

One Pair of Feet – 10<sup>th</sup> and final episode (Monica Dickens)

Monica's moving from ward to ward. Last time she went from Theatre to Men's Medical, and ended up nursing two German airmen, who upset both nurses and patients. But now she's been moved again.

Episode 10

I was on Grace Annie Sprock, the maternity ward into which I had blundered when I first came to the hospital for my interview. My brief meeting with the female cataclysm who ran this ward had left me reeling, and whole days of her now were devastating.

It was the energy of Sister Ramsbotham that was so shattering. When babies were born she was a dynamo of activity – admonishing the doctor, exhorting the mother, slanging the nurses, telling you to do something and then snatching it away to do it herself, and altogether raising such Cain in the Labour Ward that when the baby arrived, his first breath was a gasp of astonishment.

The work on this ward was confusing at first and arduous compared with the well-behaved Gastrics. Apart from the fact that many of the women were in a nervous and difficult state, the babies required endless attention. There were usually five or six of them sleeping or yelling or threatening to choke in the white cots that hung over the end of their mothers' beds. There was bathing them and changing them and feeding those that were on bottles, and frequent visits to the mother to prevent her and the baby falling into a bucolic stupor of contentment at the mere fact of each other's existence. Each baby wore its name on a piece of tape round its wrist, but when two were born close together, the fracas was such that one was never sure that Sister had not labelled them wrong in her excitement. Well may Mrs Finnucane say to her son as she clips him over the head in a few years' time: 'You unnatural child!' I always had a suspicion that he belonged to Mrs Duff. He looked much more like her, and the baby that crowed and squeaked in the cot at the foot of her bed was so markedly unlike Mr Duff that one seemed to detect a slight coldness in his manner towards Mrs Duff on visitors' day.

It seemed incredible to think that I had been in hospital for more than a year. I had never worked for so long without a break, so when I was summoned to Matron's office one morning, I thought it must be my holidays at last.

'Well, Nurse,' she said, not looking up as I came in, 'You've been here a year now, haven't you?'

'Thirteen months, Ma'am,' I corrected her respectfully. She ignored this. 'So do you think you're entitled to a red star?' she pursued, looking up. I made modest noises, but she ignored these, too. She was evidently going through a formula. 'A red star is a sign of responsibility, a sign of increased authority,' she went on. 'You should by now be a trustworthy person to have on a ward; you should be able to carry out nursing treatments without supervision, and you should realize your duties in regard to upholding hospital discipline. A red star will give you a certain amount of influence over the Juniors. As you gradually become more Senior, you are expected to help the Juniors and to assist in their training. Do you think I should give you a red star?'

Put like that, an answer obviously was 'No,' but I said 'Yes', and smiled obsequiously. She had obviously had reports on my work and knew perfectly well whether or not I was worthy to decorate my bosom with the scrap of red felt which she then handed to me with as much condescension as if it were the DSO.

'I trust you to be worthy of it, Nurse,' she said. 'Don't let me down.' It was just like being presented with one's hockey colours by the headmistress. I went out, clutching my bit of felt proudly, but sceptical about its ability to transform me suddenly into a miracle of efficiency, on whose every word the respectful Juniors hung.

The trouble was that most of them seemed to know more than I did. The Junior on Grace Annie Sprock had been at a Maternity Home in Bedford, and I was always having to ask her how to do things like putting on a nappie, about which I couldn't very well admit my ignorance to anyone else.

They say that war always increases the birth-rate – it's a form of compensation. They say that for the same reason more boys than girls are born in wartime. I don't know. They say a lot of things. They also say that a baby cries for exercise. They evidently have never been on a maternity ward. It cries to annoy, like the Duchess's baby (*in Alice in Wonderland*).

Otherwise, why should it stop when you pick it up and start again when you put it back in its cot?

We were so busy that Sister kept going to Matron and insisting that she should be given another nurse. She thought she had won this fight, and then she was not so sure, because all she got was Gunter.

