NOTHING IS OLDER THAN THE SOLDIER GROUCH

It Is Not a Discovery by Mr. Dos Passos; It Goes Back to the Days of the Flint Arrowhead

By FAIRFAX DOWNEY

Illustrations by Jefferson Machamer

"Didn't keep his eye on the wife, and when he came around with his club he sliced. The wife got away to the rough, and they never found her"

KIPLING'S lines might apply as well to the late war—"The captains and the kings depart"—for the commanding presence of the former seems to have misted away in peace-time jobs, and the departure of the latter apparently is definite, if you except the constantly recurring Charley Hapsburg. You might be inclined to think that "the tumult and the shouting," too, had died away, and that an unearthly quiet had succeeded the martial clamor, the calm before the storm of the coming Conference on Limitation of Armament.

But no. A low, ominous rumbling has been the undertone of the war-is-over stillness all the while. Even in this now peaceful country, out in the wings of the theater of war, supers have been furnishing the tonal background for a mob scene. To many of us it has been inaudible; in fact, it wouldn't have been heard at all if it had not been for the publication of the novel by John Dos Passos, "Three Soldiers." Now, we know that three years or so ago there was a hoarse, throaty murmuring of such magnitude and virulence that it could not possibly have died down as yet. It was—it is—the great, old army grouch.

Careless of us not to have noted it, especially since it is nothing new, but as old as war itself. It has gone reverberating down the ages, vying with the squawk of the war conches, the crack of the catapults and the roaring of the cannon. The fighting, the food, the duties and the discomforts, all have been targets of the grouch military, and in many of the details of these a kick, as the saying is, has been coming. But the grouch subsided, it had been believed, with the signing of treaties or the completion of demobilization. Not so. It's all been cumulative, a legacy of martial pessimism handed down from generation to generation to detonate in Mr. Dos Passos's book with a terrific explosion of—impolite, but expressive word—bellyaching.

The complaints of generals on one thing or the other have been articulate from time to time in the public prints, but those of the buck private barely have broken ranks, or at best have been forced to be content with a small and sympathetic hearing in the family circle. The heroes of "Three Soldiers" and all the rest of the rank and file with a speaking part in the book wandered through an endless slough of despond from start to finish without gain or glory and nothing to do about the mud but sling it. Nor were their objections poetic after the manner of the Light Brigade, who were quoted as remarking sadly that some one had blundered.

One with the skill of Mr. H. G. Wells in reading the "record of the rocks" might translate therefrom the obscure idiograms scratched by the clumsy hand of the Neanderthal man in protest against the headman's latest expedition against a neighboring tribe to lay in a new supply of head wives.

"What do we get out of this?" the reluctant warrior must have queried pictorially. "Probably a sharp stone through about three inches of my four-inch skull and some dental impressions in my neck. Here we have a hike of three moons ahead of us through a country infested by the most ferocious of diplodocuses, and then a tough argument with a tribe on a subject that means nothing at all in my life. If I were to rate an extra spouse or so out of it, I'd show some enthusiasm. But not when the net proceeds of this expedition go to old Dogtooth and the other headmen.

"The old man has too many wives as it is—more than he can shake a club at. The last time I saw him do any wooing, he was away off on his swing. Didn't keep his eye on the wife, and when he came around with his club he sliced. The wife got away to the rough and they never did find her. Blame this army life, anyway!"

Mr. Homer, a Greek gentleman who wrote some war verse, seems to have had a viewpoint diametrically opposite from that of Mr. Dos Passos. One gathers from a perusal of Mr. Homer's stuff that war to him was a matter of heroics, glamour and loud cheers. For all that he was somewhat of a realist and did not ignore the presence of grouches in the army, although he gave far the most space while on that trend to the bad humor of a general which is nothing out of the ordinary at all. Achilles sulked in his tent for days and upset the whole campaign. Although I cannot recall the faultless dactyllics as I translated them at school, it runs in my head that the passage in question went something like this:

> Achilles sulked in his tent for a long, long time,
> And a red-haired maiden was the cause of his crime.

