

An American in Paris, 1917

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ON April 21, 1917, I sailed from New York on the steamer *Rochambeau* for Bordeaux. In March a cable had come from Dr. Joseph Blake asking me to come over to Paris, bringing a surgical nurse with me, to work in his new hospital, which was to be opened immediately at 6 rue Piccini. Despite our frantic efforts to go at once, there had been much delay with the Red Cross about passports, and it was not until this April afternoon, when America had become a belligerent, that we were able to realize our hopes. Our sailing was serious and thrilling: everyone waved French flags, everyone cried, the band played *La Marseillaise*. It was still rather in the holiday spirit that we all departed; our realization of what America's entry into the war meant, indeed, what war itself meant, was to come, inevitably, later.

The *Rochambeau* was our first passenger steamer to be armed: we had two guns in the bow and two in the stern; the four gunners stayed beside them day and night; it made us feel very important, but no less lighthearted. We had a dull crossing; the usual precautions were taken, but the sea appeared deserted. When we entered the danger zone, we had orders not to take off our clothes or go to bed, and to keep our life preservers and valuables within reach. Only a few, I fear, paid much attention to this order; we had the sublime confidence of ignorance. We expected to reach Bordeaux in the early evening of April 30, and were out on deck all that day, enjoying the warm and beautiful weather. Just after lunch I was writing home assuring family and friends of our uneventful voyage and safe arrival when suddenly a young ambulance driver came bounding along the deck in great excitement. He said that he had been exploring the ship and from the altitude of the stern rigging had noticed that the *Rochambeau* was tearing through the water in a series of zigzags. The words were hardly spoken when off went the guns! We got to the rail in time to see the wake of the torpedo meant for us, as it cut through the water about 50 feet from our stern and exploded beyond us, throwing up great masses of spray. We rushed to the other side and saw the whirl and suction of the water where the submarine had disappeared. The guns kept firing; the water rose high into the air. Despite our excitement and unwillingness to tear ourselves from the scene, we were sternly ordered to collect our life belts and take our stations at the boats to which we had been assigned. I must say I felt little enthusiasm for my shelter: it was a raft, apparently made of rubber pillows loosely bound together; and it chanced that only women had been allotted to use it, none of whom looked at all seaworthy. Everyone was quiet and well-behaved; none of us quite realized what was happening, but there was no hysteria, no panic. We accepted it just as we would an everyday occurrence. Not more than twenty minutes after the attack, our convoy appeared, things became calm once more, and we were sent back to our cabins again. All of us, realizing with the reaction our nar-

row escape, wrote many lengthy accounts of our only exciting experience on a voyage otherwise peaceful, except for our seething, patriotic thoughts. I am sure the censor enjoyed the varied versions of the attack, even though those to whom the letters were directed never did.

Bordeaux and the country we passed through on our way to Paris looked lovely and peaceful, for it was spring in the Midi. Everything was in bloom, the peasants were busy in their fields, with the children, as usual, helping them; life went on seemingly as peacefully and beautifully as ever. But Paris: it was there one began to understand the war. Of course, the submarine attack had done something to us, but we still were somewhat dazed and uncomprehending. To reach Paris late at night in the rain; to find no lights, no taxis, unfamiliarity, strained faces, a gaiety that was only skin deep, a studied carefulness instead of the haphazard carelessness we all knew so well, few men and many black-clothed women: this was to come to an unfamiliar, rather terrifying city, a city whose purpose seemed to be grim and serious, a city whose light had at long last flickered out, leaving it to grope blindly, and so wearily, in an unaccustomed suffocating darkness. We yearned for our Paris, and sorrowed for its people.

