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The War That Lurks in Forest of the Vosges

Trenches and Log Barricades Set Among Moss, Fern and Sweet-Smelling Pine – Both French and German Soldiers Use Watchdogs for Sentry Duty

When speaking of their 500 miles of front, the French General Staff divide it into twelve sectors. The names of these do not appear on maps. They are family names and titles, not of certain places, but of districts with imaginary boundaries. These nicknames seem to thrive best in countries where the same race of people have lived for many centuries. With us, it is usually when we speak of mountains, as “in the Rockies,” “in the Adirondacks,” that under one name we merge rivers, valleys, and villages. To know the French names for the twelve official fronts may help in deciphering the communiqués. They are these:

Flanders, the first sector, stretches from the North Sea to beyond Ypres; the Artois sector surrounds Arras: the center of Picardie is Amiens; Santerre follows the valley of the Oise; Soissonais is the sector that extends from Soissons on the Aisne to the Champagne sector, which begins with Rheims and extends southwest to include Chalons; Argonne is the forest of Argonne; the Hautes de Meuse, the district around Verdun; Woevre lies between the Heights of the Meuse and the River Moselle; then come Lorraine, the Vosges, all hills and forests, and last Alsace, the territory won back from the enemy.

Of these twelve fronts, I was on ten. The remaining two I missed through leaving France to visit the French fronts in Serbia and Saloniki. According to which front you are on, the trench is of mud, clay, chalk, sandbags, or cement; it is ambushed in gardens and orchards, it winds through flooded mud flats, is hidden behind the ruins of wrecked villages, and paved and reinforced with the stones and bricks from the smashed houses.

Of all the trenches the most curious were those of the Vosges. They were the most curious because, to use the last word one associates with trenches, they are the most beautiful.

We started for the trenches of the Vosges from a certain place close to the German border. It was so close to the German border. It was so close that in the inn a rifle bullet from across the border had bored a hole in the café mirror.

The car climbed steadily. The swollen rivers flowed far below us, and then disappeared, and the slopes that fell away on one side of the road and rose on the other became smothered under giant pines. Above us they reached to the clouds, below us swept grandly across great valleys. There was no sign of human habitation, not even the hut of a charcoal burner. Except for the road we might have been the first explorers of a primeval forest. We seemed as far removed from the France of cities, cultivated acres, stone bridges, and chateaux as Rip Van Winkle lost in the Catskills. The silence was the silence of the ocean.

We halted at what might have been a lumberman’s camp. There were cabins of huge green logs with the moss still fresh and clinging, and smoke poured from mud chimneys. In the

air was an enchanting odor of balsam and boiling coffee. It needed only a man in Mackinaw coat with an axe to persuade us we had motored from a French village ten hundred years old into a perfectly new trading post on the Saskatchewan.

But from the lumber camp the colonel appeared, and with him in the lead we started up a hill as sheer as a church roof. The freshly cut path reached upward in short zigzag lengths. Its outer edge was shored with the trunks of the trees cut down to make way for it. They were fastened with stakes, and against rain and snow helped to hold it in place. The soil, as the path showed was of a pink stone. It cuts easily and is the stone from which cathedrals have been built. That suggests that to an ambitious young sapling it offers little nutriment, but the pines at least seem to thrive on it. For centuries they have thrived on it. They towered over us to the height of eight stories. The ground beneath was hidden by the most exquisite moss, and moss climbed far up the tree trunks and covered the branches. They looked as though to guard them from the cold, they had been swathed in green velvet. Except for the pink path we were in a world of green—green moss, green ferns, green tree trunks, green shadows. The little light that reached from above was like that which flitters through the glass plates of an aquarium.

It was very beautiful, but was it war? We might have been in the Adirondacks, in the private camp of one of our men of millions. You expect to see the fire warden's red poster warning you to stamp out the ashes and to be careful where you throw matches. Then the path dived into a trench with pink walls, and overhead, arches of green branches rising higher and higher until they interlocked and shut out the sky. The trench led to a barrier of logs as round as a flour barrel, the openings plugged with moss and the whole hidden in fresh pine boughs. It reminded you of those open barricades used in boar hunting, and behind which the German emperor awaits the onslaught of thoroughly terrified pigs.

Like a bird nest it clung to the side of the hill, and across, a valley, looked at a sister hill a quarter of a mile away.

“On that hill,” said the Colonel, “on a level with us, are the Germans.”

Had he told me that among the pine-trees across the valley Santa Claus manufactured his toys and stabled his reindeer, I would have believed him. Had humpbacked dwarfs with beards peeped from behind the velvet tree trunks and doffed red nightcaps, had we discovered fairies dancing on the moss carpet, the surprised ones would have been, not we, but the fairies.

In this enchanted forest to talk of Germans and war was ridiculous. We were speaking in ordinary tones, but in the stillness of the woods our voices carried, and from just below us a dog barked.

“Do you allow the men to bring dogs into the trenches?” I asked. “Don't they give away your position?”

