



## There Was a King in Flanders

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RAOUL BERON, a Private in the Belgian army

NURSE GRANT, of the British Red Cross

*Scene is an old farmhouse near Belgian lines at sunset.*

*Door C in back flat and a window almost beside it to the right. Old table littered with ambulance instruments, bundles of lint etc and over it two hand ambulances folded, odds bits of furniture to dress the room to give it a habited look. NURSE GRANT (a healthy looking Englishwoman) sitting by the table rolling lint deftly. The burr of a field telephone ringing, hanging off wall, wires leading out the window. At first call there is rattle of musketry away in the distance. A couple of deep booms from the big guns. Then the second call upon the phone. She rises, goes and takes it up and speaks in practical way.*

NURSE G      Yes, yes? It is Nurse Grant speaking - from the base at La Sainte --- farm. Who is it that is calling? Oh! Dr Collis! Then you are speaking from the lines, Sir, the Belgian lines! *(Listening for a moment, then starting back in horror)* Defeated! Broken! Oh, poor people - poor people! And the King, Sir, King Albert - they have not taken him? *(she listens a moment, then gives big sign of relief)* Thank God! *(then with sudden quick attention as though listening to practical instructions)* The corps has only gone ten minutes, sir *(quickly)* Yes! Yes! They are upon the road now, Sir? *(with a start)* The line! Yes - yes. Just hold one moment doctor

*She goes to the table, picks up her surgical scissors - puts out the light leaving the room in darkness all but the moonlight from the window; and the red glow*

*from the fire. She goes back to the phone which is lit by moonlight - calls again.*

Are you there? Yes - are there any further instructions? (*listens*) In the drawer of the table: yes. I – I'll do my best - Good - Goodbye doctor.

*She takes her scissors and cuts the telephone wires, takes the receiver and puts it in the fire then crosses down to a drawer by table. Lights a match and by its flicker takes a revolver from it and places it in her bosom under her apron, as she does so a moan is heard off, almost a faint call. She extinguishes the match and listens. There is a moment's silence.*

NURSE G      I thought - the Belgian army slaughtered - the Germans upon the road here –

*She turns suddenly and with almost a cry draws back into the corner by the fireplace. In the window the face of a man is seen peering in - he has not apparently seen her. She watches it - drawing her revolver - it disappears - she runs to the door to bolt it - as she gets there it opens slowly - a man lurches in panting; shuts it too, bolts it quickly and leans exhausted against it. He still has not seen her and she crouches back into a corner - all that can be seen of her, the glister of her revolver.*

*BERON, a ragged and dishevelled Belgian soldier, cut seemingly in a hundred places - his clothes half torn off, his hair dank and wet over his forehead - his shirt stained with blood. There is a second's silence - nothing is heard but his breathing and hers – which he is too much exhausted to notice.*

BERON      (*in an agonised whisper*) Water! In pity's name - water before I - there must be some here - there must - there must! (He gropes his way to the window - looking out a moment. In a fierce whisper) Not yet dogs: not Raoul Berone - yet (*he gropes his way towards the table - feels along it - panting heavily*) a

little water and I shall best them yet. Bon Dieu! Yes, for all that I am so weak I  
-

*His voice dies away with a sob, a heavy fall is heard - a faint quivering sigh then silence. There is a dead silence broken only by a few shots away off in the distances.*

NURSE G        (*whisper*) who are you, and what do you want here? (*There is no answer. NURSE G waits a moment then creeps a little nearer*) You have been wounded?

*Again there is no reply. She works her way down and kneeling by him lights one match which is caught by a SPOT AMBER from O.P. perch. Hurriedly she puts her revolver down and lights the candle again hiding it with her hand, looking at the window.*

NURSE G        (*frantic whisper*) The lights! They must not see them from the road!

*She looks around the room for something to hide or cover the bare window but there is nothing. With a sudden inspiration, she undoes her print nurse's dress and climbs up completely screening the window; then hurriedly comes back to him; taking water from the table as she passes, and a small flask obviously containing spirits. She lifts his head and forces it through his lips, watching him in silence a second or two. After a moment he opens his eyes, gazes round vaguely a moment, then turns them upon her; he tries to rise.*

NURSE G        You must not move! You are hurt - badly

BERON           It (*weakly*) it, is nothing, Madame.

NURSE G        You are a Belgian soldier.

BERON           (*simply*) The only one left, Madame - of two thousand, two thousand of the bravest and the best in Belgium.

NURSE G *(in horror)* All gone!

BERON All, Madame. They fought to the last then - *(with a break)* - one must die sometime. It is better to die with one's King, and for one's country than in any other way. So!

NURSE G You have been with the King to-day?

BERON *(Proudly)*. Yes Madame. That will be something good to be remembered of me - whatever there may be bad. I was with the King to-day - and I played my share! You are a nurse of the English - so?

NURSE G Yes. You must not talk too much, I will do what I can.

BERON You nurses, Madame, are like your English soldier. Brave and strong. - and kind *(in a quaint foreign accent)* eet ees a long way to tip-tiperai. So! Eh! Bon Deiu!

