

CT 63

THE FLEMINGS AND THE WALLOONS
OF BELGIUM.

BY

KARL BLIND.

REPRINTED (*by permission*) from FRASER'S MAGAZINE.

LONDON:
LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
1876.

people—kindred to the Dutch and the people of Lower Germany in race and dialect—were then repeatedly joined to the Bourbon kingdom after aggressive wars. To this day, France possesses, therefore, on her northern boundary, a Flemish population, which in various towns and villages still uses its Teutonic speech, and as a rule is at least bilingual. A glance at the mere names of many of those towns and villages shows their Germanic character, which in some cases dates back to grey antiquity. Already at Cæsar's time the mass of the Belgians—whose country then embraced the Flemish annexes at present held by France—belonged to the Germanic race.¹ The same is still the case with the Belgians today.

II

'THE majority of the present Belgian people are, then, of Germanic origin and speech?'—many will, perhaps, wonderingly ask, who in their hurried travels through Ostend, Ghent, and Brussels, found the signboards at the hotels and the shops, the talk of the business-men and of the serving class with whom they had to deal, to be almost exclusively French.

There is no doubt of it: the mass of the Belgians are of the Teutonic stock. They themselves often call their language *Neder-Duitsch*—i.e. Nether-Dutch, or Low-German. It is a tongue spoken in varied dialects throughout Flanders and Holland, and all along the German Ocean and the Baltic, by the dwellers in that part of Germany which lies, geologically speaking, on the lower and more level ground; whilst *Hoch-Deutsch*, or High-German—now the ruling language in German literature—has taken its rise in the higher and more mountainous parts of the Centre and the South.

To the 'Nether-Dutch' element belong Antwerp, Ostend, Bruges, Ghent. Nether-Dutch, in its popular strata, is even the capital—Brussels. Many of the common folk there, instead of going to the French theatre, still go to their *schouw-burg* to see plays given in a language which not only every native of Holland understands thoroughly, but which even a Hamburger, a Mecklenburger, a Hanoverian or Pomeranian peasant has very little difficulty to make out.

As regards speech, the Belgian Low Country may be mapped out into two parts of nearly the same width. The north-western section, which is by far the most thickly populated, belongs almost wholly to the Germanic race and tongue. In the south-eastern, more thinly populated part, dwell the Walloons. These latter are of Keltic race; their popular dialects are mainly of Romanic or Latin origin, with an admixture of words that have baffled linguistic research. The written language of the Walloons, and the language of their educated classes, is French. Through them and the more Frenchified classes at Brussels, that which in truth is the native language of the lesser number has become the dominant, even the domineering, tongue in the public administration.

In the north-western, Germanic, half of Belgium are included East and West Flanders; the provinces of Antwerp and Limburg; the greater part of Brabant; and a small strip on the northern border of Hennegau, or Hainault. This Flemish part of the kingdom comprises the cities once famed in mediæval history for their industry and commerce, their populousness and their freedom. Even now, men may be found in those cities to whom, in spite of the legislation and the parliamentary debates being

¹ 'Plerosque Belgas esse ortos a Germanis.'—*De Bell. Gall.*, ii. 4.

carried on in French, the French language is still quite foreign. To a Fleming of this kind, who only knows his mother-tongue, the Walloon or 'Welsh' inhabitants of the kingdom seem like an alien race; and so in return. It is true, the more well-to-do people, and most men connected with business and industry in the Flemish part of Belgium, understand French, and speak it with a more or less strong Germanic intonation—not to say brogue. But among the peasantry, and among the popular classes of the towns, there are many utterly ignorant of French, or at most possessing a slight smattering of it. A considerable portion of the middle class even—not excluding Brussels itself—continues to this day the use of the Flemish tongue in family life, or in dealing with friends of the same class. In commerce, however, especially in its larger branches; before strangers; or in the more refined social intercourse, it is thought *bon ton* to use French.

