

## FIRESIDE REFLECTIONS.

It was the evening of December twentieth. Private Dick Bedford sat in the hut on a form drawn up before he blazing fire. Supper was just over and the thirty boys who shared the room were busy in different ways, most of them in various stages of shining up their buttons, shoes and faces for a trip down town. Some were lying down taking life easy, others sat at the tables playing cards and a few were writing home, trying painfully to describe the big time they were going to have on Christmas day so that the folks back there should not guess how black and heavy was the cloud of nostalgia that hung over them. Bedford sat immovable, oblivious of his surroundings, watching the leaping flames and the tiny spurts of fire that hissed from the crevices in the coal like flaming adder tongues. Few men can sit alone gazing into an open fire and not see visions and dream dreams. Private Bedford was gifted above his fellows with imagination—"the witch," as somebody had said, "who takes the dry staw of fact and, with a touch, weaves out of it the silver thread of romance." He had been reading the papers sedulously for a week. It had been a custom of his for some years to read the best newspapers he could get, especially the editorials. Now, after following for a week the columns upon columns of discussion started by the hurling from the German camp of the one word "Peace," his mind had become abssessed by its potentialities. Hence the visions.

He knew that there was nothing to it—that it was just one more move in the wily game of statecraft—but, seeing it printed in staring headlines and repeated at three-line intervals in every paper he picked up, had the effect of sending through his being little tremors of joy. At first the feeling had been merely subconscious but now as he sat musing he had analysed it. Above all there was the anticipation of his homecoming next Christmas, for surely, the way things were going we could finish the business by that time. Gathered around the fire in the little home back there he could see each member of the family, the light of love in every eye, as he told them stories of the war. Then he saw that other home where the welcome would be no less sincere; vividly he saw the father of the house, dozing behind a paper in his big chair in the corner and mother peacefully crocheting before the fire while he shared the corner in the background with a little girl who had fluffy hair the color of an amber sunset and eyes of cerulean blue that seemed to hold within their limpid depths the mysteries of the ages. What fun it would be to spend the rest of his life taking care of her.

Then there came a few moments of retrospection. At college he had never bent himself seriously to work, deeming it sufficient if he managed to get through with a pass. But in his final year he had had an awakening and he pondered now on the curious way it had started. Somebody had one day said: "Who owns Egypt?" He was unable to answer. In his fourth year at college he didn't know whether Egypt was governed from Downing Street or the Grand Vizier's Palace at Constantinople. He determined to find out. Going to the public library he got two large volumes on Egypt by Lord Cromer and, after reading them through, he felt he could give points on the government of that country to his history professor. He had learned a lesson in relative values. A university was a fine place for a man who was willing to round out his studies with books that were not in the calendar; for the

other fellow it was four years wasted that might better have been replaced by sporadic excursions to the public library. The winning of a degree was merely an ironical discovery of the distance one would have to travel before becoming truly a Master of Arts.

A disturbance at the table behind him aroused Private Bedford to his surroundings and he noticed that the paper in which he had been reading Lloyd George's speech of the day before had dropped to the floor. Picking it up he found his place and read these comments on Germany's relations with the other Powers: "She has always been an unpleasant, disagreeable neighbour to all. She got thoroughly on the nerves of Europe, and there was no peace near where she dwelt. . . . Several times there were threats—there were two in the lifetime of our generation which presented the alternative of war or humiliation." At once his thoughts soared back over the works of current history he had read, and, focussing their salient points in his mind, the connotation of those sentences of Britain's popular tribune became clear. Africa throughout the nineteenth century had been a fertile field for the rivalry of the European Powers. Along in the eighties Germany awakened to the fact that France, Britain and even Belgium had acquired large, well-defined spheres, that she was herself but poorly represented and that, moreover, the available colonising territory was rapidly being taken up. At this time she possessed on the west coast only a cluster of buildings erected by an enthusiastic missionary and a few miles of foreshore. She looked inland at the vast stretch of rich country through which British traders had roamed for years but which Gladstone's laissezfaire government had never proclaimed a British sphere and she decided on drastic action. A huge square was accordingly marked off extending in three directions to meet the nearest acknowledged spheres and a pronunciamiento issued defining its boundaries in detail and declaring it to be German territory. Thus Germany placed her West African colony on the map and at the same time made her debut in Welt Politik. From now on she was to reveal herself the bully of the international school.

During these years France and England were not the best of friends. They found many differences cropping up in the international game of chess which they were playing in Africa. The Fashoda incident marked, of course, the point of greatest strain, when Kitchener, marching south, in 1898, found General Marchand established at Fashoda and the French flag flying over the town. But during this crisis and the earlier stress, both powers had managed to follow the approved dictates of international conduct and convention. Their difficulties were increased by the fact that they had been obliged to take over the administration of Egypt, as joint creditors and co-signees of a bankrupt Government. That they did not come to blows was largely due to the statesmanship of Lord Cromer, who represented Britain in Egypt for nearly half a century and who possessed that fine quality of a statesman, the power to think more than twice before acting. Out of the constant association and action and re-action upon each other of the two people, there naturally grew a better understanding. But there was something else that caused the two nations to draw together, and that something was the blustering attitude of Germany in international politics. They had seen the Kaiser's royal envoy assume the name of "The Mailed Fist" and depart for China to open there a door for Germany.