



The philosopher looked for a stone . . . and we hand him the merry ha-ha. My neighbour, who describes himself as a philatelist, sends east for "carefully selected assortments" of foreign postage stamps, hoping some day to find a blue Mauritius, worth a thousand—or is it a million?—dollars; so far his collection consists chiefly of "penny English" of the time of Queen Victoria. The psychical researcher neglects his business in the expectation of receiving non-essential messages from departed friends; meanwhile the company disconnects his phone. The whirling dervish aims to achieve perpetual motion—the Buddhist, eternal rest; and I, some day I am going to hear a soldier blow about his personal exploits in battle.

Years ago I was one of a number of small boys who, in a school in suburban London, listened eagerly to a discourse from a Crimean veteran. For an hour he talked to us, not of himself, nor of the heroic deeds of brave men, but of the divine self-sacrificing love of a good woman. He told the immortal story of Florence Nightingale whose shadow falling, as she passed through the cheerless wards of the field hospital, upon the bare and whitewashed walls, was kissed by shattered and dying men, and whose children, the armies of the British Empire, shall forever rise up and call her blessed.

Being reminded by the school-master that he had not spoken of his own part in the fighting, the old gentleman requested that we would sing a song while he endeavoured to recall some especially thrilling experience. We sang—

"The names of our ancestors, the names of other days,
Have reached us through all ages, illumined by glory's rays.
Those names defy oblivion, they tyrant force withstood,
They fought and fell for freedom, their simple word held good."

and when we had finished the old soldier told us of the incident which was most deeply impressed upon his mind:—

"Boys, when it was all over, the big ships came to carry us home. As we marched aboard, the regimental band played 'Home Sweet Home,' and I broke down and cried like a baby."

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As a boy of thirteen I attempted to extract from an Ashanti campaigner the story of a scar which cleft his chin. He agreed to satisfy my curiosity on condition that I accepted a chew of tobacco. After that he talked; but I have no recollection of anything he said, for I was preoccupied with the discovery that the inadvertent swallowing of a mouthful of tobacco juice has the effect of making the earth's motion immediately and violently apparent to the swallower.

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I sat in a railway carriage where an old lady worried an ex-sergeant of the Fourth Dragoon Guards to tell how he earned the two Egyptian medals, with bars, which decorated his breast.

"I didn't earn them ma'am," he replied, "they were given to me; this one for being a tea-totaller; and this for boosing in the canteen."

Another cavalryman who lost a leg in the same campaign confided to me that the most exciting moment in his military career happened when, on a recruiting march from York to London, his horse threw him and stepped on his hand.

A New Zealander who saw much fighting in the Boer war, recalled as his most painful experience, the risking of his life to save from a burning farmhouse a bottle of gold dust . . . gold dust which shone ruddily in the firelight, looked like gold but proved to be quick-silver.

In this city I worked at one time with a man who, like myself, is a cockney. At the outbreak of the great war he hurried, with what might almost be described as indecent haste, to join up. Upon his return after some two years of fighting, I met him on the street, minus one eye, and with sundry pieces of shrapnel embedded in various parts of his body as perpetual souvenirs.

"What was it like over there?" I asked.

"Pretty soft" he replied, "Why, when we came back after one battle there was rum for ten thousand men, and only three thousand of us to drink it," after which he declined to discuss the subject of war any further.

Hope springs eternal in the human breast, and some day I am going to hear a soldier blow about his personal exploits in battle.



THE PROFITEER

When he hears the Boys are coming Home.