"HOW'S IT LOOK OVER THERE?"

BY ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT

ANIZY-LE-CHATEAU, an ancient village in the Aisne valley, is a desolate cluster of house-stumps, so engrossed with the burden the war left on its shoulders that, until only a few months ago, the bleached skeleton of some nameless poilu lay white amid the poppies, with all the world about too tired, too hardened or too busy to draw a sheet of earth across him.

The château that gave the hamlet its name, the manor house around which the life of Anizy had taken shape, is gone. Only a poor, jagged fragment of a single wall is left as a reminder of all its elegance. That château had been nested in by the Germans and it was blown to powder by the French guns perched just over the slope of the hill to the south. It is one of the legends of Anizy that the French artillery captain who directed its fire had been himself the owner of the château, born and bred within its walls like his father and his grandfather before him. Very likely the story is true.

As you trundle up the white road from Coucy these days, Anizy in the distant sunlight seems like a dead city, killed by the touch of some leprous giant reaching out of the ominous East. Yet as you draw nearer, you hear the occasional clink of hammer on stone, the wheeze of a leisurely saw, the rattle of pails, the hum of voices, the music of life. And in the village itself, you come upon things that tighten your throat, brave and comic and steadfast things that make you want to laugh and cry at the same time, and, passing, leave you with renewed respect for the spirit of man.

For example, there's the hotel. Anizy-le-Château has one. It isn't much of a hotel, to be sure — just such a long, bleak, wooden barrack as could be seen by the hundreds in any American camp this time two years ago. But as you

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approach it, even across three or four blocks of crumbled homes, you catch the magnificent *élan* of its signboard and you know that something of the spirit of France—that baffling mixture of great bravery and some bravado, of fine art and some charlatanry — was in the hand that painted it. It reads:

GRAND EUROPEAN HOTEL
Weddings and Banquets

It is not till you get very near that you see its pathetic reservation, painted in shamefaced type underneath. There the management makes this confession: "*On a le droit de porter son manger,*" which, in our jargon, can best be translated: "Basket parties welcome."

Then, further along the wasted streets, you come upon another unexpected thing, a neat little shack from the door of which smiles a sunny, competent-looking woman from Denver. Inside, white, cheery and spick and span, is a dentist's office, and there, or in the one neighborhood, she has been for many a month, tending to the reconstruction of France in the way she knows best. The teeth of a countryside have been her care — the jaws of German prisoners, homesick Annamites, American relief-workers, languid Portuguese laborers, but above all, of the French children of the Aisne valley — the sharp-faced, bright-eyed youngsters whose refuge babyhood is being followed now by precarious school days in shacks pitched here and there amid a man-made wilderness. It is amusing to see Mauricette, whose turn comes next, sitting on a high stool to watch, for her own gratification and reassurance, the gentle operations on the molars of Marcel, and amusing, too, to watch both children scamper away down the lane of ruins, each right hand bristling with a brand-new toothbrush.

At this dental parlor, no money is asked, for the woman from Denver is just an outpost of the C. A. R. D. — the American Committee for the Devastated Regions—that relief organization which Mrs. A. M. Dike directs from Paris and for which Miss Anne Morgan is the campaigner on this side of the Atlantic.

Sights such as Anizy-le-Château has to offer — the unburied poilu, the obliterated manor, the spunky hotel, the toiling recommencement — are to be seen the length of the old battle-line, from the hillside hamlets in Alsace to the fishing villages of Flanders. But it is the Aisne valley that

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must interest Americans most for there, where the troops from Michigan and Wisconsin came to glory, there where the breathless youngsters of the First and Second Divisions were thrown like a piercing javelin for the redemption of Soissons, there the work of reconstruction has been turned over in some measure to the Americans. They have given us the Department of the Aisne and in its hundred odd villages, government or no government, Republican or Democrat, league or no league, there we are at work.

It is slow. To any American coming back from France these days, the first greeting from a quondam member of the A. E. F. is always this:

"Well, how's it look over there? Changed much?"

To which, after some futile, short-lived notion of describing the great mutilated stretch of France, with its million discouragements and its thousand and one evidences of renewing life, the returning wanderer must needs answer:

"No, not much."

