

From the Papers of  
Nina Courage (nee Last) 1895 - 1973

### **War Memories 1914 - 1918 - 1919**

Somehow we young ones knew that there would be a war. We had even come across Germans whom we felt were spies. Today I still feel it difficult to forgive the liberals for leaving us so unprepared. If we had been strong, would Germany have ever risked war?! In spite of these forebodings it was a great shock when we heard Belgium was invaded. We had a tennis party and alas I never saw the young men present again. They were killed early in the war, one an only son. I lost nearly all my boy friends. Indeed girls of my generation suffered the same loss.

The war was soon brought very close to us through pathetic families of Belgian refugees, who all had dreadful accounts of German cruelties. Since we had declared war I felt very restless and longed to do something to help our brave men and be in the thick of things, but in 1914 women were still not recognised as being able to do much, and I was considered too young to be of use.

My mother wisely sent me to take a 3 months course at a school of domestic economy. On my return in time for Xmas 1914 I found my parents struggling with the Belgian refugee problem. People in our small market town had been most generous in giving accommodation and even complete houses with furniture, but the families themselves presented problems. Some were splendid, adapted themselves, were grateful and seemed to be able to manage on very little money. It really was surprising the way they used to manage to make a good meal out of a single cabbage. Others gave a great deal of trouble by grumbling, expecting a great deal of money and generally making those in contact with them worried and unhappy. The Mayor of Antwerp, his wife, son and a granddaughter aged 5 arrived. Actually my parents put them up at first, until a house was found for them. But they refused to move until their maid joined them. She had been rescued with the family but she wished to see the sights of London first!! I do not know how she managed about money. Probably good people provided all she needed, as everyone was terribly sorry for poor little Belgium. However this family who I felt should have known better, gave more

trouble than any of the others. They seemed absolutely incapable in every way. Their house became so dirty mice overran the place. They were given traps and the maid seemed to enjoy catching them, but she threw their dead bodies into the street, much to the indignation of the local inhabitants. A pheasant was given them one day and the maid put it in the oven just as it was, feathers and all. The child was really to be pitied. They could not manage her at all. She was quite undisciplined. The son who we felt ought to be fighting was the father but said his wife had left him. We never knew quite what to believe as he never behaved as if he was married. His great aim seemed to be finding a rich wife. He pursued a number of girls he thought must be rich. I was much amused to find him paying me 'all attention' and even writing flowery letters. He kept talking about Chateau Last, mistaking our rambling old Rectory for our own house. Eventually he ran away with a squire's daughter.

My Mother with her usual foresight kept goats and Belgian Hares to help with the food situation. She always milked the goats herself and was said to have saved several babies' lives with the liquid. Later when the food situation became really grim her hares and kids, the latter served as lamb, were much appreciated.

After Christmas 1914 I was very thrilled to hear I was needed in a convalescent VAD Hospital at Ashridge Park. Lord Brownlow had given a wing temporarily to be used for this purpose. Two friends were already there and so my parents consented to my joining them. I had no talent or wish for nursing. The sight of blood or a wound or accident made me faint, a fault I was never able to conquer. However I was greatly needed there as there was only one maid lent to them who could not cook. My job at Ashridge was to be the assistant cook. A very charming lady was in charge and we had great fun together in spite of various drawbacks. Ashridge was a glorious place with deer in the Park, and one expected to meet Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup> round every corner. The family were still living there and I suppose generations had loved the surroundings which added to its charm. It made a wonderful convalescent home for about 40 wounded tommies. Everyone was voluntary except the matron and a nursing sister. Fortunately we were not used to modern conveniences in those days otherwise the conditions would have appalled us. Inside the house, the kitchen was almost the size of a town hall with a vast uneven stone floor covered with sawdust. Actually this was very comfortable to stand upon. Surrounded by wonderful copper cooking

