

LA BELLE

### La Belle

From 1917 to 1957 is just 40 years, and much can be forgotten and even more can be imagined after so many years. As to how much of my story is fact and how much is fancy, I will leave to your judgement.

The title of my paper is La Belle and after these many years, I am not sure whether she can be identified as Mlle. Olga Laurent Tissot, or la belle France. Generally my story is a nostalgia and the more pleasant remembrances of France and les Francaises, when I was un soldat pour la patrie in World War I.

In 1915 there were many young men recruited from the colleges of the Ivy League to serve in American ambulance units attached to combat divisions of the French Army and by the fall of 1916 the idea had spread to the mid-west and even to California. At that time an ambulance unit for the American Field Service was organized at the University of Illinois at Champaign and I considered myself more than fortunate to be one of the 20 selected to be affiliated with the French Army before the United States entered the War. It was not until early 1917, however, that the unit was completely organized and on the way to France. We landed at Bordeaux and thence to Paris, and soon thereafter to the front attached to the 59th Division of the Xth Army Corp under General Mangin, commonly known as "Bloody".

You will recall that World War I was the war of the trenches. Mostly day after day it was the wearisome duty of holding a vantage ground, days of boredom, fatigue, cold, mud, lice and unkempt living. The infantry regiments and the artillery units carried the major burden of the holding operation. In most sectors there was an unwritten gentleman's agreement regarding combat. The poilus washed their clothes at a certain time in the front line or second line trenches in plain view of the les Boches. The Germans did likewise at a respected time and never a shot was fired regardless of the proximity of the two enemies. In some sectors this laissez faire agreement extended to complete accord throughout the day and night. There were no snipers, no machine gun fire, and when the French 75's or the German 77's fired, the shells were directed to areas where both knew there were no men or materials to be damaged.

Our outfit of 20 ambulances and drivers ranged from one area of the front to another. We were usually quartered in an old shell-torn house or barn, sometimes a quarry, about twenty kilometres or so behind the lines. Our duties were concerned with evacuation of the sick, gassed, or wounded from the artillery, engineering or infantry units to a triage or field hospital some 10-20 kilometers further back of the lines.

From our base behind the lines an ambulance with a driver and a helper was assigned to a post-de-secours. The poste was usually located well in front of the artillery and shortly behind the second line of trenches. The ambulance was usually kept under some type of shelter, such as a hole in the side of a cliff, where there was some protection

from demolition by shell fire. The two drivers lived in a dugout, with two bunks.

Sometimes we had a stove, depending on the local rules of agreement and the visibility of the smoke. At times we lived in a large dugout with many tunnels and rooms with cement walls and ceilings. On these occasions we were quartered with the stretcher bearers (brancardiers) many of whom were musicians in the regimental bands.

Life in the dugout for a twenty-four or forty-eight hour assignment varied with the sector of the front. In the Argonne in 1917 there was a minimum of activity. In the Verdun area there was always something going on. Nearly every night there was a "coup de main" from our side or from theirs to take a few prisoners to determine the plans of the enemy. When a coup de main was made we were alerted an hour or so beforehand and moved up with an ambulance as near as feasible to the second line trench so the brancardiers needed to carry the wounded the shortest distance possible. The barrage would be thrown by the 75's over our heads while the infantrymen cut the barbed wires and the group of poilus went out for the prisoners. Shortly thereafter the stretcher bearers came down the communicating trench with a shaking Boche or two, and the wounded, and we loaded them into the ambulance and were off for a 20 to 30 kilometer drive to the triage, a field hospital. We drove without lights over indescribably rough roads. It was surprising how well one developed a sixth sense of perception. After crossing a small bridge with a certain loose board one turned to the right down a narrow

lane. At the end of the lane were two shell holes to be bumped over and the turn was to the left. Sometimes it was the odor of a dead horse that marked the turn or a dead soldier. They always buried the soldier, put the white cross on the grave marked "mort pour la Patrie" and hung his helmet on the cross. The first night after he was buried one could miss the turn of the road.

Despite the monotonous life in the dugout with the mud and the rats and the lice, the French taught us to maintain a certain judicious formality of etiquette. Each morning the corporal gave us our chicory coffee in bed in the dugout and formally asked us if we wished our "gnolle", a cheap rough brand of spirits distilled from the residue of the grapes from which the wine had been pressed. The distillate looked as clear and cool as water but it was liquid fire to the gullet. The ration was issued regularly at sundown and sunup when we were in the lines and on duty. With the addition of a regular issue of pinard (common red wine) each morning the fire of patriotism was kept burning pour la patrie, more vigorously than it would have been with a non-alcoholic menu. When there was no military activity, the meal was served in courses, soup, stew, salad (in summer), cheese and coffee. When we sat down to lunch underground in bad weather or under the trees in summer at a rough carpentered table, the French sergeant sat at the head of the table, with an American on his right and another on his left. He asked the blessing, made the sign of the cross over the French Army bread, cut off the heel and passed it to his American friend at his right. He poured a small portion

of wine in his cup, then filled the two Americans' cups and the other Frenchmen.

Our food rations came from military ravitaillement centers behind the lines.

