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The Germans in Brussels

WHEN, on August 4, the *Lusitania*, with lights doused and air-ports sealed, slipped out of New York harbor the crime of the century was only a few days old. And for three days those on board the *Lusitania* of the march of the great events were ignorant. Whether or no between England and Germany the struggle for the supremacy of the sea had begun we could not learn.

But when, on the third day, we came on deck the news was written against the sky. Swinging from the funnels, sailors were painting out the scarlet-and-black colors of the Cunard line and substituting a mouse-like gray. Overnight we had passed into the hands of the admiralty, and the *Lusitania* had emerged a cruiser. That to possible German warships she might not disclose her position, she sent no wireless messages. But she could receive them; and at breakfast in the ship's newspaper appeared those she had overnight snatched from the air. Among them, without a Scarehead, in the most modest of type, we read: "England and Germany have declared war." Seldom has news so momentous been conveyed so simply, or, by the Englishmen on board, more calmly accepted. For any exhibition they gave of excitement or concern, the news the radio brought them might have been the result of a by-election.

Later in the morning they gave us another exhibition of that repression of feeling, of that disdain of hysteria, that is a national characteristic, and is what Mr. Kipling meant when he wrote: "But oh, beware my country, when my country grows polite!"

Word came that in the North Sea the English warships had destroyed the German fleet. To celebrate this battle which, were the news authentic, would rank with Trafalgar and might mean the end of the war, one of the ship's officers exploded a detonating bomb. Nothing else exploded. Whatever feelings of satisfaction our English cousins experienced they concealed.

Under like circumstances, on an American ship, we would have tied down the siren, sung the doxology, and broken everything on the bar. As it was, the Americans instinctively flocked to the smoking-room and drank to the British navy. While this ceremony was going forward, from the promenade deck we heard tumultuous shouts and cheers. We believed that, relieved of our presence, our English friends had given way to rejoicings. But when we went on deck we found them deeply engaged in cricket. The cheers we had heard were over the retirement of a batsman who had just been given out, leg before wicket.

When we reached London we found no idle boasting, no vainglorious jingoism. The war that Germany had forced upon them the English accepted with a grim determination to see it through and, while they were about it, to make it final. They were going ahead with no false illusions. Fully did every one appreciate the enormous task, the personal loss that lay before him. But each, in his or her way, went into the fight determined to do his duty. There was no dismay, no hysteria, no "mafficking."

The secrecy maintained by the press and the people regarding anything concerning the war, the knowledge of which might embarrass the War Office, was one of the most admirable

and remarkable conspiracies of silence that modern times have known. Officers of the same regiment even with each other would not discuss the orders they had received. In no single newspaper, with no matter how lurid a past record for sensationalism, was there a line to suggest that a British army had landed in France and that Great Britain was at war. Sooner than embarrass those who were conducting the fight, the individual English man and woman in silence suffered the most cruel anxiety of mind. Of that, on my return to London from Brussels, I was given an illustration. I had written to *The Daily Chronicle* telling where in Belgium I had seen a wrecked British air-ship, and beside it the grave of the aviator. I gave the information in order that the family of the dead officer might find the grave and bring the body home. The morning the letter was published an elderly gentleman, a retired officer of the navy, called at my rooms. His son, he said, was an aviator, and for a month of him no word had come. His mother was distressed. Could I describe the air-ship I had seen?

I was not keen to play the messenger of ill tidings, so I tried to gain time.

“What make of aeroplane does your son drive?” I asked.

As though preparing for a blow, the old gentleman drew himself up, and looked me steadily in the eyes.

“A Bleriot monoplane,” he said.

I was as relieved as though his boy were one of my own kinsmen.

“The air-ship I saw,” I told him, “was an Avro biplane!”

Of the two I appeared much the more pleased.

The retired officer bowed.

“I thank you,” he said. “It will be good news for his mother.”

“But why didn't you go to the War Office?” I asked.

He reprimanded me firmly.

“They have asked us not to question them,” he said, “and when they are working for all I have no right to embarrass them with my personal trouble.”

