

# THE TRUTH ABOUT CHATEAU THIERRY

By Alexander Woollcott



The ruins of the bridge across the Marne at Château-Thierry where the Seventh Machine Gun Battalion, Third Division, helped check the German advance

**W**HEN, in the early summer of 1918, the Second and Third Divisions of the United States Army scrambled across France and jumped breathless into the fighting near Château-Thierry, there sprang into the minds of the folks at home the notion that "with the help of God and a few Marines," the A. E. F. had then and there halted once and for all the German drive on Paris—that just as the forces of the Imperial German Army, at the height of its power, were advancing on the French capital, they were met on the Paris-Metz road by a handful of Thermopylae-minded young Americans who, with devastating effect, proclaimed "They shall not pass" and so barred the road to civilization. Now this was a delusion, one of the most extraordinary and, in its final effect, one of the most helpful delusions in history.

Just how it arose, and just what fraction of fact it had to substantiate it, are worth our present study, not only in the interests of abstract truth, but because it was largely due to the delusion itself that the whole-hearted and fearless fighting our troops did in the Marne Valley a year ago last June not only raised the drooping spirits of an over-tired people but, for the first time, put the will to fight into the A. E. F.

Now, when it is all over and, in the perspective of a year, it is possible for all the world to see how tremendous a stimulus the Second and Third Divisions gave to the morale of the Allied forces, it is interesting to recall, what was never said openly at the time, that, in the minds of many expert French observers, the price paid in American blood for what then seemed, and indeed was, a very slight tactical advantage, was exorbitantly high. It is interesting to know that they were inclined to set down the American adventure in the Château-Thierry area as a victory for the Germans. Certainly they regarded it as nothing for which Allied hearts could thank God and take courage.

Their considerable surprise at the way in which the Americans glorified Château-Thierry was politely concealed, however, until long after the signing of the armistice, when, in the strain and stress of the peace negotiations, their old irritation found vent in such quips and cartoons as the jest which appeared on a cover of the French facetious weekly, *Le Rire*, last spring. The drawing showed two disconsolate Yanks drooping over a bar. "Cheer up," said one, "you'll soon be going home and be hailed as a conqueror." "Hell," replied the



other, or words to that effect, "I never did any fighting."

"Ca ne fait rien. An American doesn't need to have fought to be hailed as a conqueror."

Any of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who wallowed into the muck and misery of the Argonne-Meuse drive last fall will tell you, on sober reflection, that no two divisions—not even such an assortment of shock troops as made up the Second and Third—ever really stopped a man's size German drive. What actually happened was that when the Germans smashed through at the Chemin des Dames on May 27, a defensive line was formed well to the south—made up of a large number of French and a comparatively small number of American troops instructed and competent to resist any further advance. No serious attempt at a further advance was made in that area until the enemy had had a good six weeks in which to catch his breath. For what that defensive line was braced to meet was a German Army already exhausted by an incredibly successful drive, one which had brought it across the Aisne, the Tardenois and the Ourcq and down to the Marne, a German Army which had already outrun all its own expectations and was inchoate, tired, out of hand, unsupported.

**T**HE American soldier who met it said to himself: "Here comes the whole damned German Army. The poor frogs are giving way all about me, but I will not yield an inch." And he didn't. To be sure the Germans attempted no large-scale advance at that time in that region. Indeed, they never again attempted a real advance on the line from Château-Thierry to Soissons. By their lunge they had created the angle which that line formed with the Soissons-Montdidier front, and so had gone just about as far south as they dared without extending recklessly an already dangerous—as it proved later a fatal—salient.

To any one watching from a vantage point—such a point, say, as General Foch's headquarters—it was fairly obvious that the next German move would be to reduce the bastion formed by the forests of Villers-Cotteret and Compiègne and that, therefore, the next attack must be expected north of Compiègne. As a matter of fact, by the time the troops of our Second Division had come to grips with the Germans in and near Belleau Wood, all the available mobile force of the Crown Prince was assembled ready for a blow in the Metz Valley.

The day that blow was made—it came June 9—French fears were at their height, and the order for the transfer of the government from Paris to Rennes in Brittany, as once before in the war it had been transferred to Bordeaux, was written and signed. But the next day the French not only halted the German push but in turn pushed back with startling effect, and the historic order was thrown into the wastepaper basket.

