



« *The Stirrups* »  
*A Christmas Tale*

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Thanks to Miss Julie Browaeyns for reading and correcting.



## THE STIRRUPS, A CHRISTMAS TALE



An icy breeze is blowing across the Hauts de France countryside, and with good reason : it's Christmas Eve. In the middle of this wintry landscape, on the departmental road 118, between the villages of Iwuy and Rieux en Cambrésis, you can see an old isolated farmhouse that has been converted into a home. Opposite is a small cemetery with impressive wind turbines watching over it far away.

Niagara is the name chosen for this place of eternal rest, dedicated to 201 veterans of the First World War. There are 170 Canadians, 26 British, 1 Irish and 4 unidentified soldiers of Canadian origin. They all lost their lives between 10 and 17 October 1918. The majority died liberating Iwuy from the German occupiers on 10 and 11 October 1918.

The Niagara River is only 58 km long and forms a natural border between the United States and Canada. It is most famous for its world-wide known waterfalls. When the architect who built the cemetery named the site after it, he undoubtedly took into account the fact that the Erclin River, 34 km long, flowed opposite.

On the evening of 24 December, as every year in Iwuy, we pay tribute to those who died for our freedom. From 4.30 pm onwards, at the invitation of the local historical association "Iwuy'stoire", a few dozen participants lay a candle in front of each stele. The idea is to remind everyone, especially the youngest, of the tragedies that took place there 105 years ago. The aim is to think about how we can avoid repeating the mistakes of the past... Unfortunately, current events show that we have no memory. The smokescreen that certain "guides" shine with the promise of a better future often lead crowds, galvanised by fine speeches, in the wrong direction. Power and personal enrichment are often the only real motivations of these "leaders" who trigger conflicts. And so the story goes, while the powerful verbally berate each other from their gilded palaces, the humble die on the battlefield. Claiming to have a divine power, or taking themselves for one, they drive their people to despair and misery through narcissism.

Let's go back to Christmas Eve, a festival of hope and peace for humanity, believers and non-believers alike...

The participants arrive at the site and light the candles in red lanterns. Each person then goes to the grave of their choice to place the candle there, as a symbol of memory, hope and the continuation of life. The eldest accompanied their children and grandchildren. Among them were Paul, aged 8, and his little sister Eva, aged 6. They come forward, accompanied by their father, with all the seriousness required to carry out this symbolic gesture. The questions come thick and fast: Why did they come here to die? Where is Canada? Why didn't the French liberate the village? Why so many dead? Why the war? The father tries to explain: "You see, when you're a child you think that adults are responsible and reasonable people, but while there are many who have chosen the path of wisdom, there are others who think differently. There are good people on one side and bad people on the other, but it's more complicated than



that... Sometimes there are bad people on the good side and good people on the bad side. "When people clash on a battlefield, there are fathers on both sides who are fighting to preserve their country, the lives of their loved ones, their wives and children. They don't necessarily want to kill each other so that there are widows and orphans... but they have to defend themselves".

But then," says Eva, "why all this? It would be easier not to fight and just make peace.

"It's too complicated," replies the father, who has run out of arguments, "There are too many people who want to appropriate power and wealth. Unfortunately, it's those with power who decide for the soldiers fighting on the battlefields, and they're not necessarily the best ones."

"You see, Paul and Eva, in 1918 there were hundreds of dead and thousands of wounded around where we are now. There were Canadians and British who fought the Germans, some on foot, some on horseback and some in military vehicles.

Paul is surprised: "So horses died too? »

"Yes, about 70, a schoolteacher called George Hambley<sup>2</sup> even wrote about the battle in his diary, his horse was killed near the Erclin, his name was Nix".

"Where are the German graves? And the horses'?" asked Eva.

"I don't know, children, it's late and we have to get back home. Good children don't ask questions at this time of day, Father Christmas will get impatient...". The children, disappointed by this answer, regretfully left. But they wouldn't miss the meeting at the foot of the tree for the world. There are so many surprises waiting for them, and then there are all the goodies that Mum has cooked.

Slowly, daylight fades over the little cemetery, which has regained its calm. Soon twilight invades the plain, and from the road we can see the red halo of the candles reflected on the white headstones.

Back home, Paul and Eva took part in the family Christmas party and, after a busy day, they finally fell asleep after staying up for a long time hoping to catch a glimpse of Father Christmas. Their parents quickly put them to bed, so much for the presents tomorrow.

And the children began to dream of all the fantastic things that would happen that night.



