

SIEGE OF PARIS

Mr. Whitehurst

Thursday, 29 December 1870

The bombardment is going on in a desultory fashion, but the two days have cost the French about a hundred and fifty killed and wounded. It seems that the officers suffer out of all proportion. At Avron the loss was considerable, and four officers were killed. A horrible episode marked the history of the bombardment of the opening day. A Colonel Heintzler and his wife were giving breakfast at Avron to several friends, a servant being in the room. One of the guests was laughing with the hostess, and said, "No butter, certainly, but there may be a shell in its place, and"—As he spoke a shell burst in the room, killed six of the party, wounded severely the host and hostess, and only the doctor of the regiment and the servant got off unscathed. The remains of the six came just now to the Val de Grâce hospital, but it was such a human ruin that no individuality could be recognized. The Prussians are firing with eighty guns, some of them being 112-pounders, and ranging from three miles and a half to four miles.

More curious facts of this startling siege: Mr. Geisling, one of the great "scullers" of the Seine, and well known here in connection with Church and Charity, is in [the regiment known as] the Mobiles of the Seine. On Christmas Eve he was on duty within five or six hundred yards of the Prussian lines, and the rifle shots—odd compliments of the season—were mutually passing like good wishes at a friendly party. At midnight he left the trenches, advanced to the Prussian lines, and sang a Christmas hymn. The Prussians ceased firing, and did not recommence till the Anglo-Frenchman finished and coolly retreated into his own lines...

A gentleman sent yesterday to his butcher's for any possible scraps for his two favorite cats; the answer was this: "We will give no food to any cats, but we will buy any cats to sell for food." M. Deboos, the butcher of the Boulevard Haussmann, has just paid one thousand and eighty pounds for three of the elephants of the jardin des Plantes, which he proposes to kill, cut up, and sell at sixteen and eightpence a pound as "bœuf de siège." This will keep certain cooks of certain capitalists employed perhaps for ten days, but it certainly will not benefit the poor and needy; and had the government been that which they are not, they would really have taken all meat, normal and abnormal, to themselves and served out "rations"; as it is, their system is absurd and the result a failure. If we are really reduced to kill the elephants, the omnibus horses, and cut down the trees on the boulevards, Champs-Élysées, and the Bois de Boulogne and the Bois de Vincennes, is it not time (having little else) to eat humble pie? Why not do on the 1st of January what you must do on the 1st of March, and so save two months' battle, murder, starvation, and sudden death?...

1 March 1871

The troops were to enter Paris at 10 AM, but at 8.30 AM five-and-twenty of those wonderful Uhlans approached the celebrated Arc de Triomphe, and the leader, waving his sword, jumped the chain and took possession of Paris. Later two thousand men of all arms came and held the Palais d'Industrie and the Place de la Concorde, where French absurdity had veiled with black "crêpe" the faces of the "Cities of France," which caused them exactly to resemble the widows of nigger melodists, and ridiculous enough to make an angel weep under the circumstances. When the absurdity was exhibited to one Prussian it did, through some operation by the surgeon of his regiment, cause him to smile!

Then occurred several hours of most unnecessary cruelty. It is needless to say that the French no more stayed at home, as the "proclaimed" others should do, then Favre kept his inch of earth or Ducrot his promise to conquer or die. In fact, there were more French in the Champs-Élysées than there had been since the fatal Fourth! Now Prussia must have known that the wild "red" blood of Paris was mad with an impotent and insane desire to go on fighting, and as North Germany was so utterly triumphant she might have spared irritation to an already much tried and overexcited people. But no! *Vae victis!* was the order of the day, and so for hours little billeting parties paraded the quarter of Paris bordered on one side by the Seine, and on the other by the Rue du Faubourg-St.-Honoré, with maps and ready-made billet papers displayed with unnecessary ceremony. Small sections of men, too, were posted just wherever the Parisians must see them, and every now and again three Uhlans—or an Hussar with his orderly—walked past, saluting a line officer who swaggered about with a victorious and most trying assumption of dignity. . .

Of course I ought to be very enthusiastic or very downcast about this fall of Paris, but I was neither. Any military spectacle is splendid to a man who is as fond of soldiers as I am, and I will admit that since I saw the army of Sadowa defile before the Sultan, I have not looked on such good, well-drilled, military machines,—none of your republican independence here!

James Harvey Robinson and Charles A. Beard, *Readings in Modern European History*, (New York: 1909), II:208–210.