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Author's Note

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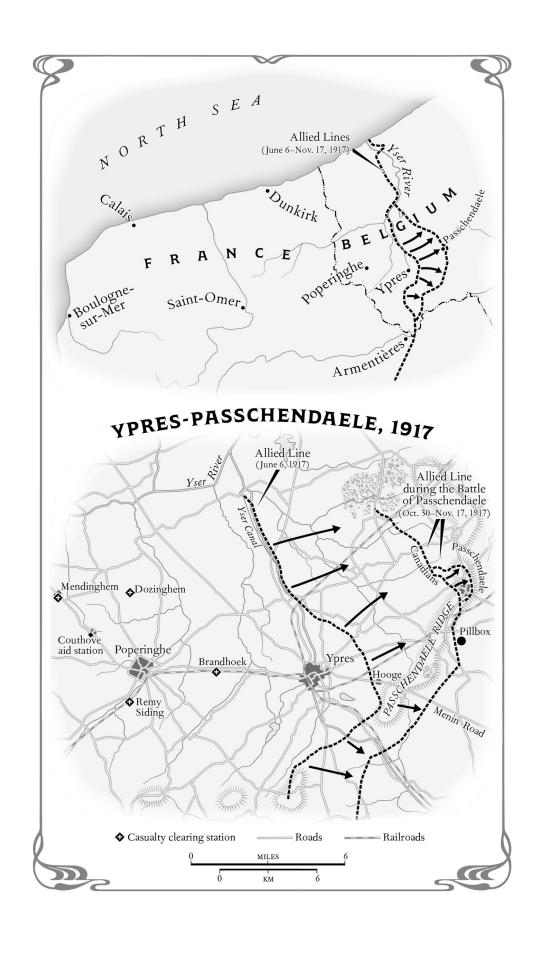
By Katherine Arden

About the Author

Et diabolus incarnatus est Et homo factus est

And the devil was incarnated And was made man

—ARTHUR MACHEN





THE BEAST FROM THE SEA

.

HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA, CANADIAN MARITIMES JANUARY 1918

REDDIE'S CLOTHES CAME TO VEITH Street instead of Blackthorn House, and the telegram that ought to have preceded them didn't reach Laura at all. She wasn't surprised. Nothing had worked properly, not since December.

December 6, to be exact. In the morning. When the *Mont Blanc* had steamed into Halifax Harbour, oil on deck and high explosive in her hold. She'd struck a freighter, they said, and the oil caught fire. Harbor crews were trying to put it out when the flames found the nitroglycerine.

At least that was how rumor had it. "No, I don't doubt it's true," Laura told her patients when they asked, as though she would know. As if, after three years as a combat nurse, she'd learned about high explosive from the things it wrote on people's skin. "Didn't you see the fireball?"

They all had. Her father had been in one of the boats trying to drown the blaze. Halifax afterward looked as if God had raised a giant burning boot and stamped. Fresh graves in Fairview sat snug beside five-year-old headstones from the *Titanic*, and the village of the Mi'kmaq had vanished.

And the post was a disaster. That was why she'd not heard from Freddie. He was her brother, he was a soldier; of course a backlog of his letters was lost in a sack somewhere. She had no time to think of it. She had too much

to do. The first makeshift hospital had been scraped together in a YMCA the day after the explosion. The snow was bucketing down and Halifax was still on fire. Laura had walked past the uncollected dead. Shut their eyes when she could reach them, laid a hand once on a small bare foot. Three years of active service, and she was familiar with the dead.

Familiar too with the sight of an overrun triage station, although it was her first time to be met not with soldiers, but with parents clutching their burnt children. Laura had taken off her coat, washed her hands, reassured the nearest wild-eyed mother. Had a word with the overwhelmed civilian doctor and set about organizing the chaos.

That was a month ago—or was it six weeks? Time had stretched, as it did when wounded poured in during a battle, reduced not to minutes or hours, but to the pulse and the breath of whoever was under her hands. She slept standing up, and told herself that she was too busy to wonder why Freddie didn't write.

"That damned virago," muttered one doctor, half-annoyed, half-admiring. The Barrington hospital was full of willing hands. The Americans, blessedly, had piled a train full of all the gauze, disinfectants, and surgeons in Boston and sent it north. It was January by then, with snowdrifts head-high outside. The gymnasium had been turned into a hospital ward, sensibly laid out, ruthlessly organized, competently staffed. Laura was doing rounds, bent over a bed.

"That harpy," agreed his fellow. "But she's forgotten more about dressings than you'll ever know. She was in the nursing service, you know. Caught a shell over in France somewhere."

It was Belgium, actually.

"Caught a shell? A nurse, really? What did she do? Dress as a man and creep up the line?"

The first doctor didn't take the bait. "No—I heard they shelled the forward hospitals."

A startled pause. Then— "Barbaric," said the second doctor weakly. Laura kept on taking temperatures. Both doctors stopped talking, perhaps contemplating trying to practice medicine under fire.

"Lord," the second doctor said finally. "Think all the girls who went to war will come back like that? Cut up, incorrigible?"

A laugh and a shudder. "Christ, I hope not."

