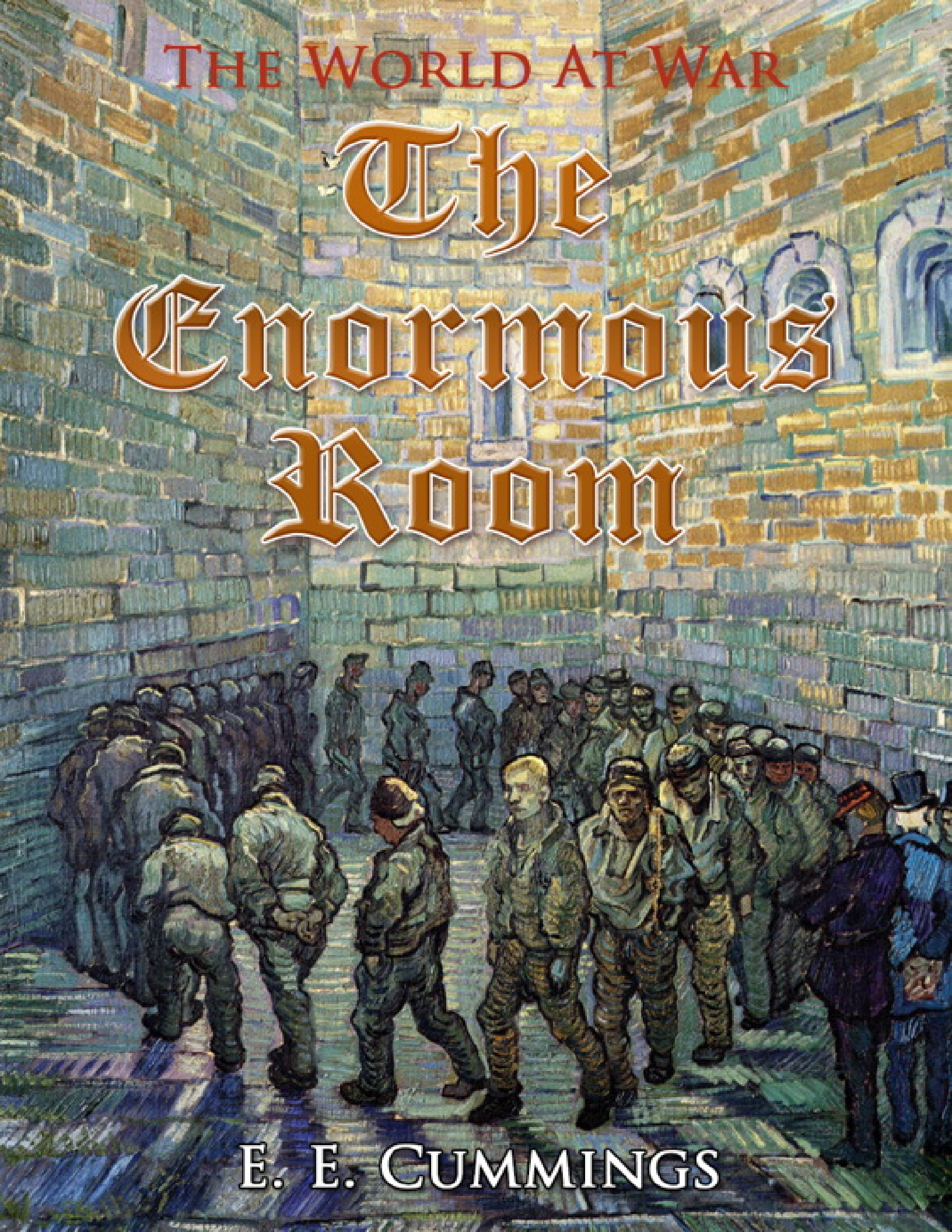
THE WORLD AT WAR

The Enormous Room



E. E. CUMMINGS

THE ENORMOUS ROOM

E. E. CUMMINGS

INTRODUCTION

"FOR THIS MY SON WAS DEAD, AND IS ALIVE AGAIN; HE WAS LOST; AND IS FOUND."

He was lost by the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps.

He was officially dead as a result of official misinformation.

He was entombed by the French Government.

It took the better part of three months to find him and bring him back to life—with the help of powerful and willing friends on both sides of the Atlantic. The following documents tell the story:

104 Irving Street, Cambridge, December 8, 1917.

President Woodrow Wilson, White House, Washington, D. C.

Mr. President:

> It seems criminal to ask for a single moment of your time. But I am strongly advised that it would be more criminal to delay any longer calling to your attention a crime against American citizenship in which the French Government has persisted for many weeks—in spite of constant appeals made to the American Minister at Paris; and in spite of subsequent action taken by the State Department at Washington, on the initiative of my friend, Hon. ——.

The victims are two American ambulance drivers, Edward Estlin
Cummings of Cambridge, Mass., and W—— S—— B——....

