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The
White Comrade

BY ALLAN P. SHATFORD
CHAPLAIN TO THE FORCES

CHRISTMAS, 1915

Foreword.

THIS little brochure was suggested by the war picture entitled "The White Comrade," painted by G. Hillyard Swinstead, R.I., and reproduced as a Frontispiece by the kind permission of F. R. Britton & Co. There is no pretension to literary merit or originality in this little story. It was penned hurriedly in the midst of exacting duties at the Front. The writer had just one purpose in view—to emphasize the abiding presence of Christ in all the relations of the war. It is only necessary to add that this is not all fiction. Men have had visions of Christ over the Battlefield—Angels have ministered to the soldiers—the Master has manifested Himself in many ways. To whomsoever this booklet may come, the writer hopes that it will bear a message of Christmas peace—the inward peace which passes all understanding.

LP PS 8537
H28W4

I.

When soldiers of the Cross waged Holy War,
With courage high, and hearts that did not quail
Before the foe, in olden times they saw
The blessed vision of the Holy Grail.
Tho' Christ was gone, His pledge was with them yet.
For, borne on wings of angels, from the skies,
They saw the chalice that once held the wine
As emblem of the Saviour's sacrifice
For men, and knew that still the Master met,
With His own friends, in fellowship divine.

II.

Christ has His soldiers now. Though years have rolled
Away, the warriors of the Cross are strong
To fight His battles, as the saints of old,
Against oppression, tyranny, and wrong.
And still amid the conflict, they can trace
The Saviour's influence. Not the Holy Grail
Which once as His remembrance was adored,
But Christ Himself is with them. For a veil
Is lifted from their eyes, and, face to face
They meet the presence of the risen Lord.

III.

O blessed vision! After all the years,
Christ's with us yet. To-day, as heretofore,
Men see Thee still and they cast off their fears,
And take fresh courage to press on once more.
The soldiers, bearing from the desperate fight
A wounded brother, see Thee, in the way,
The ever-present Saviour in their strife.
For once again, Thy loved ones hear Thee say,
(O Christ! White Comrade, in their stand for right!)
"Lo, I am with you always," Lord of Life.

V.H.S.

Canada Council / English dubk

Revised 1967

1967

\$5.00

Bernard Antrawan, May 1967.

Canada Council / English dept.



THE WHITE COMRADE.

"LO, I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS."

By G. Hillyard Swinstead, R.I.

BY PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHERS,
MESSRS. F. R. BRITTON & CO.,
24/8, BASINGHALL ST., LONDON, E.C.

1103209

THE WHITE COMRADE

I.

THE fight had waged desperately for many days. It seemed impossible for either side to gain an advantage. So strongly were the trenches held that every attempt to force them ended in failure. The artillery kept up such an incessant bombardment that men's nerves were becoming raw and the tension intolerable. The shriek of shells never paused even for a moment, and the rifles cracked and spat out their spiteful messages all the long, dreary hours of the day and night. To add to the horror of the situation the weather had been execrable for weeks. Incessant rains had turned the trenches into streams of water, and men stood knee-deep in the foul mixture of mud and slime. Feet were frost-bitten and hands so chilled that they could scarcely hold a rifle. Yet the men were not disheartened! It was magnificent to watch the spirit of determination triumph over the breaking nerves. Soldiers would call words of cheer to each other or indulge in a burst of merriment that acted like a flash of sunshine amid the gloom. They were all eager for an advance. It was with difficulty that they held themselves in leash. When the enemy had essayed an attempt upon the trenches he was beaten back furiously, leaving the dead in rows midway between the parapets. The officers moved about quietly, cheering the men, seeing that everything was in order for the charge that would be made at the proper moment. It was hoped that the plan would be carried through before Christmas, and the

men were buoyed up with the promise of a royal Yuletide.

The Canadian Division was in the hottest section of the line. All the Battalions had received their baptism of fire, but this conflict was the most critical of their experience. The men were keyed up to their very best, and already had shewn a pluck and daring that rivalled the conduct of the most seasoned troops. Every man was determined upon success—there was no room for even the thought of failure. The section of the enemy's trench entrusted to them would be captured if Canadian dash and valour could do it! All these long weeks they had been waiting for this opportunity, and now they were resolved to give a good account of themselves.

