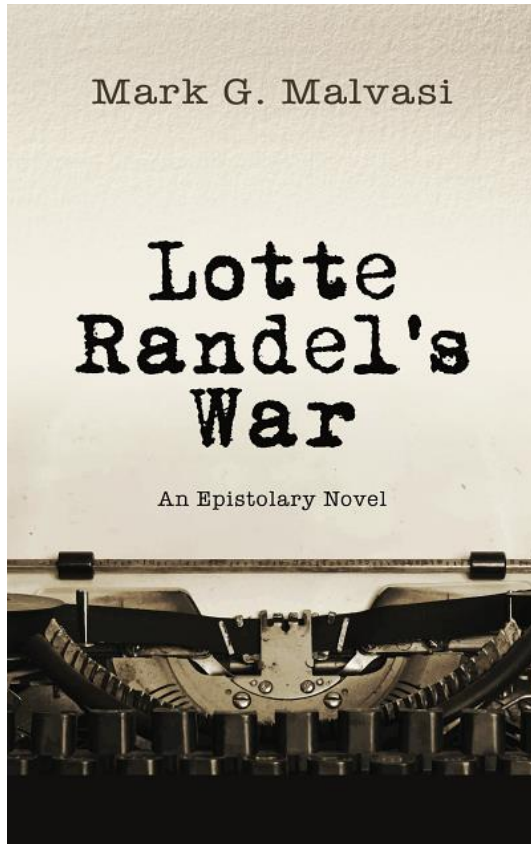




When her husband deploys to England in 1943, Lotte Randel rents a house in Georgetown, where she settles with her two children. In letters to her sister, she chronicles her daily life and her changing attitudes toward the war.

Lotte Randel's War: An Epistolary Novel

By Mark G. Malvasi

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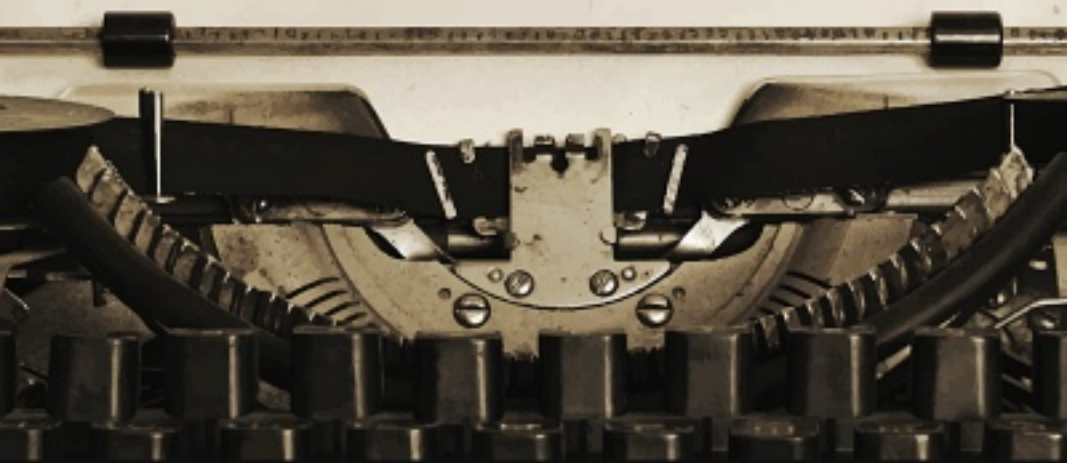
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Mark G. Malvasi

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An Epistolary Novel



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2026

First Edition

1943

P Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C.

Friday, August 13, 1943

Dearest Freddie,

Trees surround our house. Oaks mostly, but there are also a few pines and some species that I haven't yet identified. Whatever they are, they are everywhere, back and front, and do their best to block out the sun.

I should be grateful for the shade, I suppose. It is hot.

On the upper floor of the house, opening off of what will be our spare room, is a small sun porch (an awful misnomer!), which overlooks the gardens of three of my neighbors. It offers a beautiful view. I wish you would come for a visit this fall before I rent the room out to make a little extra. I've already investigated and found that I can easily ask \$32.50 a month and get it, although that sum seems to me to violate the principle of the just price.

I was so fortunate to find this place, having just one day to look before going up to New York to see Pea off. But one of our old friends, Julia Roscoe, whom we knew during our previous residence, was planning to leave Washington in August to join her

husband, who has been posted somewhere—where is a detail that has escaped me in this whirlwind—and was desperate to find someone to take over the lease. It seemed to Julia that I had dropped like a miracle from heaven. I assumed the lease and for \$82.50 a month I got quite a house: three floors, with two bedrooms on the second floor and three on the third!

