

One Pair of Feet 7 (Monica Dickens)

Monica's on night duty for the first time.

Episode 7

Towards the end of my Night Duty time, I found I could do with less and less sleep. I was so thoroughly tired – a deep-seated fatigue to which I had grown accustomed. I had forgotten what it was like to feel fresh, and even if I went to bed early these days I could not sleep for long. Once, I went up to London for the day and came back just in time to change into my uniform. I knew it would be a busy night – it always was when I had had no sleep, therefore I was not surprised to see, as I turned the corner, the blaze of light on the ward which indicated that something was up. The day nurses were behind with their work, and Chris Parry, my friend, had arrived before they had settled the ward into darkness and gone wearily off duty.

They had had several operation cases in the late afternoon and evening, and the last one, an old lady of seventy, had come back from the Theatre only just alive. 'She won't last long,' said the Day Sister. 'I've rung up her people, but I doubt whether they'll get here in time.'

Awful Sister Adams was off that night, and nice Sister Gilbert came tiptoeing up at ten o'clock with Mrs Colley's relations. The husband was a humble old man with faded blue eyes and the walk of a man who has spent his life with horses. His daughter was thin and tired-looking, her face blotched with crying, but she had put on her best coat and hat and was clutching an enormous battered handbag.

'I've brought Mum's bag along,' she whispered. 'She can't bear to be parted from it, but they took her off in such a hurry.' They stood by the bed and looked speechlessly at the old lady, her nose high and pinched in her waxy face, the collar of the white gown much too big for her.

Chris wanted to look at her dressing, and the husband and daughter went obediently to wait in Sister's sitting-room.

Chris had her hand on Mrs Colley's wrist, frowning.

'Not long,' she said. 'I hate to stand by and let someone just slip off like this. Here – stay with her a minute. That Appendix'll be out of bed if I don't give her her morphia.'

The green-shaded light over the bed fell on the old woman's face. You could trace the outline of every bone in her skull and her nose was sharp and prominent. Her skin was cold and faintly damp, and her pulse no more than a tremor and then not even that. I listened for her breathing and called Chris over. 'She's dead.'

'I wouldn't swear to it,' she said, and stood pensively tapping her foot. 'Look, get the hypo.syringe and the coramine. It couldn't hurt to give her a shot.'

'I suppose I'd better call her people in,' she said despondently, when she had given the injection. Oh, damn, here's Chubby. What the hell does he want?' Chubby was Mr Soames, the little new House Surgeon, just out of the egg, with fluffy hair that never would lie down on his round head. He was on for all surgical cases tonight, and was just going round to see if it was all right for him to go to bed. As we watched Mrs Colley, one of her eyelids fluttered and for a moment her breathing was audible.

'My God, ' said Chris suddenly. She clutched hold of Chubby's arm. 'Listen,' she whispered urgently, 'couldn't we give her an intravenous? Sister said it wasn't any use, but - *Please*, Mr Soames, do let's try. It seems awful just not to do anything when she's still alive.' 'I don't know,' said Chubby hesitatingly, 'it's not much good - ' Chris's eyes were sparking at him, her face alive with urgency. 'All right,' he said and laughed nervously, 'I'll have a shot if you like.' 'I'll go and lay up the trolley,' she gabbled. 'Don't go away - I'll have it ready by the time you've scrubbed up. You put the electric heat cradle over her,' she told me, 'and tell her people they can't come in for a sec.'

'Is she -?' asked the daughter, as I went into the sitting room. 'We going to try something,' I said. 'It might not be any good, but - '

I wanted to stay and watch Chubby cut down into Mrs Colley's vein, where the saline was going to run in through the needle, but half the ward chose to be awake and kept me running about for the next half-hour. Mrs Davenport fussed and fretted. 'What's all that light for?' she grumbled. 'A person can't sleep with all this running about.'

'We're trying to save someone's life,' I snapped.

'Poor soul,' she said. 'But me leg isn't right, Nurse...' I said something quite rude to her, I can't remember what, but it shocked her into silence.

I went to hold Mrs Colley's arm for Chris, while she bandaged it to the splint to keep it still. Mr Soames was regulating the drip, his face flushed with excitement, for it was the first intravenous he had done since he had been here. Sister Gilbert came to see why we had not rung her yet to say that Mrs Colley had died.

'I'll do the round while I'm here,' she said. 'Don't bother to come with me, Nurse,' and she tiptoed off down the ward alone.

When she came back, she found the three of us wild with excitement. Mrs Colley's skin was still cold, but it was no longer clammy. You could hear her breathing now; you could distinctly feel her pulse.

