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Blinded in Battle, But Not Made Useless

***How the Soldiers of the Allies Who Must Live Forever in Darkness
Are Now Taught to Become Independent.***

These days the streets of Paris are filled with soldiers each of whom has given to France some part of his physical self. That his country may endure, that she may continue to enjoy and each liberty, he has seen his arm or his leg, or both, blown off, or cut off. But when on the boulevards you meet him walking with crutches or with an empty sleeve pinned beneath his Cross of War, and he thinks your glance is one of pity, he resents it. He holds his head more stiffly erect. He seems to say, "I know how greatly you envy me!"

And who would dispute him? Long after the war is ended, so long as he lives, men and women of France will honor him, and in their eyes he will read their thanks. But there is one soldier who cannot read their thanks, who is spared the sight of their pity. He is the one who has made all but the supreme sacrifice. He is the one who is blind. He sits in perpetual darkness. You can remember certain nights that seemed to stretch to doomsday, when sleep was withheld and you tossed and lashed upon the pillow, praying for the dawn. Imagine a night of such torture dragged out over many years. With the dreadful knowledge that the dawn will never come. Imagine Paris with her bridges, palaces, parks, with the Seine, the Tuileries, the boulevards, the glittering shop windows conveyed to you only through noise. Only through the shrieks of motor horns and the shuffling of feet.

The men who have been blinded in battle have lost more than sight. They have been robbed of their independence. They feel they are a burden. It is not only the physical loss they suffer, but the thought that no longer are they of use, that they are a care, that in the scheme of things—even in their own little circles of family and friends—there is for them no place. It is not unfair to the poilu to say that the officer who is blinded suffers more than the private. As a rule, he is more highly strung, more widely educated; he has seen more; his experience of the world is broader; he has more to lose. Before the war he may have been a lawyer, doctor, man of many affairs. For him it is harder than, for example, the peasant to accept a future of unending blackness spent in plaiting straw or weaving rag carpets. Under such conditions life no longer tempts him. Instead, death tempts him, and the pistol seems very near at hand.

It was to save men of the officer class from despair and suicide, to make them know that for them there still was a life of usefulness, work, and accomplishment, that there was organized in France the Committee for Men Blinded in Battle. The idea was to bring back to officers who had lost their sight, courage, hope, and a sense of independent, to give them work not merely mechanical but more in keeping with their education and intelligence. The President of France is patron of the society, and on its committees in Paris and New York are many distinguished names. The French Government has promised a house near Paris where the blind soldiers may be

educated. When I saw them they were in temporary quarters in the Hotel de Crillon, lent to them by the proprietor. They had been gathered from hospitals in different parts of France by Miss Winifred Hold, who for years has been working for the blind in her Lighthouse in New York., She is assisted in the work in Paris by Mrs. Peter Cooper Hewitt. The officers were brought to the Crillon by French ladies, whose duty it was to guide them through the streets. Some of them also were their instructors, and in order to teach them to read and write with their fingers had themselves learned the Braille alphabet. This requires weeks of very close and patient study. And no nurse's uniform goes with it. But the reward was great.

It was evident in the alert and eager interest of the men who, perhaps, only a week before had wished to "curse God, and die." But since then hope had returned to each of them, and he had found a door open, and a new life.

And he was facing it with the same or with even a greater courage than that with which he had led his men into the battle that blinded him. Some of the officers were modeling in clay, others were learning typewriting, one with a drawing board was studying to be an architect, others were pressing their finger tips over the raised letters of the Braille alphabet. Opposite each officer, on the other side of the table, sat a woman he could not see. She might be young and beautiful, as many of them were. She might be white-haired and a great lady bearing an ancient title, from the faubourg across the bridges, but he heard only a voice.

The voice encouraged his progress, or corrected his mistakes, and a hand, detached and descending from nowhere, guided his hand, gently, as one guides the fingers of a child. The officer was again a child. In life for the second time he was beginning with A, B, and C. The officer was tall, handsome, and deeply sunburned. In his uniform of a *chasseur d'Afrique* he was a splendid figure. On his chest were the medals of the campaigns in Morocco and Algiers, and the crimson ribbon of the Legion of Honor. The officer placed his forefinger on a card covered with raised hieroglyphics.

"N," he announced.

"No," the voice answered him.

"M?" His tone did not carry conviction.

"You are guessing," accused the voice. The officer was greatly confused.

"No, no mademoiselle!" he protested. "Truly, I thought it was an 'M.'"

