

One Pair of Feet 4
(by Monica Dickens)

Monica's training to be a nurse during the Second World War.

Episode 4

Just about this time, I was feeling quite pleased with life. I had got an amusing friend to work with – Nurse Parry. She and I had got as far as Christian names – definitely not done at the hospital. Her name was Chris. I wondered why I had felt an aversion to her at first. Envy, I suppose, because she seemed so at home. She had hated me too, and thought I looked sour and conceited. I had found one or two others who were good for a laugh; I was no longer the most junior on the ward: there was a pathetic, half-drowned little thing called Weekes, who never spoke above a whisper and who knew no better than to ask me what to do. My complacency was doomed to shock, however.

I had forgotten that it was the first of the month. I could have cried when Night Sister read out the Change List : '...Nurse Dickens to go to Herbert Waterlow.' Dreadful Gunter leaned across the table to say : 'I'm not changed. You're on my ward.'

I returned her widespread smile with a sickly one, and slumped down to the Men's Surgical Ward in a furious temper, prepared to hate all the Surgical Men. Sister had the day off, and Nurse Sowerby, the Staff Nurse, was a feeble creature with swollen ankles, whom everyone called Sow. Gunter was always underfoot and the other nurses seemed a deadly lot. The First Nurse, a raw-boned, ginger Scotch girl called Ross, said : 'None of your dirty William Forrest ways on this ward,' before I had even started, and I knew we were enemies.

The day seemed endless, and at half-past five, I dropped what I was doing, excused myself abruptly to Nurse Sowerby, and rushed off the ward, only to be recalled half-way down the corridor by Nurse Ross, to come back and wring out the sheet I had left in the sink.

'I said, none of your dirty William Forrest ways,' she said. 'You dare to treat Sister Martin as I've no doubt you treated Sister Lewis.' I bent over the sheet, with tears of rage burning my eyes. I prayed that she would give a man the wrong medicine and be publicly disgraced.

The next day was my day off, and when I got out into the great world things clicked back into proportion. Thank heaven for these days off, and for the sanity of a long sleep. I returned to Herbert Waterlow prepared to like it, and soon discovered that I was on the best ward in the hospital, with the most lovable patients. I had to work like a slave to counteract the bad impression I had made on my first day.

As well as operation cases, we received all the casualties – the car smashes, the drunks, the would-be suicides, and the accidents from all the factories within twenty miles. It was quite exciting going on duty in the morning, because hardly a night went by without an admittance, and you might find anything, from a perforated gastric ulcer to an unconscious man with two black eyes in something that was just recognizable as a face.

Scottie was one of these – a brawny giant with red hair. He had been

embroiled with a lorry on the way home from 'The Running Horse'. He lay for two weeks like a happy baby, taking the nourishment that was fed to him and giving an occasional prehistoric grunt, but otherwise completely insensible. His tough little wife used to visit him every day and talked to him in the hope of waking him. Sometimes she would bring the baby and shake it under his nose, but he would just stare with empty blue eyes. Once, when I was pouring some Guinness down his throat, he smiled at me and winked, and I ran for Sister. When we got back to him, he was more deeply unconscious than ever, possibly due to the stout. I should like to be able to record that it was his wife and baby that at last pierced the Lethe of Scottie's brain, but what actually happened was that he suddenly grabbed Gunter's skirt as she was passing by, and said: 'Hullo, darling, it's a dark night for a nice wee lassie like you to be out by herself.'

We always had more patients than we could comfortably manage, and we still managed somehow. I had not been long on the ward before I realized that it was Sister Martin who was responsible for the unusual atmosphere of willingness. She had the knack of getting work out of people without goading them, and of making them feel that they were co-operating in a united effort. She was a rare specimen.

Chris Parry's airman boyfriend had asked her to bring a couple of friends to a concert at the aerodrome. She asked me to go. It was ages since I had been out anywhere. After a day that didn't end till 9 o'clock, I enjoyed my evening tremendously, but when we got back, very late, we saw two ambulances drawn up outside the main door, and another turned in at the gates after us. I didn't care what was up so long as I could get to bed. I thought I'd better get to my room before I was seen, but someone grabbed my arm.

'There you are!' said Nurse Ross breathlessly. 'You've got to get into uniform and go on the ward.'

'What?'

'There's been the most frightful explosion at one of the factories. Everyone on the men's wards has got to go on. There's twenty burn cases coming in, they say.'

How I got myself into my uniform I don't know. I was almost crying with tiredness, wondering how I was ever going to keep awake long enough to be any use. The ward was in chaos. Sister gave us a man each to attend to, while she dashed from bed to bed, just in time wherever she was wanted.

'Get this man ready for Theatre', she told me. 'They'll all go up as quickly as they can be taken.'

His name was Jack Roper. I was terrified. I had never seen a bad burn case before and I hardly dared to touch him. I looked around, but everybody was busy. It was up to me to look after him, and I suddenly felt proud and excited. This one shouldn't die. He was unconscious, but breathing, an ominous blue shadow round his nose and lips. I could just feel his pulse. I couldn't undress him; his overalls were burnt into his skin in places. I cut them away as well as I could.

Sister came to give him an injection. 'More blankets, Nurse,' she said, 'and hot bottles if you can find any. He's terribly shocked.' There was only one bottle in the cupboard, but I snatched another out of a nurse's hand, cursed her as she grabbed at it, and I believe I hit her before I rushed off with it. The

House Surgeon was examining my man sketchily when I got back. 'Get him up as soon as you can,' he said. 'He's got a chance.'

I grabbed the porter.

'Here, this one's next, come on.'

'Sister said that chap over there,' he said stolidly.

'No, no – she meant this one. Really, she told me.'

Between us we managed to get him on to the trolley. In the lift he suddenly opened his eyes and moaned.

'Hullo,' I said.

'Lo,' he said, and closed his eyes and moaned again.

In the anaesthetic room, there was another trolley waiting, with a nurse from another ward. 'How many have you got?' she asked.

'Ten came in,' I said. 'How many have you?'

'Six. Secker Ward have got some too. Where's yours burnt?'

'Body.'

'Face and eyes, mine.' She sighed. 'Gosh, I'm tired, aren't you?'

I remembered with a shock that two hours ago I had been on the point of death. I didn't feel a bit tired now; there hadn't been time.

The sliding doors opened and one of the Theatre nurses came through. I caught a glimpse of the usually speckless and orderly Theatre. Chaos was an understatement. We wheeled the trolley in.

They finished with Jack Roper at last. The saline had improved his pulse slightly, but his colour was still deathly. His arms and body were dark purple where they had coated him with Gentian Violet. I had to leave him when we got back to the ward, because there was so much clearing up to do. I felt fiercely possessive about him and hated to take my eye from him or let anyone else touch him in spite of their knowledge compared to my ignorance.

I had got beyond being tired now. I made beds and tidied the ward just as if it were an ordinary day, feeling that I didn't care if I never slept again. Most of the men were grand. The ones who were allowed up helped us as much as they could : they swept the balcony and emptied ashtrays and ran errands for the other patients. They approached as near as they dared and stared in mute sympathy at the violet figures.

Sister sent me off at twelve noon. Jack Roper had woken up, and he was holding his own. He had said 'Hullo' again and had taken a feeding cup of tea from me. I didn't dare ask Sister what she thought about him, in case she should shake her head.

I couldn't sleep for a long time, and when I did, I dreamed about him. I went back on to the ward in the evening, unrested, feeling as if I were moving about in a play. Sister was still there. I don't know when she slept.