

One Pair of Feet 8 (Monica Dickens)

Training as a nurse during the second world war, after the upside down hours of Night Duty, and the triumph of helping to bring Mrs Colley back to life, Monica's sent to other duties.

Episode 8

When we were consuming oxtail and haricot beans at nine o'clock in the morning, Sister Adams rapped on the table with a spoon and told me that I was to go on day duty on the Private wards. Everyone looked pitying and assured me that I should be no more than a glorified house-parlourmaid, but I was not ill-pleased. 'Going on Privates,' as it was called, had the charm of novelty and, I thought, the possibilities of amusement.

I had not reckoned with the bells. They rang all day long, and each time, you had to trek to the bottom of the long passage to see what number was wagging on the indicator. You always waited for a moment, in the hope that someone else might answer it first, but as I was the most junior nurse I usually waited in vain.

There were twelve private patients. The wedge of Red that nine months of hospital had inserted into my social outlook, made me resent them slightly, but I could appreciate that since they were paying it was a little hard that there were not enough nurses to give them their money's worth of attention. As is often the case, the objectionable people got more attention than the pleasant, unassuming ones. Sister Graham used to pin up in her sitting room little bits of paper with the likes and dislikes of the more difficult patients. She lived in terror of a complaint to Matron and would fuss up and down the corridor like a demented hen in her anxiety that all should go well.

All the rooms were occupied when I first started to work there and after a few muddled days of taking in the wrong trays, I gradually got them straight. No.2 was a lustrous girl who managed to make even an appendicectomy seem glamorous. I liked Bibi Preston. She was amusing, and was always pressing on one anything from a pot plant to a lipstick. Because we were not allowed to wear make-up in uniform, I think she thought I always looked like that, which depressed her.

In No.4 lived Mr Walter Faversham, who was not aware that he had passed his prime. He thought that all the nurses were mad for him and used to call us Little Girl and Sweetheart and pat the bed invitingly. He was married, to what he spoke of as 'the Encumbrance.' They had probably been Bright Young Things together in 1920, and he had never really grown out of it.

No.7 was the door that every nurse went through at every possible opportunity. I never had to answer this bell, because somebody always beat me to it. Lieutenant Oliver Carew lived inside, minus a cartilage in one knee, and with dark hair and a boy's brown face on the pillow that set the heart beneath the apron bib thumping. He was so naturally polite and incapable of bad temper that nurses with boy friends began to look at them critically, and those without to set their hair more carefully.

No.12 was the plague spot, in which Lady Mundsley sheltered from the shattering afflictions of the outside world. She had her own private nurse; we were not meet to handle that precious bundle of neurasthenia, and when one

did have occasion to go in to No.12, she would shudder under the bedclothes and say faintly, 'Such a *noise!*'

People who told me I should be a house-parlourmaid 'on Privates' had over-estimated. I was Dogsboddy. I spent my day cleaning rooms, doing flowers, carrying trays, looking up addresses in the telephone book, making hot milk drinks, tidying the kitchen and washing up – and of course, the bells. The Bells! The Bells! I got to feel like the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

To crown everything, Lady Mundsley, who was recovering in spite of herself, sent away her private nurse and announced that she would get her money's worth out of us.

It had now been diagnosed, for want of anything else, that her trouble might be gastric, so she was accordingly put on hourly feeds of milk and harmless puddings, for which I had to be responsible. I could never start doing anything without having to leave it in the middle to take a feed to No.12.

When Lady Mundsley was allowed to get up, it was ordained that she should be wheeled into the garden to take the sun in an invalid chair. This involved as much preparation as a Continental journey. Eiderdowns, pillows, handkerchiefs, scarves, rugs, sunshades, sunglasses, book, magazines, Gastric Barley Sugar, Eau-de-Cologne and a footstool, all had to go out as well, to the spot which Lady Mundsley had selected as not ideal, but good enough until she saw somewhere she liked better. Then she would ting-a-ling her bell, and I would have to leave someone in the middle of a blanket bath and go and push her all over the grounds until her restless spirit would find somewhere in which it could settle. By the time I got back to my blanket bath, the patient would either be resigned but shivering, impatient, or ringing bells according to temperament.