He laughed guiltily. The laugh shook you. You saw all that he could never see; inside the room the great ladies and latest American Countesses, eager to help, forgetful of self, full of wonderful, womanly sympathy, and outside, the Place de la Concorde, the gardens of the Tuileries, the trees of the Champs Elysees, the sun setting behind the gilded dome of the Invalides. All these were lost to him, and yet as he sat in the darkness, because he could not tell an N from an M, he laughed, and laughed happily. From where did he draw his strength and courage? Was it the instinct for life that makes a drowning man fight against an ocean? Was it his training as an officer of the Grande Armee? Was it the spirit of the French that is the one thing no German knows; and no German can ever break? Or was it the sound of a woman's voice and the touch of a woman's hand? If the reader wants to contribute something to help teach a new profession to these gentlemen, who in the fight for civilization have contributed their eyesight, write to the Secretary of the committee, Mrs. Peter Cooper Hewitt, Hotel Ritz, Paris.

What is going forward at the Crillon for blind French officers is being carried on in London at St. Dunstan's, Regent's Park, for blind Tommies. At this school the classes are much larger than those in Paris, the pupils more numerous, and they live and sleep on the premises. The premises are very beautiful. They consists of seventeen acres of gardens, lawns, trees, a lake,

and a stream on which you can row and swim, situated in Regent's Park and almost in the heart of London. In the days when London was further away the villa of St. Dunstan's belonged to the eccentric Marquis of Hertford, the wicked Lord Steyne of Thackeray's "Vanity Fair." It was a country estate. Now the city has closed in around it, but it is still a country estate, with ceilings by the Brothers Adam, portraits by Romney, sideboards by Sheraton, and on the lawn sheep. To keep sheep in London is as expensive as to keep racehorses, and to own a country estate in London can be afforded only by Americans. The estate next to St. Dunstan's is owned by an American lady. I used to play lawn tennis there with her husband. Had it not been for the horns of the taxicabs we might have been a hundred miles from the nearest railroad. Instead, we were so close to Baker Street that one false step would have landed us in Mme. Tussaud's. When the war broke out the husband ceased hammering tennis balls and hammered German ships of war. He sank several—and is now waiting impatiently outside of Wilhemshaven for more.

St. Dunstan's also is owned by an American, Otto Kahn, the banker. In peace time, in the Winter months, Mr. Kahn makes it possible for the people of New York to listen to good music at the Metropolitan Opera House. When war came, at his country place in London he made it next to possible for the blind to see. He gave the key of the estate to C. Arthur Pearson. He also gave him permission in altering St. Dunstan's to meet the needs of the blind to go as far as he liked.

When I first knew Arthur Pearson he and Lord Northcliffe were making rival collections of newspapers and magazines. They collected them as other people collect postal cards and cigar bands. Pearson was then, as he is now, a man of the most remarkable executive ability, of keen intelligence, of untiring nervous energy. That was ten years ago. He knew then that he was going blind. And when the darkness came he accepted the burden; not only his own, but he took upon his shoulders the burden of all the blind in England. He organized the National Institute for those who could not see. He gave them of his energy, which has not diminished; he gave them his time, his intelligence. If you ask what the time of a blind man is worth, go to St. Dunstan's and you will find out. You will see a home and school for blind men, run by a blind man. The same efficiency, knowledge of detail, intolerance of idleness, the same generous appreciation of the work of others, that he put into running The Express and Standard, he now exerts at St. Dunstan's. It has Pearson written all over it just as a mile away there is a building covered with the name of Selfridge, and a cathedral with the name of Christopher Wren. When I visited him in his room at St Dunstan's he was standing with his back to the open fire dictating to a stenographer. He called to me cheerily, caught my hand, and showed me where I was to sit. All the time he was looking straight at me and firing questions.

"When did you leave Saloniki? How many troops have we landed? Our positions are very strong, aren't they?"

He told the stenographer she need not wait, and of an appointment he had which she was not to forget. Before she reached the door he remembered two more things she was not to forget. The telephone rang, and, still talking, he walked briskly around a sofa, avoided a table and an arm chair, and without fumbling picked up the instrument. What he heard was apparently very good news. He laughed delightedly, saying "That's fine! That's splendid!"

A secretary opened the door and tried to tell him what he had just learned, but was cut short.

"I know," said Pearson. "So-and-so has just phoned me. It's fine, isn't it?"

He took a small pad from his pocket, made a note on it, and laid the memorandum beside the stenographer's machine. Then he wound his way back to the fireplace and offered a case of

cigarettes. He held them within a few inches of my hand. Since I last had seen him he had shaved his mustache and looked ten years younger, and, as he exercises every morning, very fit. He might have been an officer of the navy out of uniform. I had been in the room five minutes, and only once, when he wrote on the pad and I saw he did not look at the pad, would I have guessed that he was blind.

“What we teach them here,” he said, firing the words as though from a machine gun, “is that blindness is not an ‘affliction.’ We won’t allow that word. We teach them to be independent. Sisters and mothers spoil them! Afraid they’ll bump their shins. Won’t let them move about. Always leading them. That’s bad, very bad. Makes them think they’re helpless no good, invalids for life. We teach ’em to strike out for themselves. That’s the way to put heart into them. Make them understand they’re of use, that they can help themselves, help others, learn a trade be self-supporting. We trained them to row. Some of them never had had oars in their hands except on the pond at Hempstead Heath on a bank holiday. We trained a crew that swept the river.”

