

The summer of 1895 slipped by. General strikes in Belgium were on hold and for now the dockers stirred up no hornets' nests. Nothing was on the horizon to match the strife of three and four years before, when 450,000 protesters took to the streets at the prompting of the trade unions and the Socialist Party over issues of universal suffrage. The ships of the newly founded *Compagnie Belge Maritime du Congo*, the *СВМС*, plied their route, regularly disgorging valuable cargo at the Antwerp quays and filling their holds with relatively little for the return journey south, down to the African coast. British shipping agents could breathe easily too: their steamships moved up and down the Scheldt unhindered and on schedule, back and forth across the Channel. Eight strikes would be unleashed later, though. De Courcy-Perry's telegram to the Foreign Office of 18 June regarding bid invitations for engineering works on the new railway station had elicited some murmurings, but George Lythcott knew little more than that. Had a contract been bagged, for any segment of the works, certainly he would have heard. The matter was not looking encouraging.

As Christmas neared, he took himself off, as he regularly did on Sunday mornings, for Reverend Abraham Stanley's service at the Anglican Church, spiritual home of the city's sizeable British community. The *Chapelle des Tanneurs*, as it was then called, stood just off the Meir. Its snow-white limestone walls had something cottage-y about them that reminded parishioners of home, as did its low arched doorway beckoning people in. Stanley's

sermon, as usual, had uplift and downlift in equal measure and it took perseverance sometimes to sit dutifully through it all, particularly during muggy weather. Lythcott listened distractedly to the announcements afterwards: a forthcoming christening, a fund-raising appeal, an invitation to pray for an ailing chorister. A very useful place, Lythcott reflected, to trade useful snatches of news with the community.

Stanley's always been good about that, checking in with the Consulate and providing a bush telegraph to his congregation. Very helpful, this give and take. Why, he even persuaded Walter once to speak there about a cholera outbreak and advise about how to spot symptoms and what precautions to take. Nice to see my brother carrying forth from the pulpit for once. Puts a face to his name. Walter was rather pleased, I remember, about that!

George rose from his pew and shook hands with George Lincoln, who greeted him in his flat Connecticut accent. Lincoln had served once in Antwerp at the American consulate and would do so again before long. Lythcott then saluted others whom he knew, nodded courteously left and right and headed back home, a nice stroll across the quiet cobblestoned streets of the city. On Sundays it was always quiet and you could hear your footsteps. Not too hot, but no patina of hoar frost yet either on the trees of the city squares. The true cold snap would come later, after the holidays. The sort of cold snap that dispatched de Courcy-Perry to his sickbed all too often, leaving his American wife Elena to nurse him and to deal single-handedly with household affairs.

Lythcott had a mounting stack of local newspapers to catch up on. Others were sent out regularly from London and he needed to plough through them as well. He quickened his pace along the streets. The past week had not afforded him time to read them all. Sunday mornings were good for that. There they rested, as he came through the front door, piled neatly on the hallway table, copies of the *Gazet van Antwerpen* where Jan van Kerckhoven had now held sway for over two years. Underneath were issues of Ghent's *Volksblad* and *Le Soir*, from Brussels. He would tackle the Flemish newspapers right off as they required greater concentration; after all his years grappling with that language, reading

it still took time. The French papers were easier. He could put *The Times* aside to riffle through later on, over the leisurely cold lunch left behind on the sideboard by the maid who took Sundays off for church. But he could not resist it and stretched out his arm for the London paper with its news from home. What he read did not enhance his lunch.

I wish I understood how the French and Belgians succeeded in winning all the supply contracts for the new station. Scooped up the whole lot. They had to have pared down costs to the bone – even the marrow – no doubt about it. London will want to know what happened, given our history. After all, wasn't it two of our blokes in the first place who taught them all they know about trains and stations? Gave the Belgians just about everything they know! Got the wheels rolling. You'd think they'd throw a crumb of gratitude our way on this one. Something further ought to be coming out in the business pages of the papers any time now, explaining the situation. For now, our *chers collègues* must be gloating. Before long the billboards of the entire worksite will be erected and emblazoned with all the names, rubbed in our noses! The CG will be most dismayed. Probably it'll send him back to his sickbed. We showed our mettle at the Exposition. Everyone said so. Surely our companies warranted consideration this time?

Sitting himself by the window where the light was strongest, he then spotted another article in the local paper and the name Clément Van Bogaert caught his eye. This was the respected young civil engineer who had risen so stunningly in local government. Lythcott saw him on the street from time to time; they were on nodding terms. Perhaps I should break the ice, Lythcott thought, rustling the pages of the paper, and congratulate him on such fine results with the shed.