More than two months ago these young men were arrested, subjected to many indignities, dragged across France like criminals, and closely confined in a Concentration Camp at La Ferté Macé; where, according to latest advices they still remain—awaiting the final action of the Minister of the Interior upon the findings of a Commission which passed upon their cases as long ago as October 17.

Against Cummings both private and official advices from Paris state that there is no charge whatever. He has been subjected to this outrageous treatment solely because of his intimate friendship with young B——, whose sole crime is—so far as can be learned—that certain letters to friends in America were misinterpreted by an over-zealous French censor.

It only adds to the indignity and irony of the situation to say that young Cummings is an enthusiastic lover of France and so loyal to the friends he has made among the French soldiers, that even while suffering in health from his unjust confinement, he excuses the ingratitude of the country he has risked his life to serve by calling attention to the atmosphere of intense suspicion and distrust that has naturally resulted from the painful experience which France has had with foreign emissaries.

Be assured, Mr. President, that I have waited long—it seems like ages—and have exhausted all other available help before venturing to trouble you.

1. After many weeks of vain effort to secure effective action by the American Ambassador at Paris, Richard Norton of the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps to

which the boys belonged, was completely discouraged, and advised me to seek help here.

2. The efforts of the State Department at Washington resulted as follows:

i. A cable from Paris saying that there was no charge against Cummings and intimating that he would speedily be released.

ii. A little later a second cable advising that Edward Estlin Cummings had sailed on the Antilles and was reported lost.

iii. A week later a third cable correcting this cruel error and saying the Embassy was renewing efforts to locate Cummings—apparently still ignorant even of the place of his confinement.

After such painful and baffling experiences, I turn to you—burdened though I know you to be, in this world crisis, with the weightiest task ever laid upon any man.

But I have another reason for asking this favor. I do not speak for my son alone; or for him and his friend alone. My son has a mother—as brave and patriotic as any mother who ever dedicated an only son to a great cause. The mothers of our boys in France have rights as well as the boys themselves. My boy's mother had a right to be protected from the weeks of horrible anxiety and suspense caused by the inexplicable arrest and imprisonment of her son. My boy's mother had a right to be spared the supreme agony caused by a blundering cable from Paris saying that he had been drowned by a submarine. (An error which Mr. Norton subsequently cabled that he had discovered six weeks before.) My boy's mother and all American

> mothers have a right to be protected against all needless anxiety and sorrow.
>
> Pardon me, Mr. President, but if I were President and your son were suffering such prolonged injustice at the hands of France; and your son's mother had been needlessly kept in Hell as many weeks as my boy's mother has—I would do something to make American citizenship as sacred in the eyes of Frenchmen as Roman citizenship was in the eyes of the ancient world. Then it was enough to ask the question, "Is it lawful to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned?" Now, in France, it seems lawful to treat like a condemned criminal a man that is an American, uncondemned and admittedly innocent!

Very respectfully, EDWARD CUMMINGS

This letter was received at the White House. Whether it was received with sympathy or with silent disapproval is still a mystery. A Washington official, a friend in need and a friend indeed in these trying experiences, took the precaution to have it delivered by messenger. Otherwise, fear that it had been "lost in the mail" would have added another twinge of uncertainty to the prolonged and exquisite tortures inflicted upon parents by alternations of misinformation and official silence. Doubtless the official stethoscope was on the heart of the world just then; and perhaps it was too much to expect that even a post-card would be wasted on private heart-aches.

In any event this letter told where to look for the missing boys—something the French government either could not or would not disclose, in spite of constant pressure by the American Embassy at Paris and constant efforts by my friend Richard Norton, who was head of the Norton-Harjes

Ambulance organization from which they had been abducted.

Release soon followed, as narrated in the following letter to Major —— of the staff of the Judge Advocate General in Paris.

February 20, 1921.

My dear ——

> Your letter of January 30th, which I have been waiting for with great interest ever since I received your cable, arrived this morning. My son arrived in New York on January 1st. He was in bad shape physically as a result of his imprisonment: very much under weight, suffering from a bad skin infection which he had acquired at the concentration camp. However, in view of the extraordinary facilities which the detention camp offered for acquiring dangerous diseases, he is certainly to be congratulated on having escaped with one of the least harmful. The medical treatment at the camp was quite in keeping with the general standards of sanitation there; with the result that it was not until he began to receive competent surgical treatment after his release and on board ship that there was much chance of improvement. A month of competent medical treatment here seems to have got rid of this painful reminder of official hospitality. He is, at present, visiting friends in New York. If he were here, I am sure he would join with me and with his mother in thanking you for the interest you have taken and the efforts you have made.
>
> W—— S—— B—— is, I am happy to say, expected in New York this week by the S. S. Niagara. News of his

release and subsequently of his departure came by cable. What you say about the nervous strain under which he was living, as an explanation of the letters to which the authorities objected, is entirely borne out by first-hand information. The kind of badgering which the youth received was enough to upset a less sensitive temperament. It speaks volumes for the character of his environment that such treatment aroused the resentment of only one of his companions, and that even this manifestation of normal human sympathy was regarded as "suspicious." If you are right in characterizing B——'s condition as more or less hysterical, what shall we say of the conditions which made possible the treatment which he and his friend received? I am glad B—— wrote the very sensible and manly letter to the Embassy, which you mention. After I have had an opportunity to converse with him, I shall be in better position to reach a conclusion in regard to certain matters about which I will not now express an opinion.