utensils it still had its old fireplace complete with spits at each end. Large, fairly modern looking coal ranges had been put in by the side of the ancient ones. These we had to use, and they needed quite a lot of understanding. One range would never get properly hot and always had a cool oven. This meant that half way through the cooking of a joint the Head or I had to carry the heavy roast to the other end of the vast kitchen. The heat used to be great and all the time we were wearing high stiff collars. Desperately I used to loosen mine by removing the stud, but this inevitably used to create the signal for a visit from matron, accompanied by the commandant, and so I had to give up this relief. There was an inadequate sink with cold water only and of course most primitive lighting. The meals for the men were simple plain roast or boiled and easy puddings. The staff were more difficult and I found their supper especially, extremely difficult. Night duty food for 2 or 3 was also a problem. The sister was most dainty. After a long and tiring day it was most aggravating to see her disdainfully picking her food over and pushing it on one side of her plate as uneatable. Sometimes she would raid the larder and take little dainties I had saved for an especially sick man.

We had no bathroom or water laid on in our quarters which meant we had to boil water and carry it quite a long way in order to wash. Our bath was a plain round tin one. Slops had to be taken a long way also. But we made light of things and laughed and joked. We had a name for everything, even the slop cloth was called Lily! Except for matron, sister and the head cook we were all under 21.

One day there was great excitement when we heard that dear King George V was coming to see us. Matron alone maintained calm. 'I am used to royalty' she boasted, 'I am not at all nervous.' When the King eventually arrived and spoke to matron we were highly amused to see her turn red and pale by turns. She appeared shaky too. Was it nerves or emotion?! We girls felt thrilled and turned hot and cold with admiration and loyalty. Though the King spoke encouraging words and was cheerful, somehow we knew he minded the war so deeply. We were greatly moved.

I had now been 6 months at Ashridge. I had only undertaken to be there for a year as my great wish was to get into the Military Hospital Endell St. W.C.2. I had already sent in my name and my sister was already there aged 17. She was a born nurse and

had been accepted straight from school. I wanted to be in the thick of things. My parents had suffered financial loss when Antwerp fell as they had money in the water works there. I needed a paid job. Ashridge was expensive and we had heavy laundry bills. My last few months there were very hard. The head (cook) had to leave owing to family reasons. I was left in sole charge. Then the maid joined up. Gradually the freshly sanded kitchen floor disappeared and I was left standing all day on the uneven stones. Trouble arose. I rubbed a corn under my foot, an abscess formed underneath though I did not know this at the time and I suffered pain. I managed to grin and bear things and served my time but I felt considerable discomfort. I was sorry to leave my many friends and the beautiful surroundings. My great hope was to be accepted for a post at Endell St. In spite of the urgent needs of the war, the C.O.'s (at Endell St.) were extremely particular as to how they engaged staff.

On returning home, my mother at once insisted on taking me to London to be examined by a well known foot specialist. To my horror he said I would have to go to his nursing home for at least 6 weeks to effect a cure. Horrified at the idea of inaction I absolutely refused. My poor mother was puzzled as to what she could do. Later on in the day I met a friend and confided in her. She at once said 'Try my chiropodist, Stuart in Kensington High Street.' Suffering great pain, my mother and I at once took her advice. By that time I was almost wishing my foot off so desperate had I become with the continual throbbing. In less than 15 minutes I was completely free from pain. The man scraped off the lumps of hard skin, uncovered the abscess, and 'Oh the relief'! I never had any more trouble. Needless to say my mother never paid the specialist.

