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Rheims During the Bombardment

We left Paris with the idea of watching from a point south of Soissons the battle then in progress on the Aisne. Our going to Rheims was an after-thought. Ashmead-Bartlett, of the *London Daily Telegraph*, Captain Granville Fortescue, of the Hearst newspapers, Gerald Morgan, of the same syndicate, and I shared the automobile. To Morgan any map is an open book; so we had left it to him to plan our route. He arranged one which, while apparently not intended to lead us to any particular place, would keep us away from Villers-Cotterets.

"Veal cutlets," as the Tommies had christened it, was our dead-line. The officers of the English General Staff had made it their headquarters, and had they been afflicted with leprosy, smallpox, and bubonic plague, we could not have feared them more. Against war correspondents they had declared war to the death. Unless the setting sun did not show a line of correspondents in chains, they considered that day wasted. During that week they had "bagged" thirteen, and the day before we had seen John Reed and Robert Dunn, who had ventured hat in hand into the presence of General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, fast in his net, and on their way to the prison at Tours. So, with the English army, although we much desired to follow it, we were taking no chances. Any man in khaki filled us with terror. If we met even a stray Tommie, trying to find his way back to his regiment, the chauffeur turned the car and fled.

So, in avoiding Villers-Cotterets, we found ourselves on the hills above the Vesle River, and below us, mounting from the plain like a great fortress, the cathedral of Rheims. From what I had seen of the destruction of Louwin, I did not believe the Germans could for two weeks occupy Rheims and leave the cathedral intact; and I urged that in America there would be more interest in any affront put upon Rheims cathedral than in the result of that day's battle. The others disagreed, but as in the automobile I was a fourth owner, it was arranged that that fourth should go to Rheims and later accompany the other three-fourths to Soissons. What we saw in the cathedral kept us in Rheims. This was on the 18th of September, before the roof caught fire, when the greatest damage the cathedral had suffered was the destruction of her windows, and when it was being used as a hospital for German wounded. On the two towers Red Cross flags were flying.

The wounded lay in the western end of the building, which opens on the square. The praying-chairs that once had filled the nave had been pushed aside and the stone floor was piled knee-deep with loose straw. On this lay the men to the number of sixty. With them was a young lieutenant who was shot through the eyes, and an elderly major, a reservist, who looked less a soldier than a professor. With his back to a stone pillar he sat half-buried in the straw with one hand pressing tight a shattered arm. To protect the privacy of the wounded all the doors had been closed, and the light came only from the windows; and as they are high above the floor, the lower half of the cathedral was in twilight.

To the east were the carved screens, the chapels, tapestries, altars, the brass and silver candlesticks, the statues of the holy family, of saints and angels, of Joan of Arc. To the west was the yellow straw in which lay the gray ghosts nursing bloody bandages. Impartially upon the sacred symbols of the church, and upon the dirt and blood-stained men battered near to death by their fellow men, the famous windows of Rheims shone like vast jewels. For, in spite of the shells, parts of the stained glass still remained, and into the gray shadows cast pointing rays of blue and crimson. But the perfect glory of the glass was gone. Shrapnel and flying bits of masonry had cut through the expanses of deep blue, a blue which is as pure and cold as the blue of a winter sky by moonlight, and in them torn great gashes. Through these wounds you saw the dull sky and the falling rain. In one place in the wall a shell had made a breach so large that through it might have passed a taxicab. In spite of the nature of the building, in spite of the Red Cross flags, the shell had come shrieking into this by-path of the war, and aimed by Germans had killed two of the German wounded. With their toes pointing stiffly, they lay under little mounds of straw, their gray, wax-like hands folded in peace.

We were, escorted through the cathedral by the curé doyen of the church of Saint Jacques, Chanoine A. Frézet. His own church up to that time had not greatly suffered; nor was he one of the staff of the cathedral, but, like every other man, woman, and child in Rheims, he felt as though the stained-glass windows belonged to him. He spoke of the loss of them as of the dead.

"Except at Chartres and at Burgos, in Spain," he said, "there was in all the world no glass so beautiful. It was seven hundred years old; and the glass is gone, and the secret of it is gone."

