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Sight-seeing at the Front

Special Correspondence to Vanity Fair

from the Dot-and-Dash line across France

by Brighton Perry



OVER THE TOP

A sketch by Naudin,—one of the many illustrations designed by this noted French artist for Helleu's edition of Gerald's "La Guerre, Madame," the first English version of which was published in Vanity Fair for February and March, 1917

I AM now able to send, for the first time to any paper, a complete account of the situation which exists on the French front with regard to the facilities for accommodating the audiences. By "French front" I mean that region behind the so-called "shaded portion" on the map, perhaps twenty kilometers back of the famous Dot and Dash Line, in the vicinity of the original Arrow No. 1. In other words, not near enough to the actual fighting to inconvenience the spectators, but quite near enough to irritate the soldiers. By "spectators" is meant that tremendous body of non-combatants who seem constantly to be visiting the front, either to get "atmosphere" for propaganda, or to investigate something for a war board, or just to "see what the war is like."

I HAVE been asked by several people at home to explain how it is that General Foch has any room at the front to do any fighting; cluttered up as it must be with visiting committees, sight-seeing parties, and investigating missions. Judging from the interviews printed in the home papers, detailing the experiences of persons who have just returned from a visit to the front and giving their opinions as to what the next Allied move will be, at least five-eighths of the shipping (of the rapid construction of which we hear so much) must be devoted to transporting adventuresome parties to France in order to give them a clear picture of what the war is like.

It was to discover just where they kept the soldiers and how they had elbow-room in which to do their calisthenics, during the influx of spectators, that I set out on this tour of inspection. Since a great many people seem to be treating the war as a theatrical performance, it seemed no more than regular that proper provision should be made for the safety and convenience of these audiences; that there should be sufficient exits provided so that the theatre of war could be easily emptied of its patrons.

ON the day of the inspection, the war was drawing a good house. Hardly had we left the center of Paris when we encountered parties of sight-seers going through the Youth's & Misses' Tour-to-the-Front. These patrons are chiefly nondescript civilians from America,

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leather-goods buyers, mackintosh salesmen, etc., who happened to be in Paris and who just *couldn't* go back home without having one little peek at the war. Reading so much about it every day gives anyone who has a good news sense a craving to see what the real thing looks like,—from the audience.

We elbowed our way roughly through these inconsequential groups, however, as they were only being deluded into thinking that they were witnessing a section of the great struggle. As a matter of fact, the excavation through which they were hunching themselves along in gas-masks and steel helmets, under the impression that they were weaving through a front-line trench, was in reality simply an abandoned suburban extension of that famous municipal conduit through which Jean Valjean made his immortal escape.

What did these people know of war?

AS we progressed further into the country, however, things began to take on a more ferocious aspect. We passed squads of khaki clad women, with campaign caps and individual machine-guns under their arms.

"Ah-ha," I murmured, with no little emotion, "so many Jeannes de'Arc!"

"No," replied my guide (or rather "*non*," for he was of the French persuasion), "*non*; these are a detachment of the American Women's Boullion Cube Fund Expeditionary Force. They have been spending the week in Paris pouring hot water on boullion cubes, and are now out seeing a bit of the front—just for relaxation. All work and no play,—you know."

BUT I was not long to be denied the sight of real American masculinity in war attire. There, on the top of a neighboring knoll, was a detachment of uniformed men watching with intent gaze the progress of a deHaviland 4 (no offense meant to Mr. Borglum or to the *New York Times*) through the clouds. I turned to my guide to ask him if, by any chance, I was correct in picking the man with the face like General Pershing's for General Pershing, when he volunteered all the information I needed.

"We now come," he said, "to what corresponds to the Dress Circle in your American theatre. These seats are all right if you can't get anything better. On the hill at the left you will see a delegation representing the American Overseas Committee of the New and Enlarged Encyclopædia, which is about to be published next spring. This committee has been sent over to visit the front in order that they may get what they refer to as 'color' for writing up the section in the encyclopædia labelled 'War to Worcestershire.' They are shown some of last year's shell-holes, given a few pieces of shrapnel, and sent home, fairly reeking with 'color.' All they want, anyway, is to see a little something of the horrors of war, just enough to give a touch of reality to the news when they get home. They may also be induced to talk to reporters on their local papers."

Again our car sped forward. (I fancy I haven't mentioned the car before, have I? Well, we had one, anyway. One simply must draw the line somewhere in denying oneself comforts in this war.) The pleasant, wooded hillsides gave way to more pleasant, wooded hillsides. It was a beautiful afternoon for a matinee.

