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Opening Extract from...

A Hero in France

Written by Alan Furst

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A HERO IN FRANCE

ALAN FURST

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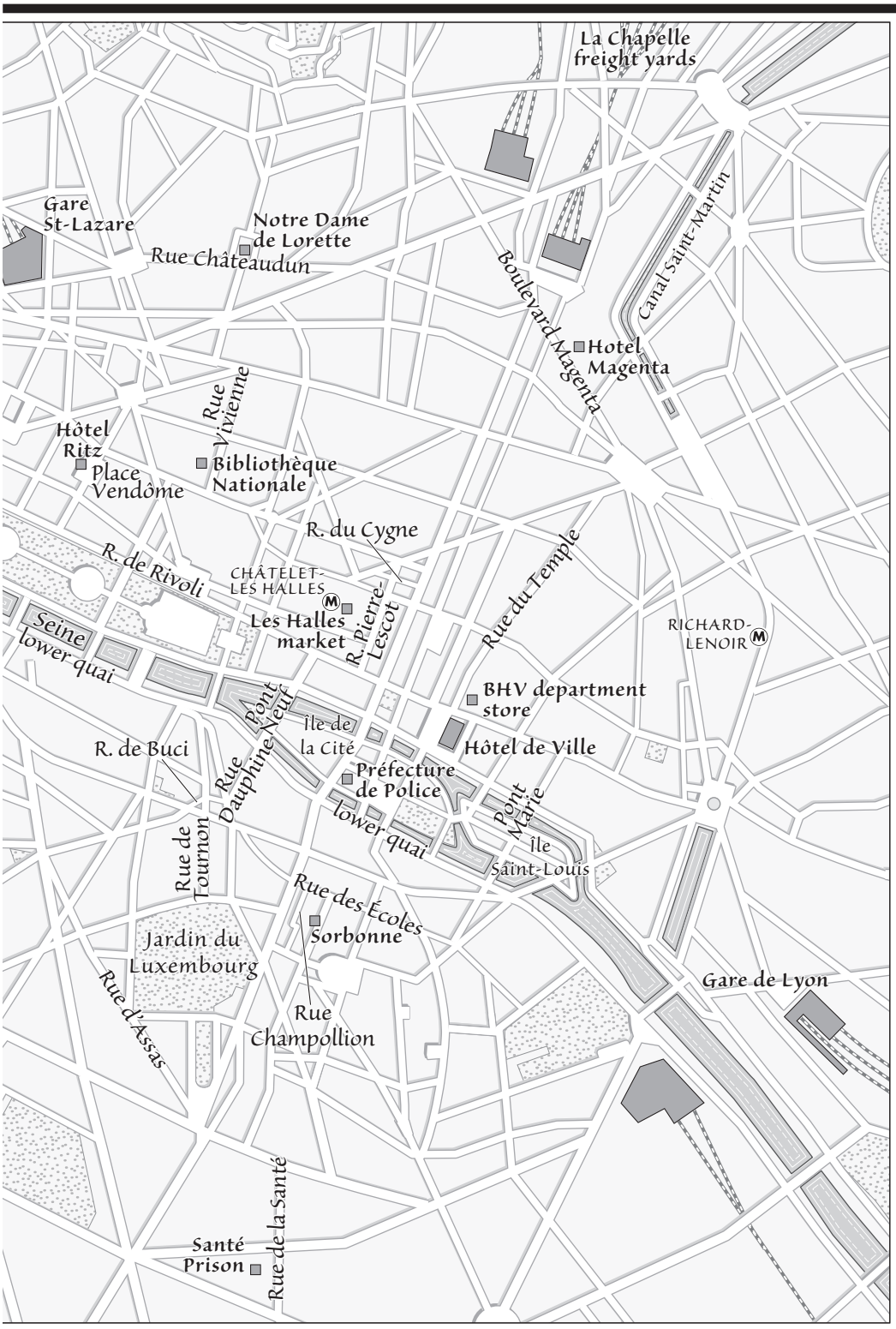
In the spring of 1941, as British bombing raids over Germany intensified, some of the returning aircraft, badly damaged and losing altitude, managed to escape German territory, their pilots and crews parachuting into the Occupied Zone of France. Here they were hidden, until they made contact with small groups of French men and women who had organized escape lines that led out of the country and, eventually, back to England.

This was the beginning of what came to be known as the French Resistance.