It almost reminds one of the practice among certain princely and aristocratic families in Germany during the last, and partly even the present, century. Using a Low-German or Swabian dialect in addressing their valets, and being often themselves unable to speak High-German correctly, they looked upon French as the only language fit for a courtly circle.

III

NEDER-DUIJSCH was the speech of the people, as well as of the public authorities, during the Middle Ages, in every part of Flanders. The same holds good for Brabant. Under a Nether-German parole ('*Schild en Vriend! God help!*')—that is: 'Shield and Friend! God help!') had the great civic movements and struggles for freedom been carried on.

Charles V. issued ordinances in favour of the French tongue. Even before him, similar attempts had been made; but the Flemings offered a tough resistance, and ever and anon regained their rights of language with full success. Charles V., the gloomy tyrant, who hated with all his heart the civic spirit of the Netherlands, and who felt more as a Spaniard than as a German—being unable to express himself properly in German—made use with eagerness of every means which appeared likely to cow the Flemish spirit. Under him, French was therefore introduced in the relations between the Estates of Flanders and the Government; a procedure against which the communes often wrathfully rose. More energetic even than in Flanders was this opposition in Brabant. On account of the nearness of the Walloon race, the danger was the greater; hence the struggle assumed there a bitterer character.

Upon the whole, in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the rule nevertheless held good that wherever Nether-German or Flemish was spoken by the people, that language was used also in public debates and documents—barring the relations with the highest authorities and with the Walloon districts.² Gradually, however, under Austrian dominion a practice began to creep in of using French for such purposes, even in Flanders. State decrees were from thence published sometimes in French, sometimes in Flemish; but the original text of these decrees always was a French one. The Government of the much-lauded Maria Theresa, before all, fostered this abuse, which, in course of time, had a blighting effect on the literature and the intellectual development of the race affected by it. The

² Report of M. Gachard, Keeper of the Archives of the Kingdom, to the Minister of the Interior.

aristocracy of the Low Countries yielded easily to this Frenchifying procedure. The people, the communes, still defended their own nationality and speech against such aggression.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Nether-German authors of the country made a strong push for restoring to the good old powerful speech its ancient and natural right. The French dominion which followed the expulsion of the Austrians, nipped these hopes in the bud. Had the language-rights of the people been respected, the cause of Freedom would have gained, and taken strong root. But oppression, in matters of speech, went to the utmost extreme. The Report of the Committee established by the Belgian Government, in 1856, for the enquiry into and redress of the Flemish grievances, says :

What was the reward of our fathers who, counting on French fraternity, had, at the price of their blood, driven the Austrians beyond the frontier? It was the unavoidable reward of every imprudent alliance with a more powerful foreign nation—namely, deception and humiliation. . . . Twice made French, once by sabre-cuts, then by decrees of the Convention, our people had no longer any representatives who would have raised their voice to denounce a crime against simple humanity. Only ready tools of the new power were to be found; they had not the courage to defend a language which yet they carried in their hearts.³

In public affairs the Neder-Duitsch tongue, the tongue of the large majority of the Belgians, was strictly laid under a ban during French rule. It was only tolerated at the side of the French language in local affairs. In 1803 an even harsher ordinance, dated Prairial 24, year XI., was issued, enjoining that, after the lapse of one year, all public documents, of whatever kind, were to be drawn up in French. On the margin, a Flemish version

might be permitted. Documents referring to private affairs were still allowed to be drawn up in Flemish by the parties concerned; but, if a public entry of such documents was to be made, a translation into French had to be added at the expense of the parties. The first paragraph of this ordinance was as follows :

After the lapse of one year, reckoning from the publication of this decree, all public documents in the departments of what formerly was Belgium (*de la ci-devant Belgique*), as well as in those of the left bank of the Rhine, . . . where the custom of drawing up such documents in the language of the country is still preserved, must henceforth be written in French.