I would only add that I do not in the least share your complacency in regard to the treatment which my son received. The very fact that, as you say, no charges were made and that he was detained on suspicion for many weeks after the Commission passed on his case and reported to the Minister of the Interior that he ought to be released, leads me to a conclusion exactly opposite to that which you express. It seems to me impossible to believe that any well-ordered government would fail to acknowledge such action to have been unreasonable. Moreover, "detention on suspicion" was a small part of what actually took place. To take a single illustration, you will recall that after many weeks' persistent effort to secure information, the Embassy was still kept so much in the

dark about the facts, that it cabled the report that my son had embarked on The Antilles and was reported lost. And when convinced of that error, the Embassy cabled that it was renewing efforts to locate my son. Up to that moment, it would appear that the authorities had not even condescended to tell the United States Embassy where this innocent American citizen was confined; so that a mistaken report of his death was regarded as an adequate explanation of his disappearance. If I had accepted this report and taken no further action, it is by no means certain that he would not be dead by this time.

I am free to say, that in my opinion no self-respecting government could allow one of its own citizens, against whom there has been no accusation brought, to be subjected to such prolonged indignities and injuries by a friendly government without vigorous remonstrance. I regard it as a patriotic duty, as well as a matter of personal self-respect, to do what I can to see that such remonstrance is made. I still think too highly both of my own government and of the government of France to believe that such an untoward incident will fail to receive the serious attention it deserves. If I am wrong, and American citizens must expect to suffer such indignities and injuries at the hands of other governments without any effort at remonstrance and redress by their own government, I believe the public ought to know the humiliating truth. It will make interesting reading. It remains for my son to determine what action he will take.

I am glad to know your son is returning. I am looking forward with great pleasure to conversing with him.

> I cannot adequately express my gratitude to you and to other friends for the sympathy and assistance I have received. If any expenses have been incurred on my behalf or on behalf of my son, I beg you to give me the pleasure of reimbursing you. At best, I must always remain your debtor.

With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

EDWARD CUMMINGS

I yield to no one in enthusiasm for the cause of France. Her cause was our cause and the cause of civilization; and the tragedy is that it took us so long to find it out. I would gladly have risked my life for her, as my son risked his and would have risked it again had not the departure of his regiment overseas been stopped by the armistice.

France was beset with enemies within as well as without. Some of the "suspects" were members of her official household. Her Minister of Interior was thrown into prison. She was distracted with fear. Her existence was at stake. Under such circumstances excesses were sure to be committed. But it is precisely at such times that American citizens most need and are most entitled to the protection of their own government.

EDWARD CUMMINGS

* * * * *

THE ENORMOUS ROOM

I

I BEGIN A PILGRIMAGE

In October, 1917, we had succeeded, my friend B. and I, in dispensing with almost three of our six months' engagement as Voluntary Drivers, Sanitary Section 21, Ambulance Norton Harjes, American Red Cross, and at the moment which subsequent experience served to capitalize, had just finished the unlovely job of cleaning and greasing (*nettoyer* is the proper word) the own private flivver of the chief of section, a gentleman by the convenient name of Mr. A. To borrow a characteristic-cadence from Our Great President: the lively satisfaction which we might be suspected of having derived from the accomplishment of a task so important in the saving of civilization from the clutches of Prussian tyranny was in some degree inhibited, unhappily, by a complete absence of cordial relations between the man whom fate had placed over us and ourselves. Or, to use the vulgar American idiom, B. and I and Mr. A. didn't get on well. We were in fundamental disagreement as to the attitude which we, Americans, should uphold toward the poilus in whose behalf we had volunteered assistance, Mr. A. maintaining "you boys want to keep away from those dirty Frenchmen" and "we're here to show those bastards how they do things in America," to which we answered by seizing every opportunity for fraternization. Inasmuch as eight "dirty Frenchmen" were attached to the section in various capacities (cook, provisioner, chauffeur, mechanician, etc.) and the section itself was affiliated with a branch of the French army, fraternization was easy. Now when he saw that we had not the slightest intention of adopting his ideals, Mr. A. (together with the *sous-lieutenant* who acted as his

translator—for the chief's knowledge of the French language, obtained during several years' heroic service, consisted for the most part in "*Sar var*," "*Sar marche*," and "*Deet donk moan vieux*") confined his efforts to denying us the privilege of acting as drivers, on the ground that our personal appearance was a disgrace to the section. In this, I am bound to say, Mr. A. was but sustaining the tradition conceived originally by his predecessor, a Mr. P., a Harvard man, who until his departure from Vingt-et-Un succeeded in making life absolutely miserable for B. and myself. Before leaving this painful subject I beg to state that, at least as far as I was concerned, the tradition had a firm foundation in my own predisposition for uncouthness plus what *Le Matin* (if we remember correctly) cleverly nicknamed *La Boue Héroïque*.

