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An Appreciation of Belgium and the Belgians

By JOHN D. CLARK

I have a very vivid recollection of my first evening in Belgium. I landed from a trans-Atlantic steamer at Antwerp late one afternoon, and in company with a Belgian, put up at a very old tavern, which my companion said, "Tourists have never heard of." It was an Antwerp holiday. The streets were decorated, and the folk were seated at café tables on the sidewalks, talking, singing, or just sitting beside their partly empty glasses.

The host and hostess at the Tavern were brother and sister, young people who had been refugees in England during the World War. Their English was excellent. Their guests were their especial care. As I needed the services of a barber, the host pointed out a neighboring shop, and for half an hour the barber plied his shears, as he told his customer of the neighborhood and its inhabitants. Then came dinner time. No, the tavern did not serve meals, but if the guest would only make known what he would like, it would be a pleasure to have him dine with the host and hostess.

As evening fell, dancing started in the streets, and the neighbors, a few at a time, came to the hostelry for refreshment. Each was presented to the guest. If they spoke French, conversation was not difficult, and if only Flemish, well, there was the host to interpret. Several of the evening visitors had been to America, and were eager for news from here. For that matter, all wanted to know more of the United States. I had a busy evening talking, smoking Belgian cigars, and drinking mineral water. (It was only too obvious that I could not accept the oft-repeated invitations to partake of the Belgian beer). Finally, as the hour grew late, I said good night to my companions of the evening and mounted the stairs to a rather general,

"Bon soir, Monsieur l'Américain," and fell asleep as the music and dancing continued.

Next morning there was an early train to catch. Not a soul awake in the tavern, aside from a woman who spoke only Flemish. Breakfast seemed out of the question, but a passing postman directed me to a café where rolls and coffee came forward at once. The proprietor, learning of the early train, telephoned for a taxi, which was waiting as breakfast was finished. A hasty return to the tavern for the baggage, and then a ride through the city to the most distant station. The chauffeur suggested that if his passenger would sit in front with him, that he (the driver) could point out places of interest.

At the station, a porter led me to the train for Germany. Then came the tip for the service. Belgian money was new to me and I gave too little. (If you have ever done this elsewhere you may know the full significance of this *faux pas*.) What a surprise! The porter lifted his cap and said, "Sir, you are a stranger here and do not know, but we have a regular charge for this service and quite by chance you lack having paid it." A handful of change was then extended, and the porter selected the exact sum, which a few minutes later I read in the Belgian time table to be the standard fee.

There were other things which went to make the visitor appreciate Belgium. The customs inspectors were very courteous. No stooping over to open baggage on the dock (as in New York), but comfortable inspection on tables placed for convenience near the end of the gang-plank. A taxi was at the end of the table; not hundreds of yards distant.

Necessity made my first visit to Belgium one of less than eighteen hours, and likewise necessity shortened my second, but when opportunity came for a third, this opportunity was embraced with pleasant anticipation.

It was raining when I arrived in Antwerp. From a guide book I had selected a hotel near the center of the

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city and was driven there. The hotel was only partially modern and I was disappointed as I saw my room. The host, who seemed to have read my mind, said that he would be pleased to telephone to another hotel and ask if I could secure better accommodations. He did so, and reported that he had made reservations for me. He showed no disappointment at seeing me go, and indeed tried to make me understand that he was better pleased if he had helped me to secure what, at the time, he did not have unoccupied. He did have an excellent dining room and later I dined with him often, and if he were about, he never failed to come to my table to greet me.

The foregoing is a very fair example of Belgian hospitality and desire to please the visitor. It was repeated and repeated. There comes to mind the dock policeman, who left his beat to take me to the end of the pier, there to direct my attention to the points of interest on the waterfront. Then there was the host in a Scheldt River hotel, who conversed with me during lunch, and who later, in seeing me in a large up-town café, left his seat and came to sit with me, there to make suggestions concerning interesting trips I might have overlooked making.

The Belgians understand the ways of the Anglo-Saxon. Daily service of two large ferries to and from England, permitting trips across the Channel without passport, encourage intermingling of the two peoples. The Belgians spend vacations in England, and the English in Belgium. Six large liners make regular trips from Antwerp to New York, not to mention the many smaller boats which ply between the Scheldt and the United States. For that matter, the Belgian has contact with much of the entire world. It is rare that the shipping news does not list at least a hundred and fifty vessels on their way to Antwerp from nearly every part of the globe.

