

FACING THE FIRING SQUAD: BEFORE AND AFTER

THE LAST HOURS OF A SPY

He was sitting in the ruined garden of an ancient monastery looking at the confusion of flowers and weeds, children of care and carelessness, the latter seemed to be gaining the upper hand since war had driven the original owners away, for the soldiers who now camped there had no time for flowers.

He was not one of them; he was a captive, a spy. Caught with important papers, he had been sentenced to be shot, and was now waiting for the firing squad which would end it all.

“But would that end it? What a foolish question. He had been brought up to believe in a hereafter, but soon after entering the University, he fell in with the common attitude of mind, the scientific mind, in that institution. The higher criticism had proved the fallacy of the Bible. In the dissecting room, the mechanical machinery of the body was made plain. Chemistry could account for the action and reaction of the organism. Psychology offered an amply sufficient solution of the marvels of mind. In short, man was proved to be a moving, thinking machine, capable, even, of perpetuating itself by means of offspring, which carried on the work when the parent machine was worn out and consigned to the scrap heap in the cemetery. Sovereign or subject, master or man, saint or sinner, all were but shadows upon the screen of Time.

But somehow or other, he was not quite so certain since the war had brought him face to face with murder en masse. He had watched hundreds dying on the field, in the trenches and hospitals, and their certainty, their absolute conviction was catching, at least it was disturbing. Could there be any truth in their assertions that they had seen “Angels,” both on the battlefield and at their deathbed? Pshaw, it was an hallucination, due to the strain of the situation. Yet, so many had seen these things, fellows like Lieutenant X and Captain Y, level-headed and cool, and the Captain never swore after that day at Marne; more than that, he carried a prayer book and had preached quite a sermon to a sergeant noted for his vitriolic tongue. And there were others.

Well, he would soon know. At five he was destined to face the firing squad.

He went into the room where he had slept last night. The guard, who had been standing at the doorway while he was outside, followed, rifle in hand and watched him while he threw himself upon the rude cot. He looked up and saw a copy of Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting, “The Last Supper.” He had never been particularly fond of art, but something seemed to draw him to the Christ at that hour. He had undoubtedly been a noble character. He was martyred for a cause, and this portrayal of His last supper brought home the analogy to the man on the cot, for he had also partaken of earth’s bounty for the last time.

Then there came into his mind the story of how Leonardo da Vinci had asked a friend to criticize the picture when it was finished, and the friend remarked upon the incongruity of the expensive goblets from which the apostles drank. Da Vinci rubbed his brush over them and sighed, he had put his whole heart and soul into the face of the Savior, and had hoped that glorious face would attract the attention of the beholder and efface everything else; instead, one of the most unimportant and insignificant details had caught the eye of his friend, even to the complete exclusion of the Lord of Glory.

“Is that also my case?” he wondered as he lay upon the cot. “Have I also fastened my eyes upon the unimportant things of life? I have looked upon death too often to fear, now that my turn has come. Still, there is so much to do in this world, that one dislikes to think of oblivion.”

“He said, ‘But one thing is needful,’ and if He was right, then I have been like da Vinci’s friend, my attention has been riveted on non-essentials, instead of seeking things eternal. I have bestowed all my time on temporal tasks.”

“Heigho! What is the use of mooning? If I keep on, my knees might begin to shake at the appearance of the firing squad.”

He rose, and, followed by the watchful guard, returned to the garden, where he was attracted by an old sundial. He read the inscription: “Oras non numero nisi serenas.” (I count only the sunny hours.) “What a fine motto, to forget all the sordid and small things in life, and to recognize only the good, the true, the beautiful!”

Looking over his life, now about to end, how near had he lived to that motto? Conscience compelled him to confess that he had fallen far short.

And now it was too late. Lost in contemplation, his eyes clung to the shadow on the dial. There was something uncanny about its silent creeping progress towards the fateful five when the firing squad was due to appear.

He was not bothered about death, but he had begun to grapple with the problem of Life, and there came over him an overwhelming desire for a solution; but there was that shadow on the dial, “that intangible nothing,” creeping on, and on, with slow but fateful force, more irresistible than the most powerful potentate. Oh that he might have the chance to seek light upon the problem of Life.

It was customary to execute those condemned under martial law at sunrise, but he had been politely informed that a suddenly ordered movement of the division which held him prisoner made delay inexpedient, and he would be required to face the firing squad at sunset instead. At the time, he had answered with a bow and a shrug of the shoulders. What did it matter, sooner or later, he would be ready. Now he was beginning to covet those hours that he might reason it out.