Having accomplished the *nettoyage* (at which we were by this time adepts, thanks to Mr. A.'s habit of detailing us to wash any car which its driver and *aide* might consider too dirty a task for their own hands) we proceeded in search of a little water for personal use. B. speedily finished his ablutions. I was strolling carelessly and solo from the cook-wagon toward one of the two tents—which protestingly housed some forty huddling Americans by night—holding in my hand an historic *morceau de chocolat*, when a spick, not to say span, gentleman in a suspiciously quiet French uniform allowed himself to be driven up to the *bureau*, by two neat soldiers with tin derbies, in a Renault whose painful cleanliness shamed my recent efforts. This must be a general at least, I thought, regretting the extremely undress character of my uniform, which uniform consisted of overalls and a cigarette.

Having furtively watched the gentleman alight and receive a ceremonious welcome from the chief and the aforesaid French lieutenant who accompanied the section for

translatory reasons, I hastily betook myself to one of the tents, where I found B. engaged in dragging all his belongings into a central pile of frightening proportions. He was surrounded by a group of fellow-heroes who hailed my coming with considerable enthusiasm. "Your bunky's leaving" said somebody. "Going to Paris" volunteered a man who had been trying for three months to get there. "Prison you mean" remarked a confirmed optimist whost disposition had felt the effects of French climate.

Albeit confused by the eloquence of B.'s unalterable silence, I immediately associated his present predicament with the advent of the mysterious stranger, and forthwith dashed forth, bent on demanding from one of the tin-derbies the high identity and sacred mission of this personage. I knew that with the exception of ourselves everyone in the section had been given his seven days' leave—even two men who had arrived later than we and whose turn should, consequently, have come after ours. I also knew that at the headquarters of the Ambulance, *7 rue François Premier*, was Monsieur Norton, the supreme head of the Norton Harjes fraternity, who had known my father in other days. Putting two and two together I decided that this potentate had sent an emissary to Mr. A. to demand an explanation of the various and sundry insults and indignities to which I and my friend had been subjected, and more particularly to secure our long-delayed permission. Accordingly I was in high spirits as I rushed toward the *bureau*.

I didn't have to go far. The mysterious one, in conversation with *monsieur le sous-lieutenant*, met me half-way. I caught the words: "And Cummings" (the first and last time that my name was correctly pronounced by a Frenchman), "where is he?"

"Present," I said, giving a salute to which neither of them paid the slightest attention.

"Ah yes" impenetrably remarked the mysterious one in positively sanitary English. "You shall put all your baggage in the car, at once"—then, to tin-derby-the-first, who appeared in an occult manner at his master's elbow—"Go with him, get his baggage, at once."

My things were mostly in the vicinity of the *cuisine*, where lodged the *cuisinier, mechanician, menusier*, etc., who had made room for me (some ten days since) on their own initiative, thus saving me the humiliation of sleeping with nineteen Americans in a tent which was always two-thirds full of mud. Thither I led the tin-derby, who scrutinised everything with surprising interest. I threw *mes affaires* hastily together (including some minor accessories which I was going to leave behind, but which the t-d bade me include) and emerged with a duffle-bag under one arm and a bed-roll under the other, to encounter my excellent friends, the "dirty Frenchmen," aforesaid. They all popped out together from one door, looking rather astonished. Something by way of explanation as well as farewell was most certainly required, so I made a speech in my best French:

"Gentlemen, friends, comrades—I am going away immediately and shall be guillotined tomorrow."

—"Oh hardly guillotined I should say," remarked t-d, in a voice which froze my marrow despite my high spirits; while the cook and carpenter gaped audibly and the mechanician clutched a hopelessly smashed carburetor for support.

One of the section's *voitures*, a F.I.A.T., was standing ready. General Nemo sternly forbade me to approach the Renault

(in which B.'s baggage was already deposited) and waved me into the F.I.A.T., bed, bed-roll and all; whereupon t-d leaped in and seated himself opposite me in a position of perfect unrelaxation, which, despite my aforesaid exultation at quitting the section in general and Mr. A. in particular, impressed me as being almost menacing. Through the front window I saw my friend drive away with t-d Number 2 and Nemo; then, having waved hasty farewell to all *les Américains* that I knew—three in number—and having exchanged affectionate greetings with Mr. A. (who admitted he was very sorry indeed to lose us), I experienced the jolt of the clutch—and we were off in pursuit.

