

Sunday, August 9th 1914. --- I got this far when the roof fell in last night. During the afternoon yesterday I got out to attend to a few odds and ends of errands---and, as always happens when I go out, things began to happen. I came back to find the Minister and de Leval wrestling with a big one.

A curious telegram had come from The Hague, quoting the text of a message which the German Government desired us to present to the Belgian Government. Here it is in translation, a truly German message:

The fortress of Liège has been taken by assault after a brave defense. The German Government most deeply regret that bloody encounters should have resulted from the attitude of the Belgian Government toward Germany. Germany is not coming as an enemy into Belgium; it is only through the force of circumstances that she has had, owing to the military measures of France, to take the grave decision of entering Belgium and occupying Liège as a base for her further military operations. Now that the Belgian army has upheld the honour of its arms by its heroic resistance to a very superior force, the German Government beg the King of the Belgians and the Belgian Government to spare Belgium further horrors of war. The German Government are ready for any compact with Belgium which can be reconciled with their conflicts with France. Germany once more gives her solemn assurance that it is not her intention to appropriate Belgian territory to herself and that such an intention is far from her thoughts. Germany is still ready to evacuate Belgium as soon as the state of war will allow her to do so.

Of course we were loath to present anything of the sort, but the thing had to be handled carefully. After some pow-wowing I went over to the Foreign Office with the message and saw Baron van der Elst. I told him seriously that we had received a very remarkable telegram which purported to contain a message from the German

Government; that it bore no marks of authenticity, and that we were not sure as to its source; but that we felt that we should be lacking in frankness if we did not show him what we had received. He seized the message and read it through, his amazement and anger growing with each line. When he had finished, he gasped for a minute or two and then led me into the next room to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, M. Davignon., to whom he translated the telegram aloud. When they had finished discussing the message and I had a pretty clear idea as to the Belgian attitude toward the proposal---not that I had had any real doubt---I asked him: "If the American Minister had delivered this message what would have been its reception?" Without an instant's hesitation, M. Davignon replied: "We should have resented his action and should have declined to receive the communication."

That was all I wanted to know and I was ready to go back to the Legation.

I took Baron van der Elst home in the car and had the pleasure of seeing him explain who he was to several Gardes Civiques, who held up the car from time to time. He was very good-natured about it, and only resented the interruptions to what he was trying to say. His son is in the army and he has no news of him. As he got out of the car he remarked that if it were not so horrible, the mere interest of events would be enough to make these days wonderful.

When I got back to the Legation and reported the result of my visit, we went to work and framed a telegram to Washington, giving the text of the German message, explaining that we had nothing to prove its authenticity and adding that we had reason to believe that the Belgian Government would not accept it. The same message was sent to The Hague. This pleasant exercise with the code kept us going until four in the morning. Eugène, the wonder chauffeur, had no orders, but curled up on the front seat of his car and waited to take me home. He was also on hand

when I got up a couple of hours later, to take me back to the Legation. Chauffeurs like that are worth having.

When I came in this morning the place was packed with Germans. Some cheerful idiot had inserted a notice in the papers that all Germans were to be run out of the country, and that they should immediately apply to the American Legation. As the flood poured in, Leval got on the telephone to the Sûreté Publique and found out the true facts. Then we posted a notice in the hall. But that was not enough. As is always the case with humans, they all knew better than to pay any attention to what the notice said and each one of the hundred or more callers had some reason to insist on talking it over with somebody. When they once got hold of one of us, it was next to impossible to get away without listening to the whole story of their lives. All they had to do was to go down to the German Consulate-General, where we had people waiting to tell them all there was to know. It was hard to make them realise that by taking up all our time in this way, they were preventing us from doing things that were really necessary to serve them in more important matters. I said as much to several of them, who were unusually long-winded, but every last one replied that HIS case was different and that he must be heard out at length.

Our refugee train left this morning and took eight hundred more of the poor people. Where they all turn up from, I don't know, but each day brings us a fresh and unexpected batch. Many of the cases are very sad, but if we stop to give sympathy in every deserving case, we should never get anything practical done for them.

To-day's budget of news is that the French have got to Mulhouse and have inflicted a decisive defeat upon the Germans. According to reports, the Alsatians went mad when the French troops crossed the frontier for the first time in forty-four years.

They tore up and burned the frontier posts and generally gave way to transports of joy. I would have given a lot to see the crowds in Paris.

A letter came yesterday from Omer, the legation footman, who is at Tirlemont, with the artillery. He said he had not yet been hit, although he had heard the bullets uncomfortably near. He wound up by saying that he had *beaucoup de courage*--- and I believe him.

It seems that some of the German troops did not know what they were attacking and thought they were in France. When brought here as prisoners, some of them expressed surprise to find that Paris was so small. They seem to have thought that they were in France and the goal not far away.

