One Pair of Feet 3
(by Monica Dickens)

In the second World War, Monica has decided to be a nurse. She's begun training at the Queen Adelaide Hospital in Redwood, 50 miles north of London.

Episode 3

For the first few days I groped my way through a duststorm of new impressions, baffling orders and mystic phraseology, but gradually the dust began to settle into the pattern of hospital life. What had seemed chaos at first emerged as a routine so rigid that it superseded any eventuality. The Ward Work must go on. That locker must be polished without and scoured within, though Death and Tragedy lie in beds on either side.
Soon I could hardly imagine a time when I had not been doing exactly the same things at the same time every day. The work seemed to have an independent existence. If all the beds were empty, one would still come on at seven o'clock and push them backwards and forwards and kick the wheels straight.
Life became more bearable with each day's knowledge of the patients and the realization that they were people, not just bodies under counterpanes whose corners had to be geometrical. Sometimes, closeted behind screens to give a blanket bath, you could get down to a good gossip, until a long white hand drew back the screen to admit the ivory face with its fluted nostrils and fastidious lips.
'Neu-rse' – Sister Lewis's voice had a kind of disdainful creak – 'you're giving a blanket bath, not paying a social call.' She was on telling-off terms with me by now. Her eye was ruthless. There was usually something to be cleaned again and I would have to miss part of the half-hour's break we were allowed for making our beds, changing into a clean apron and having a cup of coffee.

If I had been surprised by the capacity of the nurses' stomachs at breakfast, I was staggered when I did get time to go to the dining-room for what was known as 'Lunch'. The ends of yesterday's loaves were on the table, with a mound of margarine and a bowl of dripping. I tasted the dripping once, and tasted it all day in consequence, but others ate like starving refugees.
The next meal was called 'Dinner'. This was at midday, and the nurses were ready to make up for only two slices of meat by quantities of potatoes and as many goes of rice pudding as they could manage before Sister said Grace. Tea was at four and the bread was new and doughy and had to be cut in hunks anyway, and supper was at half past eight, when one came off duty. It was usually sausages and pies, and perhaps blancmange or cold left over rice pudding. One thing that hospital taught me was to eat the sort of puddings I had been refusing since the nursery. Hunger compelled it. My appetite grew enormous, and I saw myself becoming one of the doorstep-and-dripping brigade, with my apron growing tighter and my dress straining its seams.
I still felt like somebody masquerading as a nurse. The mysteries of William Forrest Ward were being slowly revealed to me; it was a medical ward, I

discovered. Nurse Richardson was kind to me. When we were making beds together, which was the only time she ever got a moment to talk, she would drill me in the patients' complaints. 'Now, Mrs Brownlees. Now, Nurse, what did I tell you about this patient's hand?'
'Cellulose,' I would say sleepily, snatching at the corner of a blanket as she whipped it through the air.
'Oh, Glory, you must try and remember – cellulitis.'
'Fancy,' said Mrs Brownlees, 'cellophane,' and stored it up to tell Ethel on Visitor's Day.
Next to Mrs Browlees was a Polish woman, a Jewish refugee from Warsaw, who when she had a pain, would keen like the lost tribes of Israel: 'Oi-yoi, oi-yoi, yoi-yoi-oi!' Her English was not good enough for her to enter into the sociability of the ward and the conversation that broke out whenever Sister was off duty. Mrs Brownlees tried to jolly her along and called her Miss Clean dearie, but as Miss Klein only stared at her suspiciously, she soon turned to Mrs Russell on the other side, who would swop a fibroid for a confinement any day.
One day, I found Miss Klein crying and oi-yoi-ing as if her heart would break.
'What's the matter?' I asked, non-plussed. Sister had told me to find out what she wanted for dinner. 'Have you got a pain?'
'No.'
'What's the matter then?'
'Pleess?'
'Cheer up,' I said. 'I want to know what you'd like for dinner….'
'Na!' She turned her face into the pillow.
I thought perhaps she didn't understand me, so without thinking, I tried her with: 'Wollen Sie fisch oder fleisch ….' She was round on me in a moment, her hair on end and her eyes flashing in her stricken face. 'Ah!' she cried, thrusting me away, 'You too! You think it too! All these women, they think I am a spy.' A great teardrop fell into her lower lip. She interrupted my protestations. 'Don' tell me. I have heard them talk about me. They don' like I am here.' She nodded towards Mrs Brownlees and Mrs Russell who were whiling away the time between courses with the subject of varicose veins.
'You shall see – they will tell the politz. Yoi-oi-oi – ' She began to sob again.

