

Brussels, October 11, 1914. - On Saturday afternoon late I went with Harold Fowler to call on Sir Claude MacDonald, who had been to the Embassy twice to see me about the English Red Cross nurses in Brussels. I tried to reassure him as to their safety, but he went to see the Ambassador later in the day and asked him to send Harold Fowler back to Brussels with me to bring the nurses out. This suited me perfectly, so we made preparations to get off together.

On Sunday evening we left Fenchurch Street at six, with a little group of friends to see us off. About the only other people on the train were a King's Messenger, a bankrupt Peer and his Man Friday, and a young staff officer. Each set of us had a separate compartment and travelled in lonely state to Tilbury, where the boat was waiting.

As we got aboard the *Brussels*, her sister ship, the *Dresden*, just in from Antwerp, pulled up alongside, and Mrs. Sherman, wife of the Vice-Consul, called me to the rail to give me the latest news. She said that everything was going to pieces, that some of the forts had fallen, and that Antwerp might be under bombardment before we got there. Then she went ashore in peace, and we went below to seek the seclusion that the cabin grants, and fortify ourselves for the bombardment.



View of the Meuse at Huy



Refugees fleeing toward Dunkirk
before the German advance, after
the fall of Antwerp

We got under way during the night and dropped down to the mouth of the Thames, where we lay to until daylight, before starting across. The first sound I heard was a hail from a torpedo-boat destroyer, which sent an officer aboard to lay our course for us through the British mine fields. We made our zigzag course across the North Sea and fetched up at Flushing, where we picked up a pilot to take us through Dutch waters. When darkness overtook us we were just about on the Belgian frontier line and had to lie to for the night, getting to Antwerp Tuesday morning about nine.

We found the place in a great hubbub-everybody packed and ready to leave. They had been on the point of departure since Friday, and the uncertainty had got on everybody's nerves---and no wonder.

Several thousand British Marines had arrived and were doing good work, holding back the Germans, while the exhausted Belgians pulled themselves together for the evacuation. The Belgian forces had been fighting with little rest and no sleep until they were physically incapable of further resistance. How human strength held out so long is the great marvel. Winston Churchill was in the Legation when I arrived, with General Rawlinson and Colonel Seeley.

After a call at the Foreign Office, most of which had been installed on a boat in the river, I went to the Palace to see General Jungbluth. He was not there, but Countess de Caraman-Chimay said that the King wanted to see me.

I was taken straight up to him in his Council Chamber, where I found him seated at a great table covered with maps and papers. He pushed them aside wearily as I came in, and rose to greet me. He talked at some length on the war and the ordeal of Belgium, but was chiefly interested in how the people were being treated. His interest was not only for his own friends, but he showed particular interest in

learning how the poorer people were being treated---whether the poorer quarters of the town were keeping calm and avoiding trouble with the Germans. He was most anxious that they should avoid doing anything that would arouse the Germans against them. He spoke simply and touchingly of his confidence in the loyalty and patriotism of all his people, and his certainty that they would come through the war with an even greater love of country.

The rest of the Palace was in confusion, with servants packing and orderlies coming and going. But the King's room was in perfect calm. The King sat quite still in his armchair and talked quietly, without haste. He was very serious, and it was clearly to be seen that he felt his responsibility and the suffering of his army. But his determination was just as evident. He realised that the evacuation was inevitable, and having made up his mind to that, he devoted his whole energies and thoughts to seeing that it was carried out effectively and quickly. He has a very patent faculty of concentration and of eliminating his own personality and feelings. I have seldom felt so sorry for anyone, partly perhaps because all of his sympathy was for others.

When the King finally rose to dismiss me, he said:

"The Queen wants to see you. Will you come back at half-past two?"

I had planned to leave for Brussels immediately after luncheon, but, of course, this was a command to which I gladly yielded.

The St. Antoine was all hurry and confusion, and the dining room was buzzing with conjecture as to whether the bombardment of the city would begin before the exodus was accomplished. The Military Governor had posted a proclamation to warn the population that it might begin at any time. There was a certain amount of unconscious humour in his proclamation. He advised people to retire into their

cellars with bedding, food, water and other necessaries; to disconnect the water, gas and electricity; to stuff the staircases with mattresses, as a matter of protection; to take with them picks and shovels, so that they could dig themselves out in case their houses fell in; and after a few more hints of this sort, the Governor genially remarks:

"Having taken these precautions, the population can await the bombardment in calm."

The German authorities have offered to spare the historic monuments of Antwerp in their bombardment, if the Belgian General Staff will send them maps of the city with such monuments and hospitals clearly marked. I found that it had been arranged in Brussels that I should collect the plans on my way through Antwerp and deliver them to the German authorities in Brussels, and, of course, agreed to do so.

After luncheon I went back to the Palace, where I was immediately received by the Queen in her sitting room. Her Majesty seemed quite oblivious of the confusion in the Palace, and, like the King, she was chiefly concerned as to the welfare of the people left under German domination. I was able to give her comforting news as to the treatment of the people of Brussels. While we were talking, the roar of the German guns seemed to increase and made the windows rattle. There was an outcry in the street, and we went to the window to see a German aeroplane pursued by a British machine. We watched them out of sight, and then went back to our talk. The members of the Court had tried to prevail upon the Queen to leave Antwerp. but when it became evident that the place must be surrendered, she refused to move and told me she would stay until the King left. And she did.

