

## LA BELLE FRANCE

Only an American college freshman would have had the gall to think that he understood La Belle France. And that's what I thought. A year in a French Swiss school and an assertive grandmother who had lived in Paris for 30 years led me to the notion that I was expert enough to lead my college room mate through the beauties of France in the summer of 1939. We took on the steamer a Ford sedan, since auto rentals in France were few and scarce, and landed at Cherbourg, where my attempt to speak French to a dock hand shamed me into an extravagant tip. This was a humbling experience that made me know I was a stranger in a foreign land. Buying gasoline in the countryside of prewar France called for dealing with a surly **madame**, her huge breasts stuffed into smelly bombazine. She condescended to take our money, but now no tip. Here we were in France, and yet would we ever find the "**femme fatale**" of legend?

We simply had to stop at Mont St. **Michel** and along with a horde of tourists savor Mere Poulard's omelets, as we climbed the Mount to its sacred buildings. At least once in a lifetime everyone should make the ascent to this creation, man's most majestic thrust soaring to heaven.

And then we were off cross country, through the beautiful and sculpted landscape toward **Lyon**. Neither of us felt courtly enough for the elegant chateaux of the Loire. The road wound through stone villages, a hundred or more, medieval relics of an agricultural era. I was asleep in the back seat when rudely awakened by a lurch and screech of brakes. In a small village my pal Fred had turned a sharp corner around a house and had run into an elderly woman, scuttling across the narrow road. Hit by our Ford, **Veuve Blanchard** as she proved to be, lay sprawled on the pavement, her skirt thrown high above her hips that were bare of underclothes. What little traffic there was stopped, while I hopped out and decorously pulled down her skirt. She seemed to have pain in a hip, as she mumbled to the curious villagers hurrying from their lunch in the nearby cafe. Shortly, a portly gendarme appeared and with much aplomb took charge. He invited us into the small police station, and over a beer we discussed all manner of things to the limit of our French. Apparently our papers for the car and passports satisfied him, and he blamed Veuve Blanchard for the accident. He told us "she's deaf, you know, and never looks before crossing the street." Two hours later we were on our way with a friendly "**au revoir**" from the gendarme.

At **Lyon**, famous for its cuisine, we found a one star hotel and restaurant. The local wine slipped down ever so easily before, during and after the meal, which had to have been a good one. We strolled to a nearby cinema. At intermission in the foyer my head began swimming dangerously, and pronto it and my wine met the floor. I don't remember much, but somehow Fred dragged me to the hotel after inconclusive conversation with the management. That taught me to

stay "en garde" with French wine.

Of course, Paris beckoned, where every tourist must make a bow. Once settled there, we tootled out to Versailles to ogle at its palatial splendor. Amazingly, we ran into two classmates and a charming young Frenchman named [Alain](#). He volunteered to guide us through the night life of Paris and practise his English at the same time.

"Would you like to see a "spectacle?" he asked, and naturally we agreed, though uncertain about it or what it would be. Alain took us to a comfortable looking house and up to a second floor room, where the four of us were seated in a row, having paid an admission. Soon there flounced in a young stud and a pubescent nymph, both stark naked. After a cursory bow they retreated to a nearby bed and began the gymnastics peculiar to their trade. With the climax the "spectacle" concluded, and our youthful guide shepherded us to some truly spectacular night club shows. Late that night [Alain](#) left us unwillingly, and we pledged to continue our fellowship by exchanging addresses. All this in August 1939.

After scanning the museums our parents would ask about, we left Paris to see what we could of the [Maginot](#) Line. It was built in the 1930's to protect La Belle France from Teutonic warriors, as happened in 1870 and 1914. The Line consisted of a huge series of interlocking underground forts with gun emplacements and antitank obstacles that stretched from [Belfort](#) in the south to [Charleville](#) on the Belgian border. It proved to be a colossal misadventure that doomed the French army to rigid defense. Nine months after our visit the Nazis simply drove around the Line through Belgium. We innocent Yanks gawked at kilometer after kilometer of concrete embankments and pillboxes. There really wasn't much to see other than military muscle. So we turned west into the champagne country and headed for Reims and its cathedral, where the kings of France traditionally have been crowned. Badly shelled in [WWI](#), this medieval marvel had been largely restored as a masterpiece of Gothic architecture. We crept by the stern figures guarding the portals, and once inside the cathedral we were swallowed by the hushed nave rising to the sky. The brash students were suddenly transformed into awed pilgrims in the midst of an immense shrine. How, we wondered, could any populace in a span of 200 years have created so many consummate cathedrals, each small city striving to outdo its neighbor? We pussy footed around the soaring columns, put coins in a box, and retreated to a restaurant to resuscitate our animal spirits. Tonight as we talk, the [Maginot](#) Line crumbles, while the cathedrals are still there, tall and sedate.

From Reims we drove northwest into [Picardy](#), where for centuries European armies have chosen to fight. In a remote village close by a handsome estate we settled in an outdoor cafe. Our ingenuous, relaxed manner stamped us as Americans and allowed us to access a brother and sister

pair at the next table. They seemed to be of the manor born and joined us willingly, as they had traveled in Britain and the U.S.

Conversation warmed quickly and they recounted for our benefit the duties and responsibilities of the leading family in a small community. Several times a year the village expected a big party at the chateau. Women in the family had to visit the sick and needy, and their father was always caught up in community projects. Their generation was sent off to proper **Ecoles superieurs** in Paris as preparation for public service. Even marriage would require parental consent. They thought that they didn't have the freedom that we seemed to have in the States and never a word about the danger of war and Germany. By the evening we were on a first name basis and fervently exchanging addresses.

A week later we left France by ferry to England and then onto Ireland where at **Galway** we caught a freighter to Boston. Two weeks later France declared war on Germany and within nine months was occupied by Nazi armies.

Nary a word from our friends in Paris and **Picardy**. Did they collaborate or resist? We'll never know.

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