Meanwhile, strange things are happening in Niagara, and Father Christmas is having problems with his sleigh. One of his reindeer, the impetuous Tornado, has hit one of the wind turbines overlooking the hill and been injured. Immediately, Santa took advantage of the red lighting that illuminated the cemetery to land his sleigh safely.

"Oh, oh, oh, my good Tornado, I'm going to need a replacement reindeer to continue my rounds, but how am I going to do that ?

Then 201 voices were heard in unison, the voices of the soldiers who were resting in peace just a few minutes ago :

"Why not use one of the Canadian army horses, old Nix, who fell here 105 years ago ? »

"But how can you bring back to life an animal that died so long ago and would be so old today? Would he be able to replace the brave Tornado and, improbably, would he be able to fly? Then Lieutenant Wallace Algie, occupant of grave no. 7, row C, decorated with the highest military distinction in the British Empire, intervened.

He himself lost his life here on 11 October 1918 after capturing three German machine-gun posts with only 9 men .

« You are a character that adults no longer believe in, but for children you really do exist. Tonight, the divine powers have brought us all back to life, even though we've been dead for over a century. Let's call Nix and his rider! We need to live in hope and bring a message of peace to all children. » They are the future of humanity, and Father Christmas must finish his rounds. It's by working together that we can achieve great things.



*George and Nix*

Once again, from all the steles on which the red light is reflected, everyone calls out in one voice to old Nix and his rider George Hambley. And the most incredible thing happened. Suddenly, a young, dashing rider appeared on his mount, the whole thing floating brightly in a sky studded with stars - it was an unreal sight, they had come from nowhere. German soldiers suddenly appeared, totally unarmed, forming a hedge of honour and applauding. They were the adversaries of yesteryear who had returned for a moment to salute the Christmas miracle.

Father Christmas can't believe it, he's seen some fantastic things in his career, but this time it's gone too far. He soon had a word with George and asked him to harness his horse instead of the Tornado. With dexterity, George, who has not lost his touch, carries it out, everyone showing the best of wills, both Tornado and Nix, who seem to speak the same language.

Meanwhile, the other reindeer were getting impatient : Rudolph with his red nose was leading the way, then came Dancer, and now Nix who was replacing the unfortunate Tornado who was resting at the back, then came Fury, Dashing, Comet, Cupid and finally Thunder who closed the march. George is seated at the front, next to Father Christmas. He would never have abandoned his faithful Nix, especially for such a fantastic trip.



*G. William Morrison*

Before leaving the premises, William Morrison grave 33, row D, the youngest tenant of the premises expressed his request to Father Christmas: "Could you please speak to the children who have come here to place a candle on my grave? Their names are Paul and Eva, and I know you don't have much time, but they were so curious and concerned about what they saw here.

And Santa replied : "I'll take as much time as I need to talk to these children, and I'll speak to them on your behalf. I'm taking George with me, he'll be an excellent ambassador. We have to leave now, it's going to be a short night and there's still a lot of work to do. Thank you all for this magical moment, thanks to you I can finish my tour."

And so the crew resumed their flight, waving to the men of the Niagara and the Germans who were admiring this marvellous carriage as it drove away. Slowly, the lights dimmed, everyone took their place under their stele and the place returned to its usual serenity. The German soldiers vanish into thin air, and there is now no evidence of what has just happened.

And George took the opportunity to ask his new red-clad friend a few questions :

"Tell me Santa, how do you keep your clothes so clean after all that time in the fireplaces, and how do you manage to be everywhere at the same time?"



"Oh, oh, oh!!! after all these years technology has changed, you don't know my dear George the new ways of heating, electricity and gas for example, which have replaced wood and coal. Chimneys have become far too small, and I've had to learn to go through walls, which means I can keep my clothes spotless today. On the other hand, the population has increased so much since you left this world

that I now have to rely on goblins to cover the whole earth in a single night. Fortunately I have the power to stop time when I need to give my reindeer a bit of rest, water and food, and my elves have that power too. However, I have to tell you in confidence that this is the first Christmas Eve that I've spent in the company of a Canadian horseman who has returned from beyond the grave.

And while we're talking, the carriage arrives at Paul and Eva's house.

Santa loaded his sack with a few presents for the children and crossed the wall into the small living room. George had no trouble following him : he was a spirit who had returned to this world for a few hours to fulfil a divine mission. As a spirit, he has the power to walk through walls, just like his new friend. George has taken a small box with him to give to the children. We might wonder how the boxes and gifts manage to get through the wall, just like the messengers who carry them. It's simple : the power of the "wall passers" is happily transmitted to the objects that accompany them. The living room where the Christmas tree stands is all lit up, and Father Christmas has promised William Morrison that he will speak to Paul and Eva. In the blink of an eye, he goes upstairs to their bedroom, where they are fast asleep. He gently wakes them up, and Paul and Eva can't believe their eyes :

"Can you come downstairs", Santa asks them, "I have a guest who has a message for you".

