

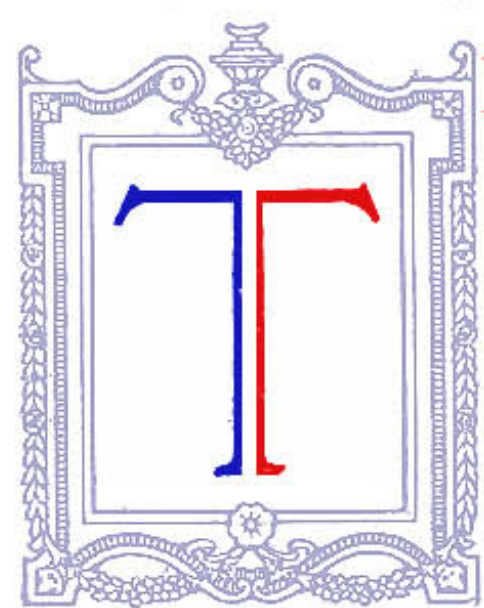
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“LES AMÉRICAINS SONT LÀ”



By Mary King Waddington



THOSE were the words on everybody's lips as the first big detachments of United States troops began to appear in the Paris streets, rather making one think of the old days of fierce fighting in the Vendée, when the phrase "Monsieur de Charette est là" seemed to put new heart and courage into the groups of peasants fighting hard for a lost cause. One could hardly call them soldiers, those bands of rough peasants, their uniforms when they had any faded and torn—scarcely armed, a few muskets, old guns, and pistols, pitchforks, sticks, whatever they could find, but all intensely religious, burning with loyalty and a mad thirst for vengeance against the hated "fléau" (Republicans) who had murdered their King, scoffed at their religion, overthrown everything that was life and country to them. Charette's name and presence worked like magic. He seemed the savior of all they held dear.

There could be no stronger contrast than these bands of young American soldiers (they all look young), vigorous, tall, supple, nor very strongly built perhaps, neither the square-shouldered, powerful Tommy, nor the sturdy muscular poilu, but swinging along with a firm free step—very bright eager eyes looking at everything and responding at once to the slightest sign of interest. They too had come to fight for an ideal—freedom and liberty of all nations, but theirs was no lost cause, their coming meant Victory and they knew it. It seemed so long to us all over here before America could make up her mind to fight. There seemed so many reasons why she shouldn't, but au fond one felt she must do her share in the world fight against tyranny and militarism. We quite understood the President's reluctance to drag his country into war—and such a war! We in France have seen all the horrors of it; still after four years of awful fighting—

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American Officer

almost a whole generation gone in France and England, and unspeakable misery in the invaded regions—there are very few people who dare to clamor for peace at any price. The men who have been wounded go back to the trenches with the same indomitable spirit, and the women send off their men with a smile and a prayer, then take up the burden of life again. Ah, what a heavy charge! It was pathetic to see the Americans so eager to get to the front, knowing so little of what was before them. Even for the regulars, the fighting in the Philippines and Mexico were skirmishes and cavalry raids compared to this terrible war.

I think there is a simple politeness in these young warriors from across the sea, whether they come from some of the big cities, New York, Boston, Chicago, or from some far-away States on the other side of the “Rockies.” There is an instinctive courtesy to all women. The other day I saw three or four young soldiers at the doors of one of our work-rooms. I said to them: “I am sure you are Americans.” In their khaki shirts and no hats it is not always easy to note the difference between them and the Australians. “Yes, ma’am”—came the answer. “I like to hear that, it reminds me of old days in America.” “My mother always taught me to say ma’am to a lady.” “Well, my boy, if you go through life remembering always what your mother taught you, you will do well.” Again came the answer “Yes, ma’am,” but this time with rather a wistful look in the eyes as if the thought of mother so far away had awakened longings for home. They tell me they are all homesick, which one can quite understand. Their compatriots over here do all they can for them in the way of clubs, restaurants, hospitals and distractions, but they are always strangers in a strange land where they don’t know the language nor the customs. I was glad to see them gradually disappearing from Paris where every possible temptation assailed them, and these simple honest country boys

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were no match for the greedy Paris shopkeepers who asked them exorbitant prices for everything; and above all for the pretty painted girls of the boulevards, who have all learned a little English, and lay in wait for these good-looking, open-handed young soldiers who half the time don't understand them but are always ready to give them a dinner or a drink or take them to the theatre.

