

POSSIBLY because I now have more time, and for no other obvious reason, I seem to be noticing more things and taking a different view of their importance. I remember wondering, during the time that I was trying to write about "Civilian into Soldier" how much effort would be required for a person to retain his individuality, and his pride in it, and still be a soldier.

I thought then that the gradually changing emphasis of modern army training was making it more possible for a soldier's personality to remain free of too many fetters, however much the organisation of so vast a machine might capture and remove from him the ownership of his physical faculties.

But, now that the contrast has been made, and I have had time to observe myself and other things, I am more than greatly exercised about what has happened to me, and about what must be happening to so many others, whether or no they are willing to examine the phenomena, as I am eager.

Time to Use

During these last few weeks of comparative freedom I have had time. I have always valued it, if only because it could be applied with equal expertness to excessive industry or successful laziness. But not until this month have I been able to define more precisely why it should be so valuable.

It is most valuable, I am coming to believe, because I think it gives me opportunity constantly to bring myself out into perspective against the background of other people, other events. I am talking for individuals who find a need always to be busy keeping clear of embroilment with the mass of life and living.

I should like to flatter myself that it is a concern for essentials. Perhaps the seeming significance of what I call essentials is only a pretence. Perhaps the whole business is self protection. Perhaps it is misanthropy.

At all events, I have lately been rediscovering the joy of making my own decisions.

This discovery proves to my satisfaction that life in the army organisation definitely did influence me a great deal more than I should have liked to admit at the time. I was busy all the time attempting to do certain jobs, and at the same time priding myself that the great regimentation of humanity, in which I was taking part, was recognised by me and its dangers avoided by me.

Now I am beginning to see that I was wrong, that I was regimented, numbered, labelled, organised; and all this with no intention, no one person responsible for it, and little realisation on my part.

Rising Tide

And time was the secret of the transformation. Then I had not time to preserve myself. Sleep and food were my only stoppages, and I took both as greedily as circumstances permitted. I

warned myself against losing my identity in the tide, and while I still warned myself the tide swept on, and me with it.

Theories like these must be translated into action. What actions did I take to resist society's attempt to transpose me into a cipher in its books?

I read the newspaper, and carefully listened to as many broadcasts as I was able. I entered into arguments with other people bent on saving the world, the film industry, social legislation, forest and bird life, hills from erosion, Christianity from perverting Pauls, and other people's women from abduction by the enemy.

But in all these matters opinions were formed hastily and forgotten faster. There was always something else to do, and in a hurry. No time to examine anything, anybody, or oneself. No time to consider living except in immediate particularities. From Reveille to Retreat, and some time after, the wrist-watch and not any personal philosophy governed existence.

Now I am beginning to realise how different it can be in civilian life. An item in the newspaper annoys. Then it was a momentary exclamation that resulted. Now, criticism is tempered in time given to thought.

Only this day I was greatly annoyed because someone had scribbled underlinings and marginal notes over the pages of a book I liked. If I had been in the army I should readily have found a suitable expression for first thoughts. In civilian life the same sort of means of expression are not lacking—in fact I'll say outright that people who do that should be stopped from proving that the practice is hereditary—but now I have time to go a little further.

Focus

Whether my thoughts about the affair would be important to you I cannot tell. I am not going to try them. But I would like to show that the fact of my thinking about the scribbling fool at all—and thinking about him judiciously and with reason—enables me to put my background into focus and throw some light on myself.

But in army life little examination of that sort is possible. Details come rushing for attention with every minute. A thought comes, and Bang! it is gone to make room for another. An experience happens and Whoof! the instant's thought chases it away to make room for another.

And most of this experience, most of these swiftly passing thoughts, must in the army be concerned mainly with physical things. In this environment you find that society has thrust you into a genial, but nevertheless exacting inferno in which the survival of the fittest is almost the one rule of life.

