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Significance of the Word "Poilu"

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The word "poilu," meaning bristly, woolly, hairy, as applied to animals, has come into jocular and even serious use throughout France to designate the more or less unshorn French heroes in the trenches. An interesting comment on it from an eminent pen is here translated for CURRENT HISTORY.

POILU is a word that only half pleases. It pleases because it designates those whom all France loves and admires, but it seems not to respect them enough; it has a touch of the animal. Besides, the word was not born of this war. It has long been in use in and around French barracks. It was one of those thousands of words that live a precarious life in the margins of dictionaries. Littré writes: "Poileux, an old term of contempt." It was Balzac (the discovery is not mine) who, in 1832, in "The Country Doctor," rehabilitated these two syllables, and, for the first time, seems to have given them the generous, vigorous, and cordial sense that we see in them today. He used the word once, then let it drop and thought of it no more.

It lacks dignity. To my taste it belittles those whom it is meant to laud and serve. A hero can hardly be expressed by this brazen-faced and slanderous epithet. And yet, since it has taken root in our battlefields now for more than a year, one hesitates to speak ill of this word, in which so many admirable acts are somehow visible. It is winning its historic titles. At certain moments when we meet it we are compelled to admire it. When the time comes to complete the article in Littré devoted to Poileux or Poilu, and to add to the old injurious sense the new meaning of today, the lexicographer will have superb texts to cite by way of example.

Here is one so beautiful that I cannot resist the impulse to pass it along. Listen to this order of the day addressed by a commander to his infantrymen. A Lorraine soldier gave it to me, and you will see in it how the word "poilu" may yet become one of the most beautiful in the French language:

"For the third time since the beginning of the campaign the —th Battalion has just covered itself with glory. Though harassed by the fatigue of six consecutive days and nights of sentry

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duty, labor, and fighting, though a trifle weakened in your confidence by the check suffered in the first attack, you promptly got hold of yourselves upon discovering suddenly a good course to follow in order to avoid the flank fire of the machine guns, and especially by following step by step, shot by shot, the efficient preparatory bombardment of our artillery. Suddenly sure of success, you rushed forth together out of the trenches at the signal of your commander, behind your officers and section chiefs, leaped like lions, and in less than four seconds reached the enemy trench and swooped into it like an eagle on its prey; but the Barbarians, frightened by the vigor and suddenness of your attack, fled aghast without trying to make the least resistance. As at Saint-Leon, as at Lille, you proved that you were at all times a picked troop capable still of furnishing, after ten months of ceaseless and terrible war, a resistless attack worthy of your ancestors, the heroes of Sidi-Brahim and Sebastopol, but especially capable of conquering the stubborn resistance of the detested Boche and hurling him "heels over head." With Poilus like you, my dear friends, victory is near and certain."

There can be no doubt that here the word "poilu" is magnificent in its weight, its freedom, and compels us to admire its savage nudity. Presented in such a sweep of thought, it is full of force and honor. It is true, bold, and creates an image; it is a soldier of Géricault, and one would be petty, indeed, to take offense at it.

How are words born? Spontaneously, by sheer genius. This one is admirable in its picturesqueness, but that is all. Its fault is that it paints only the outside of such a being as the soldier of 1916, in whom we venerate a sublime morality and the highest spirit of sacrifice.