Each day the sergeant took an ambulance and driver to purchase our supply of meat, vegetables and wine. The vegetables were seldom other than cabbage, carrots and turnips, never potatoes. It was a long time before I learned that we were alternately eating mutton and horse. I recognized the mutton but once when I remarked to the sergeant that the vaches we were buying were substantial in size, he laughed and returned with the old cliché, "Cheval, mon vieux, cheval aussi tendre que le couer de ta femme". The real delicacies, however, were the salads and the cheeses. In summer we were taught to help pick the local herbs for salads and at lunch and dinner we had a fresh tossed salad and the sergeant mixed the oil, wine, pepper and salt for the last and really superb course. The cheese was always good and the sergeant taught us how to select it. At the military store he looked over the assorted Camembert, smelled it, hefted it, examined the mould and then punched his thumb through the outer coat to test the texture. Also, there was Brie, Swiss, petite Suisse or creme and sometimes one could purchase some Bar-le-Duc to serve with the petite Suisse. We accommodated well to the food and the wine, but never to the French military breakfast. I learned to like the cheap black chicory coffee. When it was laced with a shot of gnolle, one's soul became enough alive on a bleak winter morning to tighten up the laces of one's shoes, fasten

the belt, button up the coat, put on the overcoat and be dressed for the day. In addition to the coffee we were served a portion of bread, a small can of sardines or anchovies, some Camembert, or a dried herring.

The monotony of the food was nothing compared to the boredom of sheer inactivity when off duty from the post de secours. In a quiet sector one might be assigned to duty only once a week with six days of lassitude. One of the first things we learned from the French was never to concern ourselves about the end of the War. One might be wounded - God grant it be enough to demand discharge from the Army, but not disabling, and, of course, one could be killed and then nothing mattered. To fret that the War would be over by the next 14th of July or next Christmas was only to add to despair. War was inevitable and unending.

The only pleasant and intimate contact with the outside world was a marraine, literally translated "godmother". Nearly every soldier had a marraine, who wrote him a letter once a week, sent him a present from time to time or a postal card, anything to stay "les cafardes" (the blues).

My marraine was Mlle. Olga Laurent. We first met in Paris, introduced by a girl friend of a soldier buddy. When our outfit left for the front, Olga soon became a diligent correspondent. She was a typist who lived with her widowed mother, with a brother, a non-commissioned officer in the artillery. Olga was undoubtedly a few years

my senior. She was typically Francaise, probably around 5 feet 3 inches tall with dark, brown eyes and black hair, slender, thin legged and narrow waisted. She was also, as I learned later, volatile, emotional, thrifty, stubborn, provincial, and patriotic.

My knowledge of the French language was nil when we first met and my first letters were undoubtedly more than dull. I had to rely on an old French sergeant's advice in translating hers and writing my replies. Had I followed his advice, my answers would have been romantic epistles that would have surpassed those of Cyrano de Bergerac. The sergeant was not beyond including various earthy bits not found in the standard dictionary.

In the French Army relief from military duty was granted every three months for 10 days and sometimes it was possible to visit one's marraine. By great good fortune, I was one of two of the first to be chosen to go on leave, "permission en Francais" and "perm" in the poilu slang. There was no question as to where - Paris, Paname. We brushed our uniforms, cleaned off the spots with gasoline, shined our boots, heated some water in a bucket for a bath, had a haircut from the military barber, and we were off. We hitch hiked a ride from Clermont en Argonne where we were then quartered, to Revigny, the railhead. As it was only 40 kilometers from the front, Revigny was both a military center and also a civilian town. At the gare there was the usual collection of people to see the train off. The two Americans were conspicuous. We were so obviously "en perm" and on our way to Paris that anyone felt free to give us advice. I cannot recall the bawdy details but the implications were to be intemperate. Live up your ten days, old soldier -



"faisez l'amour, buvez du vin". The other permissionnaires gave and accepted a cup of wine from the canteens and before we were out of the station at Revigny we were well in the spirit that our allies suggested. When we climbed off the train and passed through the gates there were Olga and Juliette to meet us. Was she lovely - was she adorable - there are no adjectives to describe the reunion. It was after the nine o'clock curfew and there was nothing to do but check in at a hotel near the center of town. When we registered, no embarrassing questions were asked of Mlle Olga, only her "carte d'identite" and my military papers and we were in our room. It could have been the petite Trianon and Olga might well have been Mrs. du Barry. Next morning's petite dejeuner in bed with chocolat, croissants, and a petite omelette banished all recollection of army bread, sardines, and chicory in the dugout at the front. We set out to look at Paris again, to walk down the Boulevard des Italiens, past the Madeleine, to the Place de la Concorde. We rode the autobus and the subway and that afternoon we had our aperitif at Fouquets on the Champs Elysee. We ate dinner at a little bistro in the Montmartre and had a pancake and honey at the Place Pigalle. At curfew we were back at the hotel.

It was a sensual ten days of pleasure, eating and drinking. All too soon my buddy and I were back at the gare and Olga and Juliette wept as we swung on the train to return to the front.

On our return, we relived our ten days of Paris, when we told our companions of all that we did, and gave the next four to leave en perm, sage advice on how to be intemperate. After several days we were dirty again, regained our supply of cooties and fleas, again accommodated to the mud and the stew and the shells.

Soon thereafter our division was taken out of the lines and we were back in rest billets. Christmas and New Years were upon us. On the Christmas holiday the sergeant arranged a really masterful dinner. There were aperatifs, Francais and American cocktails. Somehow he had obtained fish for the first course and a proper white wine chilled in the snow, followed by fowl and a proper light Bordeaux. With the main entree, horse no doubt but labeled filet mignon, we had a choice Burgundy followed by cheese, the black chicory coffee, cognac, and cigars. Then the champagne, stories, and the song singing of home, bawdy ballads of the soldier, the marching songs particularly the Madelone. That night I dreamt that I was in the longest bar I have ever seen, and as thirsty as I have ever been. When I awakened I was thirsty but the bar was only a dream.