Whatever may have been the forebodings inspired by t-d Number 1's attitude, they were completely annihilated by the thrilling joy which I experienced on losing sight of the accursed section and its asinine inhabitants—by the indisputable and authentic thrill of going somewhere and nowhere, under the miraculous auspices of someone and no one—of being yanked from the putrescent banalities of an official non-existence into a high and clear adventure, by a *deus ex machina* in a grey-blue uniform, and a couple of tin derbies. I whistled and sang and cried to my *vis-à-vis*: "By the way, who is yonder distinguished gentleman who has been so good as to take my friend and me on this little promenade?"—to which, between lurches of the groaning F.I.A.T., t-d replied awesomely, clutching at the window for the benefit of his equilibrium: "Monsieur le Ministre de Sureté de Noyon."

Not in the least realizing what this might mean, I grinned. A responsive grin, visiting informally the tired cheeks of my *confrère*, ended by frankly connecting his worthy and enormous ears which were squeezed into oblivion by the oversize *casque*. My eyes, jumping from those ears, lit on that helmet and noticed for the first time an emblem, a sort

of flowering little explosion, or hair-switch rampant. It seemed to me very jovial and a little absurd.

"We're on our way to Noyon, then?"

T-d shrugged his shoulders.

Here the driver's hat blew off. I heard him swear, and saw the hat sailing in our wake. I jumped to my feet as the F.I.A.T. came to a sudden stop, and started for the ground—then checked my flight in mid-air and landed on the seat, completely astonished. T-d's revolver, which had hopped from its holster at my first move, slid back into its nest. The owner of the revolver was muttering something rather disagreeable. The driver (being an American of Vingt-et-Un) was backing up instead of retrieving his cap in person. My mind felt as if it had been thrown suddenly from fourth into reverse. I pondered and said nothing.

On again—faster, to make up for lost time. On the correct assumption that t-d does not understand English the driver passes the time of day through the minute window:

"For Christ's sake, Cummings, what's up?"

"You got me," I said, laughing at the delicate naiveté of the question.

"Did y' do something to get pinched?"

"Probably," I answered importantly and vaguely, feeling a new dignity.

"Well, if you didn't, maybe B—— did."

"Maybe," I countered, trying not to appear enthusiastic. As a matter of fact I was never so excited and proud. I was, to be

sure, a criminal! Well, well, thank God that settled one question for good and all—no more *Section Sanitaire* for me! No more Mr. A. and his daily lectures on cleanliness, deportment, etc.! In spite of myself I started to sing. The driver interrupted:

"I heard you asking the tin lid something in French. Whadhesay?"

"Said that gink in the Renault is the head cop of Noyon," I answered at random.

"GOODNIGHT. Maybe we'd better ring off, or you'll get in wrong with"—he indicated t-d with a wave of his head that communicated itself to the car in a magnificent skid; and t-d's derby rang out as the skid pitched t-d the length of the F.I.A.T.

"You rang the bell then," I commented—then to t-d: "Nice car for the wounded to ride in," I politely observed. T-d answered nothing….

Noyon.

We drive straight up to something which looks unpleasantly like a feudal dungeon. The driver is now told to be somewhere at a certain time, and meanwhile to eat with the Head Cop, who may be found just around the corner—(I am doing, the translating for t-d)—and, oh yes, it seems that the Head Cop has particularly requested the pleasure of this distinguished American's company at *déjeuner*.

"Does he mean me?" the driver asked innocently.

"Sure," I told him.

Nothing is said of B. or me.

Now, cautiously, t-d first and I a slow next, we descend. The F.I.A.T. rumbles off, with the distinguished one's backward-glaring head poked out a yard more or less and that distinguished face so completely surrendered to mystification as to cause a large laugh on my part.

"You are hungry?"

It was the erstwhile-ferocious speaking. A criminal, I remembered, is somebody against whom everything he says and does is very cleverly made use of. After weighing the matter in my mind for some moments I decided at all cost to tell the truth, and replied:

"I could eat an elephant."

Hereupon t-d lead me to the Kitchen Itself, set me to eat upon a stool, and admonished the cook in a fierce voice:

"Give this great criminal something to eat in the name of the French
Republic!"

And for the first time in three months I tasted Food.

T-d seated himself beside me, opened a huge jack-knife, and fell to, after first removing his tin derby and loosening his belt.

One of the pleasantest memories connected with that irrevocable meal is of a large, gentle, strong woman who entered in a hurry, and seeing me cried out:

"What is it?"

"It's an American, my mother," t-d answered through fried potatoes.

"Why is he here?" the woman touched me on the shoulder, and satisfied herself that I was real.

"The good God is doubtless acquainted with the explanation," said t-d pleasantly. "Not myself being the—"

"Ah, *mon pauvre*" said this very beautiful sort of woman. "You are going to be a prisoner here. Everyone of the prisoners has a *marraine*, do you understand? I am their *marraine*. I love them and look after them. Well, listen: I will be your *marraine*, too."

I bowed and looked around for something to pledge her in. T-d was watching. My eyes fell on a huge glass of red pinard. "Yes, drink," said my captor, with a smile. I raised my huge glass.

"*A la santé de ma marraine charmante!*"

—This deed of gallantry quite won the cook (a smallish, agile Frenchman) who shovelled several helps of potatoes on my already empty plate. The tin derby approved also: "That's right, eat, drink, you'll need it later perhaps." And his knife guillotined another delicious hunk of white bread.

