

THE INDISPENSABLE FOREST

BY GEORGES BEAUME

FRANCE was formerly covered with forests, a good many of which still exist. But now the blessed days of peace have come we shall have to think more of the trees, if we care for the security and the nobleness of our land. Trees are our friends, the joy of our eyes, and the confidants of our hearts, the most certain help in the life of our plains and our mountains, and, after their death the pleasant, sweet-smelling stay of our hearths.

Our grandfathers loved trees, for sentimental reasons, perhaps, largely, but also for practical ones. Consider the Druid gathering the sacred mistletoe in the depths of the forests. Picture to yourself the immense forests, of which we have no idea to-day, but which in the times of the Ligurians preserved the health and prosperity of the long coast of Languedoc, so little understood even now, stretching from the Rhone to Port-Vendres. This coast, laid waste centuries ago, has become inhospitable to men, in its strange domain of sand, mud, and stagnant waters where fever lurks. Have you ever been through the Cévennes, once clad with shady chestnut woods where our flocks of sheep and goat found a succulent pasturage; those naked and barren *causses* which shine like shields in the sun, or echo like drums under the impact of the impetuous winds? It is the oak which has given its name to the Quercy. The great oak trees of the Quercy called down the blessing of heaven upon their *causses*. With their knotty roots, mightier than the hands of men, they gave men and even the

rock immovable stability. Their rustling mass stayed the clouds, and regular rain fed the brooks that flowed gayly to water the orchards, and the vineyards, the scattered farms, the villages rich in stout, sober peasantry and in sturdy cattle. To-day, on this stony *causse* which now brings scarcely anything forth, and is little by little encroached upon by brushwood, infrequent storms hurl into the cisterns, with mad fury, water that soon is brackish.

The wasted summits of our Pyrenees show how decayed the region is. The deep belt of forest which of yore covered the nakedness of our aged mother is being daily torn away by man. The vegetal earth that the grass kept upon the slopes glides downward with the waters. The rock stands out naked; chapped and exfoliated by the heat, by the cold, undermined by the thawing of the snow, it is carried away by the avalanches. Instead of a rich pasturage there remains a dry, ruined soil; the ploughman, who has driven out the shepherd, can win nothing from it himself. The waters, which used to filter gently down into the valley through the turf and the forests, now rush down in torrents, and cover the fields with the ruins he has made. Many hamlets have left the high valleys for want of firewood, and have fallen back toward France, fleeing their own devastations.

When will man learn that he is but a traveler on this earth, but the trustee of the common wealth his ancestors have created, and which it is his social duty to hand on intact at least to the

masters of to-morrow, in the social community? Must he not have the brain of a semi-barbarian to deprive himself needlessly in one day of a fortune that it took years to amass? . . . On our Mediterranean coasts there rose countless fields of olive-trees, which afforded man, without requiring any work of him in return, the most savory fruit for his table, the fruit which yields oil so pure, so generous, that the ancients were not satisfied with drinking it, but anointed their bodies with it, when they were about to undertake work that called for strength. These olive trees, our trees of peace, the lovely silver foliage of which is all one, shimmer at the slightest breath of wind — they were stupidly uprooted, thirty years or so ago, under the pretext that they hindered the growth of the vine.

Our century-old woods often go up in smoke from the negligence of a sportsman, a shepherd, or some good city dweller out for a walk. Such losses, which add up to millions, are to be made good but slowly, after privations which men do not know to be their chastisement. Diodorus of Sicily, already, said that the word Pyrenees comes from the Greek *pur* (fire) because all the forests there were burned once, the shepherds having set them on fire. Is it necessary to allude to the fires which during the last two years have devoured so many woods of pine, chestnuts, and oak trees in Algeria, in Provence, in Gascony, in Perigord? . . . Negligence is sometimes willful, and what a crime it then is! I shall take only one example from the past. A *procès-verbal* dated May 8, 1670, declares: 'In our Pyrenees there is no forest which has not been burned frequently of malice prepense by the inhabitants, or in order to turn the woods into meadows or arable land.'