On New Year's we were quartered with a family who owned a mill in a little town named Triancourt. We were invited to spend New Year's Eve with the family, the grandpere, the grandmere, the widowed daughter, the unmarried daughter and the little grandson, George. At midnight we stood around the table while the grandpere poured all of us a brimming glass of champagne. When the grandpere offerred the toast to La Bonne Anne we all clicked glasses, bowed to our host and hostess, and took a generous sip of the

bubbly wine. Not so with little George who gulped his whole glassful, bottoms up. The grandpere frowned at his behavior and the grandmere with one word, George, and a glance at her glass reproved him even more properly.

During the rest billet assignment, one made many friends among the French soldiers there. Nearly every evening a group congregated at some bistro to drink. Frequently two or three of us spent the evening with a half dozen poilus who liked nothing better than to drink the Americans under the table. Usually we drank the local beer or the vin du pays, listening to and telling stories, singing songs, and making toasts. Proper etiquette decreed that the empty bottles be left on the table till the end of the party at the 9 o'clock curfew. A newcomer to the bistro usually paused as he entered the door, saluted, and looked over the scene. A table almost completely covered with empty bottles indicated the superior capacity of the group at that table and a personal salute to the American guests. We soon learned the art of competitive drinking and it was not only personal pride at stake, but a national issue. Our French friends all knew we were whay they termed a nation of water drinkers and our position was to prove we were their equals on their own grounds. We drank toast for toast - bottoms up when demanded and sometimes grimly maintained personal and national dignity.

In addition to the soldiers, we fraternized with the French civilians. One usually found an old grandmere who would toss up an omelette, set out the tea, with French civilian bread and homemade butter. Usually the tea was supplemented by a slug of

pruny, the local name for the gnolle or cognac we received at the front. Sometimes the family were farmers and we helped with the work. Our vocabularies increased - not necessarily drawing room French - more often patois and the spicy cliches of the local country.

The grandmere's were usually great romanticists. They expected to know all about ones "petite amie" - her name, where she lived, what did she do - and see her picture. After looking it over, the old lady would evaluate her - "bien fait et jolie" (well built and pretty) - "un mien serieux" (sound judgement) - meaning she looked like she was the thrifty sort and one who would take no back talk. The old lady might well take up her anatomy - les jambes, les poitrines - le cheveux, ses yeux - and then add it all up - "probablement une belle fille et une bonne amie pour for l'American". It was too bad that you couldn't see her more often. It was too bad she wasn't a relative and perhaps she could make a little visit to see the old folks and incidentally her "soldat". Naturally, this led to the idea that a relationship could be established somehow and she could procure a military pass permitting her to the area. "Ah - c'est bien difficile". The old grandmere, however, was all for such an idea. Someone would have to provide room and board for a reasonable fee and one might well expect a reasonable addition for such a commission. Romance - obviously - one could not refrain from aiding a young lady and young man, their devoted ally, in such a project. The problem consisted simply of

establishing a family relationship and a valid reason to have the relative visit them in a military zone. Sickness seemed a possibility but no one was ill; nor was anyone going to be married; nor was there any imminent sale of property or a legal affair pending. One must take the "affaire" under consideration, it was such "une bonne idee" and there should be some means. Such schemes were considered and reconsidered but never did they materialize. Only "les generals" could ever accomplish such project and the world was ever thus - "c'est comme ca".

Nevertheless the time for the second permission was approaching and dreams of a return to Paris in the summer were soon to become a reality. Then catastrophe fell. A general order for the A.E.F. was issued that no American soldier could spend a leave in Paris. Our first reaction was that the order did not apply to us. True, we were American soldiers, but we were different. We were attached to the French Army, ate their food, obeyed the orders from their officers, and subject naturally to their rules and regulations. Sound logic but not practical. No American could spend a leave in Paris nor could he stay in the city more than 24 hours while in transit. Furthermore leaves were to be arranged only in certain areas designated by the Army. The soldiers would be transported to such recreation areas on military orders, quartered and fed in hotels under military supervision, and entertained by personnel of the Y.M.C.A. Such an order was unbelievable - inconceivable. We were fighting a war for liberty and democracy, and such a travesty of justice could not be reasonable. The paragraph in the order that

stated that the rule applied to non-commissioned personnel and commissioned officers suggested it would be effective - and it was.

The leave areas available were Nice, Aix-les-Bains, Normandy, and two others which I fail to recall. My buddy and I decided to go to Aix-les-Bains and to soften the blow to invite our two ladies to accompany us - Juliette and Olga. We would accept the challenge - when lame brains issued an order that was improper the execution of the order must be modified to accomplish the proper end result. Communications with the girls in Paris indicated that they were not only willing but were eager to go. Aix-les-Bains was a lovely resort - more pleasant in summer than Paris - and we might expect a real holiday. A tremendous correspondence ensued and the final plans were drafted to meet the girls in Paris for a 24 hour holiday and we would all leave on the same train, the two girls together, and Stewart and I. We would meet the difficulties of the rail trip as they arose. If the M.P.'s were too numerous and too troublesome we would appear to ignore the girls and meet up later in Aix. Unfortunately Olga's grandmother fell ill and she was forced to go to Dijon to visit her but she would still be able to meet us in Aix. A new complication arose when Stewart became embroiled in a quarrel with Juliette and decided not to take her at all. When we arrived in Paris he picked up with a little tart and decided to take her as a member of the foursome. We left the next day on the Express for Aix on a train crowded to capacity. With the usual donations we were able to get out of the third class where all privates traveled,

