

## The Project Gutenberg eBook of Comrades, by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

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"We're All That's Left of the Charles Darlington Post"

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Post."

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## COMRADES

BY

ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

"We're All That's Left of the Charles Darlington Post" . . . . . Frontispiece

"Folks Don't Amount to Anything. It's You, Peter"

She Thought of the Slow News of the Slaughtering Battles

## COMRADES

In the late May evening the soul of summer had gone suddenly incarnate, but the old man, indifferent and petulant, thrashed upon his bed. He was not used to being ill, and found no consolations in weather. Flowers regarded him observantly—one might have said critically—from the tables, the bureau, the window-sills: tulips, fleurs-de-lis, pansies, peonies, and late lilacs, for he had a garden-loving wife who made the most of "the dull season," after crocuses and daffodils, and before roses. But he manifested no interest in flowers; less than usual, it must be owned, in Patience, his wife. This was a marked incident. They had lived together fifty years, and she had acquired her share of the lessons of marriage, but not that ruder one given chiefly to women to learn—she had never found herself a negligible quantity in her husband's life. She had the profound maternal instinct which is so large an element in the love of every experienced and tender wife; and when Reuben thrashed profanely upon his pillows, staring out of the window above the vase of jonquils, without looking at her, clearly without thinking of her, she swallowed her surprise as if it had been a blue-pill, and tolerantly thought:

"Poor boy! To be a veteran and can't go!"

Her poor boy, being one-and-eighty, and having always had health and her, took his disappointment like a boy. He felt more outraged that he could not march with the other boys to decorate the graves to-morrow than he had been, or had felt that he was, by some of the important troubles of his long and, on the whole, comfortable life. He took it unreasonably; she could not deny that. But she went on saying "Poor boy!" as she usually did when he was unreasonable. When he stopped thrashing and swore no more she smiled at him brilliantly. He had not said anything worse than damn! But he was a good Baptist, and the lapse was memorable.

"Peter?" he said. "Just h'ist the curtain a mite, won't you? I want to see across over to the shop. Has young Jabez locked up everything? Somebody's got to make sure."

Behind the carpenter's shop the lush tobacco-fields of the Connecticut valley were springing healthily. "There ain't as good a crop as there gener'lly is," the old man fretted.

"Don't you think so?" replied Patience. "Everybody say it's better. But you ought to know."

In the youth and vigor of her no woman was ever more misnamed. Patient she was not, nor gentle, nor adaptable to the teeth in the saw of life. Like wincing wood, her nature had resented it, the whole biting thing. All her gentleness was acquired, and acquired hard. She had fought like a man to endure like a woman, to accept, not to writhe and rebel. She had not learned easily how to count herself out. Something in the sentimentality or even the piety of her name had always seemed to her ridiculous; they both used to have their fun at its expense; for some years he called her Impatience, degenerating into Imp if he felt like it. When Reuben took to calling her Peter, she found it rather a relief.

"You'll have to go without me," he said, crossly.

"I'd rather stay with you," she urged. "I'm not a veteran."

"Who'd decorate Tommy, then?" demanded the old man. "You wouldn't give Tommy the go-by, would you?"

"I never did—did I?" returned the wife, slowly.

"I don't know's you did," replied Reuben Oak, after some difficult reflection.

Patience did not talk about Tommy. But she had lived Tommy, so she felt, all her married life, ever since she took him, the year-old baby of a year-dead first wife who had made Reuben artistically miserable; not that Patience thought in this adjective; it was one foreign to her vocabulary; she was accustomed to say of that other woman: "It was better for Reuben. I'm not sorry she died." She added, "Lord forgive me," because she was a good church member, and felt that she must. Oh, she had "lived Tommy," God knew. Her own baby had died, and there were never any more. But Tommy lived and clamored at her heart. She began by trying to be a good stepmother. In the end she did not have to try. Tommy never knew the difference; and his father had long since forgotten it. She had made him so happy that he seldom remembered anything unpleasant. He was accustomed to refer to his two conjugal partners as "My wife and the other woman."

But Tommy had the blood of a fighting father, and when the *Maine* went down, and his chance came, he, too, took it. Tommy lay dead and nameless in the trenches at San Juan. But his father had put up a tall, gray slate-stone slab for him in the churchyard at home. This was close to the baby's; the baby's was little and white. So the veteran was used to "decorating Tommy" on Memorial Day. He did not trouble himself about the little, white gravestone then. He had a veteran's savage jealousy of the day that was sacred to the splendid heroisms and sacrifices of the sixties.