A graduate of Ghent's *École du Génie Civil*, Van Bogaert had joined Antwerp's railway administration, rising quickly in its ranks. And it was his design for the new train shed that was, you could say, the middle part of the sandwich which would bind together Jan van Asperen's viaduct approach with the future station. When the scaffolding in due course was entirely dismantled, the chorus for Van Bogaert would rise. The public would be pleased

by the new segment of the station, no matter what their earlier complaints. Noise and dust be damned: both the shed and the raised approach were beauties.

The Antwerp engineer's talent and flair had caught the admiring eye of the youthful *burgomeister* Jan van Rijswijck and those charged with judging the submissions. When his design had won out, Van Bogaert was given virtually free rein to see his beautiful and lofty shed start coming to life. No one could quite believe the scale of the scaffolding that went up, heralding the sheer dimensions involved.

We were thrilled by the sight of all the exuberant new buildings rising up in our midst, Lythcott recalled, as his eyes fixed on that name before him in the newspaper. Our World Fair attracted people in droves and we had 25 countries exhibiting in their respective pavilions. The brouhaha hasn't quite worn off. Van Bogaert may have had a hand in all that as well, it wouldn't at all surprise me! And now, just 30, he has delivered again. It does Antwerp proud. If his demeanour on the street was anything to go by, Lythcott guessed that Van Bogaert, with his trim little goatee, was a modest fellow, someone not much given to posturing. Gossip had it that he had kept a heavy lid on his hope to be chosen for at least part of the new station. Speculation and a lot of noise got you nowhere. Best just to sit tight.

The fact of the matter was that Van Bogaert had laboured hard and quietly on a design for the shed, that monumental half-moon structure *en pleine aire* where trains came in to a halt, and that it had already been sitting in his desk drawer for quite a while. It was nothing less than 'a marriage of metal and glass,' as one admirer described it.

In May 1894, Van Bogaert had joined Louis Delacenserie on an unheralded trip through Germany, France and Switzerland, to quietly study stations. The King, who all along had kept a watchful eye on this talented duo, had urged them to wander about the continent on a study trip. Just in case there were any extras to integrate into his closeted designs. Whatever the case, Léopold, it seemed, had the last word.

Berlin, Frankfurt, Strasbourg were only some of the stopovers. Perhaps after the travels, there were indeed refinements that

could be worked into his own segment of the project, the one sitting in that closed drawer of his study desk. As far as the public knew, however, nothing had been formally decided, nothing publicly announced. The King wasn't talking. No formal concours as yet. But for anyone who knew him, Van Bogaert seemed to be wearing a broader smile than usual when he passed people on the street these days.

The spectre of this new marvel of glass and iron, with its soaring dimensions, was now the talk of the town. What would emerge from the wrappings would leave spectators agape: a soaring arc rising 43 metres into the sky. Its 66-metre width comfortably accommodating 10 new tracks. The 186-metre length of the shed afforded Van Bogaert the proper space to insert 16 bays along the walls, giving the shed an even lengthier, sweeping look. Besides, that long canopied approach ensured that all trains would come to a halt well under cover. No passenger risked damp feet or drenched coifs in Antwerp's often uncertain weather.

Lythcott hardly heard the front door open, as he turned the pages of his newspaper in the drawing room. His brother Walter let himself in after his stroll – he never had been much of a church-goer, unlike George. Instead, he preferred his rambles on Sundays. Always something new to discover in this remarkable city, he'd say, to politely excuse himself from his brother's rooted rituals.

As it was now nearing noon, he went over to the server in their small dining alcove. The maid had left plates, napkins and cutlery, along with their cold collation. The two men would today be sharing sliced veal with a chopped caper sauce, a cauliflower and cheese concoction, slices of rye bread and an artful little pyramid of fresh fruit. A half-full decanter of red wine stood close by, its belly faintly stained. No doubt all of it would be polished off with the meal, a good excuse for an afternoon zizz afterwards.

The two ate in near silence. Their close bond allowed for that. Walter was a people man and George a place man. The twain, amicably, did not always meet. The former was not much stirred by talk of new stations or the like and the latter derived little entertainment from accounts about the total strangers his

brother seemed invariably to encounter during his constitutionals. Maybe that was a trait of all physicians, to strike up conversations with strangers. That these two should sometimes eat nearly without conversation troubled neither of them. The city fathers right now were about to inaugurate the new branch of the National Archives in Antwerp: precisely how much conversation could be milked from a topic like that between the two brothers?

George looked up from the table midway through the meal, guilty that he had been so glued to his newspaper, and noticed the seraphic smile horizoned over his brother's face. What unremarked event had brought such visible contentment to his sibling? What was his brother not sharing that afternoon over the dining room table? George rose to his feet quietly and moved to the sideboard to serve himself another slice of the cold veal, scooping up a dollop of the caper sauce. Settling back on his chair, he slowly lifted his fork and knife and cut into the meat. Some things emerge slowly. Pointless to rush them. With that, he tucked into a second round of his Sunday lunch. Walter followed suit.