

THE LITERARY DIGEST

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"THEY USED TO CALL IT THE FRONT"



"**B**RING ME BACK A PICTURE of my favorite shell-hole." That was the commission which, varied in small particulars, George F. Kearney carried with him from many of his friends of the A. E. F. on his recent visit to the old American battle-lines in France. He was given a diagram showing just how to reach one shell-hole of particularly grateful memory. From Soissons, his friend explained, he was to take the Chaudun road to Croix-de-Fer. A little to the left, he would see some dugouts. Beyond, as he writes in *The American Legion Weekly*:

I would get into trenches (he warned me to be careful of the barbed wire), and then I would see a sign marked "Broadway and Fifth Avenoo." Fifty paces farther along, the diagram said, I would see a big shell-hole that had ripped up a trench. That was it.

"Oh, you'll know it all right," he chuckled. "It has as fond memories for me as dad's old farm. I stumbled into it, face downward, just as a bullet whizzed through the ether I had just vacated. I curled up in it that night, and had my first sleep in six days. It was there, rereading my letters from the wife, that I got her hint about the coming of the kid. I'll tell the world it's my pet shell-hole!"

The news that went back to that trusting ex-soldier, "nearly broke his heart," says the writer investigator, and "if there are any other alumni of the A. E. F. with pet shell-holes," his advice is, "keep away from your old battle-fields in France, if you want to preserve your fond memory." Nevertheless, as his further accounts of conditions in Soissons, Château-Thierry, and the Marne country show, the glory and suffering of the old days have left a mark that will endure for a long time. As for the battle-fields in the farming country, however—

Those wire-tangled, gas-charred areas over which you looked toward the *Boche* line; those places that the folk back home are always calling No Man's Land—they're gone!

Old Dame Nature abhors war as much as we do. When the troops left the battle-fields she covered them over with stubble, poppies, and weeds. Then back came the French peasant. Grim and arduous toil lay ahead of him. But hunger is a relentless taskmaster; two years have passed, and now the old battle-fields are harvest-lands once more. Only in rare spots, beyond recovery, does one see hints of the passing horror of the countryside.

It all goes to prove that the beauty of northern France is something that even war can not destroy. The hills and valleys around Soissons will soon be dotted with hay-ricks shaped like windmills and almost as tall. In the green lands of the valleys sheep will soon be grazing.

Faithful to my instructions, I located my friend's sacred spot of memory. The diagram led me across a well-plowed field. I was in danger of no barbed wire. The sign "Broadway and Fifth Avenoo" was no more—some ardent souvenir-hunter can tell why. There were no trenches, and certainly no shell-hole. Far off in one corner of the little field was a peasant behind a plow and two oxen.

When he reached me he stopt his plow and we fell to talking of old days. Yes, he had heard that the Americans had a hard fight of it on the site of his farm. It took him six months' hard work before he dared plant the seeds that the Ministry of Agriculture had given him. No, he rarely brings himself to think about what happened on his farm in those horrible war-days, for, after all, the war is over, and there is so much to do. Anyway, crops were never better, for the land has had a six months' rest, and the soil . . . well, you see, the soil had been well fertilized with blood.

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He kicks the brown earth with his shoe, reaches down to dig out a bit of bone which he hands you with a heavy smile. Then he picks up a scrap of broken shell and complains bitterly that there are not enough of these small pieces to sell to the iron-dealer, particularly in these times when tobacco is so dear. Then the Government—*Mon Dieu, quel gouvernement!*—made him turn over to it the barbed wire he had removed from his field. It would have brought easily a thousand francs.

We parted the best of friends, he loud in his praise of the Americans and the cigarets I gave him. I laughed to myself as I hoofed it across my friend's old battle-field, but the laughter caught in my throat when I thought of the ghastly sights he had once witnessed in that well-plowed field.

As I reached the road I turned and looked after my French peasant friend. He had completed the furrow. The team turned, I heard him cry to the oxen, and off they started anew. Half-way up the field he stopt, turned his plow slightly, and then crossed himself. I peered closer through the gathering evening mists, watching him as he stood with his head bowed in prayer. At his feet a cross marked the grave of an unknown French soldier.