Now my hopes were fixed upon the Military Hospital at Endell St. which was conducted entirely by women with the exception of some male orderlies who were disappearing fast owing to the awful casualties in France. The C.O.s were Dr Flora Murray the physician and Dr Louisa Garrett Anderson, surgeon and daughter of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. Both had been suffragettes and bore the mark of hunger strikes on their faces. In spite of all the prejudice then regarding women, they had managed to build up good practices in London especially in the Harrow Road. When war was declared they at once offered their services to the War Office. The reply they received was 'We do not want women interfering in this pie.' Undaunted, they

determined to go to France to help in hospital work there for the wounded. They found almost complete chaos in the French hospitals. Dr Anderson seemed to have plenty of money. She and Dr Murray recruited girls from every clan in Scotland. They returned to France where they treated the wounded \*\*\* (in a church behind the front)\*\*\*\*. They were so successful that in 1915 the W.O. climbed down, overwhelmed by the terrible convoys of wounded men from the front. 'Would they consent to running a temporary military hospital?'

They were going to take over an old workhouse in St. Giles-in-the-Fields. The doctors consented on condition they had entire charge. This was granted. The building, which had been closed since 1911 was hastily prepared and equipped with \*\*\*(650)\*\*\* beds. Lifts were put in. There was plenty of room. The wards were all round a large courtyard. There were also cubicles put up for the staff. These we called the Barracks. Some of the windows looked out onto the Prince's Theatre. Dr Murray's office was supposed to be the room where Oliver Twist asked for more. Everything was very well prepared in double quick time, but there was no opportunity for replacing the old workhouse laundry. The spacious room with its remains of laundry machines was there, most surprisingly good I thought. However it could not be made use of though the splendid workhouse airing cupboards were used all through the war, also the linen room.

My sister had warned me that things were pretty grim, but after an alarming interview I was very pleased to learn I was accepted for a month's trial. This was absolutely necessary because if one became a member of the hospital staff one had to sign on for the duration. There was no escape. Not that we wished for anything beyond to take our share of something of what our men were enduring.

On arrival at the hospital I was shown into a dismal bedroom known as 'The Murray'. There were eight beds, all occupied. Mine, being a new girl was farthest from a small window looking out onto a passage off the yard. There was a horrid smell caused, I was told by an incinerator which burnt the amputated limbs. The post mortem room was just below also. This was a severe test but I felt really in the thick of things.

The next fortnight was a hard one. I had to be on duty by 7am when a sergeant clocked us in, I then cleared and lay and lit his fire. I was to act as orderly to a block of 3 wards known as The Zoo. I soon discovered the name was given because the poor men had been desperately wounded, many of them suffering from septicaemia. Some of them were delirious and their moans, cries and groans could be heard all over the hospital. The name sounds unsympathetic but we young girls had to make fun of the most distressing things in order to keep going cheerfully. The work I was asked to carry out had previously been carried out by a male orderly, but slowly they were being replaced by women. The wards were one above the other. Starting at the top I had to bring the large dirty dressing bins down in the lift, take them across part of the yard to an incinerator. Then I did the same with the ash bins. Central heating and electric fires were unknown then and there were always huge fires. Kitchen refuse also had to be emptied. Lifting these bins was no light job and the ashes used to fly all over me when I turned them out. There were 30 men in each ward and 8 coalscuttles to be taken down and filled. This meant going to the middle of the large yard where a flight of steps led down to an enormous underground cellar of coal. The shovel was heavy and too big for my hands. There was no time to take the scuttles one by one up the steep stone stairs to the lift, and they were so narrow I found I scraped my knuckles on the sides. A hasty and not very good breakfast, then back to the wards to tidy up the fires, empty the ashtrays and sweep up. I was really very frightened of some of the poor men, many of whom had to be tied in bed owing to being delirious and it was most pathetic when some (cannot read, but ? means tied up in enormous) splints begged me to release them. It was most painful too to witness their sufferings when their wounds were dressed. Sometimes a nurse would faint holding up a gangrenous leg (which often smelt terribly) for the doctor to examine.