When I got back to the hotel, I found Eugène with news that the differential of my car had broken, so that we could not start. It was important that we lose no time in

getting the plans of the town to the German authorities, so I got Baron van der Elst to go with me to the General Staff and explain the situation. General de Guise promptly wrote out an order that I should be given the best car to be found in the city. Armed with this, Eugène set forth and gathered in a very pretty little limousine to bring us back to Brussels. It was evidently a lady's car and almost too pretty, but we were not exacting and took it thankfully. However, it was too late to start out through the lines, so we gave up the idea of leaving before morning. We had thought of taking the route of the army and getting to Brussels by way of Ghent, but the people at the General Staff said the road was so crowded with transport that we would make little progress, and that the better course would be to take exactly the opposite direction and go by way of Tournhout.



Graves of civilians shot by the Germans



A typical proclamation

Translation:

In future, villages in the vicinity of places where railway and telegraph lines are destroyed will be punished without pity (whether they are guilty or not of the acts in question). With this in view hostages have been taken in all villages near the railway lines which are threatened by such attacks. Upon the first attempt to destroy lines of railway, telegraph, or telephone, they will be immediately shot.

*The Governor,
VON DER GOLTZ*



Views of the Fort of Wahlem after its bombardment by the big German guns

I took several of the ladies of the corps down to the boat, which was to take them to Ostend, which was to be the next stand of the Government. They all took it coolly and went to bed, as though there were no bombardment going on. The King and Queen, the Prime Minister, and the representatives of the allies remained in town overnight.

On one of my trips out of the hotel I met the Queen coming in to say good-bye to Princess Koudatcheff (wife of the Russian Minister), who was ill. She stopped to greet us and make inquiries as to each one.

After dark the crowd began to melt. Winston Churchill came down with his party, got into motors, and made off for Bruges. The Belgian officers staying at the hotel got off with their units, and by ten o'clock the staff of the British Legation, Fowler and I were left in almost undisputed possession of the hotel. The water-supply was cut. The lights were out and the place was far from gay, particularly as nearly all the servants had fled, and we could not get anything to eat or drink.

Most of the town repaired to the cellars for the night, but we decided that if it really came, we saw no choice between going down with the house into the cellar and having the house come down on top of us, so we turned in and got a night's rest, which, I am free to confess, was rather fitful.

All night long motors were snorting away, and all night long the guns kept pounding, although they did not seem to get any nearer. With the intelligence that one has when half awake, I carefully arranged a pillow between me and the window, as a protection against shells!

We got up early and went out into the streets to watch the movement. The few remaining troops were being poured out on the road to Ghent. On foot, in motors, on trains, on bicycles, and on horseback, they streamed. The civil population was also getting away, and all the trams in the direction of the Dutch frontier were loaded with people carrying their little bundles---all they could hope to take away with them. The hospitals were being emptied of the wounded and they were getting away as best they could, those whose legs were all right helping those who had

trouble in walking. It was a depressing sight, and above all, the sound of the big guns which we had heard steadily since the morning before.

We got under way about half-past eight., after a wretched and sketchy breakfast, and after saying good-bye to one of our friends of the British Legation.

First, we went to the north gate, only to find that it had been closed to vehicles a few minutes before, and that barbed-wire entanglements had been stretched across the road. Argument was vain, so we worked our way back through the traffic and reached the Porte de Tournhout, only to be turned back again. For nearly an hour we wandered about in the stream of refugees, in vehicles and on foot, before we finally succeeded in making our way through a side door of the Porte de Tournhout, and starting that way. We were not at all sure that we should be able to reach the Dutch frontier through Tournhout, as the Germans were supposed to be that far north, but we did make it after a long series of stops, to be examined by all sorts of Belgian outposts, who kept cropping up out of fields to stop us and look through our papers. From some little distance out of town, we could see the shells bursting over the southern part of the town, or possibly over the villages, to the south of the town proper.

We plowed along through Holland, being stopped all afternoon by Civil Guards, and reached Maestricht at sunset. We went straight to the German Consulate to have our papers put in order and learn whether it could be arranged for us to pass the lines at night. Our papers were not in order because they bore no photographs, and the Consul could not see that the German interest in our mission made any difference, so that there was nothing to do but wait over until morning, and get some pictures.

It took us until ten in the morning to get our photographs and have our papers arranged, and by good driving we reached Liège in time to lunch with the Consul. Then on to Brussels by way of Namur. On the road we picked up a German officer on his way to Namur, which kindly deed saved us much delay in being stopped by posts.

We reached Brussels at five and hastened to send the precious plans of Antwerp to Lancken. We had just settled down at the Legation to a good talk when word came that Lancken was anxious to see me at once. I went over to the Political Department to find that the gentleman merely wanted a formal statement from me as to when I had received and delivered the plans, so that he could make it a matter of record. I satisfied him on these points and went my way.

Then we gathered at the Legation and talked steadily until after midnight.

While I was away the Minister had got off a trainload of Americans, and with them he had sent the English nurses. That relieved Harold Fowler of the mission that brought him, but we bore up bravely.

The Germans have announced the fall of Antwerp and have apparently occupied the city. At first everybody was much downcast, but on second thought they have been convinced that the evacuation of the army and the surrender of an empty shell was a pretty clever piece of work. With the big siege guns that were in action, it was only a question of days until the Germans would have reduced all the forts. And then if the resistance had been maintained, the greater part of the army would probably have been captured. As it is, the Belgians inundated the country to keep the Germans from cutting off their retreat, and made off for Ostend, leaving only a handful of men with the British Marines, to hold the Germans in check. So far as

we can learn, most of the army has succeeded in getting away and forming a junction with the allies.

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/Gibs onTC.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/19141006%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141007%20PAYRO%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA%20AMBERES.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141007%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141008%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141009%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO.pdf>

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<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141011%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO.pdf>

French version :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141006%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO%20FR.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141007%20PAYRO%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA%20ANVERS.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141007%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141008%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO%20FR.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141009%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO%20FR.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141010%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO%20FR.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141011%20PAYRO%20DIARIO%20DE%20UN%20TESTIGO%20FR.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%20guerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf