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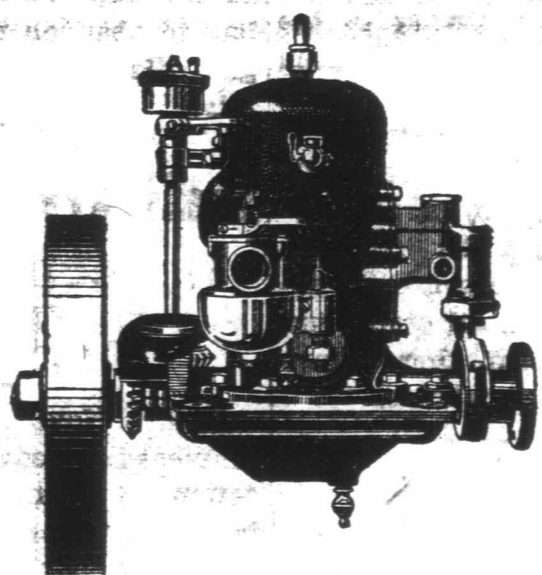
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The Belgians in England

By an American Resident in Britain.

(National Magazine, Oct., 1915)

It has been very sad to see the many Belgian people here who have been driven from their homes. They have met with great kindness from the British people, who have taken them into their homes and are caring for them in every way. It has been found more satisfactory to give their temporary homes by themselves, so numerous furnished houses have been lent to them and hundreds of other houses and flats have been temporarily furnished for them. They are much happier by themselves, preparing their own food and living in their own way. In such instances they are either provided with the food each week or with a regular weekly allowance of money.

At first they were discouraged in their wishes to secure work, and it caused some unhappiness among them, for they are naturally so very industrious. Now that all kinds of labor has become so scarce, the assistance of the refugees is welcomed, and is better all around. They are splendid munition workers. Immediately after Christmas we had a Belgian woman and her three half-grown children with us for a little over a month. They were superior people and had been, before the war, of considerable wealth. They came from Liege where the husband still remains trying to protect their property. He is, or was, a member of the "guard civique," not being eligible for the army because of frail health.

You may notice that I am not mentioning his name. It is for this reason: So many letters go astray these days and information in them is used to the disadvantage of innocent people. When people are highly connected, the Germans would be very glad of any information concerning them. The wife Madame — has told me many interesting bits of news of the first few days or weeks of war, and I saw many of her letters received from her people. Of course there are no letters now, as the Germans severely punish any Belgian who sends or receives a letter without its passing first through their hands, and a letter that goes through their hands is worse than no letter.

A sister of hers was imprisoned for five days because she wrote a letter to her son who was in Holland. This same sister has had some interesting experiences with German officers. Her husband is a physician and obliged by Germans to work in their hospitals, and in times of rush I understand she is also sent in to help, as she is very clear at nursing. She always has at least five German officers in her home to provide for daily, and so far they have done no worse than steal her front door, which was so much admired that they deemed it worthy to be sent to Germany. You see, the city she lives in is noted for its beautiful old front doors, or it was noted for them. The doors are nearly all in Germany now.

At about Christmas time the German officers convinced Madame —'s sister that her son (seventeen and nineteen years), who had been sent over to England for safety, were in great danger because terrible things were to happen there, so she was allowed five days to come and get them, and her husband's life to be the price of her failure to return in that time. So convinced was she that her boys would not be safe in England that she insisted upon taking them back in spite of everything told her to the contrary here. However, she was persuaded to leave them in Holland, and is very thankful now when she knows they would have been sent as prisoners to Germany had she taken them back into Belgium.

I have talked with many of the Belgians and they all agree in their stories of the harshness of the German treatment of Belgium. One nice young woman from Brussels has told me of her own talks with the refugees from Louvain as they arrived, terrified, in Brussels. Some of her own relatives were among those driven before the German soldiers when the Belgian army was making its heroic stand against them. Some were crazed by their experiences and could not talk or tell of their sufferings.

One of the questions I ask all Belgians in this: "Preceding the war, did Belgians fear that France might violate the neutrality of Belgium in order to attack Germany? You know Germany claims that France intended to do this. The answer has always been, 'No, we have long feared Germany, but never France.'"

In March, before the outbreak of war, a cousin of Madame — went to Germany for several weeks' work connected with his business, and soon after his arrival, quite by accident, he stumbled upon the knowledge that Germany was getting ready for the invasion of Belgium. He made certain that it was true and rushed back to his country, going at once with his information to the highest quarters.

He met with disbelief from some, while others believed him, but there was no unity one way or the other. He gave no heed to his business, and went about publicly lecturing on what he had learned and sent thousands of postcards all over Belgium. A few believed him, but the great majority laughed at him or said, "Yes, sometime, but not now."

This man is one of the people now sought after by the Germans. I am told the German blacklist is posted in all the Committee rooms established here for the relief of the Belgian refugees, so that they may all know to whom it is unsafe to return to Belgium. This man is in England and has no intention of returning for sometime.

Of course you have heard of the German atrocities and no doubt, like most other people, found them unbelievable until convinced by Germany herself that it was quite possible. I have enough first-hand stories to make me believe anything of Germany today.