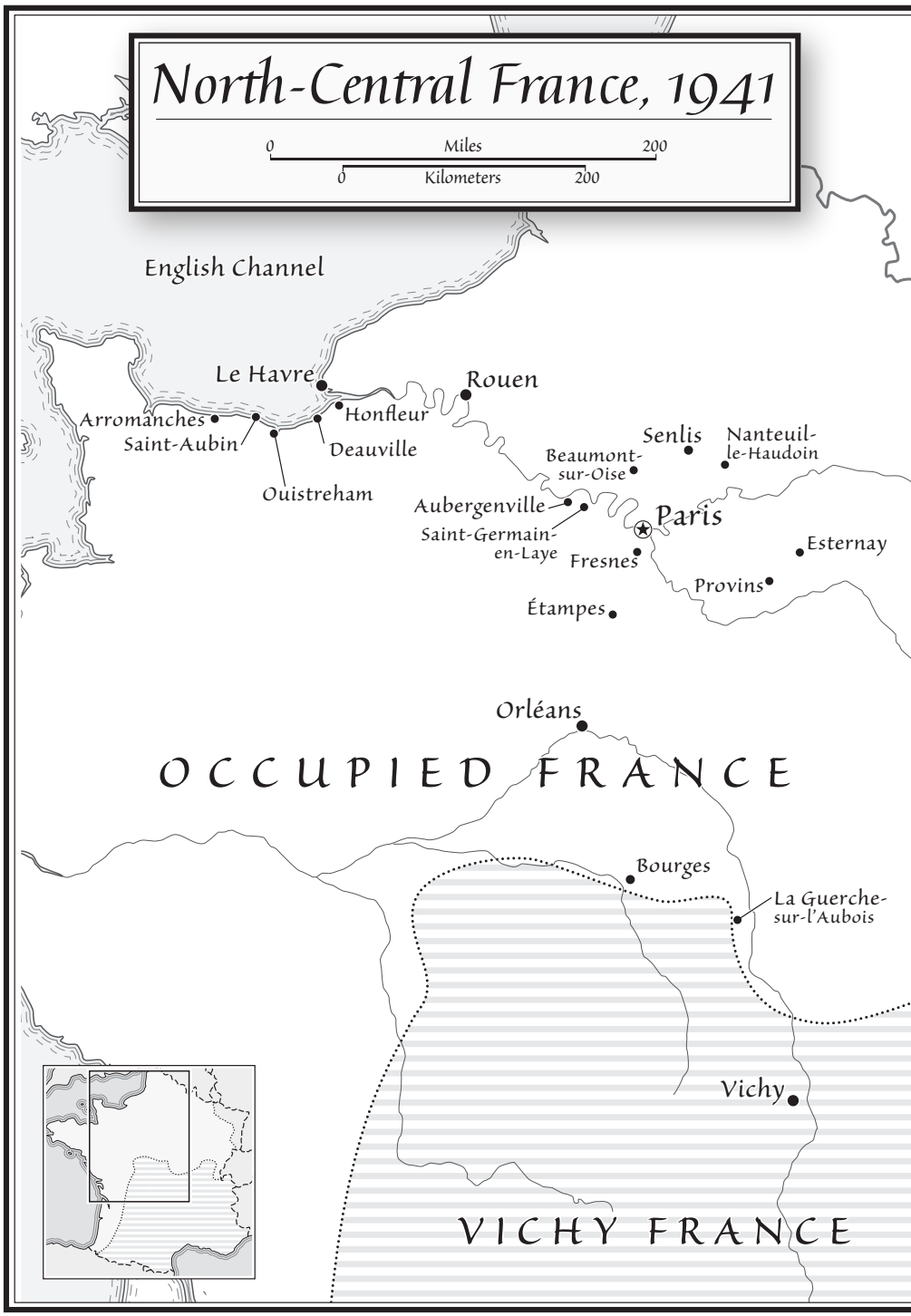
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YOU
MUST NOT
MEET THEIR
EYES …

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Occupied Paris, the tenth day of March, 1941.

At eight-twenty in the evening, the man known to his Resistance cell as Mathieu waited in a doorway where he could watch the entrance of the Métro station on the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. He tried to look beyond the entrance, at the tree-lined boulevard, but there wasn't much to be seen, only shapes in the night – the streetlamps had been painted blue and the windows of apartment buildings curtained or shuttered in the blackout ordered by the German Occupation Authority. A sad thing, he thought, a dark and silent city. Silent because the Germans had forbidden the use of cars, buses and taxis. But in that silence, nightingales could be heard singing in the parks, and in that darkness the streets were lit by silvery moonlight when the clouds parted.

