

# The Sergeant's Mail

By  
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## Sergeant Kennedy Wrote a Want-Ad for Love and Found That, Although Fifty Million Americans CAN Be Wrong, One Little French Girl Can Set Things Right

THE company clerk glanced up as the shadow darkened the doorway . . . then turned wearily back to his typing.

"So, it's only you," he observed with a manifest lack of enthusiasm. "Can't you find any place to air them new stripes but the orderly room? I got work to do."

The red-headed youth leaned a carefully pressed o. d. shoulder against the door sill and eyed the typist scornfully.

The company clerk stopped hammering his keys and leaned back to eye his visitor solemnly. "Listen here, Sergt. James J. Kennedy," he said sternly. "Run along and peddle your papers. I got to get this pay roll up."

"O, very well," the red-headed sergeant strolled across toward the smaller of the two vacant desks.

The company clerk growled, threateningly. "I'll take the top's desk," went on Sergt. Kennedy. "Where is the old boy, anyway? Out shining his buttons?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," said the company clerk. "He and you are the dudes in this outfit. He is, because he's been in the army all his life and you because you got new stripes to show off."

"Tut, tut, my good man," replied the sergeant. "Added rank brings new responsibilities and troubles. Which, of course, a mere corporal can't understand."

"Go chase yourself," snapped the company clerk, who was keenly aware of the fact that his duties should have meant an added stripe. "As for troubles—what troubles you got I'd like to know?"

"Well, for one thing," and the gay timbre suddenly faded from the sergeant's tones, "everybody in the outfit got letters from home today except me. Even the replacements that came in last week," he added bitterly.

The company clerk glanced up with quick understanding. He answered quickly:

"You got nothing on me, big boy. I didn't get any either. That's one reason I got a grouch on."

The big red head stared at him pensively. "I guess you and I were the only two men in this outfit that didn't get any mail then, Perecelli. It's tough, isn't it?"

"Damn right, it's tough," snorted Corporal Perecelli. "A fellow leaves home and goes out and enlists in this lousy war, and the very friends he's fightin' to protect won't even drop him a line after he gets to France. I didn't get any mail last time, either. And my girl was goin' with some damned gob the last I heard. I—"

"Aw, you're making it worse than it really is, though, Perecelli. The folks at home aren't so bad. Maybe the letters got lost. Or maybe they just don't think. Why, I bet I know fifty girls in New York that would write to you if they knew you felt that way."

"Fifty nothin'," fumed the corporal. "I betcha fifty francs they ain't fifty girls in the whole United States that'd write to a lousy soldier."

"I'll bet you," responded Perecelli briskly. "And there's more than that. I'll bet there's sixty."

Corporal Mario Perecelli was a literal soul. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a roll of dirty French banknotes. Carefully he selected two twenties and a ten franc note and plunked them emphatically down on the open field desk beside him.

"There's the money," he said. "Now, where's your fifty girls? Fifty'll be enough."

The sergeant stared at the money in astonishment. Then he grinned and produced a single fifty franc bill. He laid it down beside him.

"Covered," he said. "How you going to prove I can't?"

Corporal Perecelli scratched his head. "Why, I dunno," he answered. "I guess you might advertise."

The sergeant gazed at him fixedly for a long moment. Then he grinned again.

"Perecelli, you're a genius," he announced. "I'll bet you this fifty francs that I can send an ad home to a New York paper and get fifty replies from it."

"You've made yourself a bet, soldier," snapped the corporal. "I'm tellin' you they don't give a damn back there. Here, you can sit down at my typewriter and write your ad. Come on. Don't back out now."

"It's a go," laughed the sergeant. "Here, put the money in an envelope and we'll leave it with the top. He's honest. And give me that machine."

GRUNTING, the corporal arose and the sergeant slid into his place. Quickly he inserted a sheet of paper and wrote. The corporal watched the operation with a sardonic smile.

"How's this?" he read presently.

"Personal—Will the young lady who was dressed in white and led small brother by the hand, and who smiled at soldier on passing troop train" and so on. Will that do?"

