



A Memory of Amiens*

By Hubert W. Kelley

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I do not keep things—mementos, I mean. I have always believed that everything I ever saw or touched or felt in any way was kept for me—inside. Perhaps that is not true, but it seems to me that I can turn into myself, grope down into the dark pool of forgotten things and recover sensations I thought I had lost. But no matter—

I have kept one thing—a dim, gray photograph of a stone cherub—“L’Ange Pleureur,” it was called, “The Weeping Angel.” I framed it a few years ago and hung it on my wall. Certainly it adds nothing to the beauty of the room, but it gives me a feeling whenever I look at it, a feeling I need not grope for—a poignant sense of loss. I cannot exactly explain it. There is nothing of despair in my feeling about that picture. It is saddening, but it fills me with a strange, formless hope. The walls around me become insubstantial, the easy chair by the fire becomes a stone that I rest upon in the wilderness.

I saw the weeping angel for the last time thirteen years ago—in March, it was, this month. It sat on a shelf of marble in a gloomy recess of the vast and

caverned Cathedral of the Beautiful God in Amiens. I had discovered the little statue there a year before. I had no gods then, so needing one, I chose this forlorn figure of medieval stone. It was just a whim, a passing whim. I laughed about it.

But always when I went to Amiens from the front on a weekend holiday, I walked straightway to the cathedral to see my sad cherub. One of its hands rested on an hour glass, the other upon a skull. Its head was bowed. Oh, time and death! I stood there for a little while in the gloom and went away.

It was just a whim, I say. After my whimsical pilgrimage I walked down the dewy cobblestones of the main street, between tinted facades, looking for my wineshop, the only one that opened at dawn.

Perhaps Amiens is drab to the tourist. But to me, on my occasional weekend leaves from the front that year, it seemed to be the loveliest city on earth. I always left the front at midnight on a boxcar and rode into the station at the first pink of morning, sleepless but happy as a lark.

The mounded dug-outs, the gray shacks and sandbags, the torn brown earth and rusty wire, the foundations of fallen villages, the dreary, muddy soldiers, the smoke and rumble—they were behind me. And here, shining [in] the morning, was a city with colored houses and dewy cobblestones all, a city without a broken stone. People lived there as they lived here, ate in dining rooms, slept in beds, went to school or work, to theater and church. They rode in buses or walked on the boulevard with canes or parasols. Amiens, I repeat was the loveliest city on earth.

A narrow, dark canal wound through the city, passing under ancient arched ridges, eddying under leaded casements, lapping at the feet of little children who sat at a back doorstep, studying the water.

The old woman went clacking down the morning street with her basket of wet flowers; the cab driver dozed in his high seat; the waiter with long mustaches polished the window of the café with a white cloth. And, later the children of Amiens hurried to school, babbling in their foreign tongues. The blacksmith's anvil rang there.

Happy Amiens! When I walked down those cobblestones thirteen years ago, hungry, I caught the fragrance from the flower woman's basket. I sniffed the smell of warm bread as the bakeries opened. I knew my wineshop by the bouquet and the smell of omelets cooking. Marie was there. She was much older than I and probably didn't know me from one visit to another. But Marie was beautiful. She had dark eyes with a silvery luster, an oval, golden face and lovely arms. Her sleeves were always rolled up when she worked, stirring omelets, serving red wine, patting her favorites on the cheek and calling them endearing names.

I had friends in Amiens—old men who liked to talk about America and the wild Indians; old women who insisted on showing letters from their sons at the front; young girls, high school boys, who knew English and would show you where Peter the Hermit was born; where Caesar fought the Ambiani; where Jules Verne wrote; where the best pastry was—everything.

Amiens was beautiful. Its delights were simple, but it was paradise.

The last time I saw Amiens, as I say, was thirteen years ago, this month. It was not the Amiens I had grown to love. It was a foreign city. Horses galloped through the street with limbers banging and careening behind them. Grim columns marched down the boulevards. Overhead the black airplanes droned. Workmen frantically stacked bags of sand against the wall of the cathedral.

As I walked from the station that morning I saw fear upon the faces of men and women. Little children cowered in the folds of their mothers' skirts. Nobody spoke lightly. Nobody laughed. Speech was brief and harsh with consternation. For four years Amiens had escaped. And now the thunder sounded beyond a pall of smoke on the outskirts of the city. I went to see "The Angel." It seemed to me that its recess was darker than ever before. It seemed to me that its beautiful head was bowed lower, that the little hands of stone more tightly clutched the hour glass and the skull, as if to stay time and death. I hurried out. A provost marshal stopped me and ordered me back to the front. All holidays had been cancelled in a sweeping order.

I shall you tell you little more –only this:

Five nights later I lay in a plowed field on the plains near Amiens. My feet were bleeding; I had marched five days through battle, in retreat. The British army was routed; behind us lay corpses and smoking devastation. I lay there in the cold, wet soil, shivering and exhausted. An airplane just had machine-gunned our column in the moonlight. We scattered and fell on our bellies in the field.

But I was not thinking of that. I was looking toward Amiens and the flames that towered there. I was listening to the distant thunder of its crumbling walls. I was listening to little children crying in the night.

Overhead a procession of enemy planes streamed with the roar across the stars. I saw that the endless procession had blotted a long strip of the firmament. I knew that the dark wing of death was sweeping across the city of loveliness.

I thought of the Weeping Angel, the little stone cherub, sitting there in the gloomy recess while the walls fell. One hand was upon the hourglass, the other upon a skull. Oh, time and death!

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