into second class. On the overnight journey we made friends with a French civilian pair who lived in Aix, who told us of the strict discipline afforded the Americans on leave. No fraternization was allowed with the French. Nearly all the bars were off limits and an American soldier found on the street with a French lady was immediately arrested, court martialed, and returned to the front. The lady was tossed into jail and had to prove she was not a prostitute before she could be released. The situation looked bad indeed. When we arrived in Aix, we were delayed in getting off the train as our friends forgot some of their packages and in aiding them we missed the M.P.'s line up of the American soldiers on leave. We found our way to the M.P. headquarters, were soundly reprimanded for tardiness. Furthermore, the Captain informed us that we were on military duty for recreational purposes. I was assigned to a comfortable hotel with private room and bath, given the requisite number of tickets for meals, instructions regarding conduct, a ticket to a band concert that night and we were marched off to the hotel. In the confusion Stewart and I were separated and he was assigned to a different hotel than I.

Olga was due in that evening at 6 o'clock. After bath and breakfast I located the concierge of the hotel and laid my cards on the table. He shook in his boots at such an idea and as his head wagged from side to side all he could say was "Impossible - absolutement impossible". We would all end up in jail. As he turned to leave, I forced

a note of generous size upon him and the discussion was continued. I informed him that I fully realized that no arrangements could be made in his hotel as it was completely filled with American soldiers. All that was needed were arrangements for comfortable quarters for Olga and me in a suitable area with personnel adequately discrete. The concierge would meet Olga at the train, conduct her to the hotel, and I would join her there. To this he finally agreed. He found a very pleasant small hotel with comfortable quarters and the proprietair and his wife were friends of his, whom we could implicitly trust. He was in a sweat however about meeting the train. The crowd would be formidable and he was uncertain that he could identify Olga from my description. He thought it best that I accompany him, identify her, depart, and join her at the appointed rendezvous. All was in order, and another note changed hands. Shortly before train time we made our tour to the gare and as he said, a large crowd was there, soldiers, civilians, American M.P.'s, and the French gendarmes. The train pulled in and the concierge and I chose a vantage point of observation. Among the early ones to deliver her billet at the gate and enter the station room was Olga - resplendant in a new costume and blue straw sailor hat, with a suitcase, hat box, and a package. I quickly pointed her out to the concierge in loud whispers and discrete gestures. There was no need to identify her. She caught my glance in her direction, dropped her effects and ran toward us. Before I could move she was with us, arms around me, with words of tender greeting. My response was less demonstrative, a discrete kiss and an



admonition to be quiet, that danger hovered over us. Hurriedly, I attempted to explain to Olga the situation in Aix regarding American soldiers and French civilians, particularly the feminine. Her response was less than cooperative. "Quelle blague". (what a joke). Such a situation was inconceivable. I should not deceive her so cruelly. Again I insisted that she accompany the concierge and I would join her later. Her reply, "Tu me m'aime plus" (you love me no longer). What a monstrous method to be rid of her. I appealed to the concierge to explain the terrible situation which he did with words and gestures. She was unconvinced. It was a tremendous plot to deceive her. Her friend, Juliette, had been discarded and now she was to follow. She could not understand such treachery. We all talked at once, with gestures, to no purpose. Finally I commanded the concierge to take Olga to her hotel where I would join her, and discuss the problem in a safer area. I left in haste with Olga stamping her foot, still insisting she had been basely betrayed. As I went out the door I saw the concierge restraining her from following me.

After a reasonable period of time I walked to the hotel where the concierge had made reservations only to find that Mlle. Laurent had as yet not arrived. After fifteen or twenty minutes wait, I telephoned the concierge at my hotel - to learn that Olga had positively refused his help at the railway station and had refused even to talk further to him. He had returned to his hotel and shortly thereafter who should arrive

but Olga via taxi and had the porter place her baggage beside her exactly in the middle of the main lobby. The concierge was terrified and something must be done. Mlle. Laurent must be removed from the hotel immediately and I must do it. He would have nothing more to do with our project.

I returned to reconnoiter the lobby and there she was. She was glaring defiantly at the desk, the front door, and everyone who passed. Without further ado, I strode into the lobby, picked up her baggage and ordered her to follow me. I made for the elevator and took her to my room, where the argument continued. Why had I devised such a cruel situation. It was unheard of even in books, preposterous, monstrous. Even though I no longer loved her there was no need for such cruelty. Patiently, I explained to her the orders from General Headquarters. I translated from English to French the instructions we had been given by the Military Police. She refused to accept the translation. It was impossible - "tout au fait impossible". Even generals could not conceive of such ideas for soldiers on leave. French generals were certainly never to be trusted and they made many unwise decisions, it was true, and Americans and American officers were a poor lot, she presumed, but they were not insane. How could anyone deny a soldier his very birthright of drinking "une petite verre du vin" - or take away the privilege of clasping his "bien aimee" in his arms. "C'est impossible - tout au fait, impossible, mon cher".

