

# **THE SPIRIT OF THE TIME**

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The spirit of the time by Robert Hichens

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**ROBERT HICHENS**

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**The Spirit of the  
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By  
**ROBERT HICHENS**



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## THE SPIRIT OF THE TIME

### CHAPTER I

IN the autumn of 1919 Derrick Merton, although he prided himself on being a man of will and possessing a sense of humour, felt that he really couldn't "stand things" much longer. Like thousands of other people he was suffering from reaction after the long nightmare of war. Although he had been too old—alas, he was over fifty—for active service he had spent a great part of the last five years in doing things which were hardly in his "line," because he had considered it his duty to do them. He had served for four years with the Special Constables, had been a helper in an East End hospital for wounded soldiers, had done a lot of dull clerical work for a public department, and, for a few months, had driven a motor lorry in order that a man might be released for the army. Twenty-



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seven air raids had fallen to his lot. He had formerly been accustomed to spend a considerable part of each year in travelling abroad and had not left England once since the War had broken out. And now he had a bad cold in the head which he could not shake off. Even repeated and almost desperate inhalations of Friar's Balsam did him no good, and his sneezes were loud and portentous in the land of his fathers. On the top of all this came the great railway strike and a loud call for volunteers to do all sorts of extremely unattractive things. It was really too much! And life seemed almost unbearable to Derrick as he sat sneezing beside a small fire—there was very little coal to be had just then—in his flat in Cork Street, London, and wondering whether he ought to go off and offer his services as an amateur porter at one of the big stations—Waterloo perhaps!

He decided to ask a doctor. For he felt really very unwell, quite weak in body and mind. Both seemed to be saying, "We've done and borne enough and more than enough. If you demand anything more of us we shall go on strike, like everyone else."

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The doctor came, and after an examination forbade Derrick to undertake any more work.

"You're quite at the end of your tether," he said. "Go abroad. Have a long rest. I'll write you out a certificate and you'll have no difficulty about getting a passport. There's functional disturbance of the heart. It's not serious, but you mustn't play with it. Unless you follow my advice you're in for a complete nervous breakdown."

"Very well; I'll go," said Derrick.

"Better take someone with you."

"No, thank you. To tell the truth I long to get away from everybody, to see only new faces which won't recognize me. I'm aching for a little bit of complete personal freedom."

"Where will you go?"

"I'll go—abroad!" exclaimed Derrick, drawing a long breath. "That covers everything!"

The doctor smiled and wrote out the certificate.

Not many days later Derrick was in a crowded train starting from Boulogne for Paris. From Paris he meant to go to Montreux. He was almost fiercely fond of the

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sun, but just now the snows attracted him. After all the weariness of war he longed to look on the vast white solitudes, to see the peaks in the blue, to hear the shuffle of the snow dropping from the branches of pine trees, to let his eyes wander along the glories of the autumn woods on the lower slopes of the hills which guard Lake Leman. And he longed, too, to be in a country which had not been in the War. So he resolved to travel to Switzerland.

Paris was a nightmare, a phantasmagoria of hurrying people who looked morbid or mad, and who seemed unhinged by war and longing for dreadful repayments. Derrick stayed there two nights and hated it. To him it seemed like a city of vultures.

“If this is what war makes of human beings,” he thought, as he sat outside the Café de la Paix observing the frantic crowds, “God help humanity !”

The ugliness of the expressions on most of the faces almost terrified him. He drank a cup of chocolate and was charged three francs fifty by the waiter, who looked indignant when he received half a franc as a tip