AVIS FAVORABLE

by Max Hermann

Getting married in Paris is considered quite a dashing thing to do, I believe, especially when the lilacs are in bloom. I was trying to do it myself, in early 1940.

My future wife and I had arrived in France one and two years earlier, respectively. With Europe falling apart around us, our families dispersing in all directions, and ourselves in the most uncertain, even precarious, of circumstances, it became very important to have claims upon each other that would be officially recognized. So we had tried again and again to get the knot tied. We had made inquiries, *demarches*[1], pulled strings. But refugees were not encouraged to settle on French soil, and the government obviously took into account the stabilizing influence of matrimony. With simple logic, the requirements made of *étrangers*[2] of our sort wishing to be united by *M. le Maire*[3] were practically impossible to fulfill.

That was how matters stood when, in September 1939, the war changed me from a refugee to an enemy alien. I was interned in one of the camps imaginatively referred to as *Camps de Travailleurs Etrangers*[4]. The women were not rounded up until later, but, in any case, Susi, my fiancée, was safe: although born and bred in Vienna (in an enemy nation), she was a Polish national (a "friendly" alien). Such oblique citizenship status is nothing uncommon in Europe - sometimes it works out to your advantage and sometimes it doesn't.

In early 1940, it apparently occurred to someone that, as refugees, we were victims and not supporters of Hitler, and might be ready to join in the fight against him. At the *Camp de Travailleurs* we were separated from the other internees and offered the option of becoming incorporated into an auxiliary unit of the French Army. Without exception, we jumped at the chance.

Since the unit was still far from being formed, we were placed in a *camp d'attente*, not far from Nantes. By and large, living conditions here - the buildings of an abandoned farm - were not much different from those in the *Camp de Travailleurs*, but we were granted such small liberties as are given the military in wartime. Then we learned that we were to receive leaves - full, ten-day furloughs: we were no longer *prisonniers*. We were still generally confined to a camp and we still wore our motley civilian clothes, but we were *soldats francais*.

Wind of this startling change in my situation reached Susi in Paris before I was fully aware of it myself. She mentioned it in a letter. She had also learned that, my new condition transcending nationality and everything else, I could now get married, like any French soldier, on the strength of an *avis favorable* from the commanding officer of my unit.

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From the standpoint of human affairs, the *avis favorable* is an interesting document. It usually states that the undersigned *ne voit pas d'inconvénient*, sees no objection, to whatever the holder of the paper is trying to achieve. The signer does not go so far as to recommend that it be achieved. But there it is. He has openly removed himself as a possible objector, and anyone wishing to object will now have to take the initiative in doing so.

I did not contemplate with any cheerfulness the prospect of asking for such an endorsement from *Capitaine Thouet*. He was a veteran of the regular army and he had regular-army ideas about soldiering. Having been yanked out of retirement at sixty-three and put in command of this camp, he was both bewildered and outraged by a situation in which *boches*[5] were given the status of French soldiers. He never missed a chance to show us that he disapproved of the arrangement, of us, and of every privilege he was obliged to grant us.

However, one could try. My turn for leave came on a Saturday morning in mid-February. It was going to be my first taste of actual freedom since my internment, and my first reunion with my future wife. Along with a dozen or so others, I arrived early at the barracks where the official business of our unit was transacted.

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[1] *official pleadings*
[2] *foreigners*
[3] *Mayor*
[4] *"Foreign Workers' Camps"*
[5] *"krauts"*

The regimental office was a bare room containing a couple of old desks and a deal table against a wall. The *Capitaine*, characteristically, had not yet arrived. The sergeant, a young, round-eyed man, sitting at one of the desks, checked our names against a list. He then filled in the *fiches de permission*[6]. This did not take long, and when he had placed the small pile of slips representing our furlough papers on the *Capitaine*'s desk for signature, I advanced and opened my *démarches*.

"Sergeant," I said, "I would like to obtain from the *Capitaine* an *avis favorable* to get married."

"Well - speak to the *Capitaine* when he comes," he replied with indifference.

Cautiously, I pointed out that it might be a better idea if he prepared the paper first.

He looked blank. "*Bien*," he said, indicating the table, "sit down there and write what you want the *Capitaine* to sign." It was my turn to look blank. I was still far from familiar with French phraseology and I had not yet encountered the *avis favorable*. I assured the sergeant that he was certainly much better versed than I in wording such things.

