

Brussels, August 20, 1914. --- To-day has been one full of experience and the end is not yet. Last night there was a great stir in the streets, and crowds of people and weary-looking soldiers. At the Palace Hotel I found the usual collection of diplomats and some other people whom I knew, and from the crowd I elicited the fact that there had been some sort of rout of Belgian forces near Louvain, and the soldiers were falling back. That was about all they knew. I started back to the upper town in the hope of finding some news at the Porte de Namur. On the way up the hill I was stopped by half a dozen groups of Gardes Civiques and soldiers, who asked me to take them to Ghent. They were so excited and in such a hurry that they could hardly be made to realize that the car was not liable to seizure. I took advantage of the opportunity to get a little first-hand news, and learned that they had been driven back all along the line and were ordered to retreat to Ghent by any means they could find. There were no trains available; nobody seemed to know why. The last group that I talked with said that the vanguard of the German cavalry was only about fifteen miles out of town and would be in this morning. They were all tremendously excited and did not dally by the wayside to chat about the situation with me. I can't say that I blame them, particularly in view of what I have seen since.

At the Porte de Namur I found that the Garde Civique in Brussels had been ordered to disband and that the plan for the defense of the city had been completely abandoned. It was the wise thing to do, for there was no hope of defending the town with the small force of Gardes at the disposal of the military governor. It would have been quite futile and would have entailed a big loss of innocent civilian life. The governor wanted to do it purely as a matter of honour, but he would have paid for it heavily and could not have accomplished anything beyond delaying the Germans for an hour or two. The Garde Civique was furious, however, at the idea

of not being able to make a stand. There was a demonstration, but the cooler heads prevailed, and the men withdrew to their homes.



German supply train
entering Brussels



German infantry
entering Brussels

I was out by seven this morning and looked about for news before coming to the Legation. I found that the Germans were steadily advancing and that the vanguard was about seven kilometers out of the city. They expected to begin the triumphal march about eleven. The Garde Civique had disappeared from the streets and there were very few police to be found. The shops were closed, shutters down on all houses, and posters everywhere with the proclamation of the Burgomaster urging the people to refrain from hostile acts. It was an abandoned and discouraged-looking city. On the boulevards there were long lines of high carts bringing in the peasants from the surrounding country. They are great high-wheeled affairs, each drawn by a big Belgian draught horse. Each cart was piled high with such belongings as could be brought away in the rush. On top of the belongings were piled children and the old women, all of whom had contrived to save their umbrellas and their gleaming, jet-black bonnets, piled with finery. Those who could not find places in the carts walked alongside, some of them carrying other belongings that could not be put on the carts. It was the most depressing sight so far. Lots of them were crying; all looked sad and crushed. Every one of them was probably without enough money for a week's living. Even those who have money in the banks cannot get it out at this time. They have no place to go to here and have a bad prospect even if this part of the campaign is finished quickly and they are soon

able to return to their homes. Their crops are rotting in the ground and many of their homes are already in ruins. That is the hard side of the war---lots harder than the men who go out and have at least a fighting chance for their lives.

When I got down to the Legation I found that the telegraph and telephone communication had been cut off. The train service is abandoned and we are completely isolated from the outside world. I did not think it would come so soon and only hope that before we were cut off the news was allowed to get out that there would be no fighting in the city.

I had a lot of errands to do during the morning and kept both motors busy. I found time to get up signs on my door and that of M. de Leval, warning all comers that both places were inviolate. That was in anticipation of quartering of troops on private citizens, which has not been done.

We got word that the Spanish Minister had some news, so I went over to see him. He had heard from the Burgomaster as to the plans for the entry of the troops, and wanted to pass it along to us. The commanding general, von Jarotzky, was already at the edge of the city, on the Boulevard Militaire, and was expecting to start into town at one o'clock. He was to march down the Chaussée de Louvain, the boulevards, and out the other side of the city, where his men were to be encamped for the present. Other forces, comparatively small, were to occupy the railway stations and the Grande Place. At the Hôtel de Ville he was to establish the headquarters of the staff and administer the city government through the regularly constituted authorities. It was all worked out to a nicety, even to the exact measures for policing the line of march.

As the Garde Civique was withdrawn, the prisoners in the German Legation knew that there was something in the air and ventured forth into the light of day. They

were not long in learning just what had taken place, and called upon us to express their thanks for what we had done for them. I suppose they will be trotting away for their own country before there is a chance to lock them up again. It must be pretty dismal for them to be locked up without any news of the outside world when they don't know whether their armies are victorious or badly beaten.

As I was about to start to see the triumphal entry, the Spanish Minister came along with his flag flying from his motor, and bade us to go with him. We made off down the Boulevard and drew up at the Italian Legation---two motors full of us; the whole staff of the Spanish Legation and ourselves. The Italian Minister bade us in to watch the show, which we had intended he should do. This did not work out well., so M. de Leval and I started off down the street together. The first of the Germans appeared as we stepped out the front door, and we saw that they were not coming over the route that had been originally planned. Instead, they were heading down the hill into the lower town. They proved to be the troops that were to occupy the Grande Place and guard the headquarters of the staff at the Hôtel de Ville. We cut across through side streets and came upon them as they were passing Ste. Gudule. There was a sullen and depressed crowd lining the streets, and not a sound was to be heard. It would have been better had the crowd been kept off the streets, but they behaved wonderfully well.