When the order finally came, the men leaped over the parapets with a shout, and swept forward towards the enemy. "Not a man backward stayed." The fierce fire opposing them daunted not a single soul. As fast as the men fell others leaped gladly forward, and the tide flowed irresistibly on.

Private McKane of the Nth Battalion was in the very front of the charge. He had lost his best friend in the fight at Ypres, and was therefore determined to square the account. It was not in any spirit of vengeance that he set his teeth and rushed on. He was one of the most God-fearing men in the Division. But when a foe attacks your home and slays a loved one, it summons you to redress the wrong. He was the first to climb over the enemy's parapet and take toll of the men who still remained in the trenches. For the Germans had evacuated their front lines and retreated to the support trenches. As soon as the Canadians had established a sufficient number of men to hold these lines, the rest dashed on towards the second German trench. McKane was in the very

forefront of the charge again, driving courageously on, when the comrade next to him groaned and pitched headlong to the earth. Suddenly pulling himself up, McKane bent over his fallen brother to see if he were killed or wounded. That halt brought disaster upon him, for a German bullet ploughed through the side of his head, and another pierced the calf of his leg. He crumpled to the earth. The men rushed on over their bodies—he heard their cries as they sped towards the enemy. The pain in his head was agonising—everything grew vague and confused. He moved his hands about until they came into contact with the face of his comrade—a groan answered his touch. A mist blurred his vision, but somehow he thought that it was his lost friend lying beside him. Tenderly he stroked the face and then ran his hands down the body and clasped the cold fingers of his comrade. Loud cheers reached his ears—he knew what that meant. The second line of trenches had been taken—it was good to know that the boys had not failed. Then he lost grip of himself and fainted away. But he revived again! Some one was bending over him—a tall figure dressed in white. Where was he? Who could this be? Was he in some hospital. He managed to voice his wonderment. "Where am I? Who are you?" he asked. And then a voice of unutterable sweetness, like unto the distant peal of evening bells, answered him, "I am your brother, comrade with all those who fight in the cause of truth and liberty." The White Figure stretched forth a hand towards McKane.

"Why, you are wounded in the hand!" he cried. "That is an old wound," quietly answered the White Comrade, "but it has been troubling me of late." Then He bent forwards to comfort the wounded

soldier. As He did so, something fell from His head upon the body of McKane. It was a plaited crown of thorns. McKane reached forth to pick it up and return it, but when his hand grasped it a section broke off. He tried to murmur his sorrow, but he could not speak. With an effort he raised his head so as to look up into the face of his Comrade. Then it flashed upon him Who it was. He sighed contentedly, a rare smile spread about his mouth, and he slipped away into unconsciousness again.

The medical officer and stretcher-bearers had worked hard all the night collecting the wounded. When they reached McKane the first streaks of dawn were piercing the Eastern sky. They found him badly wounded and unconscious. He was lying close beside a dead comrade. When they raised him up and laid him upon the stretcher, he muttered brokenly to himself. As they bore him away, he kept saying, "I broke His crown!" They thought him merely delirious. When they reached the dressing-station he seemed more intelligible. He spoke of seeing someone with a wounded hand—of not recognising Him at first—of picking up a crown that broke in his hand! The M.O. administered chloroform to quiet him whilst he examined and dressed his wounds. When they took off his tunic they found his right hand tightly clenched. With difficulty they opened it and found therein a section of plaited thorn! So tightly had it been grasped that one thorn had pierced the palm of the hand and sunk deep in the flesh. Blood had flowed out upon the thorn and dyed it crimson. When the medical officer examined it more closely, he found an old stain of blood there, as though long years ago the plaited thorn had marred some one's flesh and drawn blood.

II.

DORA McKANE was a nursing sister in one of the Canadian Hospitals on the coast of France.

She was a petite, dark-eyed, gracious woman, serious in duty, but always cheerful. The patients under her care all loved her—she was always willing to do her utmost for their comfort. Perhaps the fact that she had a brother at the Front intensified her solicitude for the wounded and made her all the more tender. But all the nurses manifested a similar spirit. There is nothing more beautiful than the sweet gentleness, almost a maternal tenderness, of sisters in hospital work for their patients. This particular hospital was much sought after—men going up to the Front asked that they should be sent here in the event of being wounded. There seemed to be a rivalry in skill and kindness among the officers, nurses, and men as to which ward should hold the banner for general efficiency. The Hospital was quite a huge affair—great Durbar tents standing in long rows, each equipped with every convenience and comfort. The location was all that could be desired. Behind the white tents beautiful hills lifted their green sides well above the plain, and so protected the Hospital from cold winds. In the distance the waters of the English Channel spread their glory before you, and white sails dotted the stretching blue. Sand-dunes broke the monotony of the extended plain, and a glorious beach yielded satisfaction to those who braved the long walk from the hospital.

