

Veteran as Job Hunter

Back from the Great War, a Canadian Soldier Tells of His Experiences and Prospects

I'M what you might call a "hero." I've been to the front and over the top. There's scarcely anything just now that I couldn't have for the asking. But I'm willing to bet my g'ass eye that five years from now most people will be thinking me a nuisance. You'll probably point out how this war's different. And I'm willing to give my most precious possession, which is the glass eye aforesaid, against the least of yours, if five years from now you'll not only be utterly and entirely fed up, as the English say, on heroes, but if there aren't plenty of folks not afraid to say so out loud as well as think it.

Don't mistake me. I'm not grouching. I've had a square deal from everybody, and I'm not sore at finding my old job gone. I don't cherish any particular quarrel with the fellow who took it; he wasn't responsible, anyhow. I'm quite awake to the fact that there are other ways of serving your country besides getting killed, and that to these ways there attach different degrees of honor. But I'm not blind, and, believe me, when the boys begin to come home in force you'll find one thing you least expected. You'll find them different in most ways, but chiefly you'll find them seeing things heaps clearer than before, and not at all backward about speaking the blunt truth instead of camouflaging.

To go back to the beginning: I went over with the first Canadian bunch, joined up at Calgary in August, '14. Had a good job, too. Seems years ago! The Western boys, take them by and large, were a bright bunch, a kind of hand-picked crowd of good sports and rough scrappers. What we went through before we got to the front was an earful. The later contingents had a smooth time alongside ours, what with the months we wasted at Valcartier and then that rotten Winter in the mud on Salisbury Plain. However, we got there in the end. The 10th, our crowd, got pretty well shot up right from the start, but I was one of the lucky ones. Always seemed to move my head when, if I'd kept it still, like God meant, it'd have got shot off. Switching over from time to time, as companies and then whole battalions were consolidated, I kept a whole skin. But I got mine eventually. Yes, Sir. It was coming to me, I guess, and finally I got it at Vimy Ridge.

Well, they've dug all the shrapnel out of my face now, and fitted me with a g'ass left eye. I had a swell time in hospital at Ramsgate, and here I am back in Canada again. The Maple Leaf forever, you bet! Still, I'd have liked to stay on in England a while longer, but there's no arguing with the High Command. Last week I was formally discharged from his Majesty's forces, and my cozy little pension began. The board kindly gave me a 35 per cent. disability. Think of it, seventeen and a half bones a month till death do us part, whether I work or not, get married, or stay single!

Can't I find a job? Sure I can, easy enough, too, 'cause I'm a great war veteran. Some veteran, hey, aged 26? Ever look up what veteran means in the dictionary? But I don't want some kid's job like peddling pins, or bobbing up and down in a store elevator all decked out in some store uniform. I want a man's job, that wants a man's brains and not more than one eye.

Farming? Say, you "civvies" have got perfectly good intentions, but why do you persist in trying to make us chaps go farming? Why don't you go yourselves? If it's all it's said to be, and so important to keep up production and all that, it seems kind of bum patriotism trying to pass the buck. Greater production! We had our share. Don't mis-

understand me. I'm a reasonable human being, but I can't quite see it. What's farming, anyway? After a guy's been living and sleeping, eating and playing, for three years with other guys all around, on every side, never out of sight, millions of 'em, you ask him to get out into the middle of the landscape, on a farm, with no company but his blooming ego, and not miss the old familiar faces. Why, you watch the next bunch of G. W. V.'s you see. They won't even go down street to buy a packet of smokes without the whole gang goes along.

You don't believe me when I say there's going to be an old soldier nuisance. Here's the way I dope it out. The guy who's fought for his King and country, or to make the world safe for democracy, or whatever it is he fights for, wants a job. Well? Does he want any old job that nobody else wants? He does not; he thinks he's entitled to the best, and so he is. He doesn't look upon a job as an accident, he says it's the least the country owes him. But there's one unlucky thing, all the best jobs are already held. When the war started some bosses promised to keep the fellows' jobs open when they enlisted. But they didn't know the war would last so long. Four years is a long time to keep a job open, and you can't blame them if they filled them up. Do you expect them to can the fellows they've taken on or promoted and hand the jobs back to soldiers on a silver plate?

But supposing I get a job. I don't know yet what I really do want, but I guess it'll come to an office job. That's about all I can do unless there's any openings in the movies. Or better make it some one else getting a job, otherwise you'll think I'm parading my ego. This old soldier, whom we'll call Bill, is started up as a ledger keeper, say. You got to remember, first of all, that for nearly four years Bill's been fighting. Which is to say, the only concern he's had in life is killing boches and not getting killed himself. After a while that loses its novelty, but it never gets to be routine. For the rest of life he's lost all interest, or else he finds it all doped out for him in the army rules.

In exchange for this he's got to observe a lot of regulations that strike him as piffle. He's got to rule off columns in red just this particular way or get a bawling out, and to pay at-



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tention to picayune stuff like filing systems and efficiency, and fool himself that something that happens is awfully important because it's out of the piffling routine, when he knows it isn't.

