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## THE AMERICAN EMBASSY — AUGUST 4, 1914



BY E. BAX

### I

It does not seem possible that more than fifteen years have passed since that memorable day. Each moment of it is impressed upon the photographic plate of my memory, and needs only the merest hint to snap it back out of the archives of the past into the drama of the present. That day marked the dividing line between the old care-free, happy days of peace and leisurely diplomacy at London and the raucous, disintegrating, and brutal life of war. For when the sun shone out bright and clear that fourth of August it brought to the English people a stupefying fear that before twelve hours had passed the quiet peace and comfort of years might be shattered and their country plunged into the abyss of a European war.

I was in a curious position, an Englishwoman who had been in the London Embassy for several years doing stenography, typewriting, and all the usual



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little chores that fall to the lot of a woman in an office full of men. I thoroughly enjoyed my work, and liked and admired the kind and appreciative Americans with whom I was associated. I did not think of them as foreigners, and in all the years until then I had not had occasion to realize that their political allegiance and sympathies might be different from my own. For the first time that morning I felt a little rift in the lute of perfect unity.

The train that brought me into London from my suburban home was punctual. The only sign of anything untoward was a sentry standing on guard at Clapham Junction, one of the largest railway junctions just outside London. This sentry was the object of much interest on the part of the passengers of the many trains passing by, because of the novelty of seeing a soldier in such a spot. He looked rather forlorn, and there was apparently nothing at all for him to do.

Arrived at Victoria Station, I hurried out with the rest, as it was after nine o'clock, and took my way rapidly down Victoria Street to '123,' the headquarters of so many ministers and ambassadors of the United States, beloved of them all with the exception of Mr. Page, who saw the old building with his eyes instead of with his heart as his predecessors had learned to do. A flag-pole outside proclaimed the presence of a foreign embassy, and a plate beside the door confirmed the fact that this was indeed the American Embassy. The porter of the building, who was appropriately and patriotically named George England, admitted me somewhat morosely.

I saw at once the reason for George England's gloom. It was not the usual quiet, dignified scene of diplomacy *in absentia* that greeted my eyes this morning, with the individual letters for each



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secretary arranged in neat piles on the table, and friendly sounds of activity off stage. Instead, the vestibule and reception rooms were filled with men and women, all with anxious faces, talking and gesticulating — and one woman in tears. The two messengers, with Mr. Edward Bell, Mr. Gerry Greene, and Mr. Harold Fowler, secretaries of the Embassy, — all early risers during the past week, — were trying to cope with the many demands upon them and stem the tide of almost panic that seemed to be imminent. Every one of the sacred Embassy rules was apparently being broken with impunity. The place was being made into a charitable institution, a telegraph office, a tourist agency, and a steamship office, to say nothing of a nursery for a few children who played on the floors while their mothers were being offered such comfort as was possible. The harassed people had learned that all steamship passages were canceled 'for the present,' and they were frightened and short of money, as the ordinary August Bank Holiday had been extended by the Bank of England for an additional two days to get its finances adjusted. Currency was therefore very scarce, and even the American banks felt the desirability of conserving it.

So here the Americans were, stranded in a foreign land with a war almost in sight and no way to get home. This was more than they had bargained for, coming as they had for relaxation and culture, and they came to the Embassy in the hope that it would be able to bring pressure to bear on the steamship companies to release the ships. The majority of them were good-tempered and patient, but the inevitable few were outspoken in their criticisms of those who permitted such barbaric things as war to happen. Most of them also wanted passports. Now under the



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old regulations the Embassy issued passports only to travelers going to Russia, Turkey, and the Balkan States, — governments had n't realized then what a nice little source of revenue was being overlooked, — so as the circumstances were so unusual we had cabled for and received instructions to issue them to any American who desired that form of identification. There were many, also, who came in merely for comfort. They wanted assurances that this catastrophe which seemed to be rushing toward them so inevitably was all a nightmare. This group fussed and fumed, and their sorrows seemed so fatuous and empty in the face of the real tragedies that none of us were as sympathetic as we should have been, I fear. We knew that they were in no particular danger, that they would not suffer from lack of food or lodging, but were actually in the proud position of having front seats near the scene of hostilities without any participation in the war itself.