"*Eh bien*, I tell you what we'll do, we'll write it together. What do you want to say?"

I wanted *tout simplement* that the *Capitaine* should give me an authorization to get married while on leave.

"Well, sit down there." I sat down at the table. He shoved a pen and a bottle of ink over to me (there was no sign of a typewriter). Then he took a sheet of paper of the usual business format, folded it, carefully creased the fold, and tore the paper in two. One half he put back among his supplies. He stamped the upper left-hand corner of the other half with the regimental seal. He slid the fragment, thus prepared, over to me.

"*Voilá*," he said, "we'll do it together. Now you write." The bottom of the paper looked very much like a torn edge. I entered the place and the date in the upper right-hand corner.

Once I was safely doing the writing, the sergeant proceeded, without further hesitation, to dictate to me the formula with which I was to become familiar, namely, that "the undersigned, *Capitaine* Thouet, Victor, commanding officer of such and such a Company, *ne voit pas d'inconvénient à ce que Hermann, Max*, a soldier of the second class, should be married while on leave."

Give it to him when he comes in," the sergeant said.

"No, no," I said. "You find a way of slipping it to him."

But the sergeant, although an authentic French sergeant and in uniform, was not to be maneuvered into tackling the *Capitaine*.

"I tell you what we'll do," said the resourceful man. "We'll put it here, on his desk, under the *fiches de permission*."

We all stood at attention when, through one of the windows, we saw the *Capitaine* getting out of the old Renault that had been assigned to him.

He was a short man of apoplectic coloring who still wore the *bleu horizon* uniform of World War I. He entered in no worse, no better humor than usual.

He sat down at his desk and signed the slips, one after another. When he came to the final paper, he read it with a look of disbelief.

"*Que-est-ce que c'est* " he roared. "Who wants to get married?"

I stepped forward. "*Moi*, mon *Capitaine*." I saluted.

"*Je m'en fous de votre mariage*![7] You can marry one, or six, or a dozen, so far as I'm concerned!" He signed the paper and tossed it at me.

Here at last was a triumph, after the months of defeats. Hurrying to catch the train, I felt like a king.

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[6] *authorizations for leave*
[7] *"I don't give a damn about your marriage!"*

But it wasn't to be as easy as that. On Monday, with the weekend behind us and my contact with the capital renewed (the dismal change in its appearance; the lights out; the normally cocky Parisians subdued and visibly expecting the worst), we still had to get past ourselves.

For one thing, after the first flush of victory, we didn't quite believe in the efficacy of that scrap of paper, written, if not signed, by my own hand. For another thing, like most refugees, we reflexively recoiled from contact with *les autorités*. We would walk around the block and take another street simply to avoid passing a building of official aspect.

But by Tuesday morning we had gotten a grip on ourselves. We presented ourselves at the *Mairie du 5me Arrondissement*[8], two blocks from where Susi lived.

We seemed to be the only customers in the section *Mariages*, on the second floor. A small, middle-aged clerk, with the usual black cotton protectors over the sleeves of his suit, came to the railing. We did not know his name then, but we learned it later, and I shall call him *Monsieur Didier*.

My French at the time was adequate, but not fluent. In moments of excitement I was apt to stammer and become confused. I was, besides, extremely conscious of my accent, which so often brought the look "*boche*" to a French eye. The look did not appear in *M. Didier's* eye, and I was able to set forth to him, with fair lucidity, what we had come for. I explained my status. I showed him my *avis favorable*. I showed him my *fiancée*.

"Do you have," he asked, "your birth certificates?"

I produced them.

Whereupon *M. Didier* invited us behind the railing. It was farther than we had ever come before.

Everything, it seemed, was just fine. The birth certificates, from Germany and Austria, respectively, would have to be put into French (he gave me the address of an official translator). Then we should bring the translations to him, together with *certificats de domicile* covering the entire period of our stay in France. But there would be no trouble. We could be married on Saturday, the little man said, appearing delighted.

We rushed off to the official translator, in the *Place des Vosges*.

This man, a polylingual Pole, told us he'd have the papers ready Thursday morning, not before. Things took time, and the police had to legalize the documents, and so on. It seemed all right - after all, we weren't getting married till Saturday. On Wednesday we got together our *certificats de domicile*, vouchers supplied by the *concierges* everywhere you resided, present and past, and legalized at the *commissariat de police*. Some time Thursday morning we were back at Didier's railing, translations in hand.