The King to-day received through other channels the message from the Emperor of Germany in regard to peace, which we declined to transmit. I have not seen its text, but hear it is practically identical with the message sent us, asking the King to name his conditions for the evacuation of Liège and the abandonment of his allies, so that Germany may be entirely free of Belgian opposition in her further operations against France. I have heard among Belgians only the most indignant comments on the proposal and look forward with interest to seeing the answer of the King, which should appear to-morrow.(1)

The town is most warlike in appearance. There is hardly a house in the town that does not display a large Belgian flag. It looks as though it were bedecked for a fiesta. Here and there are French and British flags, but practically no others.. Every motor in town flies a flag or flags at the bow. We fly our own, but none the less, the sentries, who are stationed at all the corners dividing the chief quarters of the town and before all the Ministries and other public buildings, stop us and demand the papers of the chauffeur and each passenger in the car. We have passports and all

sorts of other papers, but that was not enough, and we finally had to be furnished by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs with a special *laisser-passer*. This afternoon I slipped out for a breath of air and was held up and told that even that was no good until I had had it viséd by the military authorities. It is said that these strict measures are the result of the discovery of a tremendous spy system here. According to the stories which are told, but of which we have little confirmation, spies are being picked up all the time in the strangest disguises.

The gossip and "inside news" that is imparted to us is screamingly funny---some of it.

Yesterday, according to one of these yarns, four nuns arriving at the Gare du Midi were followed for some time and finally arrested. When searched, they proved to be young German officers who had adopted that dress in order to conceal carrier pigeons which they were about to deliver in Brussels. Wireless outfits are said to have been discovered in several houses belonging to Germans. I cannot remember all the yarns that are going about, but even if a part of them are true, it should make interesting work for those who are looking for the spies. The regular arrests of proven spies have been numerous enough to turn every Belgian into an amateur spy-catcher. Yesterday afternoon Burgomaster Max was chased for several blocks because somebody raised a cry of "*Espion*" based on nothing more than his blond beard and chubby face. I am just as glad not to be fat and blond these days.

Yesterday afternoon a Garde Civique came in with the announcement that the chancellor and clerks of the German Legation, who were locked up there, were in dire distress; that a baby had been born the day before to the wife of the concierge, and that all sorts of troubles had come upon them. Leval, who had announced that his heart was infinitely hardened against all Germans, was almost overcome by the

news of a suffering baby and ran like a lamp-lighter to get around there and help out. When we arrived, however, we found them all beaming and happy. The baby had been born some days before and the mother was up and about before the Legation had been closed. Their meals are sent in from a neighbouring restaurant, and they are perfectly contented to bide their time as they are. They had orders from Berlin not to leave the Legation, so it made little difference to them whether they were blockaded by the Belgian authorities or not. I shall drop in every day or two and see whether there is anything I can do to lighten their gloom. Of course their telephone was cut off and they are not allowed to receive mail or papers, so they are consumed with curiosity about developments. It was, of course, necessary to refuse to answer their questions about what was going on and to make assurance doubly sure, I had the Garde Civique stand by me while I talked with them.

As things shape up now it looks as though we were the only life-sized country that could keep neutral for long, and as a consequence all the representatives of the countries in conflict are keeping us pretty well posted in the belief that they may have to turn their interests over to us. We shall probably soon have to add Austrian interests to the German burdens we now have. If there is a German advance, some of the Allied ministers will no doubt turn their legations over to us. The consequence is that we may see more of the inside of things than anybody else. Now, at least, we are everybody's friends. This is undoubtedly the most interesting post in Europe for the time being, and I would not be anywhere else for the wealth of the Indies.

Footnotes

1. The Belgian reply, which was sent on August 12th through the Netherlands Minister for Foreign Affairs, is as follows:

The proposal made to us by the German Government repeats the proposal which was formulated in the ultimatum of August 2nd. Faithful to her international obligations, Belgium can only reiterate her reply to that ultimatum, the more so as since August 3rd, her neutrality has been violated, a distressing war has been waged on her territory, and the guarantors of her neutrality have responded loyally and without delay to her appeal.

In GIBSON, Hugh (Secretary of the American Legation in Brussels, 1914) ; *A journal from our Legation in Belgium* ; New York ; Doubleday, Page & Company Garden City; 1917 :

<http://net.lib.byu.edu/~rdh7/wwi/memoir/Legation/GibsonTC.htm>

Footnotes.

It would be also interesting compare with what **Paul MAX** (cousin of the *bourgmestre Adolphe MAX*) told about the same day in his *Journal de guerre (Notes d'un Bruxellois pendant l'Occupation 1914-1918)* :

http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de%20Oguerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf