

8 days in Paris (transcribed by Margy Davey, grand-daughter) 2009-03-04 [ ]  
parenthesis denote words added after the war. Letters were heavily censored  
and names and often places were omitted due to security concerns.MD

### **EIGHT DAYS IN PARIS**

At 12.30 a.m. on the 24th November, 1917, we commenced our journey to Paris from the ancient village of [Fletre]. We were five in number, with the intention of splitting into two parties of three and two respectively on arrival in the gay city. We had a walk of 3 kilometres to the railway station. We were not pressed for time so strode along the rough cobble-stones just fast enough to keep warm. It is one straight stretch of road to the station, with three on each side at intervals of about forty feet as is the custom on all French highways. I stopped for a moment to look back, and saw, far away in the distance, the endless chain of rockets sent up all along the front by our nervous friend- the enemy. I said 'au revoir' to the war till eight days and continued my journey with the others.

After some thirty minutes of walking we saw the dim, ugly outline of the church at [Caestre]]. This ugliness is increased by the roof of the tall tower, which extends only to the inner edge and leaves the tops of the thick walls exposed to the weather. Arrived at the railway station, we made the best of a tiny fire and settled down to wait for the train. Strange to say, our train steamed in on time and we clambered aboard with that haste which can only be understood by a man who has been 'on leave' himself. We arrived at Calais about 6am, where we had a wait of five hours for the civilian train to Paris. This gave us plenty of time to buy a breakfast and look around the interesting old town.

About 11am we purchased second singles to Paris (they don't have return tickets) and managed to get good seats – in a nicely heated carriage this time. It seemed quite exciting to be on the way to Paris – we were certainly going a round-about way, but still – as long as we got there. After eight hours in this train we kept asking everybody in the carriage "How many hours before we get to Paris" – Paree, Paree – with a roll of the "r" – as pronounced by two French ladies in the carriage.

Well, at 10 o'clock we got to Paris – stopped dead at Gare du Nord which I had heard so much about. The military formalities were soon fixed up and we were then free for eight clear days. We had supper at one of the Y.M.C.A. huts which always happens to be in the right place and then my pal Stewart and myself drove off to the Hotel De Malte

], Rue Richelieu leaving the other three of the party to search for the hotel something or other to which they had been recommended. We were shown into the very decent bedroom, immediately ordered a bottle Biere de la Meuse each, then fell right into a nice soft bed and forgot Paris and everything else till the sun had got quite a long way on his journey the next morning.

We had made a rule before-hand to cut out taxi-riding so as to keep down expenses as much as possible, but we simply had to get taxi(e)s to get to church in time. (You will see that we decided to make a good beginning – however bad the end might be.) I met two Yankee officers at church – very decent fellows too. I returned by Tube (Metro. they call it), rejoined my pal and we had dinner at the hotel. The Paris tubes are not so good as the tubes in London. The speed is slower and the elevator accommodation so small that nearly everybody uses the staircases. Still they are very fine railways for all that. I got my first glimpse of the famous Champs Elysees that morning. It is magnificent. After dinner we walked right along it from the Arc de Triomphe to the Tuileries. The sculpture galleries in the latter make the Melbourne collection seem ridiculous to think about. I haven't much of an eye for this sort of thing but I did enjoy what I saw in the Tuileries. The Arc de Triomphe is something similar to the London Marble Arch, only bigger. The tube station near it is called Etoile, after Place de l'Etoile. I suppose they it this name because a number of streets or boulevards branch out from here and form a big star. We also saw the Place del la Concorde, where the notorious guillotine once stood.

There was quite a crowd of Parisians promenading along the Champs Elysees. The weather was beautifully mild for December – so mild that we had not troubled to bring overcoats – only light macintosh capes in case of rain. We wandered into the Rue Montmartre and chose the Restaurant de la Ville de Paris for tea. I am sending you one of their menus which we were unprincipled

enough to purloin – so it will speak for itself – a very cheap meal I considered it and a good one at that. After tea we came across an advertisement “La Barbriere de Seville, Trianon Lyrique, Dimanche, 8.30.” “Stewart, my boy!” said I, “we must see this.” We discovered that the theatre was situated in the Rue Rochechouart. Dearyme! What an unpronounceable name! And I hadn’t yet acquired my Parisian accent. After tremendous mental efforts we managed to get to Rochechouart tube station and then came more difficulties. Stewart had forgotten all the French he ever learned and people simply could not understand my pronunciation of proper names at first. I got over the trouble however by writing it down on paper and we eventually got to the theatre and witnessed a most delightful performance of Rossini’s merry opera. All the company were good singers and the man who played the “barber” was the king of the lot. The house was crowded but fortunately we dropped into a very good seat.

On Monday we booked seats in an eight-horse drag for Versailles. We passed the ancient Sevres village and porcelain factory on the way and the oldest church in Paris, dating back to the year 695. The palace at Versailles is beyond all description. I have never seen anything to equal the decorations of the walls and ceilings. We had with us a guide formerly in the employ of Cooks and he explained everything fully. The photograph I am sending shows our party in the foreground, with the addition of two American nurses and a Frenchman who was wounded and is now in charge of the place. The background of this photo shows Marie Antoinette’s rooms and the window at which she stood with her infant in her arms to try and pacify the unruly crowd at the time of the Revolution. It seems ridiculous to switch off on to the subject of dinners, but I must mention the sumptuous repast which our guide had ordered for us at the best hotel in Versailles. As it was ordered in advance we had to grin and bear it but we certainly ‘did ourselves in style’. About 200 courses, more or less, and we polished off everything they put before us. The old drag was too slow for us so we returned by train and got back in nice time for tea. We spent the evening at a picture show – more for a rest than anything else – and though the narratives were all in the French language – I managed to read them and explain them to Stewart as we went along.