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He examined the papers and pronounced them, radiantly, "*Très, très bien!.*" Now, he said, he would take us to see his boss – "*le chef*", as he invariably referred to him.

We had not expected this, and suffered our usual reaction. A new face to encounter - a new official, apparently important, who could give us a bad time. However, *M. Didier*, limping ahead, led us rapidly through long corridors and up stairs to a higher floor. Here he left us outside an imposing double door through which he disappeared with our documents.

After a wait that seemed long, but most likely was not, and during which we didn't dare to so much as whisper, M. Didier opened the door. He looked upset. The chief wanted to speak to us, he said, ushering us in.

The office was large, and "the chief" sat a large desk in the middle of it. Austere of expression and wearing a dark suit, he appeared in every respect the administrative official, very conscious of his place and dignity. He was probably the *maire-adjoint*[9], who has, in effect, the responsibility of running the *mairie*. We stood in front of him. *M. Didier* stood at his elbow.

"You want to get married?" he said, his eye saying "*boche*" even before I opened my mouth.

"*Oui, monsieur*."

[8] *Town Hall*
[9] *Deputy Mayor*

"You claim," he said, "that you belong to a military unit. You do not belong to a military unit. You are guarded by a military unit. You are an *interné*, a prisoner."

"But, monsieur, I am now a soldier. There is a new law... "

"You are not a soldier. You are not in uniform."

This remark threw me off balance. A great many regular French troops, newly inducted, were still without uniforms. Everybody knew this, and civilian clothes did not put your military status in question. But I got badly snarled up trying to point this out in the heat of the moment. *M. Didier* came to my rescue with discreet alacrity.

"But he has his *fiche de permission* in good order and an *avis favorable* from his *Capitaine*," he said, calling attention to the two papers lying on the desk.

"They mean nothing," the chief rejoined, his voice rising. "Whoever gave them out had no right to do so. I am very well acquainted with that law you speak of concerning military units composed of foreigners. I have it here, in my desk. I will prove to you - ", he bent forward, tapping the desk with the point of his forefinger, " - prove to you that you are a prisoner, that you are not in a position to get married." He opened the drawer immediately before him and pulled out a sheaf of mimeographed sheets, stapled together.

"Here it is, here is the law." He ran down the paragraphs with his finger and found the place he wanted. "Here is your case." He began to read rapidly to himself. "Yes, this is your case." As he read, he nodded and repeated, "*En effet, c'est votre cas…*", but the volume of his voice was diminishing. Then we began to discern among the mumbled words: "*sous le drapeaux*[10]", *unités auxiliaires assimilés â l'armée francaise*[11]", and the chief put down the papers.

He took his defeat well. The only change in his demeanor was that it was now calm. "You are right," he said. "You are to be considered a French soldier." And to *M. Didier*: "*Bien*, they can be married."

I don't remember if we thanked him.

M. Didier did. He was beaming. We began to beam, too, as soon as we were outside those doors.

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Back at his desk on the second floor, M. Didier produced a folder, marked it, with a flourish, "Hermann - Weber", and placed our papers in it. The three of us stood wreathed in smiles.

"Now," he said, returning my military slips to me, "you must go to the *Prefecture de Police*[12] and get two *permis de séjours*[13] valid for over a year."

This left *M. Didier* smiling alone. He seemed surprised by our reaction, notably mine, which was immediate end intense. "I will not go to the *Prefecture*," I said. "I am now in a military unit and they have nothing to do with me!"

I suppose, being a Frenchman, he couldn't understand an alien's - and an unwelcome alien's - feeling about the *Prefecture*. It was a place that no refugee in his right mind would visit voluntarily. It was there that we were fingerprinted and catalogued, and summoned for examination and questioning; where we were informed when our movements were to be restricted; where all bad news seemed to come from. If there had been anything like a good aspect to my internment, it had been that I was no longer accountable to the Prefecture.

"But," *M. Didier* explained, patiently, "as *étrangers* you can't get married without a *permis de séjour* of normal duration. For marriages, the normal duration is anything over a year."