Why? Well, for one thing, their backs were against the wall. Then, too, there had suddenly reappeared in command that old "butcher," General Mangin, who, though quite the finest assaulting general the French possessed, had been hid-





### Going in at Belleau Wood

den under a bushel somewhere ever since the disaster of the Champagne offensive of 1917. And above all, who doubts for a moment that the French fought better for the heartening knowledge that, not far to the east of them, the American troops were into the business at last and fighting like the very devil?

For the Americans had not been content to stand still. On their little sector, at least, the Allied move was forward. They determined on the capture of Belleau Wood and the highlands round about, a decision of their own which was acquiesced in rather than originated by the French. In the natural reaction against the exuberant enthusiasm which that enterprise evoked, there have since arisen some whispered questionings as to whether the two-kilometer depth recovered by the Americans was well taken and, indeed, whether or not there had been any real necessity for the advance at all.

The first question is more difficult to answer than the second. It might as well be admitted now that to many of the most cool-headed and seasoned of the French observers the blood there poured out was reckless business, and onlookers around the headquarters of General Degoutte, under whose corps command we were, secretly expressed the opinion that, with three battalions of trained French Infantry and a shrewd concentration of Artillery on the high and difficult portion of Belleau Wood, it should have been possible to do in short order and at small expense what a comparatively large number of Americans spent many days and many lives in doing. A good deal of this attitude may be safely accounted for by the French disposition to doubt the true generalship of any person so unfortunate as to have been born outside the domain of the French republic.

This disposition, to be sure, was derived from the fact that French genius indisputably ran to generalship. The



crisis of 1914, for instance, found France possessed of half a dozen generals, any one of them of sufficient stature to command Allied attention, or for that matter to command the Allied host.

**T**HEN, of course, wariness was scarcely a predominant characteristic of American tactics. Just as the English in the first battle of the Somme lost thousands of troops taking a certain machine gun nest which, in the summer of 1918, they took with a mere handful of troops, so the Americans plunged ahead at first much as a man, when he is so minded, plucks up a nettle with his bare hand—always a painful process and not always a necessary one. It was a tendency which abated in time with the more experienced divisions, but unquestionably it existed in the early summer. Also unquestionably it brought to the tired Allied line a needed ginger and helped to leaven the lump of caution in a host into whose uttermost ranks the notion of "strategic retreating" had seeped disastrously.

There is no attempt here to estimate how much of the American losses in June were traceable to inexperience, but it is decidedly interesting at least to note that to the thrifty, saddened French, the operations which all our own on-lookers cheered so frantically were a source of considerable alarm. For the French had long been thinking in terms of perilously diminished reserves, and could not realize that a limitless reservoir of men had at last been opened to them—that a brand new stack of chips had been put on the table.

So there were great shakings of the head—even of such sympathetic and experienced heads as that of Dr. Joseph A. Blake and his kind when the spunky American wounded began to swamp the hospitals in Paris. And among the expatriate Americans who were none too pleased with the watchful and independent administration of the A. E. F., there were great cluckings in corners and many audible predictions that, when the American public learned what was going on, "that man Pershing won't last the summer out." They foresaw for us such a giddy succession of commanders-in-chief as kept French Army politics interesting throughout the war.

Going on to the second question, and leaving aside the matter of morale, was the Belleau Wood enterprise ever necessary? Could not the Americans more prudently have waited until the taking of the wood should fall easily into a larger advance such as was ordered on July 18? In considering that question, it should be remembered that it can usually be asked captiously of any indecisive undertaking. The decision as to where and when you shall pick a quarrel with your enemy is always more or less arbitrary. Verdun, for example, became of prime importance not because of any intrinsic value its possession would give either side, but just because the Germans had said "We'll take it," and the French, as willing to fight it out there as anywhere else, had said "No you won't."

So we took Belleau Wood largely because we wanted to take something—anything—from the Germans. And the Germans clung to it in much the same spirit. Of course there were other assignable reasons. Its possession did relieve us of the prospective embarrassment of being pushed into the Marne and did give the Allies a better jumping off place for July 18. The Germans made a stiff resistance in order, as they fatuously thought, to teach us a lesson—at least to rob us of the joy of an



easy success. Which, in the light of how we crowed over it, is fairly amusing.

