

Dearest Father:

If you could have seen me this afternoon you would have been amused. I've made arrangements with a woman here who owns a patisserie to let me use her kitchen when I want to bake a lot of cakes. ~~All French cakes are forbidden now you know~~ (it was queer as the dickens in Paris to see nothing but bread, and rye bread at that, for sale in all the high life patisseries) so she doesn't use her oven and I can hire it and her too. You go through the deserted little shop into a tiny courtyard with a pump in the middle and grape vines on three sides. It's a common court for half a dozen shops and houses, mostly inhabited by friends of mine. Marie's house is one and another belongs to an old French woman with a wig who keeps a hardware store and makes me paper flowers. There's an old man there too who thought his son had been killed, but got word the other day that he was alive, although a prisoner. He fairly cried for joy and kissed the old woman.

Anyway, you cross the court, step over several children and cats and come to the kitchen. The oven fills one end. It's a huge brick affair. You put in a big bundle of brush and set fire to it. Its very picturesque; the flames leap in the black cavern; flames always do leap, don't they? - but somehow they seemed particularly glowing today. When there was nothing left but coals Mme Morin took a hoe and pulled it all out and the oven was ready for use. In the meantime Mme Morin had been showing me how to mix the cakes. ~~Anything prettier than the whites of eggs beaten to snow in a big copper pot I don't know.~~ The pans were iron slabs about a yard square and they came from a set of racks full. It was fun seeing how everything was stowed away. Anything needed was always there though not much was in evidence. It's a rather dark little kitchen in spite of two windows, L shaped, with a broad smooth table running under the windows on both sides of the inside of the L. That serves as mixing bowl as well as rolling board and ordinary table. Its lots of fun to see her sweep up the flour with a big dust brush and mix things without any bowl at all.

All sorts of things are underfoot - hens and children and cats and dogs, I haven't seen any rabbits yet - they must be around. Some corner - everyone keeps them. There's a winding stone stairway leading down to a black cellar, and I believe there's a secret passage in it; perhaps that's only a romance. It looks hundreds of years old anyway.

We make two hundred cakes at once. Mme Morin lights a lamp near the door of the oven so we can see them, and stands there with a ten foot long wooden shovel. She ladles those huge pans in and out of the oven with the greatest skill. So far we've stuck to a lady finger kind of cake - its good and I put two together with a chocolate filling - but soon we're going to branch out into eclairs and a sort of glorified "honey moon". Mme Morin tried just a few today to see how they went and they were very successful. I've 200 cakes for sale tonight - 250 I guess. We limit them to one, or two, to each man according to our supply, but I can't make them hold out for more than an half hour, no matter how many we have.

Yesterday (Sunday) was fun. There are a lot of small villages near here, full of soldiers, with no "Y". Yesterday afternoon we took a Ford truck with a lot of supplies and started out. We worked all afternoon but had time only for two villages. We went ahead and set up shop in an empty room in a little hotel, then the chaplain and the band followed in a big truck. We shut up shop while the chaplain held an out of door service in a lovely poplar grove, but reopened for a while afterwards. In about an hour we gathered up our remaining supplies and hurried to another place - just a camp on an old farm this time. The chaplain had preceded us and was just finishing when we got there. My word, the men were glad to see us. That camp was the most fun of any so far. The men jollied and joked the whole time. Many of them were borke but we gave two francs credit so everyone got something. Goodness knows whether we'll get the money back, but it was worth it. We'd just about finished about supper time so they asked us to stay for it. We had set up our shop in the kitchen (out of doors like all these army kitchens) and it certainly had smelled good - fried chicken and fresh layer cake, the first I've seen over here. The cook - a huge black haired brigand in white trousers, a thin sleeveless undershirt and a white cap - had exclaimed "A real honest American

(2)

woman! " when I came, and proceeded to spoil me. I ate fried chicken with one hand and sold with the other! My! it was good. So you see I wasn't as keen about supper as Mr. Randall was, but in spite of the fair sized I'd had on the side it certainly went to the right spot. You try living on fried eggs and roast veal day in and day out for six weeks and see if a real American chicken supper with sweet potatoes and pie doesn't look good to you.

