

**AN AMERICAN
POILU**

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An American Poilu by Elmer Stetson Harden

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INTRODUCTION

THE War, that great refiner's fire, has burned away much of the dross cumbering humankind, and left us face to face with the true metal of a myriad of souls before whose naked purity and selflessness we bow in homage.

They are the youth who followed the Glean, soldiers who despite the grimness of battle never lost sight of the vision that transformed reality to an ideal; and made of suffering an incident, and of carnage a crusade for humanity.

The accompanying letters sent by an American to his mother and sister seemed too rare a possession to be held in the custody of the few; therefore that the benediction they bring may be shared by others they are being printed. They

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were not designed for publication. Nevertheless, who would ask that they be touched by the editor's pencil?

That an American in his thirties, a nature sensitively attuned and poetic, should for the cause of the right voluntarily cast in his lot with the French *poilu*, and amid the brutalities of war, the tramp of armies, the din of cannon keep his spirit so serene that the star of his purpose is never dimmed, nor the beauty of his surroundings overshadowed, is little short of a miracle. He was not a boy to be fascinated by the glamour of adventure; neither was he of the type to whose imagination a military career appealed. It was only his love for France and for his fellowman that lured him into dedicating his life to the world freedom.

Before our own country entered the struggle, Mr. X., who had often sojourned in Paris and had there many friends, crossed the ocean to give his services as an orderly at the hospital

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at Neuilly; and it was while on this errand of mercy that he formed the friendship with the wounded officer who was so vitally to influence his future. The two men had many tastes in common; both were persons of refinement and a broad culture, and both were endowed with a discriminating love for literature and for art. During the weary weeks of the Captain's convalescence there sprang up between them an affection so tough of fiber that by the time the commander was able to be discharged and return to his troops a plan had been perfected whereby the orderly should accompany him as a member of the French infantry, the condition for enlistment being that the new recruit should remain with that particular regiment for the duration of the war, and not be subject to transfer.

Such a request was unusual, and coming from an American unequipped for army duty was without precedent in the French War Office. In conse-

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quence it was necessary to present the papers personally to the Minister of War, and when they were returned it was with the unique distinction of being the only application of the sort ever received by the French Government from an American citizen.

The letters describing the initiate's training for service are naïve and amusing. Not only was he ignorant of military tactics but although familiar with the French tongue he had no technical knowledge of foreign war terms; in addition he was quite unaccustomed to the vigorous physical exercise his new calling demanded.

Nevertheless the letters he sent back to the mother and sister across seas never emphasize his discomforts, but dwell always on the larger truth of which the actual was but a symbol.

"My dreams are my support," he says. "I transform in order to endure."

One quotation picturing a visit he and the Captain made to the rolling