But, allowing for the sake of argument that all American staffs were made up of nothing but Napoleons and Nestors, even so they builded better than they knew. Even if those June operations had cost us 100,000 lives, they would have been worth it. When it is considered what effect their fighting had on Allied morale, it may be questioned whether any like number of troops in the same space of time contributed as much to the final victory as did the Second and Third United States Divisions at Château-Thierry. The mother of every boy who was killed there can say that no soldier's life was ever given more effectively during the whole war.

**T**HE effect on the French was immediate, visible, startling. The drooping French morale revived as a midsummer flower lifts its head after a cooling shower. To appreciate this, it must be remembered that the French hope of effective American intervention had begun to fade, which was a natural and not altogether unforeseen consequence of the original French insistence that we should make a showing in France even before we were ready to fight.

By the late spring of 1918, more than a year had elapsed since we had declared war on Germany. Almost a year had passed since our first little contingent (only 15,000 raw troops) had landed at St. Nazaire.

That landing, by the way, was grotesquely exaggerated by the eager French public. The number was wildly estimated in the French press at from 80,000 to 140,000, although the exaggeration was due less to deliberate propaganda than to the fact that the excited French journalists, watching from the windows of the Grand Hôtel in St. Nazaire, used to count the troops marching by each day from the piers to the camp, and never guessed they were always the same soldiers, doomed each night to return to the ships to sleep because no adequate preparations had been made to receive them.

So now, nearly a year later, the French were beginning to wonder where we were. It was their own fault—unless, possibly, you consider it our fault not to have had a large and completely equipped Army with ample boats (and ample French docking facilities) ready when, to our own considerable surprise, we declared war in April, 1917. The raising of French hopes was a deliberate French policy, which first showed itself when, at the beginning of our intervention, Joffre upset the applecart in Washington by conveying straight to the public the French desire that American troops—no matter how few or how untrained—be sent at once to stiffen French morale.

No one not close to the councils of Chaumont and Washington will ever realize how insistently that pressure was maintained afterward and how ingeniously varied were the political devices to hurry the Americans—not necessarily to hurry their final achievement, but to hurry their immediate display. The sending of Pershing in May, 1917, months before he could hope to be followed by any considerable force, represented a yielding to that pressure.

But there was much more to which he did not yield. After General Sibert, who was the first commander of the First Division, had returned to America, it was fairly well known in France that he had differed with his chief in wishing to hustle the troops into the trenches.



When President Poincaré came down to review our troops and told them rather pointedly that they looked fit for the hardest combat, Frederick Palmer, the censor, pulled the teeth of that subtle suggestion by coming softly to the war correspondents and assuring them that if they mentioned it in their despatches it would be deftly deleted therefrom.

But meanwhile the French public had been fed for a year by a continuous movie display of "Sammies" in training and "Sammies" in action, and there was not a cinema in France that did not make much of Pershing's famous "All that we have is yours" speech, which Clemenceau adroitly circulated from one end of France to the other. Indeed, he had written it, as one might have guessed who noted how much more fluent and natural it was in French than in English. So Pershing's most famous utterance was written by Clemenceau, although of course it was shown to Pershing before it was published, and represented the substance if not the exact wording of what Pershing had actually said to Foch.

The need, then, for reviving French faith in American aid was obvious. The effect of Belleau Wood was none the less startling. Every Yank in France felt it as he walked along the village streets. There were more smiles for him from Suzette and Marie-Rose, more butter when he sneaked into a buvette for lunch. Indeed, there was more of all "les petites choses defendues."

But what the home folks cannot have realized, what no one could quite have foreseen, was the effect on the A. E. F. The effect of the Belleau Wood battle on the Americans then in France or on the way was somewhat like the effect of a little strong drink accidentally imbibed by the rabbit who then went forth and slapped a bulldog in the face. For, though of course there was no whisper of all this in the cables or letters home, the morale of our Army in France had been sagging, sagging, sagging.

**I**T could scarcely have been otherwise. Our troops had had to wait around too long, and it had taken all the heart out of them. Homesick beyond words, they had had to prepare themselves slowly for trench warfare, a deadly thing, the while all the world told them that the war would last for years and years. They had been told that what they would need was patience, when they knew deep within them that all that they had was punch. They began to wonder whether they were going to be so darned good after all. And they began to say: "Perhaps it will all be over before we get in." Natural thoughts, these, but not inspiring.