Last winter in one of the very cold spells when great blocks of ice (a most unusual sight) were floating down the Seine, I met a group of young officers walking along the Quai, sauntering in the sun, not heeding apparently the cold, sharp wind blowing from the river. Some of our French officers had told me that they found the Americans not warmly enough dressed, their tunics and overcoats all right but their undergarments not nearly warm enough. I stopped to talk to them—I always do whenever I meet them—and asked them if they felt the cold, that I had heard they were not warmly enough dressed. They all protested, said they had everything they wanted, and one of them, rather older than the others, said he had heard no complaints from his men. We discussed it a little, then he added: “Most of us come from the far West, madame. We are accustomed to months of snow and ice in the winter—this weather seems like spring to us.”

I think perhaps they didn't feel the cold, as long as there was any sun, but the damp weather tried them very much. Hundreds had heavy colds and pneumonia. They were marvellously cared for; their hospitals are perfect. We all here in France felt so keenly what a wrench it must have been for American wives and mothers to see their men leave for such far-away fighting. There must be long weeks of agonized waiting before they can get news of their soldiers, ill or wounded. I wanted them so much to know that until they had had time to organize their own hospitals and ambulances, all their men would be as tenderly and skilfully nursed as if they were at home.

Now that they have really come into the fight and are merged into the lines of

“No Ma'am.”



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“- and they eat snails here...”

had time in July to judge the Americans, so few of them had got to the front, but when we saw the long lines of tall, keen-faced, well-made young men, we felt how much they brought to give courage and fresh energy to the troops who had fought steadily for four years.

The poilu is very much astonished at the equipment and pay of the Americans, and the practical way in which they settle themselves in any quarters, and the quickness with which they do everything. They are still astonishing the small (and even the big) French officials by their quick decision and action. I was in a small town, not far from the front, several weeks ago when two or three American officers came up in their car to see about accommodation for a detachment of soldiers, about three hundred men who were to be quartered in the town and were arriving the next day. The mayor was much perturbed. He had nothing, not even a room. There were already French and a few English troops in the town, not a room available. The officers cut short his regrets and apologies, saying: “We don’t want houses nor rooms. I suppose you can give us a field—we bring our own material.”

The next day arrived a train of lorries, with huts, tents, planks—everything they needed to organize their camp. The simple peasants were astounded at the ease and rapidity with which everything was settled. That same day in the afternoon they appeared at a garden-party given by Mme. T., an American-born wife of the general commanding the legion. She had prepared for five or six hundred people, and the garden looked charming. The French soldiers had arranged a pretty little theatre decorated with flags and greens in a real “Théâtre de Verdure” in the middle of the lawn; they had arranged the flags very well, French, English and American, when at the last moment Mme. T. discovered that there was no Italian flag and one or two Italian officers were coming who were with General F.’s command. One was obtained with difficulty from somewhere so that nobody’s feelings could be hurt, but the

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honors of the day were for the Americans. Tables loaded with sandwiches, enormous chocolate cakes, tea, chocolate, syrups and lemonade (with a little “something” in it to give it a taste) were spread under the trees. The cakes were rather a problem—they were all made in the house, but the ovens here are not big enough in an ordinary country house, in war-time, to hold so many, so they were all baked at the bakery of the little town.

