

France—the Reactionary Republic

By Robert Briffault

In their realistic but world-weary stand for nationalism, the French appear a bulwark against modern world forces. These forces, Doctor Briffault believes (and Christian Gauss agrees with him in his article in this number) are inevitably breaking through old boundaries. What part will France finally play in suggested world unions for peace?

I HAVE seen Paris when it still bore the scars of the Franco-German War; I have known it in the years between, in the tense days of Armageddon, and in the hour of triumph. But no change that I have witnessed has been more marked than that presented by the "Ville Lumière" today, when it is enjoying a European hegemony which fulfils the most sanguine Gallic dream. Never did triumph wear so incongruous a mien. Paris looks rather like the capital of a defeated and hardpressed nation than of one which is able to dictate to Europe. Not only does it exhibit none of the buoyant brilliancy of its former days of glory, but it wears an aspect more chastened and subdued, not to say decayed, than at any time during the long years of political depression and humiliation. It is, in fact, suffering from a greater devastation than any wrought by the siege of 1871 or by Big Bertha. It is suffering from the first gusts of the economic cyclone.

Americans need, unfortunately, no description of the outward symptoms—notice of receiver's sales, luxury shops closed or about to close down, anxious managers on the doorstep scanning the horizon for the sight of a millionaire. Some restaurants that were world-famed landmarks have vanished; others that were too exclusive to put out a sign exhibit notices announcing meals at popular rates. The efforts of cabarets and "boîtes" to provide a factitious gaiety have about them something pathetic, so evident is the anxiety to attract the shy foreigner. The pavement of the boulevard has assumed a decency without precedent in its record. The "accrocheuses" appear to have gone into retreat or out of business. The Parisian crowd lacks its habitual vivacity; the city and the people wear a sober and deflated look. The symptoms are not yet as pronounced as in America; France is still relatively the least unprosperous of countries. Owing to local conditions and police regulations, beggars are not so much in evidence as in New York, but a stalwart and respectable-looking workingman will occasionally accost one furtively, and ask for the price of a cup of coffee.

As in America and elsewhere, the interpretation of

those now familiar symptoms involves the whole of our standards of evaluation. Do they spell decadence? The Spanish philosopher Ortéga y Gasset was lately contesting the view currently whispered, if less commonly set down in cold print, that Europe is in process of decadence. What tangible grounds, he asks, can, after all, be put forward for the verdict?

Decadence is, of course, a vague and relative conception. It is a phenomenon to be properly perceived in a historical perspective only. The Romans of the fifth century did not, in general, perceive or admit decadence, conspicuously as the fact shows up in retrospect. But our historical insight should be clearer than the Romans'. Concrete facts are, for that matter, not wanting. Lord Lloyd, speaking the other day at a Conservative dinner, sought to lay down such facts, so far as England is concerned, in tangible form. "We entered the War," he said, "as the greatest sea-power and air-power, and with incomparably the most efficient and competent land army." Today, he went on to say, England "has no mastery of the seas, we are fifth in air power, and our Expeditionary force could scarcely garrison our over-seas coasts." He spoke of the change as a decline "without parallel in history."

Military power may not be the sole, nor the essential, measure of national rise and wane. Yet, political forces being what they are, the means of which a nation disposes to back its will, which has generally been correlated with the degree of vitality of political states, military power still remains to a large extent its measure. But the present position of France offers a strange and striking comment upon that age-long standard. For close on half-a-century after her crushing defeat by Germany, humiliated France occupied a questionable political status as at best a third-rate power. What prestige she retained was largely sentimental. Today she is restored, politically, strategically, economically, to a position of European dominance which she has not held for over a century. Her prepotence in relation to other European states is more unchallenged than it was under Napoleon, more solid than under Louis XIV. Her two

great historical rivals lie prostrate. Germany is disarmed; England is in the condition described by Lord Lloyd. Yet her exaltation is fraught with more anxiety than was her prostration.

