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THEY SHALL NOT PASS

**THEY
SHALL NOT PASS**

BY

FRANK H. SIMONDS
AUTHOR OF "THE GREAT WAR"



GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
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1916

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THEY SHALL NOT PASS

I

MY TRIP TO VERDUN—GENERAL PÉTAINE FACE TO FACE

[3]

ToC

THE MEN WHO HOLD THE LINE—WHAT
THEIR FACES TOLD OF THE PAST AND THE
FUTURE OF FRANCE

My road to Verdun ran through the Elysée Palace, and it was to the courtesy and interest of the President of the French Republic that I owed my opportunity to see the battle for the Meuse city at close range. Already through the kindness of the French General Staff I had seen the Lorraine and Marne battlegrounds and had been guided over these fields by officers who had shared in the opening battles that saved France. But Verdun was more difficult; there is little time for caring for the wandering correspondent when a decisive contest is going forward, and quite naturally the General Staff turned a deaf ear to my request.

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Through the kindness of one of the many Frenchmen who gave time and effort to make my pilgrimage a success I was at last able to see M. Poincaré. Like our own American President, the French Chief Magistrate is never interviewed, and I mention this audience simply because it was one more and in a sense the final proof for me of the friendliness, the courtesy, the interest that the American will find to-day in France. I had gone to Paris, my ears filled with the warnings of those who told me that it was hard to be an American in Europe, in France, in the present hour. I had gone expecting, or at least fearing, that I should find it so.

Instead, from peasant to President I found only kindness, only gratitude, only a profound appreciation for all that Americans had individually done for France in the hour of her great trial. These things and one thing more I found: a very intense desire that Americans should be able to see for themselves; the Frenchman will not talk to you of what France has done, is doing; he shrinks from anything that might suggest the imitation of the German method of propaganda. In so far as it is humanly possible he would have you see the thing for yourself and testify out of

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your own mouth.

Thus it came about that all my difficulties vanished when I had been permitted to express to the President my desire to see Verdun and to go back to America—I was sailing within the week—able to report what I had seen with my own eyes of the decisive battle still going forward around the Lorraine city. Without further delay, discussion, it was promised that I should go to Verdun by motor, that I should go cared for by the French military authorities and that I should be permitted to see all that one could see at the moment of the contest.

We left Paris in the early afternoon; my companions were M. Henri Ponsot, chief of the Press Service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and M. Hugues le Roux, a distinguished Frenchman of letters well known to many Americans. To start for the battlefield from a busy, peaceful city, to run for miles through suburbs as quiet and lacking in martial aspect as the regions beyond the Harlem, at home, was a thing that seemed almost unreal; but only for a brief moment, for war has come very near to Paris, and one may not travel far in Eastern France without seeing its signs. [6]

In less than an hour we were passing the rear of the line held by the British at the Battle of the Marne, and barely sixty minutes after we had passed out through the Vincennes gate we met at Courtacon the first of the ruined villages that for two hundred miles line the roadways that lead from the capital to Lorraine and Champagne. Suddenly in the midst of a peaceful countryside, after passing a score of undisturbed villages, villages so like one to another, you come to one upon which the storm has burst, and instead of snug houses, smiling faces, the air of contentment and happiness that was France, there is only a heap of ruins, houses with their roofs gone, their walls torn by shell fire, villages abandoned partially or wholly, contemporary Pompeiis, overtaken by the Vesuvius of Krupp. [7]

Coincidentally there appear along the roadside, in the fields, among the plough furrows, on every side, the crosses that mark the graves of those who died for France—or for Germany. Along the slope you may mark the passage of a charge by these crosses; those who fell were buried as they lay, French and Germans with equal care. Indeed, there is a certain pride visible in all that the French do for their dead foes. Alongside a hamlet wantonly burned, burned by careful labor and with German thoroughness; in villages where you will be told of nameless atrocities and shameful killings, you will see the German graves, marked by neat crosses, surrounded by sod embankments, marked with plaques of black and white; the French are marked by plaques of red, white and blue, and the latter invariably decorated with a flag and flowers. [8]

Once you have seen these graves by the roadside going east you will hardly go a mile in two hundred which has not its graves. From the environs of Meaux, a scant twenty miles from Paris, to the frontier at the Seille, beyond Nancy, there are graves and more graves, now scattered, now crowded together where men fought hand to hand. Passing them in a swift-moving auto, they seem to march by you; there is the illusion of an army advancing on the hillside, until at last, beyond Nancy, where the fighting was so terrible, about little villages such as Corbessaux, you come to the great common graves, where a hundred or two hundred men have been gathered, where the trenches now levelled are but long graves, and you read, "Here rest 179 French soldiers," or across the road, "Here 196 Germans." [9]

Take a map of France and from a point just south of Paris draw a straight line to the Vosges; twenty or thirty miles to the north draw another. Between the two is the black district of the Marne and Nancy battles. It is the district of ruined villages, destroyed farms; it is the region where every hillside—so it will seem to the traveller—is marked by these pathetic crosses. It is a region in which the sense of death and destruction is abroad. Go forty miles north again and draw two more lines, and this is the region not of the death and destruction of yesterday, but of to-day; this is the front, where the graves are still in the making, the region of the Oise to the Meuse, from Noyon to Verdun.

On this day our route led eastward through the villages which in September, 1914, woke from at least a century of oblivion, from the forgetting that followed Napoleon's last campaign in France to a splendid but terrible ten days: Courtacon, Sézanne, La-Fère Champenoise, Vitry-le-François, the region where Franchet d'Esperey and Foch fought, where the "Miracle of the Marne" was performed. Mile after mile the countryside files by, the never-changing impression of a huge cemetery, the hugest in the world, the stricken villages, now and then striving to begin again, a red roof here and there telling of the first counter offensive of peace, of construction made against the whirlwind that had come and gone. [10]

Always, too, nothing but old men and women, these and children, working in the broad fields, still partially cultivated, but no longer the fields of that perfectly cared for France of the other peace days. Women and children at the plough, old men bent double by age still spending such strength as is left in the tasks that war has set for them. This is the France behind the front, and, aside from the ruined villages and graves, the France that stretches from the Pyrenees to the Marne, a France from which youth and manhood are gone, in which age and childhood remain with the women. Yet in this land we were passing how much of the youth and manhood of France and Germany was buried in the graves the crosses demonstrated at every kilometre. [11]

But a hundred miles east of Paris there begins a new world. The graves, the shell-cursed villages, remain, but this is no longer the France of the Marne fighting and of the war of two years ago. At Vitry-le-François you pass almost without warning into the region which is the back of the front to-day, the base of all the line of fire from Rheims to the Meuse, and suddenly along the road appear the canvas guideposts which bear the terse warning, "Verdun." You pass suddenly from ancient to contemporary history, from the killing of other years to the killing that

is of to-day—the killing and the wounding—and along the hills where there are still graves there begin to appear Red Cross tents and signs, and ambulances pass you bearing the latest harvest.

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And now every village is a garrison town. For a hundred miles there have been only women and old men, but now there are only soldiers; they fill the streets; they crowd the doorways of the houses. The fields are filled with tents, with horses, with all the impedimenta of an army. The whole countryside is a place of arms. Every branch of French service is about you—Tunisians, Turcos, cavalry, the black, the brown, and the white—the men who yesterday or last week were in the first line, who rest and will return to-morrow or next day to fight again.

Unmistakably, too, you feel that this is the business of war; you are in a factory, a machine shop; if the product is death and destruction, it is no less a matter of machinery, not of romance, of glamour. The back of the front is a place of work and of rest for more work, but of parade, of the brilliant, of the fascinating there is just nothing. Men with bright but plainly weary faces, not young men, but men of thirty and above, hard bitten by their experience, patently fit, fed, but somehow related to the ruins and the destruction around them, they are all about you, and wherever now you see a grave you will discover a knot of men standing before it talking soberly. Wherever you see the vestiges of an old trench, a hill that was fought for at this time twenty months ago, you will see new practice trenches and probably the recruits, the "Class of 1917," the boys that are waiting for the call, listening to an officer explaining to them what has been done here, the mistake or the good judgment revealed by the event. For France is training the youth that remains to her on the still recent battlefields and in the presence of those who died to keep the ground.

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Just as the darkness came we passed St. Dizier and entered at last upon the road to Verdun, the one road that is the life line of the city. For to understand the real problem of the defence of Verdun you must realize that there is lacking to the city any railroad. In September, 1914, the Germans took St. Mihiel and cut the railway coming north along the Meuse. On their retreat from the Marne the soldiers of the Crown Prince halted at Montfaucon and Varennes, and their cannon have commanded the Paris-Verdun-Metz Railroad ever since. Save for a crazy narrow-gauge line wandering along the hill slopes, climbing by impossible grades, Verdun is without rail communication.

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It was this that made the defence of the town next to impossible. Partially to remedy the defect the French had reconstructed a local highway running from St. Dizier by Bar-le-Duc to Verdun beyond the reach of German artillery. To-day an army of a quarter of a million of men, the enormous parks of heavy artillery and field guns—everything is supplied by this one road and by motor transport.

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Coming north from St. Dizier we entered this vast procession. Mile after mile the caravan stretched on, fifty miles with hardly a break of a hundred feet between trucks. Paris 'buses, turned into vehicles to bear fresh meat; new motor trucks built to carry thirty-five men and travelling in companies, regiments, brigades; wagons from the hood of which soldiers, bound to replace the killed and wounded of yesterday, looked down upon you, calmly but unsmilingly. From St. Dizier to Verdun the impression was of that of the machinery by which logs are carried to the saw in a mill. You felt unconsciously, yet unmistakably, that you were looking, not upon automobiles, not upon separate trucks, but upon some vast and intricate system of belts and benches that were steadily, swiftly, surely carrying all this vast material, carrying men and munitions and supplies, everything human and inanimate, to that vast grinding mill which was beyond the hills, the crushing machine which worked with equal remorselessness upon men and upon things.

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Now and again, too, over the hills came the Red Cross ambulances; they passed you returning from the front and bringing within their carefully closed walls the finished product, the fruits of the day's grinding, or a fraction thereof. And about the whole thing there was a sense of the mechanical rather than the human, something that suggested an automatic, a machine-driven, movement; it was as if an unseen system of belts and engines and levers guided, moved, propelled this long procession upward and ever toward the mysterious front where the knives or the axes or the grinding stones did their work.

Night came down upon us along the road and brought a new impression. Mile on mile over the hills and round the curves, disappearing in the woods, reappearing on the distant summits of the hills, each showing a rear light that wagged crazily on the horizon, this huge caravan flowed onward, while in the villages and on the hillsides campfires flashed up and the faces or the figures of the soldiers could be seen now clearly and now dimly. But all else was subordinated to the line of moving transports. Somewhere far off at one end of the procession there was battle; somewhere down below at the other end there was peace. There all the resources, the life blood, the treasure in men and in riches of France were concentrating and collecting, were being fed into this motor fleet, which like baskets on ropes was carrying it forward to the end of the line and then bringing back what remained, or for the most part coming back empty, for more—for more lives and more treasure.

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It was full night when our car came down the curved grades into Bar-le-Duc, halted at the corner, where soldiers performed the work of traffic policemen and steadily guided the caravan toward the road marked by a canvas sign lighted within by a single candle and bearing the one word, "Verdun." All night, too, the rumble of the passing transport filled the air and the little hotel shook with the jar of the heavy trucks, for neither by day nor by night is there a halt in the motor transport, and the sound of this grinding is never low.

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It was little more than daylight when we took the road again, with a thirty-mile drive to Verdun

before us. Almost immediately we turned into the Verdun route we met again the caravan of automobiles, of camions, as the French say. It still flowed on without break. Now, too, we entered the main road, the one road to Verdun, the road that had been built by the French army against just such an attack as was now in progress. The road was as wide as Fifth Avenue, as smooth as asphalt—a road that, when peace comes, if it ever does, will delight the motorist. Despite the traffic it had to bear, it was in perfect repair, and soldiers in uniform sat by the side breaking stone and preparing metal to keep it so.

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The character of the country had now changed. We were entering the region of the hills, between the Aisne and the Meuse, a country reminiscent of New England. Those hills are the barrier which beyond the Meuse, under the names of the Côte de Meuse, have been the scene of so much desperate fighting. The roads that sidled off to the east bore battle names, St. Mihiel, Troyon, and the road that we followed was still marked at every turn with the magic word "Verdun." Our immediate objective was Souilly, the obscure hill town twenty miles, perhaps, south of the front, from which Sarrail had defended Verdun in the Marne days and from which Pétain was now defending Verdun against a still more terrible attack.

And in France to-day one speaks only of Verdun and Pétain. Soldiers have their day; Joffre, Castelnau, Foch, all retain much of the affection and admiration they have deserved, but at the moment it is the man who has held Verdun that France thinks of, and there was the promise for us that at Souilly we should see the man whose fame had filled the world in the recent great and terrible weeks. Upward and downward over the hills, through more ruined villages, more hospitals, more camps, our march took us until after a short hour we came to Souilly, general headquarters of the Army of Verdun, of Pétain, the centre of the world for the moment.