The Americans arrived very punctually at four o'clock, by the garden entrance, about two hundred and fifty, marching two and two in the winding narrow paths. The poilus were there already, and the blue coats and the khaki stood out well against the background of trees as they ranged themselves in a semicircle behind the chairs reserved for the few ladies who were there and the officers. The concert was very good! Some of the French soldiers sang and played very well and some Americans (volunteers) contributed most capably and agreeably to the performance. The American songs were half patriotic, half sentimental; the men all joining in the chorus; a little shyly at first but with much entrain after a pause for refreshments. The poilus couldn't help much in the singing, as all the words were in English, but a cheer or a hurrah seems the same thing in all languages. Some of the songs were amusing; that “Kaiser Bill would feel pretty ill when the Yanks were marching to Berlin,” that chorus being given with much enthusiasm, the French soldiers smiling and nodding to the Yanks (let us hope he won't escape that illness), and another big with hopeful prophecy, “As Washington crossed the Delaware, so Pershing will cross the Rhine.”

When the concert was over we talked to the men. Many of them had just come over. They were from all parts of America. I asked were there any from New Jersey, the State where I was born, and was amused at the answer “From New Jersey, little New Jersey. No, ma'am, I don't think so.”

It is very interesting, as the War goes on, to see the difference of thought and education between the two great Anglo-Saxon nations; even when they say and do the same thing, they do them differently. The Americans move and march differently from the English—their step is lighter, freer; when they stand at attention, though perfectly correct, they are not so stiff as the Englishmen. I think many of them are shy (though it is not a national trait), especially with foreigners, but it doesn't make them as embarrassed and self-conscious as many English are. It was rather trying for some young fellows fresh from the plains or big farms

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of the far West to take part in the various entertainments provided for them in some of the clubs their compatriots in Paris had organized. They were generally very well arranged—several tables, almost always a piano, tea, cakes, sandwiches ad libitum, and pretty girls and young women waiting on them, bringing them refreshments, and asking them to play and sing.

I was shy myself when I was asked to sit down at one of the tables, and have tea with eight or ten young men of whom I knew nothing except that they wore the United States uniform, and had come across the Atlantic to stand in line with our men and help us on to victory. However, my experience, after a long and varied life, is that simplicity is always the best way to get on with all classes of society, and after the first banal questions, “Had they been long in France—were they as much pleased to come over as we were to have them,” and then the statement that I was born in America, had only been back once to my country after forty years in Europe—the ice was broken and they talked easily enough of home and the wives and children and sweethearts they had left behind. One of them showed me a picture of his wife (a pretty young woman) and two little children. I said to him: “It must have been hard for her to see you go.” “Yes, ma’am, but if I hadn’t come she would have put on the pants and come herself.” Another asked me: “Do you like living in France, ma’am, and never hearing English spoken? Isn’t America the *finest* country in the world to live in?” As I went out a soldier was singing very well an English song I didn’t know. I stopped to listen and one of his comrades, standing near the piano, told me he was a professional singer from Colorado. When the Americans first came over there were doubts expressed as to the discipline of the United States troops. No one doubted their fighting qualities, but the American from the far West, the rancher, the cowboy, has become such a familiar type in Europe that some people rather expected to see companies of “Buffalo Bills”—all carrying big Colts, and firing recklessly and cheerfully at anything or anybody, which didn’t please them—but as the French got accustomed to the quiet, confident bearing of the Americans, their opinions modified sensibly, and wherever the U. S. soldiers passed they were sure of cordial greetings.

Some of the French officers, instructors who have had charge of the Americans when they first came over, told me that their intelligence and quickness of comprehension were extraordinary. At first they rather posed as knowing it all, were

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a little contemptuous perhaps of the routine and set ways of the old trained soldier, but that mood soon passed when they began to understand and appreciate the French artillery. I heard a young American gunner talk with much enthusiasm about our famous 75, the perfection of every detail and precision of working. They learned to handle our big guns very quickly, doing better work, that is, firing more quickly than the Frenchman. The French gunner thinks, and I fancy he is right, that he is the best in the world, but the American runs him very close, and the Frenchman acknowledges it very generously. Certainly their quickness astonishes the French. Their decision is quickly made and the action follows at once.

