

DECORATION DAY

ONEY
FRED
SWEET

"And There Would Never Be Another War; Our Teachers Had Assured Us of That. No Country Would Ever Dare Fight Us—We Who Had Never Been Whipped."

LILACS just turned purple out by the front gate and the dew still wet on the green grass, the faint strains of band music drifting out above the maples of the town and a flag draped out on the porch. It's been a good many years now, but each time the day comes around I'm back there in fancy.

There's no use going back any more—except in fancy. For the little white haired man who hung out the flag every Decoration day morning isn't there any more; strangers would be sitting on the front porch. There wasn't much sentiment in his makeup about most things, but he never missed hanging out that flag. He'd fought for it. A thousand times—now that it's too late—I've been sorry I didn't take more interest when he tried to tell me about those days.

Of course she—she understood. I remember the "W. R. C." badge she used to wear on Saturday afternoons and how she attended the meetings of the society in spite of the weather and her rheumatism. Now, with a maturer vision, I know how she had watched him and her own father march away from the Pennsylvania town, and how, after the four troublesome years were over, they had married and come to the western prairies together. No wonder she lulled me to sleep with songs like "Nellie Gray."

I remember the Decoration day that came when I rebelled against marching to the cemetery with the other children of the school. It wasn't compulsory. Lots of the other kids didn't march; their fathers hadn't been soldiers, and many of them were the leading business men of the town. On the other hand, so many of the old soldiers hadn't gotten on very well in life. I remember the look on her face when I said I couldn't see the use of marching. And I recall how he threatened me with a stick. They didn't try to explain; I was too young. I couldn't appreciate what they'd gone through—not then.

How we used to hunt through the freshly awakened woods north of town for the rarest wildflowers! Tender petaled bloodroots there were in plenty, and cowslips down by the spring, and honeysuckles on the creek bank those late May days, but the "lady's slippers" and the "jack in the pulpit"—one had to know the hidden recesses where they grew. Withered they became before the hot sun sank, sending rays from the west that made the tombstones gleam like gold.

Somehow, on those days, the sky seemed a bluer blue when the words of the speaker at the "Monument of the Unknown Dead" were carried off by the faint breeze that muffled, too, the song of the quartet and the music of the village band. But close in my ears were the chirps of the insects in the bluegrass and the tweet of the robins that hopped about in the branches of the evergreens.

As for the flag marked graves—old men slept in them, men who, so far as my imagination went, had never been youths. And there would never be another war; our teachers had assured us of that. No country would ever dare fight us—we who had never been whipped. Besides, war was a thing for books of the past.

There was one teacher we had who took her work seriously. She is gone now, too, but in those days her eyes flashed vitality and the color came and went in her cheeks as she interpreted our history lessons. She was at her best when she told us of the treachery of Benedict Arnold, the man who thought more of personal ease and comfort than he did of his country at a time when its existence was in jeopardy. How she



taught us to hate Benedict Arnold and all that his name stood for!

Yet she was mistaken about there being no more wars. One February day the Chicago papers that did not reach us until noon told about the sinking of the Maine. I can see my older brother as he came home from where he was working downtown and told my father and mother what he had done—enlisted in the local militia company. My mother didn't say anything. She went back to the kitchen and pretended that something was keeping her very busy, but my father crossed to the closet where he kept his civil war relics—his discharge papers, his badges, a dagger taken from a "Johnnie reb." I wonder how the people who have since moved in and moved out of that old house have used that closet.

The militia company, drilling on the streets, seemed wonderful those early spring days. Little we dreamed what a pathetic organization it was, compared with the fighting units such as have developed. Maybe it was purely coincidence, but most of its members were the sons of old soldiers of the town. Ted McCrellis, the captain, was my hero. His father had always been active at the "campfires" held in the opera house every Lincoln's birthday night. He was a slight youth, but there was a light in his eyes and a purpose about his jaw that I shall never forget. I was down at the depot the morning they went away. I saw them climb on the train in their thick blue uniforms—thick blue uniforms and on their way to a hot summer in Georgia.