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Few towns have done less to prepare for greatness than Souilly. It boasts a single street three inches deep in the clay mud of the spring—a single street through which the Verdun route marches almost contemptuously, the same nest of stone and plaster houses, one story high, houses from which the owners had departed to make room for generals and staff officers. This and one thing more, the Mairie, the town hall, as usual the one pretentious edifice of the French hamlet, and before the stairway of this we stopped and got out.

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We were at headquarters. From this little building, devoted for perhaps a century to the business of governing the commune of Souilly, with its scant thousand of people, Pétain was defending Verdun and the fate of an army of 250,000 men at the least. In the upstairs room, where the town councillors had once debated parochial questions, Joffre and Castelnau and Pétain in the terrible days of the opening conflict had consulted, argued, decided—decided the fate of France, so the Germans had said, for they had made the fall of Verdun the assurance of French collapse.

Unconsciously, too, you felt the change in the character of the population of this village. There were still the soldiers, the eternal gray-blue uniforms, but there were also men of a different type, men of authority. In the street your guides pointed out to you General Herr, the man who had designed and planned and accomplished the miracle of the motor transport that had saved Verdun—with the aid of the brave men fighting somewhere not far beyond the nearest hills. He had commanded at Verdun when the attack came, and without hesitation he had turned over his command to Pétain, his junior in service and rank before the war, given up the glory and become the superintendent of transport. Men spoke to you of the fine loyalty of that action with unconcealed admiration.

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And then out of the remoteness of Souilly there came a voice familiar to an American. Bunau-Varilla, the man of Panama, wearing the uniform of a commandant and the Croix de Guerre newly bestowed for some wonderful engineering achievement, stepped forward to ask for his friends and yours of the old "*Sun* paper." I had seen him last in the *Sun* office in the days when the war had just broken out and he was about to sail for home; in the days when the Marne was still unfought and he had breathed hope then as he spoke with confidence now.

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Presently there arrived the two officers whose duty it was to take me to Verdun, Captain Henri Bourdeaux, a man of letters known to all Frenchmen; Captain Madelin, an historian, already documented in the history of the war making under his own eyes. To these gentlemen and their colleagues who perform this task that can hardly be agreeable, who risk their lives and give over their time with unfailing courtesy and consideration that the American newspaper correspondent may see, may report, it is impossible to return sufficient thanks, and every American newspaper reader who finds on his breakfast table the journal that tells him of the progress of the war owes something to some officer.

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"Were we to see Verdun?" This was the first problem. I had been warned two days before that the bombardment was raging and that it was quite possible that it would be unsafe to go farther. But the news was reassuring; Verdun was tranquil. "And Pétain?" One could not yet say.

Even as we spoke there was a stirring in the crowd, general saluting, and I caught a glimpse of the commander-in-chief as he went quickly up the staircase. For the rest we must wait. But not for very long; in a few minutes there came the welcome word that General Pétain would see us, would see the stray American correspondent.

Since I saw Pétain in the little Mairie at Souilly I have seen many photographs of him, but none in any real measure give the true picture of the defender of Verdun. He saw us in his office, the bare upstairs room, two years ago the office of the Mayor of Souilly. Think of the Selectmen's office in any New England village and the picture will be accurate: a bare room, a desk, one chair, a telephone, nothing on the walls but two maps, one of the military zone, one of the actual

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front and positions of the Verdun fighting. A bleak room, barely heated by the most primitive of stoves. From the single window one looked down on the cheerless street along which lumbered the caravan of autos. On the pegs against the wall hung the General's hat and coat, weather-stained, faded, the clothes of a man who worked in all weathers. Of staff officers, of uniforms, of color there was just nothing; of war there was hardly a hint.

At the door the commander-in-chief met us, shook hands, and murmured clearly and slowly, with incisive distinctness, the formal words of French greeting; he spoke no English. Instantly there was the suggestion of Kitchener, not of Kitchener as you see him in flesh, but in photographs, the same coldness, decision. The smile that accompanied the words of welcome vanished and the face was utterly motionless, expressionless. You saw a tall, broad-shouldered man, with every appearance of physical strength, a clear blue eye, looking straight forward and beyond.

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My French companion, M. Le Roux, spoke with Pétain. He had just come from Joffre and he told an interesting circumstance. Pétain listened. He said now and then "yes" or "no." Nothing more. Watching him narrowly you saw that occasionally his eyes twitched a little, the single sign of fatigue that the long strain of weeks of responsibility had brought.

It was hard to believe, looking at this quiet, calm, silent man, that you were in the presence of the soldier who had won the Battle of Champagne, the man whom the war had surprised in the last of his fifties, a Colonel, a teacher of war rather than a soldier, a professor like Foch.

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No one of Napoleon's marshals had commanded as many men as obeyed this Frenchman, who was as lacking in the distinction of military circumstance as our own Grant. Napoleon had won all his famous victories with far fewer troops than were directed from the telephone on the table yonder.

Every impression of modern war that comes to one actually in touch with it is a destruction of illusion: this thing is a thing of mechanism rather than of brilliance; perhaps Pétain has led a regiment, a brigade, or a division to the charge. You knew instinctively in seeing the man that you would go or come, as he said, but there was neither dash nor fire, nothing of the suggestion of élan; rather there was the suggestion of the commander of a great ocean liner, the man responsible for the lives, this time of hundreds of thousands, not scores, for the safety of France, not of a ship, but the man of machinery and the master of the wisdom of the tides and the weather, not the Ney, or the Murat, not the Napoleon of Arcola. The impression was of a strong man whose life was a life beaten upon by storms; the man on the bridge, to keep to the rather ridiculously inadequate figure, but not by any chance the man on horseback.

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My talk, our talk with Pétain was the matter of perhaps five minutes. The time was consumed by the words of M. Le Roux, who spoke very earnestly urging that more American correspondents be permitted to visit Verdun, and Pétain heard him patiently, but said just nothing. Once he had greeted us his face settled into that grim expression that never changed until he smiled his word of good wishes as we left. Yet I have since found that apart from one circumstance which I shall mention in a moment I have remembered those minutes most clearly of all of my Verdun experience. Just as the photograph does not reveal the face of the man, the word does not describe the sense of strength, of responsibility, that he gives.

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In a childish sort of way, exactly as one thinks of war as a matter of dash and color and motion, one thinks of the French general as the leader of a cavalry charge or of a forlorn hope of infantry. And the French soldier of this war has not been the man of charge or of dash—not that he has not charged as well as ever in his history, a little more bravely, perhaps, for machine guns are new and something worse than other wars have had. What the French soldier has done has been to stand, to hold, to die not in the onrush but on the spot.

And Pétain in some curious way has fixed in my mind the impression of the new Frenchman, if there be a new one, or perhaps better of the French soldier of to-day, whether he wear the stars of the general or undecorated "horizon" blue of the Poilu. The look that I saw in his eyes, the calm, steady, utterly emotionless looking straight forward, I saw everywhere at the front and at the back of the front. It embodied for me an enduring impression of the spirit and the poise of the French soldier of the latest and most terrible of French struggles. And I confess that, more than all I saw and heard at the front and in Paris, the look of this man convinced me that Verdun would not fall, that France herself would not either weary or weaken.

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In Paris, where one may hear anything, there are those that will tell you that Joffre's work is done and that France waits for the man who will complete the task; that the strain of the terrible months has wearied the general who won the Battle of the Marne and saved France. They will tell you, perhaps, that Pétain is the man; they will certainly tell you that they hope that the man has been found in Pétain. As to the truth of all this I do not pretend to know. I did not see Joffre, but all that I have read of Joffre suggests that Pétain is of his sort, the same quiet, silent man, with a certain coldness of the North, a grimness of manner that is lacking in his chief.

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There was a Kitchener legend in Europe, and I do not think it survives save a little perhaps in corners of England. There was a legend of a man of ice and of iron, a man who made victory out of human material as a man makes a wall of mortar and stone, a man to whom his material was only mortar and stone, even though it were human. This legend has perished so far as Kitchener is concerned, gone with so much that England trusted and believed two years ago, but I find myself thinking now of Pétain as we all thought of Kitchener in his great day.

If I were an officer I should not like to come to the defender of Verdun with the confession of failure. I think I should rather meet the Bavarians in the first line trenches, but I should like to

know that when I was obeying orders I was carrying out a minor detail of something Pétain had planned; I should expect it to happen, the thing that he had arranged, and I should feel that those clear, steel-blue eyes had foreseen all that could occur, foreseen calmly and utterly, whether it entailed the death of one or a thousand men, of ten thousand men if necessary, and had willed that it should happen. [32]

I do not believe Napoleon's Old Guard would have followed Pétain as they followed Ney. I cannot fancy him in the Imperial uniform, and yet, now that war is a thing of machines, of telephones, of indirect fire and destruction from unseen weapons at remote ranges, now that the whole manner and circumstance of conflict have changed, it is but natural that the General should change, too. Patently Pétain is of the new, not the old, but no less patently he was the master of it.

We left the little Mairie, entered our machines and slid out swiftly for the last miles, climbed and curved over the final hill and suddenly looked down on a deep, trenchlike valley marching from east to west and carrying the Paris-Verdun-Metz Railroad, no longer available for traffic. And as we coasted down the hill we heard the guns at last, not steadily, but only from time to time, a distant boom, a faint billowing up of musketry fire. Some three or four miles straight ahead there were the lines of fire beyond the brown hills that flanked the valley. [33]

At the bottom of the valley we turned east, moved on for a mile, and stopped abruptly. The guns were sounding more clearly, and suddenly there was a sense not of soldiers, but of an army. On one side of the road a column was coming toward us, a column of men who were leaving the trenches for a rest, the men who for the recent days had held the first line. Wearily but steadily they streamed by; the mud of the trenches covered their tunics; here and there a man had lost his steel helmet and wore a handkerchief about his head, probably to conceal a slight wound that but for the helmet had killed him. [34]

These men were smiling as they marched; they carried their full equipment and it rattled and tinkled; they carried their guns at all angles, they wore their uniforms in the strangest of disorders; they seemed almost like miners coming from the depths of the earth rather than soldiers returning from a decisive battle, from the hell of modern shell fire.

But it was the line on the other side of the road that held the eye. Here were the troops that were going toward the fire, toward the trenches, that were marching to the sound of the guns, and as one saw them the artillery rumble took on a new distinctness.

Involuntarily I searched the faces of these men as they passed. They were hardly ten feet from me. Platoon after platoon, company after company, whole regiments in columns of fours. And seeing the faces brought an instant shock; they all wore the same calm, steady, slightly weary expression, but there was in the whole line scarcely a young man. Here were men of the thirties, not the twenties; men still in the prime of strength, of health, but the fathers of families, the men of full manhood. [35]

Almost in a flash the fact came home. This was what all the graves along the road had meant. This was what the battlefields and the glories of the twenty months had spelled—France had sent her youth and it was spent; she was sending her manhood now.

In the line no man smiled and no man straggled; the ranks were closed up and there were neither commands nor any visible sign of authority. These men who were marching to the sound of the guns had been there before. They knew precisely what it meant. Yet you could not but feel that as they went a little wearily, sadly, they marched willingly. They would not have it otherwise. Their faces were the faces of men who had taken the full measure of their own fate. [36]

You had a sense of the loathing, the horror, above all the sadness that was in their hearts that this thing, this war, this destruction had to be. They had come back here through all the waste of ruined villages and shell-torn hillsides; all the men that you saw would not measure the cost of a single hour of trench fighting if the real attack began. This these men knew, and the message of the artillery fire, which was only one of unknown terrors for you, was intelligible to the utmost to each of them.

And yet with the weariness there was a certain resignation, a certain patience, a certain sense of comprehending sacrifice that more than all else is France to-day, the true France. This, and not the empty forts, not even the busy guns, was the wall that defended France, this line of men. If it broke there would come thundering down again out of the north all the tornado of destruction that had turned Northeastern France into a waste place and wrecked so much of the world's store of the beautiful and the inspiring. [37]

Somehow you felt that this was in the minds of all these men. They had willed to die that France might live. They were going to a death that sounded ever more clearly as they marched. This death had eaten up all that was young, most of what was young at the least, of France; it might yet consume France, and so these men marched to the sound of the guns, not to martial music, not with any suggestion of dash, of enthusiasm, but quietly, steadily, all with the same look upon their faces—the look of men who have seen death and are to see it again. Instinctively I thought of what Kipling had said to me in London:

"Somewhere over there," he had said, "the thing will suddenly grip your throat and your heart; it will take hold of you as nothing in your life has ever done or ever will." And I know that I never shall forget those lines of quiet, patient, middle-aged men marching to the sound of the guns, leaving at their backs the countless graves that hold the youth of France, the men who had known the Marne, the Yser, Champagne, who had known death for nearly two years, night and day, almost constantly. Yet during the fifteen minutes I watched there was not one order, not one [38]

straggler; there was a sense of the regularity with which the blood flows through the human arteries in this tide, and it was the blood of France.