Monsieur and Madame le Baraquet live in the shadow of Soissons Cathedral, writes Mr. Kearney, turning to another once famous battle-field. They are very partial to Americans. Particularly Madame le Baraquet, a dear old aristocrat of the old order, confesses that she adores them, for, as she explains, "*Si les Américains n'étaient pas venus, on n'aurait pu revenir chez soi!*" (If the Americans had not come, we could not have returned home.) And she shakes her white curls in testimony of her great earnestness. The writer goes on:

Living amid their old scenes is very difficult for the Le Baraquets. If you knew Soissons under shell-fire, you would wonder why, in Heaven's name, any one would care to come back to this town of underground dugouts. You will remember that all the houses around the cathedral were leveled by the bombardment. Once upon a time the home of the Le Baraquets, with its carved rafters in the dining-hall and its oak-paneled library, was a thing of rare seventeenth-century beauty. But there is not one stone of it laid upon another nowadays, and the Le Baraquets live in what was once their wine-cellar. Monsieur is eighty-two. Madame is seventy-six.

To-day the couple sleep in a bed which the old gentleman has fashioned out of a packing-box. A decrepit French army stove stands at the foot of the bed. Just beyond, Monsieur (in spite of his rheumatism) has built a little table against the wall. Their cooking utensils have been picked up from the débris. Their plates are American issue mess-kits. Once their table was graced with rare Limoges china and antique silverware. Gone are the ancestral paintings. In their place there are three crude lithographs, one of Marshal Foch, one of Prince Bonaparte, and one of General Pershing.

On the opposite wall hangs the ivory crucifix that Madame rescued from the family chapel when the old couple fled from their home during the bombardment. On a nail below hangs Madame's prayer-beads. These two articles are the only reminders of their glory of a former day.

Yet when they invite you into their dugout it is with all the grace of prewar days. It is dingy down there. The little room is filled with smoke and the walls are covered with mildew and slime. The hacking cough of Madame tells its own pathetic tale. Sitting in these squalid quarters, your mind wanders back to the days when a great house stood above these ruins. You see the wonderful tapestries, the old lamps, the marble statues, the liveried servants, the library rich in the treasures of a forgotten age.

We fell to talking of other times. "When I was a lad," explained Monsieur Le Baraquet, "I have watched Empress Eugénie, herself, ride up to this house. . . . I mean, of course, our house as it was . . . in an elegant coach and four. I have watched her as she stepped out on the carriage-stone that you will still find in front of our dugout. She was a great friend of my mother's. When I brought Madame, as my bride, to this home, Eugénie attended the ball my father gave to honor us. Little did he know that we were destined to be the last of our line. . . . Our son, Pierre, died in the first battle of the Marne. . . ."

Monsieur turned suddenly to stir up the wood-fire in the French army stove. The embers were fleecy white, growing gray. I turned discreetly to where Madame sat on the edge of the packing-box bed. Madame is deaf, so she had not heard the name of her son. Her eyes peered far into the gloom, dreaming of the fair ladies of old France that once had crowded her salon.

Suddenly her face changed and her eyes sparkled brightly with a new fire.

"The old house knew many a famous guest, Pierre, to be sure!" she cried. "But this new home of ours, this dugout, it has sheltered many a brave soldier. We have reason to live here in greater pride . . . a new glory for the old!"

In visiting the towns along the front, Mr. Kearney found that the indomitable will of the Le Baraquets to live on happily in spite of everything is characteristic of the spirit of all these refugees. He comments:

It is odd how gaily these people live amid their ruins. A walk up the main street of Soissons, with the booths set up for market-day, is a profound lesson in optimism. There everybody

laughs, if only at the vulture that sits framed in a shell-hole that has pierced the tower of Soissons Cathedral. He looks down, amazed, at the impromptu dance going on around a blind fiddler in the square.

"You see, all is still in ruins," explains the *curé* standing beside me, "but their spirit has not crumbled, for they think never of the past but always of the future. For the present—well, look for yourself."

He pointed across the plaza west from the cathedral. I looked in time to see a bill-poster pasting a sign at the door of a moving-picture show that has been established in the cellar of the Protestant church. It showed Charlot hurling a pie at the cook.

"To-morrow it will be Monsieur Arbuckle," explained the *curé*. "Tragedy is in our every-day lives; we must keep laughing to live."

There is a road leading out of Soissons that eventually takes you across the temporary bridge that connects Fismettes with Fismes. Our car rumbled across the bridge. Fismes was alive with people, careless, happy folk in holiday garb. They have patched up their homes, and this day each little house yielded a happy family that joined the throng in the streets. The children, particularly, were burning with excitement. We followed. The crowds, moving in one direction, grew.