**T**HEN suddenly the whole face of the world was changed. News came from the Marne Valley that Americans were pitching into the fight, that it was old-fashioned, paste-'em-one-in-the-eye fighting of their own sort, that they were getting away with murder. Youth and heart and enthusiasm, that was all that was wanted. So ran the tidings, and every American from Camp Lewis to Toul, said: "Gee, we're pretty good," and became so by thinking it.

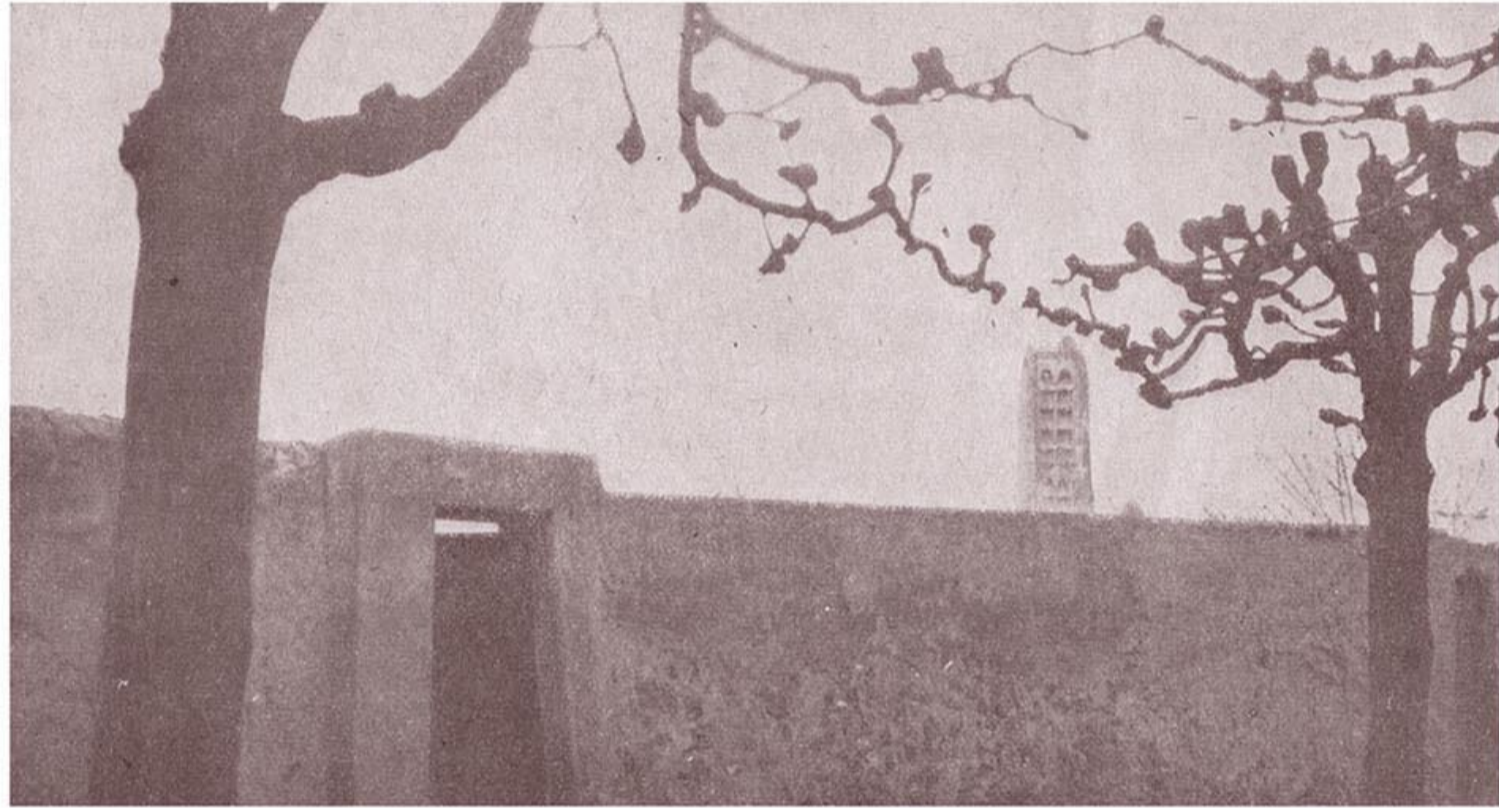
Early critics of the A. E. F. had shaken their heads and said sadly that America had no "fighting tradition." It never occurred to anyone that, by the modern methods of advertisement, the Americans would make up that shortage in their equipment in just three days. The Belleau Wood battle amounted, in cold fact, to just this. One American divi-



