

Belgian Students Prank in a Big Way

From Castle Commandeering to Pants Pulling Our Belgian Brothers Are Out for Some Fun

The author of this article, Jean Boddewyn, attended the University last year and graduated in business administration. Now back home in Belgium, he sent us this report on student life there. He said he hoped we "wouldn't find it too revolutionary."

Practical pokes in the USA are usually performed on the fraternity or dormitory level: waterbagging, showering, "putting in the stocks," hacking, etc. At best, they usually involve a few frats or dorms. To my knowledge, Junior Prom traditions are the only exception to that custom, on the Oregon campus.

But in Belgium, there are no frats and very few dorms (male students usually rent rooms in private houses). Students there can't find an exutory for their fancies and complexes.

It's Different There

Here lies the difference: American students respect legal and academic authorities, professors and policemen are taboo, and no one seems to dare provoking them by jokes. European students, on the other hand, are traditionally, actively and, if possible, humorously "against" professors, municipal and national police and the "bourgeois," i.e., the decent citizens, symbols, in their eyes, of order, peace and boredom.

Very old universities had jails for troublemaking students. The municipal police now takes care of them, and one of the most aspired to honors is to have spent at least one day in this jail. There is even kind of a secret frat of former residents of this hospitable place!

A Serious Procession

When school starts in September, professors of the University of Louvain, clad in caps, gowns and hoods, make a procession through the city. These ornaments are stored in some university building.

Well, in 1940, these caps, gowns and hoods were stolen the very day preceding the beginning of class. As they couldn't be found, the president, who blew his top, and had to send frantic telegrams to all professors to tell them to bring tuxedos, wedding garbs, dress-coats, anything to have something black and serious to wear during the procession.

It took a week to find the apparel, hidden in some remoted place. One of the professors, the Prime Minister of Belgium, found his garb floating on top of the campanilla, the stairs of which had been covered with soap to make its rescue harder!

Storming the Castle

In the center of the city of Ghent, there is a very solid-looking medieval castle, surrounded by a broad ditch full of water, the entrance to which is protected by a draw-bridge. Well, in 1950, a couple of thousand students of the University of Ghent walked in with food and projectiles, drew the bridge up, and waited for the fight.

After a couple of hours, hundreds of policemen, gendarmes, and firemen were besieging the castle with water hoses and ladders. It took about a full day of

heroic battle to get the students to surrender. They were shaking the ladders, pushing the besiegers in the ditch, and throwing rotten eggs and apples on their opponents. This day, the old city lived some hours of its glorious medieval past.

Peaceful Traffic Jam

In October 1952, the students of the same university of Ghent rented all the carts they could find, and peacefully, decently and innocently pushing these carts through the busiest part of the city. They succeeded in creating the most awful traffic-jam in the city's history.

Another traditional joke at the University of Louvain is the stealing, or rather "borrowing" of statues the day before their unveiling. As lots of big wheels (governors, state secretaries, bishops, representatives, professors) are usually invited to this official ceremony, it is always a mess for the invited speaker to have to give his talk in front of an empty pedestal.

The kidnapping of famous speakers invited to the University is also a traditional joke, either before or after the speech (it depends on the interest). Students even succeeded once in making one of these kidnapped guests so drunk that they were able to take off his pants. Then they released him in a public place where he was apprehended by the police for drunkenness and gross indecency!

A good practical poke was devised lately by English students. They put quite a few pounds of soap powder in a public fountain. After a short time, thousands of cubic feet of soap suds were pouring in the street, creating a terrible traffic jam in a very busy business district.

There happened to be at the University of Louvain a boy looking exactly like our young King Baudouin. Some wise guys took notice of it, and with the help of some professors, they prepared their farce very carefully.

Who's the King?

One afternoon in October 1951, the Reverend Sister of a Catholic high school for girls got a phone call supposedly coming from the

king's palace. The caller said: "The king's secretary is speaking: His Majesty will arrive at 3 p.m. to visit the new buildings of your school."

They Didn't Suspect

As the King sometimes makes such visits, the good nun didn't suspect anything. She ran wildly into the classes, shouting: "The King is coming! The King is coming!" Everybody got wild and started running from class to class. The flag was hung on the front door, and the girls hastily repeated our national anthem.

A quarter of an hour later, a car arrived with some young men who showed special cards, "Private Police of the King," and who took command of the phones and entrances of the building.

At 3 p.m. sharp, a black automobile with the King's plate number stopped in front of the school. The National anthem, hurrahs and flowers greeted it... and the "King" appeared before the fainting nuns and girls. Then started a visit of the buildings and a fresh new series of national anthems, hurrahs and

flowers every time the monarch entered a class.

His Majesty Detected

By this time, the chaplain had guessed something was wrong, as the King's confidants looked very young and could hardly keep from laughing. And one girl was insisting that she had danced with the "King" some time ago. He tried to phone to the King's palace, but couldn't, as the "detectives" prevented him. Finally he took a bicycle and rode to the next phone booth where he learned from the King's house that His Majesty was some place else in Belgium.

A Royal Foot Race

The chaplain came back with a few policemen to put an end to that farce. By this time, the "King" had almost ended his visit and was about to grant a special holiday to the girls when chaplain and policemen entered the school. Under the eyes of shocked nuns and girls the "King" and his confidants started a hundred meters dash through the building and across the lawn bordering it.

They were finally caught but King Baudouin (the real one) had enough sense and humor to laugh about this high-treason performed with so much skill.

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