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| Madamoiselle LouiseA Short Historical StoryBy Maryanne PetersI learned to speak English at school, and it was my favorite subject. I wanted to leave France – not permanently. The world is a big place and English is the language of the world, as much as we French hate to say it.My mother drew my attention to a family document and asked me to explain what it said. All that my mother knew was that “Madame Julie Celestine Baudhuin” was my great great great grandmother, born in 1876.It is a testimonial from the Daily Telegraph – a London newspaper – and was apparently accompanied by an annuity which was created form funds supplied by readers who wished to thank my forbear for her “her unflinching bravery” and “womanly loving-kindness to one whom her devotion saved”. |  |

Of course my curiosity was aroused. I had to learn more, and it struck me that the information must lie with the Daily Telegraph. I was determined to find out, but it was not until I travelled to London to improve my English that I learned the first version of the incredible tale, and then it was later that I learned the true version.

The setting was during and after the First World War, and the location was my home town of Le Cateau-Cambrésis near the border with Belgium. As a child growing up there, “The Great War” hung over the village because of the memorial and the cemetery, but it meant little to me until I started my research.

Le Cateau was on the front lines of the war and was overrun by the German forces shortly after the British forces arrived, ending up 60 kilometers (37 miles) behind enemy lines. One of the retreating units was a battalion called the Cameron Highlanders, and one of the soldiers in that regiment was the fresh-faced recruit named David Cruickshank.

It is unclear as to exactly how this this 19 year old soldier with only six months training found himself alone while the German forces rolled through our town, but it is said that he was injured, and that he decided that he would pretend to be dead by lying among the bodies that would later be buried in the cemetery nearby. As it turned out, the advance ignored the town in its move westward and he went to seek a place and somebody to tend to his wounds. That person turned out to be my great great great grandmother - Julie Baudhuin.

She was interviewed after the war and even travelled to London. She gave a vivid account of coming across the wounded Scottish soldier, who to her seemed to be “in a sorry state and almost mad … he was only a boy - 17 or 18 years of age only, and he was very small”.

This was August 27, 1914, a day after Cameronians (as his unit were called) had retreated from Le Cateau. It is unclear what his injuries were, but he was obviously disoriented. David claimed that he spoke French fluently, but it remains unclear as to how, or how much he spoke it. His circumstances were clear to Julie however – and she was a wife and mother, with a husband and son in the war themselves – a husband who would be taken prisoner and a son who would soon be.

In her interview Julie said that she thought about her husband and son in the same position and whether a stranger would render assistance to them. Anyway, she took David into her home and provided a place for him to hide in the garden shed behind the house.

Julie had her two younger children with her – Leon was 17 years old, and Marie, was then 12. In time they moved David from the shed into the house where they could better feed him and attend to his wounds. He soon recovered from whatever his injuries were, but it may well have been that they were more mental than physical.

Two weeks after he had been taken in Julie learned of the death of her oldest son - killed in battle on September 6th, 1914. She later said that this strengthened her resolve to keep the young Scot alive. She said – “This war has taken my son; God has sent me another in his place”.

The town was now well behind the front lines and became a billeting place for German soldiers. Houses were regularly inspected as a place where soldiers could be accommodated. Thankfully a German was never placed there, but on more than one occasion the house was visited, and David had to hide in a laundry basket.

After 3 months in hiding David had recovered from his wounds and was conversing with the family in near perfect French. He told Julie that he was confident enough in the language to step outside and pass for a villager, perhaps if his uniform could be dyed black. Julie cautioned against this. Even Leon who was two years younger was constantly being stopped by the Germans who question why he was not a combatant. Women were never stopped and questioned, which is perhaps why Julie developed her plan.

She enlisted the assistance of her cousin Marcel, who was the local hairdresser. Marcel had hairpieces that could be woven into the blond hair of the young Scotsman and he also had access to other garments that would assist in perfecting the disguise – corsetry and the like, and clothes that a younger woman might wear. Marcel also assisted in developing a look that was feminine but natural – women in wartime do not dress up or wear much in the way of cosmetics.

As for his mannerisms and movements, correcting these required extensive practise and in this Julie and Marie were ready to help. The length of his stride was far too long for a French Mademoiselle, even when parading in the living room. As the story goes – “It was suggested he should tie a length of string to his ankles to shorten his stride. After a lot of practice, David was able to effect the movements of a demure female. David grew in confidence and was at last able to leave the Baudhuin home during the day, and, posing as a cousin of the family, Mademoiselle Louise was born.”

Julie would explain to others that Louise was a second cousin and a refugee from the town of Peronne, on the River Somme, and a major battleground at this time. The war had resulted in many movements of the populations in small towns and nothing in this explanation was unusual. The whole pretence rested on the ability of a young Scotsman to pass as a French woman, and here he seemed to be able to do that with remarkable ease.

In fact, Louise attracted the attention of German soldiers. For whatever reason “she” felt the desire to give some “an enchanting smile” to the effect that “they were delighted that a young French lady looked so friendly towards them”. It really did seem to be very risky, but somehow Lousie was able to escape detection.

For obvious reasons Louise shared a room with Leon, taking the bed of the boy’s dead brother. The winter of 1917-1917 was extremely cold and difficult throughout Europe. It was known as “The Turnip Winter” because nothing else was available. Marie came to her mother’s bed for warmth, and it appears that the young men of the house also shared a bed. This may explain what happened after the war, or even before it ended.

Both Leon and Louise needed to find work to help the family which was in very dire straits. Neither wanted to work for the Germans but indirectly they did, because they were on that side of the front line and that was where the money was coming from. Leon went to work in the kitchen of the local inn (which served mainly Germans) and Julie taught Louise some skills as a seamstress that she put to use (mainly for the Germans) as well as helping out Cousin Marcel in his hairdressing business (mainly cutting German hair).

These were very hard times for the French villages behind the German lines, and even harder for young woman as Louis appeared to be. But she was well supported by her boss Marcel and by her “boyfriend” Leon. That and it is likely that she retained some strength to fight off unwanted advances. But the French population also struggled for food and what food there was could be requisitioned by the German army. Still, Louise and Leon had each other and the redoubtable Julie watching over them both, and young Marie.

Then the tide of the ware turned in 1918. There is some reference to the second Battle of Le Cateau in the histories, but official records say it never took place. The official historians later chose to designate it “The Battle of Cambrai 1918” then “The Pursuit to the Selle” which was crossed on 20 October, but my home town itself was cleared of Germans on 17 October 1918. The townsfolk turned out to thank the liberating armies, which were mainly British, and it seemed that Louise was now free to drop the disguise, cut her hair and rejoin her comrades preparing to return home, but that is not what happened.

It seemed as if she was so deeply involved with Leon, or perhaps she had been through so much as Louise that she chose not to reveal herself.

From what I understand she and Leon moved to Paris. I heard that Leon went on to run an expensive restaurant in Paris and that Louise became successful in the fashion industry. They remained in touch with my great great grandmother Marie, but she died in 1988 before I was born, and it seems that her brother and his wife died well before that. Of course there would have been no children for them and nobody to tell their remarkable story. I scarcely believe it myself.

The End

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Author’s Note: Incredibly this tale follows reported facts up until about Paragraph 19 when my romantic instincts have jerked me into fiction. Rather than have the fugitive and the family exposed by the treacherous “Madame D” and imprisoned until the Armistice, my story takes another direction.

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