Always Competition

Unless you accept the attitude of the man who likes the army because there is always someone else to do his thinking for him—unless you thus brutally resign yourself—there is no moment of the day, or even of the night, when you are not, pleasantly perhaps, but none-

theless violently, in competition with your neighbour. And all that competition is about physical affairs. It may be about the amount or quality of the food you wish to acquire at the common mess table. It might be about your drill, which is the physical application of a primevally simple idea, or it may be about the amount of straw in your palisade. It is lively while it lasts, but it does not create for you any mental stimulus superior to whatever stimulus it was that made man and the giraffe reach higher for more succulent foliage.

In civilian life, on the other hand, there is time to protect your spirit against drowning in this sort of thing. Between bouts of competition you are offered an interval of peace, in the train on the way home, or the tram, or during the lunch-hour spell, or at night waiting for sleep privately in your own bed. There is time to shed preoccupations and achieve some mental freedom.

Worried

Readers who have come so far with me will now be considerably worried. If they have not taken me seriously, they might even put me down as some sort of saboteur, about whose intentions they cannot quite be sure. If they have managed to get my meaning they will be worried, as I am, about the long-range effect of the shots which mediocrity is permitted to fire at civilisation when civilisation so hastily attempts to reduce itself to a mean in thought, action, and concentrated effort.

Observe the small cycle of experience I have tried here to record. First, the wearing of a physical uniform. Then the discovery that a mental uniform is also fitted. Then the reaction.

Compare the cycle of social experience before, during, and after those other wars of ours. First the unwilling acceptance of uniformity. Then the years of regimentation. The contagious spread of such assertive hysterias as badge-wearing and Boche-badgering. Then a cessation of all the circumstances that forced people together behind one single effort. Then the reaction. And while the withdrawal is in progress, events are marching on to outpace control or human capacity. Sensitivity must crawl away for a rest, while indomitable unreason, unflagging, indefatigably purposeless, makes again another mess.

Lately a bookmaker in England has offered evens on a large sum of money that the war will be ended within a year. Harry Hopkins gave tongue to a widespread optimism when he said in Moscow that Hitler would lose the war. About the same time a prominent New Zealand businessman discussed trade prospects after the war would be over.

Large Noises And Small

In the midst of these large noises, here is one small voice entering a plea that the end of the war, when it comes, will have other meanings. I hope it will mean more than that a bookmaker wagered shrewdly, more than that butter can once again safely cross the seas. I hope it will mean that society raised itself to perform a tremendous job of

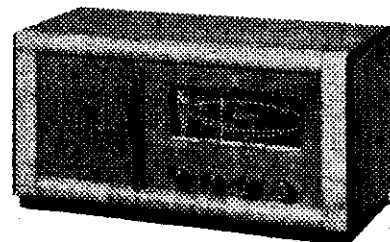
work. And I hope it will not mean when that has been done, that the best of society may feel inclined to go away and take a rest and recuperate.

That is precisely what happened after the last great war. The hate soon subsided into a realisation of human reality. The badges were thrown away. The brains of civilisation were bedded into a pillow for a tired head. Idealism and Woodrow Wilson died and the ghosts of Versailles tramped unimpeded onwards.

I have a fear that the same thing may happen again. I can't be sure that we have yet been frightened badly enough. I believe my own small and incomplete experience is typical of whole generations of other people. We accept the inevitable and we offer ourselves for common action in a common cause. We recognise the expediency of regimentation. In fact we demand it when we demand organisation for efficiency. But when it is all over we shall desire more than anything else that we might be allowed to recover the ground we have lost within ourselves. To express the feeling only in the crudest physical sense: we shall want to be allowed to eat by ourselves, walk alone for a while, and read quietly away from the noise of loudspeakers.

If we do, we might as well stay there until it is time to crawl out again and find badges for another wearing. We may submit now to necessity, but when the words of Mr. Hopkins and the bookmaker come true, then will be the time to make necessity submit and shape it for ourselves.

When that happens, I think it will be a good idea if we all sit down and write a few articles with the same title as these of mine. I find the idea well worth trying.



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