

The Visitor To His Suffering Men

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[Reprinted from *The Public*, New York, January 5, 1917]



Single Copies 3c; 12 Copies 25c

The Public Publishing Company, Inc.
122 East 37th Street
New York City

6-1495

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Night trembled like the shadows of a leafy tree in a fitful breeze; the earth shook with thunders; the sky sparkled with wicked lights flashed from millions of mouths of steel. Vapors rose tortuously, swirled by gusts blown hot through the chilly air. Men advanced and fell, writhed and moaned, and some crashed down muttering not a sound.

The sentry stood gazing into the mystery of murk. Around him lay stricken fellows dead and dying; and some in agony begged piteously for death. Anguish weltered in a mire of blood. To the sentry time seemed to stand still; eternity filled the section of a second. He was alone, an outpost not called in. With straining eyes, craning neck and quivering mouth, all wrenched painfully, he sought in the thickening gloom the source of disaster. A soldier overlooked in a world of horror. It was so long since he was stationed there he thought he was forgotten; or had the battle-line receded far, and no orders from his captain now could reach him? He prayed for dawn to come and dissipate the night. His lips and tongue were parched and thick, too numb for angry blasphemy. A

God-forsaken man where King's battalions die.

Out of the black patch into which he peered there moved a form; it seemed like a streak of grey, a rent in night's clouded sky. The form came from the enemy's lines; without show of haste it approached speedily. Weaponless it drew nigh. The sentry raised his rifle; his sight grew keener; warmer flowed his blood; and the weariness of fear fell from him. Alert, eager, and intransigent, he desired the moment of attack.

"Who goes ——?"

The figure raised its head and eyes, full of pity, gazed on the sentry before he finished the question.

"Oh!—it's you, matey," he cried in a gasp of deep relief. Then the weariness fell on him again, and leaning his worn body on his rifle, he stood bent, resting his head upon his hands, clutching his weapon as a prop.

"A friend," the figure said. "The countersign you all know. 'Mercy' is the word which passes me through all the lines." The voice was soft as gentle rain in summer time.

The sentry raised his head and smiled kindly. He looked on a man, fearless, graceful, sad, clad in a long loose robe, neither brown nor grey, but of some strange hue the darkness could not hide.

"Haven't you had enough of this business? Always aroaming about the lines, in and out, hod-nobbing with all sorts?"

"No, my business never ends," the figure replied. "I am the only neutral in the midst of all the fray."

"You are that," the soldier agreed. "But I thought you'd gone home long ago."

"Home is no place for me just now. I am not asked for there. They have other work to do."

"Here's the work they do." The soldier waved his hand over the dead and dying. Look at it, matey. Well, I hope they may see it before it's over. So you've not been home?"

"No, my countersign would not pass me in one bare yard. 'Mercy' is known only to the soldier."

"That's right, matey. But, stay a bit. Sit down. They must have forgotten about me out here; seems as I were the only live 'un standing up to-night." The sentry listened for a moment. "Strange, but it has got quiet all of a sudden. Why, I can't hear a groan," he muttered.

The figure sat down on an ammunition box and looked up into the soldier's face.

"I thought you'd have some good news to tell. So you haven't been home?"

"No, I left without a passport when the soldiers went from home."

"But where have you been? I haven't seen you for months."

"I came when you were sleeping, sometimes when you were fighting. Not a day passes but I visit all the lines."

The sentry smiled tolerantly. He was incredulous, but he had no desire to challenge the statement of his visitor.

"If I weren't sure Christ was dead, blest if I wouldn't begin to think you were Him," the soldier muttered, with a shake of his head.

"The same thought comes to most of the sentries I visit," the figure said.

"Is that right? Others think as I do? Well, I'm blest." The soldier's grime-stained face seemed to flush with joy. He looked long into the eyes of his friend, then suddenly started back. "It's the day," he cried. "It must be. It's after midnight. What's the time? My watch was smashed by a splinter. Lord, how strange I feel. It must be the day. My Mary wrote and told me good news would come this time. And you—what's the matter with me? I'm all of a tremble. Are you—? Well—but—may be——"

He muttered in staccato tones, his voice becoming softer and softer, until it sank to

a whisper. His knees gave way, and down he sat at the side of his visitor.

They were silent for a long while. The weary soldier felt relief, like sleep refreshing a wide-eyed man in pain, and to him there came a voice which said:

"I am greater than life. Duration and I are one. I am the spirit of the best that is in you: the divine you do not know. I am here to tell you there is hope for you. Soldier, all history is the same to me: it is thread spun by the seekers of Power. But the kingdoms, principalities, and commonwealths of the earth come and go, and change not, while I remain a witness of their strife, waiting the day of my enthronement in the hearts of men. You soldiers, you who inherit my shame, are now the only men who shut me not out of your hearts. It is with you as it was with me. I was the instrument Force raised up to quell Justice. Force though raised me up to its own destruction. But that day is long in coming. Yes, the Cross was Caesar's symbol of Force; my Body the symbol of My Father's Love."

The sentry started and stood up.

"Love!" he said. "There's not much love going about these days," wearily he sighed.

"More than you think."

"Look at us, at it morning, noon, and

night. Nothing but blood to see, nothing but groans to hear. Hell, but I'm tired of it. See, out here alone, forgotten by the staff. I wonder what my Mary'd say if she knew—" he muttered dreamily, thinking of his wife. "But what's it all about?"

"Power," the visitor replied. "They fight for Power."

"Blest if I don't think soldiering's a curse."

"You suffer for my strength," the figure said.

"That's a riddle, matey," the sentry smiled.

"It is quite clear. It was my stand against ruthless Power and Force which caused the rulers to make you serve in arms against me."

"Against you—against—" he murmured. "I see. You mean they're afraid of us—going over to you? Is that it?"

"How quick-witted you are in your present distress. But will you remember that when you rest from your labors? Or will you forget as speedily as heretofore? Remembrance, sentry, is more potent than sudden resolution born in an hour of pain. Remembrance this time should foster love."

"We'll remember this time," the soldier said as his face took on a look of deep determination. "But when will it be over?"