Suddenly there was a knock on the door and the chamber maid was admitted. She volubly explained that "les gendarmes Francaises et Americains" were in the hotel and soon we would be discovered. I explained to her Olga's doubts as to the rules and regulations pertaining to American soldiers in an American leave area and she again verified all that I had said. I tipped her and asked to do her best to keep the M.P.'s off our floor. She had no sooner departed then Olga upbraided me - I had bribed the entire staff of the hotel in a gigantic cabal against her. I was throwing money around to everyone. Did I have my eye on that femme de chambre - I couldn't be trusted - I had given her money. More arguments - tears - hysteria - to no avail. The concierge arrived and he was truly desolate. There were tears in his eyes as well as in his voice as he pleaded with Olga. We would all be in prison if she continued to disbelieve us. The police were going to search the hotel room by room till they found the guilty soldier and his girl friend. The concierge advised us he would secure a taxi, take the baggage, and return to conduct us to the rear of the hotel and avoid arrest. I agreed and Olga was moved to tears. He returned and I tenderly escorted my "bien aimees" down the back stairs to the waiting taxi. We proceeded to the other hotel, were properly greeted, Monsieur et Madame, and registered as private soldier premier class and Mademoiselle without reproach.

By this time Olga was half convinced that the military restrictions were more or less as stringent as she had been told. Such restrictions, however, were a personal

affront, and even more, an insult to all the womanhood of France - yes, even to the nation. We had had no dinner and rather than gamble on a scene in the dining room of the hotel, I manouvered to have dinner served in our room. We had a petite aperitif (Olga scorned American cocktails) and dinner was graciously served with a bottle of wine. I also managed a bottle of champagne in the hopes that the alcohol would have a soothing effect on our little tragedy. There were interludes of tenderness but the basic situation remained unchanged. It was a sleepless night for both of us with capitulation and recapitulation of the unhappy affair. When the femme de chambre served us our chocolat and croissants for petite dejuner we were still "en combat".

Stewart and I had arranged a picnic in the country for that day. We had engaged a coachman and a surrey for the four of us to drive out in the country to a picnic ground on a small lake. With much care a hamper of food, the proverbial bouteilles du vin, cheese, and cookies had been assembled for us for a little banquet in the woods. Stewart and his lady picked us up at our hotel about 11:00 A.M. for our jaunt to the country. We introduced the ladies and the mutual reactions were obvious. His girl might just as well have been a German fraulein. There were no signs of rapport and as we proceeded the conversation became desultory and slowed to zero. Stew talked a bit to Gabrielle and Olga was a sphinx of sullen silence.

When we arrived at our destination, Stewart and I busied ourselves to spread the picnic delicacies and then to serve it. No banquet was a greater failure. The

delicacies we had selected were tasteless; the wine was less than dry; the lively table talk a yes and no conversation.

After the meal was completed the two pairs betook their separate ways and Olga immediately began the dissection of Gabrielle. Her clothes, her hair do, her shoes, her purse, her make up, her language. Obviously she was a tart from the Montmartre. Had Stewart selected her from a bordello? To have relinquished Juliette for such a creature was an inexplicable travesty. For him to have foisted Gabrielle upon us, particularly upon Olga, and for me to have abetted the measure was an unforgiveable insult. Her wounds were already bleeding and now salt was being rubbed into them. She would have nothing further to do with Stewart or his consort, whom she hoped never to see again. I reported the necessity of our return to Aix in the carriage together which precipitated a new flood of tears. My patience was diluted by this time and I was compelled to point out to her that she could ride back with Gabrielle and Stewart or we would walk. It would be no more than a jaunt for me but for a delicate Parisienne it was doubtful if she could tolerate such travail. The argument continued and the afternoon passed uneventfully till the coachman came back and we returned quietly to Aix.

Our dinner in the hotel was another chapter of sorrow and the night a longer story and sadder. As daybreak marked the end of the night it also signified the end of our romantic journey. When I suggested that Olga had best return to Paris or to Dijon, she promptly agreed. When I told her that I would at once proceed to arrange her trans-

portation, she tossed out the final insult. "ne derangez vous pas". Not only had she refused to allow me this prerogative but she had dropped the familiar "tu" to address me in the formal "vous". We coolly embraced and I left the hotel with my few effects. She returned to Dijon and dropped me a brief and frigid note of her safe arrival.

The remaining days of my leave were desolate indeed. I secured a guest card to a British club where tennis was the prime motif. I teamed up with a young Englishman and played tennis morning and afternoon till I was utterly exhausted. We took one morning off for a trip up the mountain, where one could see the snow capped Mt. Blanc over the border on the Swiss side, returned and played tennis that afternoon. I was happy to leave Aix when my perm was over.

Back at the front, it seemed reasonable to drop in at Mme. Tissot's cottage for some tea and omelette before walking the last two miles to the quarry where the section was quartered. As soon as I arrived she divined that there was trouble. What provoked "les cafardes" in the young American? Just back home from leave with a face as long as a donkey's. As she fixed my tea I told her about l'affair du permission in the American leave area. She was very understanding. One could not comprehend such orders that an American could not visit with his French sweetheart. How could they refuse him the privilege of having a drink when and where and with whom he chose? Why after all, one expected a soldier on leave to drink and fully expected him to be

intemperate. The old man came in with the grandson and the story had to be repeated to him and he also understood. The politicians and the generals were all the same the world over. They never made the right laws nor gave the proper orders. God help the poor soldiers. They invited me to stay for supper and after some tea with a generous addition of pruny, ragout of rabbit, and the local wine I was capable of making my adieus and mille merci pour la souper to make my way back to the outfit.

