

FITTING IN THE RETURNED MAN

BY GEORGE PEARSON



ISSUED BY
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION FOR
REPATRIATION COMMITTEE
OTTAWA

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By GEORGE PEARSON.

In MacLeans Magazine.

When peace was declared, each of us took it differently. A mother exclaimed: "Oh, now my boy won't have to go," and wiped away a tear. A young girl exclaimed regretfully: "Oh, goodness! Now he won't be able to use those socks I sent him," and frowned moodily until her mother reminded her that we had also worn socks before the war.

Myself, I felt something snap. It was that something like a steel spring which had pressed on my brain all these years of war; as it has on those of millions of other men and women and children. A strange exaltation began to take possession of me. It went to my head like old wine. I found myself almost shouting: "Why, I feel a thousand years younger: I can enjoy life again." And with that thought relief swept over me: I talked rapidly; I gesticulated. At last, my mind was free.

My thought flew back to other days and other men—the dead men who had made this great day possible. It leapt back over the sadness of the years behind us to my comrades of the regiment, the Princess Patricia's, and of how they had died, and my thought included my comrades of all other regiments of all the other armies of our Allies so that I visualized the great host of the soldier-dead. And it leapt forward to the years to come so that these two thoughts became inextricably interwoven, that one of the dead men with this thought of the years to be.

And gradually my joy in peace died and was replaced by a quiet and serious satisfaction, freighted with a sense of terrible responsibility.

For I saw that when peace was signed, the new war had automatically declared itself.

In approaching the problem of the returned soldier it is necessary to acquire an understanding of the veteran. He is not normal. And in tracing the reasons for his abnormality, the threads lead back to the training camp,

the trenches, the hospital. War has made a different man of him, physically and mentally. Let me quote from my own experience.

When I first awoke in hospital, it was to the dull apathy of numbed horror, unable to reason, afraid to if I could, for fear of what I should discover in my own mind. And all about me were other men, thinking these same thoughts, or fearing to do so, staring at one another with that dull look of ineffable sorrow common to soldiers who have just come out of their "bad time." The haunting horrors of those days I shall never forget! Yet they were sweetly mingled with so many precious things which we had never thought to see again, the lovely laughter of little children, the undisturbed song of birds, flowers bursting into bloom, and all other things of peace and that old forgotten world which we had thought had surely died.

And then the nostalgia of bitter longing for our own folk that swept over us, for the dear irregularities of our own speech, the faces of those we knew, the sounds of their voices, the sights, the smells of home.

"These alien people about us; they do not understand our thoughts but those at home will. And then we will be happy!" So we thought.

LACK OF UNDERSTANDING AT HOME.

And then, when we get home at last. We don our "civies" and never shall I forget how I looked forward to that great occasion. There was only one other event in my life comparable to it, and that was in those palpitating days of the long-ago that preceded my discarding of skirts for my first pair of pants.

When I first put on civilian clothes again, I felt myself to be the cynosure of all eyes. It was much more strange and embarrassing than the first wearing of a uniform had ever been. I had longed so desperately to get into "civies," out of that uniform and away from the sight of it and all other uniforms and all other things that might remind me of the army or the war. For I was sick to the soul of the sight of a uniform.

To forget: That was the thing. To forget that there was a war or that I had ever been in it or in the army. But I could not. The thing rode my shoulder like a

nightmare, giving me no rest. I could think of no other thing. And the silly questions of the people! It was disappointing. These did not understand either. It was just the universal gulf existing between the soldier and the civilian mind. Like all my kind, I took refuge in silence, so that again I heard "How is it that none of you fellows who come back will ever tell anything about what happened to you over there?"

When we told them they doubted us, or read the wrong meaning into the facts of our recital. They were a bloody-minded lot, always curious about that horrible side of it which we sought so desperately to forget. There was that one stock question: "Did you actually stick a bayonet into a German?" and "What did it feel like?"

One man said to me. "I don't believe this war is half so bad as you fellows make out or else those of you I have seen didn't have any tough times. Anyhow, I never hear you say anything about it."

These ghouls would never dare to ask me for the painful details of a horrible death in a sick-room, or the suffering of loved ones. War is both those things on a monumental scale, with trimmings of filth and sordidness unknown in quieter deaths. Women, for the most part, seemed to understand. They looked at one with sombre eyes and asked no questions. And when they spoke it was of the suffering. Perhaps it is their quicker sympathy, greater powers of imagination? I do not know. But so it was. But the men; they spoke of charges and the glory of them and asked for details.