The forest, which is the image of

life, changeful but eternal, with what respect should it be approached! It provides us with the precious materials of our cradles, our first one and our last one; with the requisites for our furniture, the familiar companions of our lives, be they humble or elegant. The forest always seems to welcome man like an intelligent friend who will tell it his sorrows and his hopes. It stretches out toward him its kindly branches which caress his forehead like the touch of a woman's hand. If he enters hesitatingly the winding avenues that lead to a spring or some bright clearing, it whispers to him, gently, discreetly, thoughts of peace and wisdom. Soon it envelops him in the waving folds of its mantle of verdure sown with flowers; it protects him from the heat of the sun, or the biting tooth of frost; it can remain submissively silent, huge, indefinite thing that it is, to leave to the sweetness of his memories or his hopes the man who, seated at the foot of a tree or on a mound of grass, yearns for a moment's rest, and instinctively joins his hands as if in prayer. It is full of the calm peace of a cathedral.

Yet listen to it, so full of life, ever new, day after day. Within it there is the thrill of perennial youth, in the mysteries of its being, in the gleam of the forms; and all the poetry of the seasons is in its movements and the shades of its colors. Listen to the low voices of its thickets, yonder, to the very hum of its insects flying round its flowering shrubs or creeping in the dark secrecy of its brushwood, to the sudden screech or the love-song of a bird, to the stealthy flight of an unseen creature, to the sobbing of a brook over its stones, and then, when the gust of wind whirls past, to the long cry sent up by a mournful or angry crowd, and rolling on in wave after wave till it fills space.

In summer, it offers its very soul, pouring out even unto the ground the wealth of its foliage, and drinking in as high as it can the flame of day or the coolness of night. Its heavy breath spreads abroad the mingled odors of its trees, of its mould, of its groves, of its damp nooks. In autumn, what witchery of colors there is on its heaving ocean of branches! It is the wonderful season for the forest, the season of the shimmering splendors of the purple, the rust, the copper, the iron, the gold, and the silver, of all the metals, all the jewels that dawn each day sows on the branches weary of too long life in the feast of summer. And then winter, the long sleep of winter, under the hoar-frost, the snow, or the rain: the bare branches, almost black, along which sometimes there glide drops of water so limpid that they look like tears; during its sleep, at least, the forest reveals full willingly some of its mysteries and receives the sun-rays even down to the ground. But April comes. The forest wakens gently; it is clothed in a new dress and smiles with a kind of innocence at the sweeter sky: and the birds, the wasps, and the bees, seeing it happy again, come back to it, in the suave perfume of its opening foliage and its tenderly blooming flowers. All its hosts, moreover, come back and beg for shelter, food, and work; the wood-cutters and the charcoal-burners, collected in families under its spreading arches, living almost like primitive peoples healthy in body and soul.

The forest has naught but kindness for men. It enables us to build our houses, to lay our railways, to construct our ships, which go to the end of the earth to carry the produce of our workshops and our fields, the best fruits of our minds. It is not so much on account of the climate, which has sudden capricious bursts of severity,

that we send our invalids to the Côte d'Azur, it is especially on account of the purifying breath of the forests that clothe the hills and mountains that slope down to the sea. Long ago, I went through the forest of Arcachon, where under the fine network of its branches the light glimmers in delicate shades as if it were falling through a stained-glass window. I was alone, in a carriage. First of all, in the silence of the great silent pines, I felt lonely. But soon there came over me the feeling of a huge, fateful force, like that felt in the middle of the sea on the waves stretching away mile after mile. With the humility of a child beginning to understand in how many acts of kindness the genius of life is manifested, I wondered at the quiet industrious virtue of the pines, secular giants that year by year give man the blood flowing from their wounds, the sap collected in the sandstone *pichets* all along their rugged trunks.

Like a temple, the forest preserves jealously the memory of the traditions and legends with which humanity has for generations entertained his ignorance or consoled his unrest. On the skirt of the countless army of oaks, firs, and beeches which for league upon league holds fast the soil of France in the Landes, near Dax, there rises the oak of Quillacq. Proudly it lifts above its fellows the rounded roof of its foliage, and interweaving its long gnarled branches, presents the bark of its battered trunk, that four men cannot encircle with their arms, to the peasants of the neighborhood who gather around it on certain anniversaries to pray in its shade, to hang from every part of its spreading mass, which laughs at time, tiny crosses, simple little ex-votos, and to dip their hands and their foreheads in the turbid water that sleeps in the hollows of its roots, the water of the storms mingled

with the tears of the fairies and the sorceresses of that pagan forest district.

