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Letter from Paris

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FOR the first time in my life and probably the last, I have lived for a week in a great city where everybody is happy. Moreover, since this city is Paris, everybody makes this euphoria manifest. To drive along the boulevards in a jeep is like walking into some as yet unmade René Clair film, with hundreds of bicyclists coming toward you in a stream that divides before the jeep just when you feel sure that a collision is imminent. Among the bicyclists there are pretty girls, their hair dressed high on their heads in what seems to be the current mode here. These girls show legs of a length and slimness and firmness and brownness never associated with French womanhood. Food restrictions and the amount of bicycling that is necessary in getting around in a big city without any other means of transportation have endowed these girls with the best figures in the world, which they will doubtless be glad to trade in for three square meals, plentiful supplies of chocolate, and a seat in the family Citroën as soon as the situation becomes more normal. There are handsome young matrons with children mounted behind them on their bikes, and there are husky young workmen, stubby little *employés de bureau* in striped pants, and old professors in wing collars and chin whiskers, all of them smiling and all of them lifting their right hands from the handlebars to wave as they go past. The most frequently repeated phrase of the week is “*Enfin on respire,*” (At last, one breathes!)

Happiest of all, in the French film manner, are the police, who stand at street intersections with their thumbs in their belts and beam paternally at everybody instead of looking

stern and important, as they used to. Cyclists wave to them appreciatively. When, occasionally, a truck passes through a street, taking policemen to their beats, people standing on the café terrasses applaud and shout "*Vive la police!*" For Paris, where the street cry has always been "*A bas les flics!*" (Down with the cops!), this is behavior so unprecedented that the cops sometimes look as though they think it is all a dream. There is good reason for the change of heart; for the first time since Etienne Marcel led a street mob against the royal court in about 1350, the police and the people have been on the same side of the barricades. It was the police who, on August 15th, gave the signal for a mass disregard of the Germans by going on strike. It was also the police who, four days later, began the street fighting by seizing the Prefecture of the Seine, their headquarters, across the square from Notre Dame on the Ile de la Cité. Three thousand of them, in plainclothes and armed with carbines, revolvers, and a few sub-machine guns, took the place over and defended it successfully for six days before being relieved by the arrival of the French armored division of General Leclerc. This was the largest centre of patriot resistance during the struggle. Because it is in the middle of the city, it was the knot that kept the network of patriot strongpoints together. The Germans held fortresses in the Place de la Concorde, the Place St. Michel, the Luxembourg Gardens, and along the Rue de Rivoli. Von Choltitz, the German military governor of the city, was finally captured by soldiers of the armored division in the Hôtel Meurice, and the Crillon was fought for as though it were a blockhouse. During the five days of fighting before the first elements of Allied troops began to penetrate the city, the Germans sallied from their strongpoints in tanks and systematically shot up the town. The Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur had erected barricades to stop the tanks, and boys fourteen or fifteen years old, with courage that was more than a riposte to the fanaticism of the Hitler Jugend, often destroyed tanks by throwing bottles of incendiary fluid through their ports. The bottles were usually filled with mixtures prepared by neighborhood druggists. The youngsters who did the fighting were not always of the type that is ordinarily on good terms with the police. They included the problem children of every neighborhood as well as students and

factory workers. So the oldest of all Paris feuds has ended.

It has perhaps already been hinted in the New York press that our army had not expected to take Paris quite so soon. The city was to be bypassed and encircled to save it from street fighting, on the theory that the last elements of the German garrison would withdraw just before being cut off. Thus a certain amount of damage to the city's buildings would be prevented, unless, of course, the Germans mined them before departing. As it turned out, the Germans laid mines, all right, but they didn't set them off because they were caught sitting on them. There were ten tons of explosives in the vaults under the Senate alone. But none of this is so important for the future of the world as the fact that the French saved their self-respect forever by going into the streets and fighting. The F.F.I.s were already in control of the city when the regular troops arrived, they like to tell you when you talk with them in the cafés. And, with a fine bit of military courtesy, the Allied Command, when it was informed that conditions in Paris called for an immediate move, sent in Leclerc's division first. Frenchmen had begun the liberation of Paris; other Frenchmen completed it. As a result, the Parisians are happy not only because of the liberation but because they feel they earned it.

The gratitude toward Americans is immense and sometimes embarrassing in its manifestations. People are always stopping one in the street, pumping one's hand, and saying "Thank you." It is useless to protest. To the Parisians, and especially to the children, all Americans are now *héros du cinéma*. This is particularly disconcerting to sensitive war correspondents, if any, aware, as they are, that these innocent thanks belong to those American combat troops who won the beachhead and then made the breakthrough. There are few such men in Paris. Young women, the first day or two after the Allies arrived, were as enthusiastic as children; they covered the cheeks of French and American soldiers alike with lipstick. This stage of Franco-American relations is approaching an end. Children, however, still follow the American soldiers everywhere, singing the "Marseillaise" and hopefully eyeing pockets from which they think gum might emerge. And it is still hard for an American who speaks French to pay for a drink in a bar.

