Guard No. 10

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Guard No. 10 walked back and forth before the open gate, waiting until the wagon should go out again. It was a dim, gray day of February, the air full of damp chill and a raw wind blowing. The clouds that turned the skies to the color of rusty steel told of snow or sleet somewhere. Beyond the walls the dead weeds rustled sadly as the cold wind blew upon them, and over the yellow ponds tiny waves pursued each other. Across the wastes the wind moaned.

Inside the heavy stone walls of the military prison was some life, but not the life of good cheer. Coils of languid blue smoke arose from the squalid huts in which the prisoners lived. A dozen of them strolled along the rough road that ran between the huts like the street of some shambling village. Some wore the dingy

gray uniforms in which they had been taken, ragged and patched, and others were wrapped in blankets from their beds. All were thin and pale.

Guard No. 10 did not look long at the prisoners; it was too old a sight to stir any emotion in him, a man who was not given to abstruse thought, and who had feelings only of the primitive order. His own figure was in accord with the prison, with its granite walls, dark and stained by time, with the rude huts, the bleak yard, and the wasted, hopeless men. He was short, thick set, wrapped in an old blue overcoat, his face stained like the stone walls about him by all kinds of weather.

He walked back and forth, back and forth, without ceasing, always turning at the same place, and always making his steps of equal length. His blue overcoat and blue cap were the color of the steel blue sky above him. He carried his rifle across his shoulder and held the stock with a firm hand. His figure added the most somber touch to the somber scene.

Guard No. 10 continued to walk monotonously back and forth, and drew up the collar of his overcoat, for the wind was rising and the air grew colder. Most of the prisoners returned to their huts, and the guard would have gone on his mechanical way had not a prisoner spoken to him in a weak voice. He ordered him back roughly, telling him he was not allowed to approach the gate; but the man said he only wished to see the outside of a prison, a sight that had been denied to him for a year.

„Just to remind me of what I used to be," he said with a weak little laugh.

Guard No. 10 looked at him more closely. He had noticed this prisoner before, one of the most pathetic figures in a place that was full of them. He was not a man, only a boy of seventeen or eighteen, young enough to be Guard No. 10's son, slim and fair like a girl, weak from prison air, bad food, and old wounds just healed.

„I saw that the gate was open," he said appealingly, „and I wanted to take a look at the country outside, just to see the grass and the woods again; it's been a long time since I saw them."

„The grass is dead." said the guard roughly. „It's had a winter to kill it, and there isn't a leaf on the trees."

„Do you think I care for that?" said the boy. „It's because there are no prison walls around them."

He stood where he was, twenty feet from the gate, and the guard did not order him away.

„I could break him in two across my knee if I tried," thought Guard No. 10.

The air from the free world outside blew through the open gate and the boy breathed it gratefully. Guard No. 10 kept his eye on him and held his rifle ready. If any prisoner dared to make a dash for freedom he knew his duty and would do it. The boy spoke to him again and then again, but the guard was stern and did not reply. The boy looked at the man with an appeal in his face. He wished to speak of the world outside, to hear of anything that was not prison talk.

„Well, what do you want?" asked the guard at last, growing tired of the prisoner's reproachful gaze.

„I—I don't know," said the boy, starting at the suddenness of the question. „How is the war going?"

„What is that to you?“ asked the guard. „Why were you Southern boys such fools as to go into it?“

„I don‘t know,“ replied the boy, in his thin voice. „I don‘t know what the war is all about, do you?“

„No, I don‘t, except that you Southern fellows are wrong,“ replied the guard more roughly than ever.

The boy did not seem to resent the reply, as if it were an issue for which he did not care. His pale face had flushed a little under the touch of the free wind that blew in at the open gate, and he opened his mouth as if he would breathe an air purer than that within prison walls. The glimpse, the breath of the free world had a charm for him which the leaden skies, the somber day, and the dreary landscape without could not dispel. Guard No. 10 was impressed more than ever by the weakness of his frame, and the look of homesickness in his eyes.

„They say that down there in the South they have robbed the cradle and the grave to fight this war, and I guess it‘s true about the cradle,“ he said.

The boy smiled. He was not hurt at the remark.