One day in August, in Lorraine, I entered alone the vast forest which half encircles Vaucouleurs, and which visitors to Domrémy seldom visit — neglect there is no accounting for. After a quarter of an hour, I lost myself in the undergrowth, floundering across a bed of dead leaves, listening in spite of myself, and not without dread, to the scurrying and creeping of animals, wild boars, perhaps. Soon a light shot up in the heart of the foliage, and suddenly I came upon an open space on a slope, at the foot of which there rippled a rivulet. There, in the centre of the clearing, rose a chapel sacred to Sainte Anne. I knocked timidly at the door of a poor little house close to the chapel. An old woman, over eighty, still straight, with pink cheeks and bright eyes, opened it at once and smiled. For fifty years she had watched over the statue of Sainte Anne, a wooden statue that had been found long ago at the bottom of a pond, and had 'never been willing to leave the forest.' For centuries people had come from all the villages round about, on certain holidays, to walk in procession in the forest in honor of Sainte Anne. Jeanne d'Arc doubtless took part in these pilgrimages, the unconsciously pagan piety of which was strengthened by the calmness of the trees.

And the Vosges! How often have I trod those broad smooth paths. No other forest is so orderly as that forest of tall black fir trees, often wreathed round with bindweed, and sweeping upward toward the hilltops in serried ranks. In the morning, if the mist lifts, those hilltops glitter with drops of dew; during the daytime, the sun caresses them with a gentle golden kiss; in the evening, they are truly quite blue,

under a floating veil of thin fog, for the dark mantle of fir trees dips at once into the dying flame of the sun and the pale blue of the sky where the stars begin to peep out. The forest of the Vosges became strictly national after 1870. The line of the frontier passed up there, marked out along the crest of the huge mountains by green posts. Every Sunday, especially during the summer, the inhabitants of the two slopes of the Vosges went upon the heights, and far from the Prussian police, in the friendly peace of the trees, sheltered in the *charumes* of the shepherds, they gathered together and spoke of their fatherland.

Their glorious fatherland, stripped to-day of so many forests! So much has been asked from them, during this never-ending war! Crushed by the shells, scored by the trenches, laid waste by the enemy, they have been called upon to give our soldiers fire-wood and protection. Was not the living belt with which they surround Paris its best defense? The slowness of these siege operations will have wrought in favor of the forest. To many men, its appearance has been a revelation: the appearance of its changing beauties and varied resources, manifold enough to meet the requirements of the season and the hour. Unfortunately, our finest forest trees have gone to Germany. In the ten departments occupied by the enemy, the wooded area was, in 1912, according to official statistics, about 2,500,000 acres, divided almost equally between the State and the communes on the one hand, and on the other, between the State and private owners. It is often thought that forests are the exclusive appanage of a few great land-owners: nothing of the sort. Great forest districts owned by private persons are rare; by far the greater part of the forest domain is made up in reality of

little woods less than twenty-five acres in area. It is the forest land which has perhaps suffered the most in the fighting area. This destruction has particularly serious consequences, for a forest destroyed cannot be reconstituted except after very long time. It takes fifty years to make a little oak, two hundred to make a fine one. If it is easy to rebuild a house or a factory in a short space of time, given a sufficiently high indemnity, it will be impossible to bring back a forest to the state it was in before the war. What gives value to a forest is its superficies, and the wood standing, and it is time alone that can create that wood. An old, leafy forest, a fir wood in a good state of production may be worth from three to four thousand francs an acre, and even more. In the regions laid waste by the war, it will rarely be possible for us to replant the forest with the same kind of trees as those that have been destroyed. The oak, the beech, the hornbeam will be a long time in growing up. In the mountains, our magnificent woods of fir trees, an incomparable source of wealth when they were well looked after, will give way to pines. The appearance of these regions will be completely modified, not only for our generation, but also for that of our sons. And, for more than a century, the traveler, seeing this diversity, will say: 'The Germans have been here.'