And there, as if it had known what my last

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sentence was going to be, was the jolliest matinee party you could wish to see. A few yards in front of us we discerned a group of Americans of deferred classification, fiercely arrayed in Sam Brown belts and the war-like uniform of that most implacable of all our non-fighting branches: the American Civilian Investigating Corps. This particular delegation, which was being shown the front, represented the National Mushroom Association of the United States, and they were over on an official mission of investigation to study the effects of continued shell-fire on the fungus growth of Northern France. If they found that battle conditions aided the growth of rare fungi, they were to draw up a report suggesting that we have a war of our own sometime in America, for the purpose of adding to our somewhat limited list of mushroom species. There are really a lot of beneficial effects of war when you come to figure them all out.

JUST at present, the committee was taking a look around to see the way in which the soldiers lived, and to get a good working knowledge of modern warfare. One is so apt to get into a rut (*Continued on page 88*) studying mushrooms, unless one has some outside interests.

"These correspond to the balcony seats," said my guide. "At times you can hear the firing from here. I remember one day last month I had a party of war-workers here representing the French Pastry Moulders of America. They had come over to investigate the ruined chateaus of France to see if there were not some possible new designs for French pastry to be obtained from the disorganized architecture. Before they went back they wanted to see a bit of the war. They had read so much about it. We brought them out here, and they were more than pleased. As one of them said, in his quaint American way: 'It has been by far the most interesting feature of our stay in France.' It is easy to entertain people who are as appreciative as that."

But we were yet to see the really choice seats, those reserved for patrons of the military McBrides and Tysons. They were close up among the soldiery, not so near the fighting as to impede the movements of the shock troops, but so near the troops in the rear that the spectators could touch them and hear their odd manner of speech and see the real inside life of these boys who are doing their bit to win the war—along with the people at home who save fruit-pits, and accept $4\frac{1}{4}\%$ on their investments.

I wondered who were the lucky spectators whose privilege it was to stand here and observe. Whatever publication they might be writing for, they would not lack for local color. In fact there was nothing that a man who had seen the war from this vantage point could not do when he got home,—except wear service stripes.

And, as I looked about for this favored audience, I heard the sound of voices coming from behind a motor-lorry:

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"May I ask a question?"

"Does the Gentleman from Alabama yield to the Gentleman from Louisiana?"

"Certainly."

"May I ask if the honorable gentleman has considered that we are now in the midst of a great war, the greatest war, nay more, by far the greatest war, that the world has ever seen; that we have entered this war, resplendent in the shining white light of Freedom, that Freedom which was won for us on the glorious field at Lexington and the chill snow at Valley Forge; that Freedom which was maintained on the limpid waters of Lake Erie and was fostered at the Alamo; that Freedom, which, from her mountain height, was made glorious and immortal on the shell-torn field at Gettysburg and perpetuated on the sparkling tide at Manila Bay. Does the honorable gentleman realize that this is our heritage, our immortal treasure, to be maintained spotless, sub-spotless as the driven snow which blows from the virgin passes of the Rocky Mountains,—those stern, silent sentinels of our national integrity, symbolizing at once our stability as a nation and our imperishable honor as members of the Brotherhood of Man? I shall now be able to say to my constituents when I return to that glorious land of Freedom . . ."

The motor lorry, being unversed in parliamentary procedure, began to cough loudly at this juncture, and so we were unable to learn what was going to happen to that lucky Land of Freedom when the speaker should return to it. But I could guess. It would be regaled, from the halls of Congress, with the latest inside dope from the theatre of war. For these favored spectators were none other than a party of adventuresome members of Congress on a vacation, who, having voted good money for the conduct of the war, felt that the least that was due them was a front seat from which to see it work.

ALTHOUGH I couldn't observe them from where I stood, I could see a soldier who was watching them. He was a real, honest-to-gosh soldier, who wasn't writing for a paper or investigating for a committee. All he was doing was fighting; but we must never forget that the fighting men are doing their part to win the war just exactly as much as if they were in America writing editorials, or serving on a committee, or making things for the Government at only a reasonable profit. It takes all kinds of service to win a war, and if the soldier does his part faithfully, he, too, is filling his niche, and need not feel ashamed because he is not at home risking his money in Government bonds.

There was something in the expression of this ordinary soldier as he stood there, looking at the group of sight-seers that would make a valuable addi-

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tion to the *Times*' collection of war-maps. It wouldn't need any explanatory caption or legend telling what the various lines meant. All you would have to label it would be: "*Member of the American Expeditionary Force Looking at a Seeing-the-Front Party,*" and let it go at that.

As for me, I decided that there is only one costume permissible for those who would see the Front, and that I didn't have it on.

So I called the rest of the trip off.

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