The city is resuming normal life with a speed I would never have believed possible. The noise of battle has receded and the only visible reminders of the recent fighting are some damaged buildings, holes in a few streets, and a considerable number of captured German automobiles dashing about loaded with F.F.I.s and their girls, all wearing tricolor brassards and festooned with German machine pistols, Lugers, and grenades. French adolescents have for years been deprived of the simple pleasure of riding about on four wheels, and if they seem to find an excessive number of military missions for themselves, all of which involve riding down the boulevards and cheering, nobody can blame them. Until very recently they seemed to have great difficulty in resisting the equally natural temptation to shoot off their new weapons, and every day sounded like the Fourth of July, but the F.F.I., whose officers are serious soldiers, is now being absorbed into the French Army and the promiscuous shooting has come to an end. On a shattered concrete pillbox in the Place de la Concorde some playful fellow has printed, in chalk, "Liquidation. To rent, forty thousand francs." And, as I write, a painter is relettering "Guaranty Trust of New York" on the building next to the Crillon that the bank occupied before we went to war.

The physical conditions of life here are not too bad. Paris was spared the most uncomfortable experience a big modern city can have, for the water system has continued to work, a very important factor not only in sanitation but morale. Only a limited quantity of electricity is available; the power plants and distributing system are in good shape, but the hydroelectric power from central France is no longer coming in and there is a very small supply of fuel. Consequently, lights are on for only about two hours every evening, except in government offices. There is as yet no gas for cooking, but it has been promised that there soon will be. For that matter, there is not very much to cook; the city had no more than a two weeks' supply of strictly necessary foods when the liberators entered it, and though the American and French authorities have been steadily pumping food into the town, there is not yet enough for the reestablishment of good eating at home, let alone good restaurant life. Only a few small black-market restaurants still exist. The price of *petit salé* (a kind of New England boiled dinner),

one pear, and a half bottle of Bordeaux is seven hundred francs. This is the best fare you can get, and seven hundred francs, just to remind you, is fourteen dollars. Butter is four hundred francs a pound. However, the day of the black-market people is ending, because there are great quantities of butter, meat, and vegetables in Normandy, Brittany, and Anjou at about an eighth of Paris prices, and bringing them here is now simply a matter of transportation. Considering that all this food is only fifty to a hundred and fifty miles away, there is little reason to doubt that the problem will soon be solved. A decent pair of leather shoes costs a hundred dollars, a man's suit three hundred, and a portable typewriter five hundred and sixty. My advice to the Frenchman who wants any of these things is to do without for a few weeks, because such a situation can last only under the rule of the Germans, who drain a country dry of everything except grace, beauty, and good sense. The German occupation gave the black market a sort of moral sanction here. In Britain the feeling has been, ever since the blitz days, that a man who bought in the black market deprived other Britons of their share. Here people said, truthfully enough, that if you had money and didn't buy in the black market, what you wanted to buy would simply go to Germany. The black-market operators themselves are an unprepossessing lot, however, and a visit to a black-market restaurant will quickly convince anyone that a fair proportion of the patrons are engaged in other branches of the same racket.

The question of what is to be done with all this group is receiving considerable attention in the new French press. There are already eleven dailies in Paris, all almost direct offshoots of the clandestine resistance papers. Only three bear names well known before the war—the conservative *Figaro*, the Communist *L'Humanité*, and the Socialist *Le Populaire*. These three had been suppressed by Vichy, but *Populaire* and *Humanité* became as powerful as ever in their clandestine editions. Others, like *Combat*, *Libération*, and *Franc-Tireur*, are resistance papers appearing for the first time above ground and in full size. The editorial offices and printing plants of the big collaborationist papers have been handed over to the newcomers. *Populaire*, for example, is now published in the plant of *Le Matin*,

on the Boulevard Poissonnière. The new papers have from the beginning taken divergent political lines; in the cases of *Figaro*, *Humanité*, and *Populaire*, it would perhaps be better to say that they have resumed them. They are in complete accord, however, on the prestige and position of General de Gaulle and his provisional government. So is every man, woman, and child I have heard speak of de Gaulle or his government in Paris. The man's prestige is so vast that it is slightly nauseating now to think of the "opposition" to him that rich Frenchmen were still telling credulous friends about in London and Washington only a few months ago. He put the seal on a personal legend last Saturday, when, on foot and towering above a couple of million compatriots, he led a parade down the Champs-Élysées and as far as Notre Dame, where he listened to the *Te Deum* while snipers and F.F.I.s exchanged shots around him. Such overwhelming popularity may in time prove to be a handicap to him; he must eventually disappoint some of the people who now expect irreconcilable things of him. His hold on the public could not possibly be greater. A united France has crystallized around him.

While de Gaulle led the march, a few Americans were otherwise engaged.