

Chateau Air-Bel, La Pomme, Marseille, Sunday, December 8, 1940 - evening

Dear Puss,

Sinaia

I had a most extraordinary experience last week. As you may have read in the papers, Marshal Pétain visited Marseille on Tuesday and Toulon. ~~at Wednesday~~ They say he was received with great enthusiasm in both places. Unfortunately, I can't testify to that, as I was far from the scene of the enthusiasm throughout the ceremonies: I was in protective custody aboard the S. S. Sinaia - the ~~XXXX~~ boat I traveled to Greece on in 1928 or '29.

It all happened very suddenly and unexpectedly. So suddenly and unexpectedly that I still find it difficult to believe that it happened at all. I was working at the house last Monday morning. My secretary had come out from town with some letters for me to sign, and we were dictating when the police, or rather the detectives, arrived. They came in two cars (they are almost the only people who have cars these days), one an ordinary sedan and the other a regular black maria. They rushed into the house, five of them, and asked nervously if it weren't true that someone had come up the drive the night before with a large suitcase. When told that it was true, they ordered everyone in the house to come into the dining room, and then they searched the chambers one by one.

The result of this "perquisition," as the French call it, was meager: two typewriters, a service revolver belonging to a French soldier not yet mobilized, and so having a perfect right to possess it, numerous letters and reports, including absolutely everything of mine, and a surrealist drawing <sup>(not mine)</sup> on which some fool had written a disrespectful comment on the Marshal.

All of this the detectives seized and still have - all of it including every single one of the letters you have written me since I left New York, all mother's letters, all my letters of recommendation, a letter from Ursula which I have never answered, and innumerable other things of no greater interest to them than these. They also have copies of our reports on the camps - which were prepared for the French government and have long since been reposing in the Department of the Interior and the Red Cross at Vichy, and some abstract and surrealist drawings which were given me by clients of the office. I can't for the life of me imagine what they find to interest them in all these personal papers, or in the official ones either, for that matter, but the ways of the police are inscrutable at times.

After a highly cursory examination of what they had found, the five detectives announced - or rather their "chief" announced - that we were all to be carried off to the police station, all, that is, except the mothers of young children and the servants. While they were completing their preparations to take us, two other persons who live in the house happened to arrive for lunch. They were taken too. I was told that there was absolutely nothing against me - no suspicion of any sort - and that I was wanted merely as a witness and would be released within an hour. Thus we were all bundled into the black maria and taken to the police station.

From the moment of our arrival at the police station until the present we have never seen anyone who professed to have the slightest authority to take a decision regarding us. Decisions were taken, but always by unseen persons. They were carried out by men who apologized



for what they were doing but denied having any right to do otherwise. It was always a question of having to see the boss; and the boss was never available.

What happened was this. We were held all day at the police station. We repeatedly asked to be allowed to communicate with our consuls and our lawyers. We were always politely refused, on the ground that only the boss could decide, and he was out. At eleven o'clock at night, still without having had any food or drinking water all day long except what a newspaper vender bought for us, at our own expense, and without having been given any sort of hearing, or having any sort of charge brought against us, we were lead downstairs to a still larger black maria, and in that we were taken to the Sinaia. We slept on the Sinaia for three nights - slept on burlap bags filled with straw, and with only ~~two~~ very thin blankets for covering. We were fed bread and weak coffee for breakfast, frozen beef and beans, bread and wine for lunch, and soup, frozen beef and beans or lentils, bread and wine for dinner. On Tuesday, through the kindness of the captain of the boat, the Americans among us were able to slip a visiting card to the consul. He came to the boat and was refused permission to board it. He returned to the ~~village~~ city and sent two subordinates, who finally managed to get on. But still we were held. It was not until Thursday, about noon, that we were released. And then without any more explanation than had been vouchsafed to us when we were taken.

To me, accustomed to principles of Anglo-Saxon and Roman law, this was one of the most surprising and shocking experiences of my life. To be searched without a search warrant, arrested without a warrant of arrest, held incommunicado, and then released without ever having a charge brought against you - surely this is enough to make ~~x~~ you wonder where you are. I understand that that sort of thing is common in Russia, but this is the first time I have heard of it in France.

Now for the explanation, still hypothetical in part, but probably more or less correct. Rumors are going around the town that nearly 20,000 persons were arrested without warrant and held as we were. Among them, of course, were the known communists and other presumably dangerous radicals. But in the rush a very great many mistakes were made. Unfortunately, so far no one has heard of any apologies being offered. We met on the Sinaia some French businessmen who had come up from Nice to see the parade and were arrested and carried off within an hour of their arrival. We talked with two young Syrians who walked out of a restaurant in Marseille to find a police wagon parked in the street. The detective standing beside the wagon said to them, "Il reste deux places. Montez !" And without any further ceremony they were taken to the boat and interned. The correspondent of the Basler Neuste Nachrichten was dining with his girl friend - French. A detective came in and asked for their papers. His were in order, but she had no carte d'identité. So she had to go to the police station, and he, chivalrous, insisted on going with her. There she was released and he was arrested. And so on and so on.

As for the people who live here, there seems to be still more to tell. We now know (as we did not before all this happened) that eight or nine years ago, when the Prince of Wales, or some other celebrity, visited Marseille, there was a bombing here. The railway from Marseille to Nice runs through the property at a distance of perhaps 500 meters from the house. Apparently in the bombing three wagons were overturned, and one rolled into the meadow. No one was



killed, according to the owner, but there was of course great excitement. Apparently the police never learned who placed the bomb.