A large part of the reason for bringing the German troops through here was evidently to impress the populace with their force and discipline. It was a wonderful sight, and one which I never expect to see equaled as long as I live. They poured down the hill in a steady stream without a pause or a break; not an order was shouted nor a word exchanged among the officers or men. All the orders and signals were given by whistles and signs. The silence was a large element of the impressiveness.

These troops had evidently been kept fresh for this march, and I should not be at all surprised if it should prove that they had not seen any fighting. If they have suffered any losses, they have closed up their ranks with wonderful precision and show none of the signs of demoralisation. They had clearly been at great pains to brush up and give the appearance of freshness and strength. Nearly all the men were freshly shaven, and their uniforms had been brushed and made as natty and presentable as possible. They swaggered along with a palpable effort to show that they were entirely at home, and that they owned the place. The officers looked over the heads of the crowd in their best supercilious manner, and the men did their best to imitate their superiors.

First came some lancers---a couple of battalions, I should think; then there was a lot of artillery, rapid fire guns and field pieces. Then more cavalry and a full regiment of infantry. When the last contingent of cavalry came a long, they burst into song and kept it up steadily. There was a decidedly triumphant note, and the men looked meaningly at the crowd, as much as to say: "Now do you realise what your little army went up against when it tried to block us?" It seemed to me pretty rough to rub it in on them by singing songs of triumph as they rode into an undefended city. If they had been attacked and had succeeded in driving the invader back into his own capital, it would be understandable; but it seemed to me rather unnecessary to humiliate these people after trampling on their poor country and slaughtering half their army. It was more than de Leval could stand, so I walked home with him to the Legation.

When we got back to the Legation I decided that I ought to see all I could, so Blount and I went back in his car. First we worked our way through to the lower town and got a look at the Grande Place. There were a little more than two full battalions resting there, with their field pieces parked at the lower end of the square.

Small squads were being walked around doing the goose step for the delectation of the *bons Bruxellois*, who were kept a block away up the side streets leading to the square. The men had their arms stacked in the centre of the square, and were resting hard---all but those who were supplying the spectacle.

From there we went down to Luna Park, an amusement place on the edge of the city. The stream was pouring by there just as steadily as it had earlier in the afternoon. We watched the passing of great quantities of artillery, cavalry and infantry, hussars, lancers, cyclists, ambulance attendants, forage men, and goodness only knows what else.

I have never seen so much system and such equipment. The machine is certainly wonderful; and, no matter what is the final issue of the war, nobody can deny that so far as that part of the preparation went, the Germans were hard to beat. The most insignificant details were worked out, and all eventualities met with promptness. The horses were shod for a campaign in the country, and naturally there was a lot of slipping on the smooth cobble pavements. The instant a horse went down there was a man ready with a coarse cloth to put under his head, and another to go under his forefeet. so that he would have some grip when he tried to get up and would not hurt himself slipping and pawing at the cobbles. The moment he fell, all hands rushed to the rescue so effectively that he was on his feet again in no time, and the procession was barely arrested. The men's kits were wonderfully complete and contained all sorts of things that I had never seen or heard of, so I turned for explanation to Davis, who had come along and was lost in admiration of the equipment and discipline. He said he had been through pretty much every campaign for the last twenty years, and thought he knew the last word in all sorts of equipment, but that this had him staggered. I began asking him what a lot of things were for, and he frankly admitted that he was as much in the dark as I was.

A great many of the officers wore, upon their chests, great electric searchlights attached to batteries in their saddle-bags. These are useful when on the march at night, and serve to, read sign-posts and study maps, etc.

The supply trains were right with the main body of the troops, and were also carefully equipped for purposes of display. The kitchens were on wheels, and each was drawn by four horses. The stoves were lighted and smoke was pouring from the chimneys. The horses were in fine shape and in huge numbers.

The troops marched down the right side of the boulevard, leaving the left side free. Up and down this side dashed officers on horseback, messengers on motor-cycles and staff officers in military cars. There were no halts and practically no slacking of the pace, as the great army rolled in.

Here and there came large motor trucks fitted out as cobblers' shops, each with a dozen cobblers pounding industriously away at boots that were passed up to them by the marching soldiers. While waiting for repairs to be made, these soldiers rode on the running board of the motor, which was broad enough to carry them and their kits.

After watching them for a while, we moved back to the Boulevard, where we found the Minister with the ladies of the family who had been brought out to watch the passing show. We had hesitated to bring them out at the beginning for fear that there might be riots, or even worse, precipitated by the foolhardy action of some individual. Fortunately, there was nothing of the sort, and while the reception given the troops was deadly sullen, they were offered no affronts that we could see. The entry was effected quietly, and perfect order has prevailed ever since.

