Letter from Ceylon Kingston to Harriet Heath, dated January 23, 1919

Ceylon S. Kingston

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C.S. KINGSTON TO HARRIET HEATH
(Published January 23, 1919)

No. 12, Rue d'Aguesseau, Paris, - Dear Miss Heath: I think I ought to tell you that the sweater and the socks that you, Miss Smith, and Mrs. Pomeroy were so kind as to knit for me have contributed a whole lot to my comfort. The organization furnished us with two pairs of shoes--one dress and one service. When I got here on the Vosges I got out the good old service shoes, put on woollen socks, found that I had plenty of room, and felt fine and comfortable. It isn't cold here, as we know it in the Northern States, but there is an all-pervasive dampness that gets to one unless he is well clothed.

The French use very little fuel for heating and little for cooking. It is quite the usual thing for a French woman to get a meal with what the American woman would start the fire with--a few twigs and branches which she makes burn by persuading the fire with a little bellows.

I have been living lately amid the people and the French troops in a little village that is cuddled between the hills of the Vosges.

It is extremely picturesque from a distance. When you actually come into the town it is likely to disappoint you. You are impressed, figurally and actually, by the omnipresent mud, mud, mud. It is worse now on account of automobiles, cannons, and tanks. The women go clumping around in their wooden shoes waging a continuous warfare against the mud which assails their thresholds. Some of the streets are not more than 25 feet wide. That they succeed as well as they do is quite wonderful. The houses, built of stone, with thick walls, look old and decrepit, but really are intended to last for centuries, and some of them have already run their allotted period and are good, apparently, for many more. To me they typify the solid characteristics of French national life. It is easy to see that the life of one of these communities differs little so far as the fundamentals go, from what it was in the 16th century. Of course, the people read the Parisian papers and have a larger mental outlook, but here they live and die in good-natured content except when war comes to sweep the men away to far corners of the world. As an example of this, the man of the house where I am writing is somewhere in Serbia with the army of General d'Esperay.

I sleep in a monumental bed. It weighs about as much, I think, as a grand piano. It creates in me an emotion of deep respect. How many generations have lain within its massive structure. Its builders must have planned it to last as long as the French nation endured. No frivolous tribe of house renting and house moving folk would build like that.

Despite the feeling of awe, I find it good for nine hours of sleep a night. So much sleep has soaked into its great timbers thru numerous years that one simply cannot resist the impulse to sleep. It exercises an hypnotic influence. Physicians should prescribe a bed of this kind for persons troubled with insomnia.
The approved method of domestic architecture, so far as street order goes, is house, barn, house, barn, etc. Each house and barn form a single unit with different entrances from the street. The barn of your next neighbor is built solidly against your house, and your own barn, in turn, is attached to your neighbor's house on the other side. All the farms are outside the town and thither the farmers go in the morning and return in the evening.

About three miles from here is another town that before the war was celebrated for its mineral springs. There were two large hotels that were turned into hospitals at the beginning of the war. At present they contain nearly 1600 patients.

To this point come many of the repatriated prisoners who, now that the armistice is in force, are making their way home from Germany.

I was there two evenings ago to a cinema entertainment. The principal thing was a Charlie Chaplin (the French call him Charlot) comedy of the extreme "custard-pie" type. All the delicate humor that comes from turning a hose on an audience in a theater and everything else that the mind of man has imagined along this line were combined in one grand riot.

I thought that sort of thing had grown stale to me, but I don't think I ever enjoyed a moving picture more. The poor fellows who had spent years in German prisons laughed until their sides must have ached. How good it was to be back in the home land and to enjoy the foolishness and nonsense of life--the frosting on the cake of life, as some one has said.

I was in Paris the latter part of November and saw the King of England and most of the French notables in the fêtes. But I think I shall longest remember the wild taxis. There is no traffic regulation and they drive at high speed thru the maze of streets. I had unholy intuition that it would be my fortune to see someone killed, but thru some mysterious dispensation of Providence no one ever seemed to get caught when I was around. Finally one day I saw a crowd, a damaged taxi, and copious streams of blood running in the gutters. Morbidly curious to see the unfortunate victim, I pushed thru the crowd and saw--a horse with its leg cut in the glass of the windshield.

Eleven-thirty and I must call it a day's work. My best wishes.

C. S. KINGSTON