

*A Veteran Visits the Old Front—
Wishes He Had Stayed Away*

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PARIS.—Don't go back to visit the old front. If you have pictures in your head of something that happened in the night in the mud at Paschendaele or of the first wave working up the slope of Vimy, do not try and go back to verify them. It is no good. The front is as different from the way it used to be as your highly respectable shin, with a thin, white scar on it now, is from the leg that you sat and twisted a tourniquet around while the blood soaked your puttee and trickled into your boot, so that when you got up you limped with a "squidge" on your way to the dressing station.

Go to someone else's front, if you want to. There your imagination will help you out and you may be able to picture the things that happened. But don't go back to your own front, because the change in everything and the supreme, deadly, lonely dullness, the smooth green of the fields that were once torn up with shell holes and slashed with trenches and wire, will combine against you and make you believe that the places and happenings that had been the really great events to you were only fever dreams or lies you had told to yourself. It is like going into the empty gloom of a theater where the charwomen are scrubbing. I know because I have just been back to my own front.

Not only is it battlefields that have changed in quality and feeling and gone back into a green smugness with the shell holes filled up, the trenches filled in, the pillboxes blasted out and smoothed over and the wire all rolled up and rotting in a great heap somewhere. That was to be expected, and it was inevitable that the feelings in the battlefields would change when the dead that made them both holy and real were dug up and reburied in big, orderly cemeteries miles away from where they died. Towns where you were billeted, towns unscarred by war, are the ones where the changes hit you hardest. For there are many little towns that you love, and after all, no one but a staff officer could love a battlefield.

There may be towns back of the old Canadian front, towns with queer Flemish names and narrow, cobbled streets, that have kept their magic. There may be such towns. I have just come from Schio, though. Schio was the finest town I remember in the war, and I wouldn't have recognized it now—and I would give a lot not to have gone.

Schio was one of the finest places on earth. It was a little town in the Trentino under the shoulder of the Alps, and it contained all the good cheer, amusement and relaxation a man could desire. When we used to be in billets there, everyone was perfectly contented and we were always talking about what a wonderful place Schio would be to come and live after the war. I particularly recall a first-class hotel called the Due Spadi, where the food was superb and we used to call the factory where we were billeted the "Schio Country Club."

The other day Schio seemed to have shrunk. I walked up one side of the long, narrow main street looking in shop windows at the fly-speckled shirts, the cheap china dishes, the postcards showing about seven different varieties of a young man and a young girl looking into each other's eyes, the stiff, fly-speckled pastry, the big, round loaves of sour bread. At the end of the street were the mountains, but I had walked over the St. Bernard Pass the week before and the mountains, without snow caps, looked rain-furrowed and dull; not much more than hills. I looked at the mountains a long time, though, and then walked down the other side of the street to the principal bar. It was starting to rain a little and shopkeepers were lowering the shutters in front of their shops.

"The town is changed since the war," I said to the girl, she was red-cheeked and black-haired and discontented-looking, who sat on a stool, knitting behind the zinc-covered bar.

"Yes?" she said without missing a stitch.

"I was here during the war," I ventured.

"So were many others," she said under her breath, bitterly.

"Grazie, Signor," she said with mechanical, insolent courtesy as I paid for the drink and went out.

That was Schio. There was more, the way the Due Spadi had shrunk to a small inn, the factory where we used to be billeted now was humming, with our old entrance bricked up and a flow of black muck polluting the stream where we used to

swim. All the kick had gone out of things. Early next morning I left in the rain after a bad night's sleep.

There was a garden in Schio with the wall matted with wisteria where we used to drink beer on hot nights with a bombing moon making all sorts of shadows from the big plane tree that spread above the table. After my walk in the afternoon I knew enough not to try and find that garden. Maybe there never was a garden.

Perhaps there never was any war around Schio at all. I remember lying in the squeaky bed in the hotel and trying to read by an electric light that hung high up from the center of the ceiling and then switching off the light and looking out the window down the road where the arc light was making a dim light through the rain. It was the same road that the battalions marched along through the white dust in 1916. They were the Brigata Ancona, the Brigata Como, the Brigata Toscana and ten others brought down from the Carso to check the Austrian offensive that was breaking through the mountain wall of the Trentino and beginning to spill down the valleys that led to the Venetian and Lombardy plains. They were good troops in those days and they marched through the dust of the early summer, broke the offensive along the Galio-Asiago-Canoev line, and died in the mountain gullies, in the pine woods on the Trentino slopes, hunting cover on the desolate rocks and pitched out in the soft-melting early summer snow of the Pasubio.