On Tuesday we visited the Hotel de Ville, Palais de Justice, and Notre Dame. I

was rather disappointed in Notre Dame and suppose it was after seeing the splendid cathedral of [Amiens], which I sent you pictures of some time ago. We then walked along the statue of Henri IV, which was very interesting to me after reading that book "The Beloved Vagabond". We ordered coffee in a little café opposite the statue and sat and gazed on dear old Henri. Paragot whenever he had the blues, used to go down and stand for hours in front of his beloved Henri Quatre. Then we went to Passy. I was specially interested in this place because of Father's association with it. It is mostly large and luxurious flats and gardens. I should say that it bore the same relation to Paris that E. Melb or St. Kilda bears to Melbourne. There is a tube station at Passy but here the railway comes out of the ground and runs on a long bridge above the street level and right across the Seine. The Trocadero is just near by and a magnificent building it is. Such a unique design. From the balcony of the Trocadero we got a glorious view of Paris with the great Eiffel Tower in the foreground.

The Opera House is a fine building also, with the wide Avenue de l'Opera leading to it. It was a great pleasure to me to stroll down the Boulevard des Italiens and Boulevard Montmartre and admire the Parisiens and Parisiennes. There are two establishments here, splendidly fitted up, with chairs in which one may sit and hear gramophone records for fifteen centimes each. You have a list of over 7000 records to choose from (Melba, Caruso, Kubelik, Paderewski – in fact everybody worth listening to) and you put receivers to your ears after the style of a telephone. We spent five or six hours at these places at different times. They were always crowded with fashionable people. That evening I saw a very good performance of La Traviata at the Opera Comique. Mlle Fanny Heldy took the leading role: she has a beautiful voice and stage appearance. The theatre is a fine building with six tiers of seats.

On Wednesday we got up too late to go anywhere (dear oh dear) and when we did get up we decided, for several reasons, to shift our quarters to the Hotel Grand Prieure in the rue Grand Prieure. Although no one could speak a word of English at this hotel, we were more satisfied there. It is situated a couple of hundred yards from the Place de la Republique with its famous statue of Liberty where Madame Rolland is said to have knelt and said 'O! Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!' The Hotel Moderne is right opposite the

statue of Liberty and part of this hotel is utilized by the English residents of Paris as a club for English soldiers on leave. This club is very well managed, the ladies serving very good meals. It contains billiard tables, writing and reading rooms and two very good pianos. There are several big houseboats on the River Seine fitted up as baths and we indulged in a hot bath in one of these during the afternoon. The French are straight to the point on the subject of tips and if you forget to give a servant a tip when it is expected he makes no bones about asking you for it "Pourboire, monsieur: quelquechose pourboire!" However, where one has to give 6d. 1/- in London, only 1d or 2d is expected here. I notice that whenever anyone pays for a drink he gives the waiter either one or two sous. In the evening we went to the Folies Bergere – a sort of elaborate music-hall. Some of the songs were in English most of the audience seemed to amuse themselves by strolling round the extensive promenades and partaking of the various forms of liquid refreshment offered. On Thursday we had a lazy day and amused ourselves in true French fashion by sitting at the little tables outside the cafes in the Boulevard Montmartre and sipping coffee and watching the stream of passers-by. We were often greeted with "Arloo Australie". (Australians still seem to be rather a novelty in Paris.) What a delightful people the Parisians are! – Always laughing. When a man's hat blows off here, he laughs – in London he scowls. If you bump into anyone, apologies are profuse and smiles plentiful. But try bumping into an English aristocrat. Everything in Paris seems to be treated as a joke – even life itself I should imagine. I carried a pocket dictionary with me and enlisted the services of everyone who happened to be about as an instructor.

And what fun I got out of it too. Everyone was most willing to teach me and thought it a huge joke. I generally managed to understand them fairly well, but if one used a word I couldn't understand I always fished out my dictionary and requested him to look it up for me.

I was surprised to find so little English spoken in Paris. We visited the Invalides, Napoleon's Tomb, during the day, and also saw an exhibition of war trophies there, which included bits of the Zeppelin recently brought down in France, and a few Boche' planes.

On Friday we took a trip to the Luxembourg Gardens and also saw the Place Vendome. Most of Saturday was spent in 'knocking round' Paris. There is no doubt that you could have a good time here but one could have the time of one's life if one could speak French fluently. Paris is undoubtedly the centre of good taste. The girls are pretty --- a plain face seems the exception. On Sunday we went to the Bois de Boulogne and had a ride through it on the pocket railway. It is a beautiful place but of course most of the trees were leafless at this time of the year. It must be very beautiful in the springtime.

At 11.40pm we said a fond farewell to the Gay City, caught the train again at the Gare du Nord, and journeyed back to the little old village from which we originally started (Fletre) .

We had a Canadian, a Belgian, a French architect, a French aviator, and a French railway official in the carriage with us on the way back and we were all in roars of laughter all the way to [Calais] . But I'll have to tell you about this some other time as it has taken me five days to screw up enough courage to write what I have written and I am about as full up of writing it as you must be of reading it.

(We do have some fun over here sometimes.)