

[*The Times*]

SOME LEGENDS AND ROMANCES OF OLD BELGIUM

BY LOUIS LAGASSE DE LOCHT

ON St. Nicholas night Belgian youngsters sleep but little. Hou! Hou! howls the December wind. The patron saint of children travels by gusty blasts. Will he be able to reach the friendly chimneys? The clouds bar his way and catch him by the beard. The stars sparkle with jealousy at the shining sugar coating of his mitre. Through heavy clouds the crescent of the moon makes faces at the saint's crook. Thank Heaven, at last one hears hoofs scratching on the slope of the roof. The good jackass, loaded to the ears, has a heavy burden; he brings gifts to so many little ones. In almost every home rows of tiny slippers are ranged around the hearth, and wee sugar carrots have been carefully prepared as fodder for the celestial beast of burden.

Hou! Hou! howls the wind, taking an elfish delight in frightening the tiny tots, who shiver, risking only an eye into the dark, and, at the least noise, darting under the bed clothes. But here is morning, for mother appears and brings the reward. Away with fear! Away with doubt! No! the beard of the saint is not made of cotton wool. No! his voice is not a woman's voice, not even that of the governess. No! Mother is gay, her eyes laugh, her lips are soft, her words reassuring. 'Yes, we all heard foot-falls in the night . . . but we can't find the key to the room where the slippers are, but through the keyhole you can see a light shining.' Then there is a great hunt for the key, and eager cries, and mother calling, and a

rush of children, and the dumb amazement of all this happy little world as the door finally gives way and the treasures brought by miracle are discovered. Then, because there are too many beautiful things, the children stand blinded and hesitate, and their hearts beat very quickly, for they are overwhelmed.

And thus, asked to pluck the prettiest flowers of our Belgian folklore, I also stand blinded and hesitate. What shall I choose in this bouquet, over-rich in its mingling of brilliant colors and tender hues? Shall it be pearls of sacred mistletoe fallen beneath the Druid's knife; lilies grown in the shadow of convents and monasteries; roses reddened with the blood of tourneys and the carnage of battle; or, perchance, pale daisies of the fields sprung up unheeded amid the cow pasture? All are equally precious. Daughters of a fertile land, seared in the course of ages by storms let loose from the four corners of the earth, are they not the expression, the poetry, the sap of love and hate, the very soul, in a word, of a people fashioned by martial blows and bathed in the sunshine of idealism.

And I think of those tormented evenings when over our cities, shrouded in gloom, the sun sinks scarlet to its rest; I think of the delightful mornings which crown with blue and gold the slumber of our fields. Here the impenetrable features of the Flemish peasant, there the sharper profile of a forester of the Ardennes, or the noble

head of a Gaul. In all, the same blending of shadow and of light. In all, the reflection of a past, rich in faith and folklore, in violent joys and cruel deceptions, with much sonorous laughter, and some grinding of teeth beneath the torture.

Every Belgian is thrilled by the past. It is his staff and bread of life. Hence his love of cavalcades, joyous entries, and processions, the ever-recurring delight of most of our villages. Great taste is often displayed in the ordering of these parades, in the building of the triumph — to which Rubens and Jordaens did not scorn to devote their talent. And it is as if the figures of legend and history which pass through our streets had stepped down from the canvas of old masterpieces to be closer to the caresses of the crowds.

Sometimes the ceremony represents but an episode, a scene of chivalry or of mystery from the Middle Ages. In Bruges, suddenly awakened from its melancholy by the miracle of the Holy Blood, the triumphal escort of a prince consecrated to the conquest of the Holy Land moves in a rolling stream of glistening steel amid the glamour of rich silks and precious embroideries, the clashing of arms and the brazen peals of trumpets.

At Furnes, on the last Sunday in July, the procession of 'penitents' re-enacts the supreme drama of all time. For weeks the city prepares for it. The actors' parts are more coveted than public honors; some are jealously guarded as hereditary rights. Through the dense crowd, pressing ever closer, the revered figures pass in procession. And the Christ appears, weighed down by his cross, a living and staggering Christ, scourged till the blood runs from him. A shiver of religious fervor passes over the faithful. 'Mercy! Mercy!' a penitent cries aloud in his pain, and the onlookers, kneeling

down, repeat in their guttural dialect 'Forgive us! O Lord! O Lord! have mercy upon us.' Every window is a garden of tapers, candles, and lights whose flames flicker in the wind blowing from the sea. Sacred chants mingle with the piping of reeds, the noise of rattles, and the winding of horns. The crowd sobs, and sways, and wrings its hands, and falls into prayer as, following the Crucified One, the penitents pass. The men in sackcloth and the women closely veiled do penance, and their naked, torn feet bleed on the stones of the road. Perchance beneath their cloaks of burlap noble ladies whose flaxen hair and white bodies are the love treasures of this sensuous and mystic Flanders are paying the ransom of a kiss!

