

How Word Came To New Caledonia

(Written for "The Listener" by DORIAN SAKER)

IT happens to be part of my job to print and distribute a small news-sheet among N.Z.E.F.I.P. units quartered in a small French village in New Caledonia. As I passed the office of the *greffier municipale*, or local town clerk, I used to say "bon jour" and pass on. Little by little it became the practice to drop in and translate the news into French for a group which kept ever increasing, until now my audience usually consists of the local *Juge de paix*, the engineer of the *Travaux Publics*, the doctor, the head gendarme, the town clerk himself—and anyone else in the vicinity.

There is the same little drama when I arrive, my sheets under my arm. They all cease gossiping out on the verandah; the town clerk, Monsieur Nugues, ushers me into his little cubby hole, finds seats for the rest, and then says: "Eh, bien, les nouvelles sont bonnes?" Then I say: "Ah oui, very good," and start translating.

Frequently, especially when I am on the news from France, there are interruptions while an old map is spirited out of a pigeonhole, and this or that personage gives a dissertation on the peculiarities of the region involved. He may have been born there. For instance, when Montelimar on the Rhone was liberated, there were outbursts of "Ah, the nougat of Montelimar! You should taste it, m'sieur. C'est fameux!"

I DON'T think I shall ever forget the morning of August 24. This day, I went along armed with the news of the liberation of Paris. It was a morning flooded with sunshine. The trees the French call *piquants* were all out in soft balloons of bloom behind the village and the palms behind the Town Hall glistened like spears with the rain of the night before.

For some reason I was later than usual, and in the little office of the town clerk I found only an elderly mademoiselle who is in charge of the Boys' Orphanage, and was there on business, the chief gendarme, a roadman, and Monsieur Nugues himself. Monsieur Nugues asked them all whether they would like to hear the news of the day, and on their assent we all sat down and I began.

"Paris," I read. "a été libérée." Paris has been freed.

I cannot describe the response to these words, except that it was like that of a man who has been condemned to death, who has been placed against the wall, who has heard the fatal words: "Prepare to fire!", who then hears a horse galloping and knows that he is reprieved. Mademoiselle smiled happily and two scarcely perceptible tears glinted shyly in each eye. M. Nugues looked at the roadman and the gendarme in turn, and a whistle sped through his lips. "Ah..." Then they all began talking at once.

I COULD do nothing but look on and enjoy their happiness. For me Paris is a great city, a city of many old and sacred places and traditions, but it could never be the affair of the heart that it is for a Frenchman. For him Paris is his

beloved; it is Nirvana, the paradise of the Old Man of the Mountain, the mystic city of a mirage... When Paris was entered by the German hordes in 1940 France died. Now that it has been liberated France has risen from the dead.

As I watched and waited for the hubbub to evaporate, the local doctor who studied medicine at the Institut Pasteur at Paris, came on the scene. In an instant he was given the news. He too uttered a long-sounding "Ah..." and turned to me smiling: "For us this is almost as good as the day of victory."

Then he and mademoiselle fell to discussing just how the patriots had taken the Isle de France in the Seine, and—both from Paris—they reminisced over those old names the whole world knows: "Notre Dame de Paris," the "Louvre," and all the others.

Then I went my way, and when I looked back the doctor was still saying with a faraway look in his eyes: "You know the little church Notre Dame La Vierge, mademoiselle? That was where I first met my wife."

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