The Blessés

Next morning, we went out toward the Bois to report at the hospital, which had just been opened. Only two wards were in use so far, but they were crowded to overflowing with French *blessés*. All the big hotels along the Champs Elysées had been turned into hospitals; the streets were full of convalescent Allied wounded. The seats in the parks and along the avenues were theirs; one saw rows of men with only one leg or one arm, with their heads bound up, or their eyes, leading one another, helping each other, no matter what their nationalities. Sometimes three or four with half their faces gone got into the car with one; it was almost more than one could bear. All the time you swallowed and choked back the tears; it was as though your heart were being twisted, night and day it never stopped. The *blessés* in our hospital were so brave, so gay, but so tired and, unwillingly, so discouraged. They were all so interested and anxious to know when our government would send men. They were pathetically eager to know that Americans were coming soon, or, better still, were actually in France. A dozen times a day we must assure them that the men would come. So it went on, all that spring of 1917: rumor after rumor, wild tale after wild tale, but no Americans. The *blessés* in their beds and about the wards, waiting for broken bones to knit and septic wounds to heal, became less talkative, asked fewer and fewer questions; we, too, had less and less to say. On June 11, we heard that General Pershing had landed in England; one faced the *blessés* now with head up. On June 13, while we were at supper, the news was brought that he and his staff would arrive in Paris

that evening and would go at once to the Crillon. There was no time to be lost, for every American in Paris must be present when they arrived, must be a part of that first entry of our Army into Paris, into the war. We hastened into town; the Place de la Concorde was jammed with people; we could hardly have passed through except that everyone today was making way for the Americans: we had become very popular. We got to the hotel just in time—away off we heard the shouting, gradually coming nearer. Everyone in the hotel was in uniform and covered with decorations; the Americans were most of them in Red Cross uniforms; we were all so happy. Nobody looked at us, though, for every eye was on the door. Mr Sharp, our Ambassador, came in first with M. Viviani, I think it was. Then came General Pershing, tall, brown, very military. He strode to the lift, looking neither to the left nor to the right, and was snatched from view. Then came two carloads of magnificent French officers, in their beautiful blue uniforms and rows of decorations; we just glimpsed them, and they were in the lift and up out of sight. Then came another rumor: they would all be down again soon, as etiquette demanded that General Pershing pay a call on Mr. Sharp. We all waited to see. Suddenly tremendous cheering burst out again, people dashed to the door, one could see nothing. I did not know what could be lacking after such an occasion, but, mongoose-like, I headed for a dining room window to see, too. A French officer was on the window sill, trembling with excitement; I was in the same state. He pulled me up beside him; we hung out the window. An explanatory roar came from the crowd, "*C'est Papa Joffre!*" The people in the Place were almost wild; he was the idol of France and always, wherever he was, received a tremendous ovation. Big, broad, paternal, smiling, he was hurried to the lift, was whirled upwards, and in a few minutes appeared again. He stood close beside me, while waiting for his car, he even gave me a smile and a nod, looking so amused at these wild-eyed American women, excited and hoarse from cheering, uplifted and thrilled to the roots of their beings.

Plans for the Celebration

Having even such a small bit of our Army in France made all the difference in the world: the attitude of the French changed at once. To celebrate the Fourth of July properly they had planned a great ceremony. General Pershing was to be presented with flags by the highest officials of the French Army. The service was to be held in the great courtyard of the Hôtel des Invalides, historic, but far too small to accommodate all of Paris, and all of Paris fully expected to be there. Of course we had to see it, but how? The tickets of admission were limited to the military and high civil officials. No one could tell us of any wires left for us to pull; in desperation we telephoned the Ministère de la Guerre. A most sympathetic listener to our troubles assured us that it was an impossibility to procure any tickets, but hinted that any American nurse wearing her uniform could never be refused admittance. Four of us determined to try; unfortunately we had no street uniforms, we had all come over with only our white working dresses, even these had been hurriedly picked up anywhere. And we *had* to

do our Army proud at this wonderful ceremony. Happily, we were able to borrow four long and good-looking capes from the English nurses at the hospital. We sewed large red crosses prominently on their left sides and on the fronts of the blue veils we had also borrowed. Someone suggested decorations; we must have decorations; the French would never let us in without decorations. We were desolated, then we spied our modest hospital pins. Down town went a nurse to buy us tricolor ribbon while we ransacked our trunks and found at least three pins apiece: a hospital school pin, a Red Cross pin, and an alumnae pin. These sewn on the ribbons and dangling over our hearts could not be outclassed even by the bravest of generals just back from the front.