When they arrived at the foot of the tree, the two children saw the presents that had been laid out, but what intrigued them was the uniformed rider standing in front of them with a parcel in his hand. Eva was the first to speak, addressing Father Christmas: "I've never heard of a horseman accompanying you on your Christmas rounds?"

"You see," replies Santa, "tonight is a bit different. I've run into a bit of trouble on my tour, and I've enlisted the help of Niagara's soldiers. We've come on behalf of Private William Morrison. You and your brother laid a candle at his grave last night and you had a lot of questions. He heard them and asked me to answer."



"But I recognise you!!!" said Paul, addressing the rider, "you are George, George Hambley, your photo is on the monument in the square!!! and outside, among the reindeer is your horse, it's Nix!!!! How is that possible?"

"It's me, little Paul, it's Christmas and I've been given the job of helping Father Christmas finish his round. I'd like to take this opportunity to give you and your little sister a present.

"What's this?" the children asked in unison.

"These are the stirrups I wore when I rode my horse Nix on 10 October 1918 on the battlefield of Iwuy. Do you know what stirrups are?"

"Not really," replied the children.

"It's simply a metal ring on either side of the horse's saddle. A stirrup is used to get on the saddle. When you're on the horse's back, the two stirrups are used to rest your feet and keep your balance while the horse moves.

The children have a good grasp of how it works, but they find it hard to understand why George is giving them this present.

"I've only got one pair of stirrups to give you, so you must never argue when you need them, you must share them."

And Paul and Eva protested in unison: "But why just one pair for the two of us and not one for each of us, it's not fair, why give one of us the advantage and not the other?"

Then Santa and George spoke with one voice :

"This story of the stirrups is an image to help you understand how it is possible to avoid the conflicts that lead to war. The secret is that you have to agree to share things if you want to be equal in the face of life's difficulties. Never keep anything to yourself in order to crush others and hold on to power".

"When you ride a horse, the one without stirrups has trouble balancing on his mount and ends up falling, whereas the one with stirrups moves forward without any problem."

"It's by sharing that you can live in peace. You have to give everyone the same opportunities. Of course, it's always necessary to have a leader. In our story, the leader is George, the one who gives the stirrups. He's a fair leader, he explains the instructions so that there are no problems. The riders are you, Paul and Eva, and you have to agree to take it in turns to use the stirrups. This moral will apply to everything you do for the rest of your lives.

The children listen in amazement. They could never have imagined having this conversation with Father Christmas and George. They understood the meaning of the story perfectly. They came forward, taking care to place their hands together and at the same time on the box containing the stirrups. When they opened it, they realised that they were a little faded, but they were so valuable to them that they considered them a priceless treasure.



*Stirrups*

"We must now leave you children. Take good care of this gift and share this story with your family and friends, and later with your own children. If anyone asks you who gave you this present, tell them it was a gift from Father Christmas and his faithful elf George. Even if the people listening to you smile in disbelief, they will appreciate this Christmas tale and perhaps share it with others. From up here, we'll give you our full support and make sure you're listened to." As if in a dream, but is it really a dream, Paul and Eva see Father Christmas and George off at the door. They thanked him for the gifts and the secret of the stirrups. There's a lot of emotion as they leave, but all good things must come to an end, and the crew takes off for their new destination.

Over there, at Niagara, the luminaries have finished shining. A frosty fog has fallen over the green grass that covers the cemetery as day breaks. At Paul and Eva's house, the parents wake their children to find the presents at the foot of the tree. Paul and Eva smile, they already know.

"Did you sleep well?" mum and dad asked.

"Oh yes," says Paul, "but only after we've seen Father Christmas and talked to him.

And Eva adds, "There was even George with his horse Nix, who replaced one of the reindeer in the sleigh".

And the parents listen to the children recount their dream with an expression of disbelief. They are very touched by the story they have just heard, and proud of their offspring's vivid imagination. They especially appreciate the moral of the story, and wonder where they got all that. Then the little family begins to open the presents, and the parents have not been forgotten, each with their own little parcel.

"Ah! exclaims the father as he opens the box intended for him, "how I wish I could go back to childhood and believe in all those dreams".

Then he lifts the lid and... he can't believe it.

Speaking to his wife, he simply said :

"Darling, that's an excellent idea, but where did you find those faded old stirrups ?

**THE END**