So many people have asked me, I had asked myself, the question before I went to France: "Are they not weary of it? Will the French not give up from sheer exhaustion of strength?" I do not think so, now that I have seen the faces of these hundreds of men as they marched to the trenches beyond Verdun. France may bleed to death, but I do not think that while there are men there will be an end of the sacrifice. No pen or voice can express the horror that these men, that all Frenchmen, have of this war, of all war, the weariness. They hate it; you cannot mistake this; but France marches to the frontier in the spirit that men manned the walls against the barbarians in the other days; there is no other way; it must be.

[39]

Over and over again there has come the invariable answer; it would have come from scores and hundreds of these men who passed so near me I could have touched their faded uniforms if I had asked—"It is for France, for civilization; it must be, for there is no other way; we shall die, but with us, with our sacrifice, perhaps this thing will end." You cannot put it in words quite, I do not think even any Frenchman has quite said it, but you can see it, you can feel it, you can understand it, when you see a regiment, a brigade, a division of these men of thirty, some perhaps of forty, going forward to the war they hate and will never quiet until that which they love is safe or they and all of their race are swallowed up in the storm that now was audibly beating beyond the human walls on the nearby hillsides.

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Presently we moved again, we slipped through the column, topped the last incline, shot under the crumbling gate of the Verdun fortress, and as we entered a shell burst just behind us and the roar drowned out all else in its sudden and paralyzing crash. It had fallen, so we learned a little later, just where we had been watching the passing troops; it had fallen among them and killed. But an hour or two later, when we repassed the point where it fell, men were still marching by. Other regiments of men were still marching to the sound of the guns, and those who had passed were already over the hills and beyond the river, filing into the trenches in time, so it turned out, to meet the new attack that came with the later afternoon.

I went to Verdun to see the forts, the city, the hills, and the topography of a great battle; I went in the hope of describing with a little of clarity what the operation meant as a military affair. I say, and I shall hereafter try to describe this. But I shall never be able to describe this thing which was the true Verdun for me—these men, their faces, seen as one heard the shell fire and the musketry rolling, not steadily but intermittently, the men who had marched over the roads that are lined with graves, through villages that are destroyed, who had come of their own will and in calm determination and marched unhurryingly and yet unshrinkingly, the men who were no longer young, who had left behind them all that men hold dear in life, home, wives, children, because they knew that there was no other way.

[41]

I can only say to all those who have asked me, "What of France?" this simple thing, that I do not believe the French will ever stop. I do not believe, as the Germans have said, that French courage is weakening, that French determination is abating. I do not believe the Kaiser himself would think this if he had seen these men's faces as they marched *toward* his guns. I think he would feel as I felt, as one must feel, that these men went willingly, hating war with their whole soul, destitute of passion or anger. I never heard a passionate word in France, because there had entered into their minds, into the mind and heart of a whole race, the belief that what was at stake was the thing that for two thousand years of history had been France.

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II

MY TRIP TO VERDUN—A DYING, SHELL-RIDDEN CITY

ToC

THE VAUBAN CITADEL, IN THE SHELTER OF
WHICH FALLING SHELLS CANNOT FIND YOU
—HOUSES AND BLOCKS THAT ARE
VANISHING HOURLY—"BUT WILLIAM WILL
NOT COME"—WAR THAT IS INVISIBLE—A
LUNCHEON UNDERGROUND WITH A TOAST
TO AMERICA—THE LAST COURTESY FROM A
GENERAL AND A HOST—NOTHING THAT WAS
NOT BEAUTIFUL

The citadel of Verdun, the bulwark of the eastern frontier in ancient days, rises out of the meadows of the Meuse with something of the abruptness of the sky-scraper, and still preserves that aspect which led the writers of other wars to describe all forts as "frowning." It was built for

[44]

Louis XIV by Vauban. He took a solid rock and blasted out redoubts and battlements. The generations that followed him dug into the living rock and created within it a whole city of catacombs, a vast labyrinth of passages and chambers and halls; even an elevator was added by the latest engineers, so that one can go from floor to floor, from the level of the meadow to the level of the summit of the rock, possibly a hundred feet above.

By reason of the fact that many correspondents have visited this fortress since the war began the world has come to know of the underground life in Verdun, to think of the city as defended by some wonderful system of subterranean works; to think of Verdun, in fact, as a city or citadel that is defensible either by walls or by forts. But the truth is far different: even the old citadel is but a deserted cave; its massive walls of natural rock resist the shells as they would repulse an avalanche; but the guns that were once on its parapets are gone, the garrison is gone, gone far out on the trench lines beyond the hills. The Vauban citadel is now a place where bread is baked, where wounded men are occasionally brought, where live the soldiers and officers whose important but unromantic mission it is to keep the roads through the town open, to police the ashes of the city, to do what remains of the work that once fell to the lot of the civil authorities. [45]

To glide swiftly to the shelter of this rock from a region in which a falling shell has served to remind you of the real meaning of Verdun of the moment, to leave the automobile and plunge into the welcome obscurity of this cavern—this was perhaps the most comfortable personal incident of the day. The mere shadow of the rock gave a sense of security; to penetrate it was to pass to safety.

Some moments of wandering by corridors and stairways into the very heart of the rock brought us to the quarters of our host, General Dubois; to his kind attention I was to owe all my good fortune in seeing his dying city; to him, at the end, I was to owe the ultimate evidence of courtesy, which I shall never forget. [46]

Unlike Pétain or Joffre, General Dubois is a little man, possibly a trifle older than either. A white-haired, bright-eyed, vigorous soldier, who made his real fame in Madagascar with Joffre and with Gallieni, and when the storm broke was sent to Verdun by these men, who knew him, to do the difficult work that there was to be performed behind the battle line. There is about General Dubois a suggestion of the old, as well as the new, of the French general. The private soldiers to whom he spoke as he went his rounds responded with a "Oui, mon Général" that had a note of affection as well as of discipline; he was rather as one fancied were the soldiers of the Revolution, of the Empire, of the Algerian days of Père Bugeaud whose memory is still green.

Our salutations made, we returned through the winding corridors to inspect the bakeries, the water and light plant, the unsuspected resources of this rock. In one huge cavern we saw the men who provided 30,000 men with bread each day, men working as the stokers in an ocean steamer labor amidst the glare of fires; we tasted the bread and found it good, as good as all French bread is, and that means a little better than all other bread. [47]

Then we slipped back into daylight and wandered along the face of the fortress. We inspected shell holes of yesterday and of last month; we inspected them as one inspects the best blossoms in a garden; we studied the angle at which they dropped; we measured the miniature avalanche that they brought with them. But always, so far, there was the subconscious sense of the rock between us and the enemy. I never before understood the full meaning of that phrase "a rock in a weary land."

All this was but preliminary, however. Other automobiles arrived; the General entered one. I followed in the next and we set out to visit Verdun, to visit the ruins, or, rather, to see not a city that was dead, but a city that was visibly, hourly dying—a city that was vanishing by blocks and by squares—but was not yet fallen to the estate of Ypres or Arras; a city that in corners, where there were gardens behind the walls, still smiled; a city where some few brave old buildings still stood four square and solid, but only waiting what was to come. [48]

Before I visited Verdun I had seen many cities and towns which had been wholly or partially destroyed, either by shell fire or by the German soldiers in their great invasion before the Marne. One shelled town is much like another, and there is no thrill quite like that you experience when you see the first. But these towns had died nearly two years ago; indeed, in most the resurrection had begun: little red roofs were beginning to shine through the brown trees and stark ruins. Children played again in the squares. It was like the sense you have when you see an old peasant ploughing among the cross-marked graves of a hard-fought battle corner—the sense of a beginning as well as of death and destruction. [49]

But at Verdun it was utterly different. Of life, or people, of activity beginning again or surviving there was nothing. Some time in the recent past all the little people who lived in these houses had put upon wagons what could be quickly moved and had slipped out of their home, that was already under sentence of death. They were gone into the distance, and they had left behind them no stragglers. The city was empty save for a few soldiers who passed rapidly along the streets, as one marches in a heavy snowstorm.

Yet Verdun was not wholly dead. Shell fire is the most inexplicable of all things that carry destruction. As you passed down one street the mark of destruction varied with each house. Here the blast had come and cut the building squarely; it had carried with it into ruin behind in the courtyard all that the house contained, but against the wall the telephone rested undisturbed; pictures—possibly even a looking glass—hung as the inhabitants had left it, hung as perhaps it had hung when the last woman had taken her ultimate hurried glance at her hat before she departed into the outer darkness. [50]

But the next house had lost only the front walls; it stood before you as if it had been opened for your inspection by the removal of the façade. Chairs, beds—all the domestic economy of the house—sagged visibly outward toward the street, or stood still firm, but open to the four winds. It was as if the scene were prepared for a stage and you sat before the footlights looking into the interior. Again, the next house and that beyond were utterly gone—side walls, front walls, everything swallowed up and vanished—the iron work twisted into heaps, the stone work crumbled to dust; the whole mass of ruin still smoked, for it was a shell of yesterday that had done this work. [51]

Down on the Riviera, where the mistral blows—all the pine trees lean away from the invariable track of this storm wind—you have the sense, even in the summer months, of a whole countryside bent by the gales. In the same fashion you felt in Verdun, felt rather than saw, a whole town not bent, but crumbled, crushed—and the line of fall was always apparent; you could tell the direction from which each storm of shells had come, you could almost feel that the storm was but suspended, not over, that at any moment it might begin again.

Yet even in the midst of destruction there were enclaves of unshaken structures. On the Rue Mazel, "Main Street," the chief clothing store rose immune amid ashes on all sides. Its huge plate-glass window was not even cracked. And behind the window a little mannikin, one of the familiar images that wear clothes to tempt the purchaser, stood erect. A French soldier had crept in and raised the stiff arm of the mannikin to the salute, pushed back the hat to a rakish angle. The mannikin seemed alive and more than alive, the embodiment of the spirit of the place. Facing northward toward the German guns it seemed to respond to them with a "*morituri salutamus*." "The last civilian in Verdun," the soldiers called him, but his manner was rather that of the Poilu. [52]

We crossed the river and the canal and stopped by the ruin of what had once been a big factory or warehouse. We crawled through an open shell-made breach in the brick wall and stood in the interior. The ashes were still hot, and in corners there were smoking fires. Two days ago, at just this time, your guides told you, men had been working here; making bread, I think. At the same time we had come to the ruins—the same time of day, that is—the Germans had dropped a half-dozen incendiary shells into the building and it had burned in ten minutes. Most of the men who had been there then were still there, under the smoking mass of wreckage; the smell of burned human flesh was in the air. [53]

A few steps away there was a little house standing intact. On the floor there were stretched four rolls of white cloth. The General and those with him took off their hats as they entered. He opened one of the packages and you saw only a charred black mass, something that looked like a half-burned log taken from the fireplace. But two days ago it had been a man, and the metal disk of identification had already been found and had served to disclose the victim's name. These were the first bodies that had been removed from the ruins.

Taking our cars again we drove back and stopped before the Mairie, and passing under the arch entered the courtyard. The building had fared better than most, but there were many shell marks. In the courtyard were four guns. Forty-six years before another German army had come down from the North, another whirlwind of artillery had struck the town and laid it in ashes, but even under the ashes the town had held out for three weeks. Afterward the Republic of France had given these guns to the people of Verdun in recognition of their heroism. [54]

In the courtyard I was presented to a man wearing the uniform and helmet of a fireman. He was the chief of the Verdun fire department. His mission, his perilous duty, it was to help extinguish the fires that flamed up after every shell. In all my life I have never seen a man at once so crushed and so patently courageous. He was not young, but his blue Lorraine eyes were still clear. Yet he looked at you, he looked out upon the world with undisguised amazement. For a generation his business had been to fight fires. He had protected his little town from conflagrations that might sometimes, perhaps once, possibly twice, have risen to the dignity of a "three alarm." For the rest he had dealt with blazes. [55]

Now out of the skies and the darkness and out of the daylight, too, fire had descended upon his town. Under an avalanche of incendiary shells, under a landslide of fire, his city was melting visibly into ashes. He had lived fire and dreamed fire for half a century, but now the world had turned to fire—his world—and he looked out upon it in dazed wonder. He could no longer fight this fire, restrain it, conquer it; he could only go out under the bursting shells and strive to minimize by some fraction the destruction; but it was only child's play, this work of his which had been a man's business. And there was no mistaking the fact that this world was now too much for him. He was a brave man; they told me of things he had done; but his little cosmos had gone to chaos utterly.

