

LOCAL PATRIOTISM IN BELGIUM.

I.

THE Belgian visitor to Great Britain is struck by the scarcity, in conversation and in newspapers, of references to municipal affairs and municipal authorities. The meetings of County and Town Councils are hardly ever reported, and public functions are seldom graced with the presence of aldermen and other civic dignitaries. Even the obvious exception of the City of London, with its Lord Mayor's show and its various beneficent activities, raises new puzzles: why should the office be held for a year only? As no man can master the endless details of administration in such a short time, who is really attending to the work? The conclusion is that insular methods are altogether strange and that they require protracted and careful examination to be understood.

The object of the present paper is to explain what a burgomaster, a college of aldermen and a municipal council mean in the daily life of Belgium, and how they came to their position of importance. Every tourist knows how prominent are Town Halls, Cloth Halls and Belfries in the older Flemish and Walloon towns. If he has attended a congress, he has probably been welcomed in a fine decorated hall by a gentleman in uniform, wearing a state sword, a cocked hat and a tri-colour belt round his waist. The belt is the only part of the costume that has a legal meaning and value: it is the emblem of civil authority, and is often worn over plain clothes. Civil marriage, the only form of marriage recognized by law, can only be performed by a municipal officer wearing the tri-colour belt. Its origin, of course, goes back to the French Revolution and to the Code Napoléon.

We find that we have already alluded to two of the fountain heads of the spirit of municipal self-government: one is the tradition of the great free cities of the Middle Ages, which survived to the close of the eighteenth century, when Belgium was annexed to France; another is the system of revolutionary French laws, opposing the mayor to the parson as head of the parish. The existence of a town or village police, sometimes consisting of a single constable dressed in a laced cap and armed with a stick, charged on the parish funds and commanded by the burgomaster, is also due to France. But in France the mayor became chiefly the agent of the central government, acting through its *préfet* or provincial governor. In Belgium, the burgomaster also is appointed by the king's responsible minister, but he bears a double character. As an officer of the executive and commander of armed forces (police and militia) he is the king's representative.

As head of the college of aldermen (*collège des bourgmestre et échevins*), he is responsible to the elective municipal council and through them to the voters.

In this way the smallest parish of Belgium is a miniature copy of the constitutional realm itself, with its combination of hereditary authority and of democratic self-government. Though it is theoretically possible for a cabinet to appoint only party nominees as burgomasters, the constant practice of the country has been opposed to this. The municipal elections mostly run on the same party lines as the parliamentary elections. In such town and village councils as are carried by the parliamentary opposition, the crown's minister will appoint his own opponents, who, on entering office for a minimum of seven years, take command of armed forces and become the heads of the community. They therefore derive a joint authority from the popular will and from the royal commission.

But that authority again is limited, not only by the control of the elective council, who, having to approve the rates and taxes, hold the power of the purse, but also by that of the aldermen, called not by the French term *adjoints*, but by the Belgian one *échevins* (Latin *scambini*, Flemish *schepenen*). The *échevins* are elected by the council, and join the burgomaster in all those duties that are not strictly executive, such as the control of municipal schools, libraries, museums, gardens, roads, drainage, finance, public works, hospitals, poor relief, registration, markets, fire brigade, and occasionally of gas works, tramways, theatres, public pawnshops, etc. On any of these interests the burgomaster may theoretically be outvoted in his miniature cabinet, the narrow college of burgomaster and aldermen, and in the wider council; therefore he has to consult his majority and to keep them together in the same way as the prime minister of a large state.

As party spirit in Belgium runs as high as in any other free country, and as the clerical and anti-clerical organizations are many and active, it needs a constant watchfulness to meet and check the moves of the opponent, and local intrigue, gossip and press campaigns find full scope for their energies.

After dwelling on the legal and administrative aspects of municipal life, a word may be said about its effects on social habits and social relations. Suppose a Belgian removes to a new parish. After the first Sunday, his presence or absence at church makes him a marked man to the clerical and anti-clerical sets. Both know at once to which of them he belongs, the only question remains, how much help or hindrance they may expect from him. Here a good many cross influences may assert themselves: a common one is for the husband to support the anti-clericals with his vote and his subscription to party clubs, while the wife and

children keep more or less in touch with clerical schools and charities. Although cafés and shops are often sharply divided between the warring clans, and although private friendships and visiting are largely confined within each party, it is quite possible for members of opposite sets to keep on terms of mutual politeness, of course with a certain amount of reticence and reserve. The laying of traps and the capturing of prisoners is an essential feature of municipal tactics, and coaxing and cajoling are weapons no less use than the boycott.

Each side cries up its own achievements in the way of public works, education and poor law, as the height of disinterested national service, and correspondingly runs down the adversary's as a series of deceitful, selfish tricks. The impartial observer cannot but admire the social progress that results from this jealous emulation and intense activity. Village life in Belgium is full of the zest of battle and intrigue: brass bands parade the streets with banners and medals; dances, lectures, theatricals are organized, gymnastic clubs line up in showy uniforms, speeches are delivered by briefless and aspiring barristers, eager for fame and civic dignities.

