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A Peep at the Famous St. Mihiel Salient

American Author Visiting French Trench Dug Deep in Chalk Mine Catches Glimpse of German Position, Holding of Which Has Cost Thousands of Lives

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It is an old saying that the busiest man always seems to have the most leisure. It is another way of complimenting him on his genius for organization. When you visit a real man of affairs you seldom find him surrounded by secretaries, stenographers, and a battery of telephones. As a rule, there is nothing on his desk save a photograph of his wife and a rose in a glass of water. Outside the headquarters of the general there were no gendarmes, no sentries, no panting automobiles, no mud-flecked chasseurs-a-cheval. Unchallenged the car rolled up an empty avenue of trees and stopped beside an empty terrace of an apparently empty chateau. At one of the terraces was a pond and in it floated seven beautiful swans. They were the only living things in sight. I thought we had stumbled upon the country home of some gentleman of elegant leisure.

When he appeared the manner of the general assisted that impression. His courtesy was so undisturbed, his mind so tranquil, his conversation so entirely that of a polite host. You felt he was masquerading in the uniform of a general only because he knew it was becoming. He glowed with health and vigor. He had the appearance of having just come indoors after a satisfactory round on his private golf links. Instead he had been receiving reports from twenty-four different staff officers. His manner suggested he had no more serious responsibility than feeding bread crumbs to the seven stately swans. Instead he was responsible for the lives of 170,000 men and fifty miles of trenches. His duties were to feed the men three times a day with food, and all day and night with ammunition, to guard them against attacks from gases, burning oil, bullets, shells; and in counterattack to send them forward with the bayonet across hurdles of barb wire to distribute death. These were only a few of his responsibilities.

I know somewhere in the chateau there must be the conning tower from which the General directed his armies, and after luncheon asked to be allowed to visit it. It was filled with maps, in size enormous but rich in tiny details, nailed on frames, pinned to the walls, spread over vast drawing boards. But to the visitor more marvelous than the maps showing the French lines were those in which were set forth the German positions, marked with the place occupied by each unit, giving the exact situation of the German trenches, the German batteries, giving the numerals of each regiment. With these spread before him the General has only to lift the hand telephone and direct that from a spot on a map on one wall several tons of explosive shells shall drop on a spot on another map on the wall opposite. The General does not fight only at long distance from a map. Each morning he visits some part of the fifty miles of trenches. What later

he sees on his map only jogs his memory. It is a sort of shorthand note. Where to you are waving lines, dots, and crosses, he beholds valleys, forests, miles of yellow trenches. A week ago, during a bombardment, a brother general advanced into the first trench. His chief of staff tugged at his cloak.

“My men like to see me here,” said the general.

A shell killed him. But who can protest it was a life wasted? He made it possible for every poilu in a trench of 500 miles to say, “Our generals do not send us where they will not go themselves.”

We left the white swans smoothing their feathers, and though rain drove to a hill covered closely with small trees. The trees were small because the soil from which they drew sustenance was only one to three feet deep. Beneath that was chalk. Through these woods was cut a runway for a toy railroad. It possessed the narrowest of narrow gauges, and its rolling stock consisted of flat cars three feet wide, drawn by splendid Percherons. The live stock, the rolling stock, the tracks and the trees on either side of the tracks were entirely covered with white clay. Even the brakemen and the locomotive engineer who walked in advance of the horses were completely painted with it. And before we got out of the woods, so were the passengers. This railroad feeds the trenches, carrying to them water and ammunition, and to the kitchens in the rear uncooked food.

The French Marquis who guided “Mon Capitaine” and myself to the trenches either had built this railroad, or owned a controlling interest in it, for he always spoke of it proudly as “my express,” “my special train,” “my petite vitesse.” He had lately been in America buying cavalry horses. Concerning them he has a most intimate knowledge, as for years he has owned one of the famous racing stables in France. The last time I had seen him he was in silk, mounted on one of his own thoroughbreds, and the crowd, or that part of it that had backed his horse, was applauding him; and, while he waited for permission to dismount, he was smiling and laughing happily. Yesterday, when the plow horses pulled his express train off the rails, he descended and pushed it back, and, in consequence, was splashed, not by the mud of the race track but of the trenches. Nor in the misty, dripping, rain-soaked forest was there any one to applaud him. But he was still smiling and laughing, even more happily.

