

One Pair of Feet 6 (Monica Dickens)

In the Second World War, Monica is training as a nurse. She's just found out she's to go on Night Duty for the first time.

Episode six

Whenever, in my moments of depression or rebellion, or simply fatigue, I considered giving in my notice, I had always decided to stay until I had to go on Night Duty. I hated the idea of staying up all night from compulsion not choice. One would be completely cut off from the world, out of touch with normality for three weary months.

I was quite willing to give the thing a try, but I didn't see how I should ever keep awake. I went off Herbert Waterlow Ward at two o'clock in the afternoon, supposedly to get some of the sleep that I should miss that night. I had just fallen into a shallow doze when somebody came down the corridor with her voice raised in song. After that, it was the nurses coming over for their teatime cigarette. When the workmen began mending the pipes in the bathroom opposite, I gave up and switched on the light to read. I was just nodding pleasantly over the book when a battering ram struck my door and 'Uff pust sev-vun, Na-a-as!' stabbed me into the horror of reality.

This, I thought, as I got dressed, was the body that I had got to drag round with me all night. Please God, don't let me be on Maternity. And if I am, don't let any babies be born tonight. Hold up the course of nature until daytime; it can't make any difference.

The junior night nurses' breakfast was at eight o'clock and we had to be on the wards at twenty-five past, so that the day nurses could get off. There were nine of us, and we sat at one end of a table, while a maid laid the places for the day nurses' supper. Tea and porridge and bread and margarine did not go down very well at this hour. The Senior Night Sister, known as Fanny Adams, was a raw-boned woman who prowled round the hospital on silent feet, with a venomous fang for a tongue. She came in just as we rammed in the last of the porridge, and we all stood up as if we had sat on drawing pins. She looked us over in silence and ticked off our names. 'Nurse Dickens,' she said sharply, 'you're on Jane English.' I could not help a broad smile of relief at having escaped Maternity, but she wiped it off with, 'I don't know what you're grinning at. You'll find plenty of work to do there. Busiest ward in the hospital at night usually.' Then she gave us a short lecture on blackout carelessness, threatened us all with prison, and thanked the Lord tartly for our tea and porridge.

When I reported for duty, all the ward lights were out, except one or two, green-shrouded, over the beds of the very ill patients and the shaded lamp on the desk. Just behind the desk, in the middle of the ward, a fire was burning low in a tiled stove, but beyond this, the beds were in complete darkness. I knocked into one or two, and fell over a chair, but most of the women were awake anyway.

As the Day Sister gave her report, my mind wandered. It was no use feeling tired now, I told myself, with eleven hours to go, but my whole system insisted that it was time to finish work now, not to start.

'I hope you're listening carefully, Nurse Dickens,' said Sister, looking up. '

This is a methodical ward, as Nurse Maxton will tell you.' It was now that I first sensed the faint antagonism that all Day Sisters have for the night nurses. Wherever possible, the blame for a mishap is pinned on to the night nurses. It is they who have broken that syringe to which no one will confess; they who ate that jelly and stole Sister's ginger biscuits. 'When I come on in the morning,' said Sister Porter, 'I do a complete round of kitchen, sluice, bathroom, specimen room – everything, to make sure you leave everything clean and tidy as the day staff leave it for you. Good night, Nurses.' The long night had begun.

Nurse Maxton, my Senior Night Nurse, told me vaguely what my duties were, but her mind seemed to be elsewhere. When I had given out the hot drinks and helped her rub the backs and heels of immobile patients, I had to do a spot of cleaning and then wash and iron some linen bandages. I was tiptoeing through the ward, dismayed to find that my shoes squeaked, which I had not noticed in the daytime, when a hoarse whisper came from the gloom at the end of the ward.

'Nurse!' Mrs Riscoe was sitting up in bed, two long plaits of dark hair hanging over the shoulders of her white nightgown.

'I say, dear,' she whispered, 'we always has a nice cup of tea round about now, them what's awake.' I was sure this was not official, but I went into the kitchen to put on the kettle.

'And what is Nurse Diggins doing?' No footfall had announced the approach of Sister Adams.

'Oh, nothing, Sister.' I could feel myself blushing. 'I – I was just going to fill up the Sterile Water bottles.'

'You come into the ward while I do my round with Nurse Maxton,' she said.

