

Gay Paris in a State of War

Exciting Scenes in the French Capital Towards Which the German Army is Now Fighting Its Way

Paris, August 10th, 1914.

By JOHN E. WEBBER

CURIOSITY to study the French stage at first hand brought me to Paris. I remained to witness the opening acts of the great war drama staged at its emotional centre. For Paris is the real sentimental focus of the war.

Events crowded upon one another so fast that a chronological account at this distance is out of the question. We were simply hurried from one excitement to another, the suspense growing more tense with each passing hour.

The week of July 26 opened gaily enough, as summer gaiety in Paris goes. The Folies Marigny, the Bergere, the Jardin de Paris, and the famous Moulin Rouge were all in full swing and flourishing on the shekels of tourists who had come to pay momentary homage to pagan gods. Maxim's, with the Vernon Castles as a special attraction, danced away the remaining hours until dawn.

Most of the legitimate theatres, too, were still open. At the Vaudeville, for instance, I had the good fortune to see the new Bernstein play, "La Belle Adventure," which is due to appear in America this coming season. At the Grand Guignol, the parent of the repertory theatre, I saw a programme of one-act thrillers, which even the courageous Princess Players would hesitate to reproduce in Puritan America.

But the night of the Comedie Francaise, the most famous theatre in the world and the richest in literary associations, held a thriller or two quite apart from the programme provided. It was there we heard the news that Jaures, the Socialist deputy, had been assassinated in a neighbouring cafe. This was the first shot in the war. We felt the taut strings tighten to snapping point, and the audience quiver with the exciting news that might plunge the city in anarchy and the country in a revolution, just when a united France was needed most. But—this tribute must be paid to the self-control of actors and audience—the flawless performances of La Prince Charmant went on to the end as if the world outside held the quiet of a summer sea.

Two days later half the company of the Comedie Francaise were on their way to the front as soldiers. But to-night they were artists and as artists oblivious to everything but the imaginary world they were creating.

The storm that was breaking had been threatening since Monday (27th), when Austria sent her ultimatum to Serbia. Tuesday, with war declared, the skies darkened ominously. Wednesday brought news that Russia was mobilizing. Thursday, France knew from the Kaiser's tone that she might be called upon to make good her treaty obligations. But still we hoped, and all France hoped, that a way would yet be found to avert what all dreaded.

The only outward effect so far was the tightening of the strings on the money bags. Paper money became practically useless, because no one would exchange silver for it—not even the banks. Then came the odd spectacle of American millionaires with thousands of good paper money in their hands, obliged to walk the streets of Paris for lack of a silver franc to pay cab fare. Cafes would only serve food and drinks on the assurance in advance that customers had the amount of the order in change.

It was a novel situation, but not as amusing then as now in perspective. My personal first encounter with this condition occurred at the Vaudeville Theatre, and I mention it because the experience is typical. Courtesies at this particular theatre entail a tax of 2 francs 20 per seat. I had no objections to the tax, which provides for needy stage folk, but the refusal of the box office to accept my fifty-franc (\$10) note, left me the embarrassing alternative of a retreat or finding change elsewhere. Shopping in the neighbourhood for cigarettes, bon bons, etc., proved of no avail. Paris shop-keepers preferred their goods to my "bad money." Desperation, however, sometimes brings courage, and a petition to the theatre manager to extend me a day's credit to the amount of 4 fr. 40 was decided in my favour after a consultation in which apparently every member of the theatre staff took part.

BUT worse was to come. With Germany's declaration of war on Russia the next day, banks and express companies refused to honour checks, letters of credit or cable orders of any kind. It was then that the real pinch came, and with it the hasty

and panicky exodus from Paris of English and American tourists. These were the wise virgins, of course, as subsequent events proved. But we who are not of the wise—and are sometimes less than prudent—would not have foregone the experience of the days that followed for all the pretty frocks and lingerie in the kingdom.

Foreigners of other nations were given peremptory notice to leave Paris and acted upon it with such alacrity that hotels were left without servants and shops without clerks enough to open them. At my own hotel, the Majestic, which behaved magnificently to its guests—Sunday morning found us without maid or valet, and Sunday night with six waiters to serve 200 diners.

The sobriety and self-restraint of the French people through all this ordeal of suspense had been admirable. Even with war declared against her and passions temporarily loosened, there was little or no disorder. Beyond the looting of a couple of Viennese and German cafes, no acts of violence were reported. The prompt action of the authorities in



Chanteurs des Rues singing La Marseillaise along Paris streets when the Reservists went to the front. As the writer says, Frenchwomen don't merely watch their men-folk go to war; they march along with them.

declaring the city under martial law following the murder of Jaures, had no doubt much to do with the peaceful results.