One thing has especially impressed me, practically all the Belgians that I have talked with express sympathy for the German soldiers. There seems to be little bitterness against them, but the German officers come in for most violent hatred. Over and over they have told me of the soldiers telling them they did not wish to fight the Belgians, and also of how the soldiers were told they were in France when really only in Belgium, and of the surprise and sorrow among these ordinary soldiers when they learned the truth.

Of course I do not know how they feel about it now, perhaps the seeds of hate sown in their hearts by their superiors has taken root and produced a flourishing growth.

You speak of my work among the Belgians, and that you are interested to know about it, but it is nothing, only a "wee drop in the bucket," of which there is little to tell. Some of my good American friends sent me boxes of clothing that I distributed personally or handed over to one of the committees for that purpose.

It has been and is a big task to feed and clothe these unfortunate people, the majority of them being people who before the war were accustomed to the comforts and luxuries of life. Comparatively few of the poor or peasant class escaped to England. They, as always, suffer cruelly in this awful war. The work that has interested me the most is sending comforts to the men at the front.

I am particularly interested in the Belgian soldiers. It is impossible for them to "write home" for what they want, and their people can send nothing, so I try to help a little there, but as I said before, it is such a little.

Perhaps you would like to know what I send them. Socks, shirts, towels, carbolic soap, candles, leather boot laces, mittens, scarves, condensed milk, chocolate and acid drops, insect powder, tooth brushes and tooth powder, and cigarettes! Oh, how they crave those cigarettes! They are very grateful for everything but the cigarettes call forth everlasting blessings. In every box I also send a nice big fat fruit cake, and it delights them.

Since I began this letter my cook has had a letter from her brother, who is a "Tommy" at the front. In the winter he had his feet frozen and poisoned as a result of four days in the trenches with the water above his knees. The water was very foul and many dead were in it, and it was impossible for the men to stand erect or exercise to keep warm, because the Germans were near, and it so much as a finger appeared it was instantly shot.

Reinforcements were delayed in reaching them and nearly his whole company were wiped out. He is a nice, honest-faced English boy of nineteen years. Now he writes that it is dreadful over there, very hot and neither side able to bury their dead, and the pest of flies make life hardly worth living. He says the dead are literally black with flies, and the sights and odors are almost unbearable.

This is horrid to tell you, but I have come to the point where I think people must know the horrid things in order that they may truly realize the horrors of war and perhaps wake up to the uselessness and the imbecility of it all.

However, until all the nations or a strong enough majority to wake up and agree that war shall not be, I believe that every country should be prepared. That brings me to the thought of my own dear country. The longer I remain away from the U.S.A. the more proud I am to be an American and the stronger grows my wish to return.

THERE is naturally much interest just now in the attitude of the U.S.A. and her action in regard to the reply to her Lusitania Note from

Germany. I have never heard any British person express a desire for the U.S.A. to come into the war, indeed I think the government especially wants her to stay out. They seem to think the U.S.A. is more useful to the Allies as a neutral than she would be as an active ally.

On the other hand, they cannot understand America's "silence" and "patience." At present they do not understand and they do not respect or admire her for it; indeed I have heard many disagreeable and sneering remarks from those who care not if they hurt by their words, while real friends take pains to avoid the subject, or else confine themselves to questions or perhaps polite excuses for America. You see, they do not understand how America, standing for all she does, could have remained silent when Belgium was invaded.

Just between you and me, whatever America might do would meet with sharp criticism here. We find the travelled Britisher a really splendid and delightful person. He, having been to America, appreciates it and the American people, but the great majority of people here do not like Americans. In the first place, they don't want to know.

Americans are, to some extent, to blame for this. They come over here in their thousands and make many great mistakes in their conduct here. I think the average American is so passionately proud of being an American and so generously eager that others should know and share his blessings that he is apt to talk too much. The very fact that so many Americans do come over here convinces the people that we have nothing worth while at home to see or keep us there. Down deep in their hearts they have never forgiven us for our old revolt. I have actually had people ask me if the "better class of Americans do not feel that it was a mistake," and also if I do not think the time will come when we will return to the fold. You see we are really the "prodigal son" and the "fatted calf" awaits us.

Seriously, though, I do feel this war is bringing the two countries into a better knowledge and understanding of each other. The British are a fine people; I wish it were possible for us to make them our warm friends. Our differences are more in terms of expression than in fact.

Especially would I like to tell you many readers of the intense gratitude of the Belgian people to the Americans for what they have done and for what they are doing for them and their stricken country. So many times have I heard them say with deep emotion in speaking of the Americans, "Oh, they are so good; they are so good!"

A refugee from Liege told me this story: In the winter, two Belgians, working for the American Relief Commission, were stopped and roughly treated by German officials, who took from them the small American flags they were wearing and ordered them to wear no badges without their permission. News of this was quickly spread among the inhabitants, and next day practically the whole population appeared with American flags pinned on their breasts. She said the shops could not begin to supply the demand, but that did not prevent their quick and private manufacture.

Now I have taken up a lot of your time with this long and rambling letter, which was intended only to let you know we exiles do thoroughly appreciate being remembered when so far away from home. There is also the hope that you, with your great opportunities and wide acquaintance with our loved fellow-countrymen, when speaking of the Belgian people, give assurance of their heartfelt gratitude to the great and generous American people.

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