However, to continue with my first fortnight. .. I soon found that all us young girls, labelled nurses but called by our surnames, held our C.O.'s in the greatest awe. My sister and I were truly terrified of them, though we admired them greatly. Discipline and hard living were the usual routine 50 years ago and we were certainly shown no mercy if we failed to do our duty. Dr Murray was a dour Scot and Dr G. Anderson severe. Both had suffered a great deal for the rights of women. They were devoted to duty to the extent of being willing to give their entire lives to the cause in hand. Their sympathy with the men was unflinching, but they had none for any of us who failed to

come up to their standards which were extremely high. They did not suffer fools gladly. A few bitter and crushing words if anyone did the wrong thing was our worst fear. This meant that our best was given the whole time and if anyone was lucky enough to win a word, very seldom given, of praise, we felt uplifted for days. Both had great personalities. Dr Murray's was so powerful that one was aware she was walking down a passage some distance behind, before ever seeing her. Both Drs Murray and G. Anderson firmly believed that the right kind of girl could accomplish anything irrespective of training. I suppose people are given special powers in emergencies because I never found them proved wrong except in circumstances which I shall explain later. All these things I was expected to know at once, there was complete forgetfulness of self all the time.

One of the many alarming things I had to carry out during my first fortnight was wheeling patients into the operating theatre, standing in a corner, fortunately out of sight of the operation, ready to wheel the patient back again to the ward. To add to my terror I was told to make sure the man did not start to come round on the way back and try to swallow his tongue.

Naturally we were too tired to do anything when we were off duty especially as our nights were often disturbed. I was told straight away to be always prepared for convoys of wounded arriving from the front. A loud bell would suddenly go at any hour of darkness, generally around midnight. We were up in a second and incredibly quickly stuffed our nightdresses into our dark blue bloomers, popped on our uniform, caught up our hair in our bonnets and reported down in the yard. The ambulance rolled quietly in, the stretchers slide out, those willing to take the head and shoulders stood by Dr Murray, the others stood a little further away. I soon found that though the head and shoulders of a man were the heaviest there was an advantage in volunteering for this part of the stretcher case. It was easier on arrival at the lift to lower and raise facing, rather than backwards as the feet end entailed. At the end of a fortnight I was terribly scared when a message was given me to report to the C.O.'s office. What had I done or not done I wondered? My surprise and relief was great when Dr Murray informed me that there was a vacancy on the administrative side of the Hospital, and I was allocated to the Linen Room. A chit was given me for my uniform and I received £2.10/s per week for my fortnight's work. This pay was to

continue, with 14/s for board and lodging. Money still went far in those days and it seemed like riches to me. The uniform was exceptionally pretty and distinguished. A coat and skirt of khaki colour coating with blue shoulder epaulettes and blue W.H.C. (Women's Hospital Corps). Later, when the hospital became well known and famous, W.H.C. was removed and Endell Street in brass was adopted instead. A white shirt, white gloves, khaki tie and a pretty bonnet with a bow in front and a floating khaki veil completed this very becoming uniform. One felt one could hold one's own with the best wherever one went, and I was highly flattered to notice that people even in London turned round to look as I marched past with my nose in the air. They little knew all we were doing and the hardships we were enduring.

My first year in the linen room was fairly good. I was one of three. We were all very great friends. Voluntary helpers of old people came in to mend every day. The organisation was excellent as there were huge shelves for everything. We were in charge of enormous quantities of blue suits for the wounded which they wore when they were able to get up and go to a convalescent hospital. Masses of blankets including the sinister brown ones, too soon to be associated with blanket baths and delousing the poor men from the trenches. Red ties were supplied with the blue suits, also white shirts. The latter were especially good and acted as a temptation for the men who would (some of them) try to leave hospital with 2 shirts, one on top of the other. On the whole though, the men were honest. There were nightshirts suitable for wounded men, i.e. right sides open with just tapes to tie up. Left sides and the (cannot read) with the sleeves all there, had to be kept on their separate shelves. There were loads of pillows and bolster cases, towels, sheets and white overalls, the latter worn by the nurses. White socks for operations and enormous white socks to put on a bandaged foot, a few pyjamas, as alas, the men were nearly always too badly wounded to wear them, and some horrid little mattresses known as biscuits. These were used on all the beds. They were easy to move and easy to send to be cleaned, otherwise they were far from comfortable. Some unpleasant looking cloths known as 'distinctives' and used for bedpans were among the many other odds and ends that completed the large linen room.

