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The Land of Mighty Battles

Recent Impressions of Belgian Cities That Held Back the German War Machine

By LESLIE ROZE

WHAT is Belgium like? Belgium, this little country which has just startled the world by opposing her puny strength to the might of the German War Lord! To the eyes of the ordinary beholder, Belgium is very much like England—in fact, if you were to sail down the Meuse



The author in Brussels.

you might as well be sailing down the Wye, except that instead of old ruined castles you would come upon mediaeval towns, quiet, sleepy, little places that seem to put you back into the seventeenth century. Namur is one of these—as you step off onto the quay you are alongside one of the quaint, old streets, opposite is the little cafe with its tables outside and its funny awnings striped with many colours. You can eat “en plein air” and make the most of the faint breeze from the river. Be sure you see the cathedral of St. Gudule, with its great carvings. To return to our

motors, or rather our boat. I said the valley of the Meuse was like that of the English Wye. You will see the same rocky, wooded heights, the same sloping fields, but with this difference—instead of large fields of waving corn, strips of various crops are sown, looking like long green and yellow ribbons of various hues. The reason for this is that under the Belgian law each time the farmer dies the estate is divided among the sons, so that each succeeding generation sees smaller and smaller farms.

The whole of the district of the Ardennes is so like any of the hilly parts of rural England that a description of the one might easily pass for a description of the other. But there is one natural feature in this district worthy of notice. Near Rochefort is the celebrated Grotto of Hann, the largest underground cavern in Europe and one of the largest in the world—the one in the Peak in Derbyshire is a very pigmy beside it. You enter a long, dim corridor, and as the eye becomes accustomed to the dimness, begin to make out dripping stalactites on either side. Walking carefully over the uneven floor you at length emerge into a large chamber called the Cathedral on account of a marvellous arrangement of stalactites and stalagmites at one end, resembling the pipes of a cathedral organ. If you are wealthy you can have the place lighted with electricity, for powerful lamps have been installed, but if you are wise you will let your guide light you by strips of magnesium wire—the flickering lights and shadows help to carry on the illusion of this underground world, and presently you must stumble through vaults, and more dim corridors with only the beams of a little candle to point the way until at last a halt is called and the guide lights torches.

Now you must climb a steep conical hill, and when you reach the top join in “God Save the King” and the Belgian National Anthem. After this you will descend the other side of the hill, at the foot

of which flows a river, a veritable Styx. You will soon discern a funny, little boat, into which your guide helps you, and now you can see nothing and hear nothing but the splash of oars in the darkness. Someone begins to sing “Lead Kindly Light” and presently a pale ray gleams—you can see shadowy forms in the boat—a little longer and your boat glides out into the broad daylight. You have left the world of shadows and are standing near the door by which you entered the cavern. It seems ages since you started—you blink and rub your eyes, and wonder if it wasn't all a dream.

St. Hubert, a small town on the outskirts of the Ardennes, gives you some idea of the natural advantages of Belgium with respect to fortifications. It is on a rock with steep sides. High up on the rock is a beautiful cathedral dedicated to the Saint to which the town owes its name. St. Hubert seems to have been concerned in some kind of adventure with a stag, though what precisely I never could make out—all the accounts being so discursive that the main narrative was lost in the telling. However, every shop and stall in the place exhibits stags in varying sizes and of every available material. The vendors appear to think it a matter of the gravest importance that you should purchase at least one stag—though when I asked why they seemed rather nonplussed for the moment, then let off a stream of words at the conclusion of which I was exactly as wise as I had been at the beginning—but I bought a stag. There is a large French element in Belgium. Nearly all the girls in the shops are French, which accounts for their volubility. And French is the language of the educated classes.

BRUSSELS, the capital, is one of the cleanest and prettiest towns I have ever seen—broad avenues of trees everywhere and right through the town, beautifully laid-out gardens. As all the world knows, a good deal of lace-making is carried on. In the shopping streets you will often see neat French girls seated at the doors of the various establishments, pillow on knee and fingers flashing in and

out among the bobbins. Should you pause, interested in the intricacies of the lace-making, there will always be a bright smile for you:

“Madame would perhaps like to see some lace? Madame needs not to buy. We have beautiful lace inside. I shall show Madame. Yes?”—I do not think Madame will emerge without some lace.

There is a most extraordinary collection of pictures in Brussels, painted by a man named Wiertz. He was considered quite mad, and judging by the subjects chosen, I think must have been so—but the painting is clever and the gallery is worth seeing.