It is old, maybe a century or perhaps a little less, and the kitchen is antiquated with its four-legged sink. There is a laundry tub in the basement. Worse, there is a coal furnace that I will need to learn to stoke once the cold weather arrives. Pea left me clear instructions to get my coal early, before the cold weather sets in, and to use Reading Anthracite even though it is expensive. He assures me that the additional cost is worth it. He has tried to think of everything.

The house is really too much for just the children and me but finding it on such short notice was something of a miracle. I'm beginning to think that Julia is right and that Providence had a hand in it after all.

The landlord has promised to paint over the wallpaper with Kemtone.¹ The dining room is so

¹ In 1941, the Sherwin-Williams Company of Cleveland, Ohio introduced Kem-Tone, the first commercially successful water-based interior wall paint that could withstand rubbing and washing. The product was based on the chemical

dark that you can't see the wallpaper anyway, which is a blessing. We grope for our plates and must feel our way to our mouths. I am still unpacking boxes and hope that in a week or so I can have the place looking more like a home than a warehouse.

I do worry about food, which is scarce. Butter is hard to come by, though Mr. Simms, who operates the little corner grocery in our neighborhood, sets aside a stick for me now and then. At first, I think, he took pity on me, thinking I was a war widow with two small children to raise on my own. But his generosity was unchanged when he learned that Pea had merely deployed to England.

He continues to save butter for me whenever he can. We do our best to conserve it, never knowing when we shall have it again. The other day he got me a large sea trout, which I stuffed and baked. It was a veritable feast for me and the children. The fruit in his store is magnificent—I don't know where on earth he gets it—but the prices are also out of this world. I have a hard time finding beef, but I can get excellent milk from the Chevy Chase Dairy. They deliver every other day, and the milk is here by mid-morning.

innovation of emulsifying casein, linseed oil, and later tall oil as binders.

Mark G. Malvasi

Mr. Simms has three sons in the war but carries on his business with the help of his wife and his aged mother. He is a kind man, but I fear he is eaten up with worry. Still, he takes care of me.

Yours ever,
Lotte

Rehoboth Beach, Delaware
Saturday, September 9, 1944

Dearest Freddie,

It is hard to believe that summer is at an end.

It is about 8 A.M. The children are still asleep. I let them stay up later than usual last night, since our time here is running out. I want them to enjoy every last minute of summer.

I'm having a cup of coffee and waiting to see whether Nostradamus's prophecy, per Mr. Boswell, has come true.⁴⁷ As I recall the final battle with the Germans is supposed to take place today and the war is predicted to end with German surrender on September 16, according to old N. I will tune in to the news at 8:55, which may be a slightly more

⁴⁷ According to the issue of *The New Yorker* dated August 26, 1944 (p. 13), Rolfe Boswell (1904-1968), a copy editor for the *New York Sun*, was among "the most articulate interpreters of Nostradamus [*sic*] prophesies." He translated and complied them in *Nostradamus Speaks*, published in 1941. According to Boswell, Nostradamus had predicted that on September 9, 1944 "the last great battle with the Germans will take place...." On September 16, Germany would surrender and sign a peace treaty with the Allies. The Pacific War, Boswell promised, would end with Japanese surrender on October 27, 1944. But as the article in *The New Yorker* made clear, Nostradamus had foretold only the year in which these events would occur. Boswell added more specific information by measuring the dimensions of the Great Pyramid at Giza.

credible source than either Messers. Nostradamus or Boswell.

Yet, it seems that something is in the wind, so to speak. The sensational reports about the advance of the Third Army have me wondering whether and for how long the Germans can hold out.⁴⁸ I can't imagine that it will be for much longer. I confess that I am gloating at the news, even while I am nearly despondent at reports of the destruction inflicted on such cities as Florence. How are a people who regard themselves as civilized capable of such horrors--and far worse if rumors are to be believed?

