AWESOME stories

Anna Coleman Goes to Paris

Many of the soldiers whose faces were disfigured in the "Great War"—referred to as "mutilés"—refused to leave the hospital. Some committed suicide.

Anna Coleman Ladd, an American sculptress, believed she could help them. She left her comfortable life in Boston and, with the help of the American Red Cross, established the Studio for Portrait Masks in Paris in January of 1918.

The hand-painted copper masks which Anna made in her studio allowed the mutilés to become whole again. With their “new faces” they had the confidence to return to their families, find jobs, even fall in love and get married.

When Anna first arrived in Paris the surgeons were skeptical. To prove her idea, Anna created masks for three French poilus.** When she presented them to the French Service de Sante, Anna's skeptics became her heartiest supporters. Eminent French surgeon Dr. Paul Desfosses said:

> *The results obtained are truly astonishing: a stupendous illusion of reality... I advise my surgical colleagues to visit the studio.*

The minister of the Service de Sante thanked Anna, saying:

> *They permit mutilated men awaiting surgery, or whose wounds are beyond the resources of surgery, to circulate without attracting attention or becoming objects of repulsion. . .*

A report from the studio, written in 1919, noted that:

> *People get used to seeing men with arms and legs missing, but they never get used to an abnormal face.* (Quoted by Lettie Gavin in *American Women in World War I*, at page 210.)

One of Anna's patients was a man who had refused for more than two years to return home because he did not want his mother to see him. He lived in seclusion, hiding his gargoyle-like appearance, until he met Anna. Wearing the mask Anna created for him, this young man was finally able to return to his family.

Anna wanted to do more than just hide a man’s mutilation; she wanted to “put in that mask part of the man himself.” To do so she made her studio an inviting place where the men would enjoy coming and talking with her.

In describing the studio, Anna said:

> *We always tried to keep the place cheerful and frequently had the boys sitting around playing games. . . . We laughed with them and helped them to forget. That is what they longed for and deeply appreciated.*

She wanted each mask to be a reflection of the man’s spirit. To achieve this she talked to family members and studied pictures of the soldier taken before the war. She later said:

> *I was able in every case to give the mutilated, disheartened man back his personality, and his hopes, and ambitions.*

The letters of gratitude Anna received from her “victims of war” were touching and often told of new jobs, marriages and happy family reunions. One included a poem: “As the Lord God made Adam with his breath; You give back life to them prayed for death” (signed H.M.B. 1918).

The French government awarded Anna the Cross of the Chevalier of the Legion of Honor *** in appreciation for her work.

After Anna left Paris in December, 1918, her colleagues and assistants continued the work of the studio for another year before it closed.

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> *The word "poilu," now applied to a French soldier, means literally "a hairy one," but the term is understood metaphorically. Since time immemorial the possession of plenty of bodily hair has served to indicate a certain sturdy, male bearishness, and thus the French, long before the war, called any good, powerful fellow — "un véritable poilu." The term has been found applied to soldiers of the Napoleonic wars. The French soldier of to-day, coming from the trenches looking like a well-digger, but contented, hearty, and strong, is the poilu par excellence.* Henry Sheahan (a/k/a Henry Beston), from his book *A Volunteer Poilu*, published in 1916, at page 158.

*** *The Légion d'honneur* (Legion of Honor) was instituted by Napoleon I in 1802. It is France's highest civilian honor.

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Media Stream

Saying Goodbye to Madame Ladd

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