BRUSSELS is a very musical town, and only the best music has any market. The opera season lasts from October until June, and after that there are the outdoor concerts at the Vauxhall Gardens. In fact there is music all over Belgium, the Belgians being great lovers of music. Every little town has its “Kursaal,” or public garden, and it is the custom for the inhabitants to foregather there on summer evenings and, seated at little tables, to discuss the events of the day and listen to the really good band discoursing sweet music. Generally speaking, there is no charge for admission, but one is expected to order a “soup or lemonade” or some such refreshment. I commend the idea to this country, where there are so many long, fine evenings. The expense of a good band to be provided by the municipality would not be prohibitive, and some such innocent amusement would do far more to stop drinking and cost less than all the temperance campaigns. But this is a digression!

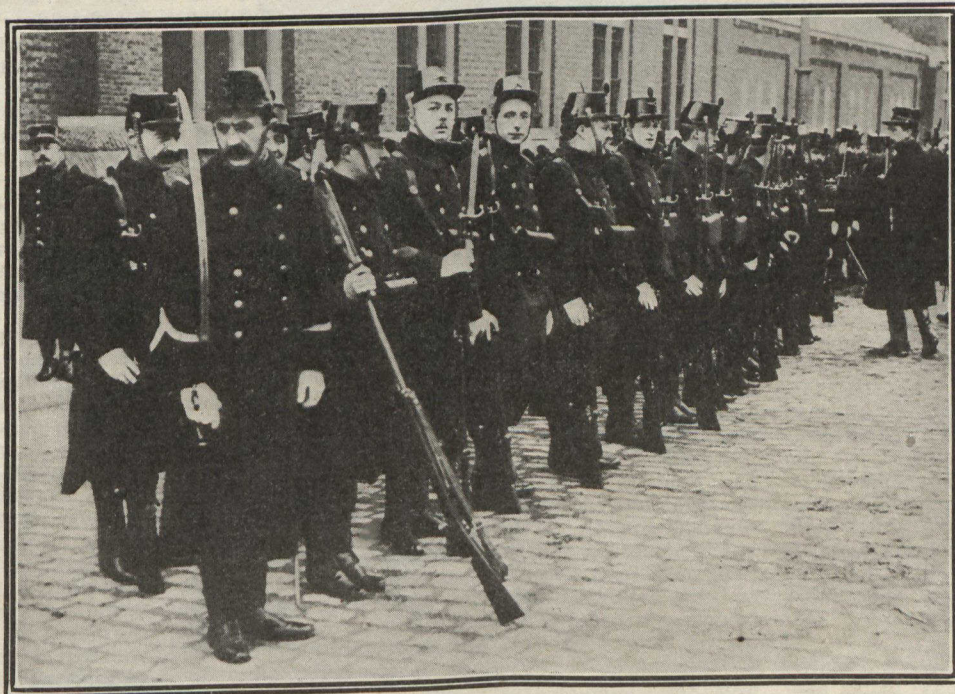
The country around Brussels is flat and the roads good. It is no unusual thing to meet loaded waggons 60 miles from the town. In fact, as far as transport is concerned, Belgium is unusually well served, for the whole country is intersected by canals. By means of the canal connecting the sea with the Rhine, goods can be conveyed to the middle of Europe, some hundreds of miles. The railways are numerous and state-owned. They have a convenient arrangement for tourists—you can get a “Bundreise” ticket, which means that for a specified price you can get a ticket enabling you to travel wherever you

like over the Belgian roads during a specified time. There is no distance limit. You can go wherever you like within the time indicated. The railroads lose a good deal over this, but as it attracts so many visitors who, of course, spend money in the country, the Government considers this policy justified.

The field of Waterloo, a few miles from Brussels, is a tiresome journey, and unless one is a student of military tactics will hardly repay a visit. It is just a field, the points of interest are far apart and there is nothing to the ordinary observer to identify the place with the mighty struggle of former years.

Bruges is more interesting, for, though one of the dead cities, she has preserved much of her ancient grandeur. Part of the old walls are still standing and the fine cathedral, which replaces a very ancient edifice built in the seventh century. In the days of her greatness, ships used to sail from England and the Mediterranean direct to Bruges, but during the fifteenth century the old sea entrance through the Zwin Channel gradually filled with sand, and from that time her prosperity declined. Antwerp stepped into her place—helped largely by the

(Concluded on page 18.)



Before the Germans had begun the invasion of Liege the Civil Guard of Brussels, the Belgian Capital, was called out. The Government offices have since been removed to Antwerp. Brussels is now occupied by the Germans.