

Belgium and Her Relations To The Great War

An Address Delivered in the Oddfellows' Hall by Dr. H. M. Mosdell, Under the Auspices of Atlantic Lodge, No. 1, I. O. O. F.—Published by Request Of the Lodge Committee

AFTER the splendid series of lectures and papers on the great war, to which the citizens of St. John's have been treated by some of our leading men and women during the last few weeks, it appears to me almost as a case of "bringing coals to Newcastle" to attempt to add anything to the general knowledge of the causes that led up to the present terrible conflict or of the great issues that are being decided by force of arms on the stricken fields of Europe. Still, while I do not hope to measure up to the standard recently set on public platforms in this city in dealing with a subject of such magnitude, I yet hope to be able to emphasise some of the great principles, in defence of which Great Britain and her Allies now find themselves at death-grips with the greatest military power that has ever figured in world history.

Six months ago a pistol was fired in the streets of Sarajevo, in the Bosnian Province of Austria-Hungary. It smote and killed the heir to the Austrian throne. Austria claimed that the assassination of her Crown Prince was due to the machinations of the Servians, who, it was well known, had always resented the annexation of this former Turkish holding to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. So Austria set herself to obtain satisfaction of the Servians and, unfortunately for the peace of Europe, overstepped the bounds of reason in her demands on the little Balkan Kingdom. Before negotiations had proceeded very far it became apparent that the Dual Monarchy was more anxious for war than for any peaceful settlement of the tragic question at issue and then Russia stepped in.

Russia
Champions Servia
Russia couldn't afford to see Austria-Hungary absorb or even humble Servia. Besides, she is related to the Servians, whose aims and aspirations closely correspond to her own. So the Russians intimated to the Austrians the undesirability of picking an open quarrel with Servia and by com-

encing to mobilise their gigantic army rather broadly hinted that they were prepared to expostulate by deed as well as by word.

And now, once again, Germany acted "the goat." If there be anything at which the Germans excel it is in acting this role. It is by no means ancient history how a German admiral "butted in" when the United States and Spain were endeavoring to settle a little quarrel of theirs down Cuba way. And Uncle Sam turned that admiral down hard, very much so. Most of us, too, can remember the "Panther" and her bluff at interfering with France in Morocco, that almost precipitated a general European War in 1905. But France maintained a firm stand and the Agadir Incident was settled without resort to arms.

So, in the Year of Our Lord 1914, Germany interfered in a matter that was no concern of hers and that could have been settled amicably and without loss of prestige to her Austrian ally.

But Germany felt that "the day" had arrived when she was in a position to measure swords with the rest of Europe. To the military-mad caste that has ensnatched her better classes that tragic assassination in Sarajevo must have appealed almost as a dispensation of Providence—I speak in all reverence—giving them an excuse for embroiling their neighbors in war, just when these neighbors least expected anything of the kind and so were in no wise prepared for it.

And Germany Got Her Answer

So Germany ordered Russia to cease mobilising or to fight. Well, she got her answer in plain round terms and is still learning on many a bloody conflict on the Eastern frontier that a Russia convinced of the justice of her cause is an opponent that not even the precisely-trained legionaries of the Kaiser can trifle with.

almost unawares, had scarcely begun to mobilise.

Now you have practically all the pieces in position on the European battlefield. Russia, Germany, France, Austria, Servia arrayed in arms. The world appalled at approaching Armageddon. A conflict in prospect whose magnitude eclipses the greatest struggles of ancient or modern times. Millions of men in arms; implements of warfare, undreamed of a few generations ago and appalling in their dire effects on a battlefield, ready to vomit death and destruction on man and the works of man's hands; scientific inventions, devilish in their very ingenuity, at hand to snuff out human lives by the thousands, aye by hundreds of thousands.

How Britain Was Brought In

But where do we come in? Why should Great Britain and her Overseas Dominions be embroiled in such a conflict? If Austria had a quarrel with Servia and started in to settle affairs in conclusive fashion, what did it matter to us if Russia did interfere on the ground that the Austrian method was altogether too severe for the Servian offence? Or further what if Germany did tell Russia to "keep out" and so precipitated another row? And if Germany felt like stirring up further trouble for herself with France, why not let the belligerents go to it in their own fashion?

We were not attacked; we were not threatened. Germany even went out of her way to be nice to us. She tried to persuade us that the row in progress in Europe was none of our concern and that we would be more than ill-advised to meddle. Yet we did meddle. We have poured men and supplies into Europe in unprecedented numbers and quantities. We have our feet hard at it on the seas. We have lost ships worth millions of dollars. We have lost lives, thousands of them, on sea and on land—the lives of our ablest, the best, the bravest of our manhood. Why?

Because there came a time, in the course of the European controversy,

when Great Britain faced a question of principle. Set down at the foot of "a scrap of paper" guaranteeing the inviolability of Belgian territory was the signature of Great Britain. Germany's was there too, but Germany considered this no reason for modifying any of her plans or for altering her course of action. It was desirable—aye, necessary—to the success of her designs upon France for her troops to march across the practically unfortified territory of Belgium, thus avoiding the highly fortified eastern Franco-German frontier and enabling the Kaiser's armies to launch a swift, paralyzing blow on France, at a moment when France was unprepared to ward it off.