Just at the outskirts of Fismes, village of dreadful memories, we came upon a traveling circus. The tent had been erected in a field that had once been No Man's Land. Inside the tent a band blared the "Marseillaise." Outside the barkers sold chances on pink doll-babies. A gipsy woman told fortunes, and an *ex-poilu* dispensed ices to eager customers.

Château-Thierry has patched its roofs, plastered its chimneys, painted its shutters, and decided to forget the war. At first, says Mr. Kearney:

Every villager dreamed of making his fortune as a tourist guide. They are all back now at their old trades. It is only the good housewife who still pays attention to tourists, and then only to think black thoughts of the dust raised by the rubber-neck automobiles that plunge without a stop through the village streets.

Over the bridge, our famous bridge, that crosses the Marne come the jolting market-carts filled with beets and cabbages grown in the farmlands at the foot of Belleau Wood. There is a good deal of grumbling about the temporary wood structure that now spans the Marne, and the peasants tell you that they can not imagine why the soldiers did not build it wide enough to let two carts pass each other. In the Café des Mariniers they talk no more of the war. Instead one hears only the idle gossip that the river-men have picked up. Château-Thierry is no place for the sentimentalist who has imagined that this town of towns would live forever in awe of its memories.

A walk through the streets reveals few marks of either the German or the American occupation. In a field on the outskirts stands the skeleton of a "tin lizzie" that once did ambulance service. On the door-jambes of several houses one can still read the billeting officer's stencils telling how many soldiers each house would accommodate. In one instance the owner has purposely left unpainted a square around these sacred numbers as a delicate tribute to his departed guests.

But if Château-Thierry itself has tried to erase all signs of the occupation, the Marne still reveals its tale of a ghastly yesterday. It was once a sparkling stream flowing through a charming valley that was particularly noted for its wooded scenery. Nowadays the Marne writhes through a valley of tree corpses. Its waters are discolored and foul. Its surface is covered with a thick, oily scum. The stream flows with great weariness, and as tho in great pain.

Even then, you must look beneath the murky water to appreciate the full horror

"THEY USED TO CALL IT THE FRONT" of the Marne. The story of what this river has mirrored in its troubled waters of yesterday is best told by the accumulation of rubbish that clutters the river-bed. There one sees rusted shells and broken artillery pieces, sometimes old shoes, broken rifles, helmets, for the Marne, as those who fought there will testify, is a continuous sepulcher to the unknown dead.

Yet, despite this, the oddest sight in a trip through the valley of the Marne is the gipsy caravan one frequently encounters on the roads. The brilliant colors of their wagon-wheels, flashing in the sun, contrast strangely with the dead underbrush by the roadside. At first you wonder why these people, who depend so much on foraging, should select these devastated areas. Certainly the returned peasant has no brass kettleware for them to mend, and there is little food that the natives can afford to share with the gipsy beggars.

I finally was told the reason for the presence of these odd tourists. It seems that the gipsies have had great difficulty in holding their younger generation to the old roving life. This is particularly true of the young men, who succumb to the comforts and attractions of town ways. So, by way of a lesson, the gipsy chieftains are taking their children across the battlefields. When they reach a particularly desolate spot the grizzled leader points a bony finger and cries:

"See! There is the civilization that lures you!"

Theodore Roosevelt's last great lesson to the American people was his decision to leave in France the body of his son Quentin. The grave is in the heart of the Tardenois country overlooking the Aisne valley. It is interesting to make the pilgrimage to this spot and to see the devotion of the French people to the memory of the young aviator.

The grave is not far from the village. It is situated on a hill in a plot of ground owned by the village blacksmith, Monsieur Lefèvre. Poor tho this man was made by the war, he has refused to accept money for his land, and has been eager to present it either to the Roosevelt family or to the American Government. Two other men, Messieurs Turpin and Quenardel, owned the land necessary to build a road to the grave, which they have named "Avenue Quentin Roosevelt." Neither of these villagers would accept compensation, nor would the notary of the little town take a fee when the properties were turned over finally to the French Government. The children of the village keep fresh flowers on the grave.

The grave of Quentin Roosevelt symbolizes, for these simple people, the courage of the American youth who saved their country from the oppression of German domination. Well do most of these people know how France would have fared as a German province, for many of them were sent into Germany to work when their town was captured. This grave symbolizes their deliverance.

As in the one instance of this single grave, so our magnificent American cemeteries typify to the French people as a whole the spirit of the American Army that came, with no thought of personal or national gain, to deliver their France. These graves are each a monument to an understanding that must forever exist between the two republics. So even now our dead, as when they lived, still served under the flags of both nations.

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