

VANITY FAIR

KING ALBERT IN AMERICA

The First Authentic Account of His Stay in the United States

By Ard Choille

IT was on March 8, 1898, that a tall, rather angular young man of twenty-three landed in the port of New York from the steamship *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*. The visitor, who traveled incognito—under the name of Count de Rethey—was in fact Prince Albert of the Belgians, heir presumptive to the throne of King Leopold II.

King Albert, who is to-day the most picturesque figure alive, was born in 1875, but it was not until his sixteenth year that he had been brought in sight of the crown. Earlier in his life three persons had stood between him and the headship of the nation: (1) his cousin, the Crown Prince (the Count of Hainault, son of Leopold, the then reigning monarch); (2) his father (the Count of Flanders); and (3) his brother (Prince Baudoin).

Through the elimination of these three men by death he found himself (in 1909) face to face with a vastly transformed destiny and his future subjects began to inquire what manner of man he was likely to turn out. Much to their relief the more they discovered about him the more reason they had to be proud and satisfied. Thoroughly democratic in his relations with the people, and speaking Flemish—the tongue of one half of the nation—as fluently as he did French—the speech of the other half—his popularity had grown steadily from 1891, when, at the age of sixteen, he had taken his place in the upper house of the Belgian Legislature.

The main reason of his American visit—at the age of twenty-three—lay in his desire to see for himself how this country was getting on; to discover what might be learned from us and applied in the case of the industrial Belgium which he had explored from one end to the other. There was also a political reason. He was curious about our national and State governments. Like the rest of his countrymen, he could not forget that the abortive Belgian revolution of 1788, looking to a free and strong Federation, had for its object the establishment of "The United States of Belgium," a government modeled on the United States of America.

THE Prince's suite consisted of his aide-de-camp, his physician, his former tutor, and two servants. The Prince looked rather embarrassed when General Merritt—representing President McKinley—with the Belgian Minister at Washington and the Belgian Consul General at New York, appeared at the dock to conduct him to the Waldorf Hotel. He soon let it be known, with good tempered firmness, that he wanted to be left to his own devices; that he could find his way about and that, as far as it was in his power, he proposed to enjoy all the freedom of an American while he was in America. One thin above all he refused even

to think of, the offer by the Government of an army officer to accompany him on his wanderings.

Of course he paid a formal visit to Mr. McKinley and dined at the White House. But this and a dinner given by the Belgian Minister were the only strictly official affairs at which he was present in America. He took his meals in the public dining room of his hotel, strolled about the streets, visited Grant's Tomb, watched the brokers from the gallery of the Stock Exchange, lunched at the Lawyers' Club, saw a dress parade of the Seventh Regiment, inspected the dry dock at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and examined a monitor—*The Terror*—at Tompkinsville.

In Washington and New York he made friends with a goodly number of newspaper reporters. In fact he relied, all through his visit, on American reporters to let him know what he ought to see and do. As one of them put it to the writer: "He never gave himself airs! He had an easy American way with him, and he never showed himself bored." The Prince had a practical interest in newspapers. He once started a publication to advocate the building up of a Belgian Merchant Marine and wrote many articles for it himself. Hence, no doubt, originated the report that at one time in his career he had held a place on the staff of an Antwerp journal. As a matter of fact he was a mere boy when he succeeded his dead brother as heir to the throne, and immediately set to work at a desk in the Foreign Office at Brussels and in the War School of the Capital to fit himself for the headship of the Monarchy so long administered by Leopold II. and, before that, by Leopold I.

One thing that helped him to do as he wished, while he was in this country, was the fact that we were all occupied with the problem of the Spanish War, and, as he spoke English with no perceptible accent, he was able to escape notice in mixed companies and pick up all sorts of information from casual strangers, who liked him instinctively, perhaps because of his modesty and good nature.

THE Prince went to Boston, and started from there on the tour which took him to the Pacific Coast. His inspection of several railroad systems was made under the guidance of Mr. J. J. Hill, whom he visited in St. Paul. Experts were surprised to find that this quiet young sprig of royalty was as familiar with the structure of locomotives as if he had been bred to the business. Machinery had always been a passion with him. For part of the journey he was in the cab with the engineer and took his place at the throttle. He explained that it was no new experience as he had run trains on several occasions in his own country. In the

course of his wanderings he inspected the power stations at Niagara Falls, the Pittsburgh Steel Works, a great variety of oil fields, cities, and all the agricultural or trade schools that came in his way. A number of our Universities were visited by him, the living quarters and the athletic fields attracting his special attention. It was at Harvard, when introduced by Dr. Eliot to a student's room, that the Prince remarked, on seeing a group of American women: "You have some very beautiful women in your country. I have heard them praised, but everywhere I am learning that this praise is justified."