It was the same old road that some of the same old brigades marched along through the dust of June of 1918, being rushed to the Piave to stop another offensive. Their best men were dead on the rocky Carso, in the fighting around Goritzia, on Mount San Gabrielle, on Grappa and in all the places where men died that nobody ever heard about. In 1918 they didn't march with the ardor that they did in 1916, some of the troops strung out so badly that, after the battalion was just a dust cloud way up the road, you would see poor old boys hoofing it along the side of the road to ease their bad feet, sweating along under their packs and rifles and the deadly Italian sun in a long, horrible, never-ending stagger after the battalion.

So we went down to Mestre, that was one of the great railheads for the Piave, traveling first class with an assorted

carriageful of evil-smelling Italian profiteers going to Venice for vacations. In Mestre we hired a motorcar to drive out to the Piave and leaned back in the rear seat and studied the map and the country along the long road that is built through the poisonous green Adriatic marshes that flank all the coast near Venice.

Near Porto Grande, in the part of the lower Piave delta where Austrians and Italians attacked and counterattacked waist-deep in the swamp water, our car stopped in a desolate part of the road that ran like a causeway across the green marshy waste. It needed a long, grease-smearing job of adjustment on the gears and while the driver worked, and got a splinter of steel in his finger that my wife dug out with a needle from our rucksack, we baked in the hot sun. Then a wind blew the mist away from the Adriatic and we saw Venice way off across the swamp and the sea standing gray and yellow like a fairy city.

Finally the driver wiped the last of the grease off his hands into his over-luxuriant hair, the gears took hold when he let the clutch in and we went off along the road through the swampy plain. Fossalta, our objective, as I remembered it, was a shelled-to-pieces town that even rats couldn't live in. It had been within trench-mortar range of the Austrian lines for a year and in quiet times the Austrian had blown up anything in it that looked as though it ought to be blown up. During active sessions it had been one of the first footholds the Austrian had gained on the Venice side of the Piave, and one of the last places he was driven out of and hunted down in and very many men had died in its rubble- and debris-strewn streets and been smoked out of its cellars with *flammenwerfers* during the house-to-house work.

We stopped the car in Fossalta and got out to walk. All the shattered, tragic dignity of the wrecked town was gone. In its place was a new, smug, hideous collection of plaster houses, painted bright blues, reds and yellows. I had been in Fossalta perhaps fifty times and I would not have recognized it. The new plaster church was the worst-looking thing. The trees that had been splintered and gashed showed their scars if you looked for them and had a stunted appearance, but you could not have told in passing, unless you had known, how they had been torn. Everything was so abundantly green and prosperous-looking.

I climbed the grassy slope and above the sunken road where the dugouts had been to look at the Piave and looked down an even slope to the blue river. The Piave is as blue as the Danube is brown. Across the river were two new houses where the two rubble heaps had been just inside the Austrian lines.

I tried to find some trace of the old trenches to show my wife, but there was only the smooth green slope. In a thick prickly patch of hedge we found an old rusty piece of shell fragment. From the cast-iron look of the smoothly burst fragment I could tell it was an old bit of gas shell. That was all there was left of the front.

On our way back to the motorcar we talked about how jolly it is that Fossalta is all built up now and how fine it must be for all the families to have their homes back. We said how proud we were of the way the Italians had kept their mouths shut and rebuilt their devastated districts while some other nations were using their destroyed towns as showplaces and reparation appeals. We said all the things of that sort that as decent-thinking people we thought—and then we stopped talking. There was nothing more to say. It was so very sad.

For a reconstructed town is much sadder than a devastated town. The people haven't their homes back. They have new homes. The home they played in as children, the room where they made love with the lamp turned down, the hearth where they sat, the church they were married in, the room where their child died, these rooms are gone. A shattered village in the war always had a dignity, as though it had died for something. It had died for something and something better was to come. It was all part of the great sacrifice. Now there is just the new, ugly futility of it all. Everything is just as it was—except a little worse.

So we walked along the street where I saw my very good friend killed, past the ugly houses toward the motorcar, whose owner would never have had a motorcar if it had not been for the war, and it all seemed a very bad business. I had tried to re-create something for my wife and had failed utterly. The past was as dead as a busted Victrola record. Chasing yesterday is a bum show—and if you have to prove it, go back to your old front.

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