'Cuffs on, please.'

Sister Adams carried a great torch like a lighthouse, which she flashed on to the patients' faces, waking them up to enquire if they could not sleep. By the time she had gone, more than half the ward was awake and wanting tea.

If it was difficult to learn patients' names and ailments in the daytime, it was impossible at night. I kept coming across a patient who should not be there, by my reckoning, and the five Fractured Femurs, with legs strung up to beams, were as one to me. For all I knew, I might have been giving out tea to Gastric Ulcers, but I couldn't keep asking Maxton, who moved in a brooding world of her own.

'What do I do now?' I asked her, as she was replacing bowls in the sterilizer.

'Oh, I don't care,' she said. 'You'd better come and sit at the desk and get on with the mending, while I write the midnight report.'

She dashed off a few words about the ill patients and said: 'Now for a bit of peace, thank goodness,' and went to fetch her knitting. This knitting – a khaki sweater for someone she called 'my sweetie' – was her passion. She hated to be called away from it and kept dashing back to it at every opportunity throughout the night. Sweetie was in an Anti-Aircraft unit and had fallen for Maxton while having his tonsils out on Secker Ward.

The nurses' Midnight Meal was vegetables cooked in water, and then the water thickened and coloured with browning to look like gravy. Afterwards, we had cold rice pudding. When I got back to the ward it was very cold. The fire had gone out and there was a bleak draught. I went and got my cloak

and leaned against one of the radiators for a while, yawning. Soon I was so sleepy that I had to sit down, and I put my head on my arms on the desk and floated peacefully away. A dig in the ribs sent me jumping to my feet just in time to see Maxton going to meet Night Sister on her early morning round. I stood by the desk swaying and shivering, and when she drew level with me, Sister stopped and flashed her torch on my sleepy face. 'And who is this Nurse with the bad manners? Ah, yes, Nurse Dickens; we shall have to keep an eye on you.' As I wasn't worth wasting her battery on, she clicked off her torch and walked on.

'You soft thing, why didn't you take off your cloak?' asked Maxton when she had gone.

'Good Lord, is that what she meant? I didn't even know I had it on. Maxton, I'm so tired, I think I'm going to die. I'll never last out. Isn't it nearly time to start waking them up?'

'Heavens, no. Not for at least another hour. We're not supposed to start before five, but it's impossible to get done if you wait till then. You just have to look out one of the Night Sisters doesn't catch you.'

I prayed that no patient would call, because apart from being too tired, I was too cold to move. I was numb with despair. I knew now, for certain, that the night would never end. On night duty, you reach the nadir of vitality at about half-past three. Your system is barely ticking over; you think you are alive but you couldn't swear to it. Soon after that, you have to start work and there is so much to do that you have to start at top speed and keep up the pace till eight o'clock, when you go off duty. Maxton and I scuttled about like mad things, my work more domestic and hers more skilled.

Being strange to the ward, I had no system. When it came to breakfast time, the discontented murmurs of the patients swelled to protest. The patients had to provide their own eggs, and in my frenzy I got mixed and gave them out at random, so that rightful egg-owners were cheated.

'I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry,' I almost sobbed as I poured out tea and got mixed up with those I had sugared and those I hadn't and gave a sugared one to a Diabetic. Just as I was making up my mind that they would all complain to Sister, and probably even to Matron, a patient called Mrs Wilson, blessed Mrs Wilson, raised her voice and stood up for me. They gradually came round, and I loved them all instead of wanting to shoot them. One or two who were allowed up even volunteered to help me clear away.

The Day Staff came on at seven, yawning and aloof, and we went on making our side of beds, secure in the superiority of having kept all these people alive while the others were callously asleep. Sister Porter arrived punctually at eight, looking as neat as a doll that doesn't undress. I had forgotten about her inspection and had to dash round trying to create order, but she arrived too soon and said: 'I will not have *my* ward untidied, Nurse, whatever you do on other wards.'

After this I went to ask Maxton if there was anything else I had to do. 'What a night,' I said, 'I'm dead to the world.'

She looked at me in surprise. 'Why, that was one of the easiest nights I've ever had. You wait till we're busy.'

I was too tired to be hungry, but I had to go up to the dining-room and face rabbit stew and ginger pudding, which, at half-past eight in the morning seemed queer eating.