Laura straightened up, smiling, and they both blanched. "Doctor," she said, and felt the subterranean amusement in her watching patients. She was one of them, after all, born by the harbor, before the world caught fire.

The doctors stammered something; she turned away again. *Virago indeed*. A fanged wind was tearing white foam off the bay, and her next patient was a blistered little boy. The child wept as she peeled off his dressings.

"Hush," said Laura. "It'll only hurt for a moment, and if you're crying how can I tell you about the purple horse?"

The little boy scowled at her through his tears. "Horses aren't purple."

"There was one." Laura snipped away stained gauze. "I saw it with my own eyes. In France. Naturally, the horse didn't start out purple. It was white. A beautiful white horse that belonged to a doctor. But the doctor was afraid that someone would see his white horse on a dark night and shoot him. Turn that way. He wanted a horse that would be hard to see at night. So he went to a witch—"

A lurch. "There aren't witches in France!"

"Of course there are. Be *still*. Don't you remember your fairy tales?" Freddie loved them.

"Well, the witches haven't *stayed* in France," the child informed her, in a voice that quivered. "With a war on."

"Maybe witches like the war. They can do what they like with everyone busy fighting. Now, do you want to hear about the purple horse or not? Turn back."

"Yes," said the little boy. He was looking up at her now, wide-eyed.

"All right. Well, the witch gave the doctor a magic spell to make the horse dark. But when the doctor tried it—poof! Purple as a hyacinth."

The child was finally distracted. "Was it a magic horse?" he demanded. "After it turned purple?"

Laura was tying off the bandages. The child's tears had dried. "Yes, of course. It could gallop from Paris to Peking in an hour. The doctor went straight to Berlin and pulled the kaiser's nose."

The child smiled at last. "I'd like a magic horse. I'd gallop away and find Elsie."

Elsie was his sister. They'd been walking to school together when the ship blew up. Laura didn't reply, but smoothed the matted, tow-colored hair and got up. Her brother's real name was Wilfred, but hardly anyone remembered. He'd been Freddie from infancy. He was serving overseas.

He still hadn't written back.

"Purple horse?" inquired the doctor-in-charge, passing. Unlike his civilian colleagues, he'd been behind the lines of the Somme in '16. He and Laura understood each other. They walked off together down the aisle between beds.

"Yes," said Laura, smiling. "It was early days. Some fool with the RAMC, straight from England. He was assigned the horse, white as you please, got windup about snipers. Tried aniline dye, the poor beast wound up violet."

The doctor laughed. Laura shook her head and consulted her endless mental checklist. But before she could set off, the three-month-old gash in her leg betrayed her. A cramp buckled her knee, and the doctor caught her by the elbow. Her leg was the reason she was in Halifax, discharged from the medical corps. A bit of shell casing, deep in the muscle. They'd got it out, but almost taken the limb with it. She'd been evacuated on a hospital train.

"Damn," she said.

"All right, Iven?" said the doctor.

"Just a cramp," said Laura, trying to shake it loose.

The doctor eyed her. "Iven, you're a wretched color. When did you come on shift?"

"Flattery, Doctor?" she said. "I'm cultivating a modish pallor." She didn't quite remember.

He looked her over, shook his head. "Go home. Or you'll be in bed with pneumonia. We can manage for twelve hours. Unless you *want* to go sprawling while holding syringes?"

"I haven't gone sprawling yet," she said. "And I still have dressings to ___"

She could browbeat most of the staff, but not this one. "I'll do it. You are not the only person in Halifax who can dress burns, Sister."

She met his adamant eye, then gave in, threw him a mock salute, and went to take off her apron.

"And eat something!" the doctor called to her retreating back.

. . .

The wind struck her in the teeth when she went outside, dried her chapped lips. She pulled her cap closer round her ears. Clouds massed, lividly purple, over the water. She longed to go straight home and drink something hot. But she'd got off early. There was time to go to Veith Street. She hadn't been there since the explosion.

The wind rippled her skirt, made her nose ache. The task would not improve with keeping. She set off, limping. To her right, the Atlantic heaved under a field gray sky. To her left, the city sloped gently upward, blackened and torn by fire.

Laura Iven was sharp-faced and amber-eyed, her jaw angled, her mouth sweet, her glance satirical, a little sad. She wore a pale blue Red Cross uniform under a shabby wool coat. A knit cap, defiantly scarlet, hid tawny hair chopped short. She walked with the ghost of a brisk, supple stride, marred by the new limp.

The wind cried in broken steeples and sent eddies of blackened snow swirling round her boots. Boats in the icy harbor snubbed their mooring lines; no ship could dock at the burnt piers. The cold crept in off the water, reached dank fingers under her cap and down the collar of her coat. A lorry backfired from the opposite curb.

For a moment, she was back in Flanders. She jolted instinctively into the cover of a charred wall. One foot slid on the snow; her bad leg couldn't steady her. Only the wall saved her from going facedown. She got her balance, swearing colorfully, if silently, in the cant of soldiers from five nations.

