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Remembering



By William E. Brooks

NOW that the summer had come, I was free to do what I had long wanted to do, visit again the old camp where I had lived in those days of war, those Homeric days, now seemingly so far away. I thought that there, at least, things would be different from what they were everywhere else in America, that those fields and skies which had witnessed the eager living of the land's young manhood as it shaped itself for the struggle, would somehow have about them the spirit of those vital days, its ideals, its enthusiasms, and that I could go back again to my job believing that there was one place in the land where the gods of the market-place were not supreme. But as I passed thru the big gates, where so often at midnight I had stood to watch the brown lines swing out for the great adventure, it seemed as tho my dreams were not to be realized, that my hopes were to issue forth in fresh disappointments.

Ours was a little camp. Before the great days came it had been a fair grounds devoted for a week of the year to horse races and prize pigs, and the rest of the year to silence. Then in the summer of '17 the buildings had been cleared of booths and the cattle sheds painted and fumigated, and boys from all over the land had filled them, lured by the certain assurance of the wise ones in Washington that in six weeks they would be driving ambulances in France. They did not get there in six weeks, but they did get there finally and mighty tales of great adventure are told of them and hundreds of decorations prove the worth of the tales. Thru that long, hot summer they had drilled here until every blade of grass was worn away by their feet, and the thousands of other feet that followed them in '18. But as I passed in thru the gates I saw that every brown worn space was green again, that every sign of their tenantry had vanished. Over on the track a horse was speeding behind a sulky, and the sheds were once more ready for the prize pigs. The camp was the fair grounds again and its men and the things they stood for were forgotten, as everywhere else in America, where pork and its products were for the while mightier than ideals.

Thru the long afternoon I prowled around the place, remembering. Here under these trees stood the tents of the medical staff where they shot us full of vaccines and viruses and made us sore physically and mentally

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—particularly mentally. There were the horse-stalls and the tale came back that they told about the rookie that wandered in late one night still in "cits," with his new issue of blankets and folding cot under his arm. "Where am I?" he asked of a group about a candle. And when they paused in their game long enough to answer, they got the startling reply, "Then I'm in the wrong place, I was ordered to the pig-pens." Here was the big mess hall under the grandstand, where we first formed that acquaintance which ripened into intimate fellowship, with "tinned Willy" and beans. And over yonder the big recreation hall, crowded o' nights, when the boxing bouts were held. I don't think I shall ever forget that last big night before the Italian contingent sailed and two thousand howled themselves hoarse about the padded ring in the center. The ground within the track had been the parade, and as I leaned over the fence I could see again the clouds of dust and the lines swinging by as the old C. O. reviewed them for the last time. He was a bully old C. O., with a lot of plain American common sense, and he knew the value of using it as he turned these American boys into fighting men.

It was just about the time when they used to sound retreat when I got back to the big flagstaff beside headquarters. To me retreat had always been the most solemn hour in the camp day, that hour when the slow bugle blew, and the colors began to fall. There was a song the band used to play as the bunting fluttered down (how was it I had not heard that song for months?), while everywhere over the camp men stopped as they were, faced toward headquarters and stood at attention. The K. P.'s peeling potatoes at the doors of the mess hall, the prisoners digging ditches or working on the coal pile, the guards walking their posts, the officers with their ladies over under the trees, every man of the camp, buck private, shave-tail and the big chaps with the eagles on their shoulders, stood stiff and steady during those proud imperious moments. Even the Q. M.'s forgot their lordly grandeur, and ceased scorning the humble crew on whom they had just thrust blouses that did not fit, as they listened to that call. It was a moment when one remembered why he was there, why men were dying on the other side of the world, and ideas like liberty and freedom and right possessed our souls. And as the band crashed out the final chords, their echoes rang thru our hearts with a high resolve that

The Star Spangled Banner in triumph shall wave,
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

I think that scene night after night repeated helped to keep the men steady thru those long slow days of training, thru the weary monotony of drills, thru the horrors of the hours when we learned to use the gas-masks, thru the cold and the heat, the snow and the dust, and sent every man, with a strong heart, ready for action over the seas. It came to me as a great relief that among the thousands I had helped send off I did not remember but one who did not want to go, however he may have felt when he came [Continued on page 209] first to the camp. That thrill, that enthusiasm, that lofty notion that the country was greater than the man, and that if it demanded all he was ready to give all; give it because it was his country and it asked; it was that that made the American soldier splendid, that made the American army magnificent. Was that not the thing which would save America and make her again, not the slave of her own desires, but the servant of the oppressed over all the world?

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I do not believe in ghosts, but there are things in life which are not seen. And they came to me there beside the empty flagstaff, to assure me that those echoes had not wholly died, that the spirit that then made America great was not dead but sleeping. This camp and scores like it thru the land had been the breeding places of a spirit which we had laid aside for the moment as we had laid aside the khaki that then we wore, but which we had not forgotten. Here boys had come from great homes and simple homes, and endured hardships and toil when a great cause challenged. Here they had sweated and sworn under hot summer suns thru long hours of drill, here they had been wet and cold when the snow lay heavy on the camp and the north wind blew. And from this place they had swung out in long straight ranks fit and ready for their task, while the sleepy guards saluted and the midnight stars looked down. And over wide seas they had gone, peril infested seas, to do the deed whose worth only the years shall tell. And so I turned away content, and took my course back to the big gates. The gods of the market-place might hold America for awhile, but they could not hold it always. Not a land for which such boys had died, and in which as veterans they still lived.

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