

One Pair of Feet 2 – by Monica Dickens

In World War 2, young Monica decided her war work would be nursing (gliding about in a cap like a halo - she'd seen too many films!). She had an unpromising interview at a hospital about 50 miles north of London, but as we now see, she got in.

Episode 2

Of course, as soon as my hopes had been realized, I had qualms. These were increased in the Buckingham Palace Road, where I bought my uniform. The stockings were so very thick and black, the collar so very high and hard, the striped dress so very like a 1920 Kodak Girl advertisement. I tried the whole thing on at home, and took it off again quickly, before anyone could see. The cap might help. The shop had told me that I would be told how to make it up at the hospital, but at the moment it was just a flat linen semicircle that bore no resemblance at all to a halo.

I arrived at Redwood station on the evening of September 30<sup>th</sup> and didn't know what to do. I couldn't walk up the hill with my luggage, I couldn't see any buses, and I didn't think it would look right to sweep up to the hospital in the dowager Rolls-Royce that seemed to be the only taxi. I asked about buses, and everyone told me something different, so eventually I decided to take the Rolls. All too soon, we were at the top of the hill, and I must get out and be a nurse or else go home again and never know what it was like. I lugged my suitcases across the gravel and presented myself at the glass box. The watch dog's blood pressure seemed worse. Surely more veins flamed round his nose than before.

'New nurse?' he panted. 'Wrong door. Nurses don't use main door. Round to your right.' I slunk away. Passing all the doors in the grey wall with their different prohibitive notices, I came at last to one larger and heavier than the rest, with a great lock on it.

NURSES' HOSTEL, it said, but it might just as well have said GAOL. I rang. Nothing happened. I was beginning to feel unwanted, when I heard footsteps behind me and turned to see two nurses arm in arm, wearing red cloaks over more convincing replicas of the uniform that weighted my suitcase. They stopped giggling to give me a silent stare, then they pushed open the door and went giggling inside. I followed and stood in a dim, square hall, trying to make out what sort of a place I was in. Dim blue bulbs made a ghostly twilight – evidently this was their way of saving blackout material.

Stairs turned upwards into obscurity. I saw a blur of face hanging over the bannister at the top.

'I say,' said a very young voice, 'did you want something?'

'Well, yes, I – er – I mean, I'm a new nurse. I've come.'

'Oh, bad luck,' she said depressingly. 'Still, I suppose you want to find your room. I wonder where they've put you. Half a mo – I'll come down and look on the board. You go and make the coff, Con,' she called back as she came downstairs, 'I shan't be a jiff.' Everything with her was an abbreviation.

Striking a match by the notice board, she searched for the number of my room. 'Presuming the Ass Mat's remembered.'

'The who?'

'Assistant Matron; old Fanny Harriman. Mad as a hat.'

Nevertheless I was prepared to like her for having the same name as my mother. It was only later that I discovered that Fanny is a derisive applied to any Sister. Seeing my name on the list gave me a thrill of belonging. The nurse led me down the long blue tunnel of the corridor. 'There's hardly anyone about now,' she said. 'They're not off duty. Here you are, here's your boud.' She opened the door and sniffed. 'Furniture pol. They only clean your room when you first come here. Makes a good impresh.' And she disappeared.

The décor of my little home was simple. Wardrobe, black iron bed on wheels, chair and dressing table with swing over mirror that overswung itself and reflected only your stomach. Behind the cupboard door there was a long list of rules starting with 'Nurses must throw open their windows and turn their mattresses before going to breakfast', and ending with 'trunks and boxes to be sent to boxroom and not kept under the bed.' That was to stop anyone flitting in the night.

Then the noise began - a crescendo of voices, door-slamming, and tramping feet that could be nothing else but the nurses coming off duty. My door burst open and a fat girl with a shiny face filled the doorway.

'Oh, hallo,' she said. 'Are you a new Pro?' I supposed I was.

'D'you know how to make up your cap?' I didn't.

'Well, you'd better come along and I'll show all of you together. ' I was relieved to hear that there were other new girls beside me. But when we met I began to feel inferior. There were three of them, two Welsh and one Yorkshire, called Gunter. They had all been nursing before. Whenever our instructress, while she was sewing a specimen cap, told us some rule or point of etiquette, the Welsh girls would say: 'Yes, we know. Like at Caerphilly,' and Gunter, who was completely silent, would nod and drop her heavy lids, as if it were an old story.

