

# Why I Live In Paris

*By a Former American Soldier*

ROMEO moaned bitterly that the terrors of exile were greater than those of death: "Banished? Oh, friar, the damnéd use that word in hell. Howling attends it." But I have never found them so. Of course, I haven't died yet and so my knowledge of death is limited, but if it resembles banishment to Paris, then I feel like exclaiming, "O Death, where is thy sting?"

True, Romeo's experience was different from mine. He was banished from his Eden, and from his Juliet, while I was exiled in the contrary direction, to Paris, and into the arms of the French girl of my dreams. He fled from Verona to save his neck, but there is no sheriff chasing after me with a warrant, since I am neither a retired bootlegger nor an escaped bigamist. I can return to America tomorrow if I wish, although I confess that the old home town of Millville, Pennsylvania, doesn't tempt me very much. But when and if I go, there will be a fatted turkey, plus cranberry sauce, to greet me, and not a prison cell such as awaited Romeo in Verona.

There was no compulsion in my case. Of my own free will I came to Paris, seeking the Blue Bird of Happiness, and I remain because I have found it. As a result of this, all the lachrymal poetry wasted on exiles makes me laugh, since the bread of banishment, which Shakespeare described as bitter, for me is sweet, palatable, and nourishing. And why? Because it is eaten in Paris, with Juliet and Juliet Junior, is sometimes accompanied by paté de foie gras, and—here comes the climax—is frequently washed down with a glass or two of sparkling, golden Burgundy.

When I left St. Nazaire in July, 1919, I never expected to return to France except possibly as a tourist or an A. E. F. pilgrim. But there was always the haunting memory of Juliet—the thrill of that final kiss in the cathedral tower of Bordeaux, the pathos of those farewell tears, and the love-light in those mist-clouded eyes. That sounds like an extract from Elinor Glyn, but it was a poignant, vivid reality to me. That is why I succumbed to the lure of France and—Juliet. I could not forget; I resisted as long as I could; I had a domestic Waterloo with my family when I announced my project; and then, one afternoon, I suddenly gave up my job, said good-bye to my mother, and ten days later was on the Atlantic. As I look back, I confess that my action was reckless, silly, irrational; it might have ended in tragedy; it might have transformed me into a beggar seeking alms in the vestibule of the American consulate. I abandoned a good job for a hazardous adventure into the unknown and the uncertain. But Providence—says a French proverb—takes care of infants and fools, which doubtless explains why, a month after my arrival in Paris, I had a job; six months later I was married, and a year after that Juliet Junior, half mystery and half plaything, appeared to brighten our home. And my exile, it seems, is of the Kathleen Mavourneen kind: "It may be for years and it may be forever." Certainly it will be broken by visits to the United States, but I will likely remain an exile to the end of my days.

Still, I am not an expatriate of the Henry James type, always throwing verbal bombs at my country. I did not leave the United States because I consider it an inferior, decadent nation, barren of romance and grace, ruled by morons and inhabited solely by boobs, as the Montparnasse intellectuals here would have us believe. Indeed, I believe quite the contrary. I have no quarrel with my country. I lament the crudity, bigotry and ignorance which admittedly exist there, but I refuse to believe that America has a monopoly of these vices; I have yet to visit a country where they are non-existent. I regret the cultural shortcomings of many of our self-made men, but if a Chamber of Commerce president or a Rotary club secretary wants to spend his leisure time playing golf instead of reading Walt Whitman or studying Beethoven, that is none of my business. As human values go, certainly Henry Ford, Thomas A. Edison, *et al.* are greater benefactors of mankind than the third-rate artists, pseudo-poets and fake intellectuals such as usually lead the Anvil Chorus in Paris. In truth, within the American colony of Paris I am the self-appointed, unpaid defender of my country. It's an ungrateful job, since I get little or no assistance, because many Americans resident in Paris have become so Frenchified

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that they are anti-American, always asking scornfully, “Can anything good come out of the United States?” The dollars by which they live, at least, come out of the U. S. A. I’m an exile, yes; but even though I adore France as my second country, I remain pro-American to the core. There’s not more than a platoon of us in Paris.

