

**THEY CALL
ME CARPENTER**

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They call me carpenter by Upton Sinclair

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UPTON SINCLAIR

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A Tale of the Second Coming

By

UPTON SINCLAIR

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*"The Brass Check," "The Jungle,"
"The Book of Life," etc.*

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I

The beginning of this strange adventure was my going to see a motion picture which had been made in Germany. It was three years after the end of the war, and you'd have thought that the people of Western City would have got over their war-phobias. But apparently they hadn't; anyway, there was a mob to keep anyone from getting into the theatre, and all the other mobs started from that. Before I tell about it, I must introduce Dr. Karl Henner, the well-known literary critic from Berlin, who was travelling in this country, and stopped off in Western City at that time. Dr. Henner was the cause of my going to see the picture, and if you will have a moment's patience, you will see how the ideas which he put into my head served to start me on my extraordinary adventure.

You may not know much about these cultured foreigners. Their manners are like softest velvet, so that when you talk to them, you feel as a Persian cat must feel while being stroked. They have read everything in the world; they speak with quiet certainty; and they are so old—old with memories of racial griefs stored up in their souls. I, who know myself for a member of the best clubs in Western City, and of the best college fraternity in the country—I found myself suddenly indisposed to mention that I had helped to win the battle of the Argonne. This foreign visitor asked me how I felt about the war, and I told him that it was over, and I bore no hard feelings, but of course I was glad that Prussian militarism was finished. He answered: "A

painful operation, and we all hope that the patient may survive it; also we hope that the surgeon has not contracted the disease." Just as quietly as that.

Of course I asked Dr. Henner what he thought about America. His answer was that we had succeeded in producing the material means of civilization by the ton, where other nations had produced them by the pound. "We intellectuals in Europe have always been poor, by your standards over here. We have to make a very little food support a great many ideas. But you have unlimited quantities of food, and—well, we seek for the ideas, and we judge by analogy they must exist—"

"But you don't find them?" I laughed.

"Well," said he, "I have come to seek them."

This talk occurred while we were strolling down our Broadway, in Western City, one bright afternoon in the late fall of 1921. We talked about the picture which Dr. Henner had recommended to me, and which we were now going to see. It was called "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," and was a "futurist" production, a strange, weird freak of the cinema art, supposed to be the nightmare of a madman. "Being an American," said Dr. Henner, "you will find yourself asking, 'What good does such a picture do?' You will have the idea that every work of art must serve some moral purpose." After a pause, he added: "This picture could not possibly have been produced in America. For one thing, nearly all the characters are thin." He said it with the flicker of a smile—"One does not find American screen actors in that condition. Do your people care enough about the life of art to take a risk of starving for it?"

Now, as a matter of fact, we had at that time several millions of people out of work in America, and many of

them starving. There must be some intellectuals among them, I suggested; and the critic replied: "They must have starved for so long that they have got used to it, and can enjoy it—or at any rate can enjoy turning it into art. Is not that the final test of great art, that it has been smelted in the fires of suffering? All the great spiritual movements of humanity began in that way; take primitive Christianity, for example. But you Americans have taken Christ, the carpenter—"

I laughed. It happened that at this moment we were passing St. Bartholomew's Church, a great brown-stone structure standing at the corner of the park. I waved my hand towards it. "In there," I said, "over the altar, you may see Christ, the carpenter, dressed up in exquisite robes of white and amethyst, set up as a stained glass window ornament. But if you'll stop and think, you'll realize it wasn't we Americans who began that!"

"No," said the other, returning my laugh, "but I think it was you who finished him up as a symbol of elegance, a divinity of the respectable inane."

Thus chatting, we turned the corner, and came in sight of our goal, the Excelsior Theatre. And there was the mob!

II

At first, when I saw the mass of people, I thought it was the usual picture crowd. I said, with a smile, "Can it be that the American people are not so dead to art after all?" But then I observed that the crowd seemed to be swaying this way and that; also there seemed to be a great many men in army uniforms. "Hello!" I exclaimed. "A row?"

There was a clamor of shouting; the army men seemed to be pulling and pushing the civilians. When we got nearer, I asked of a bystander, "What's up?" The answer was: "They don't want 'em to go in to see the picture."

"Why not?"

"It's German. Hun propaganda!"

Now you must understand, I had helped to win a war, and no man gets over such an experience at once. I had a flash of suspicion, and glanced at my companion, the cultured literary critic from Berlin. Could it possibly be that this smooth-spoken gentleman was playing a trick upon me—trying, possibly, to get something into my crude American mind without my realizing what was happening? But I remembered his detailed account of the production, the very essence of "art for art's sake." I decided that the war was three years over, and I was competent to do my own thinking.

Dr. Henner spoke first. "I think," he said, "it might be wiser if I did not try to go in there."

"Absurd!" I cried. "I'm not going to be dictated to by a bunch of imbeciles!"