The harsh order, at one and the same time, did away with the language-rights of the Belgian Flemings, and of the German people from the Upper Rhine down to Köln and Aachen. Under Napoleon I. this attempt at Frenchification was carried out with relentless rigour. In the schools of the Belgian towns the Flemish tongue was banished, together with the noble remembrances of Flemish history. The glory of the 'Great Nation,' the happiness of belonging to it, was incessantly held before the eyes of the youth. To print books in Flemish became almost impossible under the Imperial censorship. Every obstacle was placed in the way of the appearance of Flemish journals; the French Prefects declaring that they could not watch and control papers whose language they did not understand. It was regarded as an important concession when an Imperial decree, of December 22, 1812, permitted the publication of Flemish journals under condition of their being accompanied by a French translation.

French dominion, all in all, had lasted scarcely twenty years. But the

³ *Commission flamande. Institution, Délibérations, Rapport, Documents officiels, publiés sous la surveillance de Membres de la Commission.* Bruxelles, 1859.

determination with which it had set about to imprint its own stamp upon the whole Belgian people, undoubtedly had some effect. To destroy the nationality and the speech of the Flemings was, it is true, a task beyond its power. But on public life that speech had nearly lost its hold under the short-lived French rule. Even when, after the overthrow of Napoleon I., Belgium and Holland were joined together as the Kingdom of the United Netherlands, year had to pass by before the Dutch Government itself resolved upon giving back to the Flemish tongue its full rights.

IV

AGAIN a disturbing influence made itself felt, which led to the secession of Belgium from Holland.

The Walloons were opposed to Holland on national grounds. The mass of the Catholic Flemings were on bad terms with the Dutch Protestants. Propagandists in the interest of the extension of French rule spread Liberal views. Jesuit agents stirred up between the kindred Flemish and Dutch people the bitterest hatred by venomous clerical intrigues. Small provincial diversities in Flemish dialect, as spoken in Holland, Flanders, and Brabant, were purposely magnified in their alleged importance, in order to hinder the full fusion between the Dutch and the Flemish tongues, which are virtually the same.

It was under such conditions that, in 1830, the September Revolution broke out at Brussels, which made an end of the connection between Belgium with Holland.

Some undoubtedly Liberal institutions were introduced by that event, the anniversary of which is, year by year, celebrated in the

Belgian towns amidst much enthusiasm. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic priesthood also got its large share of power and influence through this withdrawal of Belgium from Holland. For forty-five years, Liberal and Ultramontane Cabinets have alternated at Brussels with a regularity deeply hurtful to the spread of culture and enlightenment among the peasantry and the poorer people in the cities. The tenure of power of the Liberals has often been a precarious one. They had to act on the defensive, and were either not allowed enough time, or did not possess the necessary strength, for overcoming the obstacles which a remarkably organised hierarchy put in the way of their progressive measures. Another sad consequence of the September rising—which had mainly been carried by the Walloon and more Frenchified portion of the community, with the aid of French sympathisers from over the border—was the leadership which the Walloon element arrogated to itself in matters of language. Thus the kingdom became French in its outward look; and the Fleming was converted into the Ash-pitel or Cinderella of the estate.

At the outset, the Provisional Government, wishing, for a temporary political purpose, to spare to some extent the feelings of the actual majority, ordained that 'the citizens, in their relations with the Administration, are empowered to make use, according to their liking, of the French, Flemish, or German language.'⁴ The same was to be allowed in the relations of the citizens with the Courts of Justice, provided the judges and the counsel all understood the language chosen.

The German (that is, High-Ger-

⁴ Art. 5 of the Decree of November 20, 1830:—'Les citoyens, dans leurs rapports avec l'administration, sont autorisés à se servir indifféremment de la langue française, flamande, ou allemande.'

man) language was mentioned in this decree, because at the side of the Flemings and the Walloons there dwells, in the Luxemburg part of Belgium, a small fragment of a population whose language is High-German. Properly speaking, the country is therefore trilingual. The decree, not referring as it did to Government and Parliamentary affairs, was certainly a modest enough concession. Equality of rights for the two chief tongues was not stipulated in it. Yet even so paltry a measure soon became, in but too many cases, a dead letter.

