

# The Old Soldier's Bonus

By FRANCIS NEILSON

A man with the desire to study the aftermath of military conflict sailed to an island which had been made desolate by war. He moored his craft in a cove and then packed a knapsack for a journey. He took with him some food, a revolver and ammunition—not that he thought he might need it to defend himself, because report on the mainland was to the effect that the island had been so seared by fire that no one thought it was worthwhile visiting it.

There were many stories told about the conquest and one which interested him particularly was concerning the evacuation of all the women and children of the island when the war began. There were some who scoffed at this report for it was realized on the mainland that women had their use and value as wives and bearers of children who grew up to be soldiers who would defend the liberties of their country.

The adventurer roamed the island for several days and saw nothing but the rack and ruin of fearful strife. Although not very many years had passed since peace was declared, grass, trees, and bushes, in little glades where they found water, were putting forth their shoots, and some had grown sturdily to a height of four or five feet. He remarked, as he observed them, that Nature, the restorer, was kinder than man.

One night he decided he would remain at the point he had reached and, as the evening air cooled, he unrolled his blanket and slept, for he had determined to push on the next day into a part of the island where there were some hills.

He set out with the rising of the sun and after traveling some hours, he saw in a valley what he thought was a huge pile of logs. On reaching it, he discovered it was a rude hut made of charred timbers and sealed together with clay—a kind of adobe. He hesitated for some time and, after looking about cautiously, he knocked on the door which swung open as he touched it. Seated be-

fore a smouldering fire was a man, bent, withered, and grey, who looked at the intruder in amazement.

"Where do you come from?" said he.

"The mainland, of course," the visitor replied. "But I did not expect to find a living soul."

"Oh, I'm living, but I don't know for how long."

"Did you fight in the war?"

"Fight?" the old man muttered in a quavering voice. "Certainly I fought! Fought to the last."

"What for?"

The old man rose and approached the visitor. He placed his hands on his shoulder and, for a moment, he tried to speak. The words stuck in his throat; then, dashing the tears from his eyes, he said in a hoarse voice, "Freedom."

The visitor attempted to soothe him and led him back to his rough seat. "There," he said, "calm yourself." And, with the notion of changing the subject, he said, "What do you do?"

After a bit, the islander muttered, "Work. Work from morn till night to get a living and that's the hardest thing to find here. Sometimes I catch a sea-fish that's got into a shallow pool. Sometimes I dig roots and, now that the trees are growing again, I gather a few berries and nuts. It's hard work."

The visitor realized that the old soldier was dying slowly in pain. Privation had marked him for a quick end.

"And are you all alone?"

"Oh, no," was the reply. "I'm not alone, thank God!"

He rose slowly and beckoned the visitor to the outside and then, pointing where there was a little

grove of trees, he said, "You see that smoke curling up? Another man lives over there. And I have to go out tonight and gather berries or find a fish for his breakfast."

"What?" cried the visitor. "Do you work for that person? Can't he get his own food?"

With a look of something like contempt, the aged islander turned and said, "You don't understand. Work is not for him. Work is for me."

"What is the matter with him? Is he a cripple or bed-ridden?"

"Not he. He's younger than I am."

"Then why do you work for him?"

Drawing close to the ear of the visitor, the old fellow whispered, "He is the Leader of the State, the guardian of my liberty, for which I fought."