It was at Newport, where he rested and enjoyed himself after his travels, and where he visited Mrs. Potter Palmer, that he made himself at home in society, leaving a splendid impression due to his affability and unaffected charm. It was at Newport that he broke a heart or two. In one case, in particular, he took a great fancy to a young American girl—now the wife of a diplomat in the United States service—and he continued for a year or more to send her souvenirs and postal cards from Belgium. He returned to New York on June 15, where he went to Madame Dupont's and had his photograph taken. This photograph is here reproduced for the first time in several years. He was delighted with his visit, and declared with emphasis, "I have never seen in all my life so many beautiful women as I have seen in America." A real compliment, as the women of Belgium maintain a high average of good looks.

A CHARACTERISTIC story is told about his return journey from New York. Two cabins of the steamship *Friesland* had been knocked into one and elaborately decorated for his use. But he refused to avail himself of the well-meant attention of the steamship company, saying that he would feel more at ease in a plain, simple room, and such a one he occupied. On the way across the Atlantic he was the least troublesome passenger aboard, making friends with everybody, from the children in the steerage to the loungers in the smoking room. In his manner there was no affectation. He has always regarded himself as a comrade of his country's soldiers and as a fellow-toiler with cabinet officers, legislators, and every citizen who is working for the welfare of his nation. If he longed for any prominence it was to be considered a worthy successor to such men as Charles Rogier, Frère-Orban, and other men of that type, who had left their mark on the face of his land in an industrial way.

How incredulous Americans would have been if in 1898 some prophet had told them that Prince Albert, who seemed to be inter-

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ested mainly in power houses and rolling mills, in dairies and artificial fertilizers, in agricultural and trade schools; would some day, as the head of a little nation of seven million souls, effectually check the onset of the greatest war machine of modern times, a war machine which had been improving steadily from the day when William I., surrounded by the sovereigns of the Empire, had re-entered Berlin in triumph, fresh from the conquest of France and the destruction of Napoleon III. If King Albert had flinched at the critical moment in the present war; if he had saved Belgium from ravage, but destroyed her freedom; if he had regarded the fundamental instrument of her very existence as a "scrap of paper"; the whole gigantic struggle would have taken on a different aspect. But he was equal to the task, and his great soul never faltered.

SOON after he got back to Belgium from America he made a visit to the Belgian Colonies—particularly the Congo—and suggested reforms in administration and management which did credit to him as a statesman and a sound economist. It was, however, only after he had ascended the throne, that he was able to make his ideas on the subject of Colonial policy really effectual.

King Albert ascended the throne in December, 1909. After almost five years of peaceful rule came the tearing up, by Germany, of the "scrap of paper." That document was nothing less than the guarantee of Belgium's neutrality. "The Treaty of Eighteen Articles," signed, on June 26, 1831, by the Five Powers,—England, France, Austria, Prussia and Russia; strengthened, in 1839, by a definitive Treaty which brought Holland into the solemn pact, and formally acknowledged in 1870, when Prussia and France scrupulously refrained from violating Belgium's neutrality, in spite of urgent military necessities. What Bismarck and Von Moltke didn't do, Emperor William II. did. The "perpetual neutrality" of Belgium, attested by Prussia, became of no account whatever.

When the German Minister at Brussels handed to the Belgian Government the ultimatum of Sunday, August 2, 1914, demanding the passage through Belgium of a German army, it was promptly rejected by King Albert, after consultation with his Parliament, as an insult to his race. He could do nothing else, if he would keep his country independent. For, when the Five Powers guaranteed, in 1831, the existence of the Kingdom, it was not only on condition that Belgium should remain neutral, but also that the nation should be prepared, at all times, to resist any Power which might attempt to violate her neutrality. It was because of his keen sense, from the first, of this solemn obligation that King Albert was ready at once to put his army in the field, and that his troops gave such an account of themselves as astonished the whole world; affording the French and the British time to mobilize, and upsetting all the long matured plans of Berlin for a rapid thrust to the westward, to end—as the General Staff thought—with the rapid capture of Paris, and the collection of an enormous indemnity.

