

LINCOLN LORE

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SLEEPING SENTINEL

Wars recall episodes which have occurred in other days of conquest. Acts of kindness and humanitarian deeds often outlive the accounts of bravery and valor of the battle field.

The story of William Scott, "The Sleeping Sentinel", has served as one of the most familiar illustrations of Abraham Lincoln's clemency. It became one of the best known incidents in contemporary history and inspired Francis de Haes Janvier to write a poem upon the theme. This poem was published with a brief introduction by T. B. Peterson and Brothers in 1863. The contents of this nineteen page booklet with the exception of a brief Shakespearean quotation is made available in this copy of *Lincoln Lore*.

"The Publishers Preface"

"The incidents here woven into verse relate to William Scott, a young soldier from the State of Vermont, who, while on duty as a sentinel at night, fell asleep, and, having been condemned to die, was pardoned by the President. They form a brief record of his humble life at home and in the field, and of his glorious death in defense of the Union.

"This poem was first read on Monday, January 19th, 1863, by Mr. James E. Murdoch, the celebrated elocutionist, to a select circle at the Executive Mansion, in the presence of the President and Mrs. Lincoln. On the evening of the same day he read it in the Senate Chamber of the United States, which was specially appropriated for the purpose,—the President and Mrs. Lincoln being again present, together with one of the largest and most distinguished audiences ever assembled in Washington. It was presented on this occasion anonymously, and produced a profound sensation.

"On the evening of February 5th, 1863, Mr. Murdoch read it, with a similar result, at the American Academy of Music, in Philadelphia, to more than three thousand persons, and then announced the name of the author. He has also read it, with the same success, in Baltimore, Albany, Boston, and other cities.

"It is now published, in compliance with a general desire for its circulation."

"The Sleeping Sentinel"

'Twas in the sultry summer-time, as War's red records show,
When patriot armies rose to meet a fratricidal foe—
When, from the North, and East, and West, like the upheaving sea,
Swept forth Columbia's sons, to make our country truly free.

Within a prison's dismal walls, where shadows veiled decay—
In fetters, on a heap of straw, a youthful soldier lay:
Heart-broken, hopeless, and forlorn, with short and feverish breath,
He waited but the appointed hour to die a culprit's death.

Yet, but a few brief weeks before, untroubled with a care,
He roamed at will, and freely drew his native mountain air—
Where sparkling streams leap mossy rocks, from many a woodland
font,
And waving elms, and grassy slopes, give beauty to Vermont!

Where, dwelling in a humble cot, a tiller of the soil,
Encircled by a mother's love, he shared a father's toil—
Till, borne upon the wailing winds, his suffering country's cry
Fired his young heart with fervent zeal, for her to live or die.

Then left he all:—a few fond tears, by firmness half concealed,
A blessing, and a parting prayer, and he was in the field—
The field of strife, whose dews are blood, whose breezes War's hot
breath,
Whose fruits are garnered in the grave, whose husbandman is Death!

Without a murmur, he endured a service new and hard;
But, wearied with a toilsome march, it chanced one night, on guard,
He sank, exhausted, at his post, and the gray morning found
His prostrate form—a sentinel, asleep, upon the ground!

So, in the silence of the night, aweary, on the sod,
Sank the disciples, watching near the suffering Son of God:—
Yet, Jesus, with compassion moved, beheld their heavy eyes,
And, though betrayed to ruthless foes, forgiving, bade them rise!

But God is love,—and finite minds can faintly comprehend
How gentle Mercy, in His rule, may with stern Justice blend;
And this poor soldier, seized and bound, found none to justify,
While War's inexorable law decreed that he must die.

'Twas night.—In a secluded room, with measured tread, and slow,
A statesman of commanding mien, paced gravely to and fro.
Oppressed, he pondered on a land by civil discord rent;
On brothers armed in deadly strife:—it was the President!

The woes of thirty millions filled his burdened heart with grief;
Embattled hosts, on land and sea, acknowledged him their chief:
And yet, amid the din of war, he heard the plaintive cry
Of that poor soldier, as he lay in prison, doomed to die!

'Twas morning.—On a tented field, and through the heated haze,
Flashed back, from lines of burnished arms, the sun's effulgent blaze;
While, from a sombre prison-house, seen slowly to emerge,
A sad procession, o'er the sward, moved to a muffled dirge.

And in the midst, with faltering step, and pale and anxious face,
In manacles, between two guards, a soldier had his place.
A youth—led out to die:—and yet, it was not death, but shame,
That smote his gallant heart with dread, and shook his manly frame!

Still on, before the marshalled ranks, the train pursued its way
Up to the designated spot, whereon a coffin lay—
His coffin! And, with reeling brain, despairing—desolate—
He took his station by its side, abandoned to his fate!

Then came across his wavering sight strange pictures in the air:—
He saw his distant mountain home; he saw his parents there;
He saw them bowed with hopeless grief, through fast declining years;
He saw a nameless grave; and then, the vision closed—in tears!

Yet, once again, in double file, advancing, then, he saw
Twelve comrades, sternly set apart to execute the law—
But saw no more:—his senses swam—deep darkness settled round—
And, shuddering, he awaited now the fatal volley's sound!

Then suddenly was heard the noise of steeds and wheels approach,—
And, rolling through a cloud of dust, appeared a stately coach.
On, past the guards, and through the field, its rapid course was bent,
Till, halting, 'mid the lines was seen the nation's President!

He came to save that stricken soul, now waking from despair;
And from a thousand voices rose a shout which rent the air!
The pardoned soldier understood the tones of jubilee,
And, bounding from his fetters, blessed the hand that made him free!

'Twas Spring.—Within a verdant vale, where Warwick's crystal tide
Reflected, o'er its peaceful breast, fair fields on either side—
Where birds and flowers combined to cheer a sylvan solitude—
Two threatening armies, face to face, in fierce defiance stood!

Two threatening armies! One invoked by injured Liberty—
Which bore above its patriot ranks the Symbol of the Free;
And one, a rebel horde, beneath a flaunting flag of bars,
A fragment, torn by traitorous hands, from Freedom's Stripes and
Stars!

A sudden burst of smoke and flame, from many a thundering gun,
Proclaimed, along the echoing hills, the conflict had begun;
While shot and shell, athwart the stream with fiendish fury sped,
To strew among the living lines, the dying and the dead!

Then, louder than the roaring storm, pealed forth the stern command,
"Charge! soldiers, charge!" and, at the word, with shouts, a fearless
band,

Two hundred heroes from Vermont, rushed onward, through the
flood,
And upward, o'er the rising ground, they marked their way in blood!

The smitten foe before them fled, in terror, from his post—
While, unsupported, two hundred stood, to battle with a host!
Then, turning as the rallying ranks, with murderous fire, replied,
They bore the fallen o'er the field, and through the purple tide!

The fallen! And the first who fell in that unequal strife,
Was he whom Mercy sped to save when Justice claimed his life—
The pardoned soldier! And, while yet the conflict raged around—
While yet his life-blood ebbed away through every gaping wound—

While yet his voice grew tremulous, and death bedimmed his eye—
He called his comrades to attest, he had not feared to die!
And, in his last expiring breath, a prayer to heaven was sent—
That God, with His unfailing grace, would bless our President!

*Editor's note—Some poetic license was used in drawing
the picture in the foregoing lines.