"I guess so," growled Perecelli, doubtfully. "But you got to sign your name to it. I live in New York and if any of my friends saw that they'd think I'd gone dippy."

"O, K.," laughed the sergeant, and wrote in the address: "Sergt. James J. Kennedy, Overseas Replacement Depot, Camp Pontanazen, Brest, France. How's that?"

"I guess it's all right," replied the corporal. "But I think the whole idea is goofy, if you ask me."

And the letter had been dropped in the outgoing mail box before the door opened again.

Both men whirled to face the newcomer, who stood smiling in the doorway. He was a stocky, stern-faced man of middle age, with the chevrons of a first sergeant on his trim khaki sleeve.

"Hello, Top," greeted the company clerk. "Pay roll all up?"

Swinging over to his desk, he dropped down in a chair and continued to smile at Kennedy.

The latter suddenly grew silent. Something about the older man's expression was pregnant with meaning. Then the first sergeant spoke.

"I've got a transfer for you, sergeant. How'd you like to go to Paris?"

The red head was galvanized into action in a second. He sprang to his feet with a whoop and his little overseas cap went sailing toward the ceiling.

"Paris!" he shouted. "Little old Parsee. The pearl of great price. Wine, women and song! And what women! Who wouldn't want to go to Paris?"

Then he grew suddenly sober. "But you're kidding, sarge. Why, everybody in the A. E. F. wants a station in Paris."

"No kidding," smiled the first sergeant. "There's a vacancy for a non-commissioned officer who can type, with the railways, requisitions and claims board. I've already sent in your name."

Kennedy dashed across the room to grip the top's hand.

"I'm tempted to kiss you frog fashion, sarge," he bubbled. "When do I go?"

"Right away," returned the first sergeant. He produced a sheaf of papers from an inside pocket.

"Here's your travel orders and commutation. I had everything fixed up this afternoon because I wanted to get you cleared out before the old man found out about it and ordered me to keep you here. You're entitled to some fun, kid."

"OUI, ma petite," said Sergt. Kennedy suavely. "mon . . . mon pater . . . no that's not it . . . how do you say it . . . my father . . ."

"Votre pere?" suggested the little telephone operator.

"Oui, mon pere . . . well, il-ya . . . mon . . . il . . . O, heck, darn such a language . . . well, anyhow he owns New York. Compris?"

The girl was staring at him wide-eyed.

"It . . . it is ver-ree odd," commented the little telephone operator.

"Sure; but all us Kennedys are like that," rejoined the sergeant. "We're modest and self-effacing. Why, only a few people know that my brother writes all of President Wilson's speeches."

The buzzing instrument board prevented the girl's answer. Hastily she snatched up a snake-like length of cord and plugged it into one of the holes before her. Then she trilled into her transmitter:

"Hospital American."

When she had ended and turned about with a smile, the red-headed sergeant was staring moodily out of the window.

"Your brother . . . he is a fr-iend of the gr-eat Pr-residente Vilson," she observed hopefully.

"O, sure," Sergt. Kennedy took up his time again. "That's the reason they shipped me up here to the sweetest hospital in the A. E. F., right here in Paris to have my tonsils out. And it was the greatest surgeon in the army who took 'em out last week, too."

But the girl was very doubtful.

"I do not know," she said. "They told us not to talk to les soldats americains . . . and you . . . peut-etre I should telephone to your colonel . . ."

The sergeant snatched the cord from her hand. "Never mind, Yvonne," he said brusquely, then turned the full light of his smile on her and her soul melted within her. "Here, I'll get on with my inspection."

There came a buzz at the instrument board. Instantly he plugged in the cord and spoke into the transmitter:

"Hospital American."

A voice, speaking good, honest English came over the wire.

"Is this Camp Hospital 121?"

"It is," replied the sergeant.

"Got a Sergt. James J. Kennedy on your rolls? Patient, I think," went on the voice.

The red-headed sergeant flushed and a worried wrinkle sprang into being between his eyes.