As the chance of obtaining credentials with the British army appeared doubtful, I did not remain in London, but at once crossed to Belgium.

Before the Germans came, Brussels was an imitation Paris—especially along the inner boulevards she was Paris at her best. And her great parks, her lakes gay with pleasure-boats or choked with lily-pads, her haunted forests, where your taxicab would startle the wild deer, are the most beautiful I have ever seen in any city in the world. As in the days of the Second Empire, Louis Napoleon bedecked Paris, so Leopold decorated Brussels. In her honor and to his own glory he gave her new parks, filled in her moats along her ancient fortifications, laid out boulevards shaded with trees, erected arches, monuments, museums. That these jewels he hung upon her neck were wrung from the slaves of the Congo does not make them the less beautiful. And before the Germans came, the life of the people of Brussels was in keeping with the elegance, beauty, and joyousness of their surroundings.

At the Palace Hotel, which is the clearing-house for the social life of Brussels, we found everybody taking his ease at a little iron table on the sidewalk. It was night, but the city was as light as noonday—brilliant, elated, full of movement and color. For Liege was still held by the Belgians, and they believed that all along the line they were holding back the German army. It was no wonder they were jubilant. They had a right to be proud. They had been making history. In order to give them time to mobilize, the Allies had asked them for two days to delay the German invader. They had held him back for fifteen. As David went against Goliath, they had

repulsed the German. And as yet there had been no reprisals, no destruction of cities, no murdering of noncombatants; war still was something glad and glorious.

The signs of it were the Boy Scouts, everywhere helping everyone, carrying messages, guiding strangers, directing traffic; and Red Cross nurses and aviators from England, smart Belgian officers exclaiming bitterly over the delay in sending them forward, and private automobiles upon the enameled sides of which the transport officer with a piece of chalk had scratched, "For His Majesty," and piled the silk cushions high with ammunition. From table to table young girls passed jangling tiny tin milk-cans. They were supplicants, begging money for the wounded. There were so many of them and so often they made their rounds that, to protect you from themselves, if you subscribed a lump sum, you were exempt and were given a badge to prove you were immune.

Except for these signs of the times you would not have known Belgium was at war. The spirit of the people was undaunted. Into their daily lives the conflict had penetrated only like a burst of martial music. Rather than depressing, it inspired them. Wherever you ventured, you found them undismayed. And in those weeks during which events moved so swiftly that now they seem months in the past, we were as free as in our own "home town" to go where we chose.

For the war correspondent those were the happy days! Like everyone else, from the proudest nobleman to the boy in wooden shoes, we were given a *laisser-passer*, which gave us permission to go anywhere; this with a passport was our only credential. Proper credentials to accompany the army in the field had been formerly refused me by the war officers of England, France, and Belgium. So in Brussels each morning I chartered an automobile and without credentials joined the first army that happened to be passing. Sometimes you stumbled upon an *escarmouche*, sometimes you fled from one, sometimes you drew blank. Over our early coffee we would study the morning papers and, as in the glad days of racing at home, from them try to dope out the winners. If we followed *La Dernière Heure* we would go to Namur; *L'Etoile* was strong for Tirlemont. Would we lose if we plunged on Wavre? Again, the favorite seemed to be Louvain. On a straight tip from the legation the English correspondents were going to motor to Diest. From a Belgian officer we had been given inside information that the fight would be pulled off at Gembloux. And, unencumbered by even a sandwich, and too wise to carry a field-glass or a camera, each would depart upon his separate errand, at night returning to a perfectly served dinner and a luxurious bed. For the news-gatherers it was a game of chance. The wisest veterans would cast their nets south and see only harvesters in the fields, the amateurs would lose their way to the north and find themselves facing an army corps or running a gauntlet of shell-fire. It was like throwing a handful of coins on the table hoping that one might rest upon the winning number. Over the map of Belgium we threw ourselves. Some days we landed on the right color, on others we saw no more than we would see at state maneuvers.