For a long time I eschewed the companionship of my kind, seeking solace in forgetfulness. But that was bad; so then I plunged into a premeditated gayety holding my nose and taking that like the medicine of the doctor. And gradually, I began to get a grip on things and on myself. I began to enjoy myself and life, laughed without forcing, took interest in the small things of life. But always in the back of my mind that knowledge which made my nights a hell of horrid dreams of blood and war and weariness, forced on me the thought that in all this talk of slackers I was the biggest slacker of them all; for I knew how bad a time my comrades over there were having; I had not the excuse of these others, of ignorance; I knew. And I could never rid myself of the feeling that

even though I was physically unable to go, yet I should go. And that same feeling did operate to send back to the ranks many a man who had been discharged for wounds. For these thoughts and experiences of mine are those of all soldiers who have had a bad shaking-up. I have talked to hundreds on the subject and all accounts agree.

The first year was the worst. It took all my powers of concentration, all my will-power, to keep me at my tasks. It was not that I wanted to do anything else—I did not know what I wanted to do—but I did not want to do what I was doing. And even now, as I write this, I find that I must drive myself to an extent that was wholly unnecessary before the war, even when I was on an uncongenial task. And I love this one; it is my supreme interest in life.

It is that terrible restlessness which possesses us like an evil spirit, the indefinite expression of a vague discontent, the restlessness of dying men, little children and old soldiers, and which I fear expresses itself in many inconsistencies.

THE WOUNDS OF THE SOUL.

The returned soldier is not a statistic: he is a man sometimes crippled by war in a way that all may see, sometimes invisibly crippled, perhaps even in the head, but always with a new slant on life that is hidden to others and probably to himself. The passionate protest we feel when we contemplate wrong conditions in our own country is sometimes nullified by a certain illogical quality of viewpoint, forced on us by the abnormality of the life we have led. We are the victims of a set of evil experiences which have done us no good except to force on us, through no merit of our own, the broader vision that the raw depths of horror bring to men. And that is not the broader vision of the traveller in new countries, unless the countries are of the mind. It is that broadness of vision which belongs to the mind that has become acquainted in all the unlovely details of an intimate contact with all the shocking barbarity of war and its upsetting of all old and cherished thought.

It is a question whether the vision gained will offset for the soldier the loss of much of the sweetness of life,

many precious qualities of heart and mind. The war has aroused and given birth to a new and a better world. No man who has studied the manifestations of the awakened conscience of humanity can deny this fact. And the majority of the men and women of the world to-day are better men and women than they were four years ago. People sacrifice now, as a matter of habit, who never before had realized their duty as citizens to their fellowmen and to their country.

But there has been a cost. And that cost is not all one of blood and arms and legs. None the less, it has largely been paid by the soldiers, or yet will be. It is the cost of the wounding of the soul of the man. It is impossible for society to place in the hands of the soldier a rifle, bid him to break one commandment and then expect him to respect the others. The brutalizing experience he goes through in war gives him a certain disrespect for all laws.

This fact must be considered as a definite part of the returned soldier problem. Above all other things, they require sympathy and patience. But not all are worthy on the basis of individual character. The measure of their worth must be adjudged not upon what they are, but upon the nature of what has made them what they are. For some are and will be unworthy, some who were once men of good character, but who in war have been wounded in the soul. In other words, a man may turn out to be an ingrate and a thief, and still be entitled to sympathy and kindly attention because the demoralizing and brutalizing effect of war on him has operated to deaden his sense of moral values. This is his wound of the soul.

This incident occurred in Toronto a few weeks ago: There was the sharp "rat-a-tat-tat" of knuckles knocking at the door of a certain house. That had given way to the repetition of muffled blows as with a doubled fist, before the woman of the house, in a mild panic at her neglect, ran to the complaining door.

She opened it full in the face of a nervous-looking man of middle age who shot an angry glance at her from beneath drawn brows, and who then, without more ado, unceremoniously thrust into her unprepared hand a highly coloured lithograph calendar which depicted the glory scene of some soldier's last sacrifice in the mud of Flanders; accompanying the action with: "Buy one of

these, lady: Only twenty-five cents," and in a tone that dangerously approached one of command.

"No, thanks," she said evenly. "I don't think I want one to-day."

"You don't, huh? What's the matter with all you women 'round here?" he flared out. "Didn't yuh see this?" And he glared sombrely at her whilst his fingers fiddled nervously with the returned soldier's button in his coat lapel.