At any rate, we still have the great Ardennes forest, the deep one (*ar duinn*) which stretches away on every side, rather immense than imposing. You meet with towns, villages, and pasturages; you think you are out of the woods, but these are nothing but clearings. The woods always begin again, always these little oaks, a humble, uniform ocean, the monotonous undulations of which can be seen at times from the top of some hill. The

forest was much more unbroken formerly. Huntsmen could ride continuously in the shade from Germany, through the Luxemburg, to Picardy, from Saint Hubert to Notre-Dame de Liesse. Many things have taken place beneath this shade; these oaks, loaded with mistletoe, could tell many a tale, if they had the gift of speech. From the mysteries of the Druids to the wars of the Wild Boar of the Ardennes, in the fifteenth century; from the miraculous stage, the appearance of which converted Saint Hubert, to Yseult and her lover. They were sleeping on the moss when Yseult's husband surprised them; but they were so beautiful, so quiet with the great sword between them, that he went noiselessly away. The traveler should visit the hole of the Han, beyond Givet, which none dared enter formerly. He must visit the solitudes of Laylone, and the black rocks of the Lady of Muse, the table of the wizard Maugis, the ineffaceable print left in the rock by the hoof of Renaud's horse.

Thus there live in the forests dreams and thoughts that have lent color and richness of soul to the History of Men. They lend them still. In the smiling shade of the fragile arches they love to see the poet who loves them, they know, and just as at the time when the nymphs came to bend their youthful faces over their glassy brooks, they favor in him the happy tremor of meditation, the patient effort of his mind and heart toward the eternal beauties, an example of which they show him in their own masterpieces. Take the forest of Fontainebleau, that grandiose sylvan wonder, which nourished, now with the virtues of its austere strength, now with the charms of its grace, the art of Millet, Rousseau, Diaz, of a Pleiad of other painters, less celebrated, but no less in love with the

splendors and silences of the free forest.

The forest is a wealth, a decoration, a poem: All over the land of France,

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we must give it our thanks and our most active attention, in our own interest and out of gratitude and dignity.

SAINT JOAN OF ARC

BY L. WHEATON

If the French, in mid-war, promised a Church, worthy of her, in honor of the Blessed Jeanne d'Arc, should the Allied cause be victorious, then the promise remains to be redeemed. Throughout the terrible struggle on the Western Front there has been a continual subconscious sense of the Maid's presence and mission. The martyrdom of Rheims (the scene of her brief earthly glory), the memory of that old fight for the liberation of France in which she figured so simply and so splendidly, these and other associations have touched the imagination of even her ancient foes, and as an English regiment filed past her statue, on entering a French town, man after man saluted it with a chivalrous 'Pardon, Jeanne!' In the realm of literature, too, the English have already amply atoned for their very natural part in the Maid's tragedy, for Jeanne has had her admirers and defenders among men of letters in both England and America for a good century.

In the last decade or two of years, we have had lives of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Bernard, St. Teresa, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Francis Xavier, by writers who too evidently are outside the atmosphere of their subjects. It is impossible for our saints to be under-

stood by those who have not shared in their fullness of life, who have not known Christ in the breaking of bread. The bare facts may be carefully accurate, but the interpretation is often far afield, and the letter killeth, where the spirit quickeneth not. In the case of Jeanne, however, the true artist has his own privilege. He has been allowed to look, if not to live, within that sacred inner sanctuary where saints are fashioned, and to apprehend with the poet's instinct what the mere scholar may miss. 'Two strong angels stand by the side of history,' writes Jeanne's first Protestant apologist, De Quincey, 'as heraldic supporters; the angel of research on the left hand that must read millions of dusty parchments blotted with lies; and the angel of meditation on the right hand that must cleanse those lying records with fire and must quicken them with regenerate life.' More than 'two angels of meditation,' by a strange irony of history, have appeared in the English-speaking world to interpret this shining figure, sometimes, it would seem, disparaged and misunderstood by certain academic judges in her own country:

But that is the modern method [writes Mr. Chesterton, of Anatole France's