Pea has written that soldiers are now permitted to tell their correspondents what they have been doing, provided the news is at least two weeks old. To that end, he wrote that his unit, the Eighth Corps, took part in the Battle of Carentan and then held the line through St. Sauveur Le Vicomte. The Eighth Corps then pushed southward, which was slow going in part because of the rainy weather and in part because of German resistance, which resulted in terrible casualties, until they broke through at Periers and Lessay. They made a rush

⁴⁸ Under the command of General George S. Patton, the Third Army is best remembered for its rapid advance across France and the critical role it played during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, especially the rescue of the besieged 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne.

through Coutances Avranches to L'orient and Brest.⁴⁹

There his account ended. He couldn't send more recent news. He thinks it will not take more than a few weeks to sweep the Nazis clean out of France. Breaking through the Siegfried Line into Germany, well, he says, that will be another matter.⁵⁰

Yours ever,
Lotte

⁴⁹ The Eighth Corps fought from Normandy to Czechoslovakia during the Second World War. Organized in November 1918, the Eighth Corps was deactivated in 1968.

The Battle of Carentan took place between June 10 and June 14, 1944. The objective of American forces was to establish a continuous defensive line against expected German counterattacks. The Germans tried to prevent such a consolidation and to keep U.S. First Army from launching an attack toward Lessay-Périers that would have cut off the Cotentin Peninsula.

St. Sauveur Le Vicomte, Periers, Lessay, and Coutances Avranché are all communes (incorporated municipalities) in the Manche Department of Normandy. L'orient is a port city in the Morbihan Department of Brittany and Brest is a port city in the Finistère Department of Brittany.

⁵⁰ The Siegfried Line was the name given to the German defensive fortifications built during the late 1930s along the western border of Germany.

P Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C.
Thursday, January 11, 1945

Dearest Freddie,

I've received a few more letters from Pea. I don't know how he finds the time to write.

His unit has moved again. He is no longer at the château but is now living in a what used to be a sanitarium. He didn't say whether it was a sanitarium for convalescents or crazies. I suppose it doesn't much matter. His description of the place made it sound horrid. And I'm certain that, as usual, he has minimized the ghastly state of affairs.

He writes that all the windows have been blown out of the place. The water and steam pipes have frozen. As a consequence, the residents have no heat, no running water, and no facilities. But at least the sanitarium is still standing and still has a roof attached. All the other buildings in the vicinity have been shelled out of recognition or bombed into rubble.

General Somervell, who is the head of the Quartermaster Corps, has announced the pending arrival of winter uniforms. ⁶⁴ Pea says the dispatch would be funny if the situation weren't so tragic. He

⁶⁴ General Brehon Burke Somervell (1892-1955).

fully expects to receive his winter clothing sometime in May or June. He says that injuries from frost bite are far more numerous than are battle wounds.

In his most recent letters, he has become at once more reflective and more cynical about the war. He writes, for instance, that while the Americans and British "thrust and parry with one another, the Russians are winning the war. At least the damn thing will be over, but a Russian victory will be both shameful and dangerous."

He says that we at home have no idea about the real nature of this conflict. The papers give the impression that every military action is purposeful and guided by intelligence. Soldiers move with speed and agility to accomplish their assigned objectives; their dexterity, skill, and virtue are enough to defeat brute force. "Everyone had the romantic notion that this war would be mechanized and fast-moving, hoping and believing that victory would come easily at a negligible cost. We were credulous if not downright stupid. For that is neither the way battles are conducted nor the way in which ground combat works. No one--not politicians, not generals, not war correspondents--wants to face the reality that field commanders and enlisted men have come to know all too well: that wars are not won save by insensate violence and human agony. There are no bargains and no shortcuts. I hear repeatedly that the generals have

learned the lesson of the last war and will avoid the wholesale slaughter of troops. I ask how is victory possible except by wholesale slaughter. Such is the nature and meaning of war. Anything else is errant nonsense.”

His words depress and frighten me, all the more so since I know he is right. But I can't engage in such philosophical discourse or allow myself to ponder the nature and meaning of war. I just want him to come home to me and our children. That is, and can be, my only thought. Nothing else matters.

Yours ever,
Lotte

P Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C.
Friday, June 15, 1945

Dearest Freddie,

Albert Jr. must have overdone it this week. He developed a sore throat and I kept him home from school on Monday and Tuesday. He was loathe to stay in bed since it's mostly fun and games this week, and he didn't want to miss out. He went back on Wednesday and summer officially began this afternoon about 3 P.M.

While he was at home, he called to me from upstairs to bring him something to do. I answered "What do you want me to bring you?" He told me to "never mind. I am reading a grown-up book now and don't want you to bother me." Fifteen minutes later when I went up to check on him, I found him engrossed in *Sonnets from the Portuguese!*⁸² When I inquired how he was enjoying it, he said that "it's about love and God, like all grown-up books."