We entered our cars again and went to another quarter of the city. Everywhere were ashes and ruin, but everywhere the sense of a destruction that was progressive, not complete: it still marched. It was as Arras had been, they told me, before the last wall had tumbled and the Artois capital had become nothing but a memory. We climbed the slope toward the cathedral and stopped in a little square still unscathed, the Place d'Armes, the most historic acre of the town. After a moment I realized what my friends were telling me. It was in this square that the Crown Prince was to receive the surrender of the town. Along the road we had climbed he was to lead his victorious army through the town and out the Porte de France beyond. In this square the Kaiser was to stand and review the army, to greet his victorious son. The scene as it had been arranged was almost rehearsed for you in the gestures of the French officers. [56]

"But William has not come," they said, "and he will not come now." This last was not spoken as a boast, but as a faith, a conviction. [57]

Still climbing we came to the cathedral. It is seated on the very top pinnacle of the rock of Verdun, suggesting the French cities of Provence. Its two towers, severe and lacking ornamentation, are the landmarks of the countryside for miles around. When I came back to America I read the story of an American correspondent whom the Germans had brought down from Berlin to see the destruction of Verdun. They had brought him to the edge of the hills and then thrown some incendiary shells into the town, the very shells that killed the men whose bodies I had seen. The black smoke and flames rushed up around these towers and then the Germans brought the correspondent over the hills and showed him the destruction of Verdun. He described it vividly and concluded that the condition of the town must be desperate.

They are a wonderful people, these Germans, in their stage management. Of course this was precisely the thing that they desired that he should feel. They had sent their shells at the right moment, the whole performance had gone off like clockwork. Those poor blackened masses of humanity in the house below were the cost that was represented in the performance. And since there is much still left to burn in Verdun, the Germans may repeat this thing whenever they desire. [58]

But somewhere three or four miles from here, and between Verdun and the Germans, are many thousands of Frenchmen, with guns and cannon, and hearts of even finer metal. They cannot even know that Verdun is being shelled or is burning, and if it burns to ultimate ashes it will not affect them or their lines. This is the fallacy of all the talk of the destruction of Verdun city and the desperate condition of its defenders. The army left Verdun for the hills when the war began; the people left when the present drive began in February. Even the dogs and cats, which were seen by correspondents in earlier visits, have been rescued and sent away. Verdun is dead, it is almost as dead as are Arras and Ypres; but neither of these towns after a year and a half bombardment has fallen. [59]

The correspondent who was taken up on a hill by the Germans to see Verdun burn, after it had been carefully set on fire by shell fire, was discovered by French gunners and shelled. He went away taking with him an impression of a doomed city. This picture was duly transmitted to America. But two days later, when I visited the city, there was no evidence of desperation, because there was no one left to be desperate. Doubtless on occasion we shall have many more descriptions of the destruction of this town, descriptions meant to impress Americans or encourage Germans. The material for such fires is not exhausted. The cathedral on the top of the hill is hardly shell-marked at all, and it will make a famous display when it is fired as was Rheims, as were the churches of Champagne and Artois. But there is something novel in the thought of a city burned, not to make a Roman or even German holiday, but burned to make the world believe that the Battle of Verdun had been a German victory. [60]

For two hours we wandered about the town exploring and estimating the effect of heavy gunfire, for the Germans are too far from the city to use anything but heavy guns effectively. The impressions of such a visit are too numerous to recall. I shall mention but one more. Behind the cathedral are cloisters that the guide books mention; they inclose a courtyard that was once decorated with statues of saints. By some accident or miracle—there are always miracles in shelled towns—one of these images, perhaps that of the Madonna, has been lifted from its pedestal and thrown into the branches of a tree, which seems almost to hold it with outstretched arms.

At length we left the town, going out by the Porte de France, which cuts the old Vauban ramparts, now as deserted as those of Paris, ramparts that had been covered with trees and were now strewn with the débris of the trees that had fallen under the shell fire. In all this time not a shell had fallen in Verdun; it was the first completely tranquil morning in weeks; but there was always the sense of impending destruction, there was always the sense of the approaching shell. There was an odd subconscious curiosity, and something more than curiosity, about the mental processes of some men, not far away, who were beside guns pointed toward you, guns which yesterday or the day before had sent their destruction to the very spot where you stood. [61]

Yet, oddly enough, in the town there was a wholly absurd sense of security, derived from the fact that there were still buildings between you and those guns. You saw that the buildings went to dust and ashes whenever the guns were fired; you saw that each explosion might turn a city block into ashes, and yet you were glad of the buildings and there was reassurance in their shadows. Now we travelled in the open country; we began to climb across the face of a bare hill, and it was the face that fronted the Germans. [62]

Presently the General's car stuck in the mud and we halted, for a minute perhaps; then we went on; we passed a dead horse lying in the road, then of a sudden came that same terrible grinding, metallic crash. I have never seen any description of a heavy shell explosion that fitted it. Behind us we could see the black smoke rising from the ground in a suburb through which we had just come. I saw three explosions. A moment later we were at the gate of Fort de la Chaume, and we were warned not to stop, but to hasten in, for the Germans, whenever they see cars at this point, suspect that Joffre has arrived, or President Poincaré, and act accordingly. We did not delay.

Fort de la Chaume is one of the many fortifications built since the Franco-Prussian War and intended to defend the city. Like all the rest, it ceased to have value when the German artillery had shown at Liège and at Namur that it was the master of the fort. Then the French left their forts and went out to trenches beyond and took with them the heavy guns that the fort once boasted. To-day Fort de la Chaume is just an empty shell, as empty as the old Vauban citadel in the valley below. And what is true of this fort is true of all the other forts of that famous fortress [63]

of Verdun, which is no longer a fortress, but a sector in the trench line that runs from the North Sea to Switzerland.

From the walls of the fort staff officers showed me the surrounding country. I looked down on the city of Verdun, hiding under the shadow of its cathedral. I looked across the level Meuse Valley, with its little river; I studied the wall of hills beyond. Somewhere in the tangle on the horizon was Douaumont, which the Germans held. Down the valley of the river in the haze was the town of Bras, which was French; beyond it the village of Vachereauville, which was German. Beyond the hills in the centre of the picture, but hidden by them, were Le Mort Homme and Hill 304. [64]

Verdun is like a lump of sugar in a finger bowl, and I was standing on the rim. It seemed utterly impossible that any one should even think of this town as a fortress or count its ashes as of meaning in the conflict.

Somewhere in the background a French battery of heavy guns was firing, and the sound was clear; but it did not suggest war, rather a blasting operation. The German guns were still again. There was a faint billowing roll of gunfire across the river toward Douaumont, but very faint. As for trenches, soldiers, evidences of battle, they did not exist. I thought of Ralph Pulitzer's vivid story of riding to the Rheims front in a military aeroplane and seeing, of war, just nothing.

The geography of the Verdun country unrolled before us with absolute clarity; the whole relation of hills and river and railroads was unmistakable. But despite the faint sound of musketry, the occasional roar of a French gun, I might have been in the Berkshires looking down on the Housatonic. Six miles to the north around Le Mort Homme that battle which has not stopped for two months was still going on. Around Douaumont the overture was just starting, the overture to a stiff fight in the afternoon, but of all the circumstances of battle that one has read of, that one still vaguely expects to see, there was not a sign. If it suited their fancy the Germans could turn the hill on which I stood into a crater of ruin, as they did with Fort Loncin at Liège. We were well within range, easy range; we lived because they had no object to serve by such shooting, but we were without even a hint of their whereabouts. [65]

I have already described the military geography of Verdun. I shall not attempt to repeat it here, but it is the invisibility of warfare, whether examined from the earth or the air, which impresses the civilian. If you go to the trenches you creep through tunnels and cavities until you are permitted to peer through a peephole, and you see yellow dirt some yards away. You may hear bullets over your head, you may hear shells passing, but what you see is a hillside with some slashings. That is the enemy. If you go to an observation post back of the trenches, then you will see a whole range of country, but not even the trenches of your own side. [66]

From the Grand Mont east of Nancy I watched some French batteries shell the German line. I didn't see the French guns, I didn't see the German trenches, I didn't see the French line. I did see some black smoke rising a little above the underbrush, and I was told that the shells were striking behind the German lines and that the gunners were searching for a German battery. But I might as well have been observing a gang of Italians at blasting operations in the Montclair Mountains. And the officer with me said: "Our children are just amusing themselves." [67]

From Fort de la Chaume we rode back to the citadel; and there I was the guest of the General and the officers of the town garrison; their guest because I was an American who came to see their town. I shall always remember that luncheon down in the very depths of this rock in a dimly lighted room. I sat at the General's right, and all around me were the men whose day's work it was to keep the roads open, the machinery running in the shell-cursed city. Every time they went out into daylight they knew that they might not return. For two months the storm had beaten about this rock, it had written its mark upon all these faces, and yet it had neither extinguished the light nor the laughter; the sense of strength and of calmness was inescapable, and never have I known such charming, such thoughtful hosts.

When the champagne came the old General rose and made me a little speech. He spoke in English, with absolute correctness, but as one who spoke it with difficulty. He welcomed me as an American to Verdun, he thanked me for coming, he raised his glass to drink to my country and the hope that in the right time she would be standing with France—in the cause of civilization. Always in his heart, in his thought, in his speech, the Frenchman is thinking of that cause of civilization; always this is what the terrible conflict that is eating up all France means to him. [68]

Afterward we went out of this cavern into daylight, and the officers came and shook hands with me and said good-bye. One does not say *au revoir* at the front; one says *bonne chance*—"good luck; it may and it may not—we hope not." We entered our cars and were about to start, when suddenly, with a blinding, stunning crash, a whole salvo landed in the meadow just beyond the road, we could not see where, because some houses hid the field. It was the most suddenly appalling crash I have ever heard. [69]

Instantly the General ordered our drivers to halt. He explained that it might be the beginning of a bombardment or only a single trial, a detail in the intermittent firing to cut the road that we were to take. We sat waiting for several moments and no more shots came. Then the General turned and gave an order to his car to follow, bade our drivers go fast, and climbed into my car and sat down. The wandering American correspondent was his guest. He could not protect him from the shell fire. He could not prevent it. But he could share the danger. He could share the risk, and so he rode with me the mile until we passed beyond the danger zone. There he gave me another *bonne chance* and left me, went back to his shell-cursed town with its ruins and its agonies.

I hope I shall see General Dubois again. I hope it will be on the day when he is made Governor of Strassburg.

As we left Verdun the firing was increasing; it was rolling up like a rising gale; the infantry fire was becoming pronounced; the Germans were beginning an attack upon Le Mort Homme. Just before sunset we passed through the Argonne Forest and came out beyond. On a hill to the north against the sky the monument of Valmy stood out in clear relief, marking the hill where Kellerman had turned back another Prussian army. Then we slipped down into the Plain of Châlons, where other Frenchmen had met and conquered Attila. At dark we halted in Montmirail, where Napoleon won his last victory before his empire fell. The sound of the guns we had left behind was still in our ears and the meaning of these names in our minds. Presently my French companion said to me: "It is a long time, isn't it?" He meant all the years since the first storm came out of the north, and I think the same thought is in every Frenchman's mind. Then he told me his story.

"I had two boys," he said; "one was taken from me years ago in an accident; he was killed and it was terrible. But the other I gave.

"He was shot, my last boy, up near Verdun, in the beginning of the war. He did not die at once and I went to him. For twenty days I sat beside him in a cellar waiting for him to die. I bought the last coffin in the village, that he might be buried in it, and kept it under my bed. We talked many times before he died, and he told me all he knew of the fight, of the men about him and how they fell.

"My name is finished, but I say to you now that in all that experience there was nothing that was not beautiful." And as far as I can analyze or put in words the impression that I have brought away from France, from the ruin and the suffering and the destruction, I think it is expressed in those words. I have seen nothing that was not beautiful, too, because through all the spirit of France shone clear and bright.

III

BATTLE OF VERDUN ANOTHER GETTYSBURG

FAILURE OF CROWN PRINCE LIKENED BY FRENCH TO "HIGH TIDE" OF CONFEDERACY

"The parallel between Gettysburg in your Civil War and Verdun in the present contest is unmistakable and striking." This was said to me by General Delacroix, one of Joffre's predecessors as chief of the French General Staff and the distinguished military critic of the Paris *Temps* now that because of age he has passed to the retired list.

What General Delacroix meant was patent and must have already impressed many Americans. Our own Gettysburg was the final bid for decision of a South which had long been victorious on the battlefield, which still possessed the armies that seemed the better organized and the generals whose campaigns had been wonderfully successful. But it was the bid for decision of a Confederacy which was outnumbered in men, in resources, in the ultimate powers of endurance, and was already beginning to feel the growing pinch both in numbers and credit.

At Gettysburg Lee made his final effort to destroy the army which he had frequently defeated but never eliminated. Victory meant the fall of Washington, the coming of despair to the North, an end of the Civil War, which would bring independence and the prize for which they had contended to the Confederates. And Lee failed at Gettysburg, not as Napoleon failed at Waterloo or as MacMahon failed at Sedan, but he failed, and his failure was the beginning of the end. The victory of Gettysburg put new heart, new assurance into the North; it broke the long illusion of an invincible Confederacy; it gave to Europe, to London, and to Paris, even more promptly than to Washington, the unmistakable message that the North was bound to win the Civil War.