July 4, 1917

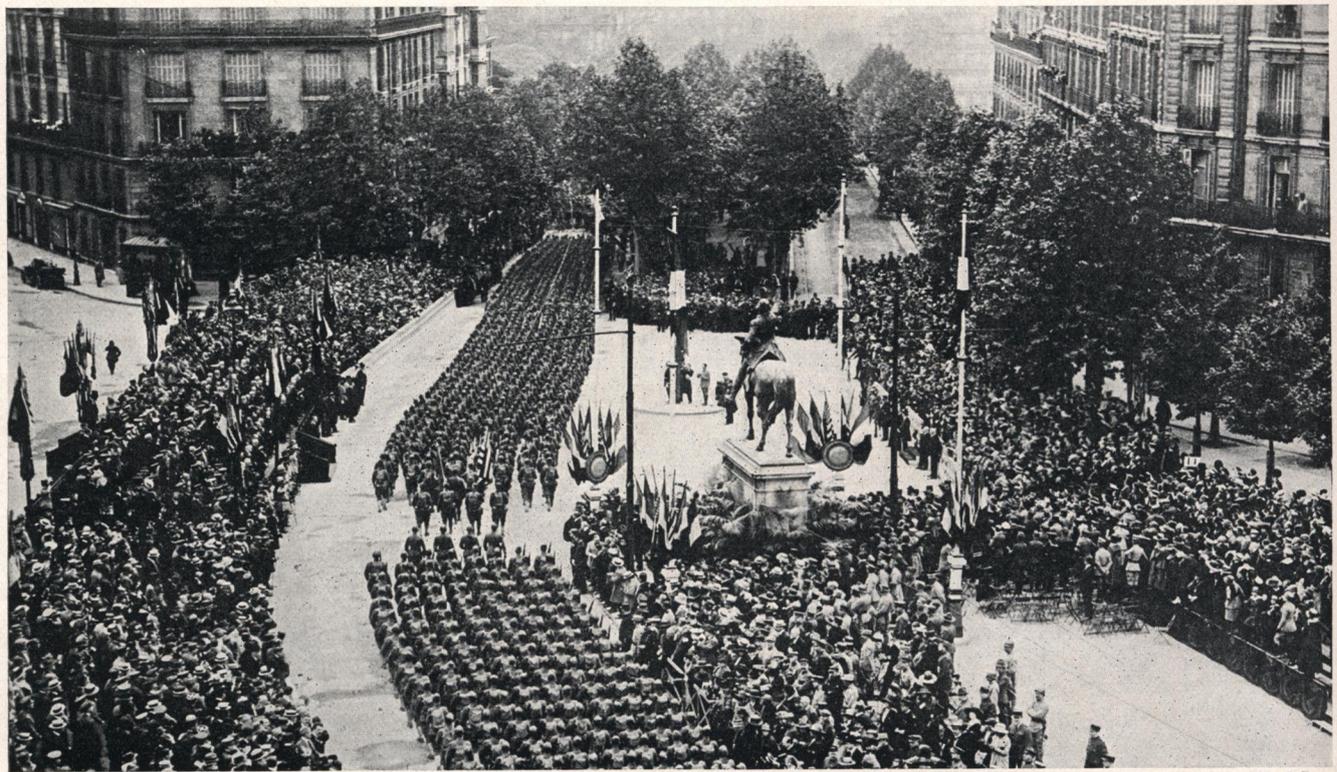
At eight o'clock on the morning of July 4, arrayed in our borrowed grandeur, we stepped into a taxi, which, complete with its dear old chauffeur, looked as if it were one of the Marne "immortals." Paris was once more the laughing city. Our soldiers were everywhere; French soldiers were everywhere; girls were everywhere; and flags, and music, and flowers, and smiles, and tears. When we arrived at the Hôtel des Invalides, we felt it was hardly worth while getting out, as the crowds were pressing in from all sides; but no sooner did the guards behold our beautiful uniforms *and* decorations than they flew to our aid. Our taxi door was opened, we were handed out and passed from one splendid bowing guard to another, while we heard guards and populace murmur in admiration, "*les infirmières Américaines.*" Before we knew it we were in the huge balcony which encircles the courtyard. Every box looked full, every spot crowded, but, before we had time even to consider our next move, a delightful elderly French general stepped out from his box in front of us and most cordially invited us to honor him, his wife, and his box, by accepting seats with them. He wore on his gay blue sleeve the regulation mourning band of black, while Madame was swathed in heavy black crêpe. When our soldiers marched in, she stood up, overcome by emotion, tears streaming down her cheeks, her hands clasped, and murmured more to herself than to me, "The sacrifice is too great for us to ask. They are so young, so straight, so beautiful." She who had already been through three years of war knew far more than we what sacrifices were before those young soldiers of ours. I do not remember all the details of that ceremony; it stands out in my mind now only as a tremendous emotional experience. I do remember that the French band came in followed by our men, so young, so straight, so tall, as Madame had said. Then came our army band, then more troops, and finally a regiment of *poilus* just back from the front, their long blue overcoats fastened back, their canteens and extra bags dangling here and there and making them look like Christmas trees. Their faces were worn and tired and haggard; their marching was superb. (Later, when I was at the front and woke at night to the incessant sound of marching troops, I could always tell which army was passing by the marching; no matter how tired they were or how dark the night, the French Army marched as one man.) General Pershing stood, it seemed, head and shoulders above most of the French officers, who

