

Our Foreign Letter.

A SOLDIER'S FUNERAL.



In the distance there is heard a faint music, then as it draws nearer the sound of muffled drums falls on the ear, for a soldier's funeral approaches. Slowly marching to the strains of that funeral music is a company of soldiers in khaki; in their midst a gun carriage drawn by two mules, and on the carriage lies the coffin with its pall of the Union Jack, surmounted by the soldier's helmet. His comrades march with arms reversed, and the great drum is swathed in crape. Presently the sweetly solemn music takes a higher note, almost we hear the bugle sound the last call to arms. Ah! when will it sound again in the unhearing ears of that still form now sleeping beneath his country's flag?

They pass on, whilst the music echoes up and down the narrow street of England's smallest colony. Far away from the homeland he is laid to rest, within sound of the unresting sea, a young soldier who has fought a good fight and won the victory in many battles. For Queen and country he fought in that grim war in Southern Africa only a few short years ago. And proud was his mother of her gallant boy when she saw the medals shining on his breast, whilst her heart gave a great leap at sight of the plain bronze cross which marked the highest title to honour.

But he had fought a harder fight with a more subtle enemy, and in that also had he conquered. Long ago in England in the space of one short hour, he went near to break his mother's heart, when, under the influence of drink, he enlisted. Yet that step which seemed so fatal proved his salvation, for, sobered by the shock, he swore to get the better of the drink fiend. And his comrades can tell how well he kept that vow.

Not only of his mother did he think when fighting hard against temptation, but of his sweetheart also, the girl who, with eyes bathed in tears, had told him he must think no more of her, she could not marry a drunkard. But he would think of her, he did think of her, and the sad look in her blue eyes as she said farewell helped him to conquer in many a fight. She should be proud of him, of that he was determined. Wounded during the relief of Ladysmith he was invalided home. That was a glad homecoming when, clasped in his mother's trembling arms he met the shy sweet glance of Annie as the girl stood behind her, nor did his sweetheart then refuse his kiss of love.

One other event of his young life in England dwelt in his memory during those last fevered days in hospital. He had been a unit in that army of her soldiers who marched through the streets of London

at the funeral of the great Queen so dear to the hearts of her subjects, when her body was carried to a well-earned rest with the simple but intensely solemn ceremony of a soldier's funeral.

As the Nursing Sister bent over her patient trying to soothe him in his fits of delirium he was again in that long procession and humming the plaintive strain's of Beethoven's and Chopin's funeral marches, whose echoes will surely never die in the memory of those present on that wonderful day. The Sister understood, for she too had heard them, and she knew that the muffled drums were even now sounding in the sick man's ears.

Just before the end he recovered consciousness. And it was then that he asked for his medals. She brought them in their little case, to his bedside. Strange, she thought, that this soldier should have escaped the countless perils of fierce warfare only to die of fever when still so young. Yet, after all, only strange inasmuch as all life is strange and full of mystery.

But stay, he is speaking, though with difficulty, and his voice is almost inaudible.

She bent low to catch his words.

"Sister," the faint voice said, "these are for my mother and Annie. Please will you write? You know where to send the letter, and you will tell them——"

Here his voice failed, but with a great effort he gasped out,

"The Cross is for ——"

In vain she strove to hear the last word which trembled on those lips, soon to become stiff in death.

The Sister was in her little room, where for one short hour she would not be interrupted. She sat at her writing table, but the sheet of paper still lay in unbroken whiteness on the blotter. She had taken up her pen and laid it down again, and was now gazing out of the open window across the sea towards the blue African mountains. How could she break the sad news to those two women in England? Then, as she gazed across the sea, memories of her own past sorrows—past, yet ever present—swept over her in great waves. And sympathy born of knowledge came to her aid, as with a sudden impulse she seized the pen and wrote. Almost blinded by her tears she wrote on; she told of his brave patience, and gave his unfinished message. The clock struck as she signed her name to the letter, and then rose from the table to resume her duty in the wards.

When that letter reached the soldier's home in the old country, his sweetheart alone received and read it.

For on the very day when her soldier boy breathed his last, his mother also had passed away into the great silence.

Annie, in the struggle of her young strong grief, cried out in vain rebellion that they should have left her to face life all alone.

She could not ——

"Ah! There was the cross, the soldier's cross, and the cross was for her.

So she took it, and wore it ever near her heart.

ELLEN MAPLES.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)