And what is this other strange scene? What all-compelling call to arms has beckoned from dusty museums these weird and varied uniforms? Crusaders and robber barons, marauders and mercenaries, Napoleon's Old Guard and Zouaves with flowing trousers, volunteers of 1830 in pleated smocks and the citizen soldiers of a later day, horsemen of all ages, breast-plated cuirassiers and dragoons, guides and hussars and lancers in tight-fitting white tunics — all are gathered together in the plain of Walcourt on Trinity Sunday. Staff officers, gorgeous in gold lace and plumes, prance and strut about. These fancy warriors march in proud array to an ancient oak in the trunk of which — so runs the legend — the Virgin of Walcourt sought refuge the night her church was burned down. The fire having been put out, Thierry, Count of Rochefort, tried in vain to induce Our Lady to leave her shelter. The boughs of the tree wove themselves together to protect the statue; the knight's charger reared up and unhorsed the gallant warrior, who was obliged to make a

solemn vow that he would rebuild the abbey, before the tree parted its branches, and the sainted Lady yielded. In token of this miracle, muskets, blunderbusses, fowling-pieces, ancient matchlocks, and modern rifles belch forth their fire. At regular intervals the festive artillery thunders blank charges which boom harmlessly. The field takes on a pall of smoke, and at sundown the sham fight ends for lack of ammunition.

Other calls to arms, no less fantastic, enliven the picturesque parades between the Sambre and Meuse. At Fosses, also, the make-believe battalions deploy in honor of a statue of the Holy Virgin hewn out of an oak by the blows of a woodman's axe. At Gerpinnes, the popular legend celebrates the chastity of the saintly Rolande. To escape marriage the poor girl was forced to flee through field and hamlet. She fell dying near a spring as clear as the crystal of her soul.

Less romantic is the 'tower' of Sainte Gertrude, the abbess and patron saint of Nivelles. The float — a very beautiful piece of thirteenth century art, drawn by eight Brabantine horses — carries her shrine over hill and valley, passing through hedges and across ditches, through ploughed fields and gentle pastures. It follows, foot by foot, the road trod in days of famine by the daughter of Pépin de Landen as she gave bread to the needy. The pilgrims carry white and pink staves, potent to drive evil spirits and unclean things from the abode of men.

In Brabant, at Hakendover, there is a pilgrimage where heavy draught horses are forced to gallop long distances. At the Tour St. Jean, at Gosse- lies, all the horsemen wear white breeches. On the Monday of the Pentecost, the cabdrivers of Brussels and its suburbs invariably invoke the blessings of Heaven upon their horses, and

go in solemn pilgrimage to the Church of St. Guidon at Anderlecht. All the harness is decked with flaglets and streamers of ribbon. For once, the brasses shine as new. The trouble with the taxicabs in Brussels is that they are not taken to be blessed once a year — they need it.

Mons, the home of the guardian saints of the British army, is the theatre every year of the famous Lumeçon display which ends the procession of Sainte Waudru. At midday to the tolling of the great bell, otherwise heard only as a war alarm, St. George gives battle to the Dragon. From every steeple the chimes peal forth the gay melody of the 'Dou-dou.' The patron Saint of England is supported by four followers mounted on wicker horses called 'chin-chins' in honor of that gallant knight Gilles de Chin. Two savage men, armed with clubs, their nakedness clothed only with leaves, make up his suite. The 'Dou-dou' is served by four devils wielding bladders. After a deadly combat, the dragon, according to rite, crashes down in the dust, shot through the nostrils, and the devils are chastised by the brave 'chin-chins.' Before entering the lists the fabled 'beaste' flays the crowd with mighty blows of his tail. British Tommies passing through Mons during the celebration will not soon forget their efforts to box with the monster's caudal appendage. The people of Mons believe that a blow from the tail brings good luck. What matter if it hurts?