"We may have," he replied guardedly. "What you want with him?"

He nodded a quick reassurance to the pretty

little phone operator who was watching him anxiously and placed a hand over the transmitter while he hurled a phrase at her.

"S'all right, Gen. Pershing wants to talk to me."

He turned back to the instrument as the voice at the other end of the wire barked:

"This is the P. E. S. . . . you know, Postal Express Service . . . up at the Hotel Mediteranee . . . and this guy Kennedy is causin' us a lot of grief. If you can get hold of him tell him he's got half the mail in the A. E. F. up here waitin' for him now. His outfit said he was in the hospital and we don't want to forward all this stuff unless we're sure he's still there."

His hearer stared at the instrument board bug-eyed.

"Are you sure it's for Sergt. James J. Kennedy?" he pressed.

"That's the guy," replied the voice. "It was all for—"



And now the interruptions came thick and fast amid growing laughter and excitement. . . .

warded up here care of the R. R. and C. from the Replacement depot down at Pontanazen. Have you got him?"

"Yeah, I know him," replied the sergeant. "And listen, if you really have got some mail for him sit on it for a while, will you?"

He'll come right down after it and glad to. He hasn't had a letter in six months. Don't bother to send it to him."

The voice at the end of the wire laughed bitterly.

"If he's really got SOME mail, says you. Listen, brother, he's got a shipload. Better tell him to bring a truck for it."

The instrument clicked.

The red-headed sergeant eyed it pensively for an instant.

"Well, I'll be damned," he observed.

Then he swung back to the girl. "I beg your pardon, mademoiselle, but I forgot. Now, if you will excuse me, I must dash downtown. Gen. Pershing wants to see me personally. But I'll be back."

With that he suddenly swooped down on her and kissed her roundly, then vanished with a broad shouldered swagger through the door, leaving behind him a sputtering French girl.

It was four hours later.

As the door of the convalescent ward opened the occupant of every bed automatically turned his eyes that way. And just as automatically came the booming chorus from a score of throats:

"When do we eat?"

A trim figure in khaki stood framed in the doorway, his right arm wig-wagging the military signal for "cease firing."

"Pipe down you gold bricks," adjured a voice. "This isn't your orderly. This is that gallant soldier, Sergt. James J. Kennedy, returning from an expedition into the enemy country laden with loot."

There was an instant of pause, after which a querulous voice piped up from the end of the room:

"Then—when do we go home? Whatta they keepin' us here after this damned Armistice is signed for?"

But there was no answer. The room was watching Sergt. Kennedy, who had turned to lift a burden from the outer hallway. It was a huge barracks bag tied with a string and crammed to overflowing. It was evidently light for the soldier swing it in easily. The bag rolled over on its side and he turned back to lift its twin through the door.

Then he swung to one side, holding the door, and spoke:

"Here we are. Come in . . . er . . . I mean . . . entrez, monseigneur, noos vovsee."

The ward stared in startled silence as through the doorway, stooping under an enormous burden, came a tiny Frenchman. The cap and bristling mustachio identified him as a taxi driver. Piled on his shoulders were three more of the bulging string tied barracks bags.

Silently Sergt. Kennedy pointed out the bed that was his and the little Frenchman staggered down the aisle to dump his burden there.

Then the red-headed sergeant strolled down to his bed, posed beside the bags with his hands thrust into his breeches pockets, and smiled condescendingly upon his mates.

"Just a few love letters from my girl friends back in the states," he observed airily. "I only brought the important ones with me. My secretary will attend to the rest."

The response was raucous.

"Little old John Cupid Barrymore in person, ain'tcha?" gibed Sergt. O'Toole from his corner of the ward. "Hey, gang, look at the answer to a maiden's prayer. They had to send him to Paris to keep the front lines from getting all cluttered up with women."

But the jeers and catcalls died into interested silence as the sergeant, ignoring all interruptions, settled himself on his bed and cut the string of the topmost bag. Half smothered oaths of amazement burst from his mates as a stream of letters cascaded out over the brown blankets, some of them falling to the floor.

