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Opening extract from

War Song

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German advance

Allied advance

1914: limit of German advance

end 1914-13 June 1916: General front line (prior to Somme)

1916-17: Allied gains

1918: German gains

11 Nov 1918: Armistice line

Hindenburg Line

PROLOGUE

AT THE FIRST grey streak of dawn Pastor le Seur drove to the Prison of St Gilles. On entering the cell he found the frail figure kneeling by the bed. A high crown of greying hair was half covered by the white halo of a nurse's cap, slightly askew.

A flickering gas flame cast an eerie misshapen shadow on the stone wall, like a lantern slide of a monster's child at prayer. Two large bunches of withered flowers stood drooping in gunmetal vases on the floor, as at a graveside.

The condemned prisoner had packed all her worldly possessions in a bag.

'How much time do we have?' she asked without looking up.

'Less than an hour,' he murmured.

For a fleeting moment a hint of fear showed in the grey eyes; but it passed swiftly. She pursed her lips and thrust out her chin.

'May I offer my services . . . as a priest?' he asked.

'No, thank you,' she said with cold politeness.

He tried again, gently, 'Please don't look upon me as an enemy, rather as God's servant.'

She was silent, uncertain about this prison chaplain.

True, he was a man of God, like her father back home in Norfolk. But he *had* blessed the German cause . . .

Her head took over from her heart: hadn't Christ commanded 'Love thine enemy as thyself'?

'There is one thing . . . '

'I'll do anything in my power.'

'I'd like you to write to my mother. Tell her this: I realize that patriotism is not enough. It isn't enough to love one's own people. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.'

She spoke as in prayer, her eyes closed, her face upturned. Then, all at once, she rose, picked up her bag and walked briskly from the cell. Quietly and calmly she made her way, as she had through life, down the long gloomy corridor of the great prison.

As she passed the warders and prison officials, a strange thing happened. It was as if Saint Joan of Arc was going to the stake, for they bowed and crossed themselves in awe.

She returned their blessings with dignity, giving each a grateful nod.

In the prison courtyard stood two black motor cars awaiting the two prisoners. First to emerge was the Belgian architect Philippe Baucq, accompanied by a Catholic priest. He walked up to both his guards, shook hands and said, 'Let us bear no grudge.' Then he

got into the back of one of the cars, sitting between the two escorts.

A few minutes later the same door swung open and the English nurse stepped on to the wet cobblestones. She walked straight to the car, took her seat, and the two saloons at once moved off. They circled the prison yard before halting at the high spiked gates.

Despite the early hour, a small crowd had gathered outside the prison. Led by deputy matron Elizabeth Wilkins, a party from the nursing school on the rue de la Culture had arrived at 5 a.m. for the very latest news.

Would there be an appeal?

A reprieve?

Monsieur Maron, the prison governor, had met them in person. They could tell from his downcast face there was to be no last-minute stay of execution.

'She is being very brave,' he said. 'If you care to wait you will see her when the car emerges.'

So, huddled against the cold drizzle, the band of nurses had waited an hour. At 6 a.m. promptly, the iron gates slowly opened and the two black cars drove quickly through. The onlookers caught no more than a glimpse of their matron in her grey cape and navy blue uniform.

She was sitting bolt upright, staring straight ahead.

That was the last they saw of her.

The two cars sped through the deserted streets, heading for the Tir National, the rifle club two miles from Brussels. On the tarmac of what was now the execution square, a company of two hundred and fifty German soldiers was waiting.

Despite the rain, high-ranking officers in full dress uniform had turned out to oversee formalities: Military Prosecutor Herr Stöber, the Kommandant of St Gilles Captain Behrens, the army doctor Dr Benn, and the Company Commander Colonel Rühl.

Herr Stöber it was who stepped forward to read out the sentence. He was a small dapper man who liked order in everything. Before he could speak, however, a voice cut into the carefully-planned ceremony.

'Comrades, in the presence of death . . . we comrades . . . '

It was young Philippe Baucq. Before he could continue, the guards quickly grabbed his arms and stuffed a rag into his mouth. There would be no further interruptions.

The sentences were read out.

'Mademoiselle Edith Louisa Cavell has been found guilty of treason—helping English and French soldiers to escape from Belgium. Because of her crime, some two hundred and fifty men joined the Allied Army in Holland. Philippe Baucq was her chief assistant. Both are condemned to death

by firing squad on this day, the 12th of October 1915.'

