

The Soldier's Rest

By Arthur Machen

The soldier with the ugly wound in the head opened his eyes at last, and looked about him with an air of pleasant satisfaction.

He still felt drowsy and dazed with some fierce experience through which he had passed, but so far he could not recollect much about it. But an agreeable glow began to steal about his heart—such a glow as comes to people who have been in a tight place and have come through it better than they had expected. In its mildest form this set of emotions may be observed in passengers who have crossed the Channel on a windy day without being sick. They triumph a little internally, and are suffused with vague, kindly feelings.

The wounded soldier was somewhat of this disposition as he opened his eyes, pulled himself together, and looked about him. He felt a sense of delicious ease and repose in bones that had been racked and weary, and deep in the heart that had so lately been tormented there was an assurance of comfort—of the battle won. The thundering, roaring waves were passed; he had entered into the haven of calm waters. After fatigues and terrors that as yet he could not recollect he seemed now to be resting in the easiest of all easy chairs in a dim, low room.

In the hearth there was a glint of fire and a blue, sweet-scented puff of wood smoke; a great black oak beam roughly hewn crossed the ceiling. Through the leaded panes of the windows he saw a rich glow of sunlight, green lawns, and against the deepest and most radiant of all blue skies the wonderful far-lifted towers of a vast Gothic cathedral—mystic, rich with imagery.

“Good Lord!” he murmured to himself. “I didn’t know they had such places in France. It’s just like Wells. And it might be the other day when I was going past the Swan, just as it might be past that window, and asked the ostler what time it was, and he says, ‘What time? Why, summer-time’; and there outside it looks like summer that would last for ever. If this was an inn they ought to call it ‘The Soldiers’ Rest.’ ”

He dozed off again, and when he opened his eyes once more a kindly looking man in some sort of black robe was standing by him.

“It’s all right now, isn’t it?” he said, speaking in good English. “Yes, thank you, sir, as right as can be. I hope to be back again soon.”

“Well, well; but how did you come here? Where did you get that?” He pointed to the wound on the soldier’s forehead.

The soldier put his hand up to his brow and looked dazed and puzzled.

“Well, sir,” he said at last, “it was like this, to begin at the beginning. You know how we came over in August, and there we were in the thick of it, as you might say, in a day or two. An awful time it was, and I don’t know how I got through it alive. My best friend was killed dead beside me as we lay in the trenches. By Cambrai, I think it was.

“Then things got a little quieter for a bit, and I was quartered in a village for the best part of a week. She was a very nice lady where I was, and she treated me proper with the best of everything. Her husband he was fighting; but she had the nicest little boy I ever knew, a little fellow of five, or six it might be, and we got on splendid. The amount of their lingo that kid taught me—‘We, we’ and ‘Bong swor’ and ‘Commong voo porty voo,’ and all—and I taught him English. You should have heard that nipper say ‘Arf a mo’, old un’! It was a treat.

“Then one day we got surprised. There was about a dozen of us in the village, and two or three hundred Germans came down on us early one morning. They got us; no help for it. Before we could shoot.

“Well, there we were. They tied our hands behind our backs, and smacked our faces and kicked us a bit, and we were lined up opposite the house where I’d been staying.

“And then that poor little chap broke away from his mother, and he run out and saw one of the Boshes, as we call them, fetch me one over the jaw with his clenched fist. Oh dear! oh dear! he might have done it a dozen times if only that little child hadn’t seen him.

“He had a poor bit of a toy I’d bought him at the village shop; a toy gun it was. And out he came running, as I say, crying out something in French like ‘Bad man! bad man! don’t hurt my English or I shoot you’; and he pointed that gun at the German soldier. The German, he took his bayonet, and he drove it right through the poor little chap’s throat.”

The soldier’s face worked and twitched and twisted itself into a sort of grin, and he sat grinding his teeth and staring at the man in the black robe. He was silent for a little. And then he found his voice, and the oaths rolled terrible, thundering from him, as he cursed that murderous wretch, and bade him go down and burn for ever in hell. And the tears were raining down his face, and they choked him at last.

“I beg your pardon, sir, I’m sure,” he said, “especially you being a minister of some kind, I suppose; but I can’t help it. He was such a dear little man.”

The man in black murmured something to himself: “*Pretiosa in conspectu Domini mors innocentium ejus*”—Dear in the sight of the Lord is the death of His innocents. Then he put a kind hand very gently on the soldier’s shoulder.

“Never mind,” said he; “I’ve seen some service in my time, myself. But what about that wound?”

“Oh, that; that’s nothing. But I’ll tell you how I got it. It was just like this. The Germans had us fair, as I tell you, and they shut us up in a barn in the village; just flung us on the ground and left us to starve seemingly. They barred up the big door of the barn, and put a sentry there, and thought we were all right.

“There were sort of slits like very narrow windows in one of the walls, and on the second day it was, I was looking out of these slits down the street, and I could see those German devils were up to mischief. They were planting their machine guns everywhere handy where an ordinary man coming up the street would never see them, but I see them, and I see the infantry lining up behind the garden walls. Then I had a sort of a notion of what was coming; and presently, sure enough, I could hear some of our chaps singing ‘Hullo, bulb, hub!’ in the distance; and I says to myself, ‘Not this time.’

“So I looked about me, and I found a hole under the wall; a kind of a drain I should think it was, and I found I could just squeeze through. And I got out and crept round, and away I goes running down the street, yelling for all I was worth, just as our chaps were getting round the corner at the bottom. ‘Bang, bang!’ went the guns, behind me and in front of me, and on each side of me, and then—bash! something hit me on the head and over I went; and I don’t remember anything more till I woke up here just now.”

The soldier lay back in his chair and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them he saw that there were other people in the room besides the minister in the black robes. One was a man in a big black cloak. He had a grim old face and a great beaky nose. He shook the soldier by the hand.

“By God! sir,” he said, “you’re a credit to the British Army; you’re a damned fine soldier and a good man, and, by God! I’m proud to shake hands with you.”

And then someone came out of the shadow, someone in queer clothes such as the soldier had seen worn by the heralds when he had been on duty at the opening of Parliament by the King.

“Now, by Corpus Domini,” this man said, “of all knights ye be noblest and gentlest, and ye be of fairest report, and now ye be a brother of the noblest brotherhood that ever was since this world’s beginning, since ye have yielded dear life for your friends’ sake.”

The soldier did not understand what the man was saying to him. There were others, too, in strange dresses, who came and spoke to him. Some spoke in what sounded like French. He could not make it out; but he knew that they all spoke kindly and praised him.

“What does it all mean?” he said to the minister. “What are they talking about? They don’t think I’d let down my pals?”

“Drink this,” said the minister, and he handed the soldier a great silver cup, brimming with wine.

The soldier took a deep draught, and in that moment all his sorrows passed from him.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Vin nouveau du Royaume,” said the minister. “New Wine of the Kingdom, you call it.” And then he bent down and murmured in the soldier’s ear.

“What,” said the wounded man, “the place they used to tell us about in Sunday School? With such drink and such joy—”

His voice was hushed. For as he looked at the minister the fashion of his vesture was changed. The black robe seemed to melt away from him. He was all in armour, if armour be made of starlight, of the rose of dawn, and of sunset fires; and he lifted up a great sword of flame.

Full in the midst, his Cross of Red Triumphant Michael brandished, and trampled the Apostate’s pride.