

# ADVENTURE OF THE FRENCH UNDERGROUND\*

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EIGHTEEN miles southwest of London, and high upon the Surrey hills, is a remarkable building protected at the rear by a towering spur of rock from which the ground slopes away in a gentle paddock that has been cleared of every obstruction. It is still called "Willet's Folly" after its eccentric builder, Sir James Willet, who amassed a great fortune in the Far East. He retired in the gay and colourful nineties, and created a white elephant of a palace, dying in an asylum five years later. For a quarter of a century it was unoccupied, until the Government acquired the estate; in 1942 it was turned over to Commando Intelligence.

Here may be met an astonishing assortment of men who are picked tools of "C.I."; tools tested for hidden flaws, and used to the point of destruction and beyond. Such men cannot be measured by any yardstick; they come and they go; some stay on to be healed and made sane by contact with their fellows. I am the secretary of the unique club whose members call me "Nunky", and occasionally confide in me. We are known as "the Odd Numbers", which expresses us admirably.

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One afternoon, as I passed through the anteroom, I was more than delighted to come across "Bonnie Prince Charlie" seated in an alcove with half-a-dozen other men. Twenty years ago someone had given Charles Stewart that nickname, by reason of his good looks and ancestry. He always loathed the title, but it had stuck. His father had been my closest friend until the Battle of Jutland wrote *finis* to a fine career. His mother, who was French, died soon after Charles was born. He had been an only child and was now over forty years of age, tall, slim and very muscular, with a keen Highland face lit by a pair of humorous eyes. Those in position to judge considered Charles Stewart the pick of our senior Intelligence; indeed, it was rumoured, more than once, that the Foreign Office had changed a declared policy after one of his audacious *coups*.

He nodded and smiled as I sat down, and continued the story he was telling. I looked hard at him, because I was shocked at the change. His eyes were too far back in his fine head, and the lines about his mouth too deeply etched and drawn, his

\*This paper is fiction, but based upon fact, by a writer directly and intimately acquainted with the France he describes.  
Editor.

hands unnaturally tense, and indeed his whole body was coiled like an overwound spring. I determined to make it my business to get to the reason, for if ever a man was in hell it was he.

The opportunity came a week later. We sat at ease in my private room, a cheerful fire of pine logs burned in the deep stone recess; heavy curtains blacked out the night; and whisky and soda stood conveniently at our elbows.

Eight years is a gap to bridge, and we talked of many things before our conversation centred upon France. In 1920 I had been appointed as naval attaché to our Embassy, and Charles, unconscious of the wound he was reopening, asked pointedly what I knew of Paris, adding, "I have been there for the last month."

Few speak to me of Paris, where I had married Luce de Vendome and where our little daughter had been born. There also Luce had died and is buried. Yes, as I told him, I knew Paris and all her many facets.

"Did you come across the de Briesacs, or was that before your day?"

"If you mean the Comte de l'Isle; yes, I knew George and Camille. We were at their marriage. They had two little girls—let me see, Lucille and Valerie. Valerie was the same age as Edith, they used to play together in the Bois—Why?"

"Only that I was engaged to Lucille," and immediately he said this he was off at another tangent.

"Ever met de Gaulle?"

"Once or twice. Is this a guessing game?"

Charles shook his head and said, "Sorry, I was only clearing the air. De Gaulle was with me when we arrested Martinet, d'Artois and Pepin Valé. That was my job—and Lucille's."

He smoked awhile to give me time to digest this, and I had the impression of a diver hesitating upon the springboard.

"Lucille and I were in love with one another before the war. We were on the point of announcing the engagement when our world crumbled. That was the day the French Government ran away to Tours *en route* for Bordeaux, and the multitudes poured out of Paris upon the roads leading south. No one knew whether the city would be defended or not, and I was awakened early by Intelligence. They told me to be at Villacoublay, the military aerodrome, by three o'clock to take off for London.

"I drove my car out to St. Germain, having made arrangements with the R.A.F. for three *evacués*. You remember the Comtesse had died some years earlier. The Chateau was as well ordered as ever, and the Comte de l'Isle seemed surprised at

my suggestion; Valerie was ill and Lucille definitely declined to leave. I said something about running away to fight another day, but was up against the France that stays put, whatever the odds.

"Lucille came with me to Villacoublay; Le Bourget was under attack. I picked up a few things at my hotel, and we drove through the Bois to lunch at the Pré-Catelan. It was a miracle of a day, early June in Paris, a cloudless sky, brilliant sunshine, warm yet fresh. You know just what June can be, Nunky, fresh and fragrant; the slanting glints of sunshine through the green leaves, kiddies and their nurses playing by the still waters of the lake; a Punch and Judy show under some trees; Anteuil race course, Bagatelle.

"Our table was set on the shady terrace and we chose our wines and dishes as though war did not exist, the service was perfect. An Eden from which peace was to be driven.

