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"THEM DAMNED FROGS"

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WHATEVER turn is taken by international politics during the next two years, whatever the official post-bellum relations between Washington and the Government of France, the degree of understanding and the nature of the sentiment existing between our people and the French is going to be of incalculable importance in shaping the twentieth century. It is going to give the true character and the only validity to whatever documents our ministers may from time to time endorse.

That is why it is worth while to look back over the history of the A. E. F., and by so doing, to measure and search for the causes of that mutual rancor which developed between the French people and the American troops—the rancor which broke out here and there in riots (as at Brest); which made the irritated Army of Occupation lean over backwards in its affability toward the Rhinelanders; which moved *Le Rire* to some caustic cartoons at the expense of the A. E. F.; and which poured into our astonished ports a stream of returning doughboys all muttering under their breaths a disparagement of "them damned frogs."

What was the origin of that feeling? What was its extent? How long will it last?

Perhaps it would be well first to consider two rather fixed delusions on the subject. For one thing, stay-at-home Americans have, quite pardonably, come to the easy conclusion that all the rancor could be explained by overcharging. Whenever a homecoming soldier was cross-examined because his emotions toward the French hardly seemed in the familiar and difficult key of Lafayette Day oratory, he was wont to talk vaguely of their profiteering, simply because that was the easiest explanation to give.

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The real explanation lay much deeper—in most cases beyond reach not only of his powers of expression, but also of his powers of analysis.

As a matter of fact, the amount of overcharging was very slight—astonishingly slight, when one considers that there were more than two million spendthrift Americans in France, far from home, overpaid, irresponsible, and loose in an impoverished country. It is against the nature of the French peasant or shopkeeper to go in all at once for resourceful profiteering, just as it is against his nature to part lightly with a sou on which he has once laid his thrifty hands. Furthermore, both the French Government and the American Army were vigilant in the matter, so that the doughboy was not despoiled with half the unscrupulousness which would have been practised on him among his own people—certainly no more than is the average lot of the expeditionary soldier anywhere under the sun.

Not one French shopkeeper in twenty seemed to think that, with these carefree Yanks scandalously overpaid and overfed when compared with their less fortunate brothers in *horizon bleu*, he was therefore justified in squaring matters slightly by exploiting them at every opportunity. Yet the rising tide of prices the world over, and the steady dwindling of the franc, affected trade in France enough to lend some color to the rumors of exploitation, and it came to be the fashion to talk about it and magnify it in stray *buvettes* from Verdun to Bordeaux.

It was easy to fall into that fashion. I know I fell into it. I remember when our teeming transport set sail from Marseilles one afternoon in May of this year. It was a wonderful day. The Château-d-If lay in the unruffled bay like a pearl set in a plaque of turquoise. A gorgeous Marseillaise, a very Carmen in appearance, stood on the pier and threw parting oranges to the doughboys on board, threw basketful after basketful, while every eye along the rails watched the lithe turn of her splendid body, followed the brilliance of her kerchief, and reflected the flash of her smile when the M. P.'s, for some reason, tried to stop her. "Who would have thought," I ventured, "that our last sight of France would be of someone giving something away?" It won an easy laugh from the loungers within hearing. Yet surely it came contemptibly from the lips of one who, in twenty-two months of soldiering in many towns

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and villages of France, had ever been treated fairly, honestly, and with kindly, simple courtesy. This paragraph is written in expiation.

Then, too, there was the delusion from which the French Government suffered—the notion that the whole source of bad feeling was the friction between the French and American staffs. There was such friction, and, during the first few weeks of the Armistice, the staff officers of the Third Army were on edge with irritation at the neighboring French command. But the emotions of a staff officer were not then and are not now of any great importance, and a tide of feeling that sweeps the ranks cannot be turned back or deflected by the handing out of decorations. It is true that the French intrusion on our area of occupation, the French disposition at least to try to enter every important town of ours from Luxembourg to Coblenz, and the French manner of swaggering into such a town with all bands playing, when the Americans had thought it better sportsmanship and generally more becoming in a victor not to rub it in—it is true that these things turned every American officers' mess in the Rhineland into a forum for the airing of discontent with the "frogs." The sensitive French liaison officers found how the wind was blowing, and sent in effective protests to André Tardieu and other interested parties at Paris. But the liaison officers knew not what was in the minds of the troops.