The men who had stood at the head of the rising of 1830 clearly made it their task to press down, to the degrading position of a so-called *patois*, a language spoken, written, or easily understood by the majority of the Belgians, all the Dutch, and by millions of North Germans—a language, moreover, which in Eastern Asia, for colonists as well as for natives, serves as a *lingua franca* as far as Japan. Whether the men in power thus acted in ignorance, or from Walloon contempt of the Flemings, or from a wish to deepen the gulf between Belgium and Holland: the bad result remained the same.

The Provisional Government declared that it was impossible to publish an official text of the laws and decrees in Flemish or German, because those languages, which 'are in use among the inhabitants of certain localities, change from province to province, from town to town!' As if the same could not be said of the various dialects of the Walloons, for whom French is the common medium! In this way the Belgian Neder-Duitsch tongue was robbed of its rights by a stroke of the pen. And to add a sneer to the injury, it was done under the parole:—'Freedom in everything and for all!' (*La Liberté en tout et pour tous.*)

V

BEYOND doubt, this maltreatment of the Germanic majority gradually became a germ of danger to the independence of the newly-founded State. The cause of Progress equally suffered from it. An alliance of somewhat heterogeneous parties had brought about the Revolution of 1830. Albeit the Walloon leaders exercised a paramount influence in those events, it cannot be asserted that the views of the various parties which had effected the rising differed exactly according to the difference of race. There were Liberal Walloons and Liberal Flemings; in the same way, Jesuits and Romanists of Walloon and of Flemish descent.

But, thanks to the activity of the many French who came over during and after the days of September, the race difference between Flemings and Walloons by-and-by became almost an antagonism of party, which the Catholic priesthood then turned insidiously to its own profit. Aggrieved, insulted, sneered at on account of their mother-tongue, the Flemish peasantry, unconversant as they were with French, lent the more willingly their ear to the priest, who spoke to them in the good, old, homely tongue; egging them on against the Liberal aspirations of the *Fransquillons*, and endeavouring to convert the want of familiarity with the 'Welsh' tongue into a hatred of progressive ideas.

To counteract this intrigue, the enlightened men of Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels ought to have held a shield before the persecuted or insulted language, so as to wring a weapon from the hands of the foes of Progress. But for many years nothing whatever was done. In the higher social layers of the Flemings themselves, the native speech met with neglect. Among the Flemish masses the effect was a deplorable one.

At the same time, the would-be French character of the more educated Flemings was so little appreciated by the real French that squibs were continually launched against Brussels from Paris.

'*Je comprends parfaitement le flamand!*' said the Comtesse de So-and-So, who had just returned from the Belgian Little Paris to the Faubourg St. Honoré.

'*Comment, Madame? Impossible! Cet affreux patois de flamand!*'

'*Si, si!* I was six months in Brussels. After three months I began to understand it. Now I catch every word of it in conversation!'

The Countess regarded as Flemish the French language of the *salons* in the Belgian capital. This is a specimen of the many anecdotes formerly current.

Yet, between all these Parisian jibes, the doctrine was propagated that Belgium had no right of existence, because 'it did not form a nationality; being simply a branch of the Gallic stem!' The short French dominion was, in fact, looked upon as a title for a lasting claim, even as against the German Rhinelands. Whole generations in France have been indoctrinated with such ambitious views, founded on palpable untruth. In an official school-book, *The Historical Geography of France*, by Dussieux, which was published and used under Louis Philippe, the very first paragraph runs thus:

France is not in possession of her natural frontiers; she does not possess yet the whole French region. . . . The French region includes in reality the county of Nice, Savoy, Switzerland, Rhenish Bavaria, the Prussian Rhinelands, the Duchy (!) of Luxemburg, and Belgium. . . . Her natural frontiers are the Rhine, from its mouths to its source; the Alps, from the source of the Rhine on the St. Gotthard, to the Col de Cadibone.