France nurses her military supremacy with nervous fervor. The gaudy parade uniforms, somewhat suggestive, in these days, of musical comedy, are ubiquitous; the tramp of troops, the clatter of cavalry squadrons impart to Paris the bustle of an armed camp. The late Boncour cabinet was openly hailed as the instrument of the General Staff. The meeting at which it was formed closed amid cries of "*Vive l'armée!*" "The army," a deputy said in the Chamber, "is the hope and salvation of menaced society, the bulwark against the revolutionary peril which threatens Europe." Some days ago an educational society issued a pamphlet protesting against the literature which is being issued for use in the primary public schools. It quoted unbelievably gruesome descriptions glorifying in truculent language the most blood-curdling aspects of war—veritable literary bayonet exercises—provided by the government for the edification of infants. The pamphlet was suppressed as treasonable. As I write, a conference of the military chiefs of the Little Entente is being held at Belgrade under the presidency of the French staff. Its ostensible object is to correlate the policy to be adopted at the disarmament conference. The only question which has been so far discussed is the correlation of armed forces and of strategy on the day of mobilization. On the northern border of French Tonkin a large concentration of troops is taking place in view of "danger from the communist armies of Southern China."

The sabre-rattling of militarism is not, however, as formerly, an expression of imperialistic ambitions and hunger for conquest. Modern militarism is confessedly inspired by anxiety and dread. The anxious efforts of France to maintain and consolidate her military supremacy are honestly innocent of schemes of aggrandizement. They have their roots in utter scepticism with regard to the fine phrases of liberal pacifism, in derisive contempt for the ignominious farce of Geneva, in the conviction that a world organized as a system of competing nations can know no peace that is not a precarious breathing-space. The next war at no distant date is taken for granted as something which does not admit of discussion. French militarism has shed its old glamorous cult of "*la gloire*." It is not inspired by any illusions of glamour. It is avowedly founded upon stark fear.

A dialectician, such as Señor Ortega, may legitimately claim that neither military nor economic conditions constitute final tests of decadence. The vigor and vitality of nations have more than once been most conspicuous in defeat and famine. It was not in the dark

hour of Cannæ that Rome proved decadent. French nationalism never showed to better advantage—I am quoting the remark of a German—than after Sedan under the leadership of Gambetta. Economic conditions are, we have been abundantly assured, subject to transitory tribulations. If the concept of decadence be admitted, it is to the deeper facts of mind and culture that it properly applies.

The theory that mind and culture are ultimately determined by economic conditions is now accepted by many who are far from being Marxists. But whether economic conditions determine mental conditions, or vice versa, whether the egg is prior to the hen, or the hen to the egg, comes to much the same. The fact is that all aspects of a social whole which are distinguished by analysis are in reality indissolubly correlated.

How does the realistic and logically disposed French mind react to the present unprecedented situation? It is not as prone as is the Anglo-Saxon or the Teutonic mind to bask in abstract sentiments. It is not easily put off with inspiring demagogic phrases appealing to moral emotions.



The economic situation arises mainly from stoppage of the world-trade which was the chief source of capitalistic wealth-production. Industrial expansion having reached the saturation point, capitalistic enterprises cannot thrive by taking in one another's washing. Dwindling interest, in turn, freezes capital, and the paralysis is thus intensified in a vicious circle of geometric progression. The woollen stockings of the French peasant are said to contain a hoard of \$560,000,000. The French financial experts are doing like the peasants; they are hoarding gold. One is reminded of a time, three or four centuries ago, when the dominant imperial power of the day, Spain, held the same simple economic theories. It amassed the greater part of the world's gold—only to discover that gold, except in conjunction with trade, is worthless. It starved and went to pieces amid mountains of gold.

Foreign trade having ceased to be a means of subsistence, the most obvious manner of making the best of a bad job is to aim at national self-sufficiency. In the same fashion as the intensification of militarism is inspired by concern for national safety rather than by desire for expansion, so economic interests have in view internal consolidation rather than unattainable foreign markets. National systems are thus, like alarmed snails, withdrawing deeper and deeper within the coils of their shells.

French realism is clear-eyed enough to perceive that to abolish the menace of certain war would mean no less than the abolishing of sovereign states, including

France and her coign of vantage. There is consequently no alternative other than stark militarism.

Similarly the present economic disorder could, as every competent thinker has concluded, be amended only by amending out of existence the present economic order. Just as there is no logical alternative to national abdication except thoroughgoing militarism, so there is no logical alternative to capitalistic abdication except thoroughgoing reaction and repression. The French are consistently logical when they shrug their shoulders over the muddled pretenses of a sanctimonious liberalism which vainly seeks to evade the horns of those dilemmas.