For the impression that the old battlefields make is of havoc undisturbed, paralysis uncured. The soldier who goes back to his old dugout in the woods near Grand Pré is likely to find that only the steady rains have reshaped it, that the old helmet the shell-hit blew from his head still lies where it fell two years ago and more. The villages of the Meuse, the Ourcq, the Vesle and the Aisne look much as they did when the American troops trudged out of them for the last time. It is true that the rubble is gone from the streets, and the litter of stone has been reduced to neat piles of assorted pieces. Here and there a rough, new cottage has been fashioned from the materials of its demolished predecessor. At intervals there are unfamiliar shacks and barracks. But on the whole, Montfaucon and Fère-en-Tardenois and Juvigny — they all look much as they did when the Yanks started home. Vaux, that little Marne village which the artillery behind the Ninth Infantry blew to bits in the excitement of June, 1918 — Vaux has only one new building. It is not much of a building at that — just a shack of wood and tar paper. And it is not a dwelling at all. It is a buvette.

It is in the spaces between the villages that the change is so remarkable. You see it even in the rolling land of the Argonne and the blasted countryside of the Chemin-des-Dames. For almost everywhere some tilling has been done.

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The recaptured fields have yielded their crops, some for one, some for two harvests, and with the passing of two peaceful Summers, have begun to take on once more the look of a blessed land. When the skies are kind, when all the fields are blooming, and patches of ripening wheat reward the eye at every turn, the passer-by can almost forget the war was ever fought. The healing that Nature can do has been done, and, in the Summer, her touch brings life and color and animation even to stretches of French countryside that two years ago looked as dead as the face of the moon.

Coucy-le-Château, that most perfect relic of mediaeval France which was dynamited by the Germans in their retreat, is now just a mound of tumbled stone, acres of tumbled stone, a ghastly and a bitter sight. Yet that great ruin in Summer time is a dazzling spectacle, so marvellous are the myriad bluebells which have overgrown it like an azure mantle. Belleau Wood is still torn and twisted, a mute memorial of the agony it shared and witnessed one far-off, half-forgotten June. Yet in Summer time, it is a glorious green.

Now it is in Summer that the tourists whiz by in their great sight-seeing cars, note all the health and ardor of a renascent land, strain their eyes for any really pleasurable scenes of destruction and return breathless to Paris to report that the devastation has been much exaggerated. Propaganda, they say, knowingly.

They would not say that if they could see the battlefields in Winter, the chill, wet French Winter, when the crumbled towns and villages stand out bleak in the lean, bare, deflowered countryside. They would not say it even in mid-July, if they could leave their fast-riding motor-cars and move around in the villages long enough and sympathetically enough to see what manner of life is lived in them. But then, in that event, they would probably say: "Aren't the French slow? Why, if this had happened in America, it would all have been built up good as new by this time. What they need over here is a little American pep. They ought to have a Charlie Schwab over here to show them what speed is. He'd show them, all right. We'll say he would."

And it is true that the work of rebuilding has moved slowly. An impoverished government, a halt in the reparations due from the other side of the Rhine, a shortage of labor, a population engrossed in the fields, the apparent

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fields, a maze of red tape, the paralysis of old laws, war-weariness, selfishness (in France and elsewhere), all these factors have helped to keep these villages — these wounded Homes—in ruins, not greatly improved since sound of the last shot died down on the Western front. The wonder is not that this is so, but that, despite the fact, life does go on in them, goes on stoically, spunkily, cheerily. It is so in all of them. There is not a community in all that strip of the world which does not recall some ant-hill on which a passer-by has trod and in which the dwellers and the toilers are busy making the best of it.

Consider Juvigny. This is the little hillside town north of the Aisne not far from the Chemin-des-Dames. It was wrested fiercely from the Germans by the troops of the Thirty-second Division, who were borrowed by General Mangin for the purpose at a critical moment in the late Summer of 1918. They did their bloody, inch-by-inch task so well that the French authorities never recovered from their special enthusiasm for this Middle-Western division. On the outskirts of Juvigny, beside the narrow railway which once upon a time was No Man's Land, is one of those austere little American cemeteries, one of those lonesome American colonies which dot the map of France. Thither, on last Memorial Day, went General Mangin himself, with all the flower-laden children of Juvigny paddling after, to do the white crosses honor, crosses marked with the names of many a family from the Great Lakes down to the Tennessee Mountains.