For between the troops and the French people there had been brewing for many months a mutual dislike. Does it surprise you that there could not be perfect harmony between a stricken nation and the rescuing army of its strongest Ally? Then let me say, rather, that it is astonishing how little outward friction there really was, how great was the genuine good feeling. Consider that here was a nervous, war-worn, disillusioned people, an essentially stay-at-home people that had never learned or cared to learn how to adapt themselves to the ways of outlanders, now suddenly invaded by a further two million of boisterous foreigners, who spoke a different language and lived on a different scale—a host rich in all the youth and gaiety and energy that France was only too bitterly conscious of having lost.

At best, it is as doubtful an experiment for two peoples to dwell together as it is for two people. It is doubly difficult if one of them is old and shrewd and frugal and

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poor and old-fashioned, while the other is young and sentimental and gay and spendthrift and rich and modern.

I think that if the dislike developed on one side before the other, its first appearance can be traced to a certain disdain for the French which the outspoken Americans were only too wont to display. To the resulting friction, a hundred and one things contribute, of which high prices constituted the least—little things like the French truckdriver's enraging habit of driving dreamily in the middle of the road, big things like the French street-walker's unprejudiced habit of accepting a negro's attentions as affably as a white man's. Then think of the source of ill feeling there must have been in the spectacularly successful philandering of the Yankees in the villages depopulated by the call of the natives to the front.

Remember that all French cities were not hospitable. Paris, for instance, was quite disinclined to open its gates to swarms of American soldiers on leave, and they were so opened only after General Pershing's stubborn insistence. Even an American who resented the fabricated "crime waves stories" which were the result, could not help sharing some of the old Parisian's dismay, could not help echoing the prayer in Montaigne's tribute to his beloved city: "God of his mercy free her and chase all our divisions from her!"

Nor are all French cities of the sort to win the wayfarer's regard for that troubled country. Any American who has tarried even a little while in some of its sorrier sections can well understand why not every homegoing doughboy was in any mood to repeat the farewell of an earlier exile: "*Adieu, charmant pays de France!*" Indeed, much of the bewildering variations in the doughboy's report on France and the French can be ascribed to France's own infinite variety. Different parts of France, even different towns in the same part of France, are unlike to a degree without parallel in America, and without explanation to the American mind. You might expect to find differences between Le Havre and Marseilles (though Portland, Maine and Portland, Oregon, are not half so unlike) but why should such close neighbors as Ste. Ménéhould and St. Mihiel vary as night and day? Why should a hike from sour Bar-le-duc to nearby St. Dizier strike the startled wayfarer as a walk from Purgatory to Paradise?

A Frenchman visiting these intriguing *Etats-Unis*

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would, if he liked the people of Geneva, N. Y., also find himself at home in Bixby, Arizona, or in Winston-Salem in La Caroline du Nord. But an American who knows only the sweet languor and friendly folk of Avignon does not know how chilling an experience it can be to settle down even for a season in such a sink-hole as Efize-la-brulée, or to know the French only through the rather forbidding samples who make up the citizenry of Meaux. So an American who was stationed in Coulommiers would come away with fond memories of a cheery, hospitable people he could not possibly have cherished had his service overseas kept him a few kilometers to the East among the drab streets and long faces of La Fère Champenoise.

The reason why French communities have such pronounced personalities and have grown so far apart is, of course, because, for several thousand years, there has been little coming and going from one to the other. Your true Frenchman lives and dies within the village where he was born, and if he ever embarks on such an adventure as a journey to the village over the hill, he considers it well worth talking about over his dominoes for the next thirty years. The good folk who dwell in Hattonchatel (and whose ancestors probably dwelt there before Caesar started the fashion of laying siege to Paris) can see the steep slope of our Montsec from the square beside the monastery in their own hilltop village. But how many have ever made the day's walk to Montsec? Not one in a hundred. Kin of the d'Arc family still live in sheltered, drowsy Domremy. It took the tremendous pressure of an aroused public opinion to force Tartarin out of Tarascon. It is easy to see how the French towns have taken on each its separate character, and how you can no more say, without qualification, "France and the French are lovable," than you can say all men are lovable or all food palatable. Parts of France, many parts, are, I think, more winning than any place under the sun. Other parts are repellent. Had I known St. Nazaire alone and not Soissons, I too, might have cursed the "damned frogs." The tourist who has been to Paris and Avignon, and who has done the château country in a motor-car, doesn't know the France the doughboy knew, doesn't know the France pictured in the letter of a machine-gun captain I want to quote, a letter worth pondering because, within