"After lunch we walked by the lake and found a small opening among the trees. The earth comforted our tired bodies, and all about us was the scent of flowers."

He was silent for a few moments.

"Lucille lay in my arms, her warm lips to my cheek, the fine strands of her golden hair alive as the sunshine filtering through the green above us. I pleaded and I implored until a cool fragrant hand closed my lips.

"I have my orders, Charles, as you have yours, orders from Marianne. It shall not be said that all Frenchmen and Frenchwomen ran before the Boche. A few will stay, stay to fight."

"But, darling, it is so useless. From Britain you can hit back with armour on even terms—here you are helpless. Your father has never hidden his views. The Comte will . . ."

"Father will fight, Charles, and so will I. There are many ways of fighting."

"I promise you plenty of fighting, sweetheart, if that is all you want."

"Will you stay, Charles?"

"Orders, Lucille—you know I must go."

"And my orders are from France." Her blue eyes looked into mine and held them so that further words died stillborn, and all that I could do was to cling to my love while the fleeting moments ran away like the sands of an hourglass.

"At three o'clock we were at Villacoublay. I saw her clearly through the glass window as we taxied for the take-off. A wave of an arm, Gallie, debonaire and splendidly unafraid, and we

were airborne. I looked back and down upon a Paris that was to be changed beyond all recognition."

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He rose and took a turn about the room, looking with unseeing eyes at a few etchings hanging upon the walls. After perhaps two or three minutes, he resealed himself and when he spoke his voice was almost normal.

"I worked for de Gaulle for three years, mostly in Indo-China, Iraq and Syria. A great man, Nunky. Politically *persona non grata*, but we knew better. Difficult in many ways and with an *idée fixe*; a beggar at a rich man's table who refuses to beg, yet cannot be ignored or used as a pawn; intellectual, incorruptible, austere, yet very human in a stiff stilted way. Yes, most trying to others—and to the Nazi."

Charles laughed almost naturally: "Smile if you like at enthusiasms from me, but I have seen what I have seen. He was an unyielding as Lincoln, and as certain to make bitter enemies—and devoted friends."

Charles went on to speak of France, betrayed, starved, plundered and insulted; of her strength and her weakness; of Petain and the collaborationists; of Darlan, Laval, Diaz and their misuse of great opportunities. He sketched the unhappy bourgeoisie, sullen, bewildered, forced to abnormal tasks and robbed of all comforts and security. He dwelt on peasant France, its sons tilling the soil of Germany, its wives worn by intolerable labour, its children rickety, undernourished and dying at the plough, of the buried stockings of hard won sous dug up and squandered by the Boche.

The Nazis, feeding the good dogs and beating hell out of the others, levying tribute beyond all reason! The Blond Beast, self-justified by might and answerable only to pagan gods!

He described the Underground of France, that inflexible, implacable, unconquerable spirit of Jeanne d'Arc infiltrating and impregnating every class and stratum, burning with a flame of the purest patriotism and with hands eager to push the tumbrils to the guillotine.

*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité et le Mort.* As he paused, I had time to catch up with his fertile brain.

The Comte de l'Isle was dead—shot soon after Dunkirk for harbouring British soldiers. Valerie also had died two years earlier of consumption due to semi-starvation, but Lucille

survived—she who had stayed to fight. She was that most terrible and loneliest of all created mortals, *l'agent double*, and the trusted of de Gaulle. God knows what her life must have been, a well fed traitor high in the hated ranks of the collaborationists and secretary to Martinet, chief administrator in Paris. Martinet, if you remember, was the fellow behind the Stavisky affair; bold, cunning and now about forty-five years of age, intelligent and unscrupulous. Lucille actually controlled his *bureau particulier* and directed d'Artois and Pepin Valé at Vichy. Charles went on to emphasise the importance of the three men who, as he explained, enforced the decrees of Philippe Petain as interpreted by Laval. Together they were the kingpin of Nazi administration in France, adding that extra turn of the rack when necessary. They represented triumphant collaboration! and shared spoils that a Caesar might envy. Hitler's New Order in Europe, whose seed was to inherit the earth!

"De Gaulle had called me back from Syria because something had to be done—something very drastic. A definite end had to be made to successful collaboration. A word from de Gaulle and the three would have died, violently, but assassination is not the way of civilized democracy; also a thousand innocent men would have died—as hostages. Violence was ruled out, rough justice the same. It had to be something inescapable, a definite penalty to be paid as surely as night follows day, not death as death, but a sentence of death pronounced by competent judges after open trial in a civil court. Execution, not murder. Do you see what I am driving at, Nunky?"

I saw clearly what he was driving at. Men such as those he had named have to be taught anew the Ten Commandments. Other men would risk assassination if the spoils were large enough and the punishment uncertain. Justice, not vengeance, was the answer. I sat mulling over the difficulty.