There were all sorts of amusing stories going about when they began to establish their camps in various parts of France. Of course the questions of transports, railways, telegraphs and telephones came up at once and the Americans, accustomed to move quickly, were impatient and irritated at the delays and formalities of everything in France. They were polite at first, resigned themselves apparently to the long wait imposed upon them by the local authorities, then took matters in their own hands,—and I know of several cases where bridges were built, rails laid, and telegraphs and telephones working before the official permission arrived.

There is much sympathy between the poilus and the Americans; the French like the dash and independence of the American, which appeals to something akin in their nature, and, in some mysterious way without understanding each other's language, they make friends, and in the long summer evenings I often saw couples under the trees—a pretty little “midnette,” book in hand, and a trim-looking young American soldier to whom she was giving French lessons.

I was in Paris on the Fourth of July and was present at the fête in the Place d'Iéna, which was most interesting. The French doing all they could to celebrate America's great National Day—Washington's statue in the centre of the square almost disappeared under the heaps of wreaths and palms and ribbons. The Stars and Stripes floated proudly everywhere. We shall miss them when they go home after the war; it will seem as if a part of us is going. The square was packed with a sympathetic enthusiastic crowd. The President, with the ambassadors, ministers and distinguished guests (among them Lloyd George, who was heartily cheered by the crowd when they recognized him) sat in a tribune on one side of the square; just opposite was another one reserved for Madame Poincaré, the ambassadors, ministers' wives and certain

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representative American ladies. There were several speeches, the speakers standing on a small platform just under the President's bay, but we didn't hear them very well. We were too far off and very few voices can bear the strain of speaking in the open air and besides all our attention was concentrated on the military display.

The French opened the march, the crowd cheering, as soon as the “clairons” were heard and the blue coats were visible—then in the distance appeared the first companies of the Americans. A great cheer greeted and accompanied them all the time they were passing. They were a splendid lot of men, their uniforms fresh and trim; they had not yet been to the front but came from a training-camp “somewhere in France.” They swung through the square with their extraordinary suppleness and light quick steps—everybody cheering and admiring. We heard exclamations in the crowd “Ah les beaux gars”; then came more French troops. Some of the Americans near me were very much struck by the cavalry salute of the officers, “le salut de l'épée,” as they passed the President. It was a pretty sight, the sunlight falling on the naked blade as it rose high in the air.

There was a movement of the crowd toward the end of the square and cheers and cries of “Vive l'Amérique” told us another detachment of Americans was arriving and a long line of soldiers debouched into the square—the men who had fought near St. Quentin, their helmets dented, their uniforms worn and faded, lagging a little, but looking soldiers every one—not the parade troop which passed first, but men straight from the firing-line with that look that one sees in the eyes of all the men who have faced death and seen their comrades fall alongside of them.

Madame Poincaré came up to me saying: “Quel jour de gloire pour vous, Mme. Waddington.” It was indeed a proud moment for any one who had American blood in their veins.

Then came our soldiers also from the fighting front—brave little poilus, their helmets and uniforms also showing signs of the fierce fighting they had been through—but marching sturdily along, keenly alive to the festal appearance of everything. The Frenchman dearly loves a show. There were ringing cheers and cries of “Vive l'Amérique,” “Vive la France.” The Marseillaise and the Star-Spangled Banner played at the same time by half a dozen bands—I think everybody had a choke in their throats, but one heard a triumphant note through all the discordant war of sound, the Te Deum of Victory. I shall never cross the Place d'Iéna again without seeing the scene, Washing-

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ton's statue covered with flowers, the sunlight streaming down on flags and swords and bayonets, and the mass of eager faces all turned in one direction following the lines of retiring soldiers, and on each one the same expression of hope and joy and confidence of victory.



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(1833 - 1923)*

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