My day started with breakfast at 7am to 7.30, then to duty in the huge room, to be swept out, the large heating cupboards pulled out and emptied and the clothes put

away. These excellent sliding drawers or cupboards were in a hot place leading off the linen room, the same as were used in workhouse days. This was named Kenya (?). Wards were supposed to bring the list of their requirements the day before and we immediately prepared their different piles. Wants however were requested all the day. If there was an operation the towels needed were incredible. At 9.30 two of us went to a dark 'cellar like' room to count the dirty linen from the wards. Not a pleasant job and how our back's ached with the long stooping. Then the different piles were tied up, heavy they were to manage too. Everything had to be carefully written down as we had to enter all sents also returns into a ledger and make three different copies on white paper to send to the different W.D. Had the powers that be realised the war was to last so long, I think they would have put the excellent facilities provided by the workhouse in the past, in order. The lack of having our own laundry proved very arduous and unrewarding. It entailed much standing in a cold draughty stone passage, frequently and frantically telephoning to the laundry for the return of clean sheets etc. As the war went on we became increasingly short of equipment, and the laundry lacked labour, also soap, and so became more and more difficult. Nerve wracking experiences began to occur, as we could not give the wards all they required and we had to plan some kind of rationing which did not make us popular, especially among the sisters who had been trained in spacious days and had no idea of economy where linen and patients were concerned. Towels were among our many problems. Curiously enough, in spite of the terrible mud and worse, of the trenches, no one seems to have thought of flannels or anything with which to wash the poor soldiers when they arrived at the hospital. Overworked and in a hurry the sisters and nurses tore up bath towels to use, hence the reason for most of the shortage. The Laundry was paid by the W.D. or W.O. The latter rightly expected very strict accounts to be kept and the returns balanced with the sents. This was impossible because the laundry was always in arrears regarding returns. Articles disappeared in spite of wearisome telephoning. In desperation we had to more or less cook the monthly accounts. These all had to be copied into a large ledger with a fine mapping pen and taken to Chelsea Barracks to be audited. In those days it was a curious position for a woman to walk across the courtyard and present the book to the C.O. It was some days before it was returned to our C.O. and woe betide us if there was a mistake. Should this be the case, one of us was summoned to the C.O.'s office, much frightened. A few biting words from Dr Murray dashed our spirits for many days to come. The whole thing

had to be gone through again to find the mistake as the C.O. at Chelsea never told us where it occurred, and then the same procedure was followed. O the relief when the book was returned with the magic words 'Certified and found correct.' As already mentioned, 3 other copies had to be made and our usual requests hardly ever granted of (articles to replenish our shelves.)

The terrible winter of 1917/18 saw us very short handed. Only 2 of us now and quite often I was the only one on duty. This meant no time off at all and I often used to become so tired, tears ran down my face almost without my knowing it. On the rare occasions that we were able to get out we were too tired to walk. We learnt that there was a bus, most blessed, that stopped outside the hospital, went round Pimlico returning to the same place. I shall never forget the relief of relaxing on top of that bus, enjoying the air. (No roof to the top of buses then). People were most kind, free entry into local cinemas and theatres but alas, if ever we were able to go, everything just went round and round owing to the war fatigue we were suffering from. Yet, we never mentioned that we were tired or gave way to fatigue for a moment, especially as we realised the brave young nurses were worse off. Too long stretches of night duty, often entirely alone, with inadequate food, were beginning to take their toll. Septic noses, teeth, fingers and other horrors including septic throats began to be rife. Worse was to come. A young friend of only 21 reported sick to the home sister (a hard cruel woman) and was dead in 3 days from a septic throat, now known as streptococcal throat. She was not the only one and grim it was when we were all summoned into the courtyard to stand in respectful silence while the coffins were carried away. A disinfecting hut was hastily put up in the yard and we were supposed to go there night and morning to breathe in steamy disinfectant air. I often had a septic nose which caused great discomfort. During these dreadful war months my sister and I were frequently grieved over the loss of boy friends, particularly the great loss of Wallie St John Mildmay, known as Bunny. A near neighbour and only child, he was as a brother to us all. Entirely devoted to war work we both resolved not to think of matrimony until the war was over.