"What do they want to go decorating all their relations for?" he argued. "Ain't there three hundred and sixty-four days in the year for *them*?"

He was militant on this point, and Patience did not contend. Sometimes she took the baby's flowers over the day after.

"If you can spare me just as well's not, I'll decorate Tommy to-morrow," she suggested, gently. "We'll see how you feel along by that."

"Tommy's got to be decorated if I'm dead or livin'," retorted the veteran. The soldier father struggled up from his pillow, as if he would carry arms for his soldier son. Then he fell back weakly. "I wisht I had my old dog here," he complained—"my dog Tramp. I never did like a dog like that dog. But Tramp's dead, too. I don't believe them boys are coming. They've forgotten me, Peter. You haven't," he added, after some slow thought. "I don't know's you ever did, come to think."

Patience, in her blue shepherd-plaid gingham dress and white apron, was standing by the window—a handsome woman, a dozen years younger than her husband; her strong face was gentler than most strong faces are—in women; peace and pain, power and subjection, were fused upon her aspect like warring elements reconciled by a mystery. Her hair was not yet entirely white, and her lips were warm and rich. She had a round figure, not overgrown. There were times when she did not look over thirty. Two or three late jonquils that had outlived their calendar in a cold spot by a wall stood on the window-sill beside her; these trembled in the slant, May afternoon light. She stroked them in their vase, as if they had been frightened or hurt. She did not immediately answer Reuben, and, when she did, it was to say, abruptly:

"Here's the boys! They're coming—the whole of them!—Jabez Trent, and old Mr. Succor, and David Swing on his crutches. I'll go right out 'n' let them all in."

She spoke as if they had been a phalanx. Reuben panted upon his pillows. Patience had shut the door, and it seemed to him as if it would never open. He pulled at his gray flannel dressing-gown with nervous fingers; they were carpenter's fingers—worn, but supple and intelligent. He had on his old red nightcap, and he felt the indignity, but he did not dare to take the cap off; there was too much pain underneath it.

When Patience opened the door she nodded at him girlishly. She had preceded the visitors, who followed her without speaking. She looked forty years younger than they did. She marshaled them as if she had been their colonel. The woman herself had a certain military look.

The veterans filed in slowly—three aged, disabled men. One was lame, and one was palsied; one was blind, and all were deaf.

"Here they are, Reuben," said Patience Oak. "They've all come to see you. Here's the whole Post."

Reuben's hand went to his red night-cap. He saluted gravely.

The veterans came in with dignity—David Swing, and Jabez Trent, and old Mr. Succor. David was the one on crutches, but Jabez Trent, with nodding head and swaying hand, led old Mr. Succor, who could not see.

Reuben watched them with a species of grim triumph. "I ain't blind," he thought, "and I hain't got the shakin' palsy. Nor I hain't come on crutches, either."

He welcomed his visitors with a distinctly patronizing air. He was conscious of pitying them as much as a soldier can afford to pity anything. They seemed to him very old men.

"Give 'em chairs, Peter," he commanded. "Give 'em easy chairs. Where's the cushions?"

"I favor a hard cheer myself," replied the blind soldier, sitting solid and straight upon the stiff bamboo chair into which he had been set down by Jabez Trent. "I'm sorry to find you so low, Reuben Oak."

"*Low!*" exploded the old soldier. "Why, nothing partikler ails *me*. I hain't got a thing the matter with me but a spell of rheumatics. I'll be spry as a kitten catchin' grasshoppers in a week. I can't march to-morrow—that's all. It's darned hard luck. How's your eyesight, Mr. Succor?"

"Some consider'ble better, sir," retorted the blind man. "I calc'late to get it back. My son's goin' to take me to a city eye-doctor. I ain't only seventy-eight. I'm too young to be blind. 'Tain't as if I was onto crutches, or I was down sick abed. How old are you, Reuben?"

"Only eighty-one!" snapped Reuben.

"He's eighty-one last March," interpolated his wife.

"He's come to a time of life when folks do take to their beds," returned David Swing. "Mebbe you could manage with crutches, Reuben, in a few weeks. I've been on 'em three years, since I was seventy-five. I've got to feel as if they was relations. Folks want me to ride to-morrow," he added, contemptuously, "but I'll march on them crutches to decorate them graves, or I won't march at all."

Now Jabez Trent was the youngest of the veterans; he was indeed but sixty-eight. He refrained from mentioning this fact. He felt that it was indelicate to boast of it. His jerking hand moved over toward the bed, and he laid it on Reuben's with a fine gesture.