We got back at about 7 to find the canteen in full swing with Marie at the fore. We shut up very soon afterwards though for regimental service in the grove. Dr. Stires of St. Thomases spoke. Perhaps he said something. I didn't get it. Eminent visiting clergymen always tell the men what a privilege it is to be here and how fine an army we have- you don't get anything from them, they don't stay in one spot long enough to know anything about it. They travel around and pick up a lot of impressions, get a pretty good birdseye view I guess, but my for real every day inspiration our chaplain beats them all out. Dr. Stires was so like the caricature of a bishop Mr. Marden does that I could hardly take him seriously. Before he finished one impassioned appeal (I haven't an idea for what) I could see him eyeing his notes for the next. Somehow you can't feel that a man is putting his whole soul into his words when they flow out eloquently all the time he's reading something else. Oh well, St. Thomases likes him.

Chaplain Gilbert isn't like that. He's not tall but straight as a die for all his weight and he stands up and gets the men all singing and talks excruciating French to the French people- who all get his sincerity in spite of his pronunciation- and tells the men that they've got to live clean, decent lives and the only to do it is with God's help. He varies that theme in all sorts of ways, sometimes he's not as good, sometimes he's magnificent, but he always rings true and he always stands for God. That's the kind of preacher we need over here. The Eminent Visiting Clergymen may get a lot of good, but they don't give much. It's hardly their fault though, this sort of thing is a little out of their line. The Chaplain has been with the regiment for 17 years and of course knows something about his job. "Oh, Chappie, he's fine" I've heard from more than one of the boys.

Mr. Randall left today. I am really very sorry to have him go. He and I understood each other pretty well and I liked working under him. He's promised to send back for me if he gets an interesting job. He's to be a Divisional Secretary now. In a month or two I shall be as glad to move on as I am now to stay here. The tent wont be good for really good weather and the Y is planning to build a real hut here - wooden. I told Mr. Ames that if he wanted me to get on with Miss Neff I'd try it, but I gather it may be some job and I'd be just as happy somewhere else. Well, anything might happen in a month. Things happen here pretty suddenly when they happen at all. No one has come yet to take Mr. Randall's place, but there is a Mr. Parmelee here who has taken over the financial part of both Ys. I'm glad to turn over the money side of it; it took hours and was a good deal of responsibility. In his spare moments Mr. P. fixes up things around the tent so we're pretty flourishing just now.

13th Aug. Last night was what I consider an almost perfect Y night; a continual stream of men, but never such a jam you couldn't at least see who you were serving, and plenty of everything they wanted. I say "almost" because the cakes did give out, I expect they always will, but at least over 200 men got some before they did. We've always crackers left and they're not bad. "Them cookies" is the men's term for everything from chocolate eclairs to hard crackers. We served somewhere around 21 gallons of lemonade last night and 7 or 8 gallons of hot chocolate. When the rush is on I ladle drinks with one hand serve out cakes with the other, and make change spasmodically in between. Just when you're busiest someone is sure to hand in a \$20. bill to take a half franc out. It's funny how the boys hang on to their American money, often they'll come and ask if we have any they can buy back. They say they like to have it around; "real, honest-to-God" is the expression for anything American from a nickel to a girl. They make it "honest to goodness" sometimes when I'm around but that somehow lacks conviction. I promised to tell you, didn't I, about my trip to St. Aignan. It's only about 10 miles away but there's no way of getting there except by automobile, and of course there aren't any automobiles except army trucks or "Y" camionettes. So I waited around all day for a conveyance and at last at about 4 o'clock got a hitch on a big "Y" truck which had come out with supplies..



The quietest country around here, pretty flat, but very lovely and I thoroughly enjoyed putting my nose out of my own little hole for the first time since I arrived. I stopped at the Y hut at St. Alban station only long enough to report to Mr. Ames, then went on up to St. Alban where I was to spend the night with Eleanor Day. She was busy at her own little Y but soon knocked off and took me around to her room. A funny little house right in the heart of the town but with a tiny garden in a front courtyard Eleanor's room opens right on the courtyard and you feel rather public, but after a while it doesn't bother you much.