I looked hideous in the cap the senior nurse made up for me. The others didn't look too bad; they had more curls or something, and Gunter was hideous anyway, with or without a cap. Afterwards, I went out for some air and she loomed beside me and stuck, like some large dog on a string. 'I like the night,' said Gunter. 'It's more quiet than the day.' With which simple truth her conversation ended and we were parting at the door of my room before she spoke again.

'I'll call for you on the way to breakfast,' she said. 'You and I'll be friends, shall we?'

Thump – crash! 'Six o'clock, Nurse!' – crash! as the door shut again.

Whoever it was had given me the shock of my life. I thought I had only just gone to sleep. I lay for a while, stunned, unable to believe that my night was at an end. So this is what it was like to rise at six!

Only the thought that Gunter might be upon me before I was dressed, forced me out of bed and into my clothes. I washed my face and let it shine on.

Now for the cap. The more I fiddled with it, the more shapeless it became. One way I looked like a half-witted waitress, the other like a half-wit. A door banged and feet hurried past my room. In a sudden panic that I was late, I left the cap to its own devices, rocking insecurely somewhere on the top of

my head, and trod into my sensible black shoes. No time to wait for Gunter, even if I wanted to, but when I opened the door, there she was, waiting like the Rock of Ages.

Nurses were coming out of doors all along the corridor and we followed the stream up endless flights of stone stairs. I felt exhausted for the day. In the dining-room there must have been about fifty nurses, gathering round three long tables like a flock of white birds. Someone shoved me into a place and a pretty little Sister with a tired face said Grace. Breakfast was strong tea, a brittle bit of bacon with the rind on, and as much bread and margarine as you could eat. And could some of them eat! The doorsteps that they got through at an hour when my stomach was only just stirring in its sleep, were staggering.

Degrees of seniority were marked by the number of red stars you wore on the bib of your apron. At my table, they had none, at the table beyond, they all had one and beyond that, two. At a smaller table sat a dozen awesome girls with no less than three stars and special caps to boot. Among the two-pips, I spotted the abbreviating girl of the night before. She looked young and fresh. She was talking to a girl who stood out from the others, from an enviable air of not belonging to the herd, but probably laughing at it. I didn't think I liked her.

When Sister called the roll, she paused at my name. 'You go to William Forrest Ward, Nurse,' she said. Gunter was destined for Herbert Waterlow, which was a relief. After Grace, I went into the corridor with the mob, which dispersed in all directions, while I stood lost. Someone grabbed my arm. It was the superior girl I had noticed. She had straight fair hair, like clear honey, and a bony face, plain but attractive.

'Come on,' she said; 'you're on my ward.' She caught up with someone on the stairs and they went down talking, while I followed behind like a servant. I felt terribly shy going into the ward, and I was relieved to find it was a women's ward – that was slightly less unnerving.

Each hour of that first day strengthened my conviction that I would never make a nurse. I was always either in the way or not there when I was wanted. The Staff Nurse, one of those with three stars and frills on her cap, strung off what my duties were, but I couldn't take them in. Simple items that even I could do, like sweeping the floor and cutting bread and butter, alternated with mysteries like 'doing one's side', or 'seeing to the gastric feeds'. I spent most of the day pottering about after somebody, saying: 'What do I do next?' and in this way discovered what the nurses were like.

The Staff Nurse, Nurse Ketch, was usually too busy doing something frightfully responsible to reply. She said: 'I told you what to do once,' and went on being highly skilled with glass trolleys and bits of rubber tubing. Nurse Richardson was kinder. She would tell me, when she had time, but then she never had time. She was always scudding about, with two furrows between her heavy brows, muttering: 'I'll never get done. I've got that ear to dress ....all those temps to take... that leg – Heavens! I've forgotten the diabetic specimens. I shan't go to tea....'

I was rather afraid of asking Nurse Parry, the girl who had brought me down. I gathered she thought me a panicking fool. She herself strolled through her work, unperturbed by crises. 'For Christ's sake, woman,' she kept saying,

'Calm down.'

Of Sister Lewis, the dictator of the ward, I knew no more at the end of the day than I did at the beginning, for she had not spoken one word to me. Nurse Parry insisted that there was once a nurse about whom, at the end of two months she was still asking: 'Who *is* that?' with the same look of delicate distaste that I had seen her direct at me.

By the end of the day, my mind and body were in such a chaos of fatigue that I couldn't think of anything but my bed. I just had the strength to stagger to a phone box and tell my family: 'I love it.' Because I did. That was the one thing that emerged clearly.

1953 words, including intro.