

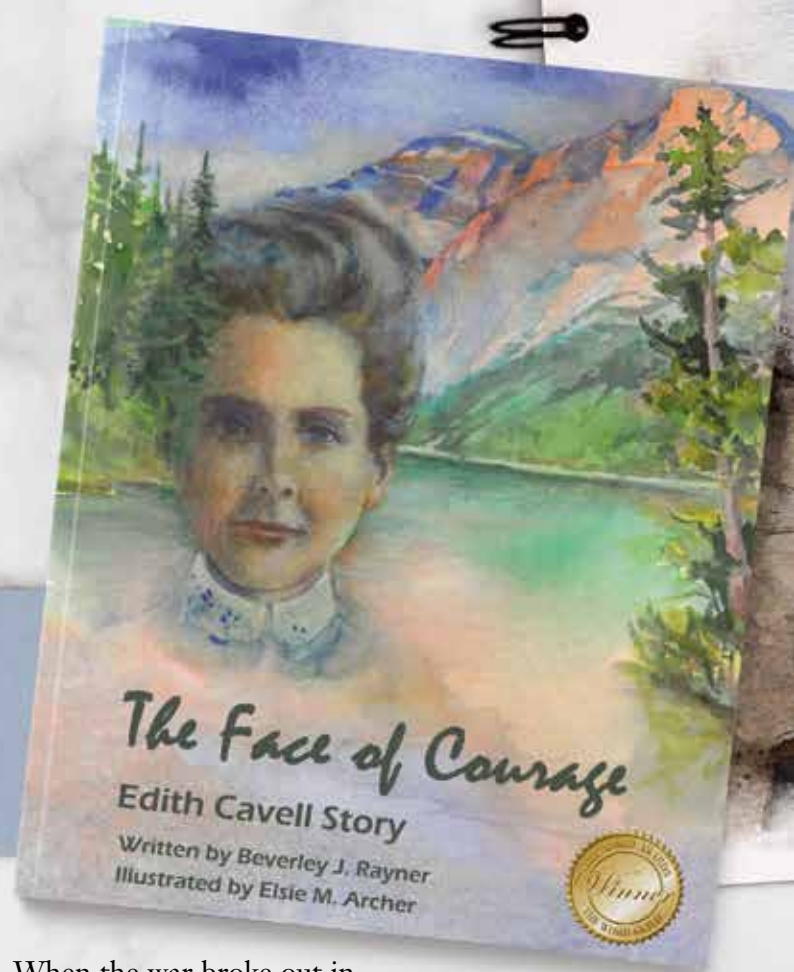
The Face of Courage

The Inspiration Behind the Storybook

By Alexandra Chelse

“Someday, somehow, I am going to do something useful, something for people. They are, most of them, so helpless, so hurt and so unhappy.”

– Edith Cavell (1865-1915)



The ministry's recently published children's storybook, *The Face of Courage*, intricately weaves together the lives of modern-day fictional characters with a powerful historical biography – one that inspires young readers through its true-life testimonial of Godly faith and uncompromising sacrifice.

The story unfolds with two school-aged children and their grandmother embarking on a travel adventure that takes them across the vast Atlantic to Norfolk county in England. There they tour several fascinating historical sites, all located in a picturesque setting that evokes fond memories for award-winning author and children's library facilitator Beverley Rayner. In fact, some of the author's earliest childhood recollections of England include the times she toured a majestic medieval castle in the historic city of Norwich. This old English city in Norfolk county not only serves as home to the grand fortification, it also happens to be the birthplace of her father.

Featured at the heart of this poignant children's story is Edith Cavell, a British nurse who served during World War I. Though Beverley was quite young when she first heard Edith's story, it left a lasting impression. "I was a young girl when I first stood before Edith's solitary grave," she thoughtfully recalls. "In that moment, I pondered on the life of one who was so daring and brave; and yet just a simple village girl from Norfolk county with a passion for serving God and helping others."

When the war broke out in 1914, Edith felt the need to use her medical training to serve others in a much more meaningful way. Compelled by her Christian faith, she willingly tended to wounded soldiers who represented all sides of the great war. What started as a heartfelt decision soon led to her conscious and compassionate service to hundreds of British, French, German and Belgian soldiers.

As a result of her involvement in helping allied soldiers safely escape from Brussels, Belgium, Edith was accused of treason, arrested by opposing soldiers, and then executed. Today, the esteemed heroine is remembered by many all over the world for her unwavering courage, relentless faith in God, and the compassion she expressed towards His beloved humanity. In fact, located here on Canadian soil is a natural grand monument – a mountain named in her honour – which can be found within Alberta's famous Jasper National Park.

For Beverley, who works as a facilitator in school libraries, children seemed a likely audience for this empowering narrative. However, choosing such a specific age-appropriate group also meant ensuring the story was properly presented. Beverley's understanding and sensitivity to the needs of young readers largely influenced her decision to weave telling details they can identify with into the story, such as Edith's love for dogs. This decision also led to her use of the



endearing grandmother figure, “Nana,” as the suitable character to narrate the story.