The lorry rumbled past, puffing petrol. No explosion could keep Halifax down for long. The city lay at the world's crossroads. She'd never seen it silenced, except that one day. Perhaps her mother, who believed in prophecies, would have found a quotation for that howling quiet that came after the flash, and the rippling flat-topped cloud. She'd have whispered the Dies Irae maybe—*Day of Wrath*—even though Laura's parents were not so much Catholic as strange.

But she couldn't ask her parents. Her father had been on the water when the *Mont Blanc* exploded. Her mother had been at home, watching the ship burn from a front window. When it detonated, all the glass flew inward.

Laura kept walking. A flaw in the wind brought her a voice from the bay as though it spoke into her ear: *Come on, you fucking bastard*. She glanced out into the fairway, saw a tug fending off a freighter, everyone shouting. She kept on. Imagined sitting down to supper. A chicken, maybe, or buttered potatoes. Tried to conjure it clearly, but it slipped away. The war had fractured her concentration.

. .

Their old neighborhood was called Richmond, and it teemed with industry, with kindness and goodwill. The whole region had answered Halifax's distress, had sent carpenters and seasoned wood, new furniture and canned goods. Undertakers.

Laura passed neighbors rebuilding. They called to her: questions about wounded relatives, snatches of news. She called back, answering, commiserating. Stopped once to look at a boil on the crown of a balding head. Promised to lance it when she had a moment. She had a surprising amount of experience with civilians. Plenty of Belgians, lacking alternatives

near the fighting, came to army nurses for medical care. Laura didn't think there had ever been a war where the army delivered so many babies.

She kept walking, avoiding snowdrifts and shattered glass. Thought about Belgian babies. One or two small girls called Laure numbered among the children she'd eased into the world. Those were pleasant memories. She was concentrating so hard on them that she walked past the house before she recognized the place. But her feet stopped before her mind knew.

Memory supplied a small house, a little shabby. White clapboards, roughened with salt, a pitched roof. Her own upper window, looking out over the dockyard to the Narrows beyond. The path out the front door, lined with seashells, her mother's vegetable garden straggling up with the clover, fighting its way through the sandy soil.

But then she blinked and it was gone.

The stove was still there, half-melted, where the kitchen had been. Here were the remains of the parlor, a fireplace poker thrusting up from the ash. She pulled the poker free, jabbed it here and there. She didn't know what she ought to be looking for. Her mother's brooch? Silver spoons? The ash was layered with snow, new and old. Memory, which she'd spent the last six weeks outrunning, circled close; for a moment, her head was full of acrid smoke and falling sparks, herself stumbling through it, blood on her skirt, her hands, pooling on the floor of her parents' bedroom, her voice rigidly controlled, calling *Stay with me, come on,* glass in her fingers, under her knees, in her mother's eyes...

Laura shook the image away.

"Laura?" called a voice from the street behind.

She nearly lost her footing in the ashy snow. Her first wild thought was that it was her father at last, staggering bluish out of the harbor. But, she reminded herself, she didn't believe in ghosts.

"Miss Iven," corrected the voice. Then, more tentative, "Laura? You there?"

She turned. A man she knew stood in the fire-scarred street. "They said you'd come past," he said.

"As you see, Wendell," she called, hearing her own voice thin but perfectly steady. "How are you, sir? Delivering to Veith Street again?"

Wendell looked relieved to see her. "A bit, but I've been keeping a lookout for you in particular. A box came for your par—" He hesitated. "For you."

"That's very kind. How is Billy?" She crossed the snowy ground, brushing frozen ash and snow from her skirt. Billy was his son. Laura had pulled him through three nights of fever. He'd been walking to school too.

"He's all right. Fat as a dormouse now. Schoolchildren in Kansas collected pennies, sent up boxes of candy."

The ash on her fingers had left streaks on her blue dress. She thought, with distant irritation, that she must launder it. "What is it, Wendell?"

A lorry was parked in the street with a wooden crate in the back of it. He indicated the box. "This. Kept it for you. Wanted to do you a good turn." He hesitated. "It's from Flanders."

A chill skated across Laura's skin. She told herself it was the bitter wind off the water. "Thanks awfully. A bit bulky, isn't it? Any chance of a lift? I'm staying with the Parkeys, you know. In Fairview."

The Parkeys had hired Laura as a nurse-companion only a few days before the explosion. She'd been in their house, safely beyond the harbor, when the ship blew up. They'd waited up for her, when she'd come back late that night with glass embedded in her hands, blood drying on her clothes, and nowhere else to go. They'd fussed and bandaged and laundered. Offered her a room to live in.

Wendell said, "Of course I'll drive you, Miss Iven. You look like you could use a bite and a sleep, if you don't mind my saying so. The old ladies treating you all right?"

"Famously. They bake me pies, and I amuse them with ditties and bad words I picked up in Europe."

Wendell grinned. "Those Frenchmen swear a blue streak, I hear."

"Everyone does when you're patching them up. Stings, you know."

Wendell offered her a hand up into the lorry. Laura took it. She didn't look back at the ash heap. Perhaps thieves would come in the night and

sieve the ruins. Let them. But though she stared straight ahead as they drove away, gooseflesh still rose, as though her mother were staring back, blindly accusing, out of the vanished upper window.