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A night earlier, at the same Métro, Mathieu had noticed a grey bicycle, bound to the trunk of a chestnut tree by a stout chain. Now he saw that it was still there. Bicycles had never been more valuable, and soon enough this one would be stolen if its owner did not retrieve it. Where was he? What had happened to him? In a cell at some police Préfecture? Possibly. But if the Paris police arrested you, friends or family would be notified and someone would have come for the bicycle. Maybe its owner was floating in the Seine – a bad fate but not the worst fate, the worst fate was to be taken by the Gestapo. And if that were so he might never be heard of again: *Nacht und Nebel,* night and fog, Hitler's very own invention; people disappeared and nobody would ever find out what had become of them. They went out to run an errand and never returned. A sharp lesson for family and friends, punished forever by their imaginations.

Now the ground trembled beneath Mathieu's feet and he could hear a rumble from down below as the train pulled into the station. Moments later, the passengers appeared, climbing up the staircase to the boulevard. They were still wearing winter clothes because it was cold in the city, apartments and offices barely heated for want of coal. As the crowd emerged, one woman caught his eye, she was lovely to look at; the face of a fallen angel, and dressed in the latest Paris fashion: she wore ski pants – warmer than a skirt – a ski jacket, and boots. She was lucky to have the boots; some passengers wore clogs, wood-soled shoes, as there was no leather to be had for repair. To Mathieu, the passengers looked tired and worn – they might well have looked like that at the end of a working day before the war but for Mathieu the weariness was different, deeper. Lately one heard the expression *Je suis las,* it meant *I am tired of the way I have to live my life,* and this was what Mathieu saw in their faces, in the way they walked. But then, he would think that, he cared for the people of Paris, as though he were a guardian. The woman in the ski jacket returned his look; a glance, nothing flirtatious, rueful perhaps, *in other times than these* . . .

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Ah, at last, here was Lisette, seventeen years old, a lycée student. She appeared not to notice him but, as she walked past the doorway, she said, her voice low and confidential, 'They have crossed the border. They're in Spain.'

12 March. In Senlis, thirty miles north of Paris, RAF sergeant Arthur Gillen was hiding in the cellar of a barbershop.

At six-thirty in the evening, Mathieu found him sitting on a blanket – as much of a bed as he had – and whittling a block of wood with a clasp knife. Looking up at Mathieu he said, 'Are you the man taking me to Paris?' Mathieu spoke good English but Gillen, with a heavy Manchester accent, was hard to understand.

'Yes, that's me,' Mathieu said and offered Gillen a cigarette.

The RAF man was very grateful. Mathieu, lighting it for him, said, 'We have a few minutes to make our train, Arthur, so we'd better be going.'

The barber, shaving a customer, gestured to Mathieu as they left the shop. It was a chilly twilight in northern France, with a lead-coloured sky and a mean little wind, so the two walked quickly, heads down, as they made their way to the railway station. Gillen was young, surely not yet twenty, and looked to Mathieu like a worker – most likely a worker in the Manchester fabric mills. He was small and thin with something of the factory gnome about him, he just needed a stub of cigarette stuck to his lip and a worker's cap. He wore a soiled grey overcoat and was, Mathieu saw, walking with a limp.

'Are you hurt, Arthur?' Mathieu said.

'Not much. Sprained an ankle when my parachute came down, but I'll be fine. I just want to go home.'

'Well, we'll try and get you there.'

With luck, he would get there and then, after a brief furlough, he'd go back to the war, and that was very much the point of Mathieu's work in the Resistance. It would have been nice to think

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that Mathieu's efforts were inspired by humane instincts, but Europe was not so humane that year. Sgt Gillen was trained and experienced in a demanding job, wireless operator on a Wellington bomber, and was in fact a *weapon*. And Britain needed any weapon – especially pilots but aircrew were almost as valuable – it could get its hands on because it was losing the war.

When the railway station came into view, Mathieu said, 'No more talking, Arthur, we don't want anybody to hear you speaking English.' The station platform passport control was, as usual, perfunctory – local police glanced at the passengers' identity documents and waved them on towards the waiting train. There were fewer trains now – French coal was used to make German homes cosy and snug – and they were all overcrowded; the compartments filled, the aisles packed with cold, tired travellers shifting from one foot to the other; with the train crawling at this pace they would never get home.

