

Alfred Gilbert

ALFRED GILBERT AT BRUGES: BY ALYS EYRE MACKLIN.

To find him there is not easy. The hermitage to which he retired ten years ago is on the far side of the town, and you must thread your way in and out of many narrow thirteenth-century streets and the maze of little canals that makes Bruges the pale "Venice of the North" before you are balancing yourself on the cobble stones of the lost little street where his home offers an inscrutable front to the rare passer-by, its long windows shrouded by impenetrable curtains, its green door obstinately closed.

When Gilbert took it, the house, rambling and old like many another in this old-world city, had stood empty for ten years because of its reputation for being haunted. It cannot be said that the information that only one ghost, and that not too well authenticated, has been seen, altogether dissipates the impression given by the legend. The living rooms are away from the street, giving on to the enclosed garden; and airy, well-lit and flower-filled though they are, their loftiness, wood-panelling, big chimneys and simple furniture combine to an effect of almost monastic austerity. They are chained together by flights of little steps that go sometimes up, sometimes down, and the vague sense of some unknown Beyond thus given, all wrapped in the wadded silence of Bruges, heightens the effect of the atmosphere that clings to old houses in general. The garden round which the house originally went in the form of a square is still more pregnant with strange meaning. It is gay now with rose bushes and fruit trees, but it used to be a graveyard.

Down one side of it runs the studio. This was once a stable; but Gilbert transformed it into an ideally practical atelier, well lit, with a clean sanded floor and containing nothing but what is necessary for work. A comparatively recent change was the raising of the roof to accommodate the enormous white figure that startles you when you set foot within.

Poised on one foot on one of the exquisitely moulded pedestals we associate with Gilbert, its great wings outstretched, one arm flung up above its head, this is a *Victory* that is an almost living expression of triumph. The delicately featured face, uplifted beneath an enshrining head-dress of three circles twined with leaves and flowers, is so intent with joy, you almost have the illusion of hearing the cry escape from the unclosed lips.



PORTRAIT OF ALFRED GILBERT, M.V.O.
FROM A PAINTING BY FRANCIS P. PAULUS
(*Photograph by M. Maurice Renard, Auditeur Militaire de Flandre Occidentale*)