The same book, with gross mendacity, added that this 'French region' is inhabited by populations

of the same origin and speech as those of France.

This was the teaching even under a so-called Napoleon of Peace! Can we wonder at the fruits under the Government of a Bonaparte?

VI

IN view of the danger which often seemed to threaten Belgium, the Walloons ought to have seen how unwise it was to refuse equality of rights in language to the Flemings. Could the small kingdom hope to make a good defence, in case of an attack, if the patriotism of a large section of the population was thus systematically wronged?

And seeing that the French aim was to gain the line of the Rhine, 'from its mouths to its source,' had not the Belgians every reason to seek the friendship of the Netherlands, whose people were equally threatened by this resumption of the old cry for the Rhine frontier? With such a common danger before both States, it may be doubted whether it was wise, from a political point of view, to give the army of Belgium altogether a French appearance; whilst, in case of war, the Nether-German tongue, common to the Flemings and the Dutch, was undoubtedly a help for co-operation.

Memoirs by G. A. Snellaert and Hendrik Conscience have treated of this military question. The Flemings—similar in this, as in not a few other things, to the popular classes of England—do not readily take to the soldier's career. They rather like to go on board ship. The officers' rank in Belgium is, therefore, mostly occupied by Walloons. But among the mass of the troops, both races are, of course, proportionately represented. Not only is the word of command, however, given exclusively in French, but the whole intercourse is carried on in that language; and so severely is the Flemish tongue shut out that a

great many dangerous, even fatal, cases of home-sickness occur from that reason in the Belgian army.⁵

After 1830, the army was all at once thrown from a Flemish form into a French one. Many Frenchmen who had come over aided in this reorganisation. Now, the firmest champions of the rights of the Flemish tongue do not wish to have this altered at present for the regular army, though they might quote the Swiss practice in their favour. Even the 'Flemish Committee,' which Government had instituted, did not advise the formation of separate Flemish and Walloon regiments. But they said, with a good show of reason, that at least the Civic Guards of the Flemish provinces might be commanded in their own language; that in the regimental schools that idiom should not be banished from the cursus of instruction; that in the regimental libraries Flemish works also should be received; that in the Military Academy not only English and German—the languages of the two nations which possibly might act as allies of Belgium—should be taught, as has been the case until now, but that instruction in Flemish should be added.

The soldier of Germanic origin should not stand before his Walloon comrade, in whose language everything is carried on, like a dunderhead who, if he cannot seize at once the officer's or sergeant's meaning, is subjected to gross indignity. The Belgian officer, if he be a Walloon, should not haughtily look down upon the men who come from the great stock of the nation. He ought to be able to speak to his soldiers in their own tongue, and to understand his neighbour of the Netherlands, with whom he might have to act on the field of battle. These are propositions which seem

to flow from the nature of things in Belgium. Yet they have been utterly disregarded.

VII

A COMPARISON with Switzerland may here be in its place. Even as in Belgium, there are several nationalities in the Swiss Republic: the German; the French; the Italian; and the 'Romansch,' which latter forms a subdivision of the Italian element within the Confederacy. More than two thirds of the Swiss are German in descent and speech. Yet all Swiss enjoy, by the Constitution and by practice, the exercise of their rights of language.⁶ The large German majority of the Republic does full justice to the claims of the minority. In Belgium—under the rule of a royal house of German extraction, under the Government of a Koburg Prince—the Germanic majority has had to suffer, and still suffers, great wrong: not without its own fault, it must be owned.

A leader of the Flemish movement, in an essay—a quotation from which may serve here as a specimen of the Nether-German language of Belgium—said:

Onbegrypelijk moet het den vreemdeling schynen, dat onder den vryheden van godsdienst, vermaetschapping, druckpers, en onderwys—wat zeggen wy? dat onder der wettelik gewaerborgte taelvryheid slechts eene schynvryheid voor den Vlaming bestaet; dat, in een word, de fransch, niet dan fransch sprekende inwooner tot allen ambten en eeren geraken kan, terwyl de vlamsch sprekende overal buitengesloten blyft, en geen deel nemen kan an's lands bestuer, an's lands welvaert, dan nadat hy ouders en voorouders veerloochend heeft, dan nadat hy onder het hatelike taeljuk den nek geplooid en naer de fransche fluit heeft leeren dansen.

