

## THE LADY WITH THE LAMP

Suppose that all the male members of the royal families of the warring nations, and all the Premiers and Presidents and Cabinets, and all the Army Councils and Commanders in Chief and their staffs, and the Editors of all the leading journals, and the Presidents of all the big Banks, were compelled to go up to the front-line trenches – and stay there. We need not put them – alas! that we can do this thing only in our imagination – at Verdun or on the Somme. Let us give them a chance. A “quiet” portion of the line would do. And to this brilliant company let us add the leaders of opinion in America who believe that this country is the laughingstock of the rest of the world, and is eternally disgraced because we are not fighting against Germany or against the Allies. Then let us suppose just a couple of shells to burst amidst these great ones of the earth – these chosen rulers of the people, these Statesmen. And perhaps a passing aeroplane might drop a bomb of poisonous gas among them. What would happen? Ellen La Motte can tell us better than anyone else, more truthfully than Kipling, with more vigor than ‘Wells, with more passion than Arnold Bennett. She has written a book called *The Backwash of War* (Putnams. \$1 net) – thirteen short chapters of pity and pain, thirteen tales of agony and bloody sweat, of anguish, cruelty and despair beyond endurance, of patience beyond belief.

Let Ellen La Motte tell us what would happen to our Kings and Captains in the trenches. Undoubtedly some of them would be killed outright – perhaps Asquith and King Albert and Count Zeppelin and the Editors of *The Outlook* and *The Fatherland* and *Punch*. The rest of them would be more or less badly wounded. This is Ellen La Motte’s story of a French soldier named Marius, one of the rank and file, but it would do just as well for one of the Commanders in Chief.

In a field hospital, some ten kilometers behind the lines, Marius lay dying [just as it might be the Crown Prince or Lord Northcliffe, or Colonel Roosevelt]. For three days he had been dying and it was disturbing to the other patients. The stench of his wounds

filled the air, his curses filled the ward. For three days, night and day, he screamed in his delirium, and no one paid much attention, thinking it was delirium. And all the while the wound in his abdomen gave forth a terrible stench, filling the ward, for he had gas gangrene, the odor of which is abominable. He shouted with laughter. He knew himself so near death, and it was good to be able to say all that was in his heart. An orderly approached him. He raised himself in bed, which the orderly knew, because the doctor had told him, was not a right position for a man who has a wound in his stomach, some thirty centimetres in length. However, he was strong in his delirium, so the orderly called another to help him throw the patient on his back. Soon three were called to hold the struggling man down. His was a filthy death. He died after three days’ cursing and raving. Before he died, that end of the ward smelled foully, and his foul words, shouted at the top of his delirious voice, echoed foully. Everyone was glad when it was over.

See that man in the next bed, it might be Sir Edward Grey or Poincaré or Bethmann Hollweg.

He’s dying too. They trepanned him when he came. He can’t speak. He wants to write. Isn’t it funny! He has a block of paper and a pencil, and all day long he writes, writes, on the paper. Always and always, over and over again, he writes on the paper, and he gives the paper to everyone who passes. He’s got something on his mind that he wants to get across, before he dies. But no one can understand him. No one can read what he has written – it is just scrawls, scribbles, unintelligible. Day and night, for he never sleeps, he writes on that block of paper, and tears off the sheets and gives them to everyone who passes. Once we took the paper away to see what he would do and then he wrote with his finger upon the wooden frame of the screen. The same thing, scribbles, but they made no mark on the screen, and he seemed so distressed because they made no mark that we gave him back his paper again, and now he’s happy. Or I suppose he’s happy. He seems content when we take his paper and pretend to read it. He seems happy, scribbling those words that are words to him but not to us. Careful! Don’t stand too close! He spits. Yes, all the time, at

the end of every line he spits. Far too. Way across the ward. Don't you see that his bed and the bed next are covered with rubber sheets? That's because he spits. Big spits, too, far across the ward. And always he writes, incessantly, day and night. He writes on that block of paper and spits way across the ward at the end of every line. He's got something on his mind that he wants to get across. Do you think he's thinking of the Germans? He's dying though. He can't spit so far today as he did yesterday."

Or take the case of that nameless soldier in the chapter "Pour la Patrie." It might be Lloyd George, or Von Turpitz, or William Randolph Hearst. He did not want to die, he fought against it. He wanted to live, and he resented Death very bitterly. Capolarde, the priest, was with him giving him the Sacrament.

Down at my end of the ward—it was a silent, summer afternoon—I heard them very clearly. I heard the low words from behind the screen.

"Dites: 'Dieu je vous donne ma vie librement pour ma patrie.'" ["Say, God, I give you my life freely for my country.""] The priests usually say that to them, for death has more dignity that way. It is not in the ritual, but it makes a soldier's death more noble. So I suppose Capolarde said it. I could only judge by the response. I could hear the heavy, laboured breath, the choking, wailing cry.

"Oui! Oui!" gasped out at intervals. "Ah mon Dieu! Oui!"

Again the mumbling, guiding whisper.

"Oui—oui!" came sobbing, gasping, in response.

So I heard the whispers, the priest's whispers, and the stertorous choke, the feeble, wailing, rebellious wailing in response. He was being forced into it. Forced into acceptance. Beaten into submission, beaten into resignation.

"Oui, oui," came the protesting moans. "Ah, oui!"

It must be dawning upon him now. Capolarde is making him see.

"Oui! Oui!" The choking sobs reach me. "Ah, mon Dieu, oui!" Then very deep, panting, crying breaths:

"Dieu—je—vous—donne—ma—vie—librement—pour—ma—patrie!"

"Librement! Librement! Ah, oui! Oui!" He was beaten at last. The choking, dying, bewildered man had said the noble words.

"God, I give you my life freely for my country!"

After which came a volley of low toned Latin phrases, rattling in the stillness like the popping of a mitrailleuse.

Suppose this fancy of ours came true, and we had these Emperors and Presidents and ex-Presidents at the front, digging themselves in. How long would it be before peace was declared? A week, you say? Oh! not so long – not half so long as that. George V would have had enough before sunset on the first day. If you doubt it, read Ellen La Motte.

*The Backwash of War* is more than a book – it is a scenario for moving pictures. Griffiths would make a great film out of the chapter "Heroes"; it is a series of pamphlets – the Woman's Peace Party should ask leave to reprint the chapter "Women and Wives" and the American Union against Militarism should reprint "Pour la Patrie"; it is a theme for a great War symphony; it is a collection of a thousand ideas for cartoons; it is a bitter, angry laugh at Churches, at discipline, nationalism, patriotism, at the whole military system, at the crime and madness of War.

Ellen La Motte writes with the simplicity and directness of the man who translated St. Luke's gospel; she has all of Thomas Hardy's emphasis of understatement. As we read her pages, we can see her late at night, going the rounds of the hospital wards. Her duty done she does not rest, she does some thinking and writing. And this immortal book is the result. Her's is a brighter lamp than Florence Nightingale's. It burns for us in this book, and throws a fierce light upon the secret, hidden places of the war. As she moves her lamp to right and left and holds it high, we stand aghast at the sights she shows us.

Meanwhile, ships leave our ports every day, with more and more doctors and nurses to carry on the good work, and more and more shells and guns, to give the doctors and nurses more of the good work to do. And so it goes on, to the Glory of God and Freedom – and J. Pierpont Morgan.

W. G. Fuller