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# Women Like That: An American Girl in Paris

One night late in the fall of 1898 in Paris, a young American girl of 22 went to Bullier's, a crowded dance hall with a family friend. When a woman of exquisite beauty and elegance entered the hall, the American girl was entranced. As the crowd caught sight of the beauty, they began to rise and whistle and cheer, "The sultana of sex has returned!" It was Liane de Pougy, one of the most desired courtesans of her day. The American, Natalie Clifford Barney, was determined that she would be her lover.

Natalie Clifford Barney, born on Halloween of 1876, was the daughter of wealthy and indulgent parents. Her father, Albert, was an alcoholic, always concerned about money and appearances. Her mother, Alice, had been highly sought after before her marriage.

After the birth of Natalie and younger sister Laura, Alice began to pursue her artistic talents and studied with James Whistler some years later in Paris.

The Barneys lived a fashionable life between Washington D.C., Europe and, in the summers, Bar Harbor, Maine. As a young woman Natalie was exuberant, lively, beautiful and gay.

Natalie claimed that by the age of 12 she understood her preference for women and intended never to betray herself by marrying. Although she was engaged (to a man named Bob Cassat) for a while, she was wealthy enough to not need a husband for economic reasons. But her father was always looking for a suitable mate for her.

In the fall of 1898, Natalie was living in Paris with her mother while Albert and Laura were in America. She and fiancé Bob had agreed that theirs would be a *mariage blanc* — an unconsummated marriage. He took Natalie to meet her female lovers, and she helped him pick out a prostitute for himself. Still, Bob was jealous of women like Liane.

The courtesan of 19th century France was part prostitute, part artiste, and part geisha. She had to engage and inspire her protectors on many levels, and many courtesans became wealthy, independent women. Liane was fluent in English and Spanish, was a fearless equestrienne, and played piano and guitar.

The day after sighting Liane at the dance hall, Natalie began her pursuit without fear of

francesca  
susanna

failure. Natalie started her courtship by sending Liane flowers with enigmatic notes; "From a stranger — alas! And who doesn't want to be one anymore." She signed them Florence Temple Bradford. While she bided her time, Natalie had a page's costume made.

In February, Natalie read that Liane and her German baron had broken up. She sent Liane a dozen black irises, and the next morning Liane appeared with one of the irises tucked at her waist. That afternoon, Natalie donned her page's outfit, concealing it under a cloak, and slipped away to Liane's house.

Almost immediately they fought. Natalie thought her love would transcend the physical to the spiritual, and that she could rescue Liane from her wretched courtesan's life. But Liane declared that she had freely chosen her lot and enjoyed her life. They began an intense, passionate, sexual affair, but Liane's profession remained a sore point for Natalie.

At first, Natalie had little trouble trysting with Liane. Alice was too preoccupied with her painting lessons to keep a sharp eye on her rebellious Natalie. When Albert returned to Europe he was stricter than Alice had been. When Bob came to visit in May, he helped her slip out to meet Liane, despite his strong disapproval and jealousy.

In the fall, the Barneys were vacationing in Brittany, where Liane also rented a cottage. Natalie sneaked away one night and met Liane at the waterfront. They hired a rowboat filled with flowers. Natalie removed her cloak to reveal a sailor costume. She sang American songs, rowed the boat across the calm water, and dropped anchor. She and Liane lay together among the flowers under the stars. Natalie was filled with such joy she wondered how she ever lived through it.

But it could never last. A friend wrote with news of a rich,

handsome gentleman who wanted to meet Liane. The lovers argued once again and Liane went back to Paris. When the Barneys returned to the city, rumors of Natalie's affair were beginning to circulate. Albert confronted his daughter, and according to a friend of Natalie's, "pulled her by the hair, which was quite long, onto the sidewalk of Avenue Victor-Hugo." He made Natalie promise to never see the courtesan again, a promise she did not keep.

Liane was done with her young American lover, though not entirely — they continued back and forth throughout 1900. But when Natalie became involved with the poet Renee Vivien, Liane wrote a jealous letter: "Your heart ... doesn't exist. ... What I used to love doesn't exist and I'm mad at you for making me discover it ... Take care that I never run into you, for I would take off your mask in front of everybody. Good-bye."

The next year Liane pub-

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lished *Idylle Saphique*, a novel. She had begun to write it while they were still in the midst of the affair and even had Natalie contribute a chapter of her own.

At the end of the book, Liane's character dies. In a way, the character died in real life too, for Liane, whom Natalie remembered as one of her greatest loves, became religiously devout and regarded Natalie as her greatest trespass. ▼

#### Further Reading:

*Wild Heart: A Life*, by Suzanne Rodriguez, Ecco, 2002

*Portrait of a Seductress: the World of Natalie Barney*, by Jean Chalon, trans., by Carol Barko, Crown, 1979

*Sapphic Idyll*, by Liane de Pougy, (if you can find it.)

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