That is:

Incomprehensible must it appear to a stranger that beneath the liberties of worship, of public meeting, of the press, of

⁵ See Report of the Flemish Committee; p. 126.

⁶ Art. 109 of the Swiss Charter:—'The three chief languages spoken in Switzerland are the national languages of the Confederacy.'

public instruction—what do we say?—that under the legally warranted freedom of language there exists but a sham freedom for the Fleming; that, in one word, the French, nothing but French, speaking inhabitant can reach all employments and honours, whilst the Flemish-speaking inhabitant remains everywhere shut out, and cannot take part in the country's administration, in the country's welfare, except if he denies his parents and forefathers, except if he has bowed his neck under the hated yoke of language, and has learnt to dance after the French flute.

Anyone conversant with German will see at a glance from this that Flemish holds the middle place between German and English—coming as close to the former language as many a dialect spoken in Germany itself. The German who can read 'Reynard the Fox' in the *Platt* of his own country will easily understand a Fleming. A look at the specimens of High-German, Swabian, Swiss, Dutch, Westphalian, and Flemish dialects, as given by Vermeire,⁷ shows how nearly akin they are. An Englishman also, who keeps in mind the more Saxon groundwork of his speech, will trippingly make his way into Flemish. With full truth did a Flemish poet and author once say that 'hoog en neerduitsch staen tot elkander gelyk de rechte tot der slinke hand'—that High and Nether-German stand to each other like the right to the left hand.

VIII

To the Belgian Nether-German his own language serves as a key for all the languages of the North—for German, Danish, Swedish, even English; not to mention Dutch, with which Flemish is well-nigh identical. This fact has often been pointed out by Mr. L. Jottrand the elder, one of the founders of Belgian independence, and a Walloon by birth. In words for which the Flemings owe him much

thanks he has shown up the great wrong done by his Walloon kinsmen, whose attempts at Frenchifying their Germanic compatriots have cut off those latter from great sources of intellectual culture.

Low-German speech, which prevails along the German Ocean and the Baltic, is, in its Dutch form, the language of administration and commerce in various countries of Asia, Africa, and America. In the richest colonies of the Pacific it is the language of civilisation. China and Japan have, in a great measure, become acquainted with European civilisation through their intercourse with the Dutch, and through the use of Dutch books, which for the Fleming are Flemish books. Will it be believed, in presence of this fact, that Belgium is represented abroad by many a diplomatic envoy and consul who knows of Flemish as much as of Turkish?

Under the Government of the formerly United Netherlands, the members of both Chambers of the States-General made use either of the Dutch or Flemish tongue, or of French—according to each member's liking. In the Brussels Chamber and Senate, only French is spoken. A deceptive Gallo-Romanic stamp has thus been put upon the Belgian part of the Low Countries. Step by step the Flemish language was driven into the background, if not utterly expelled, even in the Courts of Justice and in communal affairs. Often the peasant was judged in a tongue of which he did not understand a syllable. When he travelled, he had to ask at the railway for his ticket in a language utterly foreign to him—a somewhat difficult performance! A change, no doubt, might soon have been wrought, had the leading men among the Flemings, and the representatives of the Flemish provinces, practically maintained

⁷ See *Verhandeling over de Vlaemsche Beweging; voorgedragen in der Maatschappij 'Tael en Kunst,' te Hamme; door P. Vermeire.*

their rights of speech. The great journals, written in French and conducted mostly by men of French birth, might, it is true, have sought to foil such self-help by refusing to report speeches made in Neder-Duitsch. But this would not have availed for any length of time.