This afternoon I met one of my two summer tenants (the other is a female acquaintance of Margaret's from the Library of Congress, whom I have met only in passing) and took an immediate

⁸² Written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) and published in 1850, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is a collection of forty-four love sonnets.

and intense dislike to him. He gave me ample reason to do so.

Previously, I had known him only through our correspondence. His letters were polite and affable. He is an erudite but haughty retired professor of English named Barrett S. Sommerly (I think it's safe to assume that everyone who knows him intimately calls him B.S. for short.) He is in Washington for the summer to give a series of (pompous) lectures and to do research for a (pretentious) book.

First, although he agreed in his letters to pay \$12 a week for room and board, he now insists that he can't pay more than \$10. I had half a mind to tell him that I could accept no less than the \$12 to which we had agree, but the time is short and finding another boarder at this late date may be well nigh impossible. That \$40 a month will go a long way toward paying the bills. So, I accepted the bird that was in hand as it were, no matter how much he may have ruffled *my* feathers. For his part he made it clear how fortunate I was to have such a distinguished tenant.

Second, when he heard the children playing upstairs, he grimaced and his face turned pale. As a lifelong bachelor he explained to me that he simply loathes children and the noise that they make. I assured him that the children were mine and did not come with the house. They would be

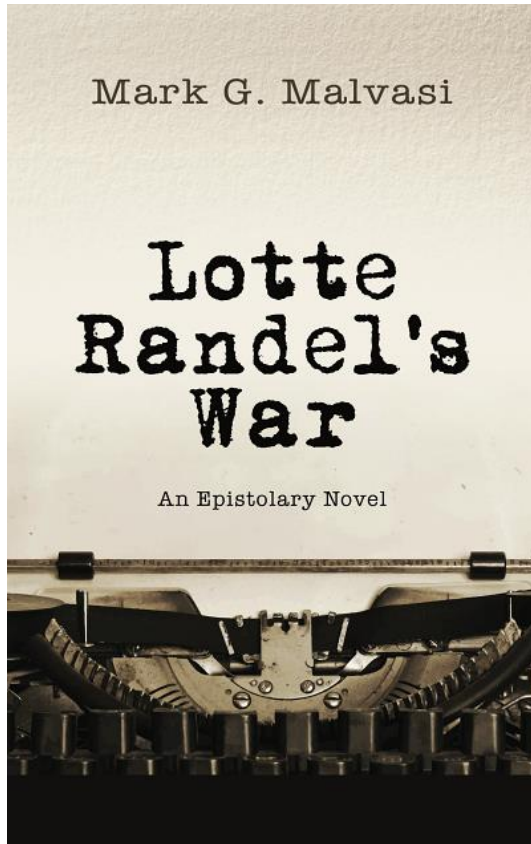
accompanying me to Pennsylvania. He was visibly relieved and muttered something that I found unintelligible. Nonetheless, whatever it was that he said made me want to punch him.

Third, old Professor B.S. is a first-class name dropper. In the thirty minutes or so that he was here, he told me that he knows, and is intimate friends with, Archibald MacLeish, Allen Tate, Katherine Anne Porter, Mark van Doren, Alexis Saint Léger Léger, Robert Penn Warren, and one or two or a hundred others whose names I can't recall.⁸³ With his legions of friends clamoring to see him at every hour day or night, he asked if it would be alright for him to entertain in his room. I assured

⁸³ Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982) was an American poet and playwright especially concerned with the threat that fascism posed to democracy. MacLeish served as the Librarian of Congress between 1939 and 1944 and as assistant secretary of state in 1944-1945. John Orley Allen Tate (1899-1979) was an American poet, essayist, literary critic, biographer, and novelist. Tate was a member of the Fugitive Poets during the 1920s and the Southern Agrarians during the 1930s. Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980) was an American novelist and essayist. Mark van Doren (1894-1972) was an American literary scholar, poet, editor, and film critic. Alexis Saint Léger Léger, pseudonym Saint John Perse (1887-1975), was a French poet and diplomat. Between 1932 and 1940, he served as Secretary General of the French Foreign Ministry. In 1940, he fled to the United States. Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) was an American poet, novelist, and literary critic. Like Tate, he was a member of the Southern Agrarians during the 1930s.

him that it would be as long as his guests arrived sober and left in the same condition. (Sobriety is not a strict rule of the house, but I imposed it just to annoy him a little since he was so obnoxious.) He looks so Teutonic that I am convinced, or rather have convinced myself, that he is a Nazi spy. It is so satisfying to dislike him.

Yours ever,
Lotte



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