Judging by his questions, the lay brother seems to think that the chief trouble of the war correspondent is dodging bullets. It is not. It consists in trying to bribe a station-master to carry you on a troop train, or in finding forage for your horse. What wars I have seen have taken place in spots isolated and inaccessible, far from the haunts of men. By day you followed the fight and tried to find the censor, and at night you sat on a cracker-box and by the light of a candle struggled to keep awake and to write deathless prose. In Belgium it was not like that. The automobile which Gerald Morgan, of the London *Daily Telegraph*, and I shared was of surpassing beauty, speed, and comfort. It was as long as a Plant freight-car and as yellow; and from it flapped in the breeze more English, Belgian, French, and Russian flags than fly from the roof of the New York Hippodrome. Whenever we sighted an army we lashed the flags of its

country to our headlights, and at sixty miles an hour bore down upon it. The army always first arrested us, and then, on learning our nationality, asked if it were true that America had joined the Allies. After I had punched his ribs a sufficient number of times Morgan learned to reply without winking that it had.

In those days the sun shone continuously; the roads, except where we ran on the blocks that made Belgium famous, were perfect; and overhead for miles noble trees met and embraced. The country was smiling and beautiful. In the fields the women (for the men were at the front) were gathering the crops, the stacks of golden grain stretched from village to village. The houses in these were whitewashed and, the better to advertise chocolates, liqueurs, and automobile tires, were painted a cobalt blue; their roofs were of red tiles, and they sat in gardens of purple cabbages or gaudy hollyhocks. In the orchards the pear-trees were bent with fruit. We never lacked for food; always, when we lost the trail and "checked," or burst a tire, there was an inn with fruit trees trained to lie flat against the wall, or to spread over arbors and trellises. Beneath these, close by the roadside, we sat and drank red wine, and devoured omelets and vast slabs of rye bread. At night we raced back to the city, through twelve miles of parks, to enameled bathtubs, shaded electric light, and iced champagne; while before our table passed all the night life of a great city. And for suffering these hardships of war our papers paid us large sums.

On such a night as this, the night of August 18, strange folk in wooden shoes and carrying bundles, and who looked like emigrants from Ellis Island, appeared in front of the restaurant. Instantly they were swallowed up in a crowd and the dinner parties, napkins in hand, flocked into the Place Rogier and increased the throng around them.

"The Germans!" those in the heart of the crowd called over their shoulders. "The Germans are at Louvain!"

That afternoon I had conscientiously cabled my paper that there were no Germans anywhere near Louvain. I had been west of Louvain, and the particular column of the French army to which I had attached myself certainly saw no Germans.

"They say," whispered those nearest the fugitives, "the German shells are falling in Louvain. Ten houses are on fire!" Ten houses! How monstrous it sounded! Ten houses of innocent country folk destroyed. In those days such a catastrophe was unbelievable. We smiled knowingly.

"Refugees always talk like that," we said wisely. "The Germans would not bombard an unfortified town. And, besides, there are no Germans south of Liege."

The morning following in my room I heard from the Place Rogier the warnings of many motor horns. At great speed innumerable automobiles were approaching, all coming from the west through the Boulevard du Regent, and without slackening speed passing northeast toward Ghent, Bruges, and the coast. The number increased and the warnings became insistent. At eight o'clock they had sent out a sharp request for right of way; at nine in number they had trebled, and the note of the sirens was raucous, harsh, and peremptory. At ten no longer were there disconnected warnings, but from the horns and sirens issued one long, continuous scream. It was like the steady roar of a gale in the rigging, and it spoke in abject panic. The voices of the cars racing past were like the voices of human beings driven with fear. From the front of the hotel we watched them. There were taxicabs, racing-cars, limousines. They were crowded with women and children of the rich, and of the nobility and gentry from the great chateaux far to the west. Those who occupied them were white-faced with the dust of the road, with weariness and fear. In cars magnificently upholstered, padded, and cushioned were piled trunks, handbags, dressing-cases. The women had dressed at a moment's warning, as though at a cry of fire. Many had

travelled throughout the night, and in their arms the children, snatched from the pillows, were sleeping.