Either interest on capital must be cut down to a point which would deprive the economic order of any motive for carrying on, or staffs and wages have to be cut down. The latter alternative is adopted with resolute courage. Drastic slashes have been effected in all wages and salaries, not only in private enterprises, but in all government departments, which, in France, include the railways and many other public services. The government has just put forward a new programme of further extensive economies which will reduce staffs and wages, and increase unemployment and poverty.



That unavoidable necessity calls, in turn, for vigorous repression of the dissatisfaction which it may cause. Concurrently with the proposed economies, the government, supported by the socialist party, is asking for a vote of 188,000,000 francs for secret police expenditure. All public meetings, gatherings, demonstrations, processions are forbidden within the city of Paris. On the same day that France repudiated the current instalment of the American debt several thousands of government workers and employees, gathering together in small groups, concentrated from all quarters toward the centre of the city. The demonstration was studiously peaceful and orderly. But 1300 arrests were effected. Not one line about the matter appeared in any of the leading French papers, although all traffic, at the Place de l'Opéra, the Palais Royal, the Boulevard Haussmann, was held up for several hours and the "metro" service stopped. Extensive strikes of dockers were paralyzing the shipping at Dunkerque, Havre, Brest, and Bordeaux. Belgium, Dutch, and American sailors were refusing to help as strikebreakers. The port of Dunkerque was completely bottled up. Repression has been particularly ferocious in Algeria, where native labor has made common cause with the French workers. The prisons are overflowing, and all proposals of amnesty are rejected by the government.

Those measures are indispensable for the control of the situation. The French authorities show admirable

energy and foresight. Whenever possible the arrest of potential disturbers of the peace is effected as a preventive precaution; by thus closing the stable door before the horse has escaped much unpleasantness is avoided.

A moment's consideration will show that such measures, indispensable for the safeguarding of the social order, cannot be effectively carried out without at the same time exercising a profound influence upon the minds and culture of the people. Thus does the linkage between purely economic conditions and the subtler forces of a nation's vitality become apparent. Ideas and thoughts which are apt to be stimulated by dissatisfaction must be combated and repressed. Influential French journalism, which enjoys for the most part the financial patronage and control of the Corsican perfumer, M. Coty, is admirably directed toward the required end. French newspapers have a literary quality to which Americans are not accustomed in their news-sheets, and are not committed to the same extent to supplying all the news that's fit to print. Judicious selection and adornment are all the easier. The foreign articles, as a rule well informed, display a remarkably unprejudiced attitude toward foreign countries, even when, as in the case of America, acute conflicts of interest exist. French intelligence realizes that other countries are faced with similar problems, and is sympathetic toward their efforts to deal with them. Despite even the profound political antagonism toward Germany and Italy, the French press shows a high appreciation of the merits of Junker governments and of the régime of Signor Mussolini. A profound admiration for the latter and for Herr Hitler is indeed noticeable in French opinion. The realism of Japanese policy, its "no nonsense" attitude, also appeals to the French mind. Some newspapers run serial articles on the U. S. S. R., which display a fine creative imagination. The confidence shown in the gullibility of the French public would be difficult to understand, if the care exercised in protecting it against the danger of access to information on the subject were not taken into account.

It should be borne in mind that France rests upon a mediæval tradition which is unknown and hard to apprehend in America. One is apt to think of France as the home of modernity, and of the French in the terms applied by Cæsar to the ancient Gauls, as seekers after novelty. But the view is superficial. The French are essentially a conservative people. Only a few steps from the boulevards and the monumental quarters of Paris with which the foreign visitor is best acquainted take one into the narrow winding streets overhung by quaint gables of a mediæval city, essentially unchanged since the seventeenth century. So likewise French culture, and the French mind that finds expression in that culture, stand very close to the traditional pattern out

of which they have grown. As soon as they shrink from pursuing the march of ideas to their conclusion, they turn back into a world which is incredibly old-fashioned. From the closed door of fear to traditional mediævalism is but a step. Invariably, reaction tends in France to take on the garb of monarchism, clericalism, of every manner of antique and outworn creed. The appeal of those intellectual antiquities to the French mind lies in their representing the traditions of nationalism upon which modern France, for all the bourgeois revolution, is built. The shades of political opinion which hark back to pre-revolutionary ideas openly style themselves "traditional."