There was a great to-do about that, but when a common soldier began to express his views on the Trojan war in general, Homer gave him only a very few lines and made a joke of him. This man, Thirsites by name, was described as having a head like a sugar loaf, and as being ludicrous of aspect. His speech to the effect that no one knew what the war was all about and that it would be just as well to pass up the remaining extent of the ten-year schedule and go home was received with a salvo of loud guffaws, and he was replied to with a passage rich in fervency and war-like feeling. I cannot entirely recollect that hearty hexameter as I translated it for a pink-whiskered professor at school, but my memory of it is this:

> Know, Thirsites, crude and ungainly, thou art not behind at the plow.
> Oh, base-born, hope not for riches. Thou'rt in the army now.

Thirsites was treated with the same disregard and derision as a lady by the name of Cassandra, who put on the pessimism for the women's auxiliaries. Homer stressed only the hurrahs for victory and the charms of Helen, whose going A. W. O. L. to Paris caused the whole war. And yet as one reads the Iliad one cannot help but feel that if the whole matter had been submitted to a fair and impartial oyster-shell vote in the various agoras the lady's face would have launched no thousand ships, but merely a one-man rowboat, with friend husband, Menelaus, at the oars.

History does not state, but it is a safe bet that while Alexander was weeping for new worlds to conquer the buck hoplites of the Macedonian army were cussing a blue streak and thanking the gods for the shortage. Around that camp Columbus would have been persona non grata.

In this general period in history there existed a remarkable body of soldiery, who are said never to have grouched. These were the Spartans. About the time when some of them might feel like enumerating the trials and worthlessness of army life, along would come some skirmish like Thermopylæ, where the generally accepted procedure was to die but never surrender. A dead soldier doesn't grumble. Hence the reputation of the Spartans.

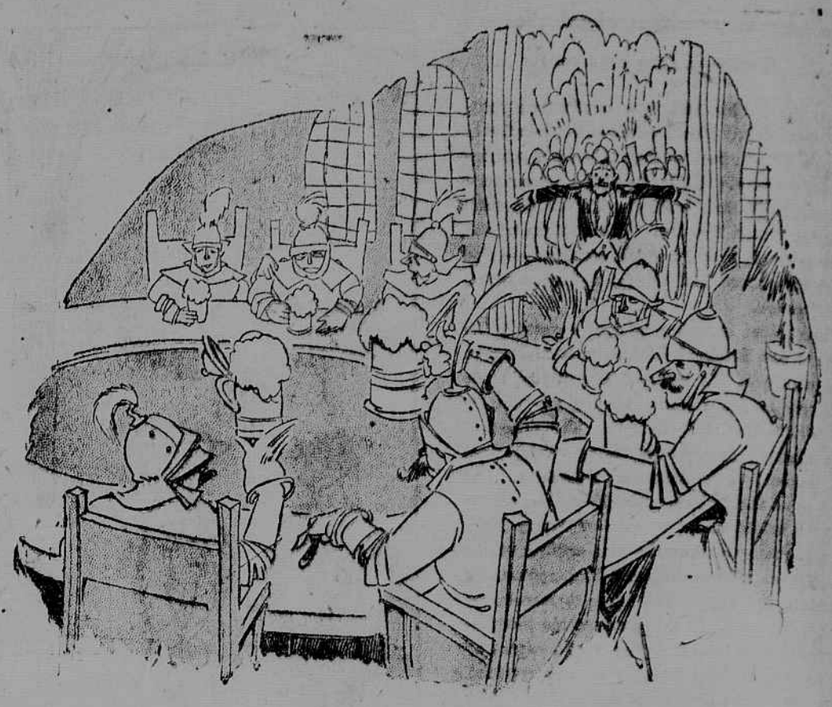
But possibly that is unjust to the bellicose inhabitants of Lacedæmonia, for one must consider the story of the Spartan youth who stole a fox and rather than confess to violation of the articles of war on plundering concealed the animal in his bosom and allowed it to gnaw his vitals till he fell dead. There was uncomplaining fortitude! Most of the soldiers in the late war kicked constantly at the bite of cooties, concealed in their bosoms, although from time to time the sanitary section fumigated them away. Remember, too, that in the days of the Spartans there were no de-foxing machines.

Let us pass from the glory that was Greece to the grandeur that was Rome, keeping in mind the military grouches that were mutual. One can imagine that grumbling filled the air in every camp of the far-flung empire, albeit most of it on the quiet, for a légion that was too outspoken in those days would wake up the next morning to find itself decimated.