NURSE G You must keep very still *(reaching for her scissors)* I am going to cut your shirt away from you. I shall hurt you a little perhaps. Not more than I can help.

BERON *(with a little gesture)* Pain, Madame, is a thing that all of us must bear. It is war Madame, what is pain? - when one fights for one's country - one's King? *(feebly he gives the left-handed salute when he mentions the King)*

NURSE G *(cutting busily away)* You are very fond of your King?

BERON *(quite simply)* Fond, madam; fond! We would die for him; because he is a man: he would die for us - if we would let him - many times in a day he has to be dragged back. It is not wise to lose a great king. Madame; a great King is a great man. We -

*He gives a sharp cry - as she quickly tears from his shoulder (his right shoulder) - the shirt- leaving him semi-bare - his body is a mass of cuts - and across the right shoulder and down his breast, one fearful cut, which, when he clutches it, the blood is running still. He sinks back; his head upon her shoulder)*

NURSE G *(quietly)*. You must be very brave for a moment or two. I will be as quick as I can.

BERON            There are others, Madam, who have suffered more to-day (*with a little gesture*  
- *and a laugh*) it is nothing, Madame, nothing! A little scratch, no more!

NURSE            (*dragging a chair along*) Can you rest on this a moment - there are things I  
want (*lifting him*)

BERON            I will try

*He lifts to get an elbow on the chair - there is a quiet moan from him - she  
helps him - he rests with his left arm upon the chair.*

NURSE G        You can stay there - a moment?

BERON            Oh yes (*with a smile*) why not?

*She goes to the table and busies herself pouring from one little phial and  
another; instantly her back is turned, his face distorts into agony, and it is  
evident he is only controlling himself by the greatest effort. His hands clench,  
and his head drops down on to his shoulder, his nails clawing into the floor.  
NURSE G suddenly notices him - and runs to him, shaking him up.*

NURSE G        You mustn't give way - you mustn't - you hear! I, I'll do my best.

BERON            (*lifting a drawn and haggard face*) You are very kind Madame. I am grateful,  
but after eighty hours in the trenches - one - one gets a little tired!

NURSE G        You must talk to me - all the time - while I get things to wash your wounds .  
You hear me?

BERON            Oui madame.

NURSE G        Tell me of today - but quietly. How did you get that fearly slash? A saber cut?

BERON            Oui, Madame. A lieutenant of Uhlans! He rose at me (*with a little cough*) I had  
seen him before - when my old mother was shot - at Termonde - and Rosalie -  
(*he breaks off with a sudden startling ferocity*) oh I knew him! Bon dieu! I  
knew him! (*he breaks into a wild laugh*)

NURSE G        Ssh! You must not do that! You will start to bleed again - beside *they* - the  
Germans are upon the road - that was why my lights were out. I am here on

duty alone!

BERON Alone! (*fiercely*) go, Madame, go!, nom de Dieu go! It does not matter for me - I have not far to run, I know it! But you!

NURSE G I can die, my friend, if needs be, as well as any other.

BERON (*with an intensity that is vibrant*) Die? Yes Madame, die because you are a brave woman, but there are other things than death, Madame, other, and worse. They would have no mercy for you; you (*with a wave of his hand*) you would be glad to die, when - when they (*he breaks off*) you see, I remember Rosalie!

NURSE G (*bringing her things down, kneeling by him, and commencing to wash his cuts*) Rosalie! You must tell me of her!

BERON (*after a wince and a moan*) Rosalie, you were saying? Oh yes, I will tell you! So! (*he lifts himself speaking eagerly*) Rosalie was just - all my world - that is all! A little dainty thing - ah! (*kissing his fingers lightly*) just as a butterfly that flutters in the sun. Only eighteenth she was, when the Bosches came to Termonde (*starting up with made ferocity*) may the -

NURSE G (*holding him sternly*) You must not - you hear me (*peremptorily*) you must not!

BERON (*glaring at her fiercely*) Must not(u)! Bon Dieu! Mu- (*he stares at her a moment vaguely; then, penitently as though something came back to him*) I am sorry, Madame, but when I think! When I remember! I -

NURSE G I understand.

BERON (*simply*) It was good of her, Madame; so young and so beautiful, to love - me. I am - (*in a whimsical way - lifting his arm for her to pass a lint roll*) oh, what would you call it? So! -

NURSE G Do you mean a - a peasant?

BERON Non, non; a peasant; he works, he is good - I - I (*with a weary shake of his head*) am no good! I - (*he struggles to remember a word in the English*) Non, I cannot think what it is you call it!

NURSE G (*slowly, humouring him*) you don't mean a vagabond do you?

BERON (*his face lighting up*) Oui! Oui, Madame! A vag-au-lone! So! That is me! Work! Oh, mon grand Dieu! Non! Non! Non! I like it not! Fight! Oh yes! I would fight all the day - and all the night - and I am happy! That is why when

the King - King Albert - calls, I go to him (*again he salutes*) so I did not know till after what had happened.

NURSE G Yes.