When we saw the havoc caused by the howitzers we had planned at once to carry the story of the desecration of the cathedral back to Paris. But while we still were in the cathedral two French batteries of field-guns from the outskirts of Rheims opened on the German positions across the river, and the Germans again began to bombard the city. As this still further threatened the cathedral, we decided, until we knew the result of the bombardment, to wait. We told our chauffeur to make his headquarters in the square in front of the cathedral. We chose that spot because from every part of Rheims the two towers were visible, and to find our way back appeared easy. We did not then suppose the Germans would make the cathedral their chief target. We walked to the outskirts of the town to watch the French artillery, but the end of each street was blocked with barricades, and through these the French officers would not allow us to pass. To view the work of the German batteries it was not necessary to leave the city. In it the six-inch howitzer shells were now falling fast. They followed each other with the regularity of trolley-cars, and the people were closing the shutters and taking refuge in their cellars, or in the caves of the champagne companies, or through the streets were flying toward the road to Paris. When the shells struck in the street, the heavy stones gave them greater power.

At the battle of Soissons we had watched them fall in the fields, where they had thrown out black fumes and ploughed up the turnips. In the soft soil they were less destructive than picturesque. But, just as it is easier to "line out" a swift ball than a slow one, so, in Rheims, when the shells struck the stone pavements and the brick and stucco houses, their resistance aided the explosive power of the shells and the result was great excavations in the streets and the wiping out of entire buildings. These latter in one second the shells lifted, shook, and deposited in rubbish in the cellar. In other bombardments I have watched a house lose its roof much as a hat is snatched off by the wind, a cornice carried away, windows punched out, and finally the whole structure battered to its knees.

It took time, and you saw the wall, or fort, or house disintegrate. But these six-inch German howitzer shells do not dismember; they destroy. It was like a gigantic conjuring trick. Over your head an invisible express train swept through space; in front of you a house disappeared. Except for those who were escaping, and the infantry who guarded the town, the streets were empty. The infantry told us they had just returned from Belgium. They were lean, tanned, clear-eyed. In spite of their long "hike" they were neither footsore nor weary. Instead, they were extremely fit and cheerful. They disregarded the shells entirely; and were moving from house to house inquiring anxiously for any cigarettes the Germans might have overlooked.

The shells had been falling near the cathedral; and when we returned to the square we did not expect to find our chauffeur. And, as it turned out, save for the statue of Joan of Arc, the square was empty. A sentry ran from one of the portals of the church and told us the chauffeur had arranged with himself to meet us outside the gate to Paris. He had waited, the sentry explained, until two houses within a hundred yards of him had vanished, then he, too, had vanished. In the rue de Vesle we joined the stream of people making toward the city gate. They formed only, a small part of the population. The rest of Rheims was standing in the doors, or on the sidewalk, watching those who fled. Those who had elected to remain did not appear disturbed. Young people, arm in arm, were parading the street, searching the sky for air-ships, pointing eagerly when a column of black smoke or powdered cement marked where a shell had burst.

At the gate of the city we asked if any one had seen our car. A man in a blouse had not seen it; but he knew how we could find it. We had only to accompany him to the general staff, who were occupying the gendarmerie. If there were any people we were less anxious to meet than the general staff it was the gendarmes. We tried to escape from the man in the blouse.

Whether he was a secret agent who thought we were spies, or the village pest, we could not tell; but he would not leave us. We whispered to each other and in the crowd lost ourselves. But the man in the blouse, accompanied by a policeman, pursued. The captain of gendarmes desired to speak with us. We knew what *that* meant. It meant showing our papers, which would disclose the damning fact that we were correspondents, and that meant Tours.

And Tours is a "long, long way from Tipperary. It's a long way to go."

The captain of gendarmes regarded us sternly.

"Is your car a limousine with a gray body?" he asked. We admitted that it was. "You will find it a mile farther up this road," he said. He will never know why we thanked him so extravagantly. Probably he still thinks, so anxious were we to escape, that only a car could take us away fast enough. The chauffeur was sure he could sleep just as well outside of Rheims as in it, and on foot we returned to the city. It had now grown dark, and, as though eager to make use of the light still remaining, the salvos from the French artillery and the return fire of the Germans had quickened. Many of those we met were now panic-stricken, and, as they ran, stumbled and tripped. Women were weeping, praying aloud, and crossing themselves, and, when the shells burst, screaming in terror.