Charles's voice hardened to a deadly, flat calm and I found myself listening to another story—a very personal one.

"Martinet wanted Lucille. Possibly he was attracted by the name she bore, or maybe he actually fell in love with the one clean thing in his murky life. He was married to a shrew of a woman, wealthy from the scandals of the last war. He tried for a divorce, but the Gestapo put their foot down. Madame was too valuable a tool to offend, although Martinet was more important to Germany. Had it come to a show-down, they would probably have bumped off the lady. However, a typical solution was arrived at. Lucille was registered as the official mistress of

Martinet, and Madame continued to be Madame Martinet. Incidentally, it was a political masterstroke that hit deeply into the pride of the real France, for imagine, if you can, a de Briesac the mistress of a Martinet."

As he spread these catastrophic explosives lightly about my feet, I stole a quick look across the fireplace. His voice was entirely impersonal—it had to be. He might have been recounting some amusing scandal of old Peking.

"D'Artois and Valé were to visit the Chateau de Briesac at St. Germain. They came to arrange another betrayal—a hundred thousand men for slave labour in German factories, so many bushels of wheat, cows, sheep, pigs and livestock and so on.

"I was a month in Paris gathering our forces and a week at St. Germain."

He nodded as though in answer to a question I had not dared to ask. "Yes! I saw Lucille. She resembled a spirit rather than a human being. I was shocked at the change I found. She was a wraith of her former self—a flame within the shell of a Fleur de Lis.

"We could not exchange a private word—dared not. The place was full of spies. I had taken over from old Emil and was Charles, the *major domo*. Lucille was Mademoiselle de Briesac, the official mistress of Martinet. For that week death was very near to Martinet."

He spoke of his mission. "One evening a large furniture remover's van arrived and was stored in the garage. It had come to collect a Louis Sixteenth suite from Lucille's boudoir for repair. Inside were some sixteen men and women to replace the Chateau servants, and four special agents trained by me.

"Martinet had worked hard the previous night with d'Artois and Valé, and I awoke him at dawn out of a heavy sleep. I told him that he was wanted in Paris, and ran his bath and set out his clothes. I brought in a *petit dejeuner* of real coffee and croissants. When he had lit an Egyptian cigarette and sat back at ease, I told him who I was and that he was under arrest."

Charles grinned at the memory, and the old look I remembered so well came into his eyes.

"He thought I was drunk or insane, and stalked angrily to the silk bellpull. No one responding, he strode to his desk. I told him again that I was a British agent, whereupon he whipped out a Luger from a drawer and order me to '*haut les mains*'. I obeyed and lit a cigarette. He pulled the trigger and the clicks

that resulted were probably the first intimation that something was seriously wrong with his world, because he took a run at me with a bronze desk lamp. I tripped him up and after the third attempt he sat dazed on the floor regarding me with smouldering eyes. I could see his quick brain orienting itself and calculating the odds. A look of relief turned to bewilderment and finally to stark fear.

"I sidestepped and saw Lucille standing very stiff in the doorway. She wore a long white garment of classic design that spread about her feet.

"Martinet said, in a voice that was beginning to crack, 'What . . . what are they doing to me?'

"Lucille replied, 'You are going to de Gaulle.'

"It was enough. I blew on a whistle and my four men entered and took him. He was gagged and gone in a matter of seconds."

Charles looked into the white ashes of the fire, and what he saw I shall never know. He seemed quite unconscious of my existence. His voice was very low, speaking sacred thoughts aloud.

"She lay in my arms as she had aeons ago. We had passed through the shadow of the Valley of Death, and had won to sunshine and open spaces. All the splendour of life lay before us, neither would ever be alone again. She was mine to serve and worship and cherish.

"Once only she spoke and said, 'Marriages are made in Heaven, Charles.' Then she closed her eyes as though blessed sleep had come at last. I laid her gently upon a *chaise longue* and kissed her cold lips. I felt a hand caress my cheek—then I went to seek de Gaulle."

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In the silence that followed I rose to replenish the glasses, moving freely but unseen within his vision. The hiss of the soda syphon seemed to bring him back to the present.

"You remember the Chateau de Briesac, I mean the old Chateau on the Loire about fifteen miles from Blois?"

"It used to be a museum."

He nodded. "It is now. We held the trial in the Great Hall. Six months it had taken to plan, six months of abnormal risk and unbelievable ingenuity. Two hundred picked Commandos took over. It is in a lonely spot well off the beaten track.

They replaced everyone they met, peasants, small townfolk agents and Nazis, and sent them up to the Chateau.

"At one end of the Great Hall was a semi-circular platform with a high desk front and five massive chairs for the judges. There was a witness stand and a dock. Above the judges' seats were blazed the words, '*Liberte, Egalité, Fraternité.*' Half a company of the Garde Republique stood magnificent in their old uniforms. There were agents and ushers; it was, to the minutest detail, a replica of the main criminal court of the Palais de Justice of the cité de Paris.