I mean in a moment to discuss the military aspects of this conflict about the Lorraine fortress, but before the military it is essential to grasp the moral consequences of Verdun to France, to the Allies, to Germany. Not since the Marne, not even then—because it was only after a long delay that France really knew what had happened in this struggle—has anything occurred that has so profoundly, so indescribably, heartened the French people as has the victory at Verdun. It is not too much to say that the victory has been the most immediately inspiring thing in French national life since the disaster at Sedan and that it has roused national confidence, hope, faith, as nothing else has since the present conflict began.

In this sense rather than in the military sense Verdun was a decisive battle and its consequences of far-reaching character. France as a whole, from the moment when the attack

began, understood the issue; the battle was fought in the open and the whole nation watched the communiqués day by day. It was accepted as a terrible if not a final test, and no Frenchman fails to recognize in all that he says the strength, the power, the military skill of Germany.

And when the advance was checked, when after the first two weeks the battle flickered out as did the French offensive in Champagne and the former German drive about Ypres a year ago, France, which had held her breath and waited, hoped, read in the results at Verdun the promise of ultimate victory, felt that all that Germany had, all that she could produce, had been put to the test and had failed to accomplish the result for which Germany had striven—or any portion thereof.

War is something beyond armies and tactics, beyond strategy and even military genius, and the real meaning of Verdun is not to be found in lines held or lost, not to be found even in the ashes of the old town that France and not Germany holds. It is to be found in the spirit of France, now that the great trial is over and the lines have held. [76]

It was Germany and not France that raised the issue of Verdun. The Germans believed, and all their published statements show this, that France was weary, disheartened, ready to quit, on fair terms. They believed that there was needed only a shining victory, a great moral demonstration of German strength to accomplish the end—to bring victorious peace. In this I think, and all with whom I talked in France felt, that the Germans were wrong, that France would have endured defeat and gone on. But conversely, the Germans knew, must have known, that to try and to fail was to rouse the whole heart of France, to destroy any pessimism, and this is precisely what the failure has done.

The battle for Verdun was a battle for moral rather than military values, and the moral victory remains with the French. It was a deliberate and calculated effort to break the spirit of France, and it roused the spirit of France as perhaps nothing has raised the spirit of this people since Valmy, where other Frenchmen met and checked another German invasion, brought to a halt the army of Frederick the Great, which still preserved the prestige of its great captain who was dead, turned it back along the road that was presently to end at Jena. [77]

Beside the moral value of Verdun the military is just nothing. To appreciate its meaning you must understand what it has meant to the French, and you must understand it by recalling what Gettysburg meant to the North, invaded as is France, defeated at half a dozen struggles in Virginia as France has been defeated in the past months of this war. Gettysburg was and remains the decisive battle of our Civil War, although the conflict lasted for nearly two years more. For France Verdun is exactly the same thing. Having accepted the moral likeness, you may find much that is instructive and suggestive in the military, but this is of relatively minor importance. [78]

Now, on the military side it is necessary to know first of all that when the Germans began their gigantic attack upon Verdun the French high command decided not to defend the city. Joffre and those who with him direct the French armies were agreed that the city of Verdun was without military value comparable with the cost of defending it, and that the wisest and best thing to do was to draw back the lines to the hills above the city and west of the Meuse. Had their will prevailed there would have been no real battle at Verdun and the Germans would long ago have occupied the ashes of the town.

Joffre's view was easily explicable, and it was hardly possible to quarrel with the military judgment it discloses. To the world Verdun is a great fortress, a second Gibraltar, encircled by great forts, furnished with huge guns, the gateway to Paris and the key to the French eastern frontier. And this is just what Verdun was until the coming of the present war, when the German and Austrian siege guns levelled the forts of Antwerp, of Maubeuge, of Liège. But after that Verdun ceased to be anything, because all fortresses lost their value with the revelation that they had failed to keep pace with the gun. [79]

After the Battle of the Marne, when the trench war began, the French took all their guns out of the forts of Verdun, pushed out before the forts, and Verdun became just a sector in the long trench line from the sea to Switzerland. It was defended by trenches, not forts. It was neither of more importance nor less than any other point in the line and it was a place of trenches, not of forts. The forts were empty and remain empty, monuments to the past of war, quite as useless as the walls of Rome would be against modern artillery.

The decline of Verdun was even more complete. From the strongest point in French defence it became the weakest. When the Germans took St. Mihiel in September, 1914, they cut the north and south railroad that binds Verdun to the Paris-Nancy Railroad. When they retreated from the Marne they halted at Varennes and Montfaucon, and from these points they command the Paris-Verdun-Metz Railroad. Apart from a single narrow-gauge railroad of minor value, which wanders among the hills, climbing at prohibitive grades, Verdun is isolated from the rest of France. Consider what this means in modern war when the amount of ammunition consumed in a day almost staggers belief. Consider what it means when there are a quarter of a million men to be fed and munitioned in this sector. [80]

More than all this, when the lines came down to the trench condition Verdun was a salient, it was a narrow curve bulging out into the German front. It was precisely the same sort of military position as Ypres, which the Germans have twice before selected as the point for a great attack. In the Verdun sector the French are exposed to a converging fire; they are inside the German semicircle. Moreover, the salient is so narrow that the effect of converging fire is not to be exaggerated. [81]

When the French attacked the Germans in Champagne last fall they advanced on a wide front

from a line parallel to the German line. As they pierced the first German lines they were exposed to the converging fire of the Germans, because they were pushing a wedge in. Ultimately they got one brigade through all the German lines, but it was destroyed beyond by this converging fire. But as the Germans advanced upon Verdun they were breaking down a salient and possessed the advantage they had had on the defensive in Champagne.

Finally, one-half the French army of Verdun fought with its back to a deep river, connected with the other half only by bridges, some of which presently came under German fire, and there was every possibility that these troops might be cut off and captured if the German advance were pushed home far enough on the west bank of the Meuse and the German artillery was successful in interrupting the passage of the river. It was a perilous position and there were some days when the situation seemed critical. [82]

Accordingly, when the German drive at Verdun was at last disclosed in its real magnitude Joffre prepared to evacuate the town and the east bank of the river, to straighten his line and abolish the salient and give over to the Germans the wreck of Verdun. The position behind the river was next to impregnable; the lines would then be parallel; there would be no salient, and in the new position the French could concentrate their heavy artillery while the Germans were moving up the guns that they had fixed to the north of the old front.

But at this point the French politician interfered. He recognized the wisdom of the merely military view of Joffre, but he saw also the moral value. He recognized that the French and the German public alike would not see Verdun as a mere point in a trench line and a point almost impossible to defend and destitute of military value. He saw that the French and German publics would think of Verdun as it had been thought of before the present war changed all the conditions of conflict. He recognized that the German people would be roused to new hope and confidence by the capture of a great fortress, and that the French would be equally depressed by losing what they believed was a great fortress. [83]

You had therefore in France for some hours, perhaps for several days, something that approximated a crisis growing out of the division of opinion between the civil and the military authorities, a division of opinion based upon two wholly different but not impossible equally correct appraisals. Joffre did not believe it was worth the men or the risk to hold a few square miles of French territory, since to evacuate would strengthen, not weaken, the line. The French politicians recognized that to lose Verdun was to suffer a moral defeat which would almost infallibly bring down the Ministry, might call into existence a new Committee of Public Safety, and would fire the German heart and depress the French. [84]

In the end the politicians had their way and Castelnau, Joffre's second in command, came over to their view and set out for Verdun to organize the defence for the position at the eleventh hour. He had with him Pétain, the man who had commanded the French army in the Battle of Champagne and henceforth commanded the army that was hurried to the Verdun sector. France now took up definitely the gage of battle as Germany had laid it down. Verdun now became a battle in the decisive sense of the word, although still on the moral side. Nothing is more preposterous than to believe that there ever was any chance of a German advance through Verdun to Paris. One has only to go to Verdun and see the country and the lines behind the city and miles back of the present front to realize how foolish such talk is. [85]

Meantime the German advance had been steady and considerable. All these attacks follow the same course—Ypres, Artois, Champagne, Dunajec. There is first the tremendous artillery concentration of the assailant; then the bombardment which abolishes the first and second line trenches of the defenders; then the infantry attack which takes these ruined trenches and almost invariably many thousands of prisoners and scores of guns. But now the situation changes. The assailant has passed beyond the effective range of his own heavy artillery, which cannot be immediately advanced because of its weight; he encounters a line of trenches that has not been levelled, he has come under the concentrated fire of his foe's heavy and light artillery without the support of his own heavy artillery, and all the advantage of surprise has gone.

What happened at Verdun is what happened in the Champagne. The German advance was quite as successful—rather more successful than the French last September; it covered three or four miles on a considerable front, and it even reached Douaumont, one of the old forts and the fort which was placed on the highest hill in the environs of Verdun. Thousands of prisoners had been captured and many guns taken. But at this point the French resistance stiffened, as had the German last year. French reserves and artillery arrived. Pétain and Castelnau arrived. There was an end of the rapid advance and there began the pounding, grinding attack in which the advantage passed to the defender. It was just what happened at Neuve Chapelle so long ago when we first saw this kind of fighting exemplified completely. [86]

In the new attacks the Germans still gained ground, but they gained ground because the French withdrew from positions made untenable through the original German advance at other points. They consolidated their line, organized their new front. Ten days after the attack had begun it had ceased to be a question of Verdun, just as in a shorter time the French had realized last September that they could not break the German line in Champagne. But like the French in Champagne, like the British at Neuve Chapelle, the Germans persevered, and in consequence suffered colossal losses, exactly as the French and British had. [87]

To understand the German tactics you must recognize two things. The Germans had expected to take Verdun, and they had unquestionably known that the French military command did not intend at the outset to hold the town. They had advertised the coming victory far and wide over the world; they had staked much upon it. Moreover, in the first days, when they had taken much

ground, when they had got Douaumont and could look down into Verdun, they had every reason to believe that they possessed the key to the city and that the French high command was slowly but steadily drawing back its lines and would presently evacuate the city. [88]

Knowing these things you can understand why the Germans were so confident. They did not invent stories of coming victory which they did not believe. They believed that Verdun was to fall because they knew, and the same thing was known and mentioned in London. I heard it there when the battle was in its earlier stages—that the French high command intended to evacuate Verdun. What they did not know and could not know was that the French politicians, perhaps one should say statesmen this time, had interfered, that the French high command had yielded and that Verdun was to be defended to the last ditch.

When this decision was made the end of the real German advance was almost instantaneous. All that has happened since has been nothing but active trench war, violent fighting, desperate charge and counter charge, a material shortening of the French line at certain points, the abolition of minor salients, but of actual progress not the smallest. The advance stopped before lines on which Pétain elected to make his stand when he came with his army to defend Verdun. The Germans are still several miles outside of Verdun itself, and only at Douaumont have they touched the line of the exterior forts, which before the war were expected to defend the city. [89]

In Paris and elsewhere you will be told that Douaumont was occupied without resistance and that it was abandoned under orders before there had been a decision to hold Verdun. I do not pretend to know whether this is true or not, although I heard it on authority that was wholly credible, but the fact that the map discloses, that I saw for myself at Verdun, is that, save for Douaumont, none of the old forts have been taken and that the Germans have never been able to advance a foot from Douaumont or reach the other forts at any other point. And this is nothing more or less than the French experience at Champagne, the German experience about Ypres in 1915. [90]

In a later chapter I hope to discuss the situation at Verdun as I saw it on April 6th, and also the miracle of motor transport which played so great a part in the successful defence of the position. But the military details are wholly subordinate to the moral. All France was roused by a successful defence of a position attacked by Germany with the advertised purpose of breaking the spirit of the French people. The battle was fought in the plain daylight without the smallest concealment, and the least-informed reader of the official reports could grasp the issue which was the fate of the city of Verdun.