It was no use trying to reason with her. Small wonder that she had this persecution mania after what she had probably been through in Warsaw. How could you trust anybody when people that you knew, even your friends, appeared from one day to the next in Nazi uniform, or even turned informer. For several days she lay sobbing off and on, and then one morning, she suddenly hopped out of bed, scooted for the door and was off down the passage in her crumpled nightgown and bare feet. When she was brought back, shrieking in Polish, they put boards round the bed so that she couldn't get out, and she lay like a trapped animal, with only her eyes moving. She had no family over here and the mistress for whom she had worked came to see her once, and stood looking down at the bed, saying: 'Oh, dear, it's all very unfortunate, but I'm not responsible for her.' Soon after that, they took Miss Klein away, I don't know where to.
At one end of the ward, glass doors led to a stone-floored balcony, where half a dozen convalescents and chest cases lay under yellow army horse-

blankets. One was my greatest friend, Mabel Mutch, a convalescent Appendix. She had a face like a slab of concrete, and a sense of humour that lit up the balcony. Her husband was called 'Cicil', and was very flash with a three-wheel car and mauve trousers. It was one of my jobs to sweep the balcony, and I used to spend as long as possible talking to Mabel about food and drink. Once Cicil brought in half a bottle of port, and when Sister had gone to supper we had quite a party.
There was not much time for sociability, however, even when Sister wasn't appearing silently with her : 'Neurse, since you appear to have plenty of spare time, you had better employ it in turning out the splint cupboard.' I was always in a desperate hurry to get done. 'Getting done' is the purpose of every nurse – so much work to do by a certain time and not long enough to do it. I was terribly slow at first and permanently harassed. I could cheerfully have killed any patient who delayed me by upsetting a glass of water, or any of the hundred things I was sure they did on purpose to annoy. After a while, I got the knack of keeping up such a speed that it was impossible to stop going. My feet became scorched by the friction and were like balls of fire at night.

Some mornings, before she said Grace after breakfast, Night Sister would read out the names of those whom Matron wished to see. This usually meant trouble. One morning, it was Nurse Dickens to see Matron at ten o'clock. I froze, a forkful of scrambled egg substitute half-way to my mouth. What had I done, or rather, what had been discovered? Could anyone have found out that I had been cleaning the bath with pure Dettol to save elbow grease?
'It's all right,' said Evans. 'I had to go yesterday. It's only to sign on.'
'What's signing on?'
It appeared that your first few months were a kind of trial on both sides. You could leave or be thrown out without notice, but once you had signed on, it was a month's notice on either side, and you could not leave without a good reason.
Once I had signed on, I realized that I had let myself in for exams and lectures. You had to attend these three days a week, in your off-duty time. The final exam was three years ahead, but there was something called 'the Pree-lim,' which you took after a year, and could take as many times as you could afford the entrance fee until you passed. Some of the nurses had been taking it cheerfully and unsuccessfully for years.
The lectures were on Hygiene, Nursing, and Anatomy and Physiology. Hygiene was all right if you happened to be keen on sewage and Activated Sludge. A knowledge of plumbing is apparently essential to a good nurse. Nursing was mostly practical work – bandaging each other and making the bed of a dummy known as Old Mother Riley who appeared to be a maternity case.
Anatomy was fascinating. I started to write a story entitled: *The Skeleton in the Cupboard,* in which the hero was called Pyloric Sphincter and the heroine Hernia Bistoury. There was a beautiful spy called Vena Cava and a will-o'-the-wisp creature called Poly O'Myelitis, who led a gypsy existence on a Cavernous Sinus.
It was bad enough having to attend lectures in your off duty, but when they fell on your day off, it was infuriating. I used to miss them and go home as

usual, but I soon found myself before Matron. The exam was nearly a year off, and I didn't think I would still be there, even if the war lasted. Every morning, as I fought my way out of sleep at six o'clock, I resolved to give in my notice. I made a bet with Nurse Parry that I would not stay a year.
'You won't have the initiative not to,' she said. 'They get you into a rut and then you haven't the energy to cut free.'
We were in the bathroom making plaster bandages. 'You may stop the bandages now,' said Sister. 'I'm going to ring the bell for the visitors to go.' She drifted away.
'Dirty swine,' said Parry. 'It's only five to four.' Sister resented the visitors and would always try to cheat them of five minutes at either end of their time. She thought they spoiled the appearance of the ward, and after they had gone we would have to mop the floor because she fancied they left muddy footmarks, even on dry land.
That must be the worst part of having someone in hospital. You have surrendered them, body and soul, to this alien, intimidating institution, that only lends them to you grudgingly for two hours twice a week.

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