The boys were all ears to hear about Aix and the story was retold again of the American M.P.'s, that leave was a military mission, and that one must relax according to orders. There was much talk about the soft brains in the higher echelon and all the boys had his own idea of how he would accept the challenge and find his own individual way of avoiding such an absurdity.

The days and the week dragged by. Our division was in a quiet sector and there was seldom even a coup de main in the way of activity. Things livened up considerably when the Second Division of the American Expeditionary Force came in to relieve us. They were the 1st and Second Marines, the first Americans to be sent into the lines. The French were expected to orient them but they disdained advice. This business of laissez faire in war was the bunk. The sooner the fight was on the better.

With the Americans in the front lines, the war was on, aggressively. Our division was moved to the Chemin des Dames and everyone knew we were slated for attack. The artillery fire for several days had been severe all the way up and down the

French front, heavy in one sector one day and active the next, a few miles away. As usual, the attack began at 4:00 o'clock in the morning and every ambulance was at various poste-de-secours. By noon we learned our division had advanced some three miles and secured their objectives. As fast as we hauled out a load of wounded and returned to the poste-de-secours a new load was waiting, all day and all the next night. We were always behind in our evacuation of the wounded. The next morning the Germans launched their counter attack, but the line held. They methodically shelled the roads at certain times and certain areas. We learned to approach a given spot such as a cross road, wait for the whistle of the 77 or the shriek of the 155, watch it explode, hold for the second shell, a few minutes later, and then proceed between the next two. They usually followed schedule both as to time and place. During the four days of attack we had no casualties among the drivers.

As our forces advanced, we were introduced to booby traps and poisoned wells. When we entered a dilapidated shell wrecked village our orders were to stay at the wheel till the engineers completed their inspection. This order was obeyed, for we hauled back many a Frenchman who had opened a door, kicked a German helmet or stepped up to look at a dirty picture on the wall, which exploded a shell or a hand grenade. The advance continued with a few days rest and a day or so of attack. The time between attacks gradually lengthened as it took the division longer to catch up with the retreating Germans. As the opposition weakened, the casualties were fewer, but our hauls back of



the lines were longer.

The false armistice didn't make much of a stir at the front. We considered it lightly as the usual grape-vine. But it was obvious that the end was in sight. When the end did come on November 11th I had been detailed to help dig our big White truck out of a mud hole. We had been at the job for 2 days and when we finally got it out, we rolled into camp about noon. All the drivers and stretcher bearers were standing idly around and soon passed us the news that an armistice had been declared at 11:00 A.M. that day. All firing had stopped promptly on both sides. A few of us rode out of town toward the front line with the French sergeant and we soon came to a French machine gun emplacement at the edge of a woods overlooking a large meadow. On top of the ridge about a 100 yards away we could see the Germans packing up their machine guns and equipment. As they left they waved and we waved back and it was certain that the war was over. We drove back to camp in a little Belgian village which was not far from Sedan. There was nothing to do. We had no supplies, not even a cabbage, and no wine at all, as we were way ahead of our supplies. There was only coffee and we went to bed as usual, dirty, tired and this time hungry and sober.

Supplies came in the next day and the celebration was on. There were a few civilians in town and everyone convened at the town hall - privates, non coms, officers and civilians. The stretcher bearers who were also members of the band furnished the music. We drank, sang, and danced, with a peasant woman or a soldier and drank some

more. The band played Le Madelon again and again and we sang it with an undescrivable fervor. The last line you may remember is Madelon - repeated thrice and with the last Madelon on the high note everyone threw his hands in the air shrieking at the top of his voice. You grasped your neighbor, clapped him on the back, and had another drink of pinard.

The war was over. Within a few days our division was moved back to Laon. We idled there for a couple of weeks and the grape vine indicated we were destined for the army of occupation. The orders came and we were on our way, so many kilometers per day as the infantry had to march on foot. We went through Nancy and into Alsace Lorraine and finally near Metz where we were stationed in an old German barracks near Forbach. We spent the rest of the fall and part of the winter there.

By this time Olga and I had resumed correspondence. At first the letters were cool and rather formal. She found some tolerance for the Americans and their many strange ways and I was lonely and forgiving and our letters again achieved the old intimacy. As the time for another leave rolled around we were again working on plans to circumvent the American leave areas. We never succeeded. When I went to Nice we had only twenty four hours together in Paris on the way down and another day and night on my return. I had to check in at 10 rue St. Anne at the Main M. P. office where I was given a badge with the exact hour and minute of my arrival and I had to be out of Paris before 24 hours had elapsed. Had I overstayed any M. P. could have picked me up, thrown

me in the jug at 10 rue St. Anne for court martial, with cancellation of leave and return to the front. The M.P.'s thought nothing of walking through a bar or a restaurant and checking every soldier's tag for the time of his arrival in Paris. I can still hear Olga say "Salle embusques". (Dirty slackers). Service in the rear carried some penalties.

