

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter III. **SUMMER**

AND so the season ends and it is June. The captains and the kings depart ; the princes and the dukes, the counts and the barons follow to their châteaux in the country, if they had châteaux, or to their various cures, or if they remained at home they closed their houses. And if through those charming narrow old streets that wind and twist and turn in the lower town the people swarmed and life went on in all its essentials as it had done for eleven centuries, the Quartier Léopold was silent and deserted, the heavy shutters were up at all its windows, the white façades stared purblindly in the summer sun, now and then an old *fiacre* with a prodigious clatter rattled over its cobble-stones, and only servants went in and out of the great doors.

And Brussels settled down to its long summer somnolence. The Ministries over in the Rue de la Loi were dim and cool and half deserted, and the relations between Belgium and America so cordial that there was not often much to be discussed. Promptly at noon the rumble of the city ceased and every one went home to luncheon, and for two hours the town was as still as though it had been deserted. Late in the afternoon every one went for a stroll along the boulevards and out the Avenue Louise, or drove through the Bois de la Cambre, the loveliest of woods. Or one could go to the Park and hear the music of the military bands that played every afternoon.

I am conscious that I write with an enthusiasm that is not *à la mode* in a too sophisticated world, but I own without shame that long before I went there to live ; I fell captive to the strange charm of Brussels. Nothing, for instance, irritated me more than to hear that old and oft-repeated *cliché* of incorrigible banality to the effect that s Brussels is a Little Paris." To the tourist gaping at Ste.-Gudule or in the Grand' Place, Baedeker in hand, perhaps yes ; but one does not know a city merely because one has visited it and seen its principal sights. I recall often, and I recall now with the pang that there is in the thought that lie is of this world no more, with his gaiety and his Irish wit — he fell in Flanders — a remark made to me once by Tom Kettle, one of the brilliant young Irish members of the House of Parliament. It was years ago at Dublin. We were speaking of the old town's peculiar charm, and Kettle, with his amused, tolerant, and somewhat proprietary love of it, said :

"Stop in Dublin three days and you think you know it ; stop three weeks and you begin to doubt ; stop three years and you realize that you will never penetrate her mystery."

Now that I have written the words down I have a consciousness of having repeated them somewhere before — perhaps in another book wherein I said something about the personality of cities. For cities are like women in respect of the evanescent and impressionistic quality that is suggested by the word charm ; they have it or they have it not : one does not know why, and if one seeks to define or to analyse it, it is quite apt to vanish away.

My own enthusiasm for Brussels was of long standing. I too in years gone by, at a time when nothing would have seemed more improbable than the thought that I should ever live there — I too, in my quality of gaping tourist, had gazed at the Grand' Place and at Ste.-Gudule and at the Manneken, had seen all the sights recommended in the guide-books. And I had caught some sense, however inadequate, of the peculiar intimate charm of that highly original personality which makes Brussels unique

among the cities of the world. It is the airiest of memories— an evening when I looked from the window of my hotel and saw a crowd of youths and maidens in a mist of gentle rain, drifting gaily in a dance down the street, where the long reflection of the lamp-lights wavered in the shining wet surface of the asphalt. I have spoken of that scene somewhere else, and if it seems too trivial to repeat, it is yet important as an implication of that gaiety, of that *insouciance*, that love of pleasure which has characterized the Belgian people all the way along the sad calvary of its history. It is as characteristic of the Walloons as it is of the Flemish, and it persists to-day as strong, as ineradicable, as it was in those long-vanished clays that are kept so vividly alive in the painting of Jordaens and of Teniers. There one beholds in bright, immortal colours the love of the feasting and the frolic and the fun, the dancing, the eating and the drinking, the coarse pleasure in which Verhaeren has found the poetical material for some of the most charming of his vignettes.

The Walloons and the Flemish meet in Brussels, and it is there that is accomplished that *amalgame* which makes the Belgian nation, and it is from the contributions of both that is formed that character which makes Brussels as unlike Paris as New York is unlike San Francisco. To the superficial and half-blind eye there are, of course, many resemblances, as in the architecture, which is generally of the French tradition and influence, save where the Spanish touch is shown in the old gables of the lower town, or the German heaviness in certain buildings that marked the German invasion of the *ante-bellum* days. Perhaps one of the things that makes the two cities seem alike to the traveller who is always repeating the tiresome banality, is the fact that in both cities the people sit at tables on the sidewalks before the cafés in the afternoons and sip their drinks. But if he were to sit at one of those tables in Brussels a while he would begin to note not merely superficial but implicit differences ; in the language first of all — that is, if he happened to know French. They speak French at Brussels, of course, but they speak Flemish too, and when outside of the Quartier Léopold they speak French, it is apt to be a French that is a translation of Flemish modes of thought, so that another dialect is formed, which degenerates into a savoury patois spoken by the Maroliens, the inhabitants of that swarming quarter which lies along the Rue Haute and the Rue Blaes, below the hill on which the Palais de Justice lifts its heavy and imposing mass. The patois is a mixture of Flemish and Walloon French, and nobody outside the Quartier des Marolles understands it except the policemen and detectives of the city. In the *petite bourgeoisie* it becomes intelligible, and its fine distinctions are shown in that charming play whose fancy and humour are to be attributed to M. Fernand Wicheler, as its stagecraft is to be accredited to M. Frans Fonson — *Le Mariage de Mademoiselle Beulemans*. The play depends for its appeal on the distinction there is between the French and the Belgian, between Paris and Brussels, and shows accurately what each thinks of the other.

The French have always made fun of the Belgians, as they have made fun of Englishmen and of Americans, as they have made fun of everybody and everything, including themselves. Their wit is apt at times to be rather sharp, with the cutting quality of finely tempered steel. They have more wit than humour ; the word does not exist in their language, and where they adopt our own word they sometimes seem to lose themselves in their use of it. The Belgians, however, have humour — in the Flemish blood whose strain is somewhere in the veins of ail of them—and they have all those lovable qualities that go with humour. This it is that makes *l'esprit bruxellois* quite another thing from that of Paris and endows it with a personality and a quality all its own, so that Brussels has a word of its own to express it — *la zwanze*.

I shall not attempt to define it or to make any one appreciate it. To do that one must live in Brussels and loiter during long afternoons in the crowded, narrow, sloping streets of the lower town, lunch in the Little restaurants in the neighbourhood of the Grand' Place or along the Quai au Bois-à-Brûler, and somehow learn to know and appreciate the tang and flavour of the local accent, and, by slow degrees, find one's way into and be accepted by the great heart of the city that is not like any other in the world.

Brand WITHLOCK

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