On occasion, both municipal officials and the clergy take part together in the festivities, and frequently our ancient customs put them to uncouth tests. Each year a procession leaves Grammont and goes to the 'Oudenberg,' said to be an ancient stronghold of the first 'Huns.' Prayers are said in public, after which loaves and fishes are

distributed to the crowd, and the burgomaster offers the priest a silver loving cup filled with white wine in which tiny minnows swim about. A wry face, a brave gulp, and the career of a little fish ends in the pastoral stomach. And so it goes till every notable and every minnow has faced the same ordeal. At nightfall huge bonfires upon the surrounding hill-tops light up the countryside. 'T is said that these customs date back to the worship of Ceres.

Other traditions have their source in the *chansons de gestes* handed down by word of mouth before the flaming logs of family firesides. The most popular tells of Charlemagne, whose beard waxed strong, and the four sons of the good Duke Aymon, Lord of Aigremont and Montfort. Maugis, the sorcerer, figures in the story as well as Bayard, the famous charger by whose warning neigh, flowing mane, and fleet hoofs the four brothers were saved from the imperial ire. A last leap of the charger, and the Meuse was crossed, but the shock was such that the rock of Dinant was cleft to the water's edge. As all men may see, the wound still gapes at the entrance of the martyred city. This legend has passed on from the surroundings of Liège to our Flemish provinces. The Rosse Bayard and its many horsemen preside over the festivities at Thiermont, much to the chagrin, 't is said, of their neighbors of Alost.

The story of the warlike virtues and tragic deaths of the 'three entwined ladies' is another jewel of Meuse folklore. In 1554 Bouvignes is furiously attacked by the King of France. The town is taken, but the valiant citadel of Crèvecœur still holds out. Assault after assault is repulsed. Alas, the defenders are now a bare hundred, including old men, women, and children, then fifty, then ten—at last three

young and beautiful women, 'The Ladies of Crèvecœur' still hold out desperately. They are about to be taken. Rather than serve at a king's feast, they climb to the topmost ramparts and entwining their arms throw themselves into the Meuse, forevermore the gentle guardian of their womanly honor. Until this day the stream continues to weave its liquid blue shroud over their white bodies.

Before invading Belgium, the Kaiser might have drawn useful lessons from the stories of thousands of gallant deeds attributed to legendary heroes. The simple folk love them, seek in them their own reflection, and cherish them as amusing playthings and instructive traditions. On great occasions our cities take delight in playing with dolls, and bring out gigantic wooden figures, sumptuously attired in rich and ancient vestments, to dance upon the public squares. Brussels, to mention but the capital, is proud of a famous family of giants—Janneke and Mieke, the happy parents of a son, christened Jefke—and no honor is too great for them when they appear in public on the old Grand' Place. Their suite comprises the Grand Turk, the Great Mogul, and the Whale.

At times these city giants pay courtly visits to each other from town to town, or meet in solemn conclave on important occasions.

Then at the opposite pole from these imposing personages one finds almost everywhere small and enigmatic figures which add their salt to the monotony of life. Their jesting philosophy frequently teaches a lesson to poor and great alike. On the banks of the Vesdre the *sotais*, or *nutons*, live, fantastic little beings closely allied to the brownies of Ireland and the elves of Scotland. They are forever playing pranks on the inhabitants of the valley, only to vanish again and hide them-

selves in the depths of their grottoes.

In order to curb the passions of unfaithful husbands, Malines, at each *ommeegang* or annual parade, tosses the manikin 'Op-Signorke' in a blanket held by four sturdy bargemen. Collin de Plany tells us that this little fellow was long an object of intense rivalry between the peoples of Malines and Antwerp. To-day, the former guard him jealously against the possible covetousness of the latter. He is enshrined in a coffer so weighty that sixteen men cannot lift it, and when the Germans started to bombard Malines 'Op-Signorke' was put in a place of safety before even the treasures of the Cathedral or the records of the city.

At Nivelles a gilded figure looks down from the collegiate towers. It is our old and popular friend Jean de Nivelles, the jovial Lord of the Manor, whose dogs are famed in song:

Jean de Nivelles a trois gros chiens,
Dont il y en a deux vaut-riens,
L'autre s'enfuit quand on l'appelle.

A little statuette made by Duquesnoy in 1648 admirably personifies the care-free spirit of the Belgian capital. Our Manneken-Pis, the oldest inhabitant of Brussels, has been honored by every régime. Ennobled by Louis XV, given the right to bear arms, he has unobtrusively worn all the various trappings of state furnished him by his masters for the time being. As a reward for his proud and imperturbable bearing during the German occupation he was recently cited in the orders of the day of the French army. His citation is as witty as it is well deserved.