The trenches were dug around what had been a chalk mine, and it was difficult to tell where the mining for profit had stopped and the excavations for defense began. When you can see only chalk at your feet and chalk on either hand, and overhead the empty sky, this ignorance may be excused. In the boyaux, which began where the railroad stopped, that was our position. We walked through an endless grave with walls of clay, on top of which was a scant foot of earth. It looked like a layer of chocolate on the top of a cake.

In some places, under foot was a corduroy path of sticks, like the false bottom of a rowboat, in other we splashed through open sluices of clay and rain water. You slid and skidded and to hold yourself erect pressed with each hand against the wet walls of endless grave.

We came out upon the “Hauts de Meuse.” They are called also the “Shores of Lorraine,” because to that province, as are the cliffs of Dover to the County of Kent, they are a natural barrier. We were in the quarry that had been cut into the top of the heights on the side that now faces other heights held by the enemy. Behind us rose a sheer wall of chalk as high as a five-story building. The face of it had been pounded by shells. It was as undismayed as the whitewashed wall of a schoolroom at which generations of small boys have flung impertinent spit balls. At the edge of the quarry the floor was dug deeper, leaving a wall between it and the enemy, and behind this wall were the posts of observation, the nests of the machine guns, the

raised step to which the men spring when repulsing an attack. Below and back of them were the shelters into which, during a bombardment, they disappear. They were roofed with great beams, on top of which were bags of cement piled three and four yards high.

Not on account of the sleet and fog, but in spite of them, the aspect of the place was grim and forbidding. You did not see, as at some of the other fronts, on the sign boards that guide the men through the maze jokes and nicknames. The mess huts and sleeping caves bore no such ironic titles as the *Petit Café*, the *Anti-Boche*, *Chez Maxim*. They were designated only by numerals, businesslike and brief. It was no place for humor. The monuments to the dead were too much in evidence. On every front the men rise and lie down with death, but on no other front had I found them living so close to the graves of their former comrades. Where a man had fallen, there had he been buried, and on every hand you saw between the chalk huts, at the mouths of the pits or raised high in a niche, a pile of stones, a cross and a soldier's cap. Where one officer had fallen his men had built to his memory a mausoleum. It is also a shelter into which, when the shells come, they dive for safety. So that even in death he still protects them.

I was invited into a post of observation and told to make my entrance quickly. In order to exist, a post of observation must continue to look to the enemy only like part of the wall of earth that faces him. If through its apparently solid front there flashes, even for an instant, a ray of sunlight, he knows that the ray comes through a peephole, and that behind the peephole men with field glasses are watching him. And with his shells he hammers the post of observation into a shambles. Accordingly, when you enter one, it is etiquette not to keep the door open any longer than is necessary to squeeze past it. As a rule, the door is a curtain of sacking, but hands and bodies coated with clay, by brushing against it, have made it quite opaque.

The post was as small as a chart room and the light came only through the peepholes. You got a glimpse of a rack of rifles, of shadowy figures that made way for you, and of your captain speaking in a whisper. When you put your eyes to the peephole it was like looking at a photograph through a stereoscope. But, instead of seeing the lake of Geneva, the Houses of Parliament, or Niagara Falls, you looked across a rain driven valley of mud, on the opposite side of which was a hill.

Here the reader kindly will imagine three stickfuls of printed matter devoted to that hill. It was an extremely interesting hill, but my captain, who also is my censor, decides that what I wrote was entirely too interesting, especially to Germans. So the hill is "strafed." He says I can begin again vaguely with "Over there."

"Over there," said the voice in the darkness, "is St. Mihiel."