Unfortunately for us, the Marshal's route from Marseille to Toulon took him over that same line. And then Mrs Breton's sister arrived at the house last Sunday night with a suitcase. She came after dark, and she had a porter carry the suitcase for her. We guess that the porter must have made a few additional francs by informing, for the police certainly knew about the mysterious suitcase arriving after dark when they came to take us away the next morning.

Getting that tip, we suppose that they looked up the records of the house and of the people in it. In the dossier on the house, of course, they must have found a report of the bombing. What more obvious than that the suitcase ~~is~~ should contain more bombs, intended for an attack on the life of the Marshal? Who lives in the house, and how long have they been there? Why, a group of French and Americans, none of whom has been there longer than six weeks or so. Obviously, they took the house deliberately to plot against the Marshal's life. Who are they? Why, one of them is something called a sur-realist! What's that? Oh, a kind of anarchist, isn't it? Yes, an anarchist! What do you know about him? Why, it seems that, twenty years ago, he interrupted a number of plays in Paris by talking back to the actors from his seat in the audience; and that he broke up at least one banquet by making loud remarks about the speakers. (I didn't know any of this when I moved in here; but I learned it after our captivity.) Conclusion, a band of dangerous anarchists who are going to try to break up the parade if not to bomb the marshal's train.

The only trouble with this beautiful theory is that it isn't true. But the detectives didn't stop to find out whether it was true or not. They just arrested everybody, held us all without charges, and then released us after the Marshal had left. Rather illogical, though, for if we were really plotting against his life, they ought to have charged us and held us.

Of course, they are still holding the typewriters and all the papers. Perhaps they are trying to find some evidence to justify the action they took without evidence or proof. If they are, they will have to look a very long time indeed: a more innocent collection of documents could hardly be imagined than those found at Air-Bel.

Needless to say, I am insisting upon a formal diplomatic protest, an investigation, and an apology from the French government. I do not intend to suffer the moral prejudice involved in being arrested, and the only way to eliminate it is to have an apology, in writing. I am determined to get such an apology if I have to stay here the rest of my life fighting for it. It is now utterly impossible to consider leaving until the apology has been made. Too bad, but that's the way I feel about it: fighting mad. Never in any fight with an arbitrary landlord have I been madder.

But there are other reasons why I feel I can't leave immediately. My successor hasn't arrived. He apparently went to Casa, for some reason, and is still there. And without me the office collapses in almost no time at all. Furthermore, I still haven't got my Spanish or my French visas. In fact, I haven't even received my carte d'identité yet; and when I get that I have to make application for my aller et retour visa - can't before. Meanwhile, the Spanish, in their



delightfully Spanish way, are still mulling over my request for permission to visit their country. Mr Weddel, our Ambassador in Madrid, has presented my demand but so far as I know he has not yet had any answer. Really, travel in Europe is difficult these days!

Incidentally, to revert for a moment to last week's experiences, one of the things which annoys me most is the thought that I should have been locked up to protect the Marshal. Actually I have the highest regard for the Marshal. From everything I know and hear about him, he is a man of honor who is pursuing the best possible policy for France in the circumstances of the moment. Those who criticize him seem to me to forget that he is not a free agent - what else would they have him do, anyway? Furthermore, it is amusing to recall how warmly I was received in his Cabinet only two weeks ago! Du Moulin de la Barthètte, the Chef du Cabinet Civil, received me very warmly indeed, as did also Mr Sébilleau, Chef Adjoint, and Mr Chaussard, attaché. And of course I was in and out of the Hotel du Parc, where the Marshal lives and works, plusieurs fois. In the circumstances, it was rather drole to lock me up on the occasion of his visit to Marseille! But Marseille has a very bad reputation, as you know. This latest event is unlikely to improve it.

About my job at FPA, naturally the work I am doing here is ten times more interesting, and, I can't help feeling, ten times more important and at least five times more instructive. I have never been very proud of my own particular role at ~~in~~ the FPA and, as you know, certain lady members of the staff have gone out of their way to make me feel that my role was far less important than theirs. On the other hand, I have undoubtedly gained enormously by working there: all the educated Americans here seem to know who I am - at least everybody at the Consulate, and all the Quakers, know my books. If I should chuck the FPA job and continue this work, what would I have when this work is over? I don't want to become a lecturer before women's clubs, like Henry Wolfe; yet it might be very difficult for me to find anything else. Therefore, much as I hate to do so, I'm afraid I'll have to accept Stone's ultimatum and return. Tell him I'll leave as soon as (a) I've received the apology of the French government for what happened to me and (b) my successor has arrived and has learned the ropes and (c) I've received my French and Spanish visas.

Incidentally, I'm gradually learning to speak French here; and of course I'm learning far more here about the inner workings of things than I ever would at FPA. If you think I ought to stay, let me know. If only you could join me, I would like a shot. Only it's terribly lonely without you, especially when things go wrong, or I have a little time to myself - as on the Sinai.

Another advantage of this job is the widening of the acquaintance: I am gradually meeting all the famous people in Europe, and corresponding with a good many of them regularly: Gide, for instance, and Roger Martin du Gard, and Matisse.

What do you advise, Pussy Cat?

Much, much love,

Vain