But we had never been able to obtain any regulation *permis de séjour* - another name and function for the *carte d'identité* - at all. As the influx of refugees into France increased, the authorities had taken to giving out nothing but *récépissés*, or vouchers, renewable every three months, certifying that a *permis* or *carte* had been applied for. That was all we had ever held, and M. Didier's request was nothing short of fantastic. I tried to reason with him.

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[10] *"under the flag"*
[11] *"auxiliary units incorporated into the French Army"*
[12] *police headquarters*
[13] *residency permts*

"*Mais ce n'est rien,*[14]" he repeated, "a formality. You will see, they'll give them to you, there's nothing to worry about. I'll give you a note."

He wrote out the note, on *Mairie* letterhead. It stated that we intended to get married on Saturday February 24th, and solicited for us "*des permis de séjour de durée normale.*" There was nothing to do but go.

"Well, at any rate," Susi said, "if we succeed I'll have a real *permis de séjour*, good for a whole year. That's something to look forward to."

Perhaps it was. But we had lunch first, and afterwards, although the *Prefecture* was within walking distance and my pockets no better lined than usual, we took a taxi.

The war had brought a lot of girls to work behind the desks of the vast *Prefecture*. The one to whom we were directed was quite pretty, but she maintained an unflinchingly grim expression. Perhaps she thought that it went with her job. She disappeared with our papers into another room and returned with two folders - no doubt our individual civic dossiers. With these she disappeared again, returned, and said we'd have to wait.

We sat at the bench which ran along the wall, and we waited. Other people - a couple, an elderly nun, an American - came, went, waited too. Over an hour went by while our anxiety mounted. You never knew what they could come up with once they started digging in your dossier. The grim-visaged maiden disappeared and returned for a third time.

"'ermann, Vebair". We hurried forward. "Here are your *permis*."

And there they were. Beautiful, full-sized forms, unlike any *cartes* we had ever seen - filled in, signed, counter-signed and stamped. We went out in a daze.

Outside, we examined them. In spite of our elation, Susi groaned with disappointment. The permits were indeed for "over a year": they were dated February 24, 1939 (the year gone by) to February 25, 1940 (the day after the planned marriage). Considered objectively, their logic was admirable. Only France can produce such documents - and I mean this respectfully.

Our next regret was that it was too late in the day to take them back to *M. Didier*.

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He was delighted when we showed them to him on Friday morning, but not surprised. "I told you," he said. "There was nothing to worry about." He brought out our dossier and placed the two *permis* in it with quiet triumph.

"Now," he said, "you must go to the *Palais de Justice* and get a *dispense de bans*[15], from the *Procureur de la République*."

Now the Public Prosecutor, or District Attorney, was one office we had never had anything to do with. We knew we'd have to get a *dispense de bans* - they were granted to the military in wartime - but we thought the *dispense* would come from the *Mairie*. I tried to make *M. Didier* understand the extreme reluctance I felt to establish contact with the office of the *Procureur de la République.*

He listened patiently but again failed to see my point. His own attitude toward all these terrifying *bureaux* seemed to be a sort of respectful jauntiness. He wrote another note soliciting a *dispense de bans* and stating our intention to marry on the morrow, and sent us on our way. We took another taxi.

At the Palais, we found *juges and avocats*[16] circulating over the wide stairways and colonnaded galleries in their flowing judicial robes. We were made to wait in a gallery outside a particular door, and we stood at a window, admiring *la Sainte Chapelle* a stone's throw away, until a *greffier*[17] told us we could go in.

The young man occupying this small, private office had an impressiveness of his own. His hands were long, white and beautifully cared for; his suit dark and immaculate; his face pale and decorated with a pencil-line mustache. After a few moments in his presence it became apparent that the gold watch he wore on his left wrist -

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[14] "*But it's nothing...*"
[15] *exemption from the requirement of "posting the banns".*
[16] *judges and lawyers*
[17] *clerk*

a gold wrist watch was seldom seen in France at that time - was the focus of a complicated tic. One supposed he had learned it in childhood from some grandfather, probably a *Monsieur le Comte*. Every so often, especially when he had delivered himself of a decisive statement, the young man gave two taps to the side of the watch with the middle finger of his right hand, delicately pushed back the cuff of his suit with the same finger, and appeared to take note of the time. Then he coughed, lightly. One could not imagine his voice rising above its present, precise, level. Moreover, he didn't exactly seem to see you. You weren't there as an individual, but merely as related to the circumstances that brought you.