It was fine to see the light in his face. His enthusiasm gave you a thrill. He might have been Guy Nickells telling how the crew he coached won at New London.

“They were the best crews, too. University crews. Of course, our coxswain could see, but the crew were blind. We’ve not only taught them to row, we’ve taught them to support themselves, taught them trades. All men who come here have lost their eyesight in battle in this war, but already we have taught some of them a trade and set them up in business. And while the war lasts business will be good for them. And it must be nursed and made to grow. So we have an ‘after care’ committee. To care for them after they have left us. To buy raw material, to keep their work up to the mark, to dispose of it. We need money for those men. For them men who have started life again for themselves. Do you think there are people in America who would like to help those men?”

I asked, in case there were such people, to whom should they write.

“To me,” he said. “St. Dunstan’s, Regent Park.”

I found the seventeen acres of St. Dunstan’s so arranged that no blind man could possibly lose his way. In the house, over the carpets, were stretched strips of matting. So long as a man kept his feet on matting he knew he was on the right path to the door. Outside the doors hand rails guided him to the workshops, schoolrooms, exercising grounds, and kitchen gardens. Just before he reached any of these places a brass knob on the hand rail warned him to go slow. Were he walking on the great stone terrace and his foot scraped against a board he knew he was within a yard of a flight of steps. Wherever you went you found men at work, learning a trade, or having learned one, intent in the joy of creating something, To help them there are nearly sixty ladies, who have mastered the Braille system and come daily to teach it. There are many other volunteers, who take the men on walks around Regent’s Park and who talk and read to them. Everywhere was activity. Everywhere some one was helping some one; the blind teaching the blind; those who had been a week at St. Dunstan’s doing the honors to those just arrived. The place spoke only of hard work, mutual help, and cheerfulness. When first you arrived you thought you had over the others a certain advantage, but when you saw the work the blind men were turning out, which they could not see and which you knew with both your eyes you never could have turned out, you felt apologetic. There were cabinets, for instance, measured in the twentieth of an inch, and men who were studying to me masseurs who, only by touch, could distinguish all the bones in the body. There was Miss Woods, a blind stenographer. I dictated a sentence to her, and as fast as I spoke she took it down on a machine in the Braille alphabet. It

appeared in raised figures on a strip of paper like those that carry stock quotations. Then, reading the sentence with her fingers, she pounded it on an ordinary typewriter. Her work was faultless.

What impressed you was the number of the workers who, over their task, sang or whistled. None of them paid any attention to what the others were whistling. Each acted as though we were shut off in a world of his own. The spirits of the Tommies were unquenchable.

Brown Five was one of those privates who are worth more to a company than the Sergeant Major. He was a comedian. He looked like John Bunny, and when he laughed he shook all over, and you had to laugh with him, even though you were conscious that Brown Five had no eyes and no hands. But was he conscious of that? Apparently not. Was he disheartened? No! Some one snatched his cigarette; and with the stumps of his arms he promptly beat two innocent comrades over the head. When the lady guide interfered and admitted it was she who had robbed him, Brown Five roared in delight.

“I bashed ’em!” he cried. “Her took it, but I based the two of ’em!”

A private of the Munsters was wearing a net, and, as though he were quite alone, singing, in a fine baritone, “Tipperary.” If you want to hear real close harmony, you must listen to Southern darkies; and if you want to get the sweetness and melancholy out of an Irish chant, an Irishman must sing it. I thought I had heard “Tipperary” before several times, and that it was a march. But I found I had not heard it before, and that it is not a march, but a lament and a love song. The soldier did not know we were listening, and, while his fingers wove the meshes of the net, his voice rose in tones of the most moving sweetness. He did not know that he was facing a window, he did not know that he was staring straight out upon the City of London. But we knew and when in his rare baritone and rare brogue he whispered rather than sang the lines:

*Good-bye, Piccadilly—
Farewell, Leicester Square
It's a long, long way to Tipperary*

---all of his unseen audience hastily fled.

There was also Private Watts, who was mending shoes. When the week before Lord Kitchener visited St. Dunstan's Watts had joked with him. I congratulated him on his courage.

“What was your joke?” I inquired.

“He asked me when I was a prisoner with the Germans how they fed me, and I said ‘Oh, they gave me five beefsteaks a day.’”

“That was a good joke,” I said. “Did Kitchener think so?”

The man had been laughing, pleased and proud. Now the blank eyes turned wistfully to my companion.

“Did his Lordship smile?” he asked.

These blind French officers and English Tommies are teaching a great lesson. They are teaching men who are whining over the loss of money, health, or a job, to be ashamed. It is not we who are keeping them, but they who are helping us. They are showing us how to face disaster and setting us an example of real courage. And those who do not profit by it are more blind than they.