„I was fourteen when I went into it.“ he said, „but there were some younger.“

„A mere baby,“ said Guard No. 10.

„I had been in more than ten battles before I was taken,“ said the boy proudly.

„But I guess you‘ve had enough,“ rejoined Guard No. 10.

„Yes, I‘ve had enough,“ said the boy frankly. „I‘m tired of war. I‘ve been here a year, and I‘m just getting well from my wounds. I had two of them, one in the shoulder and one in the side.“ He mentioned his wounds with a little touch of pride. „They are cured, and I‘m cured of war, too,“ he went on, smiling again. „It‘s the prison life that‘s done it, and it‘s the prison life that may end me, too, for though the wounds are healed, I‘m mightily run down.“

He turned his eyes again toward the open gate, and the look of homesickness in them was stronger than ever. A faint feeling stirred in the breast of Guard No. 10, and he began to think it was wrong for such young boys to go to the war. His curiosity rose a little.

„Where is your home?“ he asked.

„In Georgia, in the southern part of the State, near the sea. Oh. it‘s not gray and cold and bleak like this! It‘s green all the year round; the sun shines warm and the watermelons grow big and juicy. I‘ve had some high old times there.“

„Guess you wish you were there now,“ said the guard curtly.

The boy‘s face had flushed with enthusiasm as he spoke, but at the guard‘s question the flush died out.

„Yes,“ he said sadly, „I wish I was there. It‘s too cold for me here: it‘s not the kind of country I‘m used to. The prison doctor says I can‘t ever get all my strength so long as I stay in this place. But down in the sunshine I‘d be all right in a month. I wish I could get exchanged.“

„No chance of that,“ said Guard No. 10. „We‘re not exchanging much, because we‘ve got more men than you Rebs have, and we want to wear you out soon.“

Yet pity for the boy was finding a small lodgment in the crusty soul of Guard No. 10.

„And the doctor don‘t think you can get well here?“ he asked.

„No,“ replied the boy. „The air of the place and the bad food are against me.“

„What are you going to do about it?“

„I think I‘ll escape,“ said the boy, with a sad little laugh. „Some dark night when you guards are asleep at your posts, I‘ll climb over that high stone wall there and skip across the fields.“

Guard No. 10 looked at the stone wall rising far above his head, its smooth sides offering no hold for the human foot, and then at the frail figure of the boy.

„I guess you won‘t climb over that wall in a hurry, even if we guards should go to sleep at our posts, which we never do,“ he said grimly. „But even if you were to get over the walls, what could you do? You are in the country of your enemies, and it‘s a long road to Georgia. We‘ll have you back here inside of twenty four hours.“

„Oh, no, you wouldn‘t.“ said the boy, in a tone of conviction. „It‘s only a mile to the town, and I‘ve some friends there, some people who used to live in the South. I could get to their house, for my clothes are not the Confederate gray, and then slip down to Georgia, if these walls were not twenty feet high and two feet thick.“

„Yes. that‘s the trouble,“ said Guard No. 10. „Now, if they were only fifteen feet high and one foot thick you might make it. But we‘ve got to keep you, for so long as you‘re not with ‘em we‘ve got a chance to beat the Rebs.“

He laughed a little. The boy amused him and added a bit of interest to his lonely watch. But the prisoner‘s delicate face flushed at the guard‘s sarcasm.

„Where were you taken?“ asked the guard, feeling somewhat sorry for his sneer.

„At Chickamauga.“

„And you have been in ten battles? What was your first?“

„Shiloh.“

„Shiloh?“ said the guard, with a sudden increase of interest. „Why, I was there myself!“

„So you‘ve served at the front, too?“ said the boy.

„Yes,“ replied Guard No. 10. „I served until I got a bullet in the thigh at Stone River, that laid me up for three months. I was invalided home, and, after a while, sent to this duty. But about Shiloh. That was a hot fight!“

„Hot?“ said the boy. „Hot was no name for it! For a while I thought all the men in the world were there shooting at each other; and even now, just as I am about to go to sleep, I often hear the whistling of the bullets.“

Guard No. 10 walked back and forth more slowly, and for the first time his seamy brown face showed feeling.