"You'll be round—you'll be round before you know it," he shouted.

"I ain't deaf," interrupted Reuben, "like the rest of you." But the palsied man, hearing not at all, shouted on:

"You always had grit, Reuben, more'n most of as. You stood more, you was under fire more, you never was afraid of anything— What's rheumatics? 'Tain't Antietam."

"Nor it ain't Bull Run," rejoined Reuben. He lifted his red nightcap from his head. "Let it ache!" he said. "It ain't Gettysburg."

"It seems to me," suggested Jabez Trent, "that Reuben he's under fire just about now. *He* ain't used to bein' disabled. It appears to me he's fightin' this matter the way a soldier 'd oughter— Comrades, I move he's entitled to promotion for military conduct. He'd rather than sympathy— wouldn't you, Reuben?"

"I don't feel to deserve it," muttered Reuben. "I swore to-day. Ask my wife."

"No, he didn't!" blazed Patience Oak. "He never said a thing but damn. He's getting tired, though," she added, under breath. "He ain't very well." She delicately brushed the foot of Jabez Trent with the toe of her slipper.

"I guess we'd better not set any longer," observed Jabez Trent. The three veterans rose like one soldier. Reuben felt that their visit had not been what he expected. But he could not deny that he was tired out; he wondered why. He beckoned to Jabez Trent, who, shaking and coughing, bent over him.

"You'll see the boys don't forget to decorate Tommy, won't you?" he asked, eagerly. Jabez could not hear much of this, but he got the word Tommy, and nodded.

The three old men saluted silently, and when Reuben had put on his nightcap he found that they had all gone. Only Patience was in the room, standing by the jonquils, in her blue gingham dress and white apron.

"Tired?" she asked, comfortably. "I've mixed you up an egg-nog. Think you could take it?"

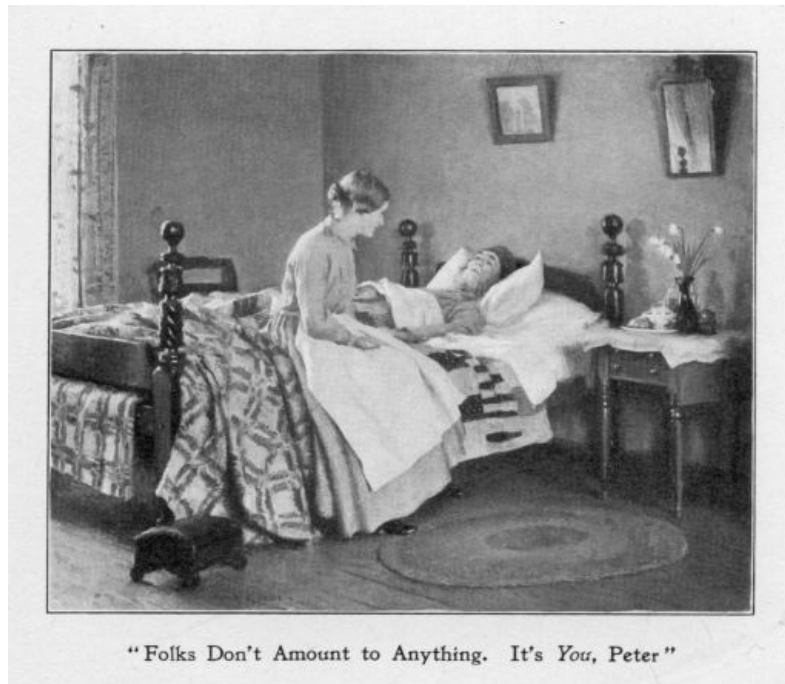
"They didn't stay long," complained the old man. "It don't seem to amount to much, does it?"

"You've punched your pillows all to pudding-stones," observed Patience Oak. "Let me fix 'em a little."

"I won't be fussed over!" cried Reuben, angrily. He gave one of his pillows a pettish push, and it went half across the room. Patience picked it up without remark. Reuben Oak held out a contrite hand.

"Peter, come here!" he commanded. Patience, with her maternal smile, obeyed.

"You stay, Peter, anyhow. Folks don't amount to anything. It's *you*, Peter."



**"Folks Don't Amount to Anything. It's *You*, Peter."**

Patience's eyes filled. But she hid them on the pillow beside him—he did not know why. She put up one hand and stroked his cheek.

"Just as if I was a johnnyquil," said the old man. He laughed, and grew quiet, and slept. But Patience did not move. She was afraid of waking him. She sat crouched and crooked on the edge of the bed, uncomfortable and happy.