In Juvigny itself, not much is standing. Of what was there before, only the *calvaire* is erect and intact, that singularly beautiful reproduction of the crucifixion, which, to the wonderment of the troops, stood in startling silhouette against the sky throughout the battle. The rest of Juvigny is flattened out, acre upon acre, of smashed-up houses. "You will find my house down a little way," says Madame Quelquechose, "just across the street from the church." But her house is only a shack and the church is visible to no eyes but hers. Probably she thinks of the old spire as still reaching toward the clouds, but the stranger has to be told that that heap of grass-grown stones and that corner of an ancient altar was once Juvigny's church.

Here and there are the wooden barracks installed by the

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government to house the old people returning to the wilderness and here and there a stone house has risen from the rubble like a phenix from its ashes. No American agency, no welfare worker, no repentant enemy, no paternal government has done this rebuilding. When you find a French peasant in that part of the world with four stone walls and a ceiling, you may know he has found time and strength and material to do the work himself. Plain little houses they are, of course, but in some cases, where the homesteader had been a bit of a mason, the work has been neatly, even handsomely done.

Such a house is most a matter of pride when it is the work of a whole family, with every one from Grand'mère to the littlest boy enlisted in the sawing, lifting and toting that a house means, for all the world like General Mangin writing his memoirs, with his whole family of nine mobilized for the carrying of paper, sharpening of pencils, deploying of dictionaries, unfurling of maps and typing of notes.

More often a house, particularly a farmhouse, is found partially rebuilt. This is the middle stage of reconstruction. The first you might have seen any time in the Spring of 1919, when, in some Montfauçon cellar, say, you would come upon two brothers camping out to be near their newly relinquished fields to which they had just led back a horse and plow. The second stage comes in the breathing space after the first harvest, when, as often in Juvigny, you find they have rebuilt one room of the old home, roofed it over temporarily, and moved in, with the skeletonized débris of the home as it used to be still sprawling around about them. Perhaps, after another harvest or so, the whole house will come to life again.

Visitors to the American graves near Juvigny in the Spring of 1919 marvelled to find that the old quarries along the ravine on the side of the town, which had once served as divisional headquarters, message centres and dugouts in time of battle, were then serving as homes for the first six of the returning families, so that children were playing with the useless gas-masks out front while spartan *perce-neiges* bloomed at cave-entrances and the week's wash flapped in the wind.

Now another Winter and another Summer has gone by. The fields near by have been largely cleared of their wire and shells and have yielded some food and a little income to

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Juvigny. Perhaps two hundred people are back in the town. But most of the houses still lie in crumbled decay and folks still make what homes they can in the dugouts along the ravine.

It is because of this scantiness of reconstruction as far as home-building goes that, as you walk along a ruined street, Juvigny seems a deserted city. But it is hardly that, and you realize as much with something of a thrill when, in a clearing amid the rubble, you come upon a barrack and catch through the windows the unmistakable drone of childish voices. It is a school and a glance through the window shows row on row of pig-tailed girls and black-smocked boys declaiming the fact that the Amazon is a river in *l'Amerique du Sud* or that Ceylon is an island where the tea comes from.

Laboring with them patiently, his brow furrowed by his sense of the time that has been lost, you see a fatherly young Frenchman. Perhaps he was a corporal at Verdun when the armistice was signed. Outside, on the bulletin board — for the schoolhouse doubles as the office of the mayor — proclamations in the neat script of the schoolmaster himself announce such-and-such an impending marriage in the village, with doubtless a reception further to follow at the shack of the bride's mother. A passing matron peers at the notices, beams on these evidences of further recovery, and tells you proudly that there have been more births in Juvigny than in any other village of the Aisne Valley.

Then, as you take another turn amid the rubble, you come upon another barrack and find within such hospitable tables and shelves of wine as glorify any buvette in France. A whopping big phonograph hums with some melody of Irving Berlin's and the *patron* shows you where, once a week, the tables can be cleared away for a dance or a picture show.

There is the whole story of Juvigny. It looks disconsolately and discouragingly as it did when the Americans left. But children play away at the tattered school-books, babies are born, marriages are solemnized by the octogenarian curé, crops come in from the once bleak fields and they dance in Juvigny of a Saturday night. That is after all the real message to the men who sweated in the town when it shrieked and shook with the smash of shells. They are dancing now in Juvigny of a Saturday night.