We hurried and caught the Y bus back to Headquarters to supper, and after supper I turned in and helped at the canteen there. My word! it was a mob! Three of us worked just as hard as we could put it from 8:30 to 10: without stopping to breathe, and we never even dented the line. There were always between 25 and 50 men waiting to be served, no matter how fast we worked. There wasn't time for a look, much less a word, it was just hands- bowls-money-next. And that was only 'wet' canteen. Two or three men worked the 'dry' and they were as rushed as we were, I think, I didn't really have much time to notice.

I may be wrong about it but it seems to me that kind of breathless rush can be handled as effectively by a detail of soldiers. As I understand it the women's job over here is to try to make things a bit homelike rather than simply feed men who are already pretty well fed at their mess. ~~They do need women to organize the work and look after it there, but even it's just a question of stopping out chocolate and making change I can't see that it makes much difference whether you're a man or a woman.~~

I keep realizing the difference here at Contres - there's all and more than one person can do effectively, but there is not such a mad rush but what you're able to jolly along a little as you tend to things. And we don't stop. I fairly swam in cocoa that night. They didn't even try to ladle, they just dipped out the stuff with the cups and bowls.

The hut is a big barn-like structure with a huge L for the men's room- canteen in the little end, a stage at the other- and the rest filled in with office rooms. There was a stunt show going on that night and between that and the canteen there was only enough room to elbow yourself around. They'll have to enlarge soon. I believe plans are already under way for that.

At ten the canteen closed and soon after I went back to the town in the Y bus. Eleanor was home already and had brought back some chocolate which she heated over an alcohol lamp and some crackers. We were both tired, but we sat back in big chairs and drank cocoa and talked. It certainly was good to get with someone I'd known at home! Eleanor felt the same way I think. Anyway we had a gorgeous time, and I guess it was nearly one o'clock before we went to bed. Next morning the landlady brought us coffee (an apology for coffee) and we ate in our wrappers like real ladies of leisure.

Then Eleanor went to her own Y and I walked the mile and a half down to Headquarters. The canteen there is open all the time so I helped, partly in the kitchen, partly at the counter. I liked the morning work better than the evening for it wasn't quite so hectic and was more humane. I got talking with one man just back from the front and hated to stop when we had to close down for lunch. You can get just about what he said from any newspaper account, only the more interesting when you're getting it straight from a man who's just seen it. "I never killed a man in my life," he said, "and that morning I killed seven, one of them was just a boy" But he wants to get back to the fight. I've seen only one man in the whole outfit here who isn't crazy either to get to the front, or to get back to it if he's been there once. Our boys are magnificent. As fine and strong and clean a lot of young men as you can imagine. I grow prouder every day of being an American. The difference in the boys from different parts of our country is awfully interesting but of course I cannot go into details about that for I'm not supposed to tell where any come from. I think I may say though that the men from my own home town do not shine in contrast to those from further away. They're less something- I don't really know what. Its not "pep" nor energy nor spirit, manners perhaps- just instinctive courtesy. They're rougher, tougher and less hail-fellow-well-met than any other group I have met.

(4)

Well, to get back to St. Aignan. I had a talk with Mr. Ames before lunch, as I wrote you in my last letter, and he decided I could come back here. I'm sure that is wise. Its hard not to be unduly influenced by how very <sup>very</sup> better I like it, but as far as I can judge I can make very much better here than there - fill an equal, if not greater, need more effectively. My tent is homelike now, as far as a tent can be, and I can handle this job. I doubt if I could help much with the other.

There were only two drops of ointment on that fly's wings - I would have received my mail quicker (it all has to be sent out from there) and it was fun living with Eleanor those two nights. It gets pretty lonely here sometimes. However, I like my own society, and Eleanor may get moved at almost any time.