sion, as good as any we had and frequently replenished, fought for a month against a force made up successively of three much smaller and more fatigued German divisions, advancing during that month for two kilometers on an eight kilometer front, capturing 1,400 prisoners and considerable equipment. That much is of record in General Bundy's congratulatory orders published after the engagement. But it was done with such an infectious spirit that the on-lookers went wild with enthusiasm and communicated that enthusiasm, by jazzy newspaper displays, to all other living Americans.

Whereupon many divisions, newly arrived or on their way, suddenly felt that there was nothing to it, that there was no need of all these depressing months of school, that if they could be given a chance, they would show the world a thing or two. Just as suddenly, General Pershing found himself commanding a lot of fighting units which, a month before, everybody (including himself probably) would have regarded as raw recruits in need of weeks of patient training, but which now, overnight, were miraculously transformed into ready instruments, fit for immediate offensive action and fairly itching to be used.

The policy of pitching them all into the thick of things at once was then decided upon, and all that happened from July 18 to November 11 followed as a natural though unforeseen consequence of what happened in June northwest of Château-Thierry. Just as an electric charge will, in a flash, take a jar of prop-



The scarred tower of Château-Thierry's Cathedral as seen from the garden of the Château

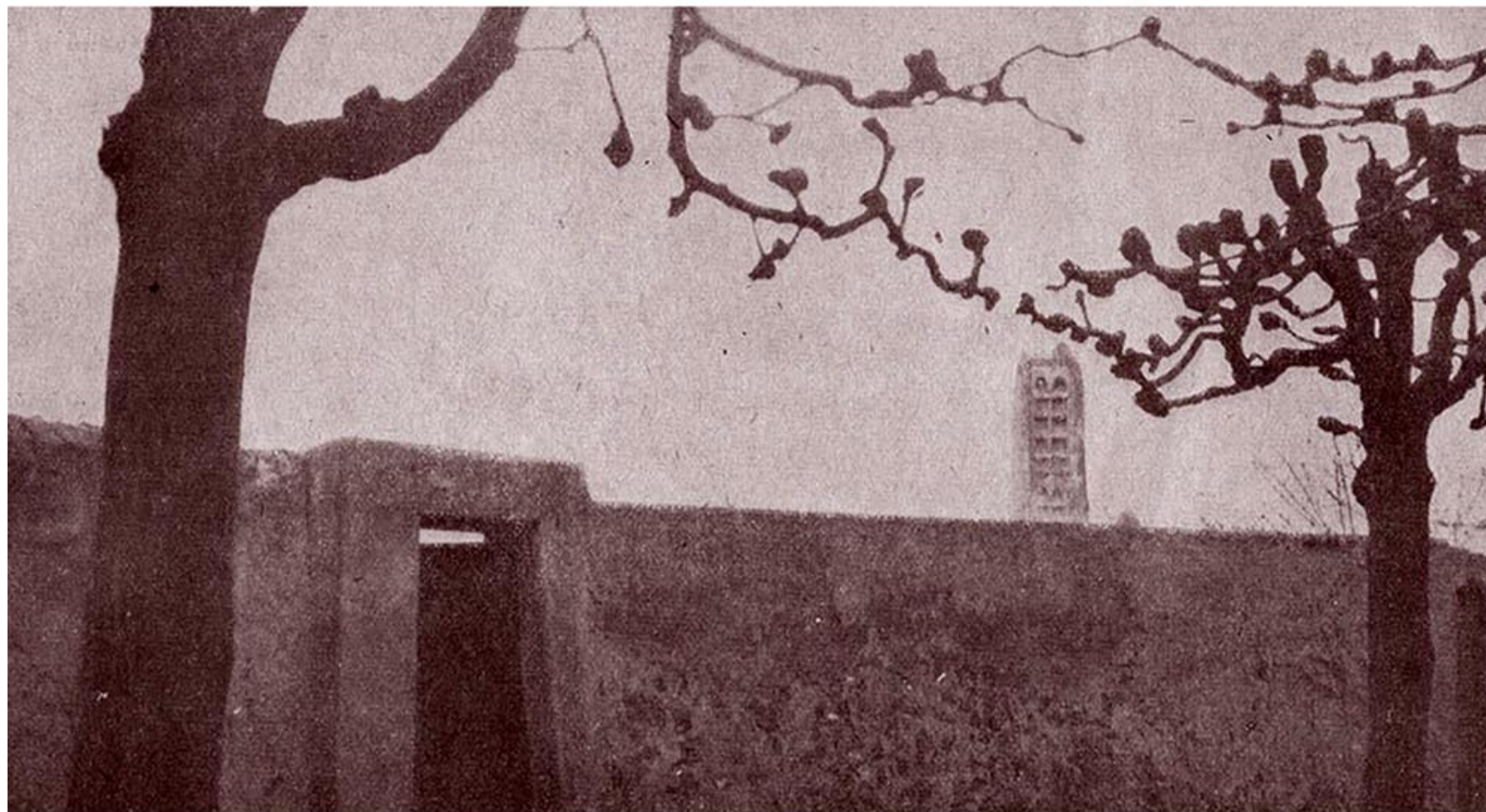
erly proportioned hydrogen and oxygen and turn it into water, so the current which, spitting blue flame and setting the whole world a-tingle, ran forth from Belleau Wood last June, took that miscellaneous assortment of dubious Americans known as the A. E. F. and turned it into an Army.