Pushing my way through the crowds into the room of Mr. Irwin Laughlin, Councilor of Embassy, which I shared, I found my desk covered with official documents which had just come, for it was part of my work to make a record of all these before they were scattered to the various secretaries for attention. The incoming and outgoing correspondence of the last few days had shattered any fond illusions that anyone at the Embassy might have had that, except by a miracle, war could be localized to the Powers immediately concerned, and we all realized that the end of this day would probably find England drawn into this great European conflict which had been in the making for years, but which had been definitely brought up on to the horizon by the assassination of the Austrian Archduke.

The spring of 1914 had been a particularly busy one at the Embassy.

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Affairs in Mexico had been none too stable, — the situation between the British and American governments in this matter might indeed have been described as ‘delicate,’ — and diplomatically there seemed to be a restless feeling of uncertainty in Europe. The season drew along to its conclusion. June came and went and July dawned. The same number of people were presented at the Courts, the same numbers applied for invitations to everything, the usual hundreds wanted tickets to the sessions of Parliament, and the same grumblers came to make complaints. By the beginning of July we were all tired out, and even tempers were worn ragged. The Ambassador was ready to leave town. The secretaries had their plans made for a much-needed rest as soon as the Ascot races were over.

Instead of that, however, ominous mutterings filled the air. I began to index small items in my geographical file under ‘Austria and Servia.’ Servia had appealed to Russia for aid against Austria, who had sent her an ultimatum demanding certain satisfactions for the murder of the Archduke. Russia told her to accept Austria’s demands with the exception of two, which she suggested be brought before the Hague Tribunal. But this did not please Austria. Her Ambassador at Belgrade declared that nothing but complete acceptance would satisfy his government, and at once left Servia for home, which, in diplomatic usage, was tantamount to a declaration of war. All this came pouring in in telegrams, notes, memoranda, of most of the countries, to my desk. All Europe was excited and afraid. Inquiries began to come as to what we should do ‘if war came.’ We began to hurry off communications and inquiries to the American embassies on the Continent, vaguely fearing that something might happen



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to prevent their safe delivery. The Ambassador instructed the secretaries to tell all American visitors very quietly and without arousing their alarm that they had better make plans to go home at once. Everybody carried out the orders, but did it so tactfully that I doubt if one single American canceled his proposed trip to the Continent or shortened by even one day his stay in England until the newspaper accounts became so alarming that they told their own story.

In the last week of July events moved fast toward war. By July 29 Austria was bombarding Belgrade, Belgium had ordered mobilization in self-defense, Germany had recalled her High Seas Fleet, and the British Navy had canceled all leave. That same day Russia began a mobilization of her troops — purely a precautionary one on her southern border, she said. But this put Germany's back up and she sent an ultimatum to Russia to demobilize and asked for her assent by August 1. The same day Germany inquired whether England intended to remain neutral. On July 31 Sir Edward Grey asked Germany and France whether they intended to respect the neutrality of Belgium according to treaty. France agreed to do so, but Germany did not reply, and on August 1 declared war with Russia. Again on August 3 the British Government inquired if Germany would respect the neutrality of Belgium, and gave her until midnight of August 4 to reply. If no answer was forthcoming by then, England would declare war.

## II

Conscious as I was, therefore, that morning, of impending tragedy, I had the routine of the day to keep me from thinking. Opening my desk, I set to work to index the incoming corre-



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spondence. A request from the Foreign Office to restrict our use of the cable to messages absolutely necessary; an inquiry about one of the ships in a German harbor; a notification that a certain consul's appointment was satisfactory; a cable from Washington asking us to secure the arrest of a certain man wanted by the State of Pennsylvania for forgery, and his return to the United States; one or two replies from the Foreign Office to questions asked on behalf of certain government departments of the United States; a reply from Washington to our inquiry as to whether anything was being done by the United States to promote peace on the Continent; and several telegrams from prominent people in America asking us to look after their various friends and relatives supposed to be in London.

By the time these were all indexed, Mr. Laughlin arrived, very worried at things in general, — as the entire responsibility for the carrying on of the executive part of the Embassy was his, — and harassed by the crowds of people through which he had to pass on his way in, many of whom recognized him and wanted to know the latest news. Almost on his heels came Ambassador Page, who also with some difficulty forced his way in and into his own room. There Mr. Laughlin joined him, with the day's correspondence in his hand, but, apparently without stopping to read it, Mr. Page came out again after a few minutes, made his way into the reception room, and began to make a speech to the assembled visitors. His cheery manner at once had a profound effect on their drooping spirits, and his common-sense attitude stabilized the atmosphere. He said that if war did come there was nothing for them to be afraid of, that their interests would be safeguarded in every way, and that he would do what-



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ever he could to get them home as soon as possible. He asked those who had not come for anything special to leave, so that the work of the Embassy — which he assured them was of grave importance — could be attended to without delay. In reply to an agitated lady who said that her passage had been canceled, and several repetitions of the same story, Mr. Page said that undoubtedly the ships would sail again in a few days, but that if it looked as though there might be any lengthy delay he would ask the American Government to send transports and money to take its people home.

