

It was a fine sunny morning when Arthur and I landed in Tilbury. The voyage had taken six weeks, plus a day or so.

It is odd, but for the life of me I can't remember what happened to Arthur. I got digs in Tottenham Court Road. It wasn't long before I discovered the parochial ways of England. My landlady instructed her son, who was my age, to take me around London on the top of a bus. We alighted at Westminster Bridge. After wandering around the precincts of Westminster on that fine Sunday afternoon, I suggested that we walk over the Bridge to the south side. My guide was surprised and wanted to know why. I suggested we walk across and back to the north side over the next bridge down. He thought the idea extraordinary. When we did this and <sup>reached</sup> the Waterloo Bridge, he confessed it was the first time he had been to the south side of the Thames. And to think he was born in London!

We did not find London strange, perhaps because we were white Anglo-Saxon Australians. Although this sneering term had not been invented in those days. Australia was 90% British stock and not the multi-racial society it is today.

I left Tottenham <sup>Court</sup> Road and went to Paris armed with a letter of introduction to an American painter, whose name I have completely forgotten. The journey from Southampton took all night and I can still recall the thrill of a foreign country with its very different sights and smells.

We had to board a ridiculous little tram for the trip to the station. I was crushed against the driver whose belly button must have been flattened against his spine. His beefy face projected from the front of the tram and his moustache bristled with indignation. It was quite a ride from the docks at Le Havre to the station. At length we arrived at Gare St. Lazarre, where a taxi took me to the address of the American painter.

Paris <sup>the smell of</sup> reeked of coffee and wine. I am sure that taxi driver took me by the most circuitous route. The American painter and his wife were flab<sup>er</sup>basted at my sudden and unexpected arrival. One moment I didn't exist and the next I was on their hands without a word of French to bless myself with. Also they were packing up for an extended stay in the South of France.

They were kindness itself, and gave me breakfast took me around to find cheap digs in the Boulevard d'Orleans which ran to the wall from the Lion de Bedford at the top end of the Raspail.

I had my own little room on the top floor. There were no lifts but the room contained a comfortable bed, plenty of cupboard space, a sink and a gas jet should I want to heat anything up. French doors opened onto a tiny balcony, marvellous!, and all for 160 francs a month. The English pound was par at 45 francs, but averaged 100 on the Stock Exchange, so I was very well off.

I was much too scared to board public transport, so walked everywhere and for miles. Cafes were easy, all one had to say was "Cafe ou lait, s'il vous plait", and behold it was there instanter. Restaurants were grim. After a prolonged scrutiny, a finger would disclose to the waitress something which you hoped would be familiar.

The schools were still on the long summer recess. There was plenty of time to explore and die of loneliness. The summer was very hot. The light was glary and reminiscent of home.

At long last the school opened and I presented myself to the Academie Julien in the Rue du Dragon, a narrow cobbled street running off the Boulevard St. Germaine.

The school was entered by a little passage leading to a small courtyard, then through a door which left you blinking a bit in the gloom. There were cries of "la porte, la porte!" It seemed that I had left the door open. The school was enormous and high and lined with the familiar charcoal choked hessian. Light was admitted by a saw toothed roof and was controlled by blinds. At one was a sculpture and painting class separated by a waist high wooden rail.

On the first Monday of any given term a student was elected by popular vote. His authority was then absolute. He chose the models and paid them, after collecting two francs from each of us. The model posed for one week and was paid in this fashion on Wednesday and Saturday.

Because of the lack of space, students were fitted in by a curious arrangement. Behind the model was a drape so we had a 180 degree range. The first row of students squatted on very low stools and worked on sawn down easles. The next row on higher stools and easles, and so to the fifth and back row where we stood. In our democratic society we all had our turn. Every fifth Monday, the back rowites would be in front staring up at the model.

During cold weather we were warmed by a huge coal burning brazier, behind this was a bigger semi-circle of iron which could be swung this way or that to direct the heat. On top of the brazier we roasted chestnuts.

For a week or so we would work most diligently, then suddenly for a day the Devil would get into us all. Sometimes the sculpture class would ignore us and concentrate on their model, and at other times join in.

We started work, Dear Students of Today, at 8.30 a.m. and worked till 5 p.m. We had an hour for lunch. The model sat from Monday morn till Saturday noon. On Wednesday and Saturday we would be instructed by a visiting professor. I was told that one was the son of Jean Paul Laurens. If you couldn't speak French it was too bad.