The woman glanced at it unmoved. "No, I hadn't noticed it; but I don't see what that has to do with my buying something I don't want." And she began to close the door.

"You don't, huh?" he rapped out savagely and as he spoke, thrust his heavy army boot into the door-way so that the woman drew back in sudden alarm. "Well, you will—all you people 'round here that don't. Just you wait 'till all the boys get back; we'll show you a thing or two; you're not worth fighting for; it'd do you an' this bloody country good if the Germans had it for a while." He paused and then added in a fresh burst of vitriolic rage: "An' they can too, for all o' me. Damn sure I wouldn't lift a hand to stop them next time." He withdrew the obstructing foot and shambled off, mumbling, making for the next house.

That incident illustrates the viewpoint of one kind of returned soldier, the kind who says: "I've done my bit; I've fought for this country; now it owes me a living. I'm through with work." That kind trade on the aroused generosity of a grateful country.

THE SOLDIER'S GREAT IDEAL.

But we are not all like that. There are two classes of returned soldiers, and much the largest class demand from their country for themselves nothing but an adequate pension for such actual physical disabilities as they suffer from and an opportunity to make good in civil life. That is their second greatest ambition.

For they do have a greater one and this is it: That this Canada for which their comrades died shall become worthy of its dead sons so that for their children the world will truly be a better place to live in. That is all they

ask. And to a greater extent than the public realizes, the better element, and that means the great majority, become consecrated to that ideal, once they leave the army and cease to think the stifling army thoughts. And it is this determination that impels most of their demands, not a selfish desire to forward the class interests of returned soldiers. The latter influence exists but nowhere is it so stoutly fought as within the returned soldiers' movement.

I attended a Great War Veterans' Association mass meeting on the night the armistice was signed. All the speakers were leaders amongst the returned men, officials of their organization. I heard W. E. Turley, the provincial secretary of the Great War Veterans' Association for Ontario, state that, "a mild social revolution was coming in Canada," that "we have a solemn obligation to those who died over there," that "we must educate the mass of the Canadian people in the true meaning of democracy," that "we have a good deal of kindergarten work to do with the Canadian public."

There were references by others to conditions here that "would not stand the sneering criticisms of the machine-guns," and yet sanely coupled with that the admonition: "Don't rock the boat; row the boat." There was a reference to "the new war that peace has brought," and to the fact that "we who have been engaged in the destruction of life and property recognize the value of a policy that will lead to the conservation of both here at home"; which was a reference to the campaign the Great War Veterans' Association is waging with the Dominion Government for better housing accommodation for the mass of the Canadian people, even though at the cost of large holders of land and speculators in house property.

One speaker said: "It is only by the enactment of such social legislation that we can hope to make good the loss of the best of Canada's manhood," and that "the United States and Canada were to-day taking lessons in democracy from the British Isles," which again was a reference to the general trend of British policy to improve the lot of the poorer classes at the expense of the richer.

Views of that nature may be open to criticism as unfair to a class, as visionary, as impractical, but at least they are not open to the charge of being selfish views. They are impelled by a genuine desire for the betterment

of the country as a whole, and not the returned soldiers as a class.

Even the better class of well-intentioned men are sometimes very "difficult" in their private relations, a fact which no doubt reacts on their general group policy. They still suffer from "nerves" for a long time after their return to civil life, but it is some comfort to know that the evidence of that fact diminishes as the man is assimilated by his civilian environment.

EMPLOYERS ARE DISAPPOINTED.

There is considerable disappointment in Canada over the returned man and the difficulty experienced in getting him to stick to his job. That feeling of employers may be warranted by the facts; but they in turn are explainable and excusable. The returned man is irritable, nervous, is hampered, and hampers those who employ him, by numerous fickle inconsistencies of character which are for him just as surely the aftermath of militarism as is the wooden leg of the soldier who must drag that through life. Many employers, out of a mistaken sense of kindness, give returned men positions for which they are constitutionally unfitted, thereby laying up trouble for a later day. And whether the man has the right kind of a job or not, there is always that sense of futility, that restlessness, which pursues him like a wraith of terrible uneasiness. I have heard of two cases almost identically the same which illustrate the extent to which this may be overcome, provided the employer and the soldier are both willing to try and the former is able to stand the loss.