As he turned from the shadow of death on the dial, its silent progress seemed more eloquent than any sermon on the fleetness of life and the inexorable certainty of death.

Again he stretched himself upon the cot to think upon this problem of existence. In less than half an hour he would know all or nothing; either he would be annihilated as soon as the light of life was extinguished by the bullet that would inevitably strike his heart, or else he would be a free spirit. It all depended upon which of the two theories was true, and the feeling of suspense was growing more intense with every moment. The longing for life became so great that it was positively painful. Of all the people who had professed their faith in the immortality of the soul, no one had ever seemed to know; they all believed—that is, all but one.

And there flashed across his memory the recollection of a meeting with a man of a strange and fascinating personality at a popular seaside resort where he had gone for rest and quiet on a certain occasion when his nerves had been overtaxed by the strenuous study of a scientific subject. This man, quiet, refined, and unassuming, had attracted him from the first, and on one occasion, where their conversation drifted to the theories of life, he had taken the materialistic view, and the stranger had confronted him with a number of seemingly unanswerable arguments. Yet it was not the force of the argument

that struck him now but it was the voice of authority, the manner and demeanor of one who knew what he was speaking about, that made the impression and filled him now with a burning intensity of inquiry.

“Did the stranger really and truly know?”

He had spoken of men who “leave their bodies at will, just as we leave a garment behind us when we enter the water for a swim. “So,” he had said, “do also those who enter certain invisible worlds.”

He had called it “The Land of the Living Dead,” and he had claimed that the so-called dead function there in a finer body in possession of all their faculties and with a full knowledge and memory of the conditions which existed around them while they lived in this life. Oh, that this stranger were here now, that he might talk with him and find out more about this matter which had now assumed so much importance in his eyes!

But what was that which appeared in the corner yonder? Was that the stranger, that cloudy, misty form in the dark corner yonder? And now he seems to hear a voice, “I will meet you when you step out of your body.” Then the figure vanished.

“Oh pshaw!” That must have been a figment of his fancy, an hallucination of his disordered brain! The wish had made him see things that were not there; he would speculate no more. And again he went out into the garden to watch the sundial as its shadow crept on towards the fateful five.

There they found him, with a bright smile on his lips, as he greeted the officer of the firing squad and begged to be spared the ignominious process of blindfolding. Together they walked towards the wall at the further end of the garden, where he turned and faced the firing squad, while the officer stepped to one side and quickly gave the command which sped the bullet that found his heart.

He heard the detonation of the guns and felt a prick of pain, as if a white hot iron had seared his soul, then a mighty wrench, and involuntarily his hand sought his heart—but, how strange, before it had reached his breast the pain was gone, and quickly he returned his hand to the hanging position at his side; he must not let the enemies of his country think him a coward.

Again he turned his attention to the firing squad, expecting momentarily to feel the impact of the bullet which he had already felt by anticipation, for in no other way could he account for the shock and the pain in his heart.

“But what did it mean?” The firing squad was standing at attention, and the officer was walking away from him to lead them out.

“Had they fired a blank charge?” No, that was unthinkable. He examined his clothing and found three holes in the coat right over the heart. He stuck his finger into one of them as far as it would reach and pulled it out again, bewildered at the absence of pain and blood. Evidently he had been struck by three bullets and, according to all the canons of experience, he ought to have fallen in a heap dead on the instant, yet here he was more alive than he had ever felt himself.

“How could it be?”

Impulsively he ran after the departing officer, caught him by the arm, and asked for an explanation, but the officer seemed to disregard both the restraining hand and the excited query. He continued to walk towards his men as if he had neither felt nor heard.

“Am I dreaming or am I mad or what?”

“Neither, my friend!” answered a voice beside him, and as he turned there stood the strange man, “Rosicrucian” he had called himself. With an intense feeling of relief, the spy turned towards him. Perhaps he could shed light on this perplexing experience. “But how did you get here? I did not see you enter with the firing squad?”

“Your eyes were not then yet attuned to the spirit vibration, you were still blinded by the veil of flesh,” came the answer. But it carried no intelligence to the spy and he began to doubt the sanity of his companion.

“I see you do not understand and that my answer is only adding to your perplexities.” He continued, “You do not realize that you are dead.”

“Dead? You surely must be mad! How can I be dead when I am standing here talking to you?” answered the spy, in greater perplexity than ever.

“You are right my friend,” admitted the Rosicrucian, “I did not express myself properly. I should have said ‘Your body is dead.’”

But the spy gazed at him in utter helplessness and hopelessness. This was getting more and more bewildering. Either he, or this man, was insane—or both.