The fact, known to a certain number of Frenchmen only, that the defence was improvised after the decision had been made to evacuate the whole salient, serves for them to increase the meaning of the victory as it increases the real extent of the French exploit. But this is a detail. The Germans openly, deliberately, after long preparation, announced their purpose, used every conceivable bit of strength they could bring to bear to take Verdun, and told their own people not merely that Verdun would fall, but at one moment that it had fallen. They did this with the firm conviction that it would fall—was falling. [91]

The French were steadily aware that Verdun might be lost. They knew from letters coming daily from the front how terrible the struggle was, and it is impossible to exaggerate the tension of the early days, although it was not a tension of panic or fear. Paris did not expect to see the invader, and there was nothing of this sort of moonshine abroad. But it was plain that the fall of the town would bring a tremendous wave of depression and if not despair yet a real reduction of hope. Instead, Verdun defended itself, the lines were maintained several miles on the other side of the town and all substantial advance came to an end in the first two weeks. The army itself, the military observers, were convinced that all danger was over as early as the second week in March, when correspondents of French newspapers were being taken to Verdun to see the situation and tell the people the facts. [92]

All over Northern France, and I was in many towns and cities, the "lift" that Verdun had brought was unmistakable and French confidence was everywhere evident. It showed itself in a spontaneous welcome to Alexander of Serbia in Paris, which, I am told, was the first thing of the sort in the war period. Frenchmen did not say that Verdun was the beginning of the end, and they did not forecast the prompt collapse of Germany. They did not even forecast the immediate end of the fighting about Verdun. They did not regard the victory as a Waterloo or a Sedan or any other foolish thing. But they did rather coolly and quite calmly appraise the thing and see in it the biggest German failure since the Marne, and a failure in a fight which the Germans had laid down all the conditions in advance and advertised the victory that they did not achieve as promising the collapse of French endurance and spirit. [93]

The Battle of Verdun was a battle for moral values, and the possession of the town itself was never of any real military value. Verdun commands nothing, and behind it lie well-prepared fortifications on dominating heights, positions that are ten times as easy to defend as those which the French have defended. It was not a battle for Paris, and there was never a prospect of the piercing of the French line; Germany was never as near a great military success as she was at Ypres after the first gas attack a year ago. The French army leaders judged the Verdun position as not worth the cost of defending. They were overruled by the politicians and they defended it successfully. But their first decision is the best evidence of the wholly illusory value that has been attached to the possession of Verdun itself.

The politicians were unquestionably right as to the moral value, and it is possible if not probable that the relinquishment of the city voluntarily might have precipitated the fall of the Briand Ministry and the creation of a Committee of Public Safety—not to make peace, but to [94]

make war successfully. The will to defend Verdun came from the French people, it imposed itself upon the army and it resulted in a moral victory the consequences of which cannot be exaggerated and have given new heart and confidence to a people whose courage and determination must make an enduring impression on any one who sees France in the present terrible but glorious time.

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IV

VERDUN, THE DOOR THAT LEADS NOWHERE

ToC

THE BATTLE AND THE TOPOGRAPHY OF THE BATTLEFIELD—AN ANALYSIS OF THE ATTACK AND DEFENCE

In a preceding article I have endeavored to explain the tremendous moral "lift" that the successful defence of the city of Verdun has brought to France, a moral "lift" which has roused French confidence and expectation of ultimate victory to the highest point since the war began. I have also tried to demonstrate how utterly without value the fortress of Verdun was, because the forts were of no use in the present war, were as useless against German heavy artillery as those of Antwerp and Maubeuge, and had been evacuated by the French a full eighteen months before the present battle began. Finally I have indicated that so little military value was attached to Verdun by the French high command that it was prepared to evacuate the whole position, which is the most difficult to defend on the whole French front, and was only persuaded to give over his purpose by the arguments of the politicians, who believed that the moral effect of the evacuation would be disastrous to France and inspiring to Germany.

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I now desire to describe at some length the actual topographical circumstances of Verdun and later I shall discuss the fashion in which an automobile transport system was improvised to meet the situation created by the interruption of traffic by German artillery fire along the two considerable railroad lines. It was this system which actually saved the town and is the real "miracle of Verdun," if one is to have miracles to explain what brave and skilful men do.

I saw Verdun on April 6th. I went through the city, which was little more than a mass of ashes, with General Dubois, the military governor of the town itself, and with him I went to Fort de la Chaume, on one of the highest hills near Verdun, and from this vantage point had the whole countryside explained to me. The day on which I visited Verdun was the first completely quiet day in weeks, and I was thus fortunate in being able to see and to go about without the disturbing or hindering circumstances which are incident to a bombardment.

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The city of Verdun is situated at the bottom of the Meuse Valley on both sides of the river. But the main portion of the town is on the west bank and surrounds a low hill, crowned by the cathedral and old Vauban citadel. The town is surrounded by old ramparts, long ago deprived of military value and belonging, like the citadel, to eighteenth century warfare. The Valley of the Meuse is here several miles wide, as flat as your hand, and the river, which is small but fairly deep, a real obstacle since it cannot be forded, wanders back and forth from one side of the valley to the other. Below Verdun it is doubled, as a military obstacle, by the Canal de l'Est.

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If you put a lump of sugar in a finger bowl you will pretty fairly reproduce the Verdun topography. The lump of sugar will represent Verdun, the rim of the bowl the hills around the city, the interior of the bowl the little basin in which the city stands. This rim of hills, which rise some five or six hundred feet above the town itself, is broken on the west by a deep and fairly narrow trough which comes into the Meuse Valley and connects it some thirty miles to the west with the Plain of Châlons. If you should look down upon this region from an aeroplane this furrow would look like a very deep gutter cutting far into the tangle of hills.

Now in the warfare of other centuries the value of the Verdun fortress was just this: the furrow which I have described is the one avenue available for an invading army coming from the east out of Metz or south from Luxemburg and aiming to get into the Plain of Châlons to the west. It is the way the Prussians came in 1792 and were defeated at Valmy, at the western entrance of the trough about thirty miles away. They took Verdun on their way—so did the Germans in 1870.

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Verdun in French hands closed this trough to the invaders.

It closed it because the low hill which bears the town was strongly fortified and was surrounded by lower ground. Such artillery as was in existence was not of a sufficiently long range to place upon the hills about Verdun which we have described as the rim of the bowl. The town of Verdun was situated on both sides of the river and commanded all the bridges. It was, in fact, the stopple in the mouth of the bottle-neck passage leading into North Central France, the

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passage through which ran the main road and, later, the railway from the frontier nearest Paris to the capital.

But when the modern developments of artillery came, then Verdun, the old fortress that Vauban built for Louis XIV, lost its value. It was commanded by the surrounding hills and the French moved out of the town and the Vauban fortifications and built on the surrounding hills, on the rim, to go back to our figure, the forts which were the defence of the town when the present war began, forts arranged quite like those of Liège or Antwerp and some four or five miles away from the town. But bear in mind these forts were designed, like the old fortress and fortifications of the eighteenth century, to bar the road from the Meuse and from Germany to the Plain of Châlons and the level country west of the Argonne. When the Germans came south through Belgium and got into the Plain of Châlons from the north they had turned the whole Verdun position and had got into the region it barred by another route; they had come in by the back door; Verdun was the front. Not only that, but they are there now and have been there ever since the first days of September, 1914. [101]

When one hears about Verdun as the gateway to Paris or anything else one hears about the Verdun of the past. It was not the door to Paris but the outer door to the region around Paris, to the Plains of Champagne and Châlons. But as the Germans are already in these plains the taking of Verdun now would not bring them nearer to Paris; they are only fifty miles away at Noyon, on the Oise, and they would be 160 at Verdun if they took the city. If they took Verdun they would get control of the Paris-Metz Railway, and if they then drove the French away from the trough we have been describing they would get a short line into France, and a line coming from German territory directly, not passing through Belgium. But they would not be nearer to Paris.

When the French saw, in the opening days of the war, that forts were of no permanent value against the German guns they left the forts on the hills above Verdun as they had abandoned the Vauban works and moved north for a few miles. Here they dug trenches, mounted their guns in concealed positions, and stood on the defensive, as they were standing elsewhere from Belgium to Switzerland. There was now no fortress of Verdun, and Verdun city was nothing but a point behind the lines of trenches, a point like Rheims, or Arras. The forts of the rim were equally of no more importance and were now empty of guns or garrisons. If the Germans, by a sudden attack, broke all the way through the French trenches here it would be quite as serious as if they broke through at other points, but no more so. There was no fortress of Verdun and the Verdun position commanded nothing. [102]

The Battle of Verdun, as it is disclosed to an observer who stands on Fort de la Chaume, a mile or two west and above Verdun and in the mouth of the trough we have described, was this: On the west bank of the Meuse, four or five miles northwest of the town, there is a steep ridge going east and west and perhaps 1,100 feet high. This is the crest of Charny, and it rises sharply from the flat valley and marches to the west without a break for some miles. On it are the old forts of the rim. [103]

Three or four miles still to the north is a line of hills which are separated from each other by deep ravines leading north and south. Two of these hills, Le Mort Homme (Dead Man's Hill) and Hill 304, have been steadily in the reports for many weeks. They are the present front of the French. Between one and two miles still to the north are other confused and tangled hills facing north, and it was here that the French lines ran when the great attack began in the third week of February. On this side the Germans have advanced rather less than two miles; they have not reached the Charny Ridge, which is the true and last line of defence of the Verdun position, and they have not captured the two hills to the north, which are the advanced position, now the first line. [104]

When I was in Paris before I went to Verdun there was a general belief that the French might ultimately abandon the two outer hills, Dead Man's and 304, and come back to the Charny Ridge, which is a wall running from the river west without a break for miles. Apparently this has not been found necessary, but what is worth noting is that if these hills were evacuated it would not mean the withdrawal from Verdun but only to the best line of defence (the last line, to be sure), which includes the town itself.

Now, east of the river the situation is materially different. Between the Meuse and the level plateau, which appears in the dispatches from the front as the Woevre, is a long, narrow ridge, running from north to south for perhaps thirty-five or forty miles. This is the Côte de Meuse, or, translated, the Hills of the Meuse. The range is never more than ten miles wide and at many points less than half as wide. On the west it rises very sharply from the Meuse and on the east it breaks down quite as abruptly into the Woevre Plain. It cannot be effectively approached from the Woevre, because the Woevre is an exceedingly marshy plain, with much sub-surface water and in spring a mass of liquid clay. [105]

Now the French, when the German drive began, stood on this ridge some eight miles, rather less, perhaps, to the north of the town of Verdun; their line ran from the Meuse straight east along this ridge and then turned at right angles and came south along the eastern edge of the Meuse Hills and the shore of the Woevre Plain until it touched the river again at St. Mihiel, twenty miles to the south, where the Germans had broken through the Meuse Hills and reached the river. The German attack came south along the crest of this ridge because the German heavy artillery could not be brought over the Woevre. [106]

About halfway between the French front and Verdun, on a little crest somewhat higher than the main ridge, the French had erected a line of forts, just as they had on the Charny Ridge, Forts Douaumont and Vaux, familiar names now, were the forts most distant from Verdun. But the

French here, as on the other side of the river, had come out of these forts, abandoned and dismantled them, and taken to trenches much to the north. It was upon these trenches that the main German attack fell, and in the first days the French were pushed back until their trench line followed the crests that bear the old forts, and at one point, at Douaumont, the Germans had actually got possession of one of the old forts; but the French trenches pass in front of this fort at a distance of but a few hundred yards.

Now, in the first days of the battle the position of the French on the east bank of the Meuse was just this: the troops facing north were meeting and slowly yielding to a terrific drive coming south and southwest; the rest of the troops that faced east toward the Woevre were not attacked severely. But as the Germans came south, and when they took Douaumont, they were able to reach the bridges across the Meuse behind the French troops on the Meuse Hills and to destroy them by indirect fire, and these French troops, more than a hundred thousand probably, were fighting with their backs to a deep river and exposed to destruction in case their lines did not hold.

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In this situation Joffre proposed to take his troops behind the Meuse and on the hills to the west and above the city, leaving the city to the Germans. The French line would thus come north behind the Meuse from St. Mihiel and then turn west above Verdun, following either the Charny Ridge or else the Hills of Regret and Chaume, on either side of the trough, described above, which the road to Paris follows.

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If Verdun were a fortress actually; if either the old town or the circle of forts outside had been of value, Joffre would not have proposed this thing. But they were of no value. Verdun was once a fortress barring the way to the Plain of Châlons, but the Germans were in the plain, having come through Belgium by the back door, as it were. The forts outside the city on the rim of the basin had already been abandoned because they could have been destroyed by German heavy artillery, as were those of Liège and Antwerp. Verdun was just a position; but it was a difficult position to defend because of the river, which cut off one-half the army and could be crossed only by bridges, which were under indirect fire.

If the French had come back to the Charny Ridge, or even to the Regret Hills south of the trough followed by the Paris-Metz road, they would have stood on hills of patent military value; the trough is a natural ditch in front. These hills are all trenched and prepared for defence. The French would merely have shortened their lines and taken an easy position to defend, instead of holding a bad position. But ultimately this would have meant the relinquishing of Verdun, the little town down in the valley below, now become a heap of ruins and having lost its military value thirty years earlier, when heavy artillery began its decisive success over the old fortifications.

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The French did not retire, because the civil government overruled the military; decided that the moral effect of the withdrawal from Verdun would be disastrous to the French and advantageous to the Germans. Instead of retiring, the French stood and held the hills beyond the Charny Ridge, Dead Man's and 304; they hold them still and seem determined to keep them. But remember that they can still retire to the Charny Ridge if they choose, and only then find their best line west of the Meuse, if they mean to hold on to the city of Verdun.