"In a chair to the right of the judges sat a tall youngish man in the uniform of a general of France. There was space for council, some of whom had come back from America. A third of the press box was packed with prominent editors of collaborationist journals, watched over by many emigré associates.

"In the first dozen rows of the public seats sat men and women from all over France. These were prominent collaborationists or doubtful patriots brought to see for themselves that the Third Republic had not been superseded by 'We, Philippe Petain.' Behind them, in closed ranks, were the pick of the Underground, masked for safety and sitting in tense, triumphant comradeship.

"We rose with de Gaulle as the judges entered with dignity, their scarlet robes and white ermine caps lending colour and majesty. Two I recognised as having escaped from Nazi prisons—the others as exiles in Britain.

"I surrendered Martinet, d'Artois and Valé to the civil authorities." Charles laughed quietly at the memory. "God knows what they expected—a torture chamber possibly—certainly not a chamber of Justice. They looked about them in bewilderment, it is probable they believed themselves to be in Paris. When he saw the calm figure in the lone chair, Valé fainted. After the charges were read the trial began.

"It lasted for seven hours. Witness followed witness, including de Gaulle, examination and cross examination. Each of the accused had counsel and solicitor. The judges made no effort to act as examiners in accordance with customary French procedure; rather they strove to bring out evidence in favour of the accused, and some of us grew impatient at the delay.

"The body of the Court filled with fresh arrivals. I counted half a dozen prominent members of the Nazi party sitting aloof and sullen in a place reserved for them; bewildered men who,



after that day, might better understand what the Underground fought and died to preserve.

"At five o'clock the judges retired to return in ten minutes. No one could be in any doubt of the guilt of the accused, the evidence had been too overwhelming. Curiously enough the three prisoners never questioned the right of the Court to try them. They listened now to the calm, cold words that pronounced the penalty for treason prescribed by the laws of France."

"And then?" I asked as he hesitated.

"Oh yes, well, an hour later the Great Hall was a museum again, windows uncovered, bare floors and walls, notice boards in French and German. A bonfire destroyed the concrete evidence. Everyone who was anyone was spirited away by the Underground. The R.A.F. and the U.S. Air Force put up a shattering attack over Northern France. Actually we got away seven passenger planes, and their waiting escort took them safely across the channel. De Gaulle said *au revoir* to his Underground, having organized it for the invasion. All in all, it was a fine show.

"Martinet? A half company of poilus saw to him. They tell me all three died bravely. They might have been facing a Nazi firing squad for France—it was fantastic. Their passing was public, extremely so. I do not doubt that it registered vividly. It had certainly taken all the pleasure and profit out of collaboration with Adolf.

"I did not see the execution, because I was halfway to Paris dodging our own bombers most of the way. I had a Nazi staff car and my four faithful men. I was feeling very happy and drove like fury. It was going to be easy sailing from now on—we should be in London by dawn. I crashed through Versailles and took the long hill up to St. Germain like a racing greyhound.

"It was my night to howl, and nothing living could have stopped me—nothing. I could have taken Hitler single handed. When I halted the Mercedes under the *porte cochere*, my four 'Nazi' aides nearly went through the windscreen. I knew that the Chateau would be in the hands of the Gestapo and had allowed for that. I had come to 'arrest' Lucille and was covered with Swastikas and loaded down with credentials. I had even a warrant signed in the name of von Backmann himself. Yes, Nunky, nothing was left to chance. We could have shot our way with her clear through a regiment. Everything had been perfectly timed and superbly arranged—by mice and men."

He emptied his glass and set it carefully back on the side

table. When he spoke again, his words seemed like the faint rustle of the wind in tall grasses.

"Lucille was dead. She had shot herself within five minutes of our parting. Marriages are made in Heaven, you remember."

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Much can happen in three months. Yesterday de Gaulle paid us a visit, coming as an ordinary member of our mess. Later he sought me out and said very gently, "I have a message for you, Monsieur l'Amiral, and you will have to pardon my pronouncement. It is from your friend and mine.

" 'Tell Nunky,'—he stumbled over the word—"Tell Nunky that I go to my marriage.' "

A pause—then in French, "Charles Stewart was shot as a spy by Rommel two days ago but not before he had placed in my hands information of such importance that it may change the plans of the Invasion."

For a time we stood together in silence looking out of the open window and on to the wide stretch of sloping paddock where cows and sheep grazed at peace. General de Gaulle placed an arm across my shoulders, bestowing upon me the Accolade—for Bonnie Prince Charlie.

Afterwards I stood where he had left me and watched his tall stiff figure cross the terrace to continue its purposeful way down the long road at whose end lies a free world.