Out on the street, between the house and the carpenter's shop, the figures of the veterans bent against the perspective of young tobacco. They walked feebly. Old Mr. Succor shook his head:

"Looks like he'd never see another Decoration Day. He's some considerable sick—an' he ain't young."

"He's got grit, though," urged Jabez Trent.

"He's pretty old," sighed David Swing. "He's consider'ble older'n we be. He'd ought to be prepared for his summons any time at his age."

"We'll be decorating *him*, I guess, come next year," insisted old Mr. Succor. Jabez Trent opened his mouth to say something, but he coughed too hard to speak.

"I'd like to look at Reuben's crop as we go by," remarked the blind man. "He's lucky to have the shop 'n' the crop too."

The three turned aside to the field, where old Mr. Succor appraised the immature tobacco leaves with seeing fingers.

"Connecticut's a *great* State!" he cried.

"And this here's a great town," echoed David Swing. "Look at the quota we sent—nigh a full company. And we had a great colonel," he added, proudly. "I calc'late he'd been major-general if it hadn't 'a' been for that infernal shell."

"Boys," said Jabez Trent, slowly, "Memorial Day's a great day. It's up to us to keep it that way — Boys, we're all that's left of the Charles Darlington Post."

"That's a fact," observed the blind soldier, soberly.

"That's so," said the lame one, softly.

The three did not talk any more; they walked past the tobacco-field thoughtfully. Many

persons carrying flowers passed or met them. These recognized the veterans with marked respect, and with some perplexity. What! Only old blind Mr. Succor? Just David Swing on his crutches, and Jabez Trent with the shaking palsy? Only those poor, familiar persons whom one saw every day, and did not think much about on any other day? Unregarded, unimportant, aging neighbors? These who had ceased to be useful, ceased to be interesting, who were not any longer of value to the town, or to the State, to their friends (if they had any left), or to themselves? Heroes? These plain, obscure old men?—Heroes?

So it befell that Patience Oak "decorated Tommy" for his father that Memorial Day. The year was 1909. The incident of which we have to tell occurred twelve months thereafter, in 1910. These, as I have gathered them, are the facts:

Time, to the old, takes an unnatural pace, and Reuben Oak felt that the year had sprinted him down the race-track of life; he was inclined to resent his eighty-second March birthday as a personal insult; but April cried over him, and May laughed at him, and he had acquired a certain grim reconciliation with the laws of fate by the time that the nation was summoned to remember its dead defenders upon their latest anniversary. This resignation was the easier because he found himself unexpectedly called upon to fill an extraordinary part in the drama and the pathos of the day.

He slept brokenly the night before, and waked early; it was scarcely five o'clock. But Patience, his wife, was already awake, lying quietly upon her pillow, with straight, still arms stretched down beside him. She was careful not to disturb him—she always was; she was so used to effacing herself for his sake that he had ceased to notice whether she did or not; he took her beautiful dedication to him as a matter of course; most husbands would, if they had its counterpart. In point of fact—and in saying this we express her altogether—Patience had the genius of love. Charming women, noble women, unselfish women may spend their lives in a man's company, making a tolerable success of marriage, yet lack this supreme gift of Heaven to womanhood, and never know it. Our defects we may recognize; our deficiencies we seldom do, and the love deficiency is the most hopeless of human limitations. Patience was endowed with love as a great poet is by song, or a musician by harmony, or an artist by color or form. She loved supremely, but she did not know that. She loved divinely, but her husband had never found it out. They were two plain people—a carpenter and his wife, plodding along the Connecticut valley industriously, with the ideals of their kind; to be true to their marriage vows, to be faithful to their children, to pay their debts, raise the tobacco, water the garden, drive the nails straight, and preserve the quinces. There were times when it occurred to Patience that she took more care of Reuben than Reuben did of her; but she dismissed the matter with a phrase common in her class, and covering for women most of the perplexity of married life: "You know what men are."

On the morning of which we speak, Reuben Oak had a blunt perception of the fact that it was kind in his wife to take such pains not to wake him till he got ready to begin the tremendous day before him; she always was considerate if he did not sleep well. He put down his hand and took hers with a sudden grasp, where it lay gentle and still beside him.

"Well, Peter," he said, kindly.

"Yes, dear," said Patience, instantly. "Feeling all right for to-day?"

"Fine," returned Reuben. "I don't know when I've felt so spry. I'll get right up 'n' dress."