The editorial processes behind *The Face of Courage* were carefully orchestrated in order to convey a story that, in the end, would inspire hope and not despair for her young and impressionable readers. “The focus at the end of the story is not on Edith’s death but on her remarkable life,” Beverley relates. “Such accounts can be a great inspiration for young readers who are deeply impacted by true stories, and they can often lead children to make profound decisions to follow Christ.”

When it came to the writing of Edith’s story, immersion in much prayer, research and reflection became a necessary component of Beverley’s creative journey. Though beyond just the telling of the historical character’s testimony was the author’s own personal connection with it.

In 2015, Beverley’s need to do further research took her back to England where she was afforded the opportunity of visiting Edith’s village in Swardeston, Norfolk county. By this point, she had already written the story. Even still, her trip to Norfolk held special meaning. Beverley’s sentimental ties with the area she had known and loved for so many years had not only flourished over time but also strengthened her bond with the brave and kind-hearted protagonist of the story.

Of equal importance to the telling of this narrative were the illustrative images that would eventually be

artistically created to coincide with the text – bringing the descriptive words to life. Appointed for this elaborate task was talented artist, author and art instructor Elsie Archer (formerly a nurse herself) whose own special connection to Edith stemmed foremost from a shared love of nursing duty.

When the opportunity was presented to illustrate Edith’s story, Elsie prayerfully took it on as yet another one of the countless ways in which she could demonstrate the living faith that existed in her own life. “When I was asked to do the illustrations for *The Face of Courage*, I had already done the artwork of three other children’s storybooks,” she explains. “Through this, I had gained some confidence, but was also aware of the time commitment. Yet, as I read Beverley’s manuscript and prayed about it, I realized that this was another opportunity to put my ‘faith into action.’ Every day, I entered my studio with many prayers for inspiration.”

With Beverley’s gift of writing for young audiences and Elsie’s keen passion for the creative arts, nothing less than the best could be expected from the fusion of such faith-filled creativity. Together, Beverley and Elsie united in an extraordinary way to bring forth the central theme of ultimate victory over tragedy, foreshadowed by God’s overpowering love for all of humanity. In June of this year, the wonderfully written storybook was awarded first place by The Word Guild¹ in each of the three categories for which it

Continued on page 10...

...continued from page 9

was nominated: children's "fiction" and "non-fiction," as well as "specialty books" (a classification representative of uniquely published works written for either children or adults).

Another crucial relationship Beverley came to cherish during the making of this book was that of its publishing team at The Voice of the Martyrs Canada (VOMC). With a heart for the persecuted church, and a most fitting example of such courage displayed in the character of Edith Cavell, the inception of this divinely orchestrated connection couldn't have taken place at a better time.

Doug McKenzie, Chief Executive Officer Emeritus of VOMC, says the book first appealed to the team because of its impressive storyline. Indeed, the empowering message of hope and strength, which forms the book's basis, is something that millions of Christians everywhere draw from daily and one that further drives the vision behind VOMC. "The storybook's child-like innocence and underlying focus on 'victory versus victim' virtues are powerfully modelled by the principle character and compelling storylines," he states. "We see our mandate echoed in the Edith Cavell story."

The ministry's newly appointed Chief Executive Officer, Floyd Brobbel (formerly VOMC's Vice-President of International Ministry and Operations), reiterates this sentiment by further expounding on how truly inspiring it is to read of Edith's conviction and steadfastness to truth: "Edith's resolve to stay and continue to minister, despite the threats, is not so much a testament to her courage but to the trust and assurance that she had in her Lord."

The author's own first-hand witness to true Godly bravery and commitment to ministry service was revealed through the life of her mother, whose bold faith was demonstrated by sending Scripture portions into Russia behind the Iron Curtain – a non-physical boundary first enacted in Europe during 1945, shortly after World War II. As Beverley now reflects, witnessing her mother's sacrifices for those who didn't have easy access to the Word of God taught her to be grateful for the freedoms we've been granted in this part of the world. "I was acutely aware of the privi-



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leges that we have to serve God so freely in contrast to the struggles of others," she adds.

According to Floyd Brobbel, such deeply rooted devotion to God as portrayed in *The Face of Courage* could be enough to inspire a generation of people today. "If all those who read this book come away with that same desire and motivation to serve God within their spheres of influence, regardless of the cost – all the while trusting Him with the results – then this book has accomplished its intended purpose."

Ultimately, it is this pursuit of God's greater will, as revealed through Edith's dedicated life, that continues to inspire Beverley to serve Him in whatever capacity possible. "When we as believers seek to follow His leading – whether in Canada, or in other countries around the world – there's a constant reminder that His purposes will be fulfilled in us. This is my sole motivation, and courage grows from this truth."

Beverley concludes with the reassurance that no matter what we may be personally facing, we can rest in the knowledge that all our life-experiences are filtered through our compassionate Lord's nail-scarred hands. As He knows the reason, purpose and direction, we are called to trust Him and remain faithful: "Edith's testimony reminds each of us that we are not to strive for perfection but rather an unwavering commitment to put Christ first in the daily decisions of our lives." 🌟

Endnote:

¹ The Word Guild is a national association representing Canadian Christian writers, authors, editors and publishers.