The only foreigners in the school <sup>beside myself</sup> were an American and two Japanese. One spoke French and the other neither English or French. I was sorry for him. He really lived in a closed world. My American friend was middle aged and came from Arizona. He told me he had been born in Indian territory. His name was Cabot Xerza. Cabot had been fascinated by the colours of the Arizona desert and felt that he must paint them. "Where does one

learn painting?" he asked himself. Answer - "Paris", or so he had heard. He came to Paris and made friends with me. To him an Australian was really an exotic. He told me of his life in Arizona, of his prospecting in the desert with a few burros, back of nowhere. The colour of the desert had entered his soul. Needless to say he was a bachelor. In the weekend we explored Paris and the galleries. Cabot had discovered the Cafe Procope in Le Rue de la Ancienne Commedienne. It was a good place to eat. It was well down the St. Germaine and off to the left towards the river.

We were able to purchase meals for three months in advance. This worked out at four francs a meal. An elastic band contained the coupons. In this way we were regarded as regulars and regaled with any gossip. In a way you became part of their world. The waitresses knew all about you, of course. Every meal had its bottle of beer or wine as desired. Cabot would not partake because the U.S.A. was prohibitionist at the time and decided he would abide by the rules of his country. I still remember with pleasure strolling down the St. Germaine on those sunny days replete with a good lunch, washed down with a bottle of beer, my own and Cabot's as well.

The owner of the Academie Julien, once so famous, was a M. Dupres. He had inherited the school from his aunt, Madame Julien. He would visit from time to time and tell us about the boar hunting somewhere or other.

Around the school walls were photographs of ex-students, almost all with a ribbon of black. I asked if they were all dead, they looked so young. "La Guerre", was the answer.

My fellow students advised me to learn five French words a day. I would soon learn to string them together. So you see I never learnt the language properly. I got by all right, just fine! At another time with different people, my French caused a lot of amusement. Apparently I was speaking an argot not used in polite society.

The only woman allowed in the school, apart from models, was Madame Francois the cleaner. Also for a small fee she would do our



mending for us. A laundry opposite washed shirts at a couple of francs a pop. A French student put my shirts in with his, otherwise my laundry would have doubled up on me. Opposite the school was a small cafe where we would have coffee mid-morning and afternoon.

At Ecole Julien, I swear the stage was reached when I could paint the nude while blindfolded. The school had no direction whatever. Arthur Murch appeared unexpectedly and signed up for a term. He did not like the school and returned to London after a few weeks, earnestly advising me to do the same. I had established loyalties and did not take his advice.

I met an Australian etcher called Eric Scott. He had a studio not far from where I lived. Eric was a first rate craftsman and made a lucrative living from American tourists. He etched on copper, scenes of Paris, famous places such as Notre Dame, Le Pont Neuf and so on. He drew with an architectural exactness. He was a purist and considered etching to be the art of the bitten line. He abhorred tonal painting in etching. Eric was an enthusiast and offered to teach me, and in return I helped him over long hours of printing.

He despised the modern movement and cited the case of a woman he knew who did her first painting. You've guessed it. Of course, her effort was hung. I went to an exhibition of the conservative establishment and couldn't believe my eyes. Some of the exhibits were vulgar beyond belief. One showed a fellow on a motorbike racing across the canvas with a female nude riding pillion. I could only seek guidance in the Louvre.

They were hard working days in Paris, but without direction or advice. Cabot and I went to evening classes following upon our days at Julien's. We attended two schools, Collarossies and the Ecole do la Grand Chaumiere both in Montparnasse. We bought a terms supply of tickets and surrendered one each time we entered the school. In fact, one school had tin discs on a stick. Once we got rid of these, we went to the other little book of tickets. No instruction was given, only models were provided. The schools opened at 2 p.m.



and closed at 10 p.m. They started one hour poses, then half hour followed by ten minutes and five minute poses. The process was continuous. One model would do a two hour stint to be followed by another. When we arrived after dinner the quickies would be on. Cabot and I would stroll up to the Montparnasse from the cafe Procope where Verlaine used to cat, and now us. We drew till 10 p.m., then to La Rotonde for coffee.

Sometimes a group of us would go to a dance hall on the Boulmiche and dance till midnight. Often I would feel a tap on my shoulder, a West Indian negro, grinning broadly would sweep my French partner away. Home to bed at last and up at seven. I would walk down the Avenue d'Orleans, then down the Raspail to La Rotonde where I was well known. The friendly greeting "Bonjour Monsieur, cafe au lait et croissant?" After breakfast the walk to the bottom of the Raspail, left into the Boulevard St. Germain left again into the Rue du Dragon and another day. From my digs to the Ecole Julien must have been a good two miles.

Sometimes on a Saturday or a Sunday evening Cabot and I would drop into the cafe "Les deux Maggots on the St. Germaine. Occasionally we would hear a group discussing painting. It was difficult to listen in without being obvious eavesdroppers.