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it, there are the clues to so much of all the friction that developed. The captain wrote:

> My battalion was billeted for four months in a small town not far from Dijon. Last November we marched down from the Argonne, a distance of 150 miles. The town has perhaps three hundred people altogether. A tourist might tell you that it was picturesque, but things have a rather different aspect when viewed from the tonneau of a limousine or from the first floor of an old barn, and whatever else it might have been, it certainly was darned uncomfortable. Our battalion, about 1,000 strong, found themselves confronted with roofs that leaked and doors that seeped, with cooties and with mud, with endless inspections and drills, fatigues and marches, with rain for 53 (actual count) consecutive days, to say nothing of a shortage of fuel, a lack of lights and few amusements. I think any fair-minded person would agree that obviously the thing to do was to drown your troubles in *vin blanc*, and although I must say the men behaved remarkably well, still, there was all the drinking that the Army pay allows, and the things incident to it.
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> We stole honey and rabbits, smashed windows, tore up doors for firewood, shot wild boars with service rifles, with wonderful disregard for the safety of the French civique, and once in a while would start a killing party, which fortunately, never killed anyone, although some poilus told me they thought it safer at the front. Aside from these things, there were the necessary evils incident to occupation—*i. e.*, increased prices, ruined roads, and the general wear and tear.
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> Yet in spite of all these things, in spite of the fact that we had run over their town roughshod, there was not a woman in the town who did not cry when we marched away. The cynic will say that they were thinking of the 60,000 francs we spent there each month, but I think it was more than that. Big, sunny, exuberant Yanks—as carefree and cheerful as school boys—how could any one, let alone the kindly French people, help liking them? You cannot tell me that the one desire of these peasants of Yonne was to see us go—no, not by a good deal. With all our faults, they loved us still, and with all our talk there are lots of us who have learned to love the French.

Also, of course there was always present as an irritant the abiding difference between the French and the American point of view about the war. It was inevitable that the high-pitched, rose-strewn, arm-in-arm fraternity with which the first American contingent was received in Paris could scarcely have maintained. You might as well expect Caruso always to sing high C, a feat which would prove not only physically impossible to him but extremely monotonous to his audience. Many arriving transports, however, came keyed to expect some such pleasant welcome, and were disconcerted by the routine absence of any demonstration. Then, when a little friction would arise, here or there, perhaps a squabble over the bill for

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deux oeufs sur-le-plat or a scrimmage over the last remaining seat in a second-class compartment,—the doughboy would feel, and very likely say, that the frogs were ungrateful.

And the frogs,—who coldly resent being so called, anyway,—saw absolutely no reason why they should be grateful to the Americans. If anything, they considered that the shoe was on the other foot. To the mussy, battered old poilu, sitting in the corner of his smoky, smelly *buvette* and listening to a stalwart young American proclaim that America had won the war and saved the world, there must have risen a vision always of a lost brother, a mutilated *copain*, a million wooden crosses which told him who did most to save the world.

By the time the Armistice was signed, the French had grown weary of being slowly "saved" by England and America—unutterably weary of forever being called the "guardians at the frontier of freedom," and then being left to do all the guarding. As the French never forgave England for taking and holding so little of the line during the first three years of the war, so they never quite forgave America for holding back so long. If, as all Frenchmen believed from the first, and as in time, most Americans came to see, it was as much to America's interest as to France's that the German plan should be checked, then the French could see no reason why the Americans should not have entered the lists from the start. The Frenchman was thankful when America came, keenly appreciative of the quality of American aid when it did come, and thoroughly aware that that aid had turned the scales. But he also knew that the youth of his own country would not all have had to be spent had America come quickly. The American thought of the few magnificent troops that were flung into the breach at Château-Thierry and talked of "saving France." The Frenchman thought of the bitter acres before Verdun, and knew who saved America.