Do I ever get homesick for America? Yes, indeed, especially for her gastronomic glories. I like French cuisine and my wife is a veritable cordon bleu—French for wow—but now and then I have an irresistible hankering for buckwheat cakes and maple syrup, for shredded wheat, and for the fluffy biscuits my mother used to bake. In Paris this is treason; it indicates vulgar prejudices and barbarian tastes, but dauntless and unashamed, I confess my intense enjoyment of Vermont sausage and Quaker Oats and grape fruit whenever some American woman exile, angel in disguise, invites us to breakfast. Ah, the American breakfast may violate all the laws of nutrition and dietetics, but it charms my palate in a manner that café au lait, with croissants and butter, never will. My stomach will always remain American. Once, to please me, my wife attempted to bake some American biscuits; after tasting the result of her efforts, I had to tell her, kindly but firmly, that she was too light for such heavy work. I know that’s a stale joke in America, but in Paris it had the desired effect.

Almost every day I get homesick for American matches and American tobacco. Bizarre as it may seem, I have an unreasonable preference for matches that really function, instead of the never-light variety which the French state manufactures. After five years of arduous training I have finally accustomed myself to French cigarettes, but at first they gave me as much pleasure as smoking a piece of hemp rope would. Consequently, when some wicked American tourist smuggles in some genuine American tobacco I give him my quadruple blessing plus an invitation to dinner. At times I also have an intense longing for American telephones. Back in America I sincerely thought Millville had the worst telephone system in the world. This was a colossal error. When the world’s championship for bad telephone service is handed out, I nominate Paris, confident that my candidate will win. In truth, if any American Socialist wants to see how miserably his ideals work in practice, let him try to light a French cigarette with a French match, and I venture he’ll be cured of his dreams; or let him try to call a friend on a French telephone, and if he doesn’t die of the weariness of waiting, he will confess that French state ownership and operation are an abject failure.

It is no wonder then that, sometimes, I get homesick for American bath-tubs, American electrical appliances, American comfort, and the American idea of service which I left behind me. In these pagan days after prohibition I realize how old-fashioned and illogical and stupid is the idea of service, but it’s my humble opinion that Paris would be better off today if she had fewer statues in her public squares and more American service in her telephone system, her railroads, and her public administration. Comparisons are odious, I know, but I can never forget that last year it required fourteen days for a package to travel from Millville to Paris, and fifty-six days for the same package to cover the distance between the Gare St. Lazare and my home, approximately three kilometres. Happily the package contained nothing perishable.

I’m thoroughly in love with France, however, for life is more than telephones and railroad trains, but I’m not a blind admirer, since I know her defects. Indeed, in some respects, Paris is the greatest hick town in the world. Can you imagine Pittsburgh’s street cars or New York’s subway system ceasing to function at 12:30 A. M., as happens in Paris? Can you imagine Chicago blocking State Street or cluttering up Michigan Avenue with a village fair, as Paris does on her Grands Boulevards every Christmas week? Can you imagine an American city where you can’t get a decent meal after midnight, as in Paris, unless you go to Montmartre in a full dress suit and pay five times the value? Can you imagine Cleveland or Birmingham requiring half a century to put a thoroughfare through to its destination, as was the case in Paris with the Boulevard Haussmann? Here are a few examples where the Americanization of Paris wouldn’t hurt a bit.

But there is another side to the coin. Being an exile in Paris has its advantages. Except for the courtesy which we owe to our French hosts, we American exiles are as free as Robinson Crusoe on his island. If we will refrain from tweaking President Doumergue’s nose or singing “Deutschland Ueber Alles” on the Place de la Concorde, we can be as eccentric, as high-brow, as low-brow, as stupid as pleases our fancy. And we are all of this, and more. Our spare time is literally and absolutely our own, and what we do with it is none of the boss’s business. There is not the slightest attempt at pressure, (Continued on page 85) political, religious, or economic. That is why many of the expatriates lose their politics and their religion. Naturally, the exile won’t call attention to the wart on



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his hostess's nose (assuming that she has a wart, which I deny), but aside from that we can air our opinions, prejudices and whims without restraint. If we criticize the national idols such as Suzanne Lenglen, Mistinguett or Georges Carpentier, we can expect heated retorts, but even the most ardent Frenchman would never think of muzzling our mouths.