Later in the morning Mr. Page repeated his cheerful words to a new crowd, many of whom had had some measure of difficulty in reaching England from the Continent, but, although some of them left, there remained a stolid group who seemed to feel safe under their own flag in their own Embassy, and could not be persuaded to go. They sat in every corner, on the tables, and even on the narrow stone staircase that led to the second floor — to the great annoyance of numbers of naval and military officers who went up and down to consult the attachés upstairs. Every time a secretary went through the hall he was surrounded and questioned, and I was even called upon from time to time when one of my own sex developed hysterical tendencies.

A telephone call from the German Embassy brought Mr. Laughlin hastily back to his room out of the clutches of a despondent gentleman who said he simply *must* sail. 'Yes, this is Laughlin. Yes, we have already promised to look after things. But are you certain that you will go? The German Government has until midnight to answer the British ultimatum.' But the members of the German Embassy seemed sure that no answer would be forthcoming, and wished to assure themselves that their



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people and their property would be taken care of by their American colleagues until the war was over. They informed Mr. Laughlin that Germans of military age were leaving as fast as they could, and that most of their officials and archives would go with the Ambassador as soon as war was an actual fact. The Ambassador would leave to-night, then? asked Mr. Laughlin. Oh, no. He could not cross the North Sea at night. It would be too dangerous. He must cross in the daytime, under a flag of truce; so he would not leave until to-morrow at the very earliest. They said also that there would still be many Germans left, especially women and children who might need protection, and would the Embassy take care of them? Mr. Laughlin, on behalf of Mr. Page, repeated the desired assurance, as he had also done previously when Austria asked the same assistance.

The Foreign Office had also inquired the day before if the American Embassy at Berlin would look after British people and interests in Germany, and Mr. Page consented to do so. He realized, of course, that all this would mean a great additional amount of work and responsibility, this looking after enemies in enemy countries, but he knew also, what turned out to be a fact, that the American diplomatic service would accept the situation calmly and do splendid work, helping to make this war in that particular respect more civilized than any of its predecessors. In the old days there would have been short shrift for civilian enemies caught in the meshes of war, but the twentieth century does some things more humanely.

### III

Troubles with our 'adopted responsibilities' developed immediately. Dur-



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ing the morning a hysterical Austrian lady appeared, sent by the Austrian Ambassador. It appeared that her husband, a German, had left his hotel, she had not seen him since, and she feared he might have been arrested to prevent his leaving England. It developed that this gentleman was an agent of the Krupp Company of Germany, and had waited just a little too long before making his get-away. The British Government had the gentleman safe and sound, and were not disposed to release him, although the lady promised in his behalf to leave his files behind. It reminded us of a visit which a group of Krupp agents had made to England only a few months before to see some of the military establishments. It seemed foolhardy, this showing off of new military inventions to a foreign competitor, but, with guile that Americans will understand, the programme was arranged with a full appreciation of certain little German weaknesses. The party always managed to arrive at their destination at mealtime, and before any tour of inspection could be made an exhaustive banquet had to be partaken of, with much wine and speech-making, after which the delegates, dazed with too much food and oratory, were permitted to make their observations, in the complete confidence that they would understand very little of the very little they were permitted to see.

The morning also brought in many prominent American business men, who, realizing that a crisis was upon them and that they could n't get home for the present, came to offer their services. They were splendid sports, and rallied round the Ambassador with touching docility and good humor. They volunteered to be dispatch bearers, clerks, to make out passports, do anything. The Ambassador accepted their services most thankfully, and at once suggested that they secure a place



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where Americans could forgather away from the Embassy, so that the regular diplomatic work could be done without further interruption. This was something they could do without any diplomatic training, and do excellently, so within a few hours the American Citizens Relief Committee was established and going strong at the Hotel Savoy, where it maintained headquarters for two or three months, issued daily bulletins of interest to Americans, later took over the whole passport department with one of the Embassy secretaries in charge, and kept us from being flooded with homesick tourists.