There had been a long period when the patients were few and the staff was beginning to chafe a bit under the inaction. Not that they wanted to see

men wounded, but, as they came out to serve, they were eager to be doing something. The last few weeks, however, had seen a change. Rumours were afloat about a big drive, and everyone was keen with anticipation. And soon the convoys began to come in. Every night there was an allotment to this hospital. The ambulances were going all the time. It was really an inspiring sight to see the way in which the wounded were handled. The orderlies were as tender as women, lifting the men out of the motors, often carrying them in their arms, and so getting them comfortably quartered in a ward. Things were done with the utmost despatch, but there was never the least suspicion of roughness or carelessness. These soldiers could not have had better care if they had been sent to the great hospitals of the world.

Sister McKane was on night duty when the biggest convoy of the year came in. Her ward held nearly 50 beds, and she was alone for this particular night. And she got a goodly share to look after. But she was equal to the demand, and quietly moved here and there as duty required her. She did not fuss or get excited, not did she find fault with the burden of the night. Each patient had been cared for or properly tucked away—the most of the men were deep in slumber, so she sat down for a few moments as she was footsore and weary. One of the patients had a bad shrapnel wound in the head and was quite unconscious. He had not moved or spoken since he came in! She was startled to hear her name called, "Dora!" and the voice sounded so much like her brother's that she found her heart beating furiously. Again the name came quite distinctly, and she hurried to the bed of the unconscious man. No! it was certainly not her brother! She

could not fancy anyone more unlike him. This man was evidently wandering and calling for someone who chanced to bear her name. Nevertheless, she went and bent over him to see if there was anything she could do. Much to her surprise he opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Are you better?" she asked. "Is there anything I can do for you?" He tried to speak but failed. A light stream of blood flowed from his mouth and trickled down the side of his face. She felt around for a hospital kerchief, but her supply had run out. Quickly she whipped her own from beneath her belt—it was a very dainty one and much prized because her mother had worked its delicate borders and initialed it before she left home—and wiped away the blood, leaving the handkerchief by the side of his head. He had become unconscious again, so she arranged his pillows and left him.

It had been an exhausting night. She tried to fix up the ward records, but her mind was confused. Her head throbbed and her whole body ached. Her thoughts were now with her brother and now with her mother. Christmas was so near, and the little home would be desolate. It was the first Christmas that they had not been together. A great wave of home-sickness swept over her—she fought to keep back the tears. Outside, the wind was blowing hard—she was chilled to the bone sitting at the desk in the draughty tent. Deep notes of slumber were all about her; the air was heavy with sleep. What a friendless and joyless time it would be this Christmas! If only there was one mother heart to whom she could go on this weary, cheerless night.

Just then she felt as though someone were near her, so she raised her head from her hands and looked up. Lo! a radiant Form stood near, a Figure

all in white. He was smiling so tenderly upon her that a great calm came to her and a strange courage filled her heart.

"You are never alone, Sister," very gently the Voice came to her. "There is One that comforteth even as a mother comforteth her children. He is with His people no matter where they are. Do you recognize this?" He held out His hand, and on the palm lay a dainty square of linen, richly embroidered.

"Why, yes Sir; but how did you get it? I left it with a patient of mine last night." And then she heard the oft-repeated text, but never as it fell upon her ears now. It was slow and measured, each word a pearl, each sound a chord of sweetest music, the whole a harmony of peace. "Inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these My brethren, ye did it unto Me." And then with a smile of rare beauty and charm He gave her the handkerchief and vanished.

The sister from the next ward dropped in for a moment's chat and found Dora in a dead faint by the desk. She quietly restored her to consciousness and asked her how it happened. Dora was quite unstrung. She kept saying, "Oh, I have seen Him. He talked to me. I'm so glad!"