Morals may not be a matter of geography, but manners are, and the man from Hometown, U. S. A., often adopts a different code upon being self-exiled in Paris. Oh, yes! There are scores of things I do regularly in Paris which I wouldn't do in Millville. I wouldn't dare carry a cane down Main Street (they would accuse me of being a snob) while on the Champs Elysées I hardly dare take my Sunday afternoon stroll without one for fear of being considered peculiar. Back home I wouldn't dare kiss my father-in-law or my wife's uncle in public, since it might arouse suspicions as to my normalcy; here in Paris it's an obligatory rite.

In Millville I wouldn't dare go to a theatre on Sunday night (assuming that one was open), while in Paris I do so quite regularly. Back home I wouldn't dare offer wine to my guests, if I had any to offer; in Paris I haven't courage enough to refrain from doing so, and sweet Anjou or mellow Bordeaux are constantly on my table. The preacher in Millville wouldn't dare smoke a cigarette, even in the secrecy of his study, but the American preacher in Paris smokes his Chesterfields in public, and the Ladies Aid Society refuses to get excited over the fact. It's all a matter of pressure or atmosphere; in Millville the pressure is (or was, when I left home) all towards Puritanical severity; in Paris it's all the other way.

Inevitably, the fundamentals of decency, honesty, fair play and truth are constant, whether in Arctic Nome or tropical Timbuctoo; neither longitude nor latitude can affect their sovereignty. But in Millville, to the pure almost everything was rotten; in Paris, we American exiles refuse to read evil into innocent acts. After all, evil is merely a perversion of good, and things are good or bad as we use or abuse them. There may be exceptions to that rule, but I have never found them. So, my sojourn in Paris has convinced me of the sanity and accuracy of Omar's attitude toward wine:

*A Blessing, we should use it, should we not?*

*And if a Curse—why, then, who set it there?*

Omar was precise in his language; he said, "We should *use* it," but never did he advocate abuse. In Millville I was formerly an ardent prohibitionist; I even made speeches for the cause; I stigmatized all liquor as "distilled damnation." Here in Paris I have taken a saner, more human view; I am still a fervid advocate of temperance and an admirer of voluntary, total abstinence; I abhor all excess, and I am convinced with the Psalmist that intoxicating liquor, consumed intemperately, is "the poison of serpents, and the venom of asps." But I am persuaded that drinking a glass of wine or a beaker of beer is not a sin, and no law, no Constitutional amendment, can ever make it so. I refuse to believe that the French peasant, who moistens and enlivens his frugal fare with a glass of wine, is committing a crime. Used in moderation, wine has no evil effects; instead, it aids

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her system of free-will temperance is infinitely superior to the prohibitionist panacea of compulsory goodness by law. In truth, since coming to Paris I have lost my youthful faith in the ability of law to effect moral reforms. Conscripted virtue doesn't work; it never yet produced a saint. Manhood and womanhood cannot be created by legislative enactment; they are the fruit of voluntary self-development. This is perhaps the principal truth which exile in France has taught me.

When I came to Paris I knew the difference between a fresco and a fire-plug, between a Gothic church and a Ford automobile, but aside from that my knowledge of art was blank and bleak nothingness. True, it wasn't my fault; my alma mater, for some mysterious reason, hadn't put art in the required portion of the curriculum, and so my artistic education suffered. Since then I have been exposed to the Parisian art microbe, and if my knowledge of painting, sculpture and architecture remains sketchy and amateurish, at least a new value has been added to my life, namely, that of art and beauty. For I have experienced a revaluation of values, and the yardstick of my salad days has been thrown into the garbage can.

Personally, I never measured life in terms of dollar marks or golf scores, but my parents used the old fashioned tape-line of goodness or virtue; today I realize its imperfections, since virtue is often bigoted, tyrannical and repulsive in its ferocity. Later my professors taught me

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that truth was the only valid standard of judgment, and I bowed reverently at the altar of science; now I am convinced that truth is a defective unit of measurement because it is often ugly, cruel and inhuman. Finally, Paris acquainted me with a third and perhaps the noblest criterion of all—beauty. I question whether it is the supreme ideal, because beauty is sometimes false and shallow, but its opposite vice—ugliness—is certainly one of the unpardonable sins.