„You‘re right about the bullets,“ he said. „All the lead that was shot off then would make a mine. You fellows caught us napping there that Sunday morning. Our generals say it wasn‘t so, but it was. And Lord, how you came, what a rush! You Johnny Rebs can fight well. I give you that much credit.“

„But you got back at us the next day when your reinforcements came up,“ said the boy. „It was our turn to be driven then.“

„Yes, we won back the ground we had lost,“ said Guard No. 10 meditatively, his mind going back to the details of the great battle. „But I can‘t forget that first morning when you rushed us. And you were there and I was there, and now we‘re both here. But it isn‘t so strange. More than a hundred thousand others were there, too, and some of them are bound to meet some day.“

„What did you think when you saw us popping out of the woods and bushes that morning?“ asked the boy.

„I didn‘t have time to think of anything,“ replied the guard. „It was just a great red and brown veil of fire and smoke, with you fellows showing dimly through it, rushing down upon us, and the noise of the cannon and rifles banging away in our ears, so we couldn‘t hear each other speak or even shout. It was just grab our guns and fire away, every fellow fighting for himself, or running—mostly running. I guess. But we got together part of our regiment in some fashion or other and tried to make a stand, though you pushed us back and kept pushing us back toward the river. Hot, boy! I should say it was hot, with the rebel bullets whizzing like hail about our ears, and forty thousand rifles and a hundred cannon blazing in our faces! Boy. I don‘t know where I‘m going when I die, but if it comes to the worst it won‘t be any hotter than it was that morning at Shiloh.“

It was the longest speech he had made in a year, but Guard No. 10 felt emotion at memory of the great battle, and as a mark of feeling shifted his gun from his left to his right shoulder. The boy‘s eyes sparkled for the first time. He, too, was aroused by the memories of Shiloh, and he waited for Guard No. 10 to continue.

„There was one regiment of the rebels that pushed us specially.“ said the guard; „a Georgia regiment. I saw the name of the State on their banner, and I remember how surprised I was to see that they were mostly blue eyed, light haired men; I used to have an idea before the war that all you Southern fellows were dark. They seemed to have picked us out as their particular meat, and they didn‘t care whether it was kill or get killed; so it was one or the other. They were brave men, if ever brave men lived. Gunpowder was apple sauce to them. I remember their colonel, funny enough looking for a circus, six feet and a half high, as thin as a rail, his long yellow hair flying back, and his uniform, five times too big for him, flapping about him like clothes on a line. But he was the bravest of them all, always in front, waving his long arms and yelling to ’em to come on, though they were coming as fast as they could. He was thunderation ugly, but he was a man all over.“

The guard shook his head and laughed, pleased at the recollection. The prisoner laughed, too, and there was heartiness in his tone.

„That bean pole was my colonel,“ he said, „and that was my regiment. You fellows were eating your breakfast when we rushed out of the woods and burst upon you. We went right through your camp when we drove you back. I remember stopping to drink a cup of hot coffee that one of you left unspilled on the ground. It had been poured out for a Yankee, and a rebel drank it before it got cold.“

The two laughed together with heartiness and enjoyment.

„And you were there in that regiment of brave men who pushed us so hard?“ said Guard No. 10 admiringly.

„Yes,“ said the boy proudly.

„Then we have fought with each other, you and I, hand to hand?“ said the guard.

„Yes,“ said the boy.

„And here you are, after such fighting as that, in a military prison.“

„Yes,“ said the boy.

„And the doctor says you will die if you can‘t get out where you‘ll have better air and better food?“

„Yes,“ said the boy sadly.

„And there‘s no chance of an exchange!“

The boy stood there, a thin figure under the somber sky. The guard looked intently into his eyes, and the prisoner‘s face grew eager when he met the look.

„That wagon will be here in a minute,“ said Guard No. 10, „and I mustn‘t be seen talking to a prisoner.“

He shifted his rifle again to his left shoulder and walked to the end of his beat, deliberately turning his back to the open gate. The wind blew dismally, and the guard heard a faint, quick footstep.

The wagon was approaching, and he walked back to the other end of his beat. There was no prisoner in sight. The wagon passed out, and the guard, closing and locking the gate, resumed his march, gun on shoulder.