When I first came to the hospital, Gunter had seemed to know a lot in a silent way, but having worked with her, I saw that she was incapable of putting it to practical use. After more than a year, she was as awkward as if it were her first week. It may have been because she was slightly deaf. She was always hearing things wrong, and, with a bland smile, doing what she thought she had been told to do and causing Sister Ramsbotham to speak of her without lowering her voice as 'that fool'. She took a passionate dislike to Gunter, which made her contempt for me affectionate esteem by comparison.

I was so tired these days. The increase of work and Sister's incessant nagging were enough to damp the most selfless enthusiasm, which mine certainly was not. I tried to work for the pending exam, but I so constantly fell asleep over the book, and even in lectures, that I saw little hope of passing. With malevolent inevitability, the exam drew near, and with it came the news that as Matron was tired of people failing, anyone who did not pass would be thrown out. We were in too much of a state to realize that she would be unlikely to do this in wartime.

Sister Tutor was not much help. She despaired of us, she said, and spent most of our valuable revision time telling us that we were paying now for the slackness earlier on about which she had warned us.

I prepared my parents for my probable return home and almost ordered myself a pair of landgirl breeches. Two days before the exam, I felt like ordering the jersey as well, because I was told I had to go on night duty on Grace Annie Sprock.

Being on day duty there, one would have thought that the babies exhausted

their lung power in the daytime. Being on night duty, one didn't see how they had the energy to carry on during the day. Their crying and my futile efforts to quiet them was the background pattern of all my nights, whatever else was going on. Sometimes, when a baby was being born and I was rushing round in stricken circles, I would not hear them for hours on end, and when it was over and one more potential taxpayer lay mouthing in its cot and the mother was having her cup of tea, I would suddenly realize that the other babies had been crying solidly all the time.

The women would not have slept well anyway, because we had several nights of air raids. I felt that I did not much care if a bomb did come through the roof. It would at least stop the babies crying. There was no question of doing any more swotting. I slept like the dead all day and although I took a text-book to the ward with me at night, I never had a chance to open it. The exam was at eleven o'clock, so that there was no time to snatch a little sleep beforehand. I had to go to it with all the hours of the night piled on top of my brain.

Often enough, I had bemoaned my life, had said that I lived only for the end of the war to get me out of this prison, but now that my existence there was threatened, I did not want to leave, although recently I had been turning over the idea. Mr Bevin's continual appeals to women to work in the munitions factories had reminded me uneasily that his need was perhaps the most urgent of all. And how satisfying to feel that one had played a part, however infinitesimal, in the manufacture of a tank or an aeroplane.

Somebody had to nurse, though. Yes, but somebody had to make munitions – and quickly. Wars go so fast these days. In the Hundred Years' War nobody put in overtime on cannon-balls and crossbows. They probably knocked them up at their leisure, but nowadays a country could be over-run before it had time to turn round. Ought one to do something about it?

Nursing was fascinating and in a way fulfilling, but the life which it entailed was unnecessarily tiresome. And yet, when one stripped away the pettinesses and tyrannies and looked at the essence of the hospital and the core of its purpose, one saw that it had the power to hold and bonds which it would be hard to break without regrets.

In the end, it was Matron who decided me. One morning, with the examination results still unknown, I went to see her for a sleeping-out pass. 'Oh – Nurse,' she said dryly, 'I hear that you wrote a magazine story about Hospital.'

'Yes, Ma'am.' Heaven forbid that she had read it.

'Well, kindly, Nurse, never do such a thing again.'

'Why not?' I asked, red in the face with all the things I wanted to say and didn't dare.

'Apart from being an unforgivable breach of etiquette, you only make yourself extremely ridiculous. So please don't try to write any more foolishness about what you see here. If you do, I shall certainly not keep you. Now you may go back to your work.'

That settled it. I had to write the book now, and if she didn't want me, I would go to someone who did. She was busy with the lists on her desk again and I cleared my throat and announced in a voice which came out several keys higher than I intended: 'Please, Ma'am, I should like to give in my notice.'

The head shot up, the glasses flashed coldly, and the thin lips ejected an impatient, toneless 'Why?'  
'Please, Ma'am,' I said, ' I want to go and make a tank.'

The End of the Book

1864 words