

Sketch

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Good Investment

Clara Bickford*

*Iowa State College

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THERE'S Zeb now, just goin' into the bank," Jim said to his wife as they drove down the street. "Just figured I'd see him around this mornin'. Wanted to ask him about that span of mules he's sellin'."

Jim parked his car across the street from the bank and climbed out. "I'll meet you in the back of Biggar's store in about an hour." He opened the door for her and helped her climb down. "Reckon Ma's rheumatism's worse today," he thought. "We're both gettin' old." He wondered if she were thinking about Bill, too. Twenty-two years ago today Bill went away to war.

"I was just a-thinkin', Jim, that we were in town twenty-two years ago today," Ma said as she smoothed her dress over her stomach and reached for her purse on the car seat. She sighed, remembering. "Well, guess I'd better get around with my tradin' or we'll be late gettin' back," she said.

Jim crossed the street to the bank. "Reckon Zeb'll be out pretty soon," he thought. "I'll just wait here and catch him when he comes out." He leaned against the window casing and lit his pipe. "Yep, twenty-two years ago today that Bill went away. May third, it was. He was just a kid, only nineteen. Marched down this very street to the depot. The day was about like today, too," he remembered. "Warm and sunny with a south wind blowing. Bill grabbed for his hat and snatched it out of the air as he marched along. He grinned and winked as he went by. Such a happy kid."

JIM looked down the street towards the depot. Same old town except for the cars. Same old depot. The train had pulled out for the west about ten that morning. He looked at his watch. "About ten now. Guess Zeb'll be along pretty soon."

Yep, the train had pulled out with all those fine boys on it. Long khaki-covered arms thrust through the train windows had waved hats in the air until the sides of the cars were alive with

waving arms. In his mind Jim watched the train out of sight again as he had twenty-two years ago, straining to get a last look at Bill.

Yep, Bill had gone away to war, but he hadn't come back. The government had sent a message, impersonal and cold as the summons to war had been. At the top Bill's name, Oct. 15, 1918, War Department, Washington, D. C. The message had said, "Killed in action." No more. Not even, "We're sorry we've taken your son." Just "killed in action." All he had left now was the memory of him, waving a khaki-covered arm from a train window.

Jim blew his nose hard on his red bandana handkerchief and relit his pipe. "Oh, hello, Zeb. Been waitin' for you. Still got that span of mules—or did you sell them?" he added as he saw Zeb's fist close around a thick wad of bills. "Or rob a bank, maybe? Say, you musta made a killin' on something."

"**W**ELL, Jim, I just cashed in my Liberty Bond I bought back in eighteen. Figure I made a pretty good investment after all. Thought for a while I wouldn't get much out of it, or might even lose it there when times wuz bad. But I made a pretty good investment." Zeb crammed the bills into his billfold and stuffed it into his pocket. "Still got them mules, Jim. Good mules, too. Why don't you come over and take a look at 'em after dinner?" Zeb reached for a cigar in his vest pocket and felt for a match.

"Yes, sir, the government's all right," he continued. "Got a match?" Jim handed him one. "Loaned 'em a thousand dollars and got back every cent, with interest too. Plenty good investment."

A spring breeze blew from the south, and an approaching train rumbled nearer.

"Well, Zeb, I made 'em a loan, too," Jim said. "Mine didn't turn out so good, though. Lost everything."

Zeb paused with the match against the cement casing. "Didn't recollect as how you made any loan during the war, Jim."

'Yep, I made 'em a loan, all right." The train roared into the station, headed west. "I loaned 'em my boy. Boys make risky investments." He watched the train slow down and come to a halt. "Well, so long, Zeb. See ya after dinner."

Jim crossed the street to his car and climbed in. As he reached for the switch, he saw Zeb still standing there by the bank with the unlit cigar dangling limply from his mouth.

The train was sliding away from the depot now, towards the west. Old Jim strained his eyes after it, seeing again the flutter of long, khaki-covered arms thrust through the window, and Bill, alive and grinning, as the train carried him away.



On Going—

Arnold Skromme

THE cows munched their dry hay and tossed it raspingly up and down the sloping mangers. The uneasy fall wind whispered hoarsely around the barn and through the grove of box elder trees to the north. The last of the lingering shadows had lengthened and retreated into the night.

Sigard emptied his foaming pail of milk into the large strainer on the can. His coarse, rough hands shook so that the swirling milk rose and fell in overlapping waves. Damn it! Milk and work, milk and work out here in the barn . . . and Marie not feeling so well, no, Marie not so good at all.

He sat down and began on the next cow's teats. The tingling, whining stream of milk shrieked inside the pail . . . zing . . . zing . . . the shriek tore his taut spine into whipping threads—the whipping threads lashed against his thudding brain . . . zing . . . his face wrinkled with each zing . . . zing . . . zing-zing . . . Marie . . . Marie . . . sick . . . sick . . . not die . . . won't die . . . can't die. Then soon, buzzume, buzzume, the milk was getting deeper in the pail now—the foam was smothering the zing, but it was boiling, bubbling deep inside. Sigard's eyes dilated, then nearly closed with each buzzume. His feelings boiled . . . rose . . . and fell.

“Sigard?”