

On the Trail of the Fighting Yanks

II. *Château-Thierry*

By Frederick Palmer

Illustrated by George A. Picken



IT was on the tableland east of Soissons that I heard from a French peasant a new compliment for the American Army. He was ploughing in the path of the July 18th advance of the First and Second Divisions which began the movement that turned the tide of the war.

Here, as elsewhere in that campaign for the reduction of the Marne salient, we went after the Germans under rolling barrages. We kept the jump on them in open fighting.

"The Americans were in such a hurry, M'sieu'," said that peasant, "that they dug no trenches for us to fill in and put out no barbed wire for us to clean up."

So our standing is high with the farmers of the Château-Thierry region, who know the amount of extremely hard work farmers of other regions had to do in order to bring their soil back under cultivation.

At a little hotel on the south side of the Marne at Château-Thierry they show you—and what they show you in the way of war souvenirs depends on what there is left to show you—the window occupied by one of our machine guns when our troops faced the Germans across the river. The hotel keeper found it worth while, as an attraction to tourists, to leave the shell gashes and bullet holes on the outside wall unmolested.

THE people of Fêre-en-Tardenois had the same kind of forethought. They have left up not only the German signs showing road directions and the location of headquarters and cellars, but even the chalk markings on the walls indicating the number of soldiers to be billeted on the premises still remain. This makes a hit with the tourists, as the guides have found.

For Fêre-en-Tardenois happens to be on the tourist route. Soldiers who did not

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fight on the tourist route are at a disadvantage so far as glory is concerned. The next thing some of the villages not on the tourist route know they will find that they were not in the war.

"To restore its prestige a village may have to go on a still hunt for some German

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signs. In that case the supply of signs will last as long as the supply of souvenir German helmets. But, "Eviter les contrefaçons!" as the French say, or, "Beware of counterfeits!" "N'a plus" that are genuine, as Fêre-en-Tardenois serves notice. If chalk marks, which are genuinely original, are touched up a little after heavy rains, why that is as allowable as that a lady should use a little powder for her complexion when her face is still her own.

To revert to machine-gun nests on the Marne. There was one I knew which was nearer the river than the one of the hotel, and which I particularly wanted to see again; but all the indications which would enable me to locate it exactly had been obliterated. Indeed, it looked across only the river's breadth to German machine-gun nests on the other side. The soldier I met there behind his camouflage curtain was the most advanced man of the Third Division that day. He had a can of bacon and a can of smoking tobacco, and was so busy watching the Boche that he was not very lonely. We had a grand talk together. I wonder where he is now. Wherever I went on the battlefields I was wondering what the fellows whom I met during those busy times were doing today—wondering all the way from the Hindenburg Line to St. Mihiel.

We know how the 3d stonewalled on the south side of the river and then threw back the German attempt at crossing. It was a memorable business in the annals of American courage. You will see some of the traces of the 3d's presence in machine-gun pits and trenches in the woods, and you may locate the stretch of railroad track where our line unflinchingly held its ground. At least, the French peasant has not ploughed in the railroad track.

The station at Château-Thierry, which some of us remember, with its litter of glass and débris on the platform, is all in order again. Particular attention was paid to the early rebuilding of railroad stations. Some of the new stations are much better than the old. And, by the way, the lettering about the number of hommes and chevaux to be accommodated on board are still on the cars already to facilitate loading in the next war. As for those big American locomotives, which we left behind in France, many of them are on sidings, as the French found their weight too hard on their light roadbeds.

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A stone bridge has not yet replaced one of the wooden bridges, since strength-

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ened, which our men built across the Marne. Château-Thierry, itself, where a few old men and women crawled out to welcome our troops, shows few ruins now. But the walls of many houses, as in so many towns in the battle area, reveal the white splashes of fresh plaster where shell holes and rents have been filled in—like lighter colored patches on an old coat.

If you want to meet people who saw the Americans when they entered a village or town, ask for the old men and old women. But usually you need not ask. The ancients make their proud distinction known at sight of an American. There was one old woman who told me that the Americans were the tallest men in the world, all over six feet, many seven. They certainly looked big to her. Next year she may increase their height to eight feet. And that is all right.

Up that street on the road to Epieds, where I saw a part of the 28th as a current of khaki under shell fire, people now come and go in the manner of the people of a quiet old French town—for that is what Château-Thierry is today. Though it gave its name to a battle few of our soldiers ever saw it. Their view was of the surrounding country over which they advanced.