In exactly the same manner as the two major parties in America have reference, not to contemporary situations, but to the conditions which existed at the time of the Civil War, so the nomenclature and characterization of French political parties have reference to even more antique conditions. The language of French politics dates in fact from the thirties of the last century, the period following the last backwashes of the eighteenth-century revolution. The expressions "right" and "left" have reference, not to any present-day tendencies of social or political opinion, but to the old opposition between "traditionalism" and the Republic, which is tainted with the sanction that its origin bestows upon revolution. There is, officially, no "right" party today in the French Chamber. It is all "left," that is to say, it is so far advanced as to accept, howbeit under protest and reservation, the republican régime. The group which is at the present moment in power, and from which the Herriot and Paul-Boncour ministries have been drawn, represents the extreme position, but one, to the "left," and is known as the "radical" party. There is nothing about it that even remotely suggests radicalism in the English or American sense. It is called "radical" with reference to the Middle Ages. Edouard Herriot is the darling of the Bourse and the big financial interests; Paul-Boncour of the General Staff.

That is why the "traditional" parties do not constitute any real opposition to the "radical" parties. The socialist party alone has been regarded with some distrust, not, however, because of any aims hostile to the ruling interests, but on account of a professed pacifism in its phraseology. Hence was the support given by that party to the militarist Boncour government particularly gratifying.

One of the most polished of French litterateurs, Albert Thibaudet, has just published a book on "Political Ideas in France," which is being widely read. One is struck by the fact that the criterion by which the author classifies political groups is their attitude toward the Catholic Church. This is not by any means peculiar to the

writer's point of view. In every French crisis, as far back as Boulanger and the Affaire Dreyfus, the cleavage of political parties has been intimately associated with the issues between clericalism and anti-clericalism, as representing in the most concrete manner the opposition between reactionary forces which, whatever their immediate aims, face toward mediævalism, and those forces which stand for the legacy of the eighteenth century and the revolution. The term "liberal," for example, has in French politics an exclusively ecclesiastical meaning. It connotes adherence to the idea of a Gallican Church independent of State control. "The liberal party," writes M. Faguet, "is exclusively composed of Royalists, Bonapartists, and Clericals," that is, of reactionary traditionalists. Pre-war France used to be thought of as a rationalistic and secularist country. The Combes legislation appeared to have eliminated the Catholic Church as a factor in French politics and culture. All that has been changed since the War. The memory of Combes and his policies is contemptuously repudiated. In no European capital, not excepting Rome, are the black robes of priests and seminarists, which were at one time excluded from the streets, seen in such swarms as in Paris. The teaching congregations have been readmitted and the Church schools reopened. It is estimated that one half of the rising generation in France is now receiving its "education" at the hands of Catholic priests.

French mentality has readily become adjusted to the change. It is perceptible throughout literature. As a critic recently remarked with satisfaction, "literature has gone right," which means in French that it has gone Catholic. The press and the radio are, according to a felicitous Parisian expression, filled with "Bon-dieuserie," or, as one might say, with Goddiness. All the daily papers are at present devoting lengthy columns to accounts of the apparitions of the Holy Virgin which have been witnessed by some children at a nuns' school at Beauraing, near the Belgian border. The miraculous appearances have been investigated by journalists and certified by "scientists," and thousands of eager pilgrims are taxing to the utmost the means of transport to the Walloon village, as well as to Lourdes and Lisieux, where miraculous showers of roses are taking place.

It is notable, however, that the tendencies of traditionalism, mediævalism, and reaction are much stronger in the bourgeois strata of French society than among the working classes, in Paris than in the provinces and in the country. A current commonplace of present French politics is that the provinces vote "left," while Paris votes "right." Even among the French peasantry the clerical influence is, except in Brittany and the Auvergne, by no means as pronounced as one might expect, or as it is among the bourgeoisie. The French

workingman is not as deeply habituated to, or so easily influenced by, bourgeois ideas as is the American worker. When he turns, he turns right about. In the sight of the workmen who are now suffering from unemployment and wage-cuts, the enemy is not the politician, the capitalist, the industrialist; he is invariably referred to as the "bourgeois." It is against the whole closed, narrow, mean circle of bourgeois ideas and interests, ready to withdraw into dead worlds and dark ages, that their resentment and their bitterness are aroused.