This feeling found no expression in the months of battle. The poilu was too polite and too politic to give it voice. But it is small wonder that it was blurted out occasionally in the trying weeks of negotiation after the peace delegates assembled—as it was, for instance, on a cover of *Le Rire*, where a cartoon showed the poilu on guard at the Rhine, on the other side of which a shadowy but gigantic ogre

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crouched ominous. Large, hearty, cheery, a Yank was bidding farewell to the little man in faded *horizon bleu*.

"Good bye, Poilu," the Yank was saying. "And if that fellow comes back across the river, just you send for me and, after waiting for three years, I'll run over and help you."

Which expresses, if not the French national viewpoint, at least the French irritation at the American's bland ignoring of the French side of it. There was provocation enough for such lampoons, Heaven knows. I remember the fatuous colonel commanding the troops returning on one voyage of a commandeered French liner. He was properly indignant at the absolutely inedible meat which the French cooks were dishing out for our boys. He descended majestically into the ship's kitchen and made a ringing speech to those cooks. He asked them with a flourish what they meant by feeding such stuff to the soldiers who had "saved their country for them."

But none of all this—not the exasperations of the French viewpoint on the war, not the chilling reception from this or that French town, not the dismal memory of any particular town, were really in the back of the soldier's mind when he called the French "the damned frogs." The young American dislikes the Frenchman because he is not clean.

In the evil-smelling French villages, with their medieval notions of sanitation, their heaps of long-undisturbed manure, the Yankee felt that he was in a country scarcely worth saving; nor did the months of fog and rain in such ghastly spots as Brest and Blois and St. Aignan reveal France in a more appealing light. Many sympathized with the darkey soldier who swore that all he had seen in France was mud and kilometers.

To some, of course, the very age of the country commended it. To some, the sight of Nantes and Tours and Angers stirred old memories, and there were ever an exultation in the very thought: "I am in France." But not many Americans had an historical sense to bring over with them in their barrack bags. A relish for the quaint is not widespread in a democratic army.

For the most of the A. E. F., there was no softening veil of sentiment drawn across France, and it might as well be said plainly that the average American was scandalized at the personal uncleanliness of the average Frenchman,

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appalled at his indifference to the dentist and his unfamiliarity with the tooth-brush. Young America is clean. The difference in this between an American camp and a French camp was startling. The campaign of education in the matter of cleanliness which our public-schools have made in routine fashion these many years has borne fruit in a generation of bathers and toothbrushers such as even Harrow and Eton and Rugby could not outdo.

It was an army made up of youth intolerant in these matters that entered Rhennish Prussia and found it dotted with well-kept, broad-walked, towns, lively with modern and enterprising shopwindows. Above all, they found it clean. Then, on all sides, the doughboys could be heard saying: "These people are more like us. We like them better than we do the French." Whereat the French were hurt, worried, perplexed.

It would, however, be a mistake to think this physical kinship deeper than it was, or not to recognize that the fellowship of the liberty-loving peoples of France and America is a deeper and more permanent thing. The Americans share the same sewage system with the Germans: with the French, they share the same ideals and cast of political thought. The things which made the Germans and the Army of Occupation dwell in harmony were the purely physical things which count most when two people are trying to live together in the same house. The things that bind the French and the Americans are matters of the spirit, and it is these which, I hope and believe, will count as the years pass by.

So I am glad that the legend of French exploitation took possession of the A. E. F. and that the troops were moved to assign all their rancor to it. Because, when they came back to prices far more staggering, it left them a little sheepish, a little remorseful, and opened the door of their hearts for readmission there of such sneaking fondness for the French as they may have had. Most soldiers, at one time or another, swore at the frogs. Many of them already can say with Laertes:

> Yet now, I must confess, that duty done,
> My thoughts and wishes bend again toward France.

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