today reflected in their happy faces the feeling of the country. The first American troops had actually landed and from now on would continue to come in a steady stream, to the great discomfiture of the enemy. The tired and discouraged Allies could once more smile and rejoice, for again they were able to entertain the long-cherished image of that elusive victory, now fast becoming possible, which they had been doggedly pursuing for three years.

When the presentation of the flags was over, we, with all the French and such Americans as were in Paris, hurried down to find our taxis. General Pershing and his staff were scheduled to go next in a procession with the French officers to the grave of Lafayette in the cemetery of Picpus. We four nurses, stimulated and uplifted by the experiences of the morning, were resigned to returning to the hospital and the daily routine. But not so our faithful taxi driver! We had found him waiting at the gate, his old red face beaming with excitement. He certainly was not going out towards the Bois when *tout le monde* was heading in the opposite direction! We had no sooner said goodbye to our old general and Madame than off we flew, far too excited to notice what direction we were going. Not until we turned into the rue de Rivoli did we realize that we were not going toward the hospital. Then it came to us suddenly that we, in our "immortal" taxi, were in the midst of the glittering army motors full of officers, and that we were a part of the American Army, at least to the thousands that lined our march. Flowers were being thrown from the packed windows and from the sidewalks to the officers and to our marching Yanks. All the wounded men who could crawl were there, pressed close to our soldiers, holding on to them, patting them, asking them questions, trying to find out how many

men were coming, and when. Girls were there, pretty French girls, cuddling up to the stalwart soldiery as only French girls can, sticking roses in their hats, in their guns. Our taxi was a part of it all, part of the thrilling pageant that meant America's answer. Who cared when, if ever, we got back to the hospital? This was *our* day, the biggest day any of us had ever known. If our Army and the diplomatic service did not object to us as headliners in their parade, we certainly did not. Through that long ride we ranked as "General Pershing's Nurses," come to France with him to nurse our wounded, serve our country, and personally save the Allies. Flowers filled our taxi, we bowed our thanks right and left; the drudgeries of hospital life, the steady grind and weariness, had become exalted into something spiritual, something far bigger than human atoms like us.

As we drew near the old cemetery where Lafayette lies, the narrow street was so crowded we could only crawl along. The police told us it would be impossible to get near the gates, that we must get out and walk; but not at all. First a French officer, and then one of the secretaries from our Embassy, took our taxi in hand, and we were escorted all the way to the gate and there, with much ceremony, handed out. Nothing was too good for "General Pershing's Nurses," and so in a minute there we were, with other and still more gorgeous officers bowing us through the opening lanes of French and American officers and diplomats. Again we heard the whispered "*les infirmières Américaines.*" And then, at last, we stood by the grave of that great hero of two lands, Lafayette. The French who were standing near us pushed us into the most advantageous places; and so it was that we had the honor and joy of hearing that famous greeting: "Lafayette, we are here!"



American Infantry Passing in Review, Paris, 1918

Signal Corps