

A Procession of Giants.

BY EMILE DESSAIX.

[From Photographs by Alexandre, Brussels.]



WOULD that this article were a biograph, in order that these curious giants might pass before your eyes as they passed before mine some time back in Brussels. It was a lively

sight. The wooden giants, with their rough-hewn faces and costly raiment, towered high above the crowds that lined each side of the streets, frightening the little children when some cruel monster of tradition went striding by, and drawing cheers from the older people, as Saint Michael or some other patron saint of a Belgian town came into view. At one moment the procession was like a Lord Mayor's show; at another, it was like a Guy Fawkes' carnival; at another, like the "Ancient and Horrible" processions which are to be seen in some parts of the United States on Fourth of July morning; and at every moment it was unique and memorable.

The Belgians dearly love a procession, and in early times used to celebrate all great national or municipal events by a so-called "cavalcade" or "omgang," in which the noted personages of Scripture and history were represented. In many respects it was like the ancient English Miracle plays. As far back as 1490, for instance, there was a procession at Louvain, held to celebrate the deliverance of the city by the defeat of the Normans, and this procession, headed by a triumphal chair carrying the Virgin of Louvain, contained Biblical characters, trade tableaux, representations of the legends of chivalry and earlier times, and "the giants." To-day, with one or two exceptions, the giants are all that remain of this former splendour, and so deeply are these favourites seated in the

hearts of Young Belgium, that they are unlikely soon to be forgotten.

You can, in fact, see them annually in various parts of Belgium. The "kermesse," which used to be held in honour of the Church and its patron saint in many towns, and later took its place as the annual fête of the municipalities, is now the occasion upon which the giants come forth from their hiding-places to delight the populace. At Antwerp, Ath, and Cambrai the giants appear in might; and at Mons, as well as in Brussels, Bruges, Tournai, and a few



THE GIANT OF HASSELT.

other places, the giants are accompanied by different ridiculous wooden figures—burlesque representations of local by-words and people of traditional or current notoriety.

That the figures are not necessarily representations of the famous ogreish giants of the nursery is shown by the appearance of such figures as the Giant of Hasselt, Charlemagne, and others. The Hasselt giant is merely the traditional pet of the little Belgian town. His figure is seen everywhere, just as the bear is seen in Berne, or the little monk in Munich. His relation to Hasselt is very like that of Gog and Magog to London.



CHARLES THE GRAND.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the important place which Charlemagne holds in legend and in the hearts of the Flemish people. Their love for him is shown by the never-ending appearance of his mighty figure in the processions, from the church cavalcade down to the present time. The grand King was reputed to be eight feet in height, and he was so powerful that he could straighten three horse-shoes with one movement of his hand. He had nine wives, but, unlike the wife of Goliath and a few other married ladies,

the wives of Charlemagne rarely appear in the procession of giants. His sword, which we may see in the accompanying illustration, was called "La Joyeuse." A German legend says that he appears in seasons of plenty, crossing the Rhine on a golden bridge, and blessing both cornfields and vineyards.

Next came the giant Crusader, followed by one of the Virgins of Brussels—the one with a curious helmet, a dangerous-looking moustache, and a cross upon his breast; the



THE GIANT CRUSADER AND THE VIRGIN OF BRUSSELS.



POLYDORE, POLYDORA, AND POLYDOORKA OF ALOST.

other with most graceful pose, a well-fitting wrap, black hair, and a maidenly face. The Crusader gave a great deal of trouble during the march, and had to be constantly held up by his attendants. His costume was perhaps not exactly in the regular Crusader style, but anachronisms in these processions are rarely noted and as rarely ridiculed. In one procession recently, Goliath appeared in an academic helmet, while Hercules wore the costume of mediæval times.

Polydore, Polydora, and Polydoorka, the three comical giants contributed by the town of Alost to the Brussels procession, are intended to burlesque the family of Termonde giants. It will be noticed that Polydora, the portly and fascinating wife of her fashionably-dressed spouse, holds a bunch of onions in her hand. Therein lies a tale, for it is reported that the people of Termonde, in their superiority, once dubbed the

people of Alost with the interesting nickname of "Onions"—a name which the inhabitants of Alost immediately adopted, with no spiteful feeling, as their own. They now look upon it as a title of honour, and they never lose an opportunity to let the Termonde people see that their superior specimen of humour failed of its effect.

Another interesting legend is attached to the wonderfully-made horse seen in the illustrations on this page. He follows Polydore and Polydora, and keeps a respectful dis-



THE HORSE BAYARD AND THE FOUR SONS OF AYMON.



THE VIRGIN OF LOUVAIN.

tance away. It is said of Bayard that he possessed incredible swiftness, and belonged to the four sons of Aymon. If one of the sons mounted, Bayard remained an ordinary size; but if all four mounted, Bayard's body became elongated to an appropriate length. One of his footprints is still said to be in existence at Soignies, and another is to be found on a rock near Dinant. The four sons of Aymon sit gracefully astride his expanded back, fine military-looking figures, even though made of wood.