"Why," the troops would mutter, "must we lay down our lives to divide all Gaul into three parts? We aren't going to write a book about it. What is Cleopatra to us? Jove drat her! What's the big idea of building a bridge across the Rhine, when there's no advantageous rate of exchange? Will there be any triumph for us lads in the ranks when one of those there elephants of Hannibal's slides down the Alps into our laps? This pro bono publico stuff may be all right, but we scratched a mean stylus on the pay tablets a month ago and we never got a blank blank drachma."

These and many other things the legionaries were prone to rise and inquire. To them it seemed hard that a veteran who slipped into the Eternal City for a little saturnalia should be rounded up by the prætors and sent to the galleys for life. Too much worship of Mars and not enough of Bacchus was the policy of the administration, they believed, and it was the secret wish of all of them that some one would sneak into the temple of the Two-Faced Janus, whose dual countenance portended war and peace, and give him a stiff neck when he was enjoying his calmer mood.

"What's the big idea of building a bridge across the Rhine when there is no advantageous rate of exchange?"



War was fair enough for King Arthur, Sir Launcelot and the rest who had seats at the Round Table, but it was hard lines for those the head waiter didn't know

"First to fight!" they would sneer. "Tell that to the gladiators!"

When knighthood was said to be in flower the outlook for the men-at-arms and the serfs might be said to be a pretty weedy one. War was fair enough for King Arthur and Sir Launcelot and the rest of them who had seats reserved at the Round Table, but it was hard lines for those whom the head waiter didn't know.

Knights won the favor of ladies fair, but for all other ranks—the churls, varlets, caitiffs and such—life was one long round of saluting and being impaled and hung. Naturally they bemoaned their lot somewhat when their part in the battle was known to consist in serving as obstacles when Childe Roland, El Cid, the Chevalier Bayard and the rest of the commissioned personnel put on a merry steeplechase with their large, flat-footed charges carrying weight—much weight.

On through the centuries soldiers beefed their best in all wars. Not that it got them anywhere. In after years some one would sit musing over their skulls and remark: "It was a famous victory."

Just or not, no war has been without grumbling in the armies. A full share must be recorded even for the Continentals in our American Revolution. Yet regard the glorious result: The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which, it must be borne in mind, was at that time without the Eighteenth Amendment.

As for the Napoleonic wars, I cannot carry my point better than by quoting a few eloquent paragraphs from Erckmann-Chartrian's novel "The Conscript." A young soldier, drafted into the exhausted ranks of the Emperor's armies, in spite of the fact that he is a cripple, is speaking to a comrade in the ranks.

"Glory is not for such as we, Zebede; it is for others who live well, eat well and sleep well. They have dancings and rejoicings, as we see by the gazettes, and glory, too, in the bargain, when we have won it by dint of sweat, fasting and broken bones. But poor wretches like us, forced away from home, when at last they return, after losing their habits of labor and industry, and mayhap a limb, get but little of your glory. Many a one, among their old friends—no better men than they—who were not, perhaps so good workmen, have made money during the conscript's seven years of war, have opened a shop, married their sweethearts, had pretty children, are men of position—city councillors—notables. And when the others who have returned from seeking glory by killing their fellow men, pass by, their chevrons on their arms, those old friends turn a cold shoulder upon them, and if the soldier has a red nose through drinking brandy, which was necessary to keep his blood warm in the rain, the snow, the forced march, while they were drinking good wine, they say, 'There goes a drunkard!' and the poor conscript, who only asked to be let stay at home and work, becomes a sort of beggar."

And something of the understanding that comes to the conscript as to the meaning of army life:

"At Frankfort I learned to understand military life. Up to that time I had been but a simple conscript; then I became a soldier. I do not speak merely of drill—the way of turning the head right or left, measuring the steps, lifting the hand to the height of the first or second band to load, aiming, recovering arms at the word of command—that is only an affair of a month or two, if a man really desires to learn; but I speak of discipline—of remembering that the corporal is always in the right when he speaks to a private soldier, the sergeant when he speaks to the corporal, the sergeant-major when speaking to the sergeant, the second lieutenant when he orders the sergeant-major, and so on to the Marshal of France—even if the superior asserts that two and two make five or that the moon shines at midday.