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On the other hand, east of the River Meuse the French are approximately in their last line. The hills and crests they hold upon the Meuse Hills are some three or four miles from Verdun, but if the French retired far they would begin to come down hill, with a deep river at their backs. In consequence, whenever you hear that the Germans have made some slight gain, taken a trench about Douaumont or Vaux, you are certain to hear at once that the French have counter attacked and retaken the lost ground.

The essential thing to remember is that the defence of Verdun is not the defence of a position that has a great military value. The French would be better off, would lose fewer men and run smaller risk of considerable losses if they should quit the east bank of the Meuse and occupy the hills back of Verdun on the west bank. On the west bank the Germans have never made any material gain, and they have not come within reach of the hills that bear the old forts. But the French Government has decided that for political reason, for reasons that affect the moral, not the military, situation, Verdun must not be surrendered; hence the army is holding it at a cost of men less than the Germans are paying to take it, but at a far greater cost than would be necessary to hold the better positions west of the river.

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The Germans have not made any gain of importance in nearly two months. The French are very sure they will not come farther south. They are as confident as men could be. But if the Germans should come farther south and at last force the French to come back behind the river and to the hills above the town, they would only win a moral victory. The military situation would not be changed, unless they should also pierce the French lines on the west of the river, and this is absolutely unthinkable now.

If you think of Verdun city as a fortress you will put yourself in the eighteenth century. It is just an abandoned town, mostly ashes and completely ruined by a useless bombardment after the main German advance had been checked. If you think of Verdun as a fortified position, like Liège, which, if it fell, would bring disaster, as did the fall of Liège, you are thinking in terms of the situation before the war. The forts of this position have all been abandoned and the French are fighting in trenches in all points save one outside this circle of forts. If you think of Verdun as the gateway to anything, you are thinking of something that doesn't exist. It was a gateway to Central France, to the Plain of Châlons, from the German frontier before the Germans came down into the Plain of Châlons from the north through Belgium.

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But if you think of Verdun as a place which has a great sentimental value for both the French and the Germans; if you think of it as a place which by reason of its importance in other days still preserves a value in the minds of the mass of the French and German publics, a town the taking of which would as a result of this wholly false appraisal be reckoned in Germany as a great victory, which would vastly encourage German masses and would be accepted in France as a great defeat which would equally depress the French public, you will think of the battle for Verdun as it is.

[113]

If you go to Verdun you will see that the estimate that the world has placed upon it is illusory. You will see it is an abandoned town. You will see, as I did, that great and famous forts are without guns, and you will see, as I did, that the positions which the French have prepared behind the Meuse and above the town are vastly stronger than those which they have held successfully, in Lorraine or any other place where the attacks have been bitter, for nearly two years.

There are no forts, fortifications, fortresses, in this war. There are just trenches, and the Verdun sector is no exception. Verdun is not surrounded; it is not invested. I went to the town from Bar-le-Duc in an automobile without difficulty, and I ran back to Paris by another road, through Châlons, with equal ease. The Germans have never got within three miles of the town on any side; to the west of the River Meuse they are not within six miles of it. They are not gaining, and have not been gaining for weeks; they are merely fighting a desperate trench campaign, and the French are fighting back, retaking trenches on the east of the river, because they are in their last line on this bank of the river, but paying less attention to German trench gains on the west because the Germans are still far from the Charny Ridge, their main position.

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If Verdun falls, that is, if the French are compelled under pressure or as a result of the cost of holding their present awkward position to go back behind the river, they will lose fifty or a hundred square miles of French territory, they will lose all the tremendous value of the moral "lift" which the successful defence has brought, but they will lose nothing else; and when the Germans have taken Verdun, the ashes, the ruins, they will stop, because there is no object or value in further attack. They are fighting for moral values, and the French politician has overruled the French soldier and compelled him to accept battle on unfavorable ground for this same moral value, but against his military judgment. He has done it successfully. He expects and France expects that he will continue to do it successfully, but in the wholly remote contingency that he failed (I can only say that it is a contingency no longer considered in France), a loss in moral advantage would be the only consequence.

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V

IN SIGHT OF THE PROMISED LAND— ON THE LORRAINE BATTLEFIELD

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ToC

In the third week of August, 1914, a French army crossed the frontier of Alsace-Lorraine and entered the Promised Land, toward which all Frenchmen had looked in hope and sadness for forty-four years. The long-forgotten communiqués of that early period of the war reported success after success, until at last it was announced that the victorious French armies had reached Sarrebourg and Morhange, and were astride the Strassburg-Metz Railroad. And then Berlin took up the cry, and France and the world learned of a great German victory and of the defeat and rout of the invading army. Even Paris conceded that the retreat had begun and the "army of liberation" was crowding back beyond the frontier and far within French territory.

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Then the curtain of the censorship fell and the world turned to the westward to watch the terrible battle for Paris. In the agony and glory of the Marne the struggle along the Moselle was forgotten; the Battle of Nancy, of Lorraine, was fought and won in the darkness, and when the safety of Paris was assured the world looked toward the Aisne, and then toward Flanders. So it came about that one of the greatest battles of the whole war, one of the most important of the French victories, the success that made the Marne possible, the rally and stand of the French armies about Nancy, escaped the fame it earned. Only in legend, in the romance of the Kaiser with his cavalry waiting on the hills to enter the Lorraine capital, did the battle live.

When I went to France one of the hopes I had cherished was that I might be permitted to visit this battlefield, to see the ground on which a great battle had been fought, that was still unknown country, in the main, for those who have written on the war. The Lorraine field was the field on which France and Germany had planned for a generation to fight. Had the Germans respected the neutrality of Belgium, it is by Nancy, by the gap between the Vosges and the hills of the Meuse, that they must have broken into France. The Marne was a battlefield which was reached by chance and fought over by hazard, but every foot of the Lorraine country had been studied for

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the fight long years in advance. Here war followed the natural course, followed the plans of the general staff prepared years in advance. Indeed, I had treasured over years a plan of the Battle of Nancy, contained in a French book written years ago, which might serve as the basis for a history of what happened, as it was written as a prophecy of what was to come.

When the Great General Staff was pleased to grant my request to see the battlefield of Nancy I was advised to travel by train to that town accompanied by an officer from the General Staff, and informed that I should there meet an officer of the garrison, who would conduct me to all points of interest and explain in detail the various phases of the conflict. Thus it fell out, and I have to thank Commandant Leroux for the courtesy and consideration which made this excursion successful. [119]

In peace time one goes from Paris to Nancy in five hours, and the distance is about that from New York to Boston, by Springfield. In war all is different, and the time almost doubled. Yet there are compensations. Think of the New York-Boston trip as bringing you beyond New Haven to the exact rear of battle, of battle but fifteen miles away, with the guns booming in the distance and the aeroplanes and balloons in full view. Think also of this same trip, which from Hartford to Worcester follows the line of a battle not yet two years old, a battle that has left its traces in ruined villages, in shattered houses. On either side of the railroad track the graves descend to meet the embankments; you can mark the advance and the retreat by the crosses which fill the fields. The gardens that touch the railroad and extend to the rear of houses in the little towns are filled with graves. Each enclosure has been fought for at the point of the bayonet, and every garden wall recalls the Château of Hougoumont, at Waterloo. [120]

All this was two years ago, but there is to-day, also. East of Bar-le-Duc the main line is cut by German shell fire now. From Fort Camp des Romains above St. Mihiel German guns sweep the railroad near Commercy, and one has to turn south by a long detour, as if one went to Boston by Fitchburg, travel south through the country of Jeanne d'Arc and return by Toul, whose forts look out upon the invaded land. Thus one comes to Nancy by night, and only by night, for twenty miles beyond there are Germans and a German cannon, which not so long ago sent a shell into the town and removed a whole city block beside the railroad station. It is the sight of this ruin as you enter the town which reminds you that you are at the front, but there are other reminders. [121]

As we ate our dinner in the café, facing the beautiful Place Stanislas, we were disturbed by a strange and curious drumming sound. Going out into the square, we saw an aeroplane, or rather its lights, red and green, like those of a ship. It was the first of several, the night patrol, rising slowly and steadily, and then sweeping off in a wide curve toward the enemy's line. They were the sentries of the air which were to guard us while we slept, for men do sentry-go in the air as well as on the earth about the capital of Lorraine. Then the searchlights on the hills began to play, sweeping the horizon toward that same mysterious region where beyond the darkness there is war.

The next morning I woke with the sense of Fourth of July. Bang! Bang! Bang! Such a barking of cannon crackers I had never heard. Still drowsy, I pushed open the French windows and looked down on the square. There I beheld a hundred or more men, women, and children, their eyes fixed on something in the air above and behind the hotel. Still the incessant barking of guns, with the occasional boom of something more impressive. With difficulty I grasped the fact. I was in the midst of a Taube raid. Somewhere over my head, invisible to me because of the wall of my hotel, a German aeroplane was flying, and all the anti-aircraft guns were shooting at it. Was it carrying bombs? Should I presently see or feel the destruction following the descent of these? [122]

But the Taube turned away, the guns fired less and less frequently, the people in the streets drifted away, the children to school, the men to work, the women to wait. It was just a detail in their lives, as familiar as the incoming steamer to the commuters on the North River ferryboats. Some portion of war has been the day's history of Nancy for nearly two years now. The children do not carry gas masks to school with them as they do at Pont-à-Mousson, a dozen miles to the north, but women and children have been killed by German shells, by bombs, brought by Zeppelins and by aeroplanes. There is always excitement of sorts in the district of Nancy. [123]

After a breakfast, broken by the return of the aeroplanes we had seen departing the night before for the patrol, we entered our cars and set out for the front, for the near-front, for the lines a few miles behind the present trenches, where Nancy was saved but two years ago. Our route lay north along the valley of the Meurthe, a smiling broad valley, marching north and south and meeting in a few miles that of the Moselle coming east. It was easy to believe that one was riding through the valley of the Susquehanna, with spring and peace in the air. Toward the east a wall of hills shut out the view. This was the shoulder of the Grand Couronné, the wall against which German violence burst and broke in September, 1914. [124]

Presently we came to a long stretch of road walled in on the river side by brown canvas, exactly the sort of thing that is used at football games to shut out the non-paying public. But it had another purpose here. We were within the vision of the Germans, across the river, on the heights behind the forest, which outlined itself at the skyline; there were the Kaiser's troops and that forest was the Bois-le-Prêtre, the familiar incident in so many communiqués since the war began. Thanks to the canvas, it was possible for the French to move troops along this road without inviting German shells. Yet it was impossible to derive any large feeling of security from a canvas wall, which alone interposed between you and German heavy artillery.

We passed through several villages and each was crowded with troops; cavalry, infantry, all the branches represented; it was still early and the soldiers were just beginning their day's work; war is so completely a business here. Transport wagons marched along the roads, companies of [125]

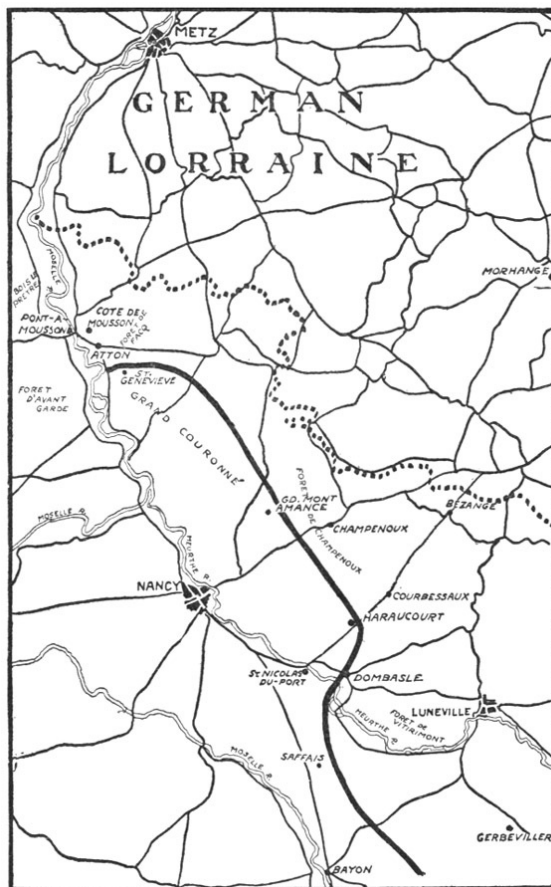
soldiers filed by. Interspersed with the soldiers were civilians, the women and children, for none of the villages are evacuated. Not even the occasional boom of a gun far off could give to this thing the character of real war. It recalled the days of my soldiering in the militia camp at Framingham in Massachusetts. It was simply impossible to believe that it was real. Even the faces of the soldiers were smiling. There was no such sense of terribleness, of strain and weariness as I later found about Verdun. The Lorraine front is now inactive, tranquil; it has been quiet so long that men have forgotten all the carnage and horror of the earlier time.