But more appealing were the peasants. We walked out along the inner boulevards to meet them, and found the side streets blocked with their carts. Into these they had thrown mattresses, or bundles of grain, and heaped upon them were families of three generations. Old men in blue smocks, white-haired and bent, old women in caps, the daughters dressed in their one best frock and hat, and clasping in their hands all that was left to them, all that they could stuff into a pillow-case or flour-sack. The tears rolled down their brown, tanned faces. To the people of Brussels who crowded around them they spoke in hushed, broken phrases. The terror of what they had escaped or of what they had seen was upon them. They had harnessed the plough-horse to the dray or market-wagon and to the invaders had left everything. What, they asked, would befall the livestock they had abandoned, the ducks on the pond, the cattle in the field? Who would feed them and give them water? At the question the tears would break out afresh. Heartbroken, weary, hungry, they passed in an unending caravan. With them, all fleeing from the same foe, all moving in one direction, were family carriages, the servants on the box in disordered livery, as they had served dinner, or coatless, but still in the striped waistcoats and silver buttons of grooms or footmen, and bicyclers with bundles strapped to their shoulders, and men and women stumbling on foot, carrying their children. Above it all rose the breathless scream of the racing cars, as they rocked and skidded, with brakes grinding and mufflers open; with their own terror creating and spreading terror.

Though eager in sympathy, the people of Brussels themselves were undisturbed. Many still sat at the little iron tables and smiled pityingly upon the strange figures of the peasants. They had had their trouble for nothing, they said. It was a false alarm. There were no Germans nearer than Liege. And besides, should the Germans come, the civil guard would meet them.

But, better informed than they, that morning the American minister, Brand Whitlock, and the Marquis Villalobar, the Spanish minister, had called upon the burgomaster and advised him not to defend the city. As Whitlock pointed out, with the force at his command, which was the citizen soldiery, he could delay the entrance of the Germans by only an hour, and in that hour many innocent lives would be wasted, and monuments of great beauty, works of art that belong not alone to Brussels but to the world, would be destroyed. Burgomaster Max, who is a splendid and worthy representative of a long line of burgomasters, placing his hand upon his heart, said: "Honor requires it."

To show that in the protection of the Belgian government he had full confidence, Mr. Whitlock had not as yet shown his colors. But that morning when he left the Hotel de Ville he hung the American flag over his legation, and over that of the British. Those of us who had elected to remain in Brussels moved our belongings to a hotel across the street from the legation. Not taking any chances, for my own use I reserved a green-leather sofa in the legation itself.

Except that the cafes were empty of Belgian officers, and of English correspondents, whom, had they remained, the Germans would have arrested, there was not, up to late in the afternoon of the 19th of August, in the life and conduct of the citizens any perceptible change. They could not have shown a finer spirit. They did not know the city would not be defended; and yet before them on the morrow was the prospect of a battle which Burgomaster Max had announced would be contested to the very heart of the city, and as usual the cafes blazed like open fireplaces and the people sat at the little iron tables. Even when, like great buzzards, two German aeroplanes sailed slowly across Brussels, casting shadows of events to come, the people regarded them only with curiosity. The next morning the shops were open, the streets were

crowded. But overnight the soldier-king had sent word that Brussels must not oppose the invaders; and at the gendarmerie the civil guard, reluctantly and protesting, some even in tears, turned in their rifles and uniforms.