'Of course, it might be only a momentary rally,' Sister said, but she obviously didn't think that.

'Keep her warm,' said Chubby, his chick's hair on end. 'I'll come back when I've finished my round. And for God's sake keep that drip running.'

'Tidy her up, ' said Sister, 'and let her people come in.'

While I was rearranging the sheets I kept touching Mrs Colley, to feel her skin gradually losing its marble chill. Suddenly she opened her eyes and looked at me accusingly. 'Me arm,' she whispered, 'what you done to me arm?'

'Now you've got to keep that arm still, d'you hear? Don't you dare move it. ' She raised a grizzled eyebrow at me.

'Hoity-toity,' she said faintly.

The husband and daughter came in, breathless with hope, glancing uneasily at the bandaged arm and the apparatus. 'She may not know you,' whispered Chris, and Mrs Colley unhooded one eye. 'Think I don't know Dad?' she mumbled. 'Ere, where's me 'andbag?'

'Here you are, Mum.' Her daughter laid it on the bed under her groping hand.

'Ah, that's more like it, she said, and drifted off into her Limbo again. The family went into Sister's room and had some tea. They wouldn't go home. Mrs Colley's pulse continued to be satisfactory.

Soon after Chubby had gone to bed, the saline tube blocked. We took the whole apparatus to pieces. We conjured with it for hours, trying different

connections and new bottles.

Mrs Colley's colour was worse and her pulse weaker. Sister gave her some more coramine, but then was summoned to another ward. I piled on more blankets, refilled the hot bottles, and tried the old lady with some oxygen. The arm was exposed now, with the needle tied into the vein, but still the saline was not running. 'I believe we'll have to get Chubby out of bed,' said Chris, and swore under her breath as she fiddled with the tube. I became aware that Mrs Davenport had been calling monotonously for some time and went to shut her up. When I got back, Chris was humming triumphantly. 'Don't move, don't breathe,' she said. 'I don't know what I did but I've done it.' One of us stayed with Mrs Colley all the time, watching her like a hawk, checking her pulse, keeping her arm still and regulating the oxygen. Presently she was well enough to take half a feeding cup of tea, and even to grumble that it was not sweet enough.

She got very naughty. That was the joy of it. As her strength returned she began to throw her weight about, and we could not let her people sit with her because she became too lively if she thought she had an audience.

'Practising on me, that's all you girls are doing – practising nursing, and I won't have it.'

'You keep that arm still,' said Chris.

'Don't you order me about, Miss,' she said. 'I'm very poorly. I'll have another cup of tea, and if I want to move me arm, I'll move it.'

I couldn't describe my feelings. I was on top of the world. We were hours behind with our routine ward work, and we scrambled to get it done before, all too soon, it was time to wake the patients and get on with the morning's work. Granny Colley was sleeping. Every time I hurried past and looked at her, my heart glowed. When I looked into the sitting-room, the husband and daughter were sleeping too.

'I've been praying for the repose of that poor soul,' said Mrs Davenport unctuously, as I took her washing bowl. 'Save your prayers for yourself,' I said. 'She's alive.'

'Well, I never. And all that noise too, the lights on and all the to-do. I don't feel strong enough to wash myself this morning, Nurse. I didn't sleep, you see.'

When I was bringing in the breakfasts, Chris called to me 'D'you realise we haven't had a thing to eat all night?' Nor we had. There hadn't been time to be hungry.

'Tell you what we'll do,' she said, putting in the milk for me while I poured the tea, 'instead of going to the dining room when we go off, we'll go to Jock's Box and have the most enormous plate of sausages and chips ever seen.' My heart swelled. It seemed the best idea I had ever heard and it kept me going through the rest of the work.

Mrs Colley's husband and daughter had some breakfast and then came in to see her. 'It's like a miracle,' the daughter kept saying. We put screens round Mrs Colley's bed, because the Day Nurses were starting the work of the ward. When Sister came on, she sought me out in the sluice. 'Nurse,' she said, 'why haven't you put Mrs Colley's mattress and pillows outside the ward to be fumigated?'

'Because she's still using them,' I said. It was one of the proudest moments of my life.

In Jock's Box, savouring the bursting sausages, the golden chips, I said for the hundredth time, 'She was dead, I'm sure she was dead, just before you gave her the coramine. We dragged her back.'

'M-m' said Chris, with her mouth full. 'Often I wonder why anyone is a nurse – the drudgery, and the impossible women, and all that. Then something like this last night happens, and you see exactly why. Let's have some more coffee, shall we?'

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