

## One Pair of Feet 5 (Monica Dickens)

In the Second World War, Monica trained as a nurse. It's the Old Days, when patients smoked, nurses cooked and cleaned, and Sister ruled all, unless things were so bad you got sent to Matron. She's on a Men's Surgical ward, where Sister Martin has been an inspiration.

### Episode 5

Just before Christmas, Sister went on holiday, and a temporary woman called Sister Oates took charge. She was a snob of the highest order, so superior that she could never bother to learn anybody's right name.

I was not looking forward to Christmas. It was the first I had ever spent away from home and I didn't think I would be very good a communal jollity.

Because I could not be at home, I pig-headedly determined not to enjoy myself, but as the preparations advanced I began to be drawn in. The men were out to have a good time. They had been getting out of hand for some time – ever since Sister Martin removed her velvet-gloved control. They mocked Sister Oates behind her back and called her 'Wild Oats', because she was so proper. There were quite a lot of them at this time who were allowed up, and it was the hardest thing in the world to get them into bed at all.

'Nurse Dickinson and Nurse Bunter' said Sister Oates to me and Gunter on the day before Christmas Eve, 'this afternoon we will decorate the ward.' Mounds of holly and miles of paper-chains were stacked in readiness in the splint cupboard, and there was a Christmas tree and a whole boxful of balloons. Sister began to blow one up, her pigeon chest pouter alarmingly. The whole ward was watching open-mouthed, wondering which would burst first – she or the balloon.

'There,' she said at last, panting and holding her hand to her heaving apron. 'I mustn't do any more, because of my heart.' She retired to her room to eat tea and buttered toast, leaving Gunter and me to cope. She spent the rest of the Christmas days saying: 'If you'd put those balloons where I wanted them, the men wouldn't have been able to reach them with their cigarettes.'

On Christmas Eve there was a dress rehearsal of the concert that we were to give to the patients – as if their suffering was not enough. I was in the back row of the chorus: 'The Redwood Juveniles', in knee-length operating gowns and big white bows of bandage in our hair. I was just going into my room to change when Beaver, the Senior Staff Nurse, gave me a slap on the back that pitched me through the doorway. 'That's right, old thing,' she said, bursting with Christmas cheer, 'don't be late for rehearsal. I'm going to give you a line to say, as Jones is off sick,' she added, as if bestowing a colossal treat.

The rehearsal was held in the Common Room. Some people turned up in strange garments, others, under the delusion that it would be All Right on the Day, had not yet thought about their costumes. Everyone talked the entire time. Beaver kept telling us that a bad dress rehearsal made a good first night. The House Surgeons were in the concert too. They strolled in after dinner, guffawed their way through the sketches, but soon got bored with it

and strolled out.

Christmas Day. Noel. Sing Hey, the Holly, but I didn't feel like singing Hey anything when the Senior Night Nurse bawled : 'Six o'clock, Nurse,' maliciously across my sleep. One couldn't even go to church, to make it seem more like Christmas, because on Christmas and Boxing Day we had no off duty at all.

All the essential work of the ward, the dressings and treatments, had to be got through in the morning, so as to leave the afternoon free for jollity. The men had started the morning by dressing up and playing charades. One who could get about at a great rate on his crutches, had chased Gunter into the bathroom and relieved her of her cap and apron. In the middle of another's famous impersonation of herself, Wild Oats arrived on duty, with a majestic hangover from the Sisters' Christmas Eve party. We had to tell her he was being Douglas Byng.

The men's Christmas dinner was the high spot of the day. There was a huge turkey and a plum pudding and a plate of bottled beer. The surgeons had to dress up in chef's caps and carve the turkey. We had Mr Harvey Watkins, who wore a small frilly apron round his non-existent waist and was full of bonhomie. We all stood round him with trays, saying 'Ha-ha' to whatever he said. Sister ladled out the vegetables and sauces as if she were presiding at an East End soup kitchen, and we carried the plates round and opened the beer. There was a certain amount of cheating among those who were on special diet. I got mixed up and gave Gastric a leg of turkey and three roast potatoes, but it didn't seem to do him any harm, and he was very difficult afterwards about his normal diet of flaked fish and puree.

The shattered turkey and the remains of the excellent rich dark plum pudding were taken out to the ward kitchen, and when Sister had taken Mr Harvey Watkins into her sitting-room for a glass of sherry, a disgraceful scene took place. All the nurses rushed for the kitchen, as fast as their various degrees of foot trouble allowed, and with silent accord we fell on the broken meats. You can get far more turkey and plum pudding by snatching it from the dish with your fingers than you ever could at table.