For more than a year you had read of St. Mihiel. Communiqués, maps, illustrations had made it famous and familiar. It was the town that gave a name to the German salient, to the point thrust in advance of what should be his front. You expected to see an isolated hill, a promontory, some position of such strategic value as would explain why for St. Mihiel the lives of thousands of Germans had been thrown like dice upon a board. But except for the obstinacy of the German mind, or, upon the part of the Crown Prince, the lack of it, I could find no explanation. Why the German wants to hold St. Mihiel, why he ever tried to hold it, why if it so pleases him he should not continue to hold it until his whole line is driven across the border, is difficult to understand. For him it is certainly an expensive position. It lengthens his lines of communication and increases his need of transport. It eats up men, eats up rations, eats up priceless ammunition, and it leads to nowhere, enfilades no position, threatens no one. It is like an ill-mannered boy sticking out his tongue. And as ineffective.

The physical aspect of St. Mihiel is a broad sweep of meadow land cut in half by the Meuse flooding her banks and the houses of the Ferme Mont Meuse. On each side of the salient are the French. Across the battleground of St. Mihiel I could see their trenches facing those in which we stood. For, at St. Mihiel, instead of having the line of the enemy only in front, the German has it facing him and on both flanks. Speaking not as a military strategist but merely as a partisan, if any German commander wants that kind of a position I would certainly make him a present of it.

The colonel who commanded the trenches possessed an enthusiasm that was beautiful to see. He was as proud of his chalk quarry as an admiral of his first dreadnought. He was as isolated as though cast upon a rock in mid-ocean. Behind him was the dripping forest, in front of the mud valley filled with floating fogs. At his feet in the chalk floor the shells had gouged out holes as deep as rain barrels. Other shells were liable at any moment to gouge out more holes. Three days before, when Prince Arthur of Connaught had come to tea, a shell hit outside the colonel's private cave and smashed all the tea cups. It is extremely annoying when English royalty drops in sociably to distribute medals and sip a cup of tea to have German shells invite themselves to the party. It is a way German shells have. They push in everywhere. One invited itself to my party and got within ten feet of it. When I complained, the colonel suggested absently it probably was not a German shell but a French mine that had gone off prematurely. He seemed to think being hit by a French mine rather than by a German shell made all the difference in the world. It nearly did.

At the moment the colonel was greatly interested in the fact that one of his men was not carrying a mask against gases. The colonel argued that the life of the man belonged to France, and that through laziness or indifference he had no right to risk losing it. Until this war the colonel had commanded in Africa the regiment into which criminals are drafted as a punishment. To keep them in hand requires both imagination and the direct methods of a bucko mate on a whaler. When the colonel was promoted to his present command he found the men did not place much confidence in the gas masks, so he filled a shelter with poisoned air, equipped a squad with protectors and ordered them to enter. They went without enthusiasm, but when they found they could move about with impunity the confidence of the entire command was gained.

The colonel was very vigilant against these gas attacks. He had equipped the only shelter I have seen devoted solely to the preparation of defenses against them. We learned several new facts concerning this hideous form of warfare. One was that the Germans now launch the gas most frequently at night when the men cannot see it approach, and, in consequence, before they can snap the masks into place, they are suffocated and, in great agony, die. They have learned much about the gas, but chiefly by bitter experience. Two hours after one of the attacks an officer seeking his field glasses descended into his shelter. The gas that had flooded the trenches and then floated away still lurked below. And in a moment the officer was dead. The warning was instantly flashed along the trenches from the North Sea to Switzerland, and now after a gas raid the underground shelters are attacked by counterirritants and the poison driven from ambush.

I have never seen better discipline than obtained in that chalk quarry, or better spirit. There was not a single outside element to aid discipline or to inspire morale. It had all to come from within. It had all to spring from the men themselves and from the example set by their officers. The enemy fought against them, the elements fought against them, the place itself was as cheerful as a crutch. The clay climbed from their feet to their things, was ground into their uniforms, clung to their hands and hair. The rain chilled them, the wind, cold, damp, and harsh,

stabbed through their great coats. Their outlook was upon graves, their resting places dark caverns, at which even a wolf would look with suspicion. And yet they were all smiling, eager, alert. In the whole command we saw not one sullen or wistful face.

It is an old saying, "So the colonel, so the regiment."

But the splendid spirit I saw on the heights of the Meuse is true not only of that colonel and of that regiment, but of the whole 500 miles of trenches, and of all France.