He examined our papers. Without a word, he stamped the bottom of *M. Didier's* note with the seal of his own office and wrote a few lines. After signing his name he returned the paper to me.

"Here is your *dispense de bans*, subject to an authorization from the Ministry of War, for you to marry an alien."

I began to stammer, suddenly at home in my accent: "But, *monsieur*, I, too, am an alien."

"You are a French soldier. You are subject to military law, *monsieur*. In view of the fact that your intended is an alien, you cannot get married without an authorization from the Ministry of War." He tapped his watch, glanced, coughed.

"But, monsieur, I have an *avis favorable* from my *Capitaine*."

"Your *Capitaine* was no doubt not aware of the circumstances. Possibly not of the law." Again he went through his little routine.

I wanted to point out to him how little time we had, how extravagant, not to say ludicrous, was the notion of my presenting myself at the Ministry of War with such a request, but he had handed our papers back to me. We were dismissed. As we went out, hearing his dry little cough, we seemed to carry with us the defeat of an entire army.

There was nothing for it but take another taxi. *M. Didier* had evidently not anticipated this, and, surely, he would find a way out. On the way, Susi delivered herself of a single observation. "Until now I was a friendly alien perversely trying to marry a *sale boche*[18]. Now you are a French patriot perversely trying to marry a *sale étrangère*[19]. *Mon dieu!*"

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M. Didier let us down utterly. After glancing at the lines that I indignantly held out to him, he said, cheerful as ever, *eh bien*, if that was the case, we should go to the Ministry of War and get the authorization in question. There would be no trouble, *etc*.

We wandered off and went into a small restaurant where they served a good soup. But I can only ascribe to the wine the strange mutation that took place within me during that meal. I recall distinctly that when we sat down I was convinced that if I ever showed my *avis favorable* at the Ministry of War, it would be declared illegal and taken from me; that even my possession of a *fiche de permission* might be questioned; in fact, that it was unwise to even show my face there. However, by the time we had finished the lunch and the wine, I felt that with two such excellent documents in hand I could present myself anywhere. The worst they could do was throw me out, which would leave us no worse off than we were now. We took another taxi. Fortunately, taxi fares in Paris are not, or were not, what they are in New York.

The big hall of the business entrance to the Ministry, on the Rue Saint-Dominique, turned out to be a disconcertingly busy place. All kinds of people, civilian and military, male and female, milled around, waited on the benches, or stood, apparently filling out forms, at the desks that were lined up, post-office style, against the walls. We appeared to be the only ones who didn't know exactly what we had come for. Then we saw a man sitting behind a window over to one side. He looked like an old sergeant - such jobs were usually given to *anciens combattants*[20] - and my boldness oozed from me with every step I took toward him. He was a big man, with a row of medals across his chest, and his expression was about as inviting as that of any sergeant stationed behind a window answering questions since early morning.

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[18] *"dirty Kraut"*
[19] *"dirty foreigner"*
[20] *war veterans*

Stumbling over my words a little more than usual, I started to explain my errand - I wanted to get married, but the *Procureur de la République* - an authorization -

"Your *future* is an alien?" His voice was no gentler than his face, but he understood at once - "When did you put in your application?"

I had put in no application, I said, but I was expecting to get married the next day - I had an *avis favorable*...

"*Ça ne va pas*. You must put in an application. The forms are over there - the third desk to the right. It will take about six weeks." He picked up the *avis favorable*, which I had been holding out to him. Again he was right on the ball. "Oh, *that* unit. It is not even formed. In that case, it will probably take longer. You must fill out the form." He motioned with his head toward the right, handed the paper back to me, and the while looked over my head at the man behind me, a commandant approaching the window with his hand politely raised to his *kèpi*.

This was really the end. If we hadn't felt that we owed *M. Didier* a report, we would quietly have gone home.

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It didn't seem necessary to relate the adverse comment made about my unit, but I told *M. Didier* the rest. I added innocently that, considering the *avis favorable* I held from my own *Capitaine*, I couldn't understand why the Ministry of War insisted on all these formalities.

M. Didier remained lost in thought for quite a while. Suddenly he leapt to his feet. "Come. We will go talk to the chief."