THE truck drivers and the gunners of the much traveled 26th, who cursed the rough going over half filled shell holes in the days when the infantry was blasting its way toward Fêre, would marvel at that new road which leads around from the north of Château-Thierry to Belleau Wood cemetery, and they would conclude, as other returning veterans have concluded, that it is much more comfortable to see where a war was fought than to help fight it. There is another cemetery at Fêre-en-Tardenois, where the men who fell in the later days of the Château-Thierry fighting are buried, but Belleau, the nearest to Paris of the battlefield cemeteries, comes in for a great deal more tourist attention.

In common with other caretakers, the one who showed me about at Belleau was depressed over the departure of our forces from the Rhine. Not that he saw anything of them when they were so far away, but he had had the privilege of the commissary which departed with them. He could buy no more American tobacco or cigarettes. "N'a plus" in all France. And French tobacco is enough to make an American repudiate Lafayette.

As we know, there was not much left of Belleau Wood when our wrestle with the Germans was over. A scraggly underbrush has grown up. Otherwise only the wear of the weather and the tourist search for souvenirs have obliterated the signs of the struggle.

Standing on the high ground at the north edge of the wood you look down upon the white rows of white crosses, each bearing the stenciled name of the man who lies underneath, and adjoining the cemetery are the warehouses in which were kept the coffins for the bodies of those whom their relatives wanted brought home. Bodies are still being found in the fields where falling trenches buried them. Their presence is frequently detected by the darker green of the grass growing over the spot.

Past the cemetery you look across the valley to the hills and patches of wood on the other side. Do you remember how after one stretch of high ground was taken there was always another ahead, other woods in which German machine guns were lying in wait? As you crossed the valley bullets pelted you and shells cracked at you, and then you charged up the next slope.

Following the winding roads I passed landmarks familiar on the battle maps

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and each bitterly intimate to some group of fighting men. To see the battlefields properly and respectfully you ought to go on foot as the dough-boys went. That, it occurs to me, would be a good lesson to some people who do not yet realize what it means to be a soldier—though the time necessary to walk the tracks of all our divisions in their battles and marches would require several summer holidays.

The disadvantage of going in an automobile is that the distances which seemed so long as you fought your way on foot become only a step. You are always running past some point of interest and getting out to walk back. There was so much you wanted to see, and you were seeing it so swiftly! My thoughts ran something like this:

"There's where the 42d relieved the 26th. Now we are in that cussed old Forêt-de-Fêre. There's the Red Cross Farm where we outwitted the Boche so neatly. That's it!—all the valley of the Ourcq opening up before the eye like an amphitheatre from a gallery seat! This is the apron of open country which the 42d descended. There is the road over the hill which the 3rd ascended after crossing the river and taking Jaulgonne. There's where the 55th brigade of the 28th joined in for its part in the junction of the 3rd and 42d for the sweep forward.

"A brave, spectacular advance! No communication trenches, no shelter—khaki figures silhouetted on the landscape! Right on, like a maneuver at the training camps at home, in the face of the guns from Meunière Woods and of the machine guns from all the heights on the other side of the Ourcq. The thing looks much bigger today than when we were close to the event.

"So this is the Ourcq, and they call it a river. Today it looks as if it might have been made by squeezing the dew out of the grass into a streak. Not so then after heavy rains, but an unfordable stream, as the engineers who bridged it under plunging fire, and our infantry who crossed over under plunging fire, well knew.

"And that's Hill 230, the highest of all those slopes which we had to conquer foot by foot after we were across the Ourcq! Keep on until you cannot waggle a foot, buddy—that's what you came to war for. Then you may be relieved, and the 32d and 4th may have their turn in the gruelling business of the final mastery of those heights and woods and farms. There's Mercy Farm, which tried our souls and kept the ambulances busy for three days before it was ours. Yes, that's about the place where ten Germans were found dead facing ten dead Americans, with the Germans looking down hill and the Americans looking up hill.

"And there are those patches of woods which suited German strategy perfectly! There the 32d went in savagely fresh against their tricky defenses. Grimpettes Wood with its hand-to-hand scuffles, and Planchette, Jomblots and all the other woods!

"The villages of Cièrges, Sergy and Seringes are behind us. We have reached Dravegny. Ahead of us are the heights of the Vesle. Now we are in Fismes, and here is the Vesle itself. No wonder that the 77th and 28th found that holding the Vesle line was real training for the Argonne Forest!"

Patched and rebuilt farm houses; patched and rebuilt village houses adjoining ruins of others; black skeletons of trees killed by shell fire; remains of machine-gun nests in the woods; fields cleared of the marks of war and smiling with crops—such is the Marne salient today.