Britain's Word Her Bond

But Great Britain held that her signature was her bond. That "scrap of paper" embodied a contract into which Great Britain and the other European Powers had entered with Belgium. And they had jointly and severally bound themselves not to violate the independence or the neutrality of Belgium and to resist the attempt of any other power to embroil that little Kingdom in war. Belgium, on her part, had promised not to give cause for offence to her neighbors. This part of the contract she scrupulously observed. It has never once been suggested that the Belgians had anything whatever to do with the inception of the great European conflict. They were drawn into it when their powerful neighbor Germany set aside all obligations of international honor and invaded their country and then, like the stouthearted folk that they are, they struck hard and decisively for independence.

Germany broke her contract with Belgium because it was to her own interest to do so and because she knew that Belgium was not powerful enough to resist the wrong done her. That is plain enough from the utterances of German public men themselves. Brutally explicit on this point is the utterance of the German Chancellor in the Reichstag on August 5, when he said:

"We find ourselves in a state of necessity, and necessity knows no law. Our troops have occupied Luxembourg. Perhaps already they have entered on Belgian territory. That is in conflict with the determination of the rights of nations. The French Government have, it is true, declared in Brussels that they will respect the neutrality of Belgium so long as the opponent respects it. We know, however, that France is ready to fall into Belgium. France can wait. We, however, cannot, and a French attack on our flank on the Lower Rhine could have been fatal. Thus we were compelled to ignore the protests of the Governments of Luxembourg and Belgium."

The wrong which we are thereby doing we will endeavor to make good as soon as our military aim is achieved. He who, as we strive for the highest prize can only think how he is to hack his way through.

Herr von Jagow, the German Secretary of State, also declared that Germany had been "obliged" to take this step in order to advance into France by the easiest and quickest way. And that this was "a matter of life and death to them."

Admit Own Dishonor

In fact, of all the host of pamphleteers who have hastened to champion the German cause there has not been found one courageous enough to contend that Germany acted honestly toward Belgium. For the most part they are truthful enough to admit that the exigencies of the case made it necessary for the Germans to act as they did.

To cite a particular instance, the author of a pamphlet addressed to the people of the United States, says "The German General Staff was obliged to force this passage in order to avoid the necessity of meeting the enemy on the most unfavorable ground." Unfortunately for the correctness of the title he chooses for his pamphlet—"The Truth About Germany"—he is not equally exact in some of the other "facts" he cites in connection with the Great War.

Germany then stands, self-confessed, as the "violinist of the rights of a neighbor." More than that all the evidence convicts her of malice aforethought. The "necessity" pleaded by the German Chancellor of "hacking through" Belgium referred to the pre-conceived German plan to meet just such a case. Germany had constructed a network of railways for military purposes. They ran up to the Belgian frontier and not to the frontier between France and Germany. Why? It will scarcely be contended that Germany feared an attack from Belgium and had thus prepared the means of transport to cope with it. Rather, Germany had long decided that it was to her interest to avoid the French fortifications to the East and to be prepared to mass huge armies on the

frontier of Belgium when "the day" arrived so as to march them into France by the easier route which led across that country which she regarded as practically defenceless.

Britain HAD To Interfere

Germany acted dishonorably; that fact is beyond cavil. But we could not condone our dishonor, had we broken our contract with Belgium, by pleading the misconduct of Germany. It will scarcely be contended that "two wrongs make a right" or that following the example of the original evil-doer mitigates any offence we may commit against the eternal principles of truth, righteousness and fair-dealing. Germany was a signatory of the treaty; Germany broke it because it was not in her interest to keep it. I refuse to believe that there is a single person here to-night who would dream of defending great Britain on the same grounds.

To us has descended a glorious heritage. It puts us in possession of all that make life worth living. Free institutions; self-government; freedom of thought; freedom of worship; freedom of action—with reasonable limitations, set by ourselves.

But ours is also the obligation to defend this heritage and to maintain also the traditions of those heroes of old, who freely gave of their hearts blood that a coming generation—our generation—might be free. It was this heroic ancestry that established the tradition that Britain is above all else faithful to her obligations, whether to the peoples who live under the Union Jack or to those of other nationalities with whom she does business of any kind.

It has always been the Briton's boast that the honesty and integrity of his nation is above suspicion. "Our word our bond" is the magic maxim that has enabled us to do business on amicable terms with all comers. It has bound Canada, Australia, India, South Africa and the Isles of the Sea to the Motherland with chains that are as imperishable as the principle it embodies.

Do You Know?

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Can you imagine Britain otherwise? Nay, rather, can you imagine noonday without the sun in the heavens? So, we responded to the appeal of Belgium and came to her help against the unscrupulous invader. Like one of the greatest of historic figures we could "do no other."

We "Could Do No Other"

Some have said that we have no business in this fight; that we need have helped neither France nor Belgium and that our navy was all-sufficient to protect us against any possible menace from abroad. He is a false Briton who raises such a cry. Nations, like individuals, are interdependent. No man lives to himself; no nation works out its destiny irrespective of its neighbors.

Just as it would be impossible for you to look on unmoved while a highwayman assaulted and robbed a law-abiding fellow-citizen, so was it impossible for Great Britain to stand aloof and watch a system of military tyranny crush out the democracy of Belgium, insignificant though she was amongst the Great Nations of Europe. And this irrespective of any international bond.

Your true man needs no signed agreement to move him to defend the cause of the oppressed and the needy. Manliness is instinctive with regard to fair-play and square dealing and will of itself inspire him in whose bosom it is found to champion these high principles.

What inclines the Italians to favor

(Continued on page 3)

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