Unfortunately, the Flemings allowed themselves to be influenced by a charge which Walloon writers readily preferred, and which was to the effect that behind the Flemish language movement there were Orangeist aspirations—that is, tendencies towards the restoration of Dutch rule. This was a mere pretext, the more palpable as the Walloons, by their assertion, contradicted, so to say, themselves. Formerly they had laid stress on the alleged great difference between the Dutch and the Flemish idioms, in order to sow further disunion between the Flemings and the people of Holland. Now that this aim had been attained, they accused the Fleming who wanted to speak his own language that he was working for the political objects of Holland; ‘Dutch and Flemish being virtually the same tongue!’

Truly, a bit from a well-known fable of Æsop!

IX

FOR ten years, Flanders bore her grievances mutely. At last, in 1840, two hundred communes sent petitions to the House of Deputies at Brussels, in which they asked:—

I. That all provincial and local affairs in the Flemish parts of the country should be conducted in Flemish.

II. That the State officials in those parts of the country should make use of the Flemish language in their relations with the communal authorities and the citizens.

III. That that language should be used before the Courts of Justice if the parties or the accused understood it.

IV. That a Flemish Academy, or at least a Flemish section of the Academy at Brussels, should be founded for the furtherance of Flemish literature.

V. That Flemish should enjoy, at the University of Ghent, and at the other State schools, the same rights as French.

Since the presentation of this petition, the grievances of the Flemings were—according to the report of the Committee alluded to—brought each year before the Chamber. Each time the majority set them aside without redress. If any small concession was occasionally made, means were found afterwards to misinterpret the law. Thus it was with the law concerning instruction in the middle schools. In Ghent and elsewhere, Flemish was not taught at all in the first class, and in the second and third classes was disposed of in a single hour; whereas even for English and German a double number of hours was appointed.

What would the valiant burghers of Ghent have said if they could have risen from their graves?—they who, in the good Neder-Duitsch tongue, made the Counts of Flanders swear, before their access to government, ‘al de bestaende wetten, vorregten, vryheden en gewoonten van’t graefschap en van de stad Gent te onderhouden en te doon onderhouden.’ That is: to uphold, and to cause to uphold, all the existing laws, privileges, liberties, and customs of the county and of the town of Ghent. How those citizens of old would indignantly wonder if they saw that, in the bringing-up of their grandsons, the first natural and customary right of a people was trodden under foot? What would an Artevelde, what would the great ‘Ruwaerd van Vlandern,’ the Protector of Flanders, have thought and said?

X

IN Europe at large—even in Ger-

many, which might be more specially interested in the matter—the Flemish cause has by far not attracted the attention it merits, in spite of the endeavours made by some eminent Germanistic scholars. Partly it was owing to a strange ignorance of the close bond between the Flemish, the Dutch, and all the other Nether-German idioms. Partly, men felt repelled by the immixtion of a retrograde Roman Catholic clergy, which sought to lead Flemish aspirations astray.

In 1858 a Liberal Association was started at Brussels, which made it its task to connect the Flemish language movement with the movement for the cause of Progress. With the activity of this Society, which had members at Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges, and elsewhere, a new chapter seemed to begin in the development of the Nether-German race of Belgium. The name of the Association was: 'Maatschappij tot Opbeuring de Vlaamsche Bevolking' ('Union for the Elevation of the Flemish People'); its device: 'Vlamingen vooruit!' ('Flemings, forwards!') The Society was destined, not only to advocate equality in the rights of language, but also to aid in enlightening the masses in the sense of true representative government and of opposition to the Roman hierarchy, so that the elections for the Chamber, for the provincial and communal administration, should be conducted in a progressive sense.

Popular books, pamphlets, and periodicals were to be published in the Flemish tongue by this Association. It also aimed at better instruction in the primary schools; if possible, under a gratuitous system. Paragraph V. of the Society's Charter laid it down, as a rule, that only men known for their Liberal principles and enlightened views should be received into, and be able to remain in, the Union. Among the leaders present at the

foundation of the Society, or active in it afterwards, were a number of members of the House of Deputies; some distinguished Professors of the University of Brussels; authors, and other notable men of the Liberal party.

