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“H. E.” and Breaking Glass

*Tracing that Restless,
Jumping Feeling Back to
the Front*

By “SHELL SHOCK”

WHAT has been the mental effect of the war upon American soldiers, particularly those who were sufficiently fortunate enough—or unfortunate, as the case may be—to see actual fighting?

The Medical Corps can prove to the entire satisfaction of the most confirmed pacifist that, with the exception of those men who were either seriously wounded or permanently disabled, returned soldiers are in infinitely better condition physically than at any time in their careers. Army doctors can show that the regulation of a soldier's life, the exercise, wholesome eating and restful sleep after honest toil have built up an aggregate health never before equaled in the history of armies. And this is borne out in the experience of the writer, who thrived on sleeping in puddles of dirty rain water, despite the fact that he went into the army a veritable shell physically.

All this physical perfection can be and is proved, but what of the mental condition of discharged soldiers—what was the effect upon their nervous systems of what they had gone through at the front? It has been said that a man's health is more than fifty per cent. of his chances of success in business and, if the truth were known, this means his mental health, for the body is heir to all kinds of mental ills. Certainly, it is the mentality of young America upon which is based the future of the nation commercially. Has the war impaired that mentality? Let us see:

Soon after my discharge from the army vague symptoms of unrest came to me—I became discontented—and for a time I believed my condition was the effect of my transition from the army to civil life? I returned to my position, at an increased salary, vainly attempting to experience the elation that I long had anticipated in France, while waiting for the word that would send me back to God's country. I did



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feel a momentary thrill at returning once more to my niche in the world of business, but the elation. Where was it? Alas, it was conspicuous by its utter absence. And it was a matter of about one full day when I was back heart and soul in the humdrum of business life, and that was all.

I WAS vaguely disturbed at this, for I had woven many beautiful dreams in French barracks of what I would do when I got back "to the States." I felt cheated, so to speak. But I had an ace in the hole. There was a welcome home party arranged for that evening, and I knew that meant Broadway, the cabarets, a few dances, and, by the way, at that time prohibition had not yet spread its baleful wings over the land. I looked back at the pleasure I was wont to get out of Broadway night life before the nightmare in France and felt altogether pleased with the prospects.

I attended the party with considerable pleasureable anticipation, but, to save a lot of verbiage, I may say that the one result of my attendance was an overpowering surprise that the life among the white lights had ever had the attraction to hold me as it had done before I went to France. I strove valiantly to hold up my end of the gayety and live up to what was expected of me, but the sum and substance of the whole thing was the constant recurrence of the question: "Can this possibly be the kind of stuff I used to like so well?" Surely something was wrong.

And yet I was sure the potentialities for recreation and pleasure were there, just as they had been in another day. The change was in me, and I knew it. Try as I would, I could not but be a killjoy on the party, and I have grave misgivings that at least one of my hosts went home with the idea that I am lacking in appreciation.

The restlessness, that is as good a word for it as any, became more tangible the following day when I attempted to read a novel by Dickens, an author who had always been the source of untold pleasure to me, and for the life of me I could not get my mind on the story. I gave up in disgust in ten minutes.

Then the thought came to me that I would love to see a good musical comedy and I got a front seat for the best in town—and walked out before the first act was over. Later I dropped in on friends I hadn't seen for years, the company of whom I ought to have enjoyed immensely, and pulled out almost before we could adequately greet each other.

AND so it has been in everything else. The last hour of

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my day's work is agony, what with my anxiety to get away from my desk before I give in to the desire to let out an impatient yelp; let someone slam a door or drop a book to the floor and I hit the ceiling; mention the advantages of living in another city—any city—and I immediately evince a strong desire to go there, and I am reasonably certain that were I in that particular city I would have a desire to get out of it; I am continually curbing my irritable temper, because on the least provocation I jump irascibly at my best friends; my finger nails are bitten to the quicks, and last, but by no means least, I am addicted to fits of melancholia that come from nowhere at all and remain with me for hours at a time.

I had not been home two weeks when these symptoms rather frightened me, particularly that of the melancholia. I had been gassed rather severely in the Argonne and I naturally put my condition down to some sort of a physical ailment. But this was exploded by a visit to my physician, who told me that, outside of a somewhat run-down condition, I was in better physical shape than I ever had been, so far as he knew. It had me guessing.

Then it struck home to me. It was clear now. I had been suffering from a mild case of shell-shock all this time and didn't know it. I questioned these chaps, both of whom were platoon sergeants of a regiment in the Seventy-seventh, and they were fellows with the intellectual ability to put their emotions into words. After buying a few, the while comparing notes on what they felt and what I had been experiencing, it was proved conclusively to me that I was a victim of a nervous disorder as a result of what I had gone through at the front.

Since that time I have talked with perhaps thirty men who have learned through experience the difference between the plop of a gas shell and the demoralizing explosion of an H. E., and, although some of them have been surprised that it could be put down as shell shock, just about one-half of them have been slaves, like myself, to an indefinable something they couldn't put into words, but which had rendered them restless, discontented and melancholy.

I have made a study of the thing and this is the result. I do not maintain, mind you, that this is a condition of the army as a whole; I merely put down in writing what I have personally experienced and what I have learned in comparing my condition with that of other men I have talked to.

As to a panacea for all this, I leave that to the metaphysicians. Frankly,

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I'm balked.

In a recent speech, General Smuts said that, in his opinion, America is "going to be the greatest power the world will have to reckon with—next to the British Empire."



They jumped about a foot.

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