgo-American Catholic priest. He is Cardinal Mercier's personal representative in America. Before the entrance of the United States into the war he was the intermediary between the American Belgium Relief Society and the Church organization in Belgium. Well equipped with letters from the President, the Secretary of State, and from scores of prominent citizens of this country, he traveled to and fro, in and out of Belgium, for more than two years. Born in the Austrian Tyrol of a Belgian mother and an Italian father, he is a naturalized 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 him as the one to be chosen, late 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 there, and bringing out over 700 women, children, and old men. He got his military passes in Berlin, through the influence of the Church and the indorsement of the American Embassy, and for the final year before the United States declared war was the only American permitted by the Germans to travel close behind the lines in Northern France.

It happens that Father De Ville is something of a bibliophile. During his various journeys he managed to pick up, here and there, various old books and manuscripts, easy of access in war 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



Front Page of "La Libre Belgique" Making Sport of the Late Governor General von Bissing's Efforts to Catch the Elusive Editor.

when he left the country, in charge of his flock, 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 imbued with the fever of clandestine publication which no amount of German vigilance could allay. He found that in far-off hamlets people were so eager 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 Hebdomadaire la Presse Française. A partial file of this important publication Mr. Lamont has also obtained from Father De Ville, and, while its historical and antiquarian 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 Germans, 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 Governor General, 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.

Father 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 precarious and without any system. On the top of the first bulletin was printed: "Price, elastic, from zero to the infinite—vendors will please not go beyond that limit."

A similar 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 115 numbers now in Mr. Lamont's hands. In addition he holds fifteen numbers of a supplement, which is a republication, in French of "J'Accuse," the book first published in Geneva by an ex-officer of the German Army and since published in England, France, and America.

The telegraphic address is given as "Kommardatur, Brussels." That means the Governor General, and to bear out the sardonic audacity of the announcement 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 tale, comes to him in this informal manner. The paper is open to contributions from all patriotic citizens and solicits them, but the method of reaching the editor is so roundabout, and goes through so many hands, that it usually requires fifteen days for a contribution to reach its destination. There are no advertisements, and a note in the first issue said: "Business being nil under the German domination, we have suppressed the advertising pages, and we advise our customers to keep their money for better days."

Under the heading "Offices and Administration" appears this: "Inasmuch as it is impossible for us to have these in a place of complete security, they are located in a cave automobile." That announcement came in the first issue. Almost a year later the obliging editor of La Libre Belgique reproduced on his front page, so that the Governor General and others interested might easily identify the place, a picture of the "cave automobile." It was a commodious and most ingenious publishing plant, arranged in three large sections, well equipped, apparently, with traction. Its appearance was so distinguished that it is difficult to imagine how any sleuth meeting it on the highway could have mistaken it for a war engine. Still, it has not been located. Can it be possible that the German espionage system is overestimated?

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

Those to whom this bulletin is sent should consider it as a proof of the confidence the editors have in their patriotism and discretion. They will pass it on to their friends, also reliable, who will transmit it to others without any delay.

The number of papers, forcibly limited, will, in this way, produce a fairly considerable effect upon public opinion in Brussels.

Our sole object is to consolidate a majority of our citizens. Belgians before anything else. La Libre Belgique will be printed today in this cave, tomorrow in another. It will not be like those newspapers which are published and distributed profusely with the authorization, the protection, and the encouragement of the Germans, and which help our enemies to lull asleep and discourage our patriotism.

No! La Libre Belgique will live in a cave, and propagate, like Catholicism in the catacombs. It will live in spite of persecution and official censure because it shall tell the truth, and because there is something stronger than might, stronger than Kultur, something stronger than the Germans—the truth! And Belgium is the soil of truth and liberty.

Germany is the country of might and haughtiness, mother of the lie and hypocrisy. La Libre Belgique will establish that especially.

La Libre Belgique will be patriotic before anything else. But it will not be aggressive, for Belgium is the staunch friend of peace and respects the propriety and liberty of its fellow-men. Therefore, La Libre Belgique will be in principle against conquest and in favor of international arbitration and conciliation. However, it will not oppose national defense. Pacifism should not be confounded with anti-militarism.

La Libre Belgique will respect everybody's convictions and will be partisan to the union of all Belgians for the defense of our constitutional liberties. It is our belief that these liberties constitute for the time being the best means for everybody to live in peace and grow in power within our boundaries.

Three months later, in the fourteenth number, was printed a leading editorial headed, "Flemish and Walloons," which outlines the whole policy of the paper. Note the restraint of the language and the precision of the utterance:

The Belgians follow with attention the manoeuvres of the German authorities in their attempt to gain the sympathy of the Flemish population. Since the first days of the occupation they have endeavored to make a marked distinction between the Flemish and Walloons, pointing out that everything

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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 there 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.

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