At last, sated with luxuries, I bade adieu to my *marraine* and allowed t-d to conduct me (I going first, as always) upstairs and into a little den whose interior boasted two mattresses, a man sitting at the table, and a newspaper in the hands of the man.

"*C'est un Américain*," t-d said by way of introduction. The newspaper detached itself from the man who said: "He's welcome indeed: make yourself at home, Mr. American"—and bowed himself out. My captor immediately collapsed on one mattress.

I asked permission to do the same on the other, which favor was sleepily granted. With half-shut eyes my Ego lay and pondered: the delicious meal it had just enjoyed; what was to come; the joys of being a great criminal ... then, being not at all inclined to sleep, I read *Le Petit Parisien* quite through, even to *Les Voies Urinaires.*

Which reminded me—and I woke up t-d and asked: "May I visit the *vespasienne*?"

"Downstairs," he replied fuzzily, and readjusted his slumbers.

There was no one moving about in the little court. I lingered somewhat on the way upstairs. The stairs were abnormally dirty. When I reentered, t-d was roaring to himself. I read the journal through again. It must have been about three o'clock.

Suddenly t-d woke up, straightened and buckled his personality, and murmured: "It's time, come on."

Le bureau de Monsieur le Ministre was just around the corner, as it proved. Before the door stood the patient F.I.A.T. I was ceremoniously informed by t-d that we would wait on the steps.

Well! Did I know any more?—the American driver wanted to know.

Having proved to my own satisfaction that my fingers could still roll a pretty good cigarette, I answered: "No," between puffs.

The American drew nearer and whispered spectacularly: "Your friend is upstairs. I think they're examining him."

T-d got this; and though his rehabilitated dignity had accepted the "makin's" from its prisoner, it became immediately incensed:

"That's enough," he said sternly.

And dragged me *tout-à-coup* upstairs, where I met B. and his t-d coming out of the *bureau* door. B. looked peculiarly cheerful. "I think we're going to prison all right," he assured me.

Braced by this news, poked from behind by my t-d, and waved on from before by M. le Ministre himself, I floated vaguely into a very washed, neat, business-like and altogether American room of modest proportions, whose door was immediately shut and guarded on the inside by my escort.

Monsieur le Ministre said:

"Lift your arms."

Then he went through my pockets. He found cigarettes, pencils, a jack-knife and several francs. He laid his treasures on a clean table and said: "You are not allowed to keep these. I shall be responsible." Then he looked me coldly in the eye and asked if I had anything else?

I told him that I believed I had a handkerchief.

He asked me: "Have you anything in your shoes?"

"My feet," I said, gently.

"Come this way," he said frigidly, opening a door which I had not remarked. I bowed in acknowledgment of the courtesy, and entered room number 2.

I looked into six eyes which sat at a desk.

Two belonged to a lawyerish person in civilian clothes, with a bored expression, plus a moustache of dreamy proportions with which the owner constantly imitated a gentleman ringing for a drink. Two appertained to a splendid old dotard (a face all ski-jumps and toboggan slides), on whose protruding chest the rosette of the Legion pompously squatted. Numbers five and six had reference to Monsieur, who had seated himself before I had time to focus my slightly bewildered eyes.

Monsieur spoke sanitary English, as I have said.

"What is your name?"—"Edward E. Cummings."

—"Your second name?"—"E-s-t-l-i-n," I spelled it for him. —"How do you say that?"—I didn't understand.—"How do you say your name?"—"Oh," I said; and pronounced it. He explained in French to the moustache that my first name was Edouard, my second "A-s-tay-l-ee-n," and my third "Kay-umm-ee-n-gay-s"—and the moustache wrote it all down. Monsieur then turned to me once more:

"You are Irish?"—"No," I said, "American."—"You are Irish by family?"—"No, Scotch."—"You are sure that there was never an Irishman in your parents?"—"So far as I know," I said, "there never was an Irishman there."—"Perhaps a hundred years back?" he insisted.—"Not a chance," I said decisively. But Monsieur was not to be denied: "Your name it is Irish?"—"Cummings is a very old Scotch name," I told him fluently, "it used to be Comyn. A Scotchman named The Red Comyn was killed by Robert Bruce in a church. He was my ancestor and a very well-known man."—"But your second name, where have you got that?"—"From an Englishman, a friend of my father." This statement seemed to produce a

very favorable impression in the case of the rosette, who murmured: "*Un ami de son père, un Anglais, bon!*" several times. Monsieur, quite evidently disappointed, told the moustache in French to write down that I denied my Irish parentage; which the moustache did.

"What does your father in America?"—"He is a minister of the gospel," I answered. "Which church?"—"Unitarian." This puzzled him. After a moment he had an inspiration: "That is the same as a Free Thinker?"—I explained in French that it wasn't and that *mon père* was a holy man. At last Monsieur told the moustache to write: Protestant; and the moustache obediently did so.