A soldier had returned to his old position in Toronto. After some days he buttonholed his employer: "It's no use: I've got to quit. I can't seem to stand it in here: I can't settle down: I want to be moving: I want to be outside."

"That's all right," his employer said, "Whenever you feel that way, you just go out and take a walk or a smoke; do anything you feel like and don't bother about your work at all. I want you to feel that I'll do anything I can to help you."

The soldier remained at his work, but after some days spoke again: "It's no use. I appreciate what you're

doing for me and I go out several times every day as much as I feel I ought to, but it's just the same. I'll have to go."

Again the employer said: "You try it again. Go out oftener. Never mind about me. Go out all you want—every time you feel that way. You'll come out all right."

That soldier could be seen day after day, many times throughout the day either sitting on the steps, smoking, or perhaps walking with bent head in the vicinity of the plant. At last he did overcome his restlessness and is to-day as able and steady a workman as there is in that plant.

Again, from some plants comes the word that the returned-soldier employees are amongst the best men there. But the purpose of this article is to present certain phases of both sides of the argument.

The existence of that terrible restlessness lies back of much of the dissatisfaction and disappointment some returned men may cause. One employer said to me: "They won't settle down. They work a week and quit, or they quarrel with the boss or the other men and appear to be dissatisfied with all the conditions of their work. Nothing seems right to them, and they don't even know what they want themselves. What am I to do? I want to help them but they won't let me. I must have efficient help; I must live, too." And this employer was discussing the better class of returned men, those who really want to get on.

So even these well-intentioned ones are beginning to wear on a war-weary public. The whole world has a bad case of war nerves.

THE BUG-A-BOO OF NOISE.

Noises are our greatest bug-a-boo. The crack of carelessly held dishes makes me shudder. Not even yet can I hear the terrible noises of our city streets, the grinding clatter of street cars, the whistles of factories and the shrill clamor of the newsboys without experiencing a shock that is as definite as a physical blow and a sharp tremor of pain that strikes and vibrates on the unseen wires of my body. And I weigh two hundred pounds and look like a prize-fighter. And all who have been in it know what it is.

for months and even years afterward, to wallow all night in saturnalias of unforgotten horror, up to the elbows in blood; and to jump shrieking from the middle ground of sound sleep to the cold centre of the bedroom floor, shaking with fright. These are some of the invisible wounds of the soldier.

There was a returned soldier in Toronto who was having difficulty in securing employment so some well-intentioned friends got together and secured for him a position at fair pay. To their intense disgust, he quit at the end of the first day. They saw in the incident only another case of a returned man who did not want to work and who would not settle down. But, that man's job consisted in unpacking cases of coarse crockery!

CASES OF INJUSTICE.

Then there are so many cases of gross injustice to soldiers who are desperately eager to do their part. To quote a current newspaper editorial on the matter: "There is a case in London, Ontario, of a peculiarly callous injustice inflicted on a returned man who fought in some of the worst battles of the war, including Vimy Ridge, and who earned a good record before his discharge on account of wounds. He wrote in the Civil Service examinations and stood twentieth in a class of three hundred. He was notified that he had been given a position in the London customs office, but on presenting himself for duty was shown a telegram cancelling his appointment. Headquarters had learned that before the war he had been convicted of theft. The plight of this soldier is worse than before because the wrong done him has impelled him to publish a circumstance which he had hoped others would forget."

Others want jobs created for them by discharging old and skilled employees. Then again, in the excessively discontented class are all those, and they are many, who meet with such unjust treatment, (such for instance as individual proposals that have been made that they should work for the regular wage of that job, less the amount of their Government pension, as in the case of a one-armed man I know), that the sufferers rapidly join the ranks of the most vicious minded.

And the alien enemy labourer question festers like a boil in the mind of the returned soldier and dominates all other phases of the employment and repatriation of returned men.

I have been amazed by the utter disregard for human life and property which the soldier, consecrated and directed by army discipline to the destruction of both, develops. Thus, soldiers have learnt that human life is the cheapest thing there is; and because property is the one great rival of human life, even of the lives of soldiers, even the best intentioned of them cannot shake off that feeling of distrust and suspicion of the motives of property which the war has aroused in the least active minded of them.

DANGEROUS LACK OF CO-OPERATION.

I know a middle-aged returned soldier, of long service in the actual front, whose three sons had similar service, all wounded and one killed, who recently applied for work at a certain Toronto plant, which has made large profits directly out of the war. The foreman to whom he applied for work said: "No, we don't want any returned men here."