I have visited six of the nine Belgian provinces. A sandy seacoast at the north and west gives way to fertile plains as one goes east and south, until at the eastern boun-

dary one is in the beautiful Ardennes, with their deep, narrow valleys and forested hills. On the Flanders plains, are the glorious old Flemish cities. Bruges was to me possibly the most interesting city of all Europe. The Belfry was magnificent. The ancient system of canals, their boats, their bridges, and the quaint old houses and gardens, which lined the banks of these canals, held my attention hour after hour. Brussels is called a little Paris and it seemed it. Ghent was more like Bruges. Antwerp had the ancient and the modern. The thousand-year-old Steen castle (now a museum), seat of the Inquisition, the cathedral, and the ancient houses are the best of the old. The skyscraper (note that the word is singular), the transportation system, the warehouses, and the docks and quays, and the modern boulevards, are the new. Louvain has its far-famed university. For industry, there remain Charleroi, Liège, Namur, and Mons. Ostende is a world-known watering resort. Blankenberghe follows in popularity, and La Panne is a model of quiet, seaside simplicity. As an inland watering place, Spa, the oldest of all health resorts, devoted to the drinking of mineral waters, ranks well toward the top. It has palatial hotels, a casino, baths, promenades and concert halls, and facilities for short excursions in some of the loveliest scenery in Europe.

If a visitor to Belgium is at all observing, he notices that the Belgians are speaking the two languages, which are always upon the public signs, French and Flemish. The people of Belgium are about half Flemish and half Walloon. Those qualified to judge, tell us that the Walloons have imagination and initiative, while the Flemings have the steady quality of seeing a thing through. The Walloon is darker, more volatile, and a more ready talker. The Fleming is more reserved in manner and more cautious of thought and speech with the stranger.

After many contacts with both, I am hazarding a "snap judgment" that each has contributed much to the other toward making both most worth-while, charming people.

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I have found three great pleasures in travel: Reading about places to which I hoped to journey, the actual visit, and again reading, this latter time with the understanding which comes from having seen places and objects which are described in the books.

Running this gamut of reading, visiting, and reading, there has come to me an appreciation of Belgian contribution to America. It was a pleasure to read of Flemish art, a greater pleasure to see it and to realize its significance in the lives of the Belgians. Its reflection in England and America is more slowly realized.

That over one-half of the first settlers of New York state came from the southern of Belgic Netherlands, that more Belgians than Hollanders were among the first settlers of New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, that the first name of the settlement at New York was Novum Belgicum, and that the first governor of the New Netherlands, but officially "New Belgic Land," was a Walloon—Pierre Minuit, or Peter Minnewit, the same who purchased Manhattan Island from the Indians, is not commonly known, though we know well that the Pilgrims were located in the Netherlands some years before coming to America—exiles in Leyden and Amsterdam. We also know too little of the Walloon, (the word comes from wal, stranger, alien, and oon, one), and their flight from southern Belgium in 1567, to England, Ireland, Germany, and the Dutch Republic, from which so many liberty-loving Americans later came.

If one found himself in New York with about \$300 in his pocket, and a month of leisure at his command, he could see Belgium, dip into Holland, cross the Rhine in Germany; go to Paris, and return to the United States and still be within the limit of his time, and also have some change in his pocket. On August 17th, trans-Atlantic fares were cut drastically. Two 16,000 ton boats of the Red Star Line offer round trip passage, the best on the ship, for about \$200. Three boats of the Compagnie Maritime Belge, of

about half the above tonnage, offer round trips, cabin class, at about \$180. A passport costs \$6.00. No visa is required to Belgium.

A fifteen-day ticket on the Belgian railroads, travel where you will, as much as you wish, costs \$9.85; second class, or \$6.44 third. Students would do well to use third class. Excellent rooms in good hotels can be had for a dollar, or even much less. Breakfast costs from fifteen to thirty-five cents. Some of the large modern department stores serve marvelous meals for 14.5 francs (1 franc is 2.8 cents). In three visits to Belgium I was never overcharged a cent. Tips are always 10 per cent of the bill. Admissions to museums and galleries are seldom in excess of five francs. An automobile with driver can be rented for about seven cents a mile. One would need to be a spendthrift to use over \$150 in Belgium on a trip of one month from America.

Not all of us met the king and queen of Belgium when they visited New Mexico a few years ago, but most of us have heard praises of them since then. They are typical of their people. Their country cannot come to us. To appreciate it, we should visit Belgium.

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