

UNDERSTANDING THE RETURNED SOLDIER

Written for "The Listener" by
THE KEA

"LOOK at him! Four years of active service and as fit as a prize-fighter." One hears remarks of that type about men on leave from the front, and by ordinary standards they seem reasonable. But there are other standards which are not ordinary, and how many of us give thought to them? Could we read the soldier's mind when he is alone, our estimate of him would receive a severe jolt.

Wounds will heal, but there is the picture that medical science cannot eliminate; it recedes with the passing of years but never goes altogether. Those of us who have seen a fatal accident in civil life, do not forget it. Consider it in this light and you will realise that the soldier has in his mind hundreds of incidents immensely more distressing—the killing and mutilation of his own comrades by enemy action, the bayoneting of the enemy, all the fearful sights and sounds that go with fighting at close quarters. Would he not wish to forget these things if it were possible? Imagine the scene when the dawn breaks after a night bombardment and the effect of high explosives is seen in all its nakedness. All this is imprinted on his mind, yet when he returns home, we speak of him as if he had just been through an interesting and rare experience, and no more.

Then take this: I was working once for a lady who, when told that the 1st N.Z.E.F. had lost 16,000 men killed, remarked in a casual way: "Ah well, that's not so many." Well, I am pretty hard-boiled, but that remark knocked me right over; when I followed my old soldier friend out to the bunkhouse, I found him in tears.

There is a reaction which affects the soldier when he has finished with the army. The glamour of war, the constant companionship, the moving drama from recruit to battle-experienced veteran, all act like a stimulant, and when discharge from the army occurs, this stimulant is lost. So do not wonder if you see a soldier drinking more than he usually does. But above all, do not lecture him or give him moral advice. He is probably a victim of that indefinable disability which only soldiers are subject to; which has no name, and which no medical man has yet diagnosed; which affects men differently, but is the shadow of the fact that these heroes have actually descended into hell.

Imaginary Message From the Past

"IF I may bring a message from my age to yours, I would say three things: first, do not let the advance of science slacken, for knowledge is power, and the pursuit of truth is one of the ultimate and eternal imperatives for men. Second, do not allow science to be divorced from morality. Your age has different views on morality from mine, but we both agree that moral rectitude is another of the ultimate human imperatives, and that it is linked with some thing outside ourselves. Finally, there is freedom. One of the sentences I am proud to have written is this: 'It is better for a man to go wrong in freedom than to go right in chains.'"—*Thomas Henry Huxley, in an imaginary interview conducted by Julian Huxley, in the BBC overseas series "Science Notebook."*

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