Friday at mid-night the general mobilization order was posted and read by the late home-comers. Saturday, Paris gave way somewhat to some of its long, pent-up excitement. All that day and night patriotic groups paraded the streets with tri-colour and shouts of "vive la France." Sometimes the flags of Great Britain and Russia marched with the tri-colour. Along the boulevards toward Montmartre, cafe orchestras would take up the patriotic songs of the marchers and drive the crowd frantic with excitement. Taxis and automobiles were hastily commandeered by the paraders and woe to unlucky chauffeurs who protested. Far into the night the revel lasted and those who were caught in the whirl will not soon forget it.

Sunday, how the mood of Paris changed! The streets were silent of the marchers, the singing and the shouting. There was no jingoistic outburst of any kind. Yesterday the keen, dramatic sense of Parisians had been alive to the romance, the passion of war; to-day its stern reality was forced upon them. A Paris sun is shining along the Bois and the Champs Elysees, and the beautiful city never looked more beautiful. But the radiance and the gaiety are gone. The city has settled down to the work of mobilization, and gravely, silently, orderly, with a full realization of the task before her the work goes on. Soldiers seem to spring up out of the ground like rabbits and disappear as mysteriously. Where they are going, only the soldiers themselves seem to know. Secrecy marks every movement. Tens of thousands pass through the gates of Paris on this and the following days, but there is no parade of troops anywhere. The authorities seem to be avoiding as far as possible any opportunity for public demonstration. I saw one troop of cavalry hurriedly cross the Champs Elysees, but not hurriedly enough to escape the pedestrians who rushed toward them from both sides, the men cheering, and the women shaking the extended hands of the soldiers.

But if the mobilization was deprived of spectacular features, the day was full of tender and intimate scenes which showed the heart of Parisians toward their protectors.

England sends her soldiers to war, but France in a very intimate and personal sense goes to war with her soldiers. And it was just this quality of intimacy that made the emotional situation so acute. It also brought a sense of nearness to the actual conflict that one did not feel, for instance, in London.

Once the medal of a veteran caught the eye of a passing crowd. In an instant he was raised shoulder high and held there while the Marseillaise was sung. It was a sweet reward for the old mother who had come to the corner to see the soldier son off once more—perhaps for the last time. At the Gare du Nord I saw a path made for a proud young soldier father and his little girl-wife, each carrying a twin. Such instances tell the story of war in a word—both its beauty and its horror.

But if the day was grave, night plunged Paris in deepest gloom. Under martial law cafes were obliged to close at 8 o'clock, and an hour later the streets were as deserted as an English village in the church hour. Rain sympathetically added to the picture. The only other sound was that of sentries patrolling the darkened streets. Huge searchlights scanning the skies for aeroplanes, suggested modern terrors from which neither soldier nor sentry could protect. A strange feeling of isolation came over us, as if the little world we inhabited had been suddenly loosed from its moorings.

From the forsaken streets, the rain and the sentries, our thoughts kept turning to the soldiers, and our ears, in fancy at least, caught the sound of their departing drums. That night probably half a million of the flower of the French soldiery would bivouac under the skies. They had gone to a war that was not of their own seeking, to drive back an enemy whose power they had every reason to respect. They had gone in no spirit of bravado or over-confidence, these brave fellows, but in a grim determination to uphold the honour of the French arms to the last. Their prospect of victory at that time was none too enviable and France realized it.

WILL ENGLAND HELP US?

FOR days the anxious question on the lips of everyone had been, "Will England help us?" France mobilized and went to the front without this answer, and many there were who doubted if a satisfactory answer would ever come. Up to the moment of Sir Edward Grey's speech, the sincerity of England's friendship was seriously in question, and even the brave words of the Foreign Secretary did not wholly allay misapprehension. But the declaration of war that quickly followed left no more room for doubt or misgiving.

I should ask no other gift from life than to have been there when it came.

For my wanderings in and about Paris in those stirring days, I have had the fortunate companionship of a little French-Italian girl—the friend of an officer who had gone early to the front. Fortunate, because it gave me not only a skilful interpreter of the language of Paris, but what is of even more importance, of its heart and its moods. Her profession apparently made her "persona grata" with the police commissary, whom my cables worried, and she gave me valuable assistance at the office of the War Minister, to whom all war correspondents must present credentials. She was very silent, my little friend, the first night we drove through the darkened streets. The great passion of events about her had stilled her own.

"My poor, unhappy Paris," she sighed. "As heart-breaking," I suggested once, "as a tear in the eyes of a beautiful woman." A remark which was applauded as "literature."

The days we spent in the cafes with a war map before us, and surrounded by a coterie of her friends, discussing the situation over and over again in real Parisian fashion. My innocence of military tactics was no excuse for not answering questions that would have qualified my little friend for a place on the board of strategy. I shall not soon forget her insistent curiosity, for instance, over the exact terms of England's first offer, and how this and that eventuality would affect the degree of England's support.

These are rather personal things to write about, perhaps, but in Paris we are in the midst of events calculated to lay bare one's thoughts even to himself.