

15th. I think

Coutres, 29 August.

Dearest Father:

I forgot to number my last letter, but I think it was the 14th. It was about what I do mornings anyway, and I believe I got up to lunch time. I'll go on with it I guess for nothing has happened here since, except that I got to the point where I just couldn't look a veal in the face or think of a fried egg so I changed and now I eat with one of the officers' messes. I'll tell you about that later, let me go back now to the "Lion d'Or". It may not interest you but it will be a kind of diary for me.

Lunch time- twelve if I'm on time, but usually one for me. The Lion d'Or is like thousands of small hotels of all nationalities- a tiny hall painted dark apricot colour, trimmed with scarlet and pea green- on one side a pale green drinking room set with iron tables and chairs- on the other a very long dining room lit by only one window looking out on the public square- a glimpse from the hall of the big courtyard at the back full of tumbledown wagons, little streams of dirty water, ducks, and stray children- an open door behind the dining room showing a little dark brown room with an oil cloth table and various women in perpetual wrappers and curl papers sewing, or cleaning, or putting away the wash.

The dining room is dark brown too. Imitation wood wainscoting, imitation leather doors, flowered paper faded to a dull brownish tint, a few plates hung around the walls with pictures of the various chateaux on them or of children rolling hoops; a long, long table down the center, always set with heavy china, rather gray linen, a big coloured glass fancy vase in the center full of dusty paper flowers, little red paper plaques for the wine carafes, and the variously folded napkins of the 8 or 9 "pensionnaires" reserving all the seats near the window.

Add all this to the same dark brown food every day and you can see why I hail "Corned Willie" and cracked enamel cups with real joy.

The people were interesting, for a while, and I suppose it was good for my French, but oh, the endless hours of waiting while one poor overworked maid tried to serve the whole table while Madam scolded in the kitchen. I met a few pleasant people; a French teacher from Vassar and her officer brother, the colourless interpreter and his wife, and some scattered passersby, but the "stendies"- elderly commonplace Frenchmen with bad teeth and worse manners- did I get pretty tiresome after a while. Mme Tebouch- the interpreter's wife, is very weary of it after one month and I struck it out for two, so I think I've earned the right to "knock" a little.

After lunch I get my bicycle from the Sigfried stage setting forge next door, and usually I get, too, a smile from its owner- a pretty redchecked, blackgowned, motherly-looking Frenchwoman- and a shy little "Bon Jour" from her little Jeannette, and then I- well I do various things in the afternoons. When we're open of course I go back to the tent, otherwise I putter, or come back to my room and write letters. Usually, though, there's something to be done at the tent and I get to my room only for one hour or for half an hour, too tired to do anything but lie off flat to rest against the evening. I like the long afternoons in the tent when the men are too busy to come in great numbers. Its then they drop in by ones or twos and stop and talk. Such a homesick boy as I had this afternoon! I thought he was going to cry any minute. He has a baby back home he's never seen and a wife just nineteen now. He's been gassed twice and wounded besides, and his mail is held up somewhere so he hasn't heard for months. He said "I almost believe Marie ain't no more United States." I was sucking a sign and I got him to help- at least it faded over this particular homesick streak. A man had been singing "The Long Long Trail" at the piano and my soldier said "I just can't stand music". That particular song is criminal anyhow, over here it would make a divorced incendiary homicidal.

Its mail our boys want most. I get pretty jumpy myself when I don't hear from home for a week or ten days, and there boys sometimes go months at a stretch without letters. You see they get worried around and the mails get lost. Its pretty tough. I don't see how they stand it. Its the one thing they want most of all.