Beron (*his voice breaking*) This officer saw her - that is all! They found her dead, face down in the little stream by Termonde, the next morning - and- and that is all

NURSE G (*in horror*) they murdered her!

BERON Non, Madame. When they had done with her - he and his friends - she thought that better than to live. That is all.

NURSE G And the officer

BERON (*starting up*) To-day I see him! - he it was that gave me this (*touching his breast*). A comrade by me said 'Raoul, that is he'. He slashed at me as he rode by; for a moment I was stunned but I caught at his leathers, and clung on! He tried to plunge his horse on me. I - that have lived my life amongst horses - and know them (*he laughs viciously*) I dragged him down, and then we fought - have you ever seen fear look out of a coward's eyes, Madame? You could have seen it to-day (*working it up*) and as I choked him with these hands (*showing them*) I told him why (*with a shrug*) it was something done - not much - still, something.

NURSE G And this officer

BERON He, Madame (*speaking with little viciousness*) He is in hell I hope. And when I join him there - there will be another fight - I hope.

NURSE G It was a bitter fight to-day, I mean, with them.

BERON They wanted something - and fought like devils for it; well, two can fight like devils - and they did not get what they fought for. Two things they fought for - that they did not get. One - the King

NURSE G (*excitedly*) Yes - he escaped.

BERON Escaped! (*in his whimsical way*) yes, Madame, if you can call it 'escaped'; when he is dragged back from them thrown like a clod into a motor car and held down by many hands, fighting like a madman to get back to his men, and stand to the last (*with a tired shrug*) if you call that to escape - why then - he escaped! So!

NURSE G He is a great King!

BERON (*saluting*) he is a great King, Madame, - as you say.

NURSE G And the other thing they wanted?

BERON (*savagely*) They wanted, Madame, so I am told - a Standard to take back to show their people that they had broken us - and beaten us - something that could be hung in their great hall! To be laughed at - jeered at - and spat upon! They did not get it - that is all. They have broken us - but, Bon Dieu, they have not beaten us. Non! Non! Non, they have the flag to spit upon. Bon Dieu! Non! (*he clutches his side firmly*)

NURSE G (*excitedly*) - you mean?

BERON (*in an eager undertone - almost a whisper*) A little man I know well - Jacques Rocke bore it all day - all through the thick of the fight. A little man, Madame, you would be surprised - so (*measuring the height as well as he can*). He comes from Malines - and the King! (*again he salutes*) fought under it. When Jacques fell - it was machine gun fire that took him down - he said to me 'Raoul, take you the flag, when they take it from you - you will be dead'. I said 'Jacque, when they take from me the flag - I will be dead!' So (*in his whimsical way*) he, Madame, was a - a - vag-au-lone like me. Well, I am not (u) - and they have not the flag to spit (*he stops suddenly with a 'ssh'*)

NURSE G What is it?

BERON (*straining his ears*) Something - I hear

NURSE G You mean - !

*BERON signals to her to put out the lights - which she does quickly; he drags himself to the window and looks out.*

BERON In case, Madame! Go you quickly. There may be a chance. Do not wait for me, it does not matter.

NURSE G (*stoutly*) No; you are not fit to be left. I'll stay by you.

BERON (*suddenly*) you hear that!

NURSE G The German bugles!

BERON Belgian! It is a rally. They have come to the King!

NURSE You are sure?

BERON Listen

*The bugles are heard miles away - the Belgian rally.*

NURSE G You are sure - you should know!

BERON Sure! Mon Dieu! Sure! (*with a laugh. But obviously growing weaker*) I know it is the only music I understand, Madame. A light - a light. I must find it! They will want it - and me!

NURSE G (*lighting again a match*) You are not fit to go (*lighting a candle. He staggers a little - she goes quickly to him*) You will die!

BERON (*fiercely, tugging at his side*) Bah! To that! I would sooner die with him - my King - than like a dog here. (*Again the bugles are heard*). You hear! The King will be there and he will say (*staggering a little*) 'Where is Raoul Beron, where is he with the colours?' and I shall say 'I am here, Sire, with the colours'. And he will say 'good! Raoul Beron, there are men in Flanders' and I shall salute and say 'Bon Dieu! There is a King in Flanders!'

*He staggers, falls to his knees. She goes to him and tries to lift him. From his side he tears a torn and tattered Belgian flag, which, half laughing, he spreads out before her. It is blood stained, and he quickly holds his side, where it has staunched the blood and kept him alive.*

BERON See - See, Madame, the Flag! It shall wave yet over them all! (*The bugle sounds nearer. Struggling to his feet*) Coming Sire! Coming - I will be there! I, Raoul Beron, with the colours! Fight, Sire! Fight for Flanders! Ha! (*staggering up to door*) There is a King in Flanders. God save -

*With a cry he falls back prone, rolls, with the flag across him - stiffens out - dead.*

*A second's pause*

*The NURSE holding the candle over him, folds his arms across him - closes his eyes.*

NURSE G      *(softly)* And God save that King in Flanders soldier - *(very quietly)* and God be gentle with his man.

*The curtain falls quickly*

*The brabanconne is heard very pp. A moment or two.*