One or two American diplomats, who had recently arrived from America en route for their posts, and who had planned a day or two's recreation in London, made hasty arrangements to continue their journey. Among these was Mr. Thomas Nelson Page, Ambassador to Italy, who left hoping to get as far as Paris by train, after which he expected to have to cross the Alps to Rome by motor. We saw him go with many misgivings, not knowing how he would make out, for there was no certainty that on some lonely Alpine highway he would not be requested to get out of his car, and find himself watching the back of it fade from sight in the hands of a group of soldiers. He had only his diplomatic rank to protect him. A former Third Secretary at London, Mr. Sheldon Crosby, on his way from Washington to Madrid, was due to reach London any day, and Mr. Page had determined to commandeer his services, if possible, to help with the passport business, which grew from hour to hour.

By lunch time he had almost exhausted the blank passport forms and had sent an urgent telegram for more. Cables from the United States inquiring for absent friends began to come thick and fast, many saying that money



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would be forwarded, if needed, for specific people — usually those who did not need it. These cables piled up, for there was no one to do anything with them. We had no one to send scouting over London to find these tourists, and as we knew they were safe if they had reached England we left them to take care of themselves. If they wanted anything they would undoubtedly show up, and later the Relief Committee could find them. We also did not bother about enlisting the assistance of the police in securing the arrest of the American fugitive from justice wanted by the State of Pennsylvania, for if the British police caught him they would be under the necessity of providing him with food and lodging for an indefinite time, as no one, not even a criminal, could be transported back until the steamships sailed again, and we did not want to inflict any additional troubles upon the British authorities just then.

The afternoon wore away, with Americans still flocking in. Outside, the crowds streamed by, newspaper boys calling extras pushed their way hither and thither and did a roaring trade, buses filled with anxious-eyed people lumbered by, and little groups of reservists marched along, very conscious of their uniforms and their impending glory. A sound of martial music brought us rushing to the front window for a moment's respite. Swaggering along, in full marching equipment, was one of the most famous Irish regiments, with cheering crowds marching along beside the soldiers. The excitement was tremendous. We did not know where they were going, and neither, it turned out, did they. They had imagined, it appeared, that they were on their way to the war and were to be the first regiment sent across. But it turned out that they were only being transferred from one barracks to another. When they discovered the



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truth their wrath boiled over with characteristic Irish thoroughness, and another regiment had to be called out to pacify these impatient would-be heroes.

The Ambassador returned, looking stern and anxious, about four o'clock, from a brief call at the Foreign Office, and shut himself into his room to write a cable dispatch to Washington. It was very quiet and peaceful in this room, with its heavy carpet and the pictures of his predecessors staring down at him from the walls. He was tired and ill at ease, and very conscious of his responsibility for these thousands of Americans cut off from home by an ocean three thousand miles wide, whom he could n't protect. He remembered with a shudder that it was the belief of the experts that Germany's first naval move against England would be to send her ships into the Atlantic Ocean, and that this attempt could be expected immediately after war was declared. In their opinion a naval battle might well be fought during the coming night which would decide the fate of the British and German navies in a few hours. Sir Edward Grey had told Mr. Page officially that war would actually be declared at midnight if no answer was forthcoming from Germany. Mr. Page must now report this and his anxieties to the Secretary of State, and ask for the assistance and money that he would need to do the stupendous task which was just beginning. He felt conscious of failure, the failure of the diplomacy he stood for, to ward off this terrible thing that was impending, and he knew that he must try to convey in his cable some indication of the disorganization, terror, and chaos that surrounded him, and his sympathy with all those who would be victims in the cruel strife.

He sat there in his chair quite still a long time, this foreigner looking on at



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a tragedy that was not his, but with which he was so closely linked. He understood what unwelcome guests his fellow countrymen must be just now in a country faced with war to the death, and tried to see how he could show Washington as exactly as possible how best to get them out of the dilemma. Finally he began to write, and page after page of his beautiful, even handwriting was placed face downward in perfect order as he finished it — as orderly as the thoughts that he strove to clothe in appropriate and burning words. His rather tragic face — which always reminded me somewhat of Lincoln's — reflected his sombre thoughts, and the feeling of the reflective mood was intensified by the sacrificial spirals of smoke which rose unheeded from a cigar smouldering by his side. His secretary came and went noiselessly, glancing at him affectionately, and letting in a buzz of eager conversation every time he opened and closed the door. But Mr. Page heard nothing. He was completely absorbed, and the room itself was the only oasis of quiet in the whole turbulent Embassy.