"Would you mind staying where you are till I get your coffee heated?" asked Patience, eagerly. "You know how much stronger you always are if you wait for it. I'll have it on the heater in no time."

"I can't wait for coffee to-day," flashed Reuben. "I'm the best judge of what I need."

"Very well," said Patience, in a disappointed tone. For she had learned the final lesson of married life—not to oppose an obstinate man, for his own good. But she slipped into her wrapper and made the coffee, nevertheless. When she came back with it, Reuben was lying on the bed in his flannels, with a comforter over him; he looked pale, and held out his hand impatiently for the coffee.

His feverish eyes healed as he watched her moving about the room. He thought how young and pretty her neck was when she splashed the water on it.

"Goin' to wear your black dress?" he asked. "That's right. I'm glad you are. I'll get up pretty soon."

"I'll bring you *all* your clothes," she said. "Don't you get a mite tired. I'll move up everything for you. Your uniform's all cleaned and pressed. Don't you do a thing!"

She brushed her thick hair with upraised, girlish arms, and got out her black serge dress and a white tie. He lay and watched her thoughtfully.

"Peter," he said, unexpectedly, "how long is it since we was married?"

"Forty-nine years," answered Patience, promptly. "Fifty, come next September."

"What a little creatur' you were, Peter—just a slip of a girl! And how you did take hold—Tommy and everything."

"I was 'most twenty," observed Patience, with dignity.

"You made a powerful good stepmother all the same," mused Reuben. "You did love Tommy, to beat all."

"I was fond of Tommy," answered Patience, quietly. "He was a nice little fellow."

"And then there was the baby, Peter. Pity we lost the baby! I guess you took that harder 'n I did, Peter."

Patience made no reply.

"She was so dreadful young, Peter. I can't seem to remember how she looked. Can you? Pity she didn't live! You'd 'a' liked a daughter round the house, wouldn't you, Peter? Say, Peter, we've gone through a good deal, haven't we—you 'n' me? The war 'n' all that—and the two children. But there's one thing, Peter—"

Patience came over to him quietly, and sat down on the side of the bed. She was half dressed, and her still beautiful arms went around him.

"You'll tire yourself all out thinking, Reuben. You won't be able to decorate anybody if you ain't careful."

"What I was goin' to say was this," persisted Reuben. "I've always had you, Peter. And you've had me. I don't count so much, but I'm powerful fond of you, Peter. You're all I've got. Seems as if I couldn't set enough by you, somehow or nuther."

The old man hid his face upon her soft neck.

"There, there, dear!" said Patience.

"It must be kinder hard, Peter, not to *like* your wife. Or maybe she mightn't like him. Sho! I don't think I could stand that.... Peter?"

"Don't you think you'd better be getting dressed, Reuben? The procession's going to start pretty early. Folks are moving up and down the street. Everybody's got flowers—See?"

Reuben looked out of the window and over the pansy-bed with brilliant, dry eyes. His wife could see that he was keeping back the thing that he thought most about. She had avoided and evaded the subject as long as she could. She felt now that it must be met, and yet she parleyed with it. She hurried his breakfast and brought the tray to him. He ate because she asked him to, but his hands shook. It seemed as if he clung wilfully to the old topic, escaping the new as long as he could, to ramble on.

"You've been a dreadfully amiable wife, Peter. I don't believe I could have got along with any other kind of woman."

"I didn't used to be amiable, Reuben. I wasn't born so. I used to take things hard. Don't you remember?"

But Reuben shook his head.

"No, I don't. I can't seem to think of any time you wasn't that way. Sho! How'd you get to be so, then, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, just by loving, I guess," said Patience Oak.

"We've marched along together a good while," answered the old man, brokenly.

Unexpectedly he held out his hand, and she grasped it; his was cold and weak; but hers was warm and strong. In a dull way the divination came to him—if one may speak of a dull divination—that she had always been the strength and the warmth of his life. Suddenly it seemed to him a very long life. Now it was as if he forced himself to speak, as he would have charged at Fredericksburg. He felt as if he were climbing against breastworks when he said:

"I was the oldest of them all, Peter. And I was sickest, too. They all expected to come an' decorate me to-day." Patience nodded, without a word. She knew when her husband must do all the talking; she had found that out early in their married life. "I wouldn't of believed it, Peter; would you? Old Mr. Succor he had such good health. Who'd thought he'd tumble down the cellar stairs? If Mis' Succor 'd be'n like you, Peter, he wouldn't had the chance to tumble: I never would of *thought* of David Swing's havin' pneumonia—would you, Peter? Why, in '62 he slept onto the ground in peltin', drenchin' storms an' never sneezed. He was powerful well 'n' tough, David was. And Jabez! Poor old Jabez Trent! I liked him the best of the lot, Peter. Didn't you? He was sorry



for me when they come here that day an' I couldn't march along of them.... And now, Peter, I've got to go an' decorate *them*.