Much of that which the Association promised to do, remained unfulfilled. But its activity has, nevertheless, given a fresh start to the Flemish movement. Among the demands put forth in the Society's programme, the following appear dictated by the simplest sense of justice:—

That the Walloon should be held to understand Flemish in all cases where the Fleming is obliged to know French.

That the official records of Flemish communes shall be drawn up in Flemish, even as those of the Walloon communes are drawn up in French.

That the decrees of the provincial administrations and of Government shall be published in an official text of both languages, so that all Belgians shall be able to take due notice of them.

That in the same way the debates and Acts of Parliament shall be published in both languages, the text of each of which shall be equally valid before the law.

That judicial matters shall, in the Flemish part of Belgium, be exclusively conducted in Flemish.

That all officials—excepting those employed by the communes—shall be obliged, in the Flemish as well as in the Walloon part of the country, to know both languages, so that a Walloon or a Fleming shall not be treated like a foreigner in his own country.

Lastly, that in the whole kingdom equal importance shall be attached to the instruction in Flemish and in French.

These demands prove that their authors did as little desire a separation or antagonism between the two races as the subjection of

one of them to the other, but that, on the contrary, they wished to bring about the fullest brotherly intercourse.

XI

OWING to the unjust treatment of the Flemings, the strife became so bitter that Government found itself compelled to seek for information, by means of its diplomatic agents abroad, as to how matters stood in foreign countries where different languages exist. Reports were thus sent in from Switzerland; from the then Sardinian States (where Italian and French was spoken); from Austria; and from Schleswig-Holstein, at that time still under Danish rule. Belgium, too, had, as it were, its Schleswig-Holstein Question! So it was high time, indeed, that something should be done for the grievances of the Flemings.

Though a concession has been made, within the last few years, in regard to the conduct of judicial matters, the Flemish movement has still a hard struggle before it. Belgium is an intermediate country between Germany, France, and England. The natural support, not only of its Neder-Duitsch-speaking people, but of the country in general, is, on the one hand, England; on the other, the German nation, which has no annexationist aims, but which is bound up by kinship and blood with the majority of the Belgians—even as is the case between the Flemings and the English. Yet the intellectual contact between Belgium and Germany has hitherto been rendered difficult in various ways—not least so by the high duties laid on books and other prints which come from Germany, whilst but slight duties were imposed upon French books and prints. The real object of this measure can easily be gathered from a characteristic additional enactment. France, too, had until lately a German-speaking population in Alsace-

Lorraine, and still has a Flemish-speaking population in her northern departments. Now, any books or prints published in France, either in the High-German or the Neder-Duitsch language, were burdened, on the part of Belgium, with equally high duties as those coming from Germany. The privilege was only for the publications in French. This measure was clearly taken with the object of Frenchifying the Flemish people.

It may be readily acknowledged that modern Flemish literature cannot bear a comparison with French literature, although the former is by far not so insignificant as many may believe; nor is all of the latter sheer gain. All the Flemish literature of Belgium is, moreover, home-growth, whilst a great deal of the so-called French literature of Belgium is mainly importation. The intellectual productivity of the Nether-German race in Belgium need at any rate not be despaired of. It has had a great and noble past, in politics as well as in art. To-day, also, the chief painters and sculptors of Belgium prove themselves to belong to the race which formerly gave rise to most excellent artistic productions.

In Flanders and Brabant, at a time when those provinces stood in closer connection to Germany, civic freedom was flourishing. On their soil, momentous battles were fought against foes at home and from abroad. To-day, when Germany is glad to see the independence of Belgium as firmly upheld as that of the Swiss Republic, a more intimate intellectual contact with a kindred people may aid in repelling the dark powers of priestcraft, and so speed the triumph of Right and Light. In this sense it is desirable to refresh the Nether-German population of Belgium from the very source of its origin, whilst fully guarding the position of a country which means to be neither German nor French.