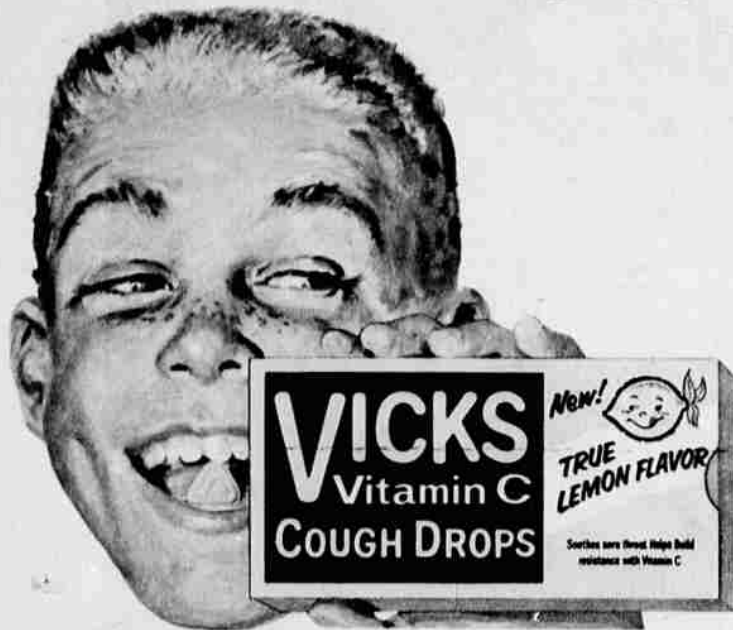


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The man who

by R. E. Gurvitz

THE EYEGLASSES, the letter, and the ultimatum lay on the general's table. He picked up the letter and tried to read the finely written lines, but they danced and swam before his eyes. Ruefully, he reached for the glasses and put them on. They were new and slipped slightly to the bridge of his nose. He would have to memorize any parts of the letter he wished to read to his officers. It wouldn't do for them to see him wearing glasses. He smiled at his vanity and began reading.

His friends urged patience. They knew that the army was restless—that two years had passed since their last victory had neutralized the enemy and that a peace treaty had not yet been signed. They realized that the army had not been paid and that families of men who had fallen were destitute. They were trying, they wrote, but he must give them more time.

He thought, "Time, my friends, is no longer mine to give." His officers' ultimatum lay before him. He picked it up and examined it again. "Be our king" was its sum and substance. It urged him to lead them away to another country or to let them march on the capitol and give him the throne at bayonet point.

He had argued with them—had pointed out that they had sworn to defend their government and that they couldn't desert it in times of crisis. When he felt his arguments failing, he had used the love and respect they had for him to gain extra time to plead their case before the government. This was the answer.

He rose and walked to the tent flap. Peering through it, he could see the carpenters putting the final touches on the meeting hall he had ordered built.

The moment it was finished, his officers would gather and wait for his decision. There would be no more time left.

His eyes took in the tents scattered over the neighboring hills, and a thrill of pride shot through him. His rag-tail, pick-up army, he thought. How they had fought!

It was unthinkable that men like these should ask to be ruled. His own anger rose at the government delays that had reduced them to this state. Deep within him he struggled against the nagging temptation to accept the crown they offered.

"I'd rule them wisely," he thought. Started at the turn of his thoughts, he spoke the next words aloud. "It would be a betrayal—a betrayal of everything."

He could see the carpenters picking up their tools. The building was finished. From all parts of the encampment men began to drift toward the clearing. Hard-bitten bearded veterans, untried recruits, wounded men on crutches, gunners, cooks, engineers—each of the skills and trades that keep an army functioning was repre-

sented outside that fateful meeting hall.

There was a holiday air about the gathering, and they cheered the officers as they arrived and entered the building.

The youngest of his lieutenants came to tell him that the officers were assembled. He rose slowly and gathered his notes from the table. He looked at the words he had scribbled and prayed that they were the right ones.

THE TROOPS were a black field in front of him, and they shouted greetings as he walked through their ranks.

"There goes our first king!" a grizzled corporal shouted. A cheer went up.

The officers rose as he entered the hall. He walked to the lectern and stood there silently surveying them. A single word from him would start them marching—a march which wouldn't end until he was crowned king!

He began to talk, clenching and unclenching his hand. "Do not lessen the dignity and sully the glory you have hitherto maintained," he said.

They knew he was turning them down, and an angry murmur swept through the crowd. Some of the young officers jumped to their feet.

He raised his voice. "You will," he said, "by the dignity of your conduct afford occasion for posterity to say, when speaking of the glorious example you have exhibited to mankind, 'Had this day been wanting, the world had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining!'"

He had summed up his entire appeal in the last statement, and the angry voices had still not quieted. Perhaps, he thought, if he read them some of the letters he had received. He reached into his pocket and brought forth the latest. His eyes blurred and he dug into the pocket for his glasses and put them on.

The murmuring stopped. In all parts of the hall, men were suddenly struck silent. They realized, quite suddenly, that the man they had thought of as granite and iron was flesh and blood. The suffering, the privations of the last cruel years had left their stamp on him. The long service showed suddenly in lines they had never noticed, in the slight bend to the proud back, in the veined hands.

He pointed apologetically to the glasses. "Gentlemen," he said, "I have grown gray in your service and now find myself growing blind."

He put away the letters, stepped down from the dais, and started for the exit. His officers formed a solid rank behind him—a rank which would not falter again.

And as he crossed the threshold, General George Washington had still another meeting—this time with history—as President, not king, of the United States.