"I'm the last livin' survivor of the Charles Darlington Post," added the veteran. "I'm going to apply to the Department Commander to let me keep it up. I guess I can manage someways. *I won't be disbanded*. Let 'em disband me if they can! I'd like to see 'em do it. Peter? *Peter!*"

"I'll help you into your uniform," said Patience. "It's all brushed and nice for you."

She got him to his swaying feet, and dressed him, and the two went to the window that looked upon the flowers. The garden blurred yellow and white and purple—a dash of blood-red among the late tulips. Patience had plucked and picked for Memorial Day, she had gathered and given, and yet she could not strip her garden. She looked at it lovingly. She felt as if she stood in pansy lights and iris air.

"Peter," said the veteran, hoarsely, "they're all gone, my girl. Everybody's gone but you. You're the only comrade I've got left, Peter.... And, Peter, I want to tell you—I seem to understand it this morning. Peter, you're the best comrade of 'em all."

"That's worth it," said Patience, in a strange tone—"that's worth the—high cost of living."

She lifted her head. She had an exalted look. The thoughtful pansies seemed to turn their faces toward her. She felt that they understood her. Did it matter whether Reuben understood her or not? It occurred to her that it was not so important, after all, whether a man understood his wife, if he only loved her. Women fussed too much, she thought; they expected to cry away the everlasting differences between the husband and the wife. If you loved a man you must take him as he was—just man. You couldn't make him over. You must make up your mind to that. Better, oh, better a hundred times to endure, to suffer—if it came to suffering—to take your share (perhaps he had his—who knew?) of the loneliness of living. Better any fate than to battle with the man you love, for what he did not give or could not give. Better anything than to stand in the pansy light, married fifty years, and not have made your husband happy.

"I 'most wisht you could march along of me," muttered Reuben Oak. "But you ain't a veteran."

"I don't know about that," Patience shook her head, smiling, but it was a sober smile.

"Tommy can't march," added Reuben. "He ain't here; nor he ain't in the graveyard either. He's a ghost—Tommy. He must be flying around the Throne. There's only one other person I'd like to have go along of me. That's my old dog—my dog Tramp. That dog thought a sight of me. The United States army couldn't have kep' him away from me. But Tramp's dead. He was a pretty old dog. I can't remember which died first, him or the baby; can you? Lord! I suppose Tramp's a ghost, too, a dog ghost, trottin' after—I don't know when I've thought of Tramp before. Where's he buried, Peter? Oh yes, come to think, he's under the big chestnut. Wonder we never decorated him, Peter."

"I have," confessed Patience. "I've done it quite a number of times. Reuben? Listen! I guess we've got to hurry. Seems to me I hear—"

"You hear drums," interrupted the old soldier. Suddenly he flared like lightwood on a camp-fire, and before his wife could speak again he had blazed out of the house.

The day had a certain unearthly beauty—most of our Memorial Days do have. Sometimes they scorch a little, and the processions wilt and lag. But this one, as we remember, had the climate of a happier world and the temperature of a day created for marching men—old soldiers who had left their youth and strength behind them, and who were feebler than they knew.

The Connecticut valley is not an emotional part of the map, but the town was alight with a suppressed feeling, intense, and hitherto unknown to the citizens. They were graver than they usually were on the national anniversary which had come to mean remembrance for the old and indifference for the young. There was no baseball in the village that day. The boys joined the procession soberly. The crowd was large but thoughtful. It had collected chiefly outside of the Post hall, where four old soldiers had valiantly sustained their dying organization for now two or three astonishing years.

The band was outside, below the steps; it played the "Star-spangled Banner" and "John Brown's Body" while it waited. For some reason there was a delay in the ceremonies. It was rumored that the chaplain had not come. Then it went about that he had been summoned to a funeral, and would meet the procession at the churchyard. The chaplain was the pastor of the Congregational Church. The regimental chaplain, he who used to pray for the dying boys after battle, had joined the vanished veterans long ago. The band struck up "My Country, 'tis of Thee." The crowd began to press toward the steps of the Post hall and to sway to and fro restlessly.