But below the noisy and entertaining display, which has a positive value in making the world picturesque and exciting, the solid labour of social improvement is fostered by the rivalries of contending factions. The thrill of pity for the toiling classes which runs through the history of the last few generations has touched both sides, and both have responded to it by the creation of a network of social centres. Almsgiving was increased until the pauper knew that he might earn a pair of boots by putting a child into a lay school in one season, and a suit of clothes by taking him out and putting him into a denominational school a little later. This excess of goodwill had to be remedied by the organization of charity. Pauperism was not only fought by means of liberality, it was also undermined by Friendly and Building Societies, which reached and assisted every individual through local committees. There are few landlords and squires in Belgium, where inheritances are divided according to the French *codé*. Therefore the middle class have taken in hand much of the work done in England by the aristocracy. The labourer does not feel patronized or humiliated by advances from clubs whose representatives often stand on the same level with himself. As his vote is needed for political ends and the attendance of his children at school for the obtaining of educational grants from the central government, he knows himself to be a power in the state, and can support whichever faction he chooses with some regard for his own religious or political convictions, and without losing his self-respect. He is a member of the party, not a mere slave to it. Even if his

motives should be mean and selfish, as human motives are apt to be, he still has to be won over, and not brutally driven. Whatever are the means through which his standard of living is raised, its rise is a clear profit to his progeny and to the nation, and ultimately makes for health and independence.

I remember being kept waiting in my burgomaster's house : his apology was that some labourers in the party opposed to his wanted some papers signed for their societies, and that he could not delay them. This weapon of courtesy, which the proud old gentleman consistently handled in fighting his opposition, had kept his party supreme for about forty years, during which he had himself conducted each marriage ceremony in the parish. If a man came to him to give notice of his intention to build a house on the street front he would examine the plans, suggest alterations, and obtain such changes as would improve the appearance of the street and make the dwelling more comfortable. He was the father of the village, and would underline his triumph after an election by special kindness and good humour to those whom he knew to have voted against him.

A man of independent means and good family connection in Belgium will be quite proud to stand for a municipal election and to accept, in due course, to serve as alderman and burgomaster even in a small village. A characteristic statue in the parish of Meysse, near Brussels, is that of Baron d'Hooghvorst, a Commander of the forces before King Leopold I's election, who was a burgomaster of the little place. He is represented in a farmer's smock, the uniform of the revolutionary army, with shoulder cords across his chest and a busby on his head. The green of a hamlet was felt to be an appropriate site for a bronze statue to an early ruler of the realm. Another typical memorial to the dignity and continuity of municipal office is a fountain in a pretty village north of Liège, now destroyed by the Germans : it is (or was) adorned with the busts of four lineal representatives of the one family of Fléchet, great-grandfather, grandfather, father and son, all of whom were local burgomasters, so that their dynasty survived empires and kingdoms, and linked up parish tradition from one century to another.

The devotion of some municipal officers to their duties amounts to a passion. Many give up all their time to parochial affairs, appear punctually at the town hall like salaried clerks, fight for the interests and beauty of their towns with the obstinacy and expert knowledge of landlords administering their hereditary estates. They will rush to the capital to argue with cabinet ministers and departmental chiefs, they will conduct negotiations with gas and tram companies, or try to wrest some concession from the State railways. They are no less ardent in asserting their authority

inside the parish than outside. One distinguished scholar and member of Parliament, who was a burgomaster in a suburb, always had receiving hours for each and all of his administrés (there appears to be no English equivalent for this French name for the inhabitant of a municipality). One good woman came to complain of having been reported by one of the constables for delaying to clean the street in front of her house, in compliance with municipal bye-laws. He took the trouble to investigate the matter, and on finding that the policeman had been unduly strict to a good house-mother he ordered the report to be cancelled. By its very insignificance this incident shows the extent and the patriarchal character of a burgomaster's power. If prizes are given to the pupils in a municipal school, he will be there in full uniform, hand the gilt-edged books to the children, deliver addresses to the parents, and never fail to sound the note of local pride.

The extent to which burgomasters may become national representatives is exemplified in Leopold II's abortive attempt to share in the international expedition against the Boxers during the siege of the European legations in Peking. The King was prevented from sending out a body of troops belonging to the national army, but he persuaded the burgomasters of the four largest towns—Brussels, Antwerp, Liège and Ghent—to appeal for volunteers and form a small expeditionary force. Exceptional as this was, it shows how the people's spokesmen were and are the elected representatives of the cities, as they were in the fourteenth century, when Jacques Van Artevelde had an alliance with his gossip King Edward III.

All burgomasters are bound to accept a trifling salary as a token of their allegiance to the crown, some receive a moderate income from the city funds, but no man would take the office for mercenary reasons. It always is a disinterested public service, entailing more labour and expense than would a similar business situation, and yet it frequently ends by absorbing all the energy and ability of those that fall victims to it.

When Burgomaster Max of Brussels fought his battle royal for the national self-respect, after his city was occupied by the enemy, he rendered a service to the municipal spirit of Belgium and to the cause of European freedom equal to that rendered in their time by the Van Arteveldes, but he and his townspeople were continuing a worthy and uninterrupted tradition.

Among the many statues which are the pride of the city of Brussels one commemorates the rebellion and execution of François Anssessens, the dean of one of the local guilds, who in 1719 laid down his life in defence of the corporative privileges against an Austrian governor. His monument represents him as an old man walking proudly to the scaffold with his hands tied behind him. His memory and example have been an inspiration to later heads of our capital.

II.

It is obvious that the above account is founded on historical and political data, and that it includes no economic considerations. Now the extent of the average Belgian commune or parish—which is only three or four miles across—is not sufficient for such municipal enterprises as electric cars, gasworks, water supplies and drainage systems. Public works of that type have therefore increasingly been initiated and conducted by associations, each of which contained several municipalities. The various forms and achievements of such associations, which very often are connected with private companies, cannot be studied in a short paper like the present. Let it therefore suffice to state that they exist and have help to solve many of the civic problems confronting such a highly complex and organized social community as that of Belgium was before it was crippled by the war.

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