Corporal Ranzito in the adjoining bed reached over and picked up a handful of them, glancing at the addresses before he passed them back.

"Hell, fellows," he gasped, "they ARE letters . . . all addressed to him, too."

Sergt. Kennedy smiled in a superior fashion and solemnly picked up the first letter and slit it open. A photograph fell out, but the eyes of the awe-stricken spectators were too far away to perceive more than it was the picture of a woman.

Hastily the sergeant ran through the letter and his eyes grew wider. Then he reached into the envelope and fished out a long newspaper clipping. He glanced over it for a minute and then looked up to meet the curious stares that accompanied the flood of questions. He held up his hand for quiet.

"Listen, fellows," he began, "this is the damndest thing that ever happened to me. I don't know about the rest of these letters, but I've got a hunch they're all about the same thing. Anyhow, this one is the result of a fool bet I made with a corporal down at Brest. And I suppose I'll never see him again to collect my money. But, well, you see it was this way."

HE plunged into a description of the terms of the bet, but his discourse was interrupted by the gleeful howls of his listeners. When he had finished he held up the newspaper clippings.

"But here's the pay-off, gang. Instead of putting in the ad they wrote a story about it . . . a big story. Listen to this:

"Lure of a Smile Cheers Lonely Soldier in France," he read. "That's the headline, clear across the page. And here's the story:

"Somewhere in France today a bit of hopeless romance offers the one bright spot for a fearless Yankee hero. Out there facing the Hindenburg line with ready bayonet or slogging through the dismal mud of the trenches he is cheered by the golden memory of a fleeting smile. It is the most precious possession of a gallant fighting man. He is Sergt. James J. Kennedy . . ."

But here the reader was forced to pause, to yield to another gleeful chorus:

"Yea, our gallant fighting man," shrieked Corporal Ranzito. "Gents, I give you the health of our hero with the ready bayonet."

"Boy, no wonder the kaiser ordered an armistice and high tailed it for Holland," shouted the signal corps private. "He heard that Sergt. James J. Kennedy had landed in France and . . ."

"Man, I'm gonna get me some of that dismal mud from the trenches what was trod by his heroic foot," called First Class Private Levy, "and auction it off when I get back to New York."

But curiosity triumphed in the end and the reader was allowed to resume:

" . . . at present stationed at Camp Pontanazen. But as he goes into the front lines . . . even as the whistles shrill out their deadly message of zero hour he hears with him a wonderful vision, a vision of a glorious American girl back home. She it was whose smile flashed encouragement . . ."

"And the funny thing is," continued the sergeant, "that there must have been a girl there that morning, who did smile at a soldier. Because here's her letter. It's funny that I should have stumbled on it out of all these hundreds of letters. I suppose the rest are from sympathetic people trying to cheer me up, but this girl was actually there and says she remembered me at once as soon as she read the enclosed story in the New York Gazette. She sends me her picture. Not a bad-looking dame, either."

"It's a riot," agreed Corporal Ranzito, "but you better let the rest of us help read some of the sympathetic letters. It'll take you six months to go through all of 'em."

A rush of pajama clad invalids responded and soon half the contents of the barracks bag were distributed among the prone readers who occupied the beds in the convalescent ward. For an instant there was a dead silence, broken only by the ripping of envelopes and the unfolding of newspaper clippings. Then Corporal Ranzito broke in:

"Hell, this is funny. There must of been two girls there that morning because this one says she was there, too. And she was dressed in white and leadin' her little brother, too. And she lives in Philadelphia, because her clipping is from the Philadelphia Press. She was up to New York on a visit and changin' trains. Here's her picture . . ."

And now the interruptions came thick and fast amid growing laughter and excitement:

"Well, I'll be damned. Here's another one from Pittsburgh that was there that morning. She remembers smiling at you, Kennedy . . ."

"Another from New York . . . says she lives in Brooklyn . . . she was there, too . . . same day . . ."