Then slowly there emerged from the hall, and firmly descended the steps, the Charles Darlington Post of the Grand Army of the Republic. People held their breaths, and some sobbed. They were not all women, either.

Erect, with fiery eyes, with haughty head—shrunk in his old uniform, but carrying it

proudly—one old man walked out. The crowd parted for him, and he looked neither to the right nor to the left, but fell into the military step and began to march. In his aged arms he carried the flags of the Post. The military band preceded him, softly playing "Mine Eyes have Seen the Glory," while the crowd formed into procession and followed him. From the whole countryside people had assembled, and the throng was considerable.

They came out into the street and turned toward the churchyard—the old soldier marching alone. They had begged him to ride, though the distance was small. But he had obstinately refused.

"This Post has always marched," he had replied.

Except for the military music and the sound of moving feet or wheels, the street was perfectly still. No person spoke to any other. The veteran marched with proud step. His gray head was high. Once he was seen to put the flag of his company to his lips. A little behind him the procession had instinctively fallen back and left a certain space. One could not help the feeling that this was occupied. But they who filled it, if such there had been, were invisible to the eye of the body. And the eyes of the soul are not possessed by all men.

Now, the distance, as we have said, was short, and the old soldier was so exalted that it had not occurred to him that he could be fatigued. It was an astonishing sensation to him when he found himself unexpectedly faint.

Patience Oak, for some reasons of her own hardly clear to herself, did not join the procession. She chose to walk abreast of it, at the side, as near as possible, without offense to the ceremonies, to the solitary figure of her husband. She was pacing through the grass, at the edge of the sidewalk—falling as well as she could into the military step. In her plain, old-fashioned black dress, with the fleck of white at her throat, she had a statuesque, unmodern look. Her fine features were charged with that emotion which any expression would have weakened. Her arms were heaped with flowers—bouquets and baskets and sprays: spiraea, lilacs, flowering almond, peonies, pansies, all the glory of her garden that opening summer returned to her care and tenderness. She was tender with everything—a man, a child, an animal, a flower. Everything blossomed for her, and rested in her, and yearned toward her. The emotion of the day and of the hour seemed incarnate in her. She embodied in her strong and sweet personality all that blundering man has wrought on tormented woman by the savagery of war. She remembered what she had suffered—a young, incredulous creature, on the margin of life, avid of happiness, believing in joy, and drowning in her love for that one man, her husband. She thought of the slow news after slaughtering battles—how she waited for the laggard paper in the country town; she remembered that she dared not read the head-lines when she got them, but dropped, choking and praying God to spare her, before she glanced. Even now she could feel the wet paper against her raining cheek. Then her heart leaped back, and she thought of the day when he marched away—his arms, his lips, his groans. She remembered what the dregs of desolation were, and mortal fear of unknown fate; the rack of the imagination; and inquisition of the nerve—the pangs that no man-soldier of them all could understand. "It comes on women—war," she thought.



She Thought of the Slow News After Slaughtering Battles

### **She Thought of the Slow News After Slaughtering Battles**

Now, as she was stepping aside to avoid crushing some young white clover-blossoms in the grass where she was walking, she looked up and wondered if she were going blind, or if her mind were giving way.

The vacant space behind the solitary veteran trembled and palpitated before her vision, as if it had been peopled. By what? By whom? Patience was no occultist. She had never seen an apparition in her life. She felt that if she had not lacked a mysterious, unknown gift, she should have seen spirits, as men marching, now. But she did not see them. She was aware of a tremulous, nebulous struggle in the empty air, as of figures that did not form, or of sights from which her eyes were holden. Ah—what? She gasped for the wonder of it. Who was it, that followed the veteran, with the dumb, delighted fidelity that one race only knows of all created? For a wild instant this sane and sensible woman could have taken oath that Reuben Oak was accompanied on his march by his old dog, his dead dog, Tramp. If it had been Tommy— Or if it had been Jabez Trent— And where were they who had gone into the throat of death with him at Antietam, at Bull Run, at Fair Oaks, at Malvern Hill? But there limped along behind Reuben only an old, forgotten dog.

This quaint delusion (if delusion we must call it) aroused her attention, which had wavered from her husband, and concentrated it upon him afresh. Suddenly she saw him stagger.

A dozen persons started, but the wife sprang and reached him first. As she did this, the ghost dog vanished from before her. Only Reuben was there, marching alone, with the unpeopled space between him and the procession.

"Leave go of me!" he gasped. Patience quietly grasped him by the arm, and fell into step beside him. In her heart she was terrified. She was something of a reader in her way, and she thought of magazine stories where the veterans died upon Memorial Day.