The sentences read out, two priests were permitted to say a last word to the condemned.

Taking the nurse's hand, Pastor le Seur recited the Lord's Prayer. At the 'Amen', she lightly pressed his fingers and murmured, 'Thank you. Please let my loved ones know my soul is safe, and that I am glad to die for my country.'

He took her elbow and led her gently to the wooden post against the far grass verge. A waiting German soldier stood her up against the post and bandaged her eyes. Tears at once wet the bandage and trickled down beneath the sightless eyes.

The slim woman, her hair held in a bun by two metal combs, her jaw set defiantly forward, calmly awaited the moment of death.

She made no sound as two parties of eight riflemen were marched forward to a line six paces from the execution posts. At a sharp command from the officer, they raised the rifles to their shoulders. Almost at once came a second command:

'FIRE!'

Two volleys rang out and both figures sank to the ground without a sound. No scream, no cry for mercy.

Pastor le Seur muffled a cry of horror. He had never witnessed an execution before, let alone that of a

woman. Nurse Cavell had slumped forward; three times she seemed to try to rise. Blood was pouring from her face.

He later learned from the doctor that the jerking of her body was merely a reflex action. For as he and Dr Benn ran forward, they saw that the bullet holes were as large as a fist and went right through her body. One bullet had smashed her lower jaw and her head was now lying in a rapidly filling pool of blood.

It was done.

The doctor certified death and, a few minutes later, two coffins were lowered into newly-dug graves.

So died one of England's noblest heroines.

1

LIKE THE GIRLS in her class, Florence and Dorothy Loveless had sat silent beside the schoolmistress, arms folded, backs straight, while Miss Harmer had read out the nurse's story. For a full minute the room of seventy girls was deathly quiet—apart from a few sniffles and sobs.

Miss Harmer herself, normally stern of stare and cold of demeanour was having trouble with a heaving chest.

Finally, with a humph-humph cough to clear her throat, she put down the Cavell story and pulled herself together.

'Is there nothing the beastly Germans won't do?' she flung at the class, and her two helpers, the Loveless girls, as if they knew the answer. 'To murder a poor English nurse in cold blood, I ask you . . . '

There was a lesson to be learned here, and the schoolmarm was not one to let it slip.

'Let the noble sacrifice of Nurse Cavell be an example to you all. At Christmastide you girls will be leaving school to take your places in the world. Help the war effort and avenge the nurse's death—that's my advice to you. War opens up new horizons. Before the

war, many of you would have gone into domestic service at half a crown a week. Now, look, you can do factory work for good pay, making shells and guns, bullets and bombs.'

Recalling a song she'd heard recently, Miss Harmer began to write neatly on the blackboard. Uplifted by the stirring words, she got the entire class to chant the answer to her question:

'Girls, what can you be?'

'The Girl Behind the Man Behind the Gun.'

'Once more.'

'The Girl Behind the Man Behind the Gun.'

'Well done, class. Now copy it into your exercise books.'

Seventy pen nibs dipped into thirty-five inkwells and wrote scratchily on lined paper:

'We are the girls behind the men behind the guns.'

Despite this heart-pounding 'call to arms', Miss Harmer now had to move on to the next lesson of the day—housewifery. While the boys at George Street Elementary School did woodwork, the girls donned white pinafores and trooped out of the school building to the model house next door.

There they learned to sweep, dust, polish, cook, wash, iron, make beds, and bathe a life-sized doll.

Most of them were dab hands at those chores already.

'Munitionettes, not cooks and sweeps, are what we need to win the war,' Miss Harmer muttered to her helpers. She had dared to mention it once to the headmaster, Mr Cleal; but he would have none of it.

'A woman's place is in the home,' he insisted.

He even looked down his nose at women teachers. But, as he grumbled to his wife, 'Needs must where the Devil drives.'

Not that the George Street girls minded doing housewifery. They were accustomed to their place in school life. To protect them from the 'rough boys', they had separate classes, separate playgrounds, even a separate entrance. 'GIRLS' was carved in stone above the door.

Too bad for the boys. Housewifery was far more fun than boring old woodwork. When the teacher's back was turned, the girls jumped on the beds, had pillow fights, splashed each other from the chipped enamel tubs, swept dirt under the mats, and drowned the hated doll.

The boys didn't know what they were missing.