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The rough scheme, then, has been to get the farms and factories and schools re-started and to let the houses follow as a consequence—a scheme that works out the more slowly, of course, because so much of the husky youth that belonged to this wilderness was wiped out in four years of fighting. So many of those who have come back are old folk, unable to do much more than putter about, anxious only to spend their last days in their own *pays*. This inclination of the very old to forsake the greater physical comfort of their refuges in Southern France for the greater satisfaction of being home would be natural enough anywhere in the world. It is inevitable in France. Sometimes the younger generation tries sternly to forbid such return until the wilderness should be more livable and the homes more fit. But the old folks feel the sands running out and they come back somehow.

Once such a grandfather was trudging along the road north of Soissons when a camionette girl at the wheel gave him a lift. He was all jubilance at the thought that he would soon be back in the village where he was born. His son had written him not to come, but *mon dieu!* When she pulled up for him on the edge of the village, he did not recognize it in its demolition, and, in his bewilderment, would not get out. Just then, out of a crazy lean-to, a man came forward. It was the son, in whose sheltering arms, as the truck passed on, the driver left a collapsed and tearful old man.

Next day, the same driver on an errand in that part of the valley, passed the lean-to. On a soap-box out in front, sat the old man, drinking Pinard. He lifted his glass to her in jovial salutation.

"Does all go well, *grandpère?*" she sang out to him.

"I am home," he replied, and beamed upon her.

Now this first rush of the homesick wanderers is over and the first relief work, the thrilling emergency work of being ready with hot coffee and mattresses and blankets, is giving way to the harder, duller, more thankless, less picturesque tasks of building up and replacing some of the community functions which had been lost or destroyed during the hejira.

It is one thing to come back and camp out under any sort of roof to be near the fields you hope to till once more. It is quite another to have to wonder if a traveling huckster

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will ever pass by, if there will be schools for the children, and somewhere for the young people to go of an evening, if there will be community comforts like dentists and surgeons within reach or transportation to some hospital in case any one should be hurt. It is these latter worries which the relief workers are trying to lift from the minds of the overburdened natives.

For the C. A. R. D. workers in the Aisne valley, the blanket-and-hot-coffee era is past and they are busy with everything from school-books to tractors. They have brought up great lumbering tractors for the use of the farmers around Blérincourt, have followed these with gas stations to keep the tractors going, and these in turn with warehouses to shelter for a better transportation period the excess crops which such stimulated agriculture means.

They have established clinics and the little ambulances scoot over the country, bringing in the babies for the appointed days and hours when the doctor and nurse will be at each dispensary. They have set up country stores where useful things like lamps and knitting wool and blankets and pottery are sold at cost, while the old wives of the villages haggle delightedly over every purchase and cluck with one another over the cost of living. They have established work-rooms where girls can learn to sew—shops of which the coarser products are sold there in the neighborhood and the finer ones borne off to Paris to catch the eye of some acquisitive, money-spending matron from Chicago or Buenos Aires.

They have started libraries in circulation and financed and transported circuit-riders to keep going a score of classes in domestic science, for, to the grief of the mothers in these regions, the young girls during the years of flight or captivity, have come close to the marriage age without having learned any of the household arts that any girl knew in the humblest French home before the war.

These C. A. R. D. women, who work from their four headquarters in the Aisne area, turn their hands to any one of a hundred schemes for settling and sweetening the life there. I can think of none more arduous than running the movie shows one night a week in each of the villages—nights when the school-house is packed to suffocation (being French) and the stalest of films is greeted with explosions of delight. Until you have mended a tire on a muddy road

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at dusk and turned a crank for five reels of the most deadly movies, you have an entirely misleading notion as to the softships of relief work.

I can think of no work of theirs more satisfying to the worker herself than the meeting of such an emergency as befell Crouy this year when a whole new generation was approaching confirmation without any of the festive confirmation regalia with which the streets of Paris are so gay in the Spring. There was none to be had within a hundred miles. Such a scramble there was to get to Paris in time, buy up stocks of white gowns and veils for the girls and beribboned arm-bands for the boys, such rejoicing as there was in Crouy when these arrived and the confirmation could proceed according to ancient tradition.