Things began to go from bad to worse. During the winter of 1917/18 we were really hungry in London and if only women had been conscripted there would not have been the long (hours). Many nurses' lives might have been saved and perhaps the valuable

and clever Dr Flora Murray also, who died shortly after the war as a result of overwork. She was soon to lose half a finger from septic poisoning. We were increasingly aware that in spite of prejudice, she and Dr Garrett Anderson were making a great impression even among male doctors. The then great surgeon Dr Bland- Sutton came and watched Dr Anderson carry out a head operation, and he was heard to express admiration over the way her little hands worked. She had already performed 28,000 operations by 1918. Doctors too were interested over the way Dr Murray gave anaesthetics. At that date, she seemed to be the only one who could administer this without causing discomfort or sickness to the patients when they came round. They were always terribly busy and as they lived in the hospital, they always seemed on duty. I can of course see that this was wrong now, and that being women they could not relax in the way men do when they should be off work.

The greatest compliment that the staff could be given we thought, was to be invited to dinner with the C.O.'s. My sister and I were thrilled when we were asked to dine with them, but also alarmed too. However, we were charmed with our hostesses who treated us as honoured guests. Alas, the treat did not last long. The distressing cries of a man in pain ended our evening. 'O that poor man!' said Dr Murray rising. 'I must go and see what I can do for him.' It was the signal for our departure and so the strain was ever with those incredible and brave women. What a debt of gratitude I owe to the incomparable (ones).

My cubicle looked out onto the courtyard and I could see the nurses on night duty when I went to bed, and (I) could hear the many terrible groans and cries of those in pain. I never failed to have one of Jane Austen's works by my bedside. They certainly had a wonderful power of taking one's mind off unpleasant things, a completely different world in fact.

With America at last come into the war we were suddenly told 20 American girls were coming to help the hospital. Preparations were made for their welcome and naturally we were delighted with the idea, especially as we were so short handed. They were granted the facilities we had, but of course they would be strangers in a strange land and deserved all we were able to give them. We were told they were picked girls from Boston. Alone now in the linen room, I was to have one. My sister

who was on night duty in one of the zoo wards was allotted another, to my relief. Three were put in charge of the men's canteen in order that the pressed staff could be released for the wards, and the others of course were to be shared around. It is sad to record that they were a great failure from the beginning. A different contingent who undertook to take the WACS (?) off our hands in an American hospital in France, also failed us. We cleared out the Women's Ward known as 'H', of 65 beds, and filled it with wounded men, only to be told a few weeks later that we would receive sick WACS again. The American girls who slept in cubicles near me did nothing but bemoan their iced drinks etc. and talk about their 'boxes' from home filled with good things, though we never saw anything of them. Hungry as we always were now, there was great pleasure when a friend of mine was sent a large tin of biscuits. She generously called all of us in that particular wing into her cubicle and we were each given 2 of the precious biscuits. This treat continued for 2 or 3 evenings when they came to an abrupt end. 'Where are my biscuits, they are gone, who has taken them?!' said my friend. Everyone denied that they had done so. Then it was noticed that neither of the American girls were present. Later they were questioned. 'O yes, we took them' they said, 'we were hungry and helped ourselves. We never saw any of those biscuits again. Meanwhile unsatisfactory reports came from all concerned.