Nearly every Belgian city possesses a

"pucelle," or Virgin, to whom the people love to do endless honour. Just the same as in France, where Joan of Arc, the Pucelle d'Orleans, may often be seen in religious processions, so in Belgium the Virgin of Louvain is an oft-appearing attraction. She is a stately figure, with the sign of her maidenly occupation in her hand, and so unwieldy at times that she has to be supported by ropes in the hands of diminutive but living men.

The Antwerp giants possess a remarkably interesting history, and their appearance is



ANTIGONUS, THE ANTWERP GIANT.



SILVIUS BRABO.

always the signal for a shout of welcome. When the Antwerpens themselves hold their procession, the welcome is, of course, even more spontaneous and overwhelming. They have a legend to the effect that one Silvius Brabo, a man of enormous strength and a hero of undaunted courage, once defeated and cut off the hand of the giant Antigonus, who was accustomed to exact a heavy toll from vessels entering the Schelde, and who ruthlessly cut off and tossed into the river a hand of every shipmaster who refused to pay. Antigonus has been hated for centuries, and Brabo stands on a bronze fountain in front of the Hotel de Ville in Antwerp. When they appear in the procession of giants, they are usually followed by Pallas Minerva, another gigantic contribution from Antwerp. It is related of Pallas Minerva that she got her sobriquet by killing Pallas, one of the Titan giants, and then flayed him, using his skin

for armour. In the procession she is beautiful and majestic, shining brilliantly in her splendid armour. On the breast of Antigonus you will be able to distinguish an enormous hand—the sign of his brutal profession.

The Grand Turk is one of the figures that take us back to the times of the cavalcade, for he, too, held a prominent place in the Louvain procession of 1490. The name, as everyone knows, was given by the Christians to the Ottoman rulers, and it is curious to note the costume which tradition assigned



PALLAS.



"MY UNCLE" AND THE GRAND TURK.

to the Grand Turk, and the Gallic cast of features which the man who carved the statue gave to this most stalwart and handsome favourite.

It may, perhaps, be wondered at how these giants, so apparently unwieldy, are carried with safety through the streets; but the explanation is easy. In nearly all the figures, the wooden dummy on which the clothes are placed extends not farther than the waist. The clothes are then tacked to the wood,

shown in nearly all the illustrations. "My Uncle," it may be said in passing, is a popular skit upon that most unpopular of men—the pawnbroker and usurer.

The giant of Ath and his wife are very popular giants, perhaps because the wife is so pretty with her bouquet of flowers and her flowing veil, and the husband so masterful with his glistening helmet and spiked club. In nearly every sense, they were the handsomest giants in the procession. One



THE GIANT OF ATH AND HIS WIFE.

and are allowed to drop gracefully to the ground—thus hiding the man inside the clothes who is holding the dummy up. Each figure is also supported in the air by three or four men, sometimes with their hands alone, as in the illustration of "My Uncle" and the Grand Turk, and sometimes by means of ropes, as in the case of the Virgin of Louvain. The man inside gets air by means of openings cut in the clothes—openings



A QUARTETTE OF BRUSSELS FAVOURITES.

can hardly believe that the expressive faces of these two were carved from a block of wood.

Strange to say, some of these figures have no name. According to one writer on Flemish costumes they represent neither the founder nor the liberator of the city, neither the heroes of Scripture nor of mythology, neither an inhabitant of Heaven nor Hell. They have no character, sacred or profane, and no significance, good or bad; they are simply "the giants"—that is to say, the puppets of a people who have forgotten almost the traditions connected with them. Of such a nature are the curious figures

possible, and the amount of cloth swallowed up by these tremendous dummies is sometimes beyond belief.

Everyone who has been to Brussels knows the Mannikin Fountain. It is one of the curiosities of the city, and possesses no little artistic excellence. He is a great favourite of the lower classes, and on all great occasions he is dressed in gala attire. When he appears in procession during the Kermesse, he stands high upon a triumphal car, drawn by four horses, and gaily decked with rich trappings and flowers. The city fathers spare no expense for the Mannikin, and they walk

which make up the quartette of Brussels favourites, shown on this page.

Some idea of the costly raiment worn by these giants may be gained from our illustration of the giants of Nivelles. They wear expensive black velvet, bordered with gold, and the sleeves upon Araygon's wife are made of costly lace. The towns which contribute these figures to the procession take pride in dressing them as well as



THE GIANTS OF NIVELLES.



THE BRUSSELS MANNIKIN.

beside the car with top-hats and swelling pride.

The ability of the giants to create laughter is immense. As they move along the streets they are manipulated by the men who carry them, so that they curtsey, dance, hop, skip, and jump to the point of exhaustion. In narrow streets they peep into second story windows, and flirt with the girls and boys who watch them. This unnatural activity often results in damages to personal beauty, and the loss of valuable arms and heads. In the procession of 1890, the wife of the giant of Nivelles lost her head, Janus lost his necktie, and Pallas dropped an arm along the route. The Grand

Turk, at one time, entirely disappeared, and was not discovered until the men who had been attending him came out of the "brasserie," where they had been slyly tipping, and started in search.



JANUS.