This American work in the Soissons region is a source of satisfaction to those who perform it, those who finance it and those who witness it, for reasons other than the mere immediate assistance given. There is the idea that at least one more part of France is being permanently re-enforced as a place of friendship for America. Whatever of bitterness and disappointment there may be traced in the attitude toward this country among certain French people—and that bitterness is grotesquely exaggerated by some of the uncomprehending tourists—you find none of it in the Aisne.

After all, any man's notion on large questions is narrowed and colored and deflected by his own personal experience. I suppose many a Yank who lost his arm in France and was later fleeced by some French shrew now cares precious little what becomes of the "frogs" the next time Germany splits her seams. Then I know one Brittany mother whose bouncing three-year-old boy is a daily reminder of a passing surgeon in olive drab who saved the eyes a stupid midwife had blinded. I doubt if the most caustic of Paris newspapers could dissuade her from her hearty enthusiasm for "*les Americains.*"

Or consider the woman who beams over the rich old farm on the outskirts of Bézu-le-Guéry near Belleau Wood. To her the war was a distant rumbling, a far away disaster, till one day all her neighbors from the north seemed in flight past her door and every one told her she too must fly. Then in came certain fresh young Americans who climbed into her *gréniers*, strung wires from her tool-house, displaced her cows with map tables and slept all over her

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house. She heard the enemy come booming to the very edge of the landscape visible from her upper windows, saw these newcomers hurry up to get between her and that enemy (very obliging of them) knew of the tussle that followed and then, in time, heard that the Germans were in inglorious retreat to the other end of the world. All this she saw with her own eyes, heard with her own ears. So, when some tired poilu says to her scornfully: "And did you know that those *effroyable* Americans are claiming they won the war?" she probably makes answer: "*Mon dieu*, and didn't they?"

So, if it be a good thing to hope that France and America will remain in sympathy with each other—not that their chancelleries should always be in cohoots but that their peoples should be fraternal and mutually respectful—we may all be glad that the hard-pressed folk of the Aisne at least do not think of the Americans as comrades-in-arms who, when the fighting was over, packed gaily off and left them neck-deep in want and trouble.

Something of all this must be in the mind of every American who starts back from Soissons to Paris and sees the desolate villages give way gradually to tidy clusters of red-roofed houses and garden land that never felt the scorch of war. Perhaps his thoughts run in this fashion:

"Whatever the inextricable tangle of responsibility for the war, there were no people in all the world less guilty than these simple, hardworking country-folk of northeastern France. Yet theirs was by far the greatest share of the suffering and woe. Wherever we may eventually decide—if at all—to strike at the source of the ugly business, it would be monstrous for us to let their struggle go on unaided while we talk and talk. Or while we forget.

"What a pity that the forces of good-will and co-operation could not have remained mobilized just long enough after the signing of the armistice for the rebuilding of these battlefields. Just as we made shells and built ships and killed Germans for one another, so we might have pitched in and put a lot of health and comfort into a part of the world that needed it most. True, these American women are doing something, but after all, it is not much and then theirs is but a fragment of the wilderness. What a pity we didn't stay to finish at least this much of the job!"

Thus his thoughts run, and, as the train slides along

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through Villers-Cotteret and he sees all the preposterous havoc and blight still in force, he finds himself thinking of the pleasant suburbs back in America, comfortable, well-fed America, of tidy lawns and overflowing Fords and children romping off to school, of country clubs and poker games and silk stockings and squandered wealth. And of people who say: "Oh, forget about the war." And he begins to feel a certain tingling resentment at America.

But then the train wheezes into Paris and his taxi whirls him away to boulevards all gay with bustling people and restaurants with groaning tables and such food and drink as only the old world knows. He sees luxury and ease and extravagance on every side and he sees that not all of it can be laid to strangers within the gates. He wanders on down into rich Touraine, a land flowing with milk and honey, where people, knowing only vaguely of the hardship to the north, fret and fume about their taxes and go on about their business.

And he realizes then that all the selfishness and forgetfulness in the world is not American. Whereupon, he grows depressed and gives himself over to a low opinion of the human race. But even that fairly tenable position he cannot hold for long. For he keeps remembering something. He remembers that they are dancing in Juvigny of a Saturday night.

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