From this point on our conversation was carried on in French, somewhat to the chagrin of Monsieur, but to the joy of the rosette and with the approval of the moustache. In answer to questions, I informed them that I was a student for five years at Harvard (expressing great surprise that they had never heard of Harvard), that I had come to New York and studied painting, that I had enlisted in New York as *conducteur voluntaire*, embarking for France shortly after, about the middle of April.

Monsieur asked: "You met B—— on the *paquebot*?" I said I did.

Monsieur glanced significantly around. The rosette nodded a number of times. The moustache rang.

I understood that these kind people were planning to make me out the innocent victim of a wily villain, and could not forbear a smile. *C'est rigoler*, I said to myself; they'll have a great time doing it.

"You and your friend were together in Paris?" I said "yes." "How long?"

"A month, while we were waiting for our uniforms."

A significant look by Monsieur, which is echoed by his *confrères*.

Leaning forward Monsieur asked coldly and carefully: "What did you do in
Paris?" to which I responded briefly and warmly: "We had a good time."

This reply pleased the rosette hugely. He wagged his head till I thought it would have tumbled off. Even the mustache seemed amused. Monsieur le Ministre de la Sureté de Noyon bit his lip. "Never mind writing that down," he directed the lawyer. Then, returning to the charge:

"You had a great deal of trouble with Lieutenant A.?"

I laughed outright at this complimentary nomenclature. "Yes, we certainly did."

He asked: "Why?"—so I sketched "Lieutenant" A. in vivid terms, making use of certain choice expressions with which one of the "dirty Frenchmen" attached to the section, a Parisien, master of argot, had furnished me. My phraseology surprised my examiners, one of whom (I think the moustache) observed sarcastically that I had made good use of my time in Paris.

Monsieur le Ministre asked: Was it true (a) that B. and I were always together and (b) preferred the company of the attached Frenchmen to that of our fellow-Americans?—to which I answered in the affirmative. Why? he wanted to know. So I explained that we felt that the more French we knew and the better we knew the French the better for us; expatiating a bit on the necessity for a complete mutual

understanding of the Latin and Anglo-Saxon races if victory was to be won.

Again the rosette nodded with approbation.

Monsieur le Ministre may have felt that he was losing his case, for he played his trump card immediately: "You are aware that your friend has written to friends in America and to his family very bad letters." "I am not," I said.

In a flash I understood the motivation of Monsieur's visit to *Vingt-et-Un*: the French censor had intercepted some of B.'s letters, and had notified Mr. A. and Mr. A.'s translator, both of whom had thankfully testified to the bad character of B. and (wishing very naturally to get rid of both of us at once) had further averred that we were always together and that consequently I might properly be regarded as a suspicious character. Whereupon they had received instructions to hold us at the section until Noyon could arrive and take charge—hence our failure to obtain our long-overdue permission.

"Your friend," said Monsieur in English, "is here a short while ago. I ask him if he is up in the aeroplane flying over Germans will he drop the bombs on Germans and he say no, he will not drop any bombs on Germans."

By this falsehood (such it happened to be) I confess that I was nonplussed. In the first place, I was at the time innocent of third-degree methods. Secondly, I remembered that, a week or so since, B., myself and another American in the section had written a letter—which, on the advice of the *sous-lieutenant* who accompanied *Vingt-et-Un* as translator, we had addressed to the Under-Secretary of State in French Aviation—asking that inasmuch as the American Government was about to take over the Red Cross (which meant that all the Sanitary Sections would be affiliated with

the American, and no longer with the French, Army) we three at any rate might be allowed to continue our association with the French by enlisting in l'Esquadrille Lafayette. One of the "dirty Frenchmen" had written the letter for us in the finest language imaginable, from data supplied by ourselves.

"You write a letter, your friend and you, for French aviation?"

Here I corrected him: there were three of us; and why didn't he have the third culprit arrested, might I ask? But he ignored this little digression, and wanted to know: Why not American aviation?—to which I answered: "Ah, but as my friend has so often said to me, the French are after all the finest people in the world."

This double-blow stopped Noyon dead, but only for a second.

"Did your friend write this letter?"—"No," I answered truthfully.—"Who did write it?"—"One of the Frenchmen attached to the section."—"What is his name?"—"I'm sure I don't know," I answered; mentally swearing that, whatever might happen to me the scribe should not suffer. "At my urgent request," I added.

Relapsing into French, Monsieur asked me if I would have any hesitation in dropping bombs on Germans? I said no, I wouldn't. And why did I suppose I was fitted to become aviator? Because, I told him, I weighed 135 pounds and could drive any kind of auto or motorcycle. (I hoped he would make me prove this assertion, in which case I promised myself that I wouldn't stop till I got to Munich; but no.)

"Do you mean to say that my friend was not only trying to avoid serving in the American Army but was contemplating

treason as well?" I asked.

"Well, that would be it, would it not?" he answered coolly. Then, leaning forward once more, he fired at me: "Why did you write to an official so high?"