The streets and sidewalks were strewn an inch deep with the broken glass of the window-panes, and under the hurrying feet of the refugees this carpet gave out sharp, metallic echoes. With the whistling and grinding of the shells, and the crash of the failing masonry, is always associated in my mind this tinkling, musical accompaniment. Seeking a lodging for the night, and pounding on the closed doors, we walked over half the city. But no one invited us, and we were preparing to sleep in the car when we stumbled upon the Hôtel du Nord.

We found it running smoothly, and except for one man who made the beds, run by a staff composed entirely of women. That French women are capable is a bromide, but these women, under trying conditions, were especially so. They were acting as clerks, cooks, butlers, waiters, and, when their duties permitted, were industriously knitting. Their guests also were women. But they were refugees, and having no responsibility they were not capable. They sat in the pretty garden, their poodle-dogs and handbags on their knees; and each time the guns spoke, each would duck. At eight o'clock the firing had sunk to a low growl like the passing of a summer thunder-storm; and until four in the morning, when the bombardment again shook the city, there was silence. We thought what we had seen of the destruction of the cathedral required us to get our story at once on the wire; and we returned to Paris. But our judgment was at fault; we should have remained where we were. The next morning in Paris the eleven-o'clock communiqué told that the cathedral was in flames, and again we started toward Rheims. It was a most difficult, and, with constantly before us the chance of arrest, a most anxious journey. A turning movement on a big scale was going forward and every foot of the way was blocked with troops. The roads could not hold them and across country they were making short cuts, the wheels of the artillery and of the motor-trucks ploughing deep furrows in the wheat-fields. We were smothered with soldiers; they clung to the running-boards of the car, were silhouetted against the sky-line, like lakes of blue they spread across the valleys, and, as though, performing a gigantic snake dance, across the hills their red trousers in columns a mile long twisted and turned. Whence they came, or where they were going, we did not know. Certainly we did not ask. Into the secrets of the General Staff we had no desire to pry. We wanted only to reach Rheims and the cathedral that was in flames. For hours, purring with displeasure, the car crept through miles of infantry cavalry, artillery, mounted gendarmes, zouaves, Turcos, ambulances, Algerian tirailleurs. In the villages they swamped the narrow streets; against the shadows of the forests their camp-fires twinkled; in the grass-gutters by the side of the road, in the fields around the stacks of grain, doubled forward or lying heavily upon their backs, they stole a moment's sleep. From a hilltop, distant six miles from Rheims, we saw the cathedral. For seven hundred years, just as for several years the flatiron building dominated New York City, it had dominated the countryside, and like a rock of Gibraltar it still rose above the plain; but now, in a heavy pall, smoke rose above it; the roof was gone, part of the left tower had disappeared.

With the goal in sight those last six miles of our journey tried our souls. We now knew that the official communiqué had told only the truth; and in pressing forward we had no more evil intent than to tell newspaper readers in the United States and Great Britain of one of the gravest crimes in history. In doing this we thought we were serving France, and by reporting the facts might possibly help in preventing further outrages. But the General Staff did not look at it in that way. To the General Staff we were potential spies; and among the thousands of soldiers we passed any one of them was justified in arresting us and in aiding in sending us to Tours. In all France there were no other six miles so long.

The cathedral had been one of the most magnificent examples of early Gothic architecture. Fergusson called it "perhaps the most beautiful structure produced in the Middle Ages." It was a structure noble in its proportions, beautiful in its exquisite detail. We found the structure still standing, still noble, but the beauty was destroyed. It was like the carved statue of a saint from which some one in a drunken frenzy, with a mallet and chisel, had chopped away the features. The west façade had held five hundred and thirty statues; they were figures of the Virgin, saints, confessors, martyrs, apostles, angels. They were all mutilated, chipped, battered, dismembered. Where, the day before, pieces of the precious glass were missing, now whole

windows, glass, lead, sash, and frame of carved stone, had been torn out, and in the wall was a ragged hole. We picked our way among the broken arms, hands, wings, halos of statues that for hundreds of years, to the glory of God, had faced the elements; our feet trod upon bits of glass more beautiful than jewels. What the shells had failed to batter down, the heat of the fire, started by the shells, had destroyed. With your hands you could crumble a statue into powder; when we walked on the upper galleries above the flying buttresses, and a piece of masonry seemed unsafe, a kick would send it crashing into the street below.

