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Britain's Tribute to Miss Cavell.

(By PHILIP GIBBS.)

On May 15, 1919, Britain paid tribute to one of its greatest daughters, Miss Edith Cavell, the martyred nurse, who, after an impressive service at Westminster Abbey, was buried in her native city of Norwich. Her last journey over English soil was marked by scenes of profound mourning. School children paid homage to her with wild flowers at wayside stations, and the King was represented at the great Abbey service. East End residents flow modest Union Jacks at half-mast and Queen Alexandra sent a touching message with a wreath. Philip Gibbs of the London Chronicle's staff wrote the following description of the service:

It was the beauty of the courage of a woman's soul that passed through London on May 15 and stayed a little while with prayer and music in the Abbey, when the body of Nurse Cavell received the salute of the silent crowds. The heart of London, so restless, so noisy, with its tide of traffic surging through the glare of sunshine, was touched by the spiritual meaning of that flag-covered coffin which held a woman's dust; and the millions who were in the streets stood at attention, with bowed heads, thinking back a moment to the tragedy and valor of this lady's death.

They were glad—I heard them say so in the crowds—that there was sunshine for her last journey. She had so loved England that it was good now that her home-coming should be in such fine May weather, when England was as fresh and lovely as she had thought of it out there in Brussels, in her loneliness, amidst the rack and agony of war. The sunshine and this beauty were for the spiritual remembrance of one of England's nursing sisterhood, who had laid down her life, ungrudgingly, and took the risk of death, with full knowledge of her peril, because of the love in her heart for suffering humanity. Before dying, by that brick wall outside the prison of St. Gilles, in Brussels, she wished all her friends to know that she gave her life willingly for her country.

"I have no fear nor shrinking," she said. "I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me."

These words, or the spirit of them, were remembered, I am sure, by many people in the crowds outside Victoria Station and along the way to Westminster, where they were deeply moved, when the gun carriage bearing Nurse Cavell's coffin passed slowly by to the Abbey behind a detachment of Coldstream Guards, with their hand playing the pitiful—and joyous—melody of Chopin's "Funeral March."

Those words of hers, spoken before her hurried execution, to the Chaplain who stayed in her prison cell have been repeated in the hearts of many other women who were of her profession, and who in the crowds of London remembered how they were of comfort to them, in hospitals behind the western front, and other fronts, where day after day they tended a tide of wounded, and watched death's harvesting, and risk their own lives, but did not flinch, when air raids or epidemics took toll of women as well as men.

"When fear creeps a little into my heart," said one of these nurses to me, "I think of Miss Cavell, and that gives me courage again." Yesterday there were thousands of nurses in the

crowds—the flag was at half-mast above a group of them outside Westminster Hospital—and in the Abbey there were mostly women in nurses' uniforms of every kind and branch of service, who had come to pay homage to one of their heroines. Perhaps it was their salute which was most pleasing to the spirit of Miss Cavell if her spirit hovered above that flag-draped coffin—God knows—for these women knew with her the meaning of the wards in wartime. They had seen, as she saw, the tide of mangled flesh that poured into them, the bloody sacrifice of youth, the piling up of human agony. They had heard, as she did, the awful snuff of unconscious men, and the sharp moaning of men who are not glad to die.

They had toiled, as she did, to relieve all this sum of pain, until their own bodies ached, and all their nerves were plucked and jangled, though they kept brave faces and never wept—for what was the use of tears?

Those nursing sisters in the Abbey and in the crowds would understand more closely, perhaps, than most others the secret which gave Nurse Cavell so much courage when her enemies entrapped her—that scorn of death of which she had seen so much, and the gladness of her service for suffering men.

But in the crowds also there were men who lifted their hats, or stood to the salute, as her dust passed, with understanding in their souls, and gratitude for what this lady had done and tried to do. They had been prisoners in Germany. They had known the agony of long imprisonment, of forced labor with weak bodies, under brutal guards. They had made desperate efforts to escape. Some of them, by the help of women like Nurse Cavell, by the organized system which that lady had helped to form had escaped.

They were nearly all women engaged in this work. I met a number of them in Ghent and Liege and Namur and other towns—English governesses who had been caught up in the tide of war, French and Belgian ladies whose hearts ached at the sufferings of our prisoners. They were links in a chain which reached right through Belgium, and through Brussels, where Miss Cavell had been in touch with them.

They took frightful risks and knew the penalty of discovery. But I met women who had worked in this way all through the war, who had been imprisoned in foul cells on suspicion, and had been let out, for lack of evidence, and had gone on again, with enduring courage, smuggling food to the prisoners, hiding letters across the lines, hiding runaways, helping them to escape.

In Ghent after its capture from the enemy I met three men singing "Tipperary" with the dancing crowds. "You're English," I said, and one of them said "I'm a Scot," and the other said "I'm Irish," and the third said "I'm London born and bred." They had been hiding in Ghent for a month when it was swarming with Germans, and they owed their escape and hiding place to a group of ladies whom afterward I met, and who had risked Nurse Cavell's fate, doing the same work.