In another case, returned men repeatedly complained that they could not get employment. A certain Government department tested this plant. Six returned men, wearing their returned soldier buttons, dropped in at intervals and applied for work. Each one was refused. Each one withdrew, removed his button and applied again. They were all hired on the spot!

It does not follow in these cases that the employer has initiated such a policy of discrimination himself. Some of his foremen may have done that. But these things do conclusively prove that the employer is not making the matter of justice to returned men, a governing policy of his business.

It will be observed that, in my desire to be fair, some of the facts I have related are not wholly to the credit of individual returned men. I sincerely trust that this fact will give added emphasis to that point I wish to make, and that is this: in spite of the kindly attitude that the great mass of the Canadian people maintain toward the returned

soldiers, there are far too many employers who are not yet making it their own individual affair to adjust their own business to this fact—that the industrial life of Canada must absorb a certain number of returning soldiers and that the business of this individual employer, because it is a part of the industrial life of Canada, must, even at some sacrifice to that business and its present employers, absorb its share of these men if serious troubles are to be avoided. A discontented soldiery offer the most fertile field imaginable for Bolshevik doctrines; a contented soldiery the surest bulwark against it, a great stabilizing influence in the life of the Dominion, half a million men, trained to arms, and because of their contentment pledged to the cause of good Government and to the policy of effecting all such changes as they, the soldiers, may desire, by the orderly means of a progressive evolution of the constitutional instrument and not by the disorderly violence of sheer force.

TAKE INSURANCE AGAINST BOLSHEVISM.

If Canadian employers will view this problem from this standpoint, they will see that their intelligent co-operation with the Government, with the Great War Veterans' Association, and with all other reconstructive agencies will constitute the best possible insurance against what many employers dread, even worse than hard times—Bolshevism!

Employers must think of reconstruction in new terms—think of it less as the problem of how they can adjust their business to peace without disturbing the stability of it or the flow of its profits and think of it more as the problem of how that business may be adjusted to absorb its fair proportion of returned men. For on that last, all thinking minds agree the other depends, absolutely. For the last involves those questions of broad humanitarian policies which underlie and govern and determine all the lesser ones of the economic structure, of industry and of profits.

The Central Branch, Toronto, G.W.V.A., has passed a resolution asking employers to be as eager now to advertise the number of returned men employed by them as they were in war-time, to advertise the number of their

employees overseas, and to do so by exhibiting a flag similar to the service flag, thereby initiating a kindly competition amongst themselves in the repatriation of returned men. This suggestion is here called to the attention of the readers and their co-operation in pushing this suggestion is asked for by the returned men. The United States has adopted the idea. Let us not be behind them.

A Canadian newspaper correspondent recently said to me: "The returned men have too big an idea of themselves. They think they are heroes and that because they fought for the country, it is theirs to do what they like with. The Canadian people won't stand for it."

There are returned men who have such an idea, the very ignorant and the very selfish ones. But that man did bitter injustice to the great number of returned men who are inspired only by the highest forms of patriotism in their campaign for their comrades and for their country. There are many returned men who take not the slightest credit in having been overseas, who realize that their going and another man's staying was often merely the accident of circumstance, men who are either removed from want, or else are too independent to accept special consideration either from an employer or a government, men who want nothing for themselves. But they see many of their comrades who are entitled to better treatment than they are getting, and who need it and they realize that until such neglect is remedied and even obviated, the whole spiritual and material life of Canada will suffer. They are Canadian first and returned soldiers afterwards.

Those returned men who are impelled by this thought ask for the co-operation of all other men, the realization that the repatriation of soldiers is up to individuals as well as to governments. The latter seems at last, after years of lethargy, to be awake to the problem, but it cannot do it alone. It needs your help and mine. It is our duty as citizens of Canada to give this help, each in his own way, as his own circumstances permit and his own conscience dictates.

We do not ask you to create a favoured class, but we ask for your patience and for your sympathetic understanding so that you will realize that there are other wounds than those of the body, that there are those invisible wounds of the soul which cripple a man's efficiency

and retard his mentality, perhaps for years. Be patient with nervous, inefficient, irritable returned men. Remember that these too are wounds. Help them to become normal. Work with them and us to fit our comrades into the national life so that out of the ashes of war there may arise, Phoenix-like, a newer, better Canada which in this spirit may live and thrive and advance to its own great destined end, so long as men continue to love service for the sake of service; so long as men continue to honour the sacrifice of unselfish patriotism.