On my return from Paris to Forbach I contracted the flu. I awoke the first morning back and vaguely remember being in the ambulance. The next thing I remember, as I began to recover in the French hospital was the daily cupping. A corporal would come in and gently roll me over on my stomach and the medicin would make three cuts on my back in one direction, three cross cuts, and then the corporal would clap on the hot cup. This was repeated on both sides of my back and the cups would partially fill with a few ounces of blood. With this therapy I was in a convalescent state in about a week, and finally got on my feet. My neighbor in the next bed instructed me in how to prolong my stay in the hospital. He procured a small pebble and showed me how to place it under my tongue and click it against my lower incisors. By following this procedure while the medicin examined my chest, he said that the click would make a noise like a "rale" a term that was to come into my vocabulary again a year or so later in medical school. But I wanted to get out of the hospital. I was soon on the mend and the officers of the hospital told me they wished to send me back to my outfit but they did not know where it was. It had moved a few days after I was evacuated and they were unable to locate

it. They wished to know the name of my colonel and where he was located. When I told them his name and that his bureau was in Paris, they informed me that they had orders never to send any American soldier to Paris. I pleaded ignorance of the location of my outfit and stuck to my story of my colonel in Paris and each day we had a conference with no decisions. They finally gave me a letter addressed to my colonel in Paris stating the facts but no transportation orders. With this letter written in French, I went to Metz, persuaded the transportation officer to put me on the Paris-Metz Express and returned to Paris. When I reported at our headquarters, the sergeant allowed me to translate the letter to him, and looked up the location of my section, which he found was just outside of Metz. He didn't bother to insinuate that I knew this but told me to see the colonel. I was admitted very promptly and I told him my story and presented my letter. He told me that it was all very irregular, looked at my service stripes, and the Croix, and asked me what I wanted. I asked for a week to recuperate and he compromised on five days.

I telephoned Olga and she nursed me back to full health. I learned a new French word that week - a very simple one - da-da. She told me her grandmother always gave them da-da to eat when they were convalescent and insisted that I have some, to which I agreed. It proved to be raw ground meat - horse meat, of course - with salt, pepper, vinegar and olive oil, and I felt much strengthened and Olga was pleased.

I returned to the outfit in Metz where we spent the remainder of the winter and early spring very comfortably. There was much stove pipe talk about demobilization but no action.

Finally orders came to proceed to Paris with our ambulances, where they were to be turned over to the French government. We turned them in at the Parc Vincennes one day at noon and all of us were given leave till midnight. We arranged to meet that night at the Bal Tabarin for a big frolic. Olga lived near by and soon joined me. After dinner, we took off for the Bal to join up with our friends. Most of them were there and most of them had a girl friend, old or new. It was a gay evening and it seemed unreasonable to return to camp by midnight. We agreed that if we all stayed out, the punishment could not be severe and we knew the lieutenant would never check in himself. To validate the contract we agreed that all of us would stay at the same hotel and check in at the camp at 6:00 the next morning. The contract was never fulfilled as the fifteen or so ladies, characteristically in the French manner, could not agree on any one hotel. Most of us got back to camp by 6 O'clock or thereabouts and there were no penalties. We proceeded to the main ambulance camp near Meaux about 40 kilometers from Paris. Discipline was strict and regular army life new and strange.

One morning the lieutenant lined us up and read an order from headquarters. The order stated that any soldier who had enlisted in France could be promptly demobilized there but he would be responsible for his own transportation to the U.S.A. If he was returned by the army to the U.S. he could not claim transportation back to his place of enlistment in France. The lieutenant then ordered all those who wished to be demobilized in France to step two paces forward. Five of us jumped two yards forward and

we were promptly given orders to St. Aignan in southern France. We were there for eleven days. Finally they gave us our discharge papers, paid us off, and gave us a new stripe showing we were demobilized. We pinned the discharge stripe to our coat sleeve and were on the train for Paris that evening. It was an all night ride and we arrived early the next morning, just as the sun was rising. We were soon registered in at a hotel and Olga joined me and the party. There were others but I don't recall their names.

The next day we had a conference of the quintet. Three of the five decided to stay in Paris for a few weeks and then return home. Two of us decided to stay in Paris indefinitely. Our funds were limited but we fully expected to find a job to sustain us. We decided to rent a furnished apartment for all five, and large enough for guests if the situation demanded. This we accomplished in the heart of the Montmartre on the rue Blanche. We spent a week enjoying our leisure and the night life of Paris in the Montmartre. We snubbed the M.P.'s at will and took youthful delight in passing officers, particularly American ones, without a salute. Our three friends left us after a big going away party and we signed off the big apartment in the Montmartre. My friend, Jack, who also elected to remain in France, and I easily secured jobs in the American Red Cross. We started out as guards but soon angled our way into the typewriter repair department. We had had our fill of the night life and found a small cottage in Meully just outside the Porte Maillot. We bought a set of civilian clothes and settled down to pleasant and easy living in our cottage just outside the walls of Paris. We found some old friends

who were students at the Beaux Art and made many new ones. Jack had a girl friend and they went on many parties with Olga and me.

We went to Versailles when the government re-opened the fountains. We were as pleased and proud as the Frenchmen when the gorgeous fountains erupted in the massive aqueous spectacle for the first time in over four years. There were picnics out in the country and swimming parties. We went to the races at St. Cloud and strangely enough we won more often than we lost on the horses. We visited the Louvre which was reopened and admired the Mona Lisa with the tourists. We attended mass at Notre Dame and Sacre Coeur up on the hill back of the Montmartre. Sometimes there was an evening at the theatre, or the movies at Gaumont Palace, or a concert. Our appetites were insatiable for going places and enjoying ourselves after the disciplinary war years. The most memorable day was the 14th of July.