At this I laughed outright. "Because the excellent *sous-lieutenant* who translated when Mr. Lieutenant A. couldn't understand advised us to do so."

Following up this *sortie*, I addressed the mustache: "Write this down in the testimony—that I, here present, refuse utterly to believe that my friend is not as sincere a lover of France and the French people as any man living!—Tell him to write it," I commanded Noyon stonily. But Noyon shook his head, saying: "We have the very best reason for supposing your friend to be no friend of France." I answered: "That is not my affair. I want my opinion of my friend written in; do you see?" "That's reasonable," the rosette murmured; and the moustache wrote it down.

"Why do you think we volunteered?" I asked sarcastically, when the testimony was complete.

Monsieur le Ministre was evidently rather uncomfortable. He writhed a little in his chair, and tweaked his chin three or four times. The rosette and the moustache were exchanging animated phrases. At last Noyon, motioning for silence and speaking in an almost desperate tone, demanded:

"*Est-ce-que vous détestez les boches?*"

I had won my own case. The question was purely perfunctory. To walk out of the room a free man I had merely to say yes. My examiners were sure of my answer. The rosette was leaning forward and smiling encouragingly. The moustache was making little *ouis* in the air with his pen.

And Noyon had given up all hope of making me out a criminal. I might be rash, but I was innocent; the dupe of a superior and malign intelligence. I would probably be admonished to choose my friends more carefully next time and that would be all....

Deliberately, I framed the answer:

"*Non. J'aime beaucoup les français.*"

Agile as a weasel, Monsieur le Ministre was on top of me: "It is impossible to love Frenchmen and not to hate Germans."

I did not mind his triumph in the least. The discomfiture of the rosette merely amused me. The surprise of the moustache I found very pleasant.

Poor rosette! He kept murmuring desperately: "Fond of his friend, quite right. Mistaken of course, too bad, meant well."

With a supremely disagreeable expression on his immaculate face the victorious minister of security pressed his victim with regained assurance: "But you are doubtless aware of the atrocities committed by the boches?"

"I have read about them," I replied very cheerfully.

"You do not believe?"

"*Ça ce peut.*"

"And if they are so, which of course they are" (tone of profound conviction) "you do not detest the Germans?"

"Oh, in that case, of course anyone must detest them," I averred with perfect politeness.

And my case was lost, forever lost. I breathed freely once more. All my nervousness was gone. The attempt of the three gentlemen sitting before me to endow my friend and myself with different fates had irrevocably failed.

At the conclusion of a short conference I was told by Monsieur:

"I am sorry for you, but due to your friend you will be detained a little while."

I asked: "Several weeks?"

"Possibly," said Monsieur.

This concluded the trial.

Monsieur le Ministre conducted me into room number 1 again. "Since I have taken your cigarettes and shall keep them for you, I will give you some tobacco. Do you prefer English or French?"

Because the French (*paquet bleu*) are stronger and because he expected me to say English, I said "French."

With a sorrowful expression Noyon went to a sort of bookcase and took down a blue packet. I think I asked for matches, or else he had given back the few which he found on my person.

Noyon, t-d and the grand criminal (alias I) now descended solemnly to the F.I.A.T. The more and more mystified *conducteur* conveyed us a short distance to what was obviously a prison-yard. Monsieur le Ministre watched me descend my voluminous baggage.

This was carefully examined by Monsieur at the *bureau*, of the prison. Monsieur made me turn everything topsy-turvy and inside out. Monsieur expressed great surprise at a huge shell: where did I get it?—I said a French soldier gave it to me as a souvenir.—And several *têtes d'obus*?—also souvenirs, I assured him merrily. Did Monsieur suppose I was caught in the act of blowing up the French Government, or what exactly?—But here are a dozen sketch-books, what is in them?—Oh, Monsieur, you flatter me: drawings.—Of fortifications? Hardly; of poilus, children, and other ruins.—Ummmm. (Monsieur examined the drawings and found that I had spoken the truth.) Monsieur puts all these trifles into a small bag, with which I had been furnished (in addition to the huge duffle-bag) by the generous Red Cross. Labels them (in French): "Articles found in the baggage of Cummings and deemed *inutile* to the case at hand." This leaves in the duffle-bag aforesaid: my fur coat, which I brought from New York; my bed and blankets and bed-roll, my civilian clothes, and about twenty-five pounds of soiled linen. "You may take the bed-roll and the folding bed into your cell"—the rest of my *affaires* would remain in safe keeping at the *bureau*.

"Come with me," grimly croaked a lank turnkey creature.

Bed-roll and bed in hand, I came along.

We had but a short distance to go; several steps in fact. I remember we turned a corner and somehow got sight of a sort of square near the prison. A military band was executing itself to the stolid delight of some handfuls of ragged *civiles*. My new captor paused a moment; perhaps his patriotic soul was stirred. Then we traversed an alley with locked doors on both sides, and stopped in front of the last door on the right. A key opened it. The music could still be distinctly heard.