The visitors came after lunch, bringing presents and strewing the ward with paper and string. I had to go off and get ready for the concert. By the time we had done it on all the five big wards, it seemed to be getting very stale, but the audience lapped it up. They enjoyed seeing the doctors and nurses, in whose power they normally were, making fools of themselves. The House Surgeons dashed off in between every performance to fortify themselves, taking some of the more attractive nurses with them.

I enjoyed Boxing Day more than Christmas Day. Sister went off in the afternoon, and the men produced some beer from their lockers. Nurse Robins brought up her gramophone, and we moved the desk and cupboards from the centre of the ward and danced with any patient who could.

The aftermath of Christmas was as might be expected. Two days of thirteen hours apiece without a break had left everyone tired and irritable, and the patients were inclined to be whiny, like children overtired by a party. Into the Out-Patients' Department there poured a stream of black eyes, broken heads and acute abdominal disorders. Admitted to our ward were an old man who had been knocked down by a car, and a couple of motor-cycle

accidents. One of these was a Canadian soldier, whose right leg was amputated soon after he came in. He was about thirty-five, weathered and independent, a man to lean on in a crisis. And now he was leaning on me, asking me whether his leg was there, for of course he could still feel it. I didn't know what to say. He was only just round from the anaesthetic and very shocked. I hedged. 'All you've got to do is just not to worry. Try and get some sleep.'

The words sounded trite and silly as I said them.

He gave me a look that he had probably given a lot of brainless women, and said: 'Come on now, Honey. I can take it.'

'We're not allowed to tell patients anything. You have to ask a doctor.'

'They've chopped it off, then,' he said, fixing a cold blue eye on me. I nodded.

'Yeah.' It was more a long-drawn expiration than a word. 'Thanks for telling me.'

Laurence Cowley – that was his name – had had a knock on the head that had wiped out all recollection of the accident or what led up to it. It was more than a week after his operation before something clicked in Cowley's brain and he remembered part of what he'd forgotten.

'Jumping Jesus!' he said, 'I knew there was something! Maisie!' he almost shouted. 'What happened to her?'

'Who's Maisie?'

'Why, the kid who was riding pillion on the bike.'

'Maybe she wasn't hurt,' I suggested.

'She must have been. She'd have come around to see me. Listen, maybe she's even dead – Jeeze, poor little Mais.'

'If she was hurt, she's probably in this hospital. I'll ask Sister if I can ask at the Secretary's office.'

'Keep that old battleship out of this. Find out yourself –'

'I'll try, but we're not supposed to give information about patients, you know.'

'Don't pull that on me,' he said, magnetizing me with an eye.

'All right, I said. 'I'll find out.'

Maisie was in Jane English Ward, with compound fractures of both legs. She had been told about Cowley, though not yet about the amputation. Evans, one of the Welsh girls who had come in with me, was on that ward, and told me all I wanted to know.

After I had found out, I sounded out Sister Oates. 'Sister,' I said casually, 'does Cowley know about that girl who was injured with him?'

'No,' she said. 'He remembers nothing, and Sir Curtis Rowntree doesn't want him told yet. How did you know about the girl, Nurse Dixon? He hasn't said anything about her, has he?'

'No,' I said. 'One of the nurses on Jane English was talking about her at tea.'

'There's a great deal too much shop talked at meals, in my opinion,' said Wild Oats. 'When I was doing my training anyone who mentioned the wards was sent away from table. But girls these days have no social manners at all.'

When she was safely away at her supper, I told Cowley what she had told me.

'You won't tell anyone I told you, will you?' I said.

'Hell, no. Listen, do one thing more for me, will you? Write a little note and have them give it her.'

'Quick, then,' I said, 'before Sister comes back.'

I carried several notes backwards and forwards for Larry before Sir Curtis Rowntee decreed that the taboo subject might be broached. Larry put up a good pantomime of gradually dawning memory, and immediately began to make himself a nuisance. He wanted to be wheeled round to call on Maisie. He could see no reason why it should not be allowed. Nor could I, but it was just one of those things that weren't.

Sister Martin came back at the end of that week, much to the relief of everyone. It was nice to see the ward return to its old efficiency and the stimulating air of enthusiasm come creeping back. Even Larry noticed the difference and became more amenable.

Then my happiness was neatly whisked away. There was only one announcement after roll-call at breakfast. 'Nurse Dickens to go on Night Duty tonight. For what we have received, the Lord make us truly thankful.'

1896 words, incl. intro.