"I'll march to decorate the Post—and Tommy—if I drop dead for it!" panted Reuben Oak.

"Then I shall march beside you," answered Patience.

"What 'll folks say?" cried the old soldier, in real anguish.

"They'll say I'm where I belong. Reuben! Reuben! *I've earned the right to.*"

He contended no more, but yielded to her—in fact, gladly, for he felt too weak to stand alone.

Inspiring him, and supporting him, and yet seeming (such was the sweet womanliness of her) to lean on him, Patience marched with him before the people; and these saw her through blurred eyes, and their hearts saluted her. With every step she felt that he strengthened. She was conscious of endowing him with her own vitality, as she sometimes did, in her own way—the love way, the wife way, powerfully and mysteriously.

So the veteran and his wife came on together to the cemetery, with the flags and the flowers. Nor was there a man or a woman in the throng who would have separated these comrades.

In the churchyard it was pleasant and expectant. The morning was cool, and the sun climbed gently. Not a flower had wilted; they looked as if they had been planted and were growing on the graves. When they had come to these, Patience Oak held back. She would not take from the old soldier his precious right. She did not offer to help him "decorate" anybody. His trembling mechanic's fingers clutched at the flowers as if he had been handling shot or nails. His breath came short. She watched him anxiously; she was still thinking of those stories she had read.

"Hadn't you better sit down on some monument and rest?" she whispered. But he paid no attention to her, and crawled from mound to mound. She perceived that it was his will to leave the new-made graves until the others had been remembered. Then he tottered across the cemetery with the flowers that he had saved for David Swing and old Mr. Succor and Jabez Trent, and the cheeks of the Charles Darlington Post were wet. Last of all he "decorated Tommy."

The air ached with the military dirge, and the voice of the chaplain faltered when he prayed. The veteran was aware that some persons in the crowd were sobbing. But his own eyes had now grown dry, and burned deep in their sunken sockets. As his sacred task drew to its end he grew remote, elate, and solemn. It was as if he were transfigured before his neighbors into something strange and holy. A village carpenter? A Connecticut tobacco-planter? Rather, say, the glory of the nation, the guardian of a great trust, proudly carried and honored to its end.

Taps were sounding over the old graves and the new, when the veteran slowly sank to one knee and toppled over. Patience, when she got her arms about him, saw that he had fallen across the mound where he had decorated Tommy with her white lilacs. Beyond lay the baby, small and still. The wife sat down on the little grave and drew the old man's head upon her lap. She thought of those Memorial Day stories with a deadly sinking at her heart. But it was a strong heart, all woman and all love.

"You *shall not* die!" she said.

She gathered him and poured her powerful being upon him—breath, warmth, will, prayer, who could say what it was? She felt as if she took hold of tremendous, unseen forces and moved them by unknown powers.

"Live!" she whispered. "*Live!*"

Some one called for a doctor, and she assented. But to her own soul she said:

"What's a doctor?"

The flags had fallen from his arms at last; he had clung to them till now. The chaplain reverently lifted them and laid them at his feet.

Once his white lips moved, and the people hushed to hear what outburst of patriotism would issue from them—what tribute to the cause that he had fought for, what final apostrophe to his country or his flag.

"Peter?" he called, feebly. "*Peter!*"

But Patience had said he should not die. And Patience knew. Had not she always known what he should do, or what he could? He lay upon his bed peacefully when, with tears and smiles, in reverence and in wonder, they had brought him home—and the flags of the Post, too. By a gesture he had asked to have these hung upon the foot-board of his bed.

He turned his head upon his pillow and watched his wife with wide, reflecting eyes. It was a long time before she would let him talk; in fact, the May afternoon was slanting to dusk before he tried to cross her tender will about that matter. When he did, it was to say only this:

"Peter? I was goin' to decorate the baby. I meant to when I took that turn."

Patience nodded.

"It's all done, Reuben."

"And, Peter? I've had the queerest notions about my old dog Tramp to-day. I wonder if there's a johnnyquil left to decorate him?"

"I'll go and see," said Patience. But when she had come back he had forgotten Tramp and the johnnyquil.

"Peter," he muttered, "*this has been a great day.*" He gazed solemnly at the flags.

Patience regarded him poignantly. With a stricture at the heart she thought:

"He has grown old fast since yesterday." Then joyously the elderly wife cried out upon herself: "But I am young! He shall have all my youth. I've got enough for two—and strength!"

She crept beside him and laid her warm cheek to his.

## THE END

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