“‘My body is dead?’ But how can you say such a thing? Am I not standing here, moving my lips, talking with you? I can move my limbs and walk, just as well as you, though I confess I am at a loss to know how I am alive with three bullets in my heart.”

“I see your perplexity, my friend, and I will explain presently, but first come with me to the place where you stood facing the firing squad. There is something there which will interest you.”

Together they walked to the place.

“Look there among the flowers, my friend,” said the Rosicrucian.

And as he followed the direction of the other’s eyes, the spy saw partly hidden by the tall weeds and flowers, which grew so rankly over the garden, what appeared to be himself lying face downward. He bent down and sought to turn the fallen form over to settle this impossible dilemma, but perplexity seemed to heap itself on perplexity without end, for as he grasped the inert form by the shoulder to lift it, his hand went through it as if it had been made of thin air and not flesh and blood.

Again he straightened himself up and turned to his companion.

“For God’s sake straighten this tangle out for me, or if I am not insane already, I shall go mad in another minute!”

“Patience, my friend,” answered the Rosicrucian. “It is all right, and I shall set you at ease in a few minutes, what has happened is this: “When the firing squad fired the fatal shots, three of the bullets entered your heart with such fatal effect that you only felt the pain for a fraction of a second before the physical body wrenched itself free from the ethereal body which you now use and fell forward on its face. Henceforth, this ethereal body will serve you as well and better than the dense body you have discarded by death.”

“Ethereal body,” stammered the spy, still unable to follow.

“Yes, my friend. Does that seem so strange, that man has an ethereal body? Science puts forward the hypothesis that all things, from the densest mineral to the rarest gas, are permeated with ether, and they are right in their guess. The human body is no exception to the rule; it also is interpenetrated by ether. When that escapes, death occurs, as demonstrated by Dr. McDougall in the Boston General Hospital a decade ago, when he put a number of people about to die on scales and they invariably showed a loss of weight at the moment of expiration.

“What the doctors and scientists do not know is that this ether continues to retain the form and similitude of the dead dense body and remains the house of the everlasting spirit, though invisible to those who are still in the physical body.”

A great light and a look of intense relief spread over the face of the spy. “But how did the ether come out of my clothes, for I am wearing the same clothing as the dead body, and how did the bullet-holes reproduce themselves in my present clothing?”

“That is a trick of the subconscious mind, my friend.” answered the Rosicrucian, “Though you were not aware of the harm done to your body, the exact circumstance was registered upon a little atom located in your heart when you drew your last dying breath; for each breath drawn into the lungs contains ether, which carries a picture of all the things in your environment, on the same principle that it carries the pictures to a sensitized plate in the camera. The air and ether enters the bloodstream, which carries it to the heart. There the seed atom corresponds to the photographic film. Each successive breath produces a new picture, and so there is imprinted upon this little seed atom a consecutive picture of the life from the cradle to the grave. This molds our destiny after death and is the occult basis of the saying, ‘as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.’ When the so-called ‘dead’ step out of their bodies, the ether forms their clothing, it reproduces their physical peculiarities and infirmities with absolute faithfulness according to the pattern of the last picture on the seed atom which the man takes along as a guide for his life in the future.”

The spy remained silent and lost in thought for some time, examining the explanation of the Rosicrucian from every angle. It seemed perfectly sound, logical, and in harmony with the known discoveries of science. Nor was it an insurmountable difficulty that the seed atom spoken of by the Rosicrucian must be extremely minute. Had not the eye of a fly numerous facets of which each reproduced a picture of its surroundings, and had not the microscope opened the world of wee things—who would dare draw the limit?

“But must I go on forever then with holes in my clothing and wounds in my breast, or will they heal, and can I procure other clothing?”

“Nothing easier, my friend, as I told you, here in the Land of the Living Dead it is a law that ‘as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.’ The poor fellows who fell upon the battlefields, horribly maimed by the thousand in the beginning of the war, were terribly distressed at their condition, until we taught them to think of themselves as they were before going to the war—hale and hearty. It was quite a task to get them to believe that that was all that was necessary to restore them to health, and it was slow work, for there were many to be helped and we were few; but by degrees they were convinced and fitted to help later victims of the war, so that now there are thousands of helpers ready to care for and help the thousands that are slain.

“Ah! You are an apt pupil. I see you have already mended your clothing and healed your wounds.”

“Yes!” answered the spy, “and thank you. I can never repay you for the relief you have given me. But I have one more difficulty. How was it that my body seemed thin air and my hands went through it? I know that it is solid.”