Then, twenty miles from Paris, the locomotive was shunted to a different track, one that swerved away from the passenger line. A businessman next to Mathieu said, 'What the hell are they doing now?'

A man standing nearby said, 'There's no depot here, this is a track used by freight trains, leads to a water tower and a coaling station.'

A few sighs of despair and a muttered curse or two could be heard in the aisle – *now what?*

Very slowly, the Senlis local passed lines of freight cars on two tracks to its left. On the right-hand side, a weedy field bordered by partly thawed mounds of soot-blackened snow. At last, with a hiss of steam from the locomotive, they stopped by a water tower. 'They must need water,' the businessman said. 'Couldn't they get it in Senlis?'

When a conductor appeared from the next car everybody turned towards him, waiting for what they sensed would not be good news. 'Mesdames and messieurs, all passengers must leave

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the train.'

As Mathieu and Gillen got out, they saw a nightmare: in the white glare of floodlights, a surprise control; gendarmes – French military police in khaki uniforms – were everywhere, there were two of them by the steps that led to the ground, herding the passengers towards a concrete slab beneath the water tower, where four tables manned by gendarme officers awaited them, the control guarded by gendarmes carrying submachine guns. As the passengers formed a ragged line, getting their documents ready for inspection, the businessman said, 'They are looking for somebody, a fugitive.'

Mathieu pressed the inside of Gillen's arm, holding him back, trying to get as far away from the tables as possible. Gillen would be asked questions; there was no way he could answer them. For fifteen minutes, the lines moved slowly; stopping, taking a step or two, and stopping again. Then, something went wrong at the tables. A well-dressed older woman, harassed beyond patience, was screaming at the officers. A moment later, two of the gendarmes took her by the elbows, arresting her, which drew growls of muted protest from the passengers. She refused to move and, when they lifted her off the ground, she kicked her feet – one of her shoes flew away – and shrieked. From the crowd of passengers, a gasp.

'Now,' Mathieu said and, with Gillen following, dropped to the ground and, expecting a police whistle or a bullet in the back, rolled beneath the coach, crawled over the rails, and, with Gillen beside him, crouched behind the high wheel of the local train. Then they climbed over a coupling to reach the next track, where a locomotive was taking on coal. By the cab two railwaymen, one in an engineer's cap, were talking and having a cigarette. When Mathieu approached them, the engineer said, 'What's going on over there?'

'Surprise control. We have to get away from here or we're dead.'

The engineer paused for a close look at the two, then said, 'On the run? Is it you they're looking for?'

'No, but my friend can't be questioned.'

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'What'd you do? Hold up a bank?'

'Defied the Boche.'

'Hmm, they could do with a little defiance. Well, you can ride down to Paris with us but we can't stop on the way, we're going to the La Chapelle freightyards.' The engineer led them to one of the freight waggons and rolled the door back. 'We'll let you out in Paris. In an hour, maybe, we have to go slow, we had to paint the locomotive's windows blue because of the blackout, so we can't see much. And don't disturb the freight in here, it's going to Germany on another train. Oh yes, and good for you, whatever the hell it is that you're doing.'

Sitting with his back against a pile of wooden crates, Mathieu, who had been a tank captain in 1940, smelled Cosmoline, the grease used to protect weapons when they left the armoury. Mathieu shook his head. 'Look at this, Sergeant, a shipment of arms made in French factories, headed for the Wehrmacht.'

Gillen made the sound of spitting. 'Maybe some of my mates will take care of them once they're on German railway tracks, could be some ammunition there too, it makes a great show when you hit an arms train.'

For a time they were silent – the only sound in the darkened freight car the rhythmic clatter of the train's wheels – then Mathieu said, 'How did you get to Senlis?'

'I landed near a village and found the local priest, that's what we're taught to do if we bail out over France. Fine old man, Père Anselme, looked like a prophet in the films, you know, white hair, face like a statue. I'd been in the woods for two days, I was wet through and banged around, shaking like a lost dog. He fed me, gave me some brandy, got in contact with the right people, and took me to the barbershop.'

'You were shot down over France?'

'Well, hit in Germany, came down in France. We were on a night bombing run to the railyards at Essen, and dropped incendiaries and regular bombs, there were fires below us when we banked