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[page 844]
Jean ***, Lettres d'un soldat
(Argonne, 24 June 1916)

Yesterday was one of my best days. With the glorious weather at noon, after soup, knowing that F* was in the front line with his regiment, I decided to go see him. I found my way by the sun, straight ahead, through the woods, without deviating,

[page 845]

jumping the trenches and avoiding the barbed wire, stopping to pick some blueberries, enjoying my walk through the forest as if I was in the forêt de Humont.¹ I reached the reserve positions of the regiment. From there, following the cooks who were going to distribute the soup and the wine ration to the troops of the front line through a well-laid out communication trench, I succeeded in reaching F*. He showed me an observation post at a high point in the Argonne, like Hohneck in the Vosges,² separated from the corresponding Boche³ post by only the crater of a mine explosion, about 25 meters wide, or the width of a street. Around me, the ground was tortured and devastated, whitish gray rock, arid, naked, reflecting the heat of the sun. The sandbags, the winding trenches, the mine explosions, the artillery craters, and the mines (The mines are large-scale explosives, containing 20 to 60 kilos of cheddite,⁴ rather insubstantial weapons, but ones that had a moral impact and considerable destructive power), the remains of jagged tree trunks rising just a few centimeters above the ground, and from place to place the watchful, blueish shadow of a poilu,⁵ the desolation, the silence, the hidden dangers, the harsh light. Housed along a wall that is constantly being renewed with sandbags, suffocating under the scorching sun, I saw the front line, to my right and left. Stretching like a bald spot amid the woody hillsides, absurdly naked, it's the zone of mines—the width of which varies from 200 to 300 meters. I followed it towards my sector where everything merged together.

At my feet (I was on a promontory called “the pigeon loft”) towards the west, zig-zagging around some more or less jagged craters, ran the French trench. The German trench, almost straight, followed at a parallel from eight to thirty meters from ours. In the back, towards the north, is a ravine that we lost about a year ago, full of Boche that I would not have been able to see without binoculars.

Further, towards the west, is one of the most beautiful panoramas that I have ever seen; the entire Argonne stretching from south to north,

[846]

a long, very long, blue line. Beyond, towards infinity, is the soil of Champagne, its quirky terrain,

¹Located in the Vosges region of France

²Third highest mountain (about 1300 meters) in the Vosges region

³Colloquial, derogatory name for the Germans used by the French in World War I

⁴Common explosive of World War I

⁵Slang name for a French soldier in World War I

Massiges, Tahure,⁶ and even further beyond, more towards the west, the soil of France, to which France still clings and through which I traveled in such a fantastic rush of days. That's our wall. Some clouds of powder, about 30 km from here, in Champagne, the cannons of Verdun behind me, the shells, the grenades, the sniper's slots, and after an hour's march towards the north, some French families who are waiting.... From my pigeon loft, I sensed, I grasped the meaning of the war.

The view towards the east was hidden by a slight decline. I was at one side of this and was told that was Vauquois. I looked. I was dazed. I knew that there was nothing left of Vauquois. But I did not expect to see this. Dominating the surroundings, looking like a smooth, whitened rump, a skull, an egg. If someone could give an example of similar devastation somewhere else, then I'd like to know. There was once a village and trees here. Now—it's fantastic—just a crater. On the southwest side, near the top, a huge crater is visible. It's said that it's about 120 meters wide and about 30 to 60 meters deep. The base of the hill is sparsely covered with some vegetation. Only the summit presents an incredible and chaotic spectacle.

At the foot, towards me, the laughing valley of the Aire,⁷ with a charming bridge of dilapidated arches. It joins two demolished villages, gutted houses, of which some traces remain. Just like Vauquois!

Further, towards the northeast, dominating an elongated ridge, like the dorsal fin of a large shark, the church tower of Montfaucon.⁸

And so, I've related, as drily as I can, the impressions that I have seen on this excursion that has left me with indelible memories.

⁶Communes in northeastern France

⁷Aire River is a tributary of the Aisne River in northeastern France.

⁸Village between the Argonne Forest and the Meuse River in eastern France that was the scene of fierce battles between the Germans and Americans in 1918.