"This is very difficult to learn, but there is one thing that assists you immensely, and that is a sort of placard hung up in every room in the barracks, and which is from time to time read to you. This placard pre-supposes everything that a soldier might wish to do; as, for instance, to return home, to refuse to serve, to resist his officer, and always ends by speaking of death, or, at least, five years with a ball and chain."

Having growled fiercely down the years to 1917, one reaches the era of which Mr. Dos Passos writes, according to him, an era of thin, inedible slum, of greasy water for the washing mess kits, of unbearable and senseless discipline; of domineering, inefficient and utterly malevolent officers; of non-coms, swayed by the sychophantic; of wishy-washy "Y" men; of obscenity, inhumanity and brutality, and all the aimless agony of a war sometimes reputed to have been waged for the defense of civilization. A picture which, were it drawn to the scale of the whole truth instead of the part, would put an end to war without the aid of the approaching conference in Washington. And, by the way, should that conference or some future conference succeed in the abolition of war and arms it also will still forever that equally venerable but far less deadly institution—the soldier's grouch.

But may the work of the conference be wholehearted, thorough and complete, for while you may limit armament there can be no such thing as limitation of soldier grouches. While there are any arms at all, it is a safe presumption there will be armies to use them, whether they are disguised as cops in the manner Germanic or whether they are skeletonized ad absurdum, after the less efficient American method. And while there are any armies there will be grouches. The ranks may be thin, but the grouches will be up to war strength—or better.

While bugles blow an untimely reveille, while cooks ladle slum, while rifles continue to have that mysterious property of increasing in weight by the mile, while artillery horses are heavy of foot and unequipped with shock absorbers, while officers and non-coms fail to consult one's personal inclinations; in short, while it is "this man's army" there will be a plentiful supply of grouching material outside of the regular quartermaster's issue.

But let it continue. Let the old soldiers' homes perpetuate it. For it is harmless and singularly refreshing to the many who weary of the tap of the unseen baton and the leader's voice commanding, "We will now all join in singing that grand old ballad 'Why General Wood Wasn't Sent to France.' First chorus, Mr. Creel; second (and same), Mr. Tumulty. And, boys, mind your p's and commas!"

IN THE PARK

By PIERRE VALDAGNE

Translated by William L. McPherson

Copyright, 1921, New York Tribune Inc.

YVONNE rushed into the room with all the impetuosity of her eight years and threw herself into her mother's arms.

"How hot it is, mama!"

Mme. Rebours wiped her little daughter's forehead.

"Did you have lots of fun in the park?"

"Yes! Yes, mama. Camille and Paul were there—and André and Marie. We played ball and then hop-scotch and then we skipped rope. Paul tried to steal my ball. I gave him a slap."

"A slap?"

"Yes, mama. And then there was a gentleman sitting there on a bench who kissed me."

"What gentleman?"

"I don't know, mama. An old gentleman, a poor man."

"But why did this poor man kiss you?"

"I don't know."

Whirling on her toes, Yvonne dashed away, crying:

"I am going to make a bonnet for my doll with the lace you gave me."

"You had better sew up her stocking. It has a hole in it."

"Bah! What of that?" Yvonne declared, absolutely indifferent to so negligible a disaster.

Mme. Rebours smiled at the child. Making a bonnet for the doll would certainly put her back in her studies. But after all, Mlle. Léger, her governess, was there to see that she studied. Besides, M. Rebours wasn't on hand to scold her.

M. Rebours scolded often. He scolded his wife, Mlle. Léger and Yvonne. And the worst of it was that when he scolded he was seldom in the wrong. You might say even that he was always in the right. His wife found that insupportable.

She had a lively disposition. She was still young. Her spirit ran to the fanciful and the unexpected.

Alas! this impulsiveness had brought her unhappiness when she was much younger. She had made a serious mistake in life, and it was M. Rebours who had brought her to see this.

Now she had entered upon an existence which was absolutely sage, prudent and tranquil. M. Rebours, a director in an insurance company, had salvaged everything—her fortune and her happiness. For since she had married him who could maintain that she wasn't happy? She had an enviable establishment, solid connections and a perfect husband. So perfect, in fact! He was faithful (and isn't that for a woman the first condition of happiness?). And punctual in all his habits. And always reasonable. Never an imprudence, never anything erratic. Everything was weighed in the scales of a rigorous sagaciousness. In his hands Mme. Rebours felt absolutely secure. Nothing disturbing could happen. Life would run along without accidents or surprises.