“That is not one of our dogs,” said the Colonel. “That is a German sentry dog. He has heard us talking.”

“But that dog is not across that valley,” I objected. “He's on this hill. He's not 200 yards below us.”

“But, yes, certainly,” said the colonel. Of the man on duty behind the log barrier he asked:

“How near are they?”

“Two hundred yards,” said the soldier. The soldier grinned and, leaning over the top log, pointed directly beneath us.

It was as though we were on the roof of a house looking over the edge at some one on the front steps. I stared down through the giant pine trees towering like masts, mysterious,

motionless, silent with the silence of centuries. Through the interlacing boughs I saw only shifting shadows or, where a shaft of sunlight fell upon the moss, a flash of vivid green. Unable to believe, I shook my head. Even the Boche watchdog, now thoroughly annoyed, did not convince me. As though reading my doubts, an officer beckoned, and we stepped outside the breastworks and into an intricate cat's cradle of barbed wire. It was lashed to heavy stakes and wound around the tree trunks, and, had the officer not led the way, it would have been impossible for me to get either in or out. At intervals, like clothes on a line, on the wires were strung empty tin cans, pans, and pots, and glass bottles. To attempt to cross the entanglement would have made a noise like a peddler's cart bumping over cobbles.

We came to the edge of the barb wire, and what looked like part of a tree trunk turned into a man-sized bird's nest. The sentry in the nest had his back to us and was peering intently down through the branches of the tree tops. He remained so long motionless that I thought he was not aware of our approach. But he had heard us. Only it was no part of his orders to make abrupt movements. With infinite caution, with the most considerate slowness, he turned, scowled, and waved us back. It was the care with which he made even so slight a gesture that persuaded me the Germans were as close as the colonel had said. My curiosity concerning them was satisfied. The sentry did not need to wave me back. I was already on my way.

At the post of observation I saw a dog kennel.

"There are watchdogs on our side, also," I said.

"Yes," the officer assented doubtfully. "The idea is that their hearing is better than that of the men, and in case of night attacks they will warn us. But during the day they get so excited barking at the Boche dogs that when darkness comes, and we need them, they are worn out and fast asleep."

We continued our walk through the forest and wherever we went found men at work repairing the path and pushing the barb wire and trenches nearer the enemy. In some places they worked with great caution hidden by the ferns and dragging behind them the coils of wire; sometimes they were able to work openly, and the forest resounded with the blows of axes and the crash of a falling tree. But an axe in a forest does not suggest war, and the scene was still one of peace and beauty.

For miles the men had lined the path with borders of moss of six inches wide and with strips of bark had decorated the huts and shelters. Across the tiny ravines they had thrown what in seed catalogues are called "rustic" bridges. As we walked in single file between these carefully laid borders of moss and past the shelters that suggested only a gamekeeper's lodge, we might have been on walking tour in the Alps. You expected at every turn to come upon a chalet like a Swiss clock and a patient cow and a young woman in a velvet bodice who would offer you warm milk.

Instead, from overhead, there burst suddenly the barking of shrapnel and, through an opening in the tree tops, we saw a French biplane pursued by German shells. It was late in the afternoon, but the sun was still shining and entirely out of her turn, the moon also was shining. In the blue sky she hung like silver shield, and toward her, it seemed almost to her level, rose the biplane.

She also was all silver. She shone and glistened. Like a great bird, she flung out tilting wings. The sun kissed them and turned them into flashing mirrors. Behind her the German shells burst in white puffs of smoke, feathery, delicate, as innocent-looking as the tips of ostrich plumes. The biplane ran before them and seemed to play with them as children race up the beach laughing at the pursuing waves. The biplane darted left, darted right, climbed unseen aerial trails,

tobogganed down vast imaginary mountains, or, as a gull skims the crests of the waves, dived into a cloud and appeared again, her wings dripping, glistening and radiant. As she turned and winged her way back to France you felt no fear for her. She seemed beyond the power of man to harm, something supreme, superhuman. A sister to the sun and moon, the princess royal of the air.

After you have been in the trenches it seems so selfish to be feasting and drinking that you have no appetite for dinner.

But for the defenders of the forests of the Vosges you cannot feel selfish. Visits to their trenches do not take away my appetite. They increased it. The air they breathe tastes like brut champagne, and gases cannot reach them. They sleep on pillows of pine boughs. They look out only on what in nature is most beautiful. And their surgeon told me there was not a single man on the sick list. That does not mean there are no killed or wounded. For even in the enchanted forest there is no enchantment strong enough to ward off the death that approaches crawling on the velvet moss or hurtling through the tree tops.

War has no knowledge of sectors. It is just as hateful in the Vosges as in Flanders, only in Vosges it masks its hideousness with what is beautiful. In Flanders death hides in a trench of mud like an open grave. In the Forest of the Vosges it lurks in a nest of moss, fern, and clean, sweet-smelling pine.