

The garden at the gates of Hell

by *Leona Francombe*

Inspired by 'Sketches from a Belgian Field Hospital: A War Nurse's Diary' (anonymous)

She hurried across Veurne's darkened square. The town had extinguished all light in preparation. It was October, 1914, and three miles to the east, the First Battle of Ypres had just begun. Her nurse's cloak ballooned behind her as she struggled against the North Sea wind. She carried an oil lamp and a pair of scissors for the hospital, a makeshift affair in the Roman Catholic school across town. She glanced anxiously up at the lurid, flaring sky while beneath her, slick and treacherous, the cobbles shook with the thunder of combat.

Ninety-four years later, I followed her there. I slid over the same cobbles and looked up, as she would have done, at the quaint, stepped gables of the marketplace. But as I wandered down Appel Markt towards the school, the sky gleamed with fresh autumn light and all around, things dozed in cosy silence. She was slipping away into time, my courageous nurse, turning one last corner in her journey and taking with her the drama and passions of her war. Could I even hope for a glimpse?

Casualties poured into the hospital on that first night of the battle. The wards lay bathed in protective darkness. Stretchers laden with groaning, bloodied men crowded the floor. Wounds were examined by candlelight, the flames guttered as nurses rushed and whispered. Light glinted on raw flesh, while in the corners of the draughty room shadows moved seductively, flirting with death. The oil lamp, though evil-smelling, was a godsend, as were the precious scissors for cutting away sodden, filthy clothes.

A lorry rumbled beside me and my heart quickened. I heard the past in that roar – other wheels, heavy with other, wartime burdens. The driver tramped off on an errand, and in his steps I heard the shuffle of leather boots long rotted away. Next to me stood the ancient Saint Nicholas church, unchanged for centuries. On the cold flagstones inside, soldiers had slept on scattered straw. In late November, my

nurse had taken a room in a house opposite the church and could watch the men emerge at dawn, breaking the ice in the horse-trough to wash. They dragged back from the trenches at dusk, blue overcoats caked with mud, minds churning in solitude around their horrors.

By Christmas, Veurne was under constant bombardment. Between four and five o'clock on Christmas Day, the town took the brunt of over 200 shells. A festive dinner was underway in the hospital: turkey, goose, suckling pig. The old priest had even brought up some of his best wine from the cellar. Suddenly, the great bell clanged at the gate and lines of stretchers straggled in. The feast was abandoned, half-eaten. Doctors dashed away, still wearing their party hats.

The Belgian Army was headquartered in the Town Hall at that time, inviting attack; King Albert I also had his command post here until January, 1915. It became too dangerous to stay in Veurne. Anyway, they needed a field hospital within sight of the trenches, and suitable premises were found in an old

almshouse on the lonely road to Ypres. I followed her there, my nurse, to the tiny hamlet of Hoogstade. A handsome grey building still stands a mile or so down the road. In the fields opposite, just as she said, there is a farm, now shuttered and neglected. For an instant I could imagine the convoy of Belgian ambulances parked there in the bog, waiting for the cover of darkness to get to work.

The almshouse is a rest home now. The only trace of its past is a plaque near the door commemorating the Belgian Military Hospital that was established here during the Great War. And yet I

was surrounded by the memories of my elusive nurse: the tall shade trees beneath which her patients slept away the summer heat; the cornfield used for hasty burials; even the little stream threading dreamily through the back of the property. The hospital grounds, now lush and well-tended, gathered me into a strange, respectful silence, and I remembered that King Albert and Queen Elisabeth had often strolled here during their many visits to this outpost.

On an afternoon in late April, 1915, marooned on her rural

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islet, my nurse watched the slaughter across the fields as a crescent of fire and mayhem swept from the seacoast to Ypres. German Taubes engaged in sharp aerial contests with French and Belgian planes. Siege-guns blasted at the enemy from innocent copses near the hospital garden. The building shuddered and swayed. Where spring had just thrown handfuls of green, the earth was torn wide, and black bones of trees pierced the sky.

British, Belgians, Germans, French: she treated them all, at night, without respite. Many had the grey sweat of death on their brows, their eyes two diminishing points in a wash of light. They would have seen her as they faded, her uniform white against the gloom, her pale hands stained from a river of blood.

I sat looking over those fields, searching, searching. How could so many thousands lie buried here? Gulls drifted in

from the sea and settled on the soft furrows of earth. Light spread to the edges of the horizon and was caught, alive and quivering, in the myriad pools and canals. Plump leeks and pumpkins were ripe for harvest, and apples swelled on the trees.

Where was the past in all this? I closed my eyes and listened. Somewhere on the wind there must be a clue, an echo of what had happened. But only a cow bellowed, and rushes rasped near the stream. A pheasant rattled past like a squeaky axle. Then silence closed back over this plain of remembrance and I realised how much of history is pure conjury: fanciful visions sketched by an eager mind. But we are unable to think on the grand scale of our catastrophes. The sketches must be small, intimate, like kitchen gardens. Perhaps only then can we conjure the Great War, face by youthful face – one soldier, and one nurse, at a time.