On their way home from school that afternoon, the twins Florence and Dorothy still had the nurse story stuck in their heads.

'I wouldn't mind being a nurse,' said Floss.

'Garn, nursing ain't for the likes of us,' retorted Doss. 'That Cavell was a vicar's daughter with pots of dosh.'

'That's as maybe . . . But this time last year we could've been dusting for two measly bob a week. Now we can do a "man's" job for three quid. Makes you think, dunnit?'

'Beats dressmaking,' said Doss. 'I was promised one and six a week, eight to eight. Long hours for nuffink.'

'Well, now's our chance. What with our Jack and Dad and the rest of 'em fighting and dying, there'll soon be only women left.'

They marched on, their two younger sisters and brother in tow, each dreaming of adventure and riches beyond their wildest dreams.

They were right to dream. In the scorching summer of 1914, there had been no hint that the world was about to be turned upside-down—or that, for many, it was about to end altogether.

Now, at the end of 1916, two-thirds of Europe was alight and the flames were licking out towards the whole world. Already half the youth of half the world, like moths to a flame, had been drawn into a war that raged across the muddy fields of France and Belgium—where Jack was fighting—and among the blinding sandstorms of Palestine—where Dad was posted.

The 'gallant British Army' that had routed Napoleon at Waterloo, tamed the Russian Bear in the Crimea, singed Boer beards in South Africa, and won an Empire that stretched all round the globe . . . was

bogged down on the Somme, and suffering untold losses.

Girls were badly needed on the home front: to drive trams, trucks, and trains, as brickies and chippies, as miners and munition workers. For some it was as exciting as a boy's running away to sea. Now, for the first time, they could earn enough to keep themselves, get away from home. No longer did they have to bow and scrape to tyrants in country homes.

'We're 'ome, Mum,' yelled the twins together as they pushed through the open front door of 39 George Street.

'Shush,' came a muffled voice from the scullery. 'You'll wake up Joey.'

A wail from the parlour soon greeted them. Joey was awake.

'Oh well, he'll have to air 'is tonsils,' muttered Mrs Loveless. 'I've only one pair of 'ands.'

It was washday.

Wearing a coarse apron of sacking and a square of oilskin across her chest, she was rubbing each item with her Sunlight soap, giving extra elbow grease to the wee and poo stains. After she'd done the whites, she tossed them into the copper together with a shower of soda, stirring the boiling bundle with her copper stick.

The whole place reeked of steamy washing.

After a good soaking, she lifted the washing out and left it to drain as she struggled to the sink with the dirty water. Having emptied it down the sink, she refilled the tub with cold water and placed it under the wringer. Then she rinsed the washing once and put it through the wooden rollers, turning the mangle handle with her free hand.

If the weather had been fine she'd have hung the whole lot out to dry. But since it was raining, she had to string it up on a clothes line indoors, so that it flapped about their heads in the cramped kitchen and parlour.

To each of the kids she gave a task. To the youngest—Reggie, the younger twins, and Timmie—sweeping the kitchen, scullery, and passage; to the eldest—Elsie, Annie, Floss, and Doss—cleaning the grate and making a fire with newspaper, sticks, and coke. That gave her a breather for changing Joey's nappy and getting tea for the ten of them—bread, marge, and plum jam.

With four infants to mind, she could have done with the twins at home rather than them spending an extra couple of years as school helpers. Like other children, they'd left school at 12, but gone back to lend a hand for a few pennies a week. She would really have had them earning real cash at a man's job; it was hard to manage on her soldiers' allowance.

Still, she thought, I shouldn't grumble. At least our Bert and Jack are safe (touch wood!), unlike Jack's

mates Harry and Freddy, and poor Mr Garside opposite.

As she sat down for fifteen minutes, she fished out Jack's last letter, holding it in one hand as she spooned bread and milk into Joey's mouth with the other.

And she cried.

Not at her own hard lot. But at the war.

It was no longer somewhere over there, out of sight. It was on the doorstep. It wasn't just the soldiers on crutches that had brought home the horrors of war. Every day, in column after column, the casualty lists filled whole pages of newspapers. The army that had first crossed the Channel in the autumn of 1914, Jack and Harry among them, was by now practically wiped out.

Yet they still called for more.

'Join Up, Join Up, Join Up!' was the cry.

Recruiting posters bawled from every billboard:

'Women of Britain Say—Go!'

Had anyone ever asked them?