Miss Cavell gave her reasons for her acts to the judges who sat around her,

staring grimly at the spiritual face of that lady, who gave quiet answers confessing her guilt against German military law. When she was asked why she helped the soldiers to go to England, she answered that she thought, if she had not done so, they would have been shot by the Germans, and that, therefore, she thought she only did her duty to her country in saving their lives.

She admitted all the charges against her. Often she helped her prosecutors by detailed statements on points that had not occurred to them. She made no concealment, and was glad to confess what she had done for young men caught whole and living in the trap of war, as others had been caught and mangled in the wards where she tended them—Germans as well as British.

I think all soldiers who saluted her poor dust acknowledged their debt to her as one of the women who in this war were a spiritual power behind the fighting lines, and whose faith and courage in those ruined towns and villages out in France and Flanders, even in little English homes far from the sound of guns, was greater sometimes than that of the soldiers—and whose agony of soul was not less.

I am glad I saw the scene in Westminster Abbey because I think it had a message, beyond even that of woman's courage, to all those women there. I glanced down those long lines of British womanhood on each side of the nave to the transept and the choir. Shafts of light struck slantwise through the clerestory windows between the tall old pillars of that Abbey church where for 700 years the prayers of English people have gone up in thanksgiving or in sadness as our history has played out its drama. There were Australian, New Zealand, and Canadian nurses, as well as those of our own isles. They waited with devout patience for the coming of Edith Cavell, rising once when Queen Alexandra came, with Princess Victoria, and greeted them all—her nurses—with a grave smile. The Earl of Athlone was there representing the King. The band of the Grenadier Guards played Sullivan's "In Memoriam," and then, just as we heard other music far away through the open doors, Massenet's "Last Sleep of the Virgin." It was as though a Princess was coming to her bridal when the Abbey clergy in their robes went out to the sunlight through the west door to greet the lady who was coming.

The choristers streamed after them to begin a song of greeting. Through the open door came the sound of tramping feet and of carriage wheels, and the loud music of Chopin's song of sadness and gladness. A loud voice called out an order: "Rest on your arms—reversed!" The choristers turned back again and led the way up the long nave, and after the clergy came the coffin of Edith Cavell, wrapped in her country's flag, borne upon the shoulders of Coldstream Guards. There were flowers above the flag, and the sunlight followed them as far as the choir. On each side of the nave the women had risen, standing like soldiers, shoulder to shoulder. The choir sang the psalm:

The Lord is my Shepherd; therefore I can lack nothing. He shall feed me in a green pasture, and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort.

Yea, though I walk through the Valley of Death I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. While that psalm was being sung, and the prayers were being said, I thought of some other words spoken by Nurse Cavell before the brutal bullet found its target in her flesh. These words were her real message to the world:

This I would say, standing as I do in view of God and eternity: I realize that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness toward any one. Her life as a nurse in Brussels had been dedicated to love, not to hatred. She had tended German soldiers with as much devotion as British soldiers, seeing in them the same victim of that hatred which had caught the world in its madness. And in the hour before her death she did not utter words of hatred against the enemy who had condemned her, nor desire vengeance on German boyhood because of the crimes of their war lords.

She looked back on the scene of agony she had seen, in which all the world was involved, and on the frightful passions that had been unleashed in the hearts of peoples, and her spirit passed beyond operations and the narrow limits of patriotism, and embraced all human life in its pity. "I realize that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness toward any one"—a hard saying—a Christlike message to the world which is still worshipping a cult of hatred, making new breeding grounds of hate, cherishing its heritage. Yet that was the message which in Westminster Abbey the spirit of Nurse Cavell spoke to her sisters.

It was at the end of the service that all true women rose to sing the hymn which Nurse Cavell sang very softly in her prison cell before going out to be shot: Abide with me; fast falls the eventide; The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide; When other helpers fail, and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O, abide with me. To the music of the Dead March in "Saul" the coffin was borne out of the abbey again, and placed on the gun

carriage, and, with guards pacing slowly ahead and music leading on, the dust of a gentle lady was carried through vast crowds standing bareheaded again, along the Thames, and so past the Mansion House, through the city, to Liverpool Street Station, where a special train for Norwich was waiting.

There were not many tears shed. I saw no weeping eyes. But people stared through the glamour of sun at the bright colors of the coffin, and thought sadly of one great crime of war among many crimes, of one tragedy to womanhood among many tragedies, and of the spirit which is stronger than the flesh and counts for victory.

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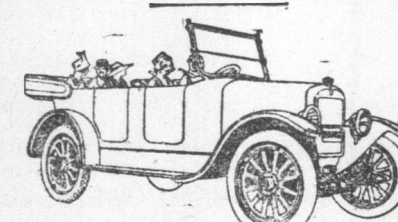
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