And, truly, after the storms of her early years she had a right to felicitate herself on having arrived in a port so peaceful and so restful.

The governess came into the room. She had first gone upstairs to take off her hat.

She was a young woman of about twenty-five, not pretty, but with a good figure and intelligent eyes.

Mme. Rebours liked her very much. Although they had never exchanged confidences, she knew that Mlle. Léger pitied her sometimes for having married a husband so given to grumbling and also so inexorably perfect.

Mlle. Léger thought: "That mustn't be comfortable all the time. And the most terrible thing about it is that there is nothing with which to reproach this big bear. Even when he criticizes me I am forced to recognize that I have deserved it. It's frightful. Ah! how much more soothing a man would be who makes mistakes now and then or does something foolish!"

"Well," asked Mme. Rebours, "how did Yvonne get along to-day in the park?"

"Very well, madame. She played a great deal. And she was very well behaved. But something curious happened, something I don't understand. While the children were amusing themselves I sat on a bench. Alongside me there was a man"——

"Oh, yes," Mme. Rebours interrupted. "Yvonne has just told me that a man kissed her."

"That is true, madame. This is how it happened. I was sitting on the bench, not far from this person, whom I had hardly noticed. Yvonne was near me. She was talking to another little girl whom I didn't know and who asked her: 'What is your name?' 'Yvonne.' 'Yvonne what?' 'Yvonne Noral.'

"At this the man gave a start. He looked at the children. He bent forward in his seat, stared at Yvonne and stretched out his hand. But she was already running away. Then he turned to me and asked me in a trembling voice:

"'Mademoiselle, is this little girl's name Yvonne Noral?'

"'Yes, monsieur. Why?'

"He grew very pale and said:

"'Will you allow me to kiss her, mademoiselle? She resembles a little girl whom I lost.'"

While Mlle. Léger was speaking Mme. Rebours's whole expression changed. She seemed to be laboring under an intense emotion.

"What sort of man was he?" she asked anxiously. "Yvonne said he was old."

"No, madame, he wasn't at all old. But he looked poor and was shabbily dressed. His beard made him seem old. I examined him closely afterward. He had beautiful eyes and he expressed himself perfectly. Undoubtedly he was a well educated man—a man of the world—who had had reverses."

"And when he kissed Yvonne?" Mme. Rebours asked.

"Well, madame, that was a great surprise to me. He took Yvonne by the hand and said softly: 'May I kiss you, Mademoiselle Yvonne?' And how he looked at her! How he looked at her! He first kissed her on the cheek. Then suddenly he took her in his arms and covered her with kisses. You could tell that he was deeply moved. I saw that he was weeping."

"What did Yvonne say?"

"She seemed to be much astonished. But she wasn't afraid. When it was over she went back to her play. Then the man said to me:

"'Mademoiselle, I lost a little girl whom I loved very much. She isn't dead. But I have lost her, all the same, because in a moment of folly I abandoned her mother. Since then I have lived a miserable life. I left the country. I have suffered poverty and fallen very low. I am in hiding. I have been in hiding for the last five years. I was a weak, thoughtless man. I was an artist, somewhat erratic, somewhat of a dreamer. I loved my wife and my child. But I was led astray by a villainous creature. I am paying for it. I am paying dearly for it. And to-day I am paying for it atrociously.'

"Did you understand, mademoiselle?" asked Mme. Rebours, who had turned as white as a sheet.

Mlle. Léger bowed her head.

"Yes, madame. That man is your first husband. He is Yvonne's father. I understood all this when he told me his story and I understood why he kissed Yvonne in such a transport of tenderness and grief."

"And afterward?"

"Afterward he got up and went away without a word. He walked with a limp. He looked so broken down. I almost wished"——

Mme. Rebours struggled to suppress a cry. She recovered her self-possession presently and said:

"No! It is better so. What's finished is finished. He was a poor fellow—very weak, as he said. He was a child when it came to facing the problems of life. But he was an admirable artist. All that has gone to wreck. Yet he was charming. Ah! how charming he was—so gay, so full of fantasy and imagination! He made me suffer afterward. But now I have nothing against him."

After a silence she added:

"If you see him again in the park, mademoiselle, let him kiss Yvonne any time he asks to."