That afternoon I knocked off canteen work and shopped a bit for my tent. St. Aignan is bigger than Contres and I got a lot of things its far more picturesque there than we are here. In the first place we're flat and that is a real hill town with all streets on an angle and a gorgeous old church and chateau crowning the top. We aren't so very old here, but St. Aignan must go back hundreds of years. You get glimpses of old stone stairways down the crooked alleys, and of bits of masonry that must stretch back for centuries. There are a couple of ruined towers by the chateau that may be older than medieval times, quite as old certainly. A fascinating place to explore but not so convenient for living, with your work a mile and a half away. Eleanor was doing accounts that afternoon so after I'd finished shopping I helped her and then we climbed the towers and examined the old church together.

Next morning I went to Headquarters for breakfast and soon afterwards caught a car that was to pass through Contres, but in the interval I heard one of the soldiers sing - really sing. He had the kind of voice that sounded as if he meant it and it was worth hearing. We're sentimental over here, "The Long Long Trail" is the most popular song there is, at least that's what one of the men says who's had the opportunity to travel around a lot. That nearly finished me that morning, but not quite. The song that made me hope no one was looking at me was the Irish one, I think its called "The Dear Little Girl" I'm not sure. I could fairly hear my little fat Betty's baby talk in that and see her eyes as she said "What was it the little pig had done?" I was glad when he stopped.

When our boys sing here they come out strongest on "When Uncle Sammy learns to parley voo" Get it, Eleanor, and you'll know what kind of thing we like over here. "The little Grey Home in the West" goes too, and "Baby's Prayer at Twilight" always comes in somewhere. On the victrola we have "My ukelele girl" and "I picked a lemon in the garden of Love" and a few others like that for a steady diet. They sing "Over There" sometimes - "Pack up your troubles" oftener and a few local songs a lot.

As you may gather from the length of this letter I'm taking a day off I haven't had one for a couple of weeks and I think the principle of the thing is good. However, if Father thinks the letter is too long for circulation, cut it down anyway you like. I know its not important. I feel deep sympathy for one of the soldiers here who felt the lack of excitement for his home letters and tried to make up for it. One of the lieutenants told me he'd censored a letter which said "I am sitting in the midst of a terrific bombardment. As I write two of my comrades have been killed beside me" Here! except for our men leaving so often for the front this is the most peaceful town you can imagine. "The Battle of Contres" Mr. Randall calls it when he and the chaplain and I have a vegetable party. Julianne, Marie's niece, thinks it too dull and wants to get back to the front in spite of the fact that she's still coughing terribly from having been gassed. Well if the good news of the last few weeks keeps up who'll be able to go home safely soon, but I don't want to lose Marie. You can't pay for interest like Marie's. She feels the responsibility of our "Allied Canteen" just as truly as I do.

I'm longing for letters. Its ten days since I've heard from Father though I've had letters from both Anne and Betsy in the interval. I'm a perfect gourmand for letters - If I got one every day I'd grumble because they didn't arrive twice a day I think. You've no idea how letters count over here. Just now I'm hoping for word that you've received my first letters, you hadn't in the last I got. I know of course by now, the 13th of August, you



(5)

must have received lots of them, but I'm awfully sorry about that long wait at first and I'm hoping for word that its over.

The thirtieth of August! It seems like yesterday sometimes, that I came home and sometimes like several lives ago. If I were at home now I'd be leaping for Suzannah and the apple tree and my star rock. Whenever we get a breath of coolness I long for "Toad Hall" and Mrs. Ripley. Next summer, as Dave said, we'll have a reunion. Oh, I do want to be so many people next summer! I don't see how I shall want to take a minute away from being with Father and yet I positively ache for another camping trip in the Maine woods and for lots of places- and people. Well, its a long long trail but its not an endless one, and its very good along the way.

Dearest love to Father- just a little less but still heaped down and running over to everyone else.

Mildred

P.S. My hand is all right again now. The skin all peeled off the back so my two hands don't match, but its absolutely O.K. now.

O.K.  
Chaplain Gilbert

Your daughter tells me this letter is about me, so I'm tempted to read it, but on second thought I'd be terribly afraid to know what she really thinks of the Chaplain.