And although the last person we felt like encountering again was this chief, we found ourselves hurrying along behind the limping figure of *M. Didier* as we had done three days before. Upstairs, we again waited outside while he went into the big double doors.

We didn't have to encounter the chief. *M. Didier* handled everything. To this day I wonder what he could have said to bring the chief around. And, for that matter, why? The way the little man had espoused our case was as heartwarming as it was unaccountable.

"*Ca y est*!" he cried as soon as he had shut the door behind him, "It's done!". Since I had this *avis favorable*, the chief would waive the matter of formal authorization from the Ministry. We trooped downstairs with wings on our feet.

At *M. Didier's* desk, in the midst of joy and mutual congratulation, he explained to us that Saturday mornings were given over to war marriages.

Since there were many of them (and they were very inexpensive), *M. le Maire* performed them all in one ceremony, which took place at 10 o'clock. But we should be there earlier, because there still remained papers for us to sign. And we should bring two witnesses, carrying identification papers.

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It goes without saying that our witnesses were already alerted. They had unimpeachable papers and flawless presence. We had asked Dr. Cernik, a physician from Prague (*nationalité alliée*), whose daughter Jarka was Susi's roommate, and M. Lelorme (*Français*), a professor at the Lycee Henri IV, with the red ribbon of the Legion of Honor in his buttonhole. This gentleman would meet us at the *Mairie*. The rest of us would get together at Susi's apartment.

Saturday dawned as fine as a wedding day should. After barbering and getting myself rigged up in my best clothes I ran out to look for flowers. The lilacs were not yet quite ready to bloom in Paris, but the florist shops had them – white, for this day of marriages. I presented myself at Susi's apartment with a bunch.

There I found everybody assembled and Susi frantic. She had ordered only one new thing for her wedding, *une petite blouse*, and the dressmaker hadn't delivered it. Susi put on, and had me admire, a charming hat that Mrs. Cernik had lent her. Somehow she seemed to consider it one more compelling reason to wait for the blouse. I reminded her desperately of the professor waiting on the street, of the papers to be signed. All I achieved was that Jarka Cernik announced that she would fetch the blouse - the dressmaker lived *dans le quartier*[21]. After that we waited for Jarka. I was about to dash off to the *Mairie* by myself when Susi, looking as unhappy a bride as

[21] *in the neighborhood*

ever walked, resigned herself to putting on an old blouse. We were downstairs and hurrying through the main entrance to the street, when in rushed Jarka, carrying the blouse. I don't believe Susi even heard my protests. The two girls joyfully ran up the three flights of stairs (Jarka was going to stay home to "prepare a wedding breakfast"). In what I must admit was only a few minutes Susi came running down again, serene and smiling, the new blouse - it turned out to be yellow - just visible above the collar of her black suit. We ran all the way to the *Mairie*.

The professor had waited a good fifteen minutes, but he was a man of calm and dignity and great courtesy, and he showed no annoyance. We were about to swarm upstairs to *M. Didier's* office, but the *suisse*[22] resplendent in the *habit de cérémonie* and gold chains he wore in honor of the day, stopped us. The witnesses were to remain downstairs. Susi and I went up.

The instant we saw M. Didier we knew that something had gone wrong. Inexpressibly downcast, he told us that *le chef* had thought about it in the night - indeed, he gave us the impression that the chief had lost sleep over it - and had decided that he had gone too far in consenting to disregard the condition laid down by the *Procureur de la République*. If we could not get an authorization from the Ministry of War, we should get one from the *Bureau de Place* - the Military Command.

"But my Military Command is in Nantes," I said.

"*Ça ne fait rien*, you can get it from the Paris Command. The chief insists upon it."

"But even if I obtain it, by the time I get back the ceremony will be over and it will be too late."

"If you are too late, *Monsieur le Maire* will marry you separately. And if you don't get back until this afternoon he will have to come back to marry you!" *M. Didier* was getting excited. "Go! You must go! They will certainly give it to you. *Tenez*, I'll give you a note."

I must confess that I felt slightly sick. I knew the *Bureau de Place* - I had been there before. It was an enormous honeycomb of offices, lodged in the *Invalides*. I couldn't imagine myself obtaining anything there. Or, for that matter, coming to any good there.

"Let's forget about it," Susi said. "It 's just too much. We can get married another time."