IF the sympathy of the world has gone out to King Albert, his Queen, Elisabeth, daughter of the ducal man of science, Charles of Bavaria, has not been forgotten. She married

the King in 1900, two years after his return from America. She is a heroic figure. A trained physician, she has proved herself perfectly at home in the field hospitals. She has refused to leave her husband, going, by his side, close to the firing line. No dangers fright her and no labors tire. She will share the noble place in twentieth century history already assured to her husband. The breaking

is "The Great" because he upset all Europe, to the honor and glory of France. The German Emperor William I. was labelled "The Great" by his grandson William II.—again note the "second"—in order to slight Bismarck, and suggest, at the same time, the importance of what had been accomplished when the Hohenzollerns became assured overlords of what had been the North German Federation, now turned into a modern and improved version of the Empire of Charlemagne.

But Albert of the Belgians will be "The Great," not for what he did for the Belgians—fine as that was—but for what he did for the world. If the map of Europe is to be of many colors, and not of one color only, the credit must always be his. If the "Family of Nations" is to continue as a legal, civilized idea, and an obstacle to the theory that all-is-fair-in-war, he is solely to be praised for it. If International Law has been rescued from the blood-and-iron scrap heap, it was his strong hand that drew it forth. To accomplish all this it was necessary for him to put in jeopardy his own life and the life of his Queen; to risk the future of his three children; to give over his peaceful and peace-loving country to heart-breaking ruin; to invite the destruction of every beautiful city in the land, and of every institution, from ancient Louvain to the newest Belgian agricultural school. It was a case of opening the dikes. But the flood that was let in was not the sea, but a horde of invaders, bent on destruction, and equipped for the enterprise with the most terrible and merciless weapons.

A flamboyant general once signed a despatch, "From headquarters in the saddle." King Albert would have been justified, many times, in dating messages from "The Belgian Capital in a motor car." From Brussels to Antwerp, from Antwerp to Ostend, from Ostend to the line of the Allies across the French border, he has time and again been forced to change the seat of his Government. Belgium only wanted to be let alone. She is not looking for territorial gains in the war which was thrust upon her. So far as is possible, she is to be restored through a huge indemnity to her original prosperous condition, even if her ruined cities cannot be made what they were. England, Russia and France are pledged to exact the utmost farthing of what is owing to her. This is no mere debt of honor, no chivalrous resolve, but an acknowledgment of benefits received. French civilization is intact to-day because the Belgians stood in the way of the destroyer who said "France must go."

Owing to the almost equal division of King Albert's country into Flemish and French speaking people, the national parties are balanced. If Belgium were to receive in the final settlement a slice of German territory, north of Alsace-Lorraine and west of the Rhine, the result would be to introduce a Teutonic element into politics which might upset the existing balance.

A recent drawing has pictured King Albert standing in the midst of his desolated, violated and burning country. All around him are dying soldiers, and ruins, and smoke and famine. The German Emperor is standing beside him and whispering in his ear: "There! You see! You have lost everything." To which King Albert makes reply: "I have not lost my soul."



THE KING AND THE QUEEN OF THE BELGIANS

From a portrait taken shortly after their marriage in 1900

of blood ties in Europe that has marked this war is indicated by the fact that, in one of the bombardments—Antwerp—the brother of Queen Elisabeth was serving with the troops whose heavy guns were trained on the retreat of his own sister and her three young children.

Albert of the Belgians has won as certainly the begrudged respect of his enemies, as the enthusiastic admiration of the active and neutral friends of his country. Not his bravery, or grit, as a soldier—though those qualities he has abundantly—have made his fame secure. Courage of the physical sort is a common thing. No doubt the vast majority of the millions engaged on both sides have it, and to spare. It is necessary to look in another direction for an explanation of this King's pre-eminence as a world figure.

THE Belgians will insist, no doubt, on calling him "Albert the Great," and all disinterested persons will unite with the Belgians in so doing. But whereas that designation, as applied to the successful Chief of State, has usually suggested national self-consciousness and even selfishness, in the present case it will be quite different. Czar Peter was named "The Great" by Catherine II—note the "second"—because of what he had done for Russia. Frederick became "The Great" because he made Prussia something vastly more than the obscure state he found it. Napoleon

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King Albert: An American Portrait

The only posed portrait of him taken in this country

Photographed in New York, June 15, 1898, by Aimé Dupont