It wasn't much of a war, but along in July they started to ship some of the boys in those thick, hot uniforms back from Chickamauga. They shipped them back on cots, and when they lifted them off the train they were such skeletons we hardly recognized them. At least half had typhoid fever before the last of them, dribbling home by handfuls, had returned. Six of them died. The insanitary camp had proven as disastrous as any enemy bullets.

My brother didn't come back on a cot, but he came back with the color gone for good from his cheeks, and where it had been easy for him to laugh before he now made unsuccessful attempts. And yet he came back uncomplaining. It was the country's system of grabbing an army together in time of stress and the country's system of handling that army once it had been grabbed together. He sat around the house for a day or two. I remember the nights were beginning to get cool right after school, the tomato vines had already been frosted, and the yard was littered with fallen maple leaves. Then he went about it to pick up the threads of life where they had been broken. No—no country could lick the United States. History had repeated.

And the years passed. I remember going back home once along about Decoration day.

"The little white haired man hung out the flag every Decoration day morning."

The old place had run down a good deal and they had changed; I noticed the gray when he came in from the garden and took off his hat; I noticed her limp as she nervously pattered about to tidy up the rooms as a tribute to my unexpected arrival. For a long time they had been alone now—just the two of them. I had been down south, down in the old south—Mississippi.

"Well," said my father, going over to the sink to wash his hands, "you've come home. When I call upstairs for you now in the mornings I'll get an answer. Mother will tell you I call up there every morning just the same, even though I know there's no one there. Maybe you can help me weed my garden; my back's pretty lame from getting down among those onions. And the lawn ought to be mowed. Tomorrow's Decoration day and the parade will be going past here."

"That's something I've missed these last two years," I said. "Do they still keep it going?"

The look that came into their faces! "Still keep it going?" my mother gasped. "What kind of teachings did you pick up down there?"

"They were all right, mother," I assured her, "but I never heard 'Marching Through Georgia' sung at all and they did show me how there was a good deal of bunk in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' and there wasn't much paradise about those northern prisons either, I learned. But I was sitting out on the porch this morning watching the automobiles go by. Most of them were driven by folks who have only been over in America few years—folks who came over here and picked out the land that's jumped to such a high price. It struck me how you had grubbed along here as pioneers, putting up with all the hardships, driving thirty miles for flour while you waited for the railroad and going through all sorts of privation. And now the

country around here's settled—two-thirds of it by foreigners who haven't yet lost their old country accent—and where's your part of the results? Maybe you've given too much thought to your war relics and the state encampments of the G. A. R. and the Lincoln's birthday meetings and all that stuff, while they were taking advantage of the opportunities that had been made possible. They'll be busy plowing their \$200 an acre cornfields tomorrow while you and old man Ferris and old man McCrellis will be hanging out your flags. It seems to me—"

But their hurt expressions stopped me. My father had turned very white.

"I knew you shouldn't have gone way off down there," quavered my mother. "If I had known you would come back like this."

"My boy," my father began in a tone that told me his fighting blood was up, "if you'd given the best four years of your life fighting for something as we had to fight you'd feel differently about it. Maybe I didn't realize fully what it meant when I went in—I was only 18—but I knew what I was fighting for by the time we stopped that charge at Gettysburg. We had 'copperheads' then—folks who said the war was foolish and stayed home to make profit from it. It's all vague to you—you came so long afterward. You can't understand how we old fellows feel when we come across one another wearing the little bronze button, but I wouldn't exchange my little bronze button for all the automobiles in the county!"

Yes, there's strangers living in the old house now. They've probably changed things around a lot; it was pretty old fashioned inside. The last time I went by it I couldn't stand to take any more than just a hurried glance in its direction, but I saw they'd cut down the lilac bushes. Yet I fancy they hang out a flag on the old porch on Decoration day morning. They'd have to; his spirit would make them do it.