You got to remember that the way Bill looks at things isn't like you do. He's seen so many nasty things occur right in his immediate locality, like his pals getting their heads blown off, that he's kind of callous, kind of cynical and disillusioned about life. He's seen human life itself held so cheap that he figures it down to consisting of merely dodging death, with a sing-song or a smoke in between that a shell may end any second. Put him in an office and he's apt to make fun of filing systems and such like, which don't get him far with the office manager, who's been educated to believe filing systems are serious things and don't understand that Bill used to spend all his time in the trenches making fun of serious things and established customs. Add to this that Bill will want to tell stories all the time about how he and Haig finished the war, and will probably take up a lot of other people's time telling them. You can see a

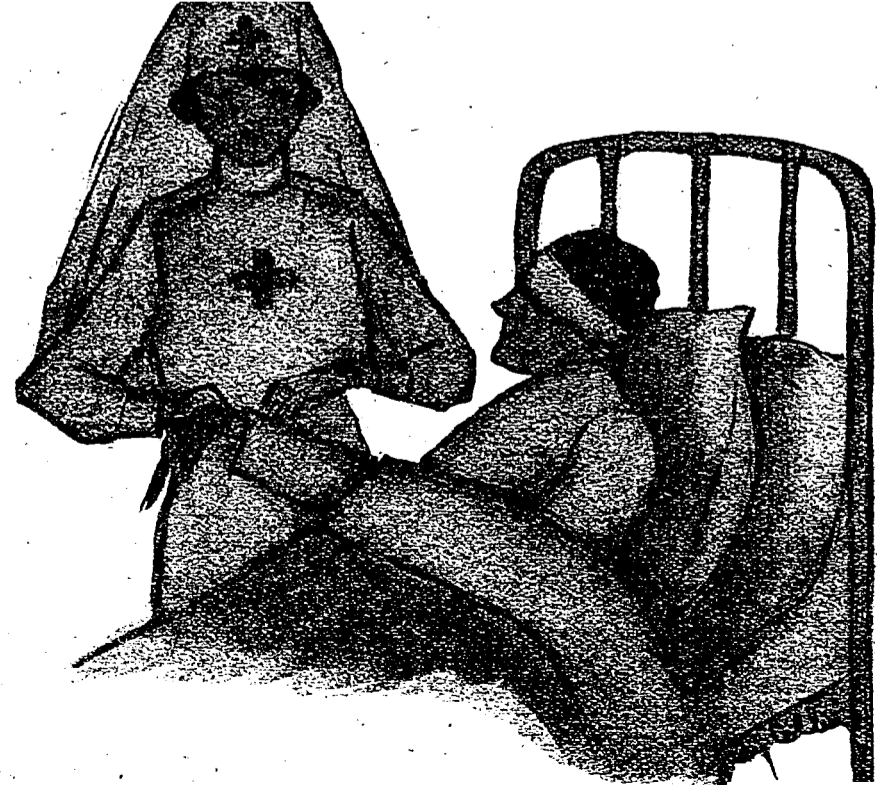
limit to that sort of thing in any office, hey?

Well, anyway, the war is now over some time. Things are back to what they used to be, or as near as they'll ever be. The big boss will one day go into session with himself, tell himself what a darned fool he was to ever hire returned soldiers, and bingo! Bill is out of his job without just knowing why. Or, maybe, if he's an honest gink, he's got discouraged because he sees he doesn't measure up to what they want and lost his self-respect, which is another way of saying that he gets the boot in God's good time.

The next thing that happens is that Bill drifts down to what is left of the Great War Veterans' Club, collects a few of his cronies, and pours his grievances out to them. He finds lots more in the same boat. When enough disgruntled guys are sworn in, there's trouble started somewhere, a riot outside some man's office that's fired a soldier, or raids on public meetings, or processions of G. W. V.'s. Pretty soon some slick politician who sees a chance for himself organizes a new political party composed of discontented ex-soldiers, and it's going to be a bold man to say nix to this party, even if they asked for the moon.

War's hell, ain't it? It sure does bring out the worst in human nature. When you join up you feel like Jan. 1 and you've sworn off everything, or just got confirmed in a little white nightie. You go around, oh, so different, with the rainbows a-playing round your head and wings sprouting under your vest. But it don't last—it don't last.

That's why I say, give the veteran a square deal, like you want yourself when you say the Lord's Prayer, no more, no less. None of us is a plaster saint, and if, when the boys come back, you sometimes think that they seem to have mean streaks in them, or that war hasn't ennobled them any, remember they're just average humanity. Suppose you'd been all so exploding with excitement that you nearly busted, and really did feel like a hero as you started running across No Man's Land, and then come to in a ward minus some useful part, and stayed in bed so long that you got to hate the sight of a white sheet till you died, or stuck around a convalescent home doing nothing for months. Guess you'd feel depressed, too, sort of at a loose end. And then, on top of it all, you gotta get out and hunt a job—you, that's musing around in a mess of things you'd forgot the use of.



"I had a swell time in a hospital at Ramsgate."