Lady Mundsley didn't like me much. I was clumsy enough in the other rooms, but in hers, it seemed I could never touch a vase without spilling the water or tipping the flowers out on to their heads. If I had to break a medicine glass, I would always break it in No.12. Lady Mundsley apparently had some influence with the Governors of the hospital and even Matron had to kowtow to her. She always had to have the best vases and the newest linen, and clean pillowcases far more often than anyone else. It was a good thing she was not on a normal diet, or she would have got all the best food.

I don't know who it was who suggested that Lady Mundsley should be taken on a tour of the Hospital for her diversion. It was most embarrassing. I had to push the wheelchair, while Sister walked by the side, pointing out features of interest. Lady Mundsley had on her best velvet dressing gown and a soft Angora rug over her knees. Her high-nosed face was carefully made up and her blue-grey hair, which her coiffeur came every week to keep blue, carefully set. Thus she was wheeled round the wards, up to one bed or another to exchange a few gracious words. In Herbert Waterlow, some of the men began to mutter and scowl, but most of the patients got the impression that she was Royalty and took it quite well.

It was July, and much too hot to work. We toiled on, with the starch melting in our high collars. I sweated up and down after the bells, with a cross red face and a molten area round my waist under my stiff belt. We had a patient in with Shingles, and when my waist got hot, I used to think I had got them too. She had them all round her back and under her ribs, and Maggie, the Ward Maid, (a sour, knotted woman, dispirited by years of service), said that

when they met in front she would die.

One morning, I suddenly felt very dizzy. Perhaps I was going to have a heat stroke; my head felt muzzy. We were very busy and I didn't have much time to think about it, but I had a vague sensation that I was using somebody else's legs. I hoped that I was going to be ill. It would be a rest if nothing else. By tea-time, I couldn't take in properly what was said to me. Surely now I was ill ; I didn't want to feel like this for nothing. But as I went to get a thermometer, I remembered. Tomorrow was my day off. My father was fetching me tonight and driving me up to London. I couldn't be ill yet, otherwise they would keep me here in my black iron bed. If I could stave it off, I could be ill at home, which would be lovely.

I sneaked off with a thermometer and locked myself in somewhere to see whether I was dying. I was over a hundred and two. Joy and a faint sense of pride mingled with alarm at the prospect of bearing up for four hours more. I felt worse now that I knew there was something wrong.

Only the passionate longing for home kept me going. I kept taking my temperature and watched it creep beyond a hundred and three with morbid satisfaction. The others were too busy to notice if I looked peculiar. By half-past eight, I felt so ghastly I didn't care if I stayed on all night, I couldn't feel any worse. Sister sent me off punctually, saying that I looked tired which, I thought resentfully, was underestimation considering that my temperature was nearly a hundred and four.

My ordeal was not yet over, because if I told my father about it before we got home, he might refuse to take me and put me to bed at the hospital. I would have to keep up the pretence for another hour. I would lie back and pretend to sleep, so that I didn't have to talk.

Luckily, it was dusk when I got out to the car and his sight wasn't good enough to see what I looked like.

I'd forgotten about his sight. 'You can drive,' he said casually. 'I can't see a thing in this light.'

My performance merely confirmed his previous opinion of my driving. We got home somehow, but how, I shall never know.

A few days later I felt strong enough to open my copy of *Sister Fairchild* to see what she had to say about chicken-pox. There was a terrifying photograph – no, that was smallpox. Chicken-pox was on the other side, almost as bad, but in different places. I couldn't think how I had caught it. There had not been a whisper of it in Redwood.

'May be contracted,' I read, 'through contact with a case of *Herpes Zoster*.' I was sure we hadn't got any of that. I looked it up in the index : '*Herpes Zoster*, or *Shingles*.' I felt like writing to the *Lancet*. It is always so surprising when the written word is proved by experience.

When I returned to Redwood, I learned that I had started quite a run on chicken-pox. Nurse Donovan, in fact, had gone one better than *Sister Fairchild's* theory by subsequently getting shingles.

Whenever you had been away, you had to report to Matron's office that you were back. What did one say? 'I'm back,' was so obvious and was liable to elicit the retort : 'Where from?' for Matron could not be expected to have the comings and goings of some hundred odd nurses at her finger-tips.

Labouring up the hill to the hospital, I considered : 'Here I am,' 'Please, Ma'am, I'm better,' or just walking into the room and presenting myself for

inspection like a child in a new dress. Matron was one of those people for whom one always rehearsed beforehand. Not that it ever got me anywhere. I never went into that room without saying the wrong thing. I was lucky today. Matron was out, and I had only to report to Sister Harriman.

1947 words