#### IV

Twilight and evening came late, as they do in England in August. The staff worked on unceasingly at the official business which had been so delayed all day, callers themselves grew fewer and fewer, and the Ambassador finally left for the night after a cheerful word to his busy helpers, and a hearty 'Thank you.' By this time it was beginning to be realized by the general public that no answer was coming from Germany. The streets grew almost impassable with people all intent on being in front of the Houses of Parliament or Buckingham Palace when the great moment arrived. Poor things, how could they know, mere human



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atoms in the clutches of a violent emotion, what was in store for their country and their loved ones? They were filled with a clanging, rather cheap, false gayety, whistling perhaps to keep up their courage. Girls and boys with linked arms marched merrily, the boys almost unconsciously trying to pull away as the inherited instincts aroused by the thoughts of war made them long to be gone, while the girls almost as unconsciously tried to restrain them. Older men and women with anxious faces passed along, with more understanding. They were not carried away by this glamorous aspect of war. They had seen other wars. Their loved ones had come back to them before wounded and wasted. Some had never come back. But these thoughtful ones were in the minority. Every bus was loaded with sight-seers. There was some horse-play, some air of holiday because something unusual was astir, some boasting about 'poor old Fritz and what 'e 'ad comin' to 'im, pore old chap,' and a good deal of drinking. It would be a quick war, over in a very few months, and there was nothing much to worry about.

I went out for a hasty supper about ten o'clock. Every restaurant was full, bands playing bravely, to the same assortment of gay and serious people. A steady stream of others went by, flocking toward Buckingham Palace, and the light on top of Big Ben announced to the world that Parliament was still sitting, and that, probably at that very moment, while they were waiting for the final answer, a debate was going forward that might change English history forever. The scene in the streets showed that mixture of sublime and ridiculous which makes life for the interested observer so everlastingly thrilling.

The Embassy looked untidy and almost tawdry as I came in about 10.30,



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with papers scattered everywhere, a feeling of dead air, and a silk hat perched rakishly on the head of the sculptured Miss Liberty, giving her a ribald and unladylike appearance. The hum of typewriters clicking upstairs in the headquarters of the naval and military attachés proclaimed them still at work, and in the messengers' office cables were being prepared in cipher for dispatch to Washington. My desk was piled with new things to be done, and Mr. Laughlin sat at his absorbed in a dispatch in which he was attempting to convey some sense of the general events to a far-off government. He did not even glance up. He had a power of concentration sometimes that I envied, for in all my work that day I had been almost carried away with the drama of my position there in the midst of history in the making, and seeing it from the point of view of another country which was not concerned in it for the time being except as a spectator. I was also apprehensive, discouraged, and swamped in a sort of sloppy sentimental patriotism which was absurd and destructive. I could not command my complete attention in the way Mr. Laughlin did, for my ears were tuned to the noises outside and my spirits were sinking as the hours drew on to midnight.

Eleven o'clock, then twelve — zero hour, with no news. The streets blazed with light, most of the population seemed to be out of doors this beautiful summer night, and an air of expectancy pervaded everything. Our telephone rang a few times during that last hour, and I jumped nervously, but it was only newspaper men asking for news, or anxious wives inquiring for erring diplomatic husbands who had entirely overlooked their dinner. The pile of work grew less. We were all tired, and it was a final relief when the Ambassador's secretary let himself in just after



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midnight, although the news he brought was bad. He had just come from outside of Buckingham Palace, where he had heard the news of war. He had seen the King and Queen respond to the overwhelming demonstrations of faith and patriotism, and had joined with the crowd in singing 'God Save the King.' In the face of the inevitable, we decided that our slight efforts could now make very little difference, and that, as this was but the beginning of terrible days, we had better conserve our strength for the future.

As I opened the front door to let myself out, a Foreign Office special messenger handed me a note, marked 'Immediate,' addressed to the Ambassador. With it in my hand I walked quickly back and handed it to Mr. Laughlin, standing by while he read it. It was the official declaration: —

'The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs presents his compliments to the American Ambassador, and begs to inform His Excellency that a state of war exists between His Majesty's Government and that of Germany.'

War had begun.

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