“Ah yes! That is amusing, the people in the physical world think of the so-called ghosts as being composed of intangible, filmy stuff, like a wreath of smoke; that is, if they take stock in their existence at all. Their own bodies they regard as solid as a stone; but once they have passed beyond the veil to the Land of the Living Dead, they are shocked to find

out that they are as immaterial to us as we are to them and that it is just as easy for us to poke an arm through them as it is for them to walk through us. In fact, they are as ghostlike to us as we to them.”

“You are now a citizen of the Land of the Living Dead. Come, let us go hence and see the sights. But first, is there anyone you would like to speak to, for within the next few hours your spiritual body is more dense than at any other time during your post-mortem career, and it will therefore be easier for you to manifest to your friends at this time than at any time afterwards?”

“I have a sister, but she lives in the town of X, which is five or six thousand miles away. There is no one around here who would know or care.”

“Distance is no barrier to the spirit.” said the Rosicrucian, “Think yourself there and we will be at the house of your sister within two minutes.” And together they floated away, yet the speed did not seem extraordinary to the spy as he passed over one town and village after another. He seemed to have ample time to note the various details of the country, the architecture of the houses, the clothing of the people, etc. While passing over a great stretch of waters he noticed a number of ships with the crews and passengers upon them engaged in their various tasks or pursuing their pleasures. In fact, the time did not seem either long or short; time seemed to be non-existent in his consciousness, and he marveled in his own mind that he took it all in such a matter of fact way, as if he had all his life been floating around through the air and seeing the things he was now observing. One thing, though, was strange, and did bother him somewhat at first: the air seemed to be peopled with spirit forms floating through the air just like himself and the Rosicrucian. At first he tried to avoid them but found it impossible. He braced himself for a collision when, to his surprise, he found that these people floated right through him and his companion just as if they had no existence whatever. This filled him for the moment with consternation and bewilderment, until the Rosicrucian, observing his dilemma, laughed reassuringly and bade him not to mind. That was the custom in the Land of the Living Dead, for there all forms are so plastic that they easily interpenetrate one another at times, and there is no danger whatever of losing one’s identity.

Arrived at the home of his sister, they found her seated in a comfortable living room and the spy impulsively rushed over to her and embraced her, only to find to his dismay that she was absolutely unaware of his presence and that his hands, instead of clasping her form, went right through it. Again he turned to the Rosicrucian and asked the question, what he should do to make himself felt. “Stand over in this corner here where the light is dim, for the etheric vibrations of light are stronger than the vibrations you are able to set up. Then make clear in your mind the message you want to send her and think it with all the intensity of which you are capable. It was the intensity of your thought before the facing the firing squad which came to me in my home and caused me to leave my physical body for a while in order to come to you and give you a helping hand in your hour of transition. If you can think of the message you want your sister to have with a similar intensity, she will receive it and her looks will be drawn towards you.”

Thus instructed, the spy formulated the message: “I am now in the Land of the Living Dead; I have passed beyond the veil.” Fixing his gaze upon his sister, he stood there immovable, iterating and reiterating that message for several minutes. Suddenly the eyes of his sister sought the corner where he was standing, and perceiving her brother standing

there, she commenced to tremble and fell, fainting, upon the floor. Immediately the spy rushed forward to lift her up, when his sister, with a glad cry, threw herself in his arms.

“Oh, how did you come, Bob? It is only a few days since I had a letter saying that you were leaving on a dangerous mission and here you are. How did it happen?”

Again blank amazement spread itself over the face of the spy; he had seen his sister fall, and here she stood! Was she also dead?

“No,” explained the Rosicrucian, as he stepped forward and was introduced as a friend of Bob’s. “No, she is not dead, she merely fainted and she will have to go back in her body. There it is, lying upon the floor, just like your own body after they had fired the fatal shot. And she probably will not have any remembrance of speaking with you now. She will not know that you are in the Land of the Living Dead, but will have only the impression that she has seen your ghost and that something has happened to you; unless you have been successful in impressing her sufficiently with your message, stating that you have passed beyond the veil and are now in the Land of the Living Dead. Every night, however, when she goes to sleep, you will have the same chance as you now have to speak with her, for when we are asleep we are really in the same place as those whom the world calls ‘dead.’”

At this moment the spy’s sister seemed to fall asleep and she was irresistibly drawn towards the body lying upon the floor. Gradually the spy saw her melt away and disappear into the form lying on the floor, which then began to moan and move.

“Come, let us go hence,” said the Rosicrucian. “While you were speaking with her, I worked over her body and have done all that can be done to ease her return to consciousness. You can do nothing more for her, so come, let us go hence.”