However, I have not deserted either virtue or truth as exploded ideals; I still retain them, but attempt as well as I can to blend these everlasting ideals with beauty.

But the supreme science of all is the art of living, and in this the French are past masters. They may lack our mechanical appliances, they may be less businesslike, but they certainly get more delight out of living than Americans do in the haste, bluster and dirt of our industrial cities. The Frenchman takes time to live; he is not overly ambitious; he is not constantly in a hurry; and he extracts from the routine events of life—the evening aperitif, the beefsteak smothered in onions, the friendly intercourse of the family council—every bit of enjoyment that they can possibly bestow. We American exiles are fortunate in receiving instructions from these specialists in the science of living. So we shed some of our American habits; we abandon the cafeteria mode of existence; we adopt a more leisurely manner of life; we take two hours for luncheon; we idle in the pleasant, musical atmosphere of the sidewalk café; we take time to eat—to play—to get acquainted with our families—to rest—to live!

These impromptu confessions would be incomplete if I neglected to pay tribute to the French home life which we American exiles, wedded to French

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wives, are permitted to enjoy. In France the home is more than a place to sleep, to eat, to hang up your hat. It is the veritable social unit, the delightful, wholesome joys of which exceed all others. Loyalty to his family is the distinguishing trait of the Frenchman, despite the lopsided pictures of family life painted by French novelists (for which they ought to be drowned in the Seine). In France no paterfamilias would allow his family circle to be broken into five or six segments, at meal time, as so often occurs in America. No; the evening repast takes on the character of a sacrament, a holy rite to which the stranger is seldom invited. Forgetting the cares of the workaday world, the French family gathers at night-time for friendly converse, for the exchange of confidences, for a true communion of souls. After participating in one of these friendly family meals the American visitor begins to realize why Jesus, in instituting the greatest of His sacraments, made it a Holy Supper. And still there are some imbeciles who, because the word home has no French equivalent, assert that the institution does not exist in France!

The average American exile can't explain why he is in France. He thinks he knows, but he doesn't. He rhapsodizes about the charms of Paris, but if you ask him to define those charms he hems and haws and stutters and finally seeks refuge in an awkward silence. Or he may reply, "Because Paris is the art center of the world," but when you question him you learn he hasn't been to the Louvre once in five years, and that his acquaintance with art is limited to renting a studio apartment. Perhaps he will blame his presence in Paris on music, but cross-examination reveals that the only music he has heard in twelve months was produced by the jazz band — sometimes native, sometimes American—in the Casino de Paris or the Moulin Rouge. "Paris is so poetic," he mutters, and then you discover that the closest he ever got to poetry was one afternoon at the Café du Dome, where he accidentally bumped into a would-be versifier whose poetry is still in the future tense. Of course, if he tells you he came over to escape prohibition, he is likely telling the truth, as his rum-scented breath or rubicund nose (or possibly his Parisian police record) will demonstrate. I do not deny that real poets and genuine artists exist in Paris, but in the American colony they are few and far between, while the would-be's and false-alarms are in the great majority.

Many exiles like myself, however, will readily confess that a little French girl was to blame for it all, which has the advantage of being truthful and understandable. Undoubtedly Paris has stimulated my mental life; acquaintance with another language, another civilization, has widened my intellectual horizon; freedom from absurd restraints and taboos has been a delightful boon; but I would be a triple liar and an unmitigated snob if I gave these as my reasons for remaining in France. The true explanation is much simpler and more human; it consists of Madame Dough-boy and our daughter Juliet. They are the irresistible magnets that hold me in Paris; they symbolize romance made real. Perhaps we could be happy in America, but we are unwilling to try the experiment just now. Some day perhaps we will. For the moment, however, I remain in Paris, a contented exile, a voluntary expatriate, but always

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an alien. That is the price of my present happiness, and I am perfectly willing to pay it. My father abandoned Europe to find happiness in America; I have merely reversed the process. So far, neither of us has regretted our contrary courses across the Atlantic.



*The Eiffel Tower, one thousand feet high, the tallest edifice ever constructed by man, as seen from the Trocadero across the Seine. In circle, the Trocadero, photographed from the second landing of the Eiffel Tower. The business sessions of The American Legion's Ninth National Convention, to be held in Paris from September 19th to 23d, will be conducted in the Trocadero*