"Here's a dame from Bridgeport. She was there . . . why they must have been DOZENS of girls in white with little brothers on that platform that morning . . ."

"This one's from Atlanta. She was visiting New York with her nephew . . . she remembers . . ."

"And here's one from Louisville. She always dresses in white. She was at Manhattan transfer last Aug. 12 and . . ."

"That platform must of been jammed with dames in white and their little brothers. This gal from Boston . . ."

The voice of Sergt. James J. Kennedy presently beat down the tumult.

"Goddamn it. Did ANY of you have any idea what awful liars women can be?"

Gradually the tumult died down. One by one the barracks bags were emptied and the mound of pictures on Sergt. Kennedy's bunk grew larger and larger. Empty envelopes and discarded letters and clippings littered the floor. Each man read his fill of the epistles, sharing with his mates the most romantic sentiments.

THE next afternoon the adjutant stopped the sergeant as the latter was returning from his visit of inspection to the telephone office and asked him about the affair. It was the subject of much levity in the officers' mess that night.

The story received a new lease of life a week later when another shipment of mail reached Paris from the States, and once again Sergt. Kennedy was buried under a stack of letters from white clad damsels who had led small brothers about the platform at Manhattan transfer.

Even Sergt. Kennedy began to doubt the wisdom of the jest when the third shipment arrived. It took too much effort sorting through the heap of letters to dig out the few legitimate missives from people he really knew. And he didn't have a great deal of leisure. He knew he was due for return to duty any day and his secret visits of inspection to the phone office (a fiction religiously observed both by himself and the diminutive operator) took a lot of time.

He had to work fast. The golden days in Paris were drawing to a close. Half the A. E. F. had packed up and gone home after the peace conference. Now detachments were leaving for the America bound transports almost daily; transports which carried their quota of French war brides. And that gave Sergt. Kennedy his idea. With the big red-headed non-com, to think was to act.

One autumn day he marched into an inner office, clicked his heels together, and snapped a salute at the gray-headed colonel behind the desk.

"Sir," he began briskly, "Sergt. Kennedy requests permission to secure transportation on an army transport for his wife, a former resident of Paris."

The old colonel looked startled.

"I didn't know you were married, my boy," he observed kindly.

The sergeant's cheeks flushed as red as his hair.

"I'm not, sir. But I will be tomorrow, and I'd like to take my wife home with me."

The colonel fiddled with a pen for a minute.

"The army doesn't look on such matters with approval, sergeant," he began, "but in exceptional cases . . . well, who's the bride?"

"Mlle. Yvonne Dumont, the telephone operator at Camp Hospital 121, sir," replied the sergeant.

"Her father was a colonel in the French army . . . killed at Verdun . . . and her whole family was wiped out during the war. They lived near Rheims . . . She's well educated and . . . and I love her, sir."

The colonel beamed.

"Well, I guess maybe we can fix it up—and get you your orders for home on the next transport, sergeant . . . but . . ."

and here a twinkle crept into the officer's eye, "seems to me I heard a story at mess. Aren't you the young man that gets more mail than anybody in the A. E. F.?"

Sergt. Kennedy grinned.

"I guess I probably do, sir."

The colonel smiled in his turn.

"Is it still . . . keeping up?" he asked.

"It is," replied the sergeant. "You see, the first letters came from the eastern seaboard. But the story was picked up by papers farther and farther west and it takes time for their letters to get here. The second shipment was mostly from around Chicago, Indianapolis, and Detroit. The third came in from Kansas City, Denver, and Salt Lake City. And now I'm beginning to get 'em all the way from Seattle to Los Angeles."

The colonel laughed again.

"Well, I'm surprised that you're marrying a Parisienne with all the United States to pick from. I'd think with all those letters . . ."

The sergeant interrupted.

"If you please, sir, I never want to see another letter. And one thing in my fiancée's favor, sir—perhaps one of the strongest motives that prompted me to marry her—was the fact that, well, sir, she can't write English and she admits she was never at Manhattan transfer in her life."

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