Years later I learnt that Picasso and his friends often had their coffee there at the time. Whether we ever saw Picasso is something I will never know.

One evening I was alone in the Cafe Procope, Cabot had gone to London, when I noticed two very fair girls at the other end of the restaurant trying to attract my attention. They were laughing and beckoning me to their table. They spoke to the waitress and seemed disappointed. The waitress told me they were Danish and had thought I was a fellow countryman. They were nonplussed to discover I was an Australian.

I came to know the maze of little streets between La Cite and the St. Germaine backwards, in fact all the left bank. Once





Cabot and I descending from Montmartre, coming to the right bank we entered a little square and after examining a piece of sculpture in the centre fountain, we realised we were lost. Four streets entered the square, they were equidistant and identical in appearance. We had not noticed the one we had come down. The sky was low and leaden grey, the time mid-afternoon on a Sunday and not a sign of life anywhere. All we could do was toss a coin. Instead of finding the Seine near the Isle de la Cite we found ourselves somewhere near the top end of the Rue du Rivoli, a mighty long way from where we wanted to be.

I remember taking Cabot to the Paris Catacombes. These tunnels seemed to run for miles and contained human skeletons by the thousands. They were on the side walls of the tunnels and ghoulishly arranged in decorative patterns. The catacombs are only a oncer; we were glad to reach daylight again.

Weekday traffic in Paris was unbelievable. Honking horns started at the crack of dawn and continued until midnight. Collisions were daily entertainment. No one was ever hurt, only their feelings. Pedestrians who wanted to cross the street, particularly horror stretches like the Place Vendome, would wait until a dozen or more collected, then grab hands and walk across in convoy. Once I tried to nip across a narrow street and had my trousers ripped.

I became very conscious that my parents must be making sacrifices, and tried to live as economically as possible. First I limited cigarettes to five a day, and then to one. I bought a cheap spirit burner and started to cook my evening meal. I got to know the local butcher. Some weeks went by before I realised the significance of the horse's head in brass above the door. After that I gave away home cooking.

The weather was becoming fearfully cold, and for the first time in my life I purchased leather gloves. Frequently the papers reported the death of some elderly person whose body was found under one or other of the bridges.



Shortly before Cabot left we were joined by an Englishman, a student called Piersoll. I believe he was some sort of cousin of Orpen. Piersoll's trousers were unbelievably baggy. There came a day when he apologised for asking, but he just had to know how I kept such a knife crease in mine. The answer was simple, I put mine under the mattress every night.

The only American I actually knew in Paris was Cabot. Lord knows there were plenty there. A lot tried to look Bohemian and had patches on their expensive elbows and knees. They did not look poor, simply decorative. I saw one light a cigarette with a five franc note. A gesture on the pavement of a crowded cafe. Goodness knows where they studied.



## CHAPTER 5

Christmas was approaching and my relatives in the north of England wanted me to <sup>enjoy</sup> it with them. The school closed down for the Christmas break, so I found myself on the night train for Dieppe. Sitting opposite me was a young bloke who eyed me surreptitiously for some time, then decided I was not a local. He was an English bank clerk going home for Christmas, and deadly scared of a possible bad crossing. I did my best to reassure him.

"Goodness me, it's nothing, now take my six weeks journey from my home!" I <sup>described</sup> the huge seas in the Great Australian Bight, the monsoons sweeping down from India, not to mention the Bay of Biscay. . . . . We reached

Dieppe a bit after midnight. Feeling peckish and finding a place open we purchased a ham roll each. It was a huge affair. I could hardly munch my way through it, <sup>and even wished I hadn't.</sup>

We went to a long jetty where the cross channel packet lay. The tide was flat out, some fishing vessels were alongside below jetty level, one further out seemed bigger. There was no sign of a ship. I asked someone when the cross channel steamer would arrive.

"Arrive boy, there it is!" My informant pointed downwards. I had always ascended a gangway, this time I descended one to board a ship.

The packet cleared the harbour and rolled around in a white capped sea. My friend the bank clerk hurriedly went below. I never saw him again for which I am grateful. I spent the night in my own spuke wedged underneath a lifeboat.

We reached Folkestone before breakfast. I made my way to the customs feeling very poorly. "What's in that box, son?" asked the customs bloke. "It's a paint box, Sir, I am an art student." "And what's in your overcoat pocket?" "Nothing Sir," "Oh", he put his hand in the pocket and pulled out a bottle of cognac, which I had completely forgotten was there. His beady eyes aroused resentment.



I told him I was going to Newcastle-on-Tyne for Christmas and that it was for my Granny. It was the plain truth. He thrust it into my overcoat pocket again, and said, "Off you go!"