On this day the Allies planned for the formal celebration of their victory over Germany. There was to be a gigantic parade of all the units of the Allies through the Arc de Triomphe, formal dedication ceremonies to the unknown soldier buried there, to celebrate the glorious victory and attainment of peace and liberty for all the world.

On the night of the thirteenth, the four of us, Jack and his bien aimie of the moment and Olga and I, prepared for the festivity. Jack and I brought out our uniforms to be pressed, shined our shoes and fixed up our ribbons in regular military fashion. The girls prepared a big basket of food - cheese, cold meats, sausage, bread, butter,

confiture, and a number of bottles of wine. At about 8:00 P.M. of the thirteenth we hoped to find and preserve places at the curbstone near the Arc de Triomphe where the parade would begin the next day. We were none too early as the crowd was already gathering and the front line places at the curb were almost filled. In proper French fashion we established ourselves with the basket, blankets, and cushions on the curb with our feet on the cobblestones. Within the hour the line was at least 5 deep from the curb and the gendarmes were riding up and down to keep order. Routine traffic was ordered off the boulevard. By midnight the whole wide avenue was jammed with soldiers, civilians and children. There was constant bickering and minor altercations. An old madame would try to ease up to the front with her grandchild, explaining that it was her right and province to one of the best places. Was not her grandchild an orphan of the war, whose father was lost at Verdun and buried God knows where? If the government was honest and the generals reliable they would have given her a chair right at the Arc de Triomphe and all the other mothers of France who had lost their sons. Her arguments were in vain and no one made a place for her so she went back to her stool before some other patriot appropriated her seat. The talk was all of the war, the sacrifices, the lack of food, the restrictions and the ex-soldiers relating what fronts they had been on and of the battles they had been in.

As Americans, we were looked upon most hospitably and soon were friends with all our neighbors as soon as they found we spoke their language and had served in their



own army. We drank from their bottles and ate from their baskets and they in turn accepted our hospitable offers of wine and foods. We were soon completely "en famille" and gave and accepted the jokes and small talk. When the call of nature took one of the crowd to the nearby urinoir or to a cafe on the sidewalk, there was much to be said on all sides. There was criticism of one's vital capacity, of one's endurance, and whether or not permission had been sought and granted from le capitain for such an act. The ladies were no more immune than the men from the ribald remarks and even the children came in for "proper" remarks about the natural course of human events. Stories were told, songs were sung, we ate and drank, and lounged uncomfortably on our stony seats throughout the night. At the break of day we left, singly, while the remaining three guarded our seat, to go into the cafe for a cup of coffee and a croissant. There was a long line at the W.C. and the usual old lady at the door charged twenty sous instead of the regular one sou fee for the privilege of entering and cleaning up a little.

The sun rose brightly and the day was perfect for the parade. The gendarmes inspected the ropes and tightened them. The spectators sullenly ignored the policemen for the most part or openly insulted them with aside remarks for they knew most of them had never spent a day at the front. The parade started around eleven o'clock, led by Marshall Foch and his general staff. He was personally popular and received a great ovation. Military units from the various corps d'armee, divisions and regiments with their officers followed. Squad after squad of poilus marched by in their faded

blues. Then there were the Alpine Chasseurs, the Algerians, the Senegalese, the artillery, the engineers, and the bands. Near the end of the French contingent a little Ford ambulance came along with an American driver. The crowd in our area roared its approval of the lone representative of our outfit and Olga threw her arms around me, kissed me, and then again on both cheeks. The crowd could not hear her call me "mon brave" but they all joined in the embrace, the men, women, and children nearby. It was the best moment of all the war.

The allied contingents marched by, the English, the Australians, the New Zealanders, and the Scotch. Then came the Americans led by General Pershing. The ovation was indescribable. When the crack Marine platoon passes no one could deny that here was the top outfit of the whole allied army. The crowd knew every detail of their victories first at Chateau Thierry, and on through the war, but the showmanship of that platoon spectacularly bespoke their rank as veterans - first class. The end of the parade came late in the afternoon. We had our last drink with our friends in the area and walked off through the crowd to Porte Maillot and back to our cottage.

We bathed, and took a nap to prepare for the evening. Again we took off for Porte Maillot and crowded our way down the subway. When we arrived at the Place de la Concorde we were barely able to fight our way out and up the stairs. The crowd was immense and we were overwhelmed. The four of us locked arms and drifted slowly and dangerously toward the Madeleine and finally we were able to extricate ourselves from the mob into a side

street. Every bar was jammed with celebrants. It was impossible to get near enough to the bar to purchase a drink. As soon as we approached a door of a bistro some one offered us a glass or a French soldier insisted on giving us a cup of wine from his canteen. There were bands of soldier musicians playing in the street and around each one there were groups dancing on the cobblestones and we were forced to join in their festivity. The festival was too much for us and we finally found our way out of the terrific crowds. At last we came upon an empty taxi and bargained for a ride to Porte Maillot by a circuitous route and home again.

As the rest of July passed and August came everything seemed like an anticlimax. Jack and I decided to go home. I will avoid description of the farewells with neighbors and friends and with Olga.

After forty years it is all a pleasant memory, but La Belle France is no more and her valorous army crumbled in the second World War. Olga is no longer une belle amie, more likely she is a grey haired apple cheeked grandmother. I would like to know how vigilant and watchful she is over her granddaughters. After so many years, I still am not sure whether I have written about La Belle France or une belle Francaise, but l'histoire est fine.