**S**O much for a delusion and what it can do. There was one other less fortunate delusion which was born at the same time and which can be summed up in the popular notion that whereas the French were retreating disgracefully through the Americans, as water runs through a sieve, the Americans stood their ground and so saved the day. This is hardly true and in no way fair to the French.

What happened was this. As the Americans approached the battle, under command of General Degoutte, a French corps commander, the oncoming Germans were being opposed by two depleted French divisions, weary from five days of disorderly and disheartening retreat. They were about all in, but they were ordered to hold their ground until the Americans could get into position behind them. Then they were to fall back through the Americans and withdraw for a much-needed rest and rehabilitation.

All that happened thereafter was according to order. The withdrawal of the exhausted French troops through the lines of the exuberant Americans was successfully accomplished, and was no





The scarred tower of Château-Thierry's Cathedral as seen from the garden of the Château

reflection whatever on their spirit. In holding out as long as they had against overwhelmingly superior numbers, they had done their share.

Of course this maneuver was understood only by the higher commanders, so naturally enough there was much confusion on the subject in the minds of the French and American troops involved. And though, actually, everything was moving "according to plan," it was no less wonderful that the Americans could go in with undiminished courage when their roads were swarming with delapidated French troops in the full process of a bewildered retirement. Certainly it must have seemed to them that they alone were holding fast when the entire fabric of French defence was crumbling all around them. Also they got there and spread throughout the A. E. F. a poor notion of the French Army—a notion based on an entire misconception of what was going on, a notion which survives to this day.

Naturally enough the French minor officers, having received mysterious orders to fall back, were puzzled by the spectacle of Americans coming forward and, here and there, urged them to withdraw to safety.

At this time arose the great legend that General Bundy, then commanding the Second Division, had met the French order to retreat with a resounding refusal.

"Retreat hell, I just got here!"

**WHICH** story, born of the mood of those wonderful days, spread like the flu from continent to continent. It was not true. But it was not sheer invention. Captain Williams of the Marines, getting into position with his company on the first day, was met by an excited French officer who told him that the order was to retreat, which, as far as the French troops were concerned, was quite true. And Captain Williams told him to go to hell.

He did not know that he was making superiors: "Oh, listen, I have just done a wonderful and courageous thing." Far from it. He had spoken out of his heart, and then fearing that perhaps he had not employed the proper attitude toward an Allied officer of higher rank, he had sent in his own report of the proceedings to beat any one else to it. Captain Williams was wounded later, and when he was on the operating table in the dressing station he was killed by a random shell. He is among the multitudinous dead who lie in the Valley of the Marne. But the thing he said and the work he did is very much alive. It lives and works today in the Treaty of Peace.

## THE HOME SECTOR

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p. 5