Chancet, with his heavy *sabots*, coarse blue blouse, and silk hat, is the unchallenged master of the revels of Liège. He is the incarnation of the spirit of its people. His wife Nanesse, a scolding and evil-tempered shrew, is

just the opposite. The little puppet-shows of the Outre-Meuse quarter are their stage, and, dangling from his string, Chancet tells many a truth in jest, nor cares he whose feelings are hurt.

Doubtless the folklore of Flanders differs from the Walloon traditions and customs. The latter are light and gay, the former rich in color and full of quaint beliefs. The Flemish *kermesses* begin by prayer and the solemn warnings of priests who thunder from their pulpits: 'Hell, mind ye, opens beneath the feet of blonde maidens who trip the merry dance; beware, for misfortune will surely visit the stable and weigh upon the head of brawny yeomen too easily tempted by foaming beer and the smiles of women.' But the last words of priestly warning have scarce died away before the festive board creaks beneath the good things of this earth, and ardent youth feels that it lives. As evening falls on the gay Sundays of August, ribald songs and old-time dances end these village fêtes worthy of a Rubens or a Teniers.

In the Walloon country the *ducasses* also bring joy and laughter. These fairs lure vast crowds, the booths are gayly decorated, the merry-go-rounds invade the market square. The tarts, *couques*, and *mastelles* fill the houses with the appetizing aroma of rich golden pastry. And the *cramignons farandols*, and *bouffées* bring dainty waists into amorous contact with the steel-muscled arms of the men of Liège. Parish and county festivities are always accompanied by public games, and here again the past has left its deep imprint. Apart from such typical scenes as sack races, potato races, three-legged races, obstacle races, the climbing of greasy poles, and the walking of bowsprits, which need no little patience and dexterity, there are other

and rougher sports. Husky young laborers mounted on heavy farm stallions charge madly under a tightly stretched cord from which hangs high a live goose securely tied by the feet, and as they pass at full speed, they seek to grasp its head and tear it off. Others joust for rings after the manner of the Russian Cossacks.

In a long court, carefully marked out with chalk, parties of hand-ball players play one of the oldest and finest games in the world. Their cat-like agility, their wonderfully accurate eyes, their leathery and supple palms, powerful as rackets, receive a supreme reward when each year according to ancient custom the King himself distributes prizes to the victorious teams. Archery is in great honor, and many a strong bow is drawn, many an arrow speeds true to the feathery target placed on top of high masts. Then there are cross-bow matches on the greens and in the clearings, where also men bowl and wrestle. Even the *estaminets* are transformed into noisy battlefields where smoking contests, 'vogel-pik,' and card games prevail.

But I must not tire my readers' patience, and yet I have but skimmed through the pages of a volume full of brilliant illustrations. I have said nothing of the wonderful pilgrimages whose trains wind along our country roads for miles and miles, with old-time prayer and sonorous chants, with lighted tapers and embroidered banners, as they wend their way to the feet of Our Lady of Montaigu en Campine, or toward Hal, the sanctuary of the Black Virgin who caught in the folds of her azure robe the cannon ball aimed by a sacrilegious enemy at her shrine.

I have said nothing of the legends of the Scheldt, our artery of life; nor of the giant of Antwerp and the severed hands; nor of Geneviève of Brabant,

the persecuted, and her fawn; nor of the thickets of Luxemburg, which even now tremble as the Sire de la Marek — the boar of the Ardennes — charges through them.

I have said nothing of the forest of Soignes, gay playground of the Dukes of Burgundy, sweet setting of Gothic abbeys cloistered by countless ogives; of the forest where St. Hubert was laid to rest after he had knelt before the stag between whose antlers shone the crucifix of conversion, and where the winding of his sacred horn may yet be heard when days of terror are at hand — the forest which stretches its emerald mantle between Brussels and the epic field of Waterloo.

I have said nothing, nor can I, for over devastated Belgium have arisen greater figures than those of the past: a White Queen of legend and a King whose unconquerable soul has been tempered in the fires of glory!

[*The Anglo-Italian Review*]

ITALY OF THE OLIVE HARVEST

BY DOROTHY NEVILLE LEES

In the quiet days of winter, when the more feverish activities of the peasants' year are a little lessened, comes the harvest of the olives, the pressing of the oil.

Florence lies in the very heart of the oil country, and one of the most striking characteristics of its surrounding scenery is that misty silver of the olives, which, whitening in the wind, lend to its loveliness a quality peculiarly spiritual and austere.

The trees will flourish and yield their fruit in even the most barren and stony soil, and, growing over the terraced hillsides, where the low stone walls mark the barriers from field to field, they recall poignantly, when first seen, the Bible picture-books of our childish