Afterwards we drove out to the country and watched the steady stream nearer its source; still pouring in, company after company, regiment after regiment, with apparently no end in sight. We watched until after seven, and decided that the rest would have to get in without our assistance. On the way back a German monoplane flew over the city, and, turning near the Hôtel de Ville, dropped something that spit fire and sparks. Everybody in the neighbourhood let out a yell and rushed for cover in the firm belief that it was another bomb such as was dropped in Namur. It dropped, spitting fire until fairly near the spire of the Hotel de Ville. when it burst into ten or a dozen lights like a Roman candle--evidently a signal to the troops still outside the city---perhaps to tell them that the occupation had been peacefully accomplished. We learned afterward that the Minister and Villalobar were riding down the hill and the infernal machine seemed right over their car, giving them a nice start for a moment. When I got back to the Legation, I found that the Minister had gone with Villalobar to call on the Burgomaster and the German General. They found the old gentleman in command at the city hall, carrying on the government through the Bourgomaster, who has settled down with resignation to his task. He is tremendously down in the mouth at having to give up his beautiful Grande Place to a foreign conqueror, but he has the good sense to see that he can do more good for his country by staying there and trying to maintain order than by getting out with a *beau geste*.

The first thing the General did was to excuse himself and go to take a bath and get a shave, whereupon he reappeared and announced his readiness to proceed to the discussion of business.

The General said that he had no intention of occupying the town permanently or of quartering soldiers, or otherwise bothering the inhabitants. He was sent there to keep open a way so that troops could be poured through toward the French frontier.

They expect to be several days marching troops through, and during that time they will remain in nominal control of the city. Judging from this, there must be a huge army of them coming. We shall perhaps see some of them after the big engagement, which is bound to take place soon, as they get a little nearer the French frontier.

Brussels has not been occupied by a foreign army since Napoleon's time, and that was before it was the capital of a free country. It has been forty-four years since the capital of a European Power has had hostile troops marching in triumph through its streets, and the humiliation has been terrible. The Belgians have always had a tremendous city patriotism and have taken more pride in their municipal achievements than any people on earth, and it must hurt them more than it could possibly hurt any other people. The Burgomaster, when he went out to meet General von Jarotzky, declined to take his hand. He courteously explained that there was no personal affront intended, but that under the circumstances he could hardly bring himself to offer even such a purely perfunctory manifestation of friendship. The old General, who must be a good deal of a man, replied quietly that he entirely understood, and that under similar circumstances he would probably do the same. The two men are on exceedingly workable terms, but I don't believe they will exchange photographs after the war is over. Poor Max was going to spend the night at the Hôtel de Ville. Most of his assistants cleared out for the night, but he could not bring himself to leave the beautiful old building entirely in control of the enemy. He curled up and slept on the couch in his office, just for the feeling it gave him that he was maintaining some sort of hold on the old place.

The Minister arranged to have his telegrams accepted and transmitted without loss of time, so we shall soon get word home that we are still in the land of the living. We wrote out our message and sent it off right after dinner, but Gustave brought it back, saying that the telegraph office was closed and that he could find no one to

whom he could hand his bundle of messages. Evidently the orders for the re-opening of the place did not get around in time for our purposes. We shall try again the first thing in the morning, and hope that some of the newspaper men will have succeeded in getting their stuff out in some other way. They were around in force just after dinner and wild to get an O.K. on their stuff, so that it could be sent. The General had said that he wanted the Minister's O.K. on the men themselves, and that he himself would approve their messages after having them carefully read to him. He gave them an interview on alleged German atrocities and will probably let them send through their stories if they play that up properly.

After dinner I started out on my usual expedition in search of news. I found the Foreign Office closed, and learned upon inquiry that the few remaining men who had not gone to Antwerp were at home and would not be around again for the present---thus we have no dealings through the Foreign Office, but must do the best we can with the military authorities. I went down to the Palace Hotel on the chance of picking up a little news, but did not have much luck. The restaurant was half filled with German officers, who were dining with great gusto. The Belgians in the café were gathered just as far away as possible, and it was noticeable that instead of the usual row of conversation, there was a heavy silence brooding over the whole place.

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 interesting compare with what **Roberto J. Payró** told about the same day in his *Diario de un testigo* (*La guerra vista desde Bruselas*) :

Original Spanish version :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140820%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20INCOMUNICADO.pdf>

Original Spanish version about Adolphe MAX :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140820%20PAYRO%20UN%20CIUDADANO%20EL%20BURGOMAESTRE%20MAX..pdf>

Original Spanish version about Dinant :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140820%20PAYRO%20DINANT%20SP%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

French version :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140820%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20INCOMUNICADO%20FR.pdf>

French version about Adolphe MAX :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140820%20PAYRO%20UN%20CIUDADANO%20EL%20BURGOMAESTRE%20MAX..pdf>

[ANO%20EL%20BURGOMAESTRE%20MAX%20FR..pdf](#)

French version about Dinant :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140820%20PAYRO%20DINANT%20FR%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

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