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What to Expect at the Front

**Maximum of Military Activity Is
 Seen Twenty Miles Behind
 Fighting Lines—From the
 Trenches the Battle-
 field Looks Like
 A Deserted
 Section.**

What is the front like? Every one that comes to France, whether soldier or civilian, has a certain pardonable curiosity as to the "Front" and a vigorous desire to see it. It may interest the men who are going there to fight, to learn beforehand what the front looks like to a civilian. When I speak of the front, I mean a quiet section where it is safe for visitors to come. Only soldiers have any right to pretend to tell about the active front. In this whole war newspaper writers have been only commonplace tourists. The front of today is not a line of trenches, or two lines, or three or four. It is not just one series of continuous ditches or parapets. The front that stretches from the Swiss border to the North Sea is rather the edge of a fortress grinding against the edge of another. There is always firing going on at every part of the front, especially at night; men are stationed at every corner, watching the other side. The vigilance never ceases, night or day. There are always patrol parties crawling out into the No Man's Land, where death is always lurking behind every bush, behind every rock or mound. No part of the ground is safe. Nerves are tense everywhere.

In the same sense it may be said that France is a huge fortress or arsenal. Not that there are not quiet spots, where there are no signs of war, but that everyone is working for the war. All activities that amount to anything are strained toward making the edge of the fortress as strong as possible, making its teeth sharper so they may grind into the fortress opposite.

When traveling from the interior of the fortress toward the edge, it is only the last forty or fifty miles that begin to show military signs, soldiers' camps, troops moving, long lines of motor trucks, some horse vans, ambulances, artillery trains, steam rollers mending roads, prisoners breaking stone, repair shops, soldiers in billets, etc. One might say that the visible military activity reaches its maximum in the area ten to twenty miles behind the front. There one sees more men than at the front itself,

where practically everything is hidden. In fact, looking out from the first line observation posts over the German trenches and the territory behind, I have never seen a living thing, never seen anything move, though I have frequently heard the German machine guns rattle and have heard the bullets whine a few feet above my head.

The country looks like a deserted piece of ground. The casual observer would say that the No Man's Land extended indefinitely. The German shells seem to come from a mysterious source. There is no smoke until they explode. There is only the sound of the "depart" somewhere in the distance, the scream overhead, and then the roar of the explosion. It is only the trained observers, knowing every stone, every bush, every tree, every mud bank, that see anything going on. The untrained newcomer sees nothing. He stares stupidly through the peek-holes and with Mayor Gaynor exclaims, "So this is the Front."

Never having seen an attack, except at some distance, with the generals, I cannot describe it, only a fighting man has the right to try, but I can imagine the inferno of exploding shells, the terrible "feu de barrage" or curtain fire, the smoke bombs, the gun shells, the confusion, the tense atmosphere, like that just before starting a race, and then the infantry rising out of the ground like gophers from the prairie.

But these are things that no visitor sees. He gets the battle reports second or third hand. What he does see near the front, is, first of all, destroyed houses, ruined villages and towns. Then a mile or two behind the front, at a point sheltered by some ridge or forest, he enters the trench system by going down the mouth of a communication trench, or "boyau" (literally "bowel"). This trench, or winding ditch, which gets deeper and deeper, leads to the system of regular trenches, but no man can tell where the "boyau" ends and where the "trench" begins. It is all part of the same underground system of defenses.

The trenches run in all possible directions, according to the lay of the land. Sometimes they are covered, sometimes they are open. They are so complicated that a stranger would be sure to be lost should he try to find his way alone. Even for the occupants there are signs at the junctions, indicating the directions. Nothing being

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