"You're dreaming, Sister. Whom did you see? Don't be hysterical; you're simply worn out. Come and lie down;" and she led her towards a vacant cot. But Dora would not be silenced. She wanted to tell the glad story that was flooding her heart. "See, my handkerchief! He returned it to me!" And she spread out the delicate cambric. There was no blood-stain on it—it was snowy white. In the corner opposite her own initials there was wrought in the linen a small red cross which glowed like a flame and underneath were the letters I.H.S.

III.

IN a Canadian town overlooking the mighty St. Lawrence river there is a humble cottage set upon the road leading out into the country. It is neat and trim, but one can easily see that it is not the abode of luxury and ease. The vine festooning the doorway is dry and leafless, and the little garden is buried beneath a blanket of snow. There is a sound of stir in the back-yard, for a sturdy lad is finishing the chores of the day and piling up the wood against the rigour of the night. He is singing merrily at his work, for this is Christmas Day, and he has already counted over his little store of gifts. A warm muffler keeps out the biting wind, a new cap tells forth to the world the pride of its owner ; a red sled is waiting for the dash to-night down the hillside and out over the frozen river. These are the remembrances of his loved ones, and they are worth more to him than the fanciful presents of his brother in the large city. His Aunt lives alone in the house, since her son and daughter went to the War, and he comes over every day to do odd jobs for her. The sled is her gift and he is impatient to try it.

Within the house, a little grey-haired, sweet-faced woman is sitting at her table before a crackling fire. Near her hand are several letters, which now and again she fondles tenderly. A newspaper is resting in her lap—she has just read the dispatches of the victory achieved by the Canadians. It was a brave charge, and her heart is proud that her boy was in it. But the uncertainty is hard to bear—she is not sure that he is safe. Her last letters, which came yesterday, were written weeks ago, and this charge

only happened a few days ago. It will be an anxious time for the next week until the casualties are published. Every knock at the door will be like a blow on her heart. She wonders now if she were wise to consent to the going of both her children. Surely a widow ought to be exempt from so grave a sacrifice! And when she knows of so many mothers who have given no sons to the cause, she asks why it should be necessary for her to give all? This war falls with grievous weight upon some while others escape. And yet she would not exchange places with those who have withheld themselves from the pain and sacrifice. If the anguish is hers, so will the glory be hers when victory comes and our land is safe!

But she would much like to know how her boy fares to-night! He has been so faithful to her, writing regularly, sending forward even the little that she had insisted on his keeping for himself. He is bound to do well—but after all, bullets are no respecter of persons, and he may even now be numbered among the slain. And her Dora! She must be experiencing much sorrow and suffering among the wounded. It will be a lonely time for her, as she was always in need of mothering. If only she could reach forth her hands and touch her dear ones to make sure that they are safe. Her lips move in prayer—she lifts her eyes to a picture on the wall. Her lad had sent it out when he was in camp at Shorncliffe. It is called "Christ on the Battlefield," and pictures the Master walking among the slain. There are broken gun carriages, dead horses, and the general wreckage of war. In the background is a rude building with the Red Cross floating above it—a hospital of some kind. Jesus walks with bowed head, saddened by all the evidences of man's

inhumanity to man. Mrs. McKane breathes her prayer to Him to keep her loved ones "under the shadow of His wings until this tyranny be overpast." But what is this? The picture seems to be changing! The widow dashes her hand across her eyes to clear her vision, but it does not make any difference. The Master is all in white and there is a wonderful glory about His face. He seems to be smiling! And see! there are two figures, one on either side of Him and He has His arms about them. Yes, the one is her boy, and the other is Dora! They are both radiant, lifting their happy faces towards the Figure in White, and talking to Him as though He were their Comrade. And does the mother hear, or is it her imagination? The words are clear enough, "Lo, I am with you always"—they sing their way into her heart and bring her great peace.

There is a knock at the door. It dissipates the glory, and the commonplace returns. Mrs. McKane walks bravely out—she could have no fear now. Any message must bring good tidings of her dear ones. She returns with two cablegrams. Quietly she seats herself and calmly opens one:

"Love and good wishes on the White Comrade's birthday.—Frank."

Her heart at once realises that her son had been vouchsafed a vision of the Christ.

She then opens the other yellow envelope:

"Love and good wishes on the White Comrade's birthday.—Dora."

Kneeling by the table she sings her Magnificat, and then goes to lock away among her treasures the two cablegrams.