We turned out of the valley and climbed abruptly up the hillside. In a moment we came into the centre of a tiny village and looked into a row of houses, whose roofs had been swept off by shell fire. Here and there a whole house was gone; next door the house was undisturbed and the women and children looked out of the doors. The village was St. Geneviève, and we were at the extreme front of the French in August, and against this hill burst the flood of German invasion. Leaving the car we walked out of the village, and at the end of the street a sign warned the wayfarer not to enter the fields, for which we were bound: "War—do not trespass." This was the burden of the warning.

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Once beyond this sign we came out suddenly upon an open plateau, upon trenches. Northward the slope descended to a valley at our feet. It was cut and seamed by trenches, and beyond the trenches stood the posts that carried the barbed-wire entanglements. Here and there, amidst the trenches, there were graves. I went down to the barbed-wire entanglements and examined them curiously. They at least were real. Once thousands of men had come up out of the little woods a quarter of a mile below; they had come on in that famous massed attack, they had come on in the face of machine gun and "seventy-fives." They had just reached the wires, which marked high water. In the woods below, the Bois de Facq, in the fields by the river 4,000 Germans had been buried.

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Looking out from the trenches the whole country unfolded. Northward the little village of Atton slept under the steep slope of Côte-de-Mousson, a round pinnacle crowned with an ancient château. From the hill the German artillery had swept the ground where I stood. Below the hill to the west was Pont-à-Mousson, the city of 150 bombardments, which the Germans took when they came south and lost later. Above it was the Bois-le-Prêtre, in which guns were now booming occasionally. Far to the north was another hill, just visible, and its slope toward us was cut and seamed with yellow slashes: Those were the French trenches, then of the second or third line; beyond there was still another hill, it was slightly blurred in the haze, but it was not over five miles away, and it was occupied by the Germans. From the slope above me on a clear day it is possible to see Metz, so near are French and German lines to the old frontier.

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Straight across the river to the west of us was another wood, with a glorious name, the Forest of the Advance Guard. It swept to the south of us. In that wood the Germans had also planted their guns on the day of battle. They had swept the trenches where I stood from three sides. Plainly it had been a warm corner. But the French had held on. Their commander had received a verbal order to retreat. He insisted that it should be put in writing, and this took time. The order came. It had to be obeyed, but he obeyed slowly. Reluctantly the men left the trenches they had

held so long. They slipped southward along the road by which we had come. But suddenly their rear guards discovered the Germans were also retreating. So the French came back and the line of St. Geneviève was held, the northern door to Nancy was not forced. [129]

Looking down again it was not difficult to reconstitute that German assault, made at night. The thing was so simple the civilian could grasp it. A road ran through the valley and along it the Germans had formed; the slope they had to advance up was gentle, far more gradual than that of San Juan. They had been picked troops selected for a forlorn hope, and they had come back four times. The next morning the whole forest had been filled with dead and dying. Not less than a division—20,000 men—had made the terrible venture. Now there was a strange sense of emptiness in the country; war had come and gone, left its graves, its trenches, its barbed-wire entanglements; but these were all disappearing already. On this beautiful spring morning it was impossible to feel the reality of what happened here, what was happening now, in some measure, five miles or more to the north. Nature is certainly the greatest of all pacifists; she will not permit the signs of war to endure nor the mind to believe that war itself has existed and exists. [130]

From St. Geneviève we went to the Grand Mont d'Amance, the most famous point in all the Lorraine front, the southeast corner of the Grand Couronné, as St. Geneviève is the northern. Here, from a hill some 1,300 feet high, one looks eastward into the Promised Land of France—into German Lorraine. In the early days of August the great French invasion, resting one flank upon this hill, the other upon the distant Vosges, had stepped over the frontier. One could trace its route to the distant hills among which it had found disaster. In these hills the Germans had hidden their heavy guns, and the French, coming under their fire without warning, unsupported by heavy artillery, which was lacking to them, had broken. Then the German invasion had rolled back. You could follow the route. In the foreground the little Seille River could be discerned; it marked the old frontier. Across this had come the defeated troops. They had swarmed down the low, bare hills; they had crossed and vanished in the woods just at my feet; these woods were the Forest of Champenoux. Into this forest the Germans had followed by the thousand, they were astride the main road to Nancy, which rolled white and straight at my feet. But in the woods the French rallied. For days there was fought in this stretch of trees one of the most terrible of battles. [131]

As I stood on the Grand Mont I faced almost due east. In front of me and to the south extended the forest. Exactly at my feet the forest reached up the hill and there was a little cluster of buildings about a fountain. All was in ruins, and here, exactly here, was the high water mark of the German advance. They had occupied the ruins for a few moments and then had been driven out. Elsewhere they had never emerged from the woods; they had approached the western shore, but the French had met them with machine guns and "seventy-fives." The brown woods at my feet were nothing but a vast cemetery; thousands of French and German soldiers slept there. [132]

In their turn the Germans had gone back. Now, in the same woods, a French battery was shelling the Germans on the other side of the Seille. Under the glass I studied the little villages unfolding as on a map; they were all destroyed, but it was impossible to recognize this. Some were French, some German; you could follow the line, but there were no trenches; behind them French shells were bursting occasionally and black smoke rose just above the ground. Thousands of men faced each other less than four miles from where I stood, but all that there was to be detected were the shell bursts; otherwise one saw a pleasant country, rolling hills, mostly without woods, bare in the spring, which had not yet come to turn them green. In the foreground ran that arbitrary line Bismarck had drawn between Frenchmen forty-six years before—the frontier—but of natural separation there was none. He had cut off a part of France, that was all, and one looked upon what had been and was still a bleeding wound. [133]

I asked the French commandant about the various descriptions made by those who have written about the war. They have described the German attack as mounting the slope of the Grand Mont, where we stood. He took me to the edge and pointed down. It was a cliff almost as steep as the Palisades. "C'est une blague," he smiled. "Just a story." The Germans had not charged here, but in the forest below, where the Nancy road passed through and enters the valley of the Amezeule. They had not tried to carry but to turn the Grand Mont. More than 200,000 men had fought for days in the valley below. I asked him about the legend of the Kaiser, sitting on a hill, waiting in white uniform with his famous escort, waiting until the road was clear for his triumphal entrance into the capital of Lorraine. He laughed. I might choose my hill; if the Emperor had done this thing the hill was "over there," but had he? They are hard on legends at the front, and the tales that delight Paris die easily on the frontiers of war. [134]

But since I had asked so much about the fighting my commandant promised to take me in the afternoon to the point where the struggle had been fiercest, still farther to the south, where all the hills break down and there is a natural gateway from Germany into France, the beginning of the famous Charmes Gap, through which the German road to Paris from the east ran, and still runs. Leaving Nancy behind us, and ascending the Meurthe valley on the eastern bank, turning out of it before Saint Nicholas du Port, we came presently to the most completely war-swept fields that I have ever seen. On a perfectly level plain the little town of Haraucourt stands in sombre ruins. Its houses are nothing but ashes and rubble. Go out of the village toward the east and you enter fields pockmarked by shell fire. For several miles you can walk from shell hole to shell hole. The whole country is a patchwork of these shell holes. At every few rods a new line of old trenches approaches the road and wanders away again. Barbed-wire entanglements run up and down the gently sloping hillsides. [135]

Presently we came out upon a perfectly level field. It was simply torn by shell fire. Old half-filled trenches wandered aimlessly about, and beyond, under a gentle slope, the little village of

Courbessaux stood in ruins. The commandant called my attention to a bit of woods in front.

"The Germans had their machine guns there," said he. "We didn't know it, and a French brigade charged across this field. It started at 8:15, and at 8:30 it had lost more than 3,000 out of 6,000. Then the Germans came out of the woods in their turn, and our artillery, back at Haraucourt, caught them and they lost 3,500 men in a quarter of an hour." Along the roadside were innumerable graves. We looked at one. It was marked: "Here 196 French." Twenty feet distant was another; it was marked: "Here 196 Germans." In the field where we stood I was told some 10,000 men are buried. They were buried hurriedly, and even now when it rains arms and legs are exposed. [136]

Two years had passed, almost two years, since this field had been fought for. The Germans had taken it. They had approached Haraucourt, but had not passed it. This was the centre and the most vital point in the Lorraine battle. What Foch's troops had done about La Fête Champenoise, those of Castelnau had done here. The German wave had been broken, but at what cost? And now, after so many months, the desolation of war remained. But yet it was not to endure. Beside the very graves an old peasant was ploughing, guiding his plough and his horses carefully among the tombs. Four miles away more trenches faced each other and the battle went on audibly, but behind this line, in this very field where so many had died, life was beginning. [137]

Later we drove south, passing within the lines the Germans had held in their great advance, we travelled through Lunéville, which they had taken and left unharmed, save as shell fire had wrecked an eastern suburb. We visited Gerbéviller, where in an excess of rage the Germans had burned every structure in the town. I have never seen such a headquarters of desolation. Everything that had a shape, that had a semblance of beauty or of use, lies in complete ruin, detached houses, a château, the blocks in the village, all in ashes. Save for Sermaize, Gerbéviller is the most completely wrecked town in France.

You enter the village over a little bridge across the tiny Mortagne. Here some French soldiers made a stand and held off the German advance for some hours. There was no other battle at Gerbéviller, but for this defence the town died. Never was death so complete. Incendiary material was placed in every house, and all that thoroughness could do to make the destruction complete was done. Gerbéviller is dead, a few women and children live amidst its ashes, there is a wooden barrack by the bridge with a post-office and the inevitable postcards, but only on postcards, picture postcards, does the town live. It will be a place of pilgrimage when peace comes. [138]

From Gerbéviller we went by Bayon to the Plateau of Saffais, the ridge between the Meurthe and the Moselle, where the defeated army of Castelnau made its last and successful stand. The French line came south from St. Geneviève, where we had been in the morning, through the Grand Mont, across the plain by Haraucourt and Corbessaux, then crossed the Meurthe by Dombasle and stood on the heights from Rossières south. Having taken Lunéville, the Germans attempted to cross the Meurthe coming out of the Forest of Vitrimont. [139]

Standing on the Plateau of Saffais and facing east, the whole country unfolded again, as it did at the Grand Mont. The face of the plateau is seamed with trenches. They follow the slopes, and the village of Saffais stands out like a promontory. On this ridge the French had massed three hundred cannon. Their army had come back in ruins, and to steady it they had been compelled to draw troops from Alsace. Mülhausen was sacrificed to save Nancy. Behind these crests on which we stood a beaten army, almost routed, had in three days found itself and returned to the charge.

In the shadow of the dusk I looked across the Meurthe into the brown mass of the Forest of Vitrimont. Through this had come the victorious Germans. They had debouched from the wood; they had approached the river, hidden under the slope, but, swept by the hell of this artillery storm, they had broken. But few had lived to pass the river, none had mounted the slopes. There were almost no graves along these trenches. Afterward the Germans had in turn yielded to pressure from the south and gone back. Before the Battle of the Marne began the German wave of invasion had been stopped here in the last days of August. A second terrific drive, coincident with the Marne, had likewise failed. Then the Germans had gone back to the frontier. The old boundary line of Bismarck is now in many instances an actual line of fire, and nowhere on this front are the Germans more than three or four miles within French territory. [140]

If you should look at the map of the wholly imaginary Battle of Nancy, drawn by Colonel Boucher to illustrate his book, published before 1910, a book describing the problem of the defence of the eastern frontier, you will find the lines on which the French stood at Saffais indicated exactly. Colonel Boucher had not dreamed this battle, but for a generation the French General Staff had planned it. Here they had expected to meet the German thrust. When the Germans decided to go by Belgium they had in turn taken the offensive, but, having failed, they had fought their long-planned battle. [141]

Out of all the region of war, of war to-day and war yesterday, one goes back to Nancy, to its busy streets, its crowds of people returning from their day's work. War is less than fifteen miles away, but Nancy is as calm as London is nervous. Its bakers still make macaroons; even Taube raids do not excuse the children from punctual attendance at school. Nancy is calm with the calmness of all France, but with just a touch of something more than calmness, which forty-six years of living by an open frontier brings. Twenty-one months ago it was the gauge of battle, and half a million men fought for it; a new German drive may approach it at any time. Out toward the old frontier there is still a German gun, hidden in the Forest of Bézange, which has turned one block to ashes and may fire again at any hour. Zeppelins have come and gone, leaving dead women and children behind them, but Nancy goes on with to-day. [142]

And to-morrow? In the hearts of all the people of this beautiful city there is a single and a simple faith. Nancy turns her face toward the ancient frontier, she looks hopefully out upon the shell-swept Grand Couronné and beyond to the Promised Land. And the people say to you, if you ask them about war and about peace, as one of them said to me: "Peace will come, but not until we have our ancient frontier, not until we have Metz and Strassburg. We have waited a long time, is it not so?"

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Typographical errors corrected in text:

Page 56: Everywhere where replaced with Everywhere were
Page 128: alowly replaced with slowly

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THEY SHALL NOT PASS ***

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