But we had come so far. And there was *M. Didier* holding out his note. I seized it. "You explain to the others," I almost shouted at Susi. "I'm going. Wait till I get back."

I ran down the stairs and into the street. A taxi turned up almost immediately. I rushed into it, telling the man to get me to the *Invalides le plus vite possible*! It was exactly ten o'clock.

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In the long corridors of the *Bureau de Place*, lined with offices on either side, I had no idea where to go. I entered, in succession, three or four doors that happened to be open, but the soldiers, non-coms, or girls behind the desks didn't know more than I did. They were only briefly diverted by my errand, and my stammered inquiries became more garbled with each repetition. At last, a sergeant, who chanced into a room while I was there, appeared to understand what I wanted.

"I know who occupies himself with marriages," he said. "Come with me." And, as we walked out of the door: "It's a part of the *Deuxieme Bureau*", he said.

I followed him, but my heart sank to the very soles of my shoes. As every schoolboy in France knew, the *Deuxieme Bureau* was the Office of Counter Espionage. There would be no point in repeating here the outlandish thoughts that went through my head as I was being marched along more corridors and up some stairs. The word "*Discipline"*, appearing under the words *"2me Bureau"* on the door we entered, did nothing to make me feel better.

Inside, it was like any other office. At one desk, a captain. At another desk, a girl. The sergeant took me to the captain, explained that I had come for an authorization to get married, and departed, quite casual, while I barely collected myself in time to thank him for his trouble.

[22] *doorman*

The captain, a placid-looking man, examined my papers, read *M. Didier's* note, listened to my halting account of the reluctance of *M. le Maire*, and then said, pleasantly, that *le Maire* was quite right. I could not marry an alien without an authorization from the Ministry of War.

"But, *mon capitaine*, the marriage is set for today. My *fiancée* is now, this instant, waiting at the *Mairie* with the witnesses. It was believed that you would give me an authorization."

It had nothing to do with him, he said. The affair did not concern his office at all. He could only tell me that such was the law. He repeated this several times, in the same and in different words, because I, on my side, could not make up my mind that, somehow, he could not do something for me.

So we were going on, back and forth, when his attention was arrested by the *avis favorable* lying before him:

"Who gave you this *avis favorable*?" he asked. "I've never seen anything so irregular-looking. It isn't written on any letterhead. It has no reference number. *Qui a écrit ca*? "

He was looking at the scrap of paper as he said this, not at me, or I am sure he would have seen the perspiration breaking out on my brow.

"It was written at the office of the regiment," I said. My voice sounded normal. "And signed by *le Capitaine Thouet*."

"*Eh bien, je vous dis* he had absolutely no right to give you this kind of a paper. The only thing for you to do is to go back, get another *avis favorable*, properly made out and referenced, and have it go through the Ministry of War with your application."

"But that will take over six weeks, and my *fiancée* is even now waiting, *etc., etc*."

I don't know why he didn't throw me out. Instead, with an air of desperation, he picked up the phone - "Wait a minute, I'll find out...". Over the phone, he stated my case, discussed its points, repeated, "That's what I've been telling him - " several times, and hung up. He regretted *infiniment*, he said to me, but he had been confirmed on every point. There was nothing for me to do but -

There was a sharp knock at the door. In walked just the sort of personage one expected to see in the *2me Bureau*. Tall, thin, pale, erect, a black monocle in his right eye, and wrapped with supreme elegance in a long military coat. The eye evidently a casualty of the last war.

The captain sprang to his feet, saluted: "...*mon colonel*." He thrust my papers at me. "Listen - wait outside - I'll see you later."

* * *

I sat down miserably on a bench at the top of the stairs. If I had been older and wiser I would have gone away. But he had said “wait”, so I waited. I don't know what I expected, after what he had already told me. Nearly a half hour later the spy-thriller colonel came out the door and, brushing past me, vanished down the stairs. I went back to the door, knocked, and entered.

The captain had to make a visible effort to place me. "What, you're still here? But *merde*, I tell you, there's nothing I can do for you. This does not concern me." I just stood there. He thought for a moment. "I tell you what I'll do. It does not concern me, but I'll do it for you. I'll telegraph your *Capitaine Thouet* and ask him whether it would be in order to give you this authorization. If he says it is, I'll give it to you."