Political and economic facts may be ephemeral and superficial symptoms of decay. But experience shows that vital mental correlates are invariably and intimately associated with them. The correlation is exhibited today by France, the source of so much European culture and thought, more strikingly perhaps than anywhere else. When political and economic interests demand that the mind shall remain closed to realities, that inhibition does not take place with impunity to the vital qualities of the mind. In Italy the Fascist régime has effectually sterilized thought, art, literature. As of old when ecclesiastical "licensors of thought" aroused the denunciations of Milton, "this was it which damped the glory of Italian wits, that nothing had been written there now these many years but flattery and fustian." French wits, having "gone right," still show their traditional gifts of verbal clarity and discrimination in the analysis of "nuances." But those talents are lavished upon worlds of ideas and sentiments which are almost oppressively musty. Paul Valéry, the most modernist of French poets, the idol of the young æsthetic intelligentsia, has published his "Views upon the World of Today" (*Regards sur le monde actuel*). They have about as much bearing upon the world of today as what Mr. Gladstone said in 1863, and the failure of elementary apprehension is almost moronic. There is a noticeable vogue in French literature and on the French stage for a revival of classicism, for backward glances upon the fossil remains of French literary tradition. One might apply to the French literature of today what Mallarmé said of the French Academy: "It is a fallen god that remembers Olympus."

The most powerful work by far published in France this year is the "Journey to the Edge of Night" (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*) by Louis-Ferdinand Céline. It depicts with a force which recalls Dostoevski the material and mental disintegration of the French bourgeois class in the throes of the world crisis. Those who, like Señor Ortéga y Gasset, ask for proofs of decadence should read this remarkable document. It is a cry of misery and anger, an epic of despair which reflects the dissolution of a world. "We have no choice," one of the characters exclaims, "but to die or to lie." The book

was narrowly prevented from being awarded the Prix Goncourt, which was bestowed instead upon Guy Mazeline's "Wolves" (*Les Loups*) a greatly inferior work. Céline's work was given the Renaudot prize. The author of what is perhaps the most important literary creation published in France since Proust's panorama of aristocratic decadence, does not glimpse a ray of hope. His mind is as completely closed to faith in the future as it is to the inward causes of the decadence, despair, and dissolution of bourgeois society which he depicts.

The most notable literary figure of France today, André Gide, occupied until lately the same position of nihilism and despair. In his "Journal," which has been running in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, he proclaims his discovery of the fact that what he had set down to human nature and fate is the outcome of a social anarchy which is engaged in compassing its own elimination. The conversion of Gide to communism has set the critics busy explaining him away, as English and American critics have explained away Shaw, Dreiser, John Dos Passos. The courageous language of André Gide has, however, heartened a host of other writers, such as Henri Lefebvre, the editor of "Philosophies," Paul Nizan, the talented author of "Watchdogs" (*Chiens de garde*), and Philippe Lamour.

The French attitude toward present world-dilemmas differs only from that of other peoples in being less obscured by sentimental disguises and shallow euphemisms. It is selfish; it is purely selfish. Nationalism is merely a selfishness sufficiently enlightened to discern the obvious fact that the prosperity of the tribal group is indispensable to the gratification of personal selfishness.

The argument of selfishness is the most difficult of all arguments to refute. What have been termed sciences of ethics, and much of what is called religion, have been attempts to meet the argument. There is no valid logical refutation. If I choose to sacrifice the whole world to my personal interests, there is no logical argument which can convict me of folly.

There is none—so long as the relation between the human being as an individual and the human being as a social product is not clearly apprehended. That relation has become concretely demonstrable in our time only. The logic of facts demonstrates today that selfishness, economic or political, individual or tribal, defeats ultimately its own purpose. The defeat of Western civilization which we are witnessing is the defeat of insufficiently enlightened selfishness. Whosoever, man or nation, is unable to adapt the selfish calculations of interest to changing conditions is, politically, economically, intellectually, culturally, in process of decadence. France is putting the reactionary logic to the acid test. The world may profitably ponder the lesson.

LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

Retreat to the Land

AN EXPERIENCE IN POVERTY

By Charlie May Simon

Illustrations by Howard Simon

A GROUP of us were having tea one Sunday afternoon at our studio in New York. As may be expected, we were discussing the depression. There were, besides Howard, who is an artist, and myself, a stock broker, a publisher, a writer, and a dancer. We did not know the first thing about economics, but we freely expressed our opinions and theories.

As I listened to them my thoughts turned to a cabin of our own in some wilderness, with a garden patch, a pig, a cow, and some chickens, and perhaps even a sheep and a loom, for we were in a receptive mood then. When I glanced at Howard I saw an expression in his face that reminded me of the time six years ago, in the Latin Quarter of Paris, when he asked me to marry him four days after we met. When our company had gone I was not surprised when he said to me, "Will you go?" and I answered, "Of course."

Howard counted up the month's bills. He found that we had exactly eight hundred and fifty-seven dollars and some cents after they were paid, including the return deposit of the electric company. We were young, we said, healthy and self-reliant. We were interested in the same things, and were not bored with each other. Of course our venture would succeed. We did not mind giving up luxuries, those toys of civilization that had been invented in the last generation or so. All we asked of life was a little food, shelter, clothes enough for warmth, and peace and leisure to do the things we wanted to do.

So one morning, a few weeks later, we got into our Ford roadster and started west. We settled in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, following the

footsteps of a long-ago ancestor. We were not long in filing a homestead claim on sixty acres of virgin pine forest, and started in on the job of wresting a living from the soil. Here we have been for over a year and a half.

We are thirty miles from the nearest railroad, telephone, or radio. A dirt road winds its way through our wilderness, but the creeks are unbridged and have to be forded when swollen by winter rains. Sometimes they are impassable, and our mail is held up when the mail carrier who brings it from the railroad to our little postoffice cannot cross on his mule. Rumors reach us by the grapevine system, and they are even more garbled than newspaper reports.

"They say Mr. Hoover's started a war on Chiny, or somewhere," we were told during the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. And just before the election Uncle Bill Taylor said that Doctor Evans said that some one told him if the Republicans got in, every man, woman and child would receive a hundred dollars. But there was no talk of depression, and here, we decided, was the ideal place to build our home.

Our nearest neighbor for five miles on one side is old Uncle John, who lives alone with two half-starved hound dogs in a tumbledown shack. He cooks over the fireplace and sleeps on what appears to be a bundle of rags, though they were at one time patchwork quilts. He hid from us for several weeks, and we learned that it was because his trousers were too torn to be patched any more. But his modesty gradually left him, and he often comes to sit and chat, always saying as he leaves, as though he was just about to forget it, "By the way, kin I borry a little—?"

On the other side, our nearest neigh-

bor is six miles away, a tall and gawky young man, Oval, and his equally tall and gawky wife, Amerika. A short time after we arrived here, they came calling in a home-made vehicle with no two wheels alike, drawn by a pair of lean mules. Ameriky brought her two weeks' old baby.

"I jist been duncey to see yore place," she told me. "But the little one here war borned on the day youens come. Hits name's Jewel."

Oval, dressed in the conventional overalls and a little straw hat that covered less than half of his shocky blonde hair, had nothing to say at first. He sat smoking one cigarette after another, rolling them in strips of catalog paper with home-grown tobacco, and striking the matches on the bare soles of his feet. Finally he asked Howard to step outside.

"I jist wanted to say," he said, "that when I hearn youens war a livin' here, I lowed there war a goin' to be trouble. But I see youens know how to mind yore business, and I wan ter shake hands with you and say I'm yore friend." With that he reached back in his over-all pocket and drew out a quart fruit jar filled with white corn whiskey, and shoved it out toward Howard.

The log house, with its huge stone fireplaces, slowly grew to look like the drawings Howard had made in New York. It is just large enough to meet the needs of two people: a studio, a library, a kitchen, a bedroom and a wash-room, with plumbing, such as it is, by an expert moonshiner. The rooms are built around a stone-paved courtyard bordered with wild flowers transplanted from the woods. We had labor at fifty cents and a dollar a day, depending on the size of the family of the workers.