The change came at ten in the morning. It was as though a wand had waved and from a fete day on the Continent we had been wafted to London on a rainy Sunday. The boulevards fell suddenly empty. There was not a house that was not closely shuttered. Along the route by which we now knew the Germans were advancing, it was as though the plague stalked. That no one should fire from a window, that to the conquerors no one should offer insult. Burgomaster Max sent out as special constables men he trusted. Their badge of authority was a walking-stick and a piece of paper fluttering from a buttonhole. These, the police, and the servants and caretakers of the houses that lined the boulevards alone were visible. At eleven o'clock, unobserved but by this official audience, down the Boulevard Waterloo came the advance-guard of the German army. It consisted of three men, a captain and two privates on bicycles. Their rifles were slung across their shoulders, they rode unwarily, with as little concern as the members of a touring-club out for a holiday. Behind them, so close upon each other that to cross from one sidewalk to the other was not possible, came the Uhlans, infantry, and the guns. For two hours I watched them, and then, bored with the monotony of it, returned to the hotel. After an hour, from beneath my window I still could hear them; another hour and another went by. They still were passing. Boredom gave way to wonder. The thing fascinated you, against your will, dragged you back to the sidewalk and held you there open-eyed. No longer was it regiments of men marching, but something uncanny, inhuman; a force of nature like a landslide, a tidal wave, or lava sweeping down a mountain. It was not of this earth, but mysterious, ghostlike. The uniform aided this impression. In it each man moved under a cloak of invisibility. To describe its gray-green color is impossible, because it has no color, and yet it absorbs all colors, and reflects no light. We saw it first in the warm summer sunshine, later under the glare of electric lamps, hours later in the gray of the morning. At all times the men clothed in it were indistinguishable. They blended with the gray stones of the street, with the green of the trees; they shifted and merged like drifting fog. Even as you pointed they dissolved into thin air. It was like a conjuring trick. It is a fact that often you would see advancing toward you a troop of horses and you could not see the men who rode them.

All through the night, like the tumult of a river when it races between the cliffs of a canyon, in my sleep I could hear the steady roar of the passing army. And when early in the morning I went to the window the chain of steel was still unbroken. As a correspondent I have seen all the great armies and the military processions at the coronations, in Russia, England, and Spain, and our own inaugural parades down Pennsylvania Avenue, but those armies and processions were made up of men. This was a machine, endless, tireless, with the delicate organization of a watch and the brute power of a steamroller. And for three days and three nights through Brussels it roared and rumbled, a cataract of molten lead. The infantry marched singing, with their iron-shod boots beating out the time. In each regiment there were two thousand men and at the same instant, in perfect unison, two thousand iron brogans struck the granite street. It was like the blows from giant pile-drivers. The Uhlans followed, the hoofs of their magnificent horses ringing like thousands of steel hammers breaking stones in a road; and after them the giant siege-guns rumbling, growling, the mitrailleuse with drag-chains clanking, the field-pieces with creaking axles, complaining brakes, the grinding of the steel-rimmed wheels against the stones echoing and re-echoing from the house-front. When at night for an instant the machine halted, the silence awoke you, as at sea you wake when the screw stops. For three days and three

nights the column of gray, with fifty thousand bayonets and fifty thousand lances, with gray transport wagons, gray ammunition-carts, gray ambulances, gray cannon, like a river of steel cut Brussels in two.

For three weeks the men had been on the march and there was not a single straggler, not a strap out of place, not a pennant missing. Along the route, without for a minute halting the machine, the post-office carts fell out of the column, and as the men marched mounted postmen collected postcards and delivered letters. Also, as they marched, the cooks prepared soup, coffee, and tea, walking beside their stoves on wheels, tending the fires, distributing the smoking food. No officer followed a wrong turning, no officer asked his way. He followed the map strapped to his side and on which for his guidance in red ink his route was marked. At night he read this map, by the light of an electric torch buckled to his chest. For the gray automobiles and the gray motorcycles one side of the street always was kept clear; and so compact was the column, so rigid the vigilance of the file-closers, that at the rate of forty miles an hour a car could race the length of the column and need not for a single horse or man once swerve from its course.

To perfect this monstrous engine, with its pontoon bridges, its wireless, its hospitals, its aeroplanes that in rigid alignment sailed before it, its field telephones that as it advanced strung wires over which for miles the vanguard talked to the rear, all modern inventions had been prostituted. To feed it, millions of men had been called from homes, offices, and workshops; to guide it, for years the minds of the highborn, with whom it is a religion and a disease, had been solely concerned.

It is, perhaps, the most efficient organization of modern times; and its purpose only is death. Those who cast it loose upon Europe are military-mad. And they are only a very small part of the German people. But to preserve their class they have in their own image created this terrible engine of destruction. For the present it is their servant. But "Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small." And like Frankenstein's monster, this monster, to which they gave life, may turn on them and rend them.