With enormous relief I reflected that this was Saturday, the time near noon. "*Capitaine Thouet*," I said, "is never at the barracks on Saturdays at this time. He wouldn't get the telegram until Monday, and by that time I'll be on my way back to rejoin my unit." This was stretching the truth a bit, but anything was better than that *Capitaine Thouet* should ever receive such a telegram.

I didn't know, in fact, how I would go about asking him for another, improved, avis favorable. The outlook was unspeakably depressing. In fact, hopeless.

"I had hoped," I said, "that since everything is in readiness, and my *fiancée* waiting at the Mairie - "

I had, possibly, said this already nine times. The captain made a gesture of impatience. "Wait a minute," he said. I stood in religious silence while he gave himself over to thought.

"Give me that note from the *Mairie*," he said. I gave it to him and watched, holding my breath.

He stamped the space at the bottom of the note with the seal of his office. He uncapped his *stylo*. He entered the date. Then he thought a long time, wrote a few words, thought and wrote again. Finally he signed his name.

"*Voilá*," he said, handing the paper to me with a smile. "Now you can get married."

I bowed, I saluted, I beamed and backed away, all at once. "*Merci, merci, mon capitaine*!" Then I was out of the door and down the stairs like a rabbit. Luck was with me again. A taxi came cruising along just as I had crossed the great court at a run and come out on the *Place des Invalides*. Throwing myself into it, I impressed upon the driver the necessity of making it to the *Mairie du 5me* before twelve o'clock. It was not until we were on our way that I was able to look at the paper in my hand.

Of course I haven't seen it for fifteen years, but I am sure I remember the words correctly. "In view of the fact," the captain had written, "that the named Hermann, Max, is in possession of an *avis favorable* from the *Capitaine Thouet*, it is to be presumed that the requirements of the Ministry of War have been complied with."

As I've already said, where but in France…?

* * *

It was ten minutes of twelve when I leaped out of the taxi in front of the *Mairie*. The group that had played such a prominent role in my *plaidoyer*[23], was standing across the square, on the sidewalk in front of the Pantheon. They had moved over there because Susi, clasping her wilting white lilacs in front of the Mairie, was eliciting too much pity among the passers-by. But the group had not dared move as far as the cafe around the corner, for fear of missing my arrival. No one, it seems, had complained or become ungracious.

From that point on the proceedings took on the aspect of one of those jerky old movies with the action speeded up. Susi detached herself from the group and came running across the wide *place*. The others were strung behind her in the gradations of their personal speed. I waved my paper: "I have it!" We rushed in the door and up the stairs, and the sun burst on *M. Didier's* face. He seized and scanned the paper: *"Mais c'est magnifique c'est parfait! Je vais voir M. le Maire"*, and he hurtled out. In a few minutes he was back - *M. le Maire* had been putting on his overcoat, but he had taken it off again. He would marry us. Everything was in order. "*Vite. vite*!" "But our witnesses..." "Never mind", said M. Didier, hurrying us along, "*on s'en occupera*[24]". At a long table in a gallery he handed us over to a *huissier*[25], together with our dossier, and vanished. Every paper in the dossier had to be either signed or initialed by both of us, the *huissier* pointing to the designated spot in each. Another *huissier* stood by, getting back into his *habits de ceremonie*, his Great Chain. Then on we rushed to *la grande salle*, an imposing room with columns, oak paneling, red velvet chairs, flags. And there were our witnesses, their papers already processed by *M. Didier*. Sonorously announced by a *huissier, M. le Maire* arrived running, attaching his *echarpe tricolore*[26] as he ran. He was a small rubicund man, with a full white beard, looking like an unawesome *bon Dieu*. He was also a very gracious man. He raced through the marriage ceremony (a long page of print mounted on a piece of cardboard which he held in front of him) in an avalanche of unintelligibility, and, later on, he departed at a run. But he took the time, before leaving, to shake our hands and to wish us happiness. He also inquired as to the whereabouts of my unit, and recalled an occasion when he had visited the place himself.

Susi and I were possibly not in quite the frame of mind to appreciate the solemnity of the occasion. Mrs. Cernik, however, did her best for us. The torrent of speech had barely begun to issue from the lips of *M. le Maire* when her gentle sobbing started behind us, and it continued without faltering until we were pronounced man and wife.

\# \# \#

[23] *pleading*
[24] *"they will be taken care of"*
[25] *usher*
[26] *tricolored sash*