The origin of the fire is now well known. Lit by a shell, it started among the scaffolding that surrounded the left tower. From the scaffolding it spread to the arched roof of oak and lead that surmounted the lower curved roof of stone. The sparks and the molten lead fell on the straw in the nave where lay the wounded.

The abbé Chinot, a young, athletic, manly priest, and the venerable Archbishop Landreux called for volunteers, and aided by the Red Cross nurses and doctors dragged the unhappy wounded out of the burning building and through the north door. There a new danger threatened them. They were confronted by a mob. Maddened by the sight of their beloved church in flames, by the bombardment of their homes, by the death from the shells of five hundred of their townsmen, the gray uniforms drove the people of Rheims to a frenzy. They called for the death of the barbarians. What followed cannot be too often told. The aged archbishop and the young abbé Chinot placed themselves between the mob and the wounded. With splendid indignation, with perfect courage, they faced the raised rifles. "If you kill them," they cried, you must first kill us." And the mob, recognizing their bravery and the self-sacrifice, permitted the wounded to be carried to a place of safety. We are told that greater love hath no man than that for another he should lay down his life. If that other be his enemy, his sacrifice leads "him very near to the company of the saints. The story of the young priest and the venerable archbishop, with their cathedral burning behind them, with the Germans they hated clinging to them for safety while they protected them and, in their behalf, from their own people invited death, will always live in the records of this war and of the church. It will be told in histories and in songs, and each spring will be reproduced upon the walls of the salon. With their shells the Germans hammered the nave where Joan of Arc once stood, where the monarchs of France were crowned, and destroyed the palace of the archbishop. But the spirit of the church, which is the spirit of Christ, the shells could not destroy. The two French priests proved that. With such men to keep alive the spirit, France is consoled for the loss of carved statues and rose windows.

The Germans say they fired on the cathedral because it was being used by the French for purposes of observation. I thought that would be their excuse, and the first question I asked the abbé Chinot was whether he had permitted the French officers to occupy the towers. I explained why the question was important, and why the facts were important. He told me most vehemently and earnestly that at no time had any officers been permitted to make use of the church for military purposes. For two nights, to protect the non-combatants of the cit from air-ships, he had permitted the soldiers to place a search-light in the tower. But, fearing this would be construed by the Germans as a hostile act, he had ordered the search-light removed. And it was not until five nights after it had been removed that the Germans began to bombard. Abbé Chinot pointed out that had it been the search-light to which the Germans took exception they would have shelled the tower while the light was shining, not five days after it had disappeared. During the absence of the archbishop Landreux at Rome the abbé Chinot had been in complete authority. And, as a priest, he gave me his solemn assurance that without his permission and knowledge no one could have entered or left the cathedral, and that by no officer or soldier had it been

occupied. The other excuse of the Germans, that the French artillery was so placed that to fire at it without striking the cathedral was impossible, is so trifling as to be insolent. The cathedral was not in the line of fire between the French battery, and the German battery. It was between the two French batteries.

I was in the cathedral while the Germans were shelling it. Some of their shells burst within twenty-five yards of us, and at the exact time those shells were falling I could hear the French guns to the north and south; one, a mile from us, the other, two miles. The Germans claim they were firing at those guns. To accept that, we must believe that continuously for four days they aimed at a battery and, two miles from it, hit the cathedral of Rheims.

[NOTE.—While returning from Rheims Mr. Davis and his fellow correspondents were arrested by General Asibert, and by gendarmes taken to Paris, where they were placed in the Cherche-Midi prison. Through the good offices of the American ambassador and on their giving their parole that for eight days they would not write of what they had seen along the Aisne, they were given their liberty.]