

One Pair of Feet 9 (Monica Dickens)

Monica was Dogsboddy on the Private wing, when she developed Chicken Pox and managed to get home before she gave in to the illness.

Episode 9

When I first came back, I was sent to the Theatre for a few weeks. I thought this would be exciting, but I was not there long enough to get much farther than sluicing out all the gowns and towels which piled up round me all day as I toiled with sodden hands in the sluice. Things that had been taken out of people used to be brought out here in bowls until they were sent down to the Laboratory, and though at first they made my hair rise, I soon got blasé and could pass an appendix or a kidney or even a finger without having to peep with horrified fascination. Some people liked to have their bits and pieces pickled as a memento. A private patient once insisted on having her spleen bottled. They tried to dissuade her, for the thing was the size of a football, but she took it proudly home, where I believe it reposes in a kind of goldfish bowl among the Wedgwood and Ming.

Theatre Sister was trying. She had a wicked temper, and prided herself on being unable to suffer fools. I was quite glad to be obliged to spend most of my time in the sluice, because in the operating theatre it was possible to do more things wrong to the minute than anywhere else. Even the Surgeons were susceptible to Sister's moods. If those eyebrows were drawn down like bars of iron and that foot was tapping, the atmosphere became so thick you could hardly get in at the door. The Surgeon was irritable, the House Surgeon nervous, the Anaesthetist monosyllabic, and we Nurses sweating with anxiety.

It wasn't really safe for her to be loose among all those razor-sharp scissors and scalpels.

Theatre Sister had once left nursing to be married, returning on the death of her husband. Consequently, she was either called the black widow spider or the Praying Mantis, the female of which, according to Sister Tutor, was given to killing the male.

Apart from the Praying Mantis, I loved working on the Theatre. Operations were enthralling, and daily I marvelled at the things a body will stand. When I saw Sir Curtis Rowntree removing clots from a femoral artery as easily as he would clean his pipe, I thought that nothing could be more miraculous until I saw Mr Vavasour do a Caesarean.

I was quite prepared to come over queer. I had read stories of nurses and students thudding to the ground and being left to lie there while the white-robed, inhuman figures bent over the still, shrouded figure on the table, oblivious to all save their glorious task of saving life. I found, however, that if you are near enough to see anything, interest overcomes nausea. All eyes, all minds, are magnetized to that one point, the small uncovered area which for that hour is the focus of existence.

Although I was disappointed when Sister Gilbert announced one morning that I was to go to Martin Callaghan, the Men's Medical Ward, I was relieved to have escaped what was coming to me for letting the sterilizers boil dry the day before. I underestimated Theatre Sister. She made a special trip down

to Martin Callaghan to let Sister Tarling know what kind of vermin I was. Not that Sister Tarling paid much attention. She had been nursing for more than thirty years and knew exactly what she was at. She moved about the ward slowly, because her legs hurt her. She would have been retired if it had not been for the war.

There were two nurses on this ward junior to me, so after being only a bad smell on Theatre, I felt quite important. I was Relief Nurse, which meant I did the work of whoever was off. One day I would be bustling about with dressings and forceps, and the next I would be back at my old game of scouring the sluice.

We had a nice lot of men on the ward. They were a gentler, quieter lot than on Herbert Waterlow. We had fewer emergencies and casualties and more chronics.

There was one particular man, a Gastric called Siddons, who had been in for weeks and weeks to see whether an operation could be avoided by treatment. He was short and stocky, with hair like a carpet brush. He flip-flapped about in a pair of carpet slippers, looking after the other patients like a mother. The men called him 'Auntie.' He was solicitous with the old men and tender with the ill ones.

There were a lot of Gastrics on this ward. I had been harassed enough over Lady Mundsley's feeds on the Private wing, but these would have driven me demented if it had not been for Siddons. Some were on milk only, some on pre-digested milk, some hourly and some two hourly. Auntie had it all at his finger-tips. He knew when a patient's diet was changed. He took a deep interest in everything, and loved nothing better than a medical discussion, propounding a mixture of the old wives' stuff on which he had been reared, and technicalities that he had picked up during his long sojourn in hospital.

When the Anti-Aircraft unit brought down a German plane in a ploughed field five miles outside the town, we were the only ward that had beds to spare for the two survivors. Sister Tarling, who was so patriotic that she cried when the wireless played *There'll Always be an England*, hated the idea, and had to summon all her professional sense of duty and innate compassion to conquer her racial instincts.

'After all, Nurses, a case is a case,' she told us, all gathered in her sitting-room before the arrival of the Germans. 'I want you to look on it like this. To us has been given the privilege of healing the sick. It's a responsibility that transcends all other issues. The science of medicine is universal; it's far greater than any political upheaval or any war that was ever fought. These men are sick men. That's all you've got to think about – don't think about their nationality, and if you can't stomach their language, don't talk to them.' She paused. She had come to the end of the piece which she had prepared as much to convince herself as us.

We had not given much thought to the matter before. The mental apathy engendered by hospital routine had dulled the patriotic fervour which was responsible for half of our presences here. War news could no longer get us worked up; in fact, we seldom studied it, and as for discussing it – there were far more absorbing topics much nearer home. So the idea of two German patients had not moved us to murderous frenzy. It would be something new; you could say that for it. Now that Sister was making a Thing of it, however,

we began to feel those very reactions which she had called us in here to eradicate. We saw how strongly she objected. Her usually smooth, untroubled face showed traces of the struggle between her obligations and her instincts.

'After all,' said Nurse Dawlish, in her slow, resentful voice, 'they did come here to drop bombs on us. I don't see how we can be expected to forget that. I didn't come here to toady to a lot of Nazis. I shall tell Matron so.' Sister made a shocked, hushing face. 'I know it's difficult,' she said, 'but I look to you to back me up, as I know you will.' We all made *esprit de corps* noises. 'They'll be nursed behind screens, of course,' she went on, 'and there's no reason why the men should know who they are. You are strictly forbidden to mention them to the other patients. Is that clear?' she added, with a burst of severity.

It didn't make any difference. The men found out within a day. Trust Siddons not to be kept in the dark about anything that was going on in his ward. One had to keep constant watch on him to prevent his sneaking behind the screens to 'see what the bleeders looked like.' It was all rather embarrassing. The Germans were quite pleasant, well-mannered boys, not too badly injured to be perfectly aware of the effect of their presence on their unseen fellow-patients. Naturally, they hated being here as much as we hated to have them. They both had fractures and were difficult to move, and anything one had to do for them, like bathing them or making their bed, took a long time. Whenever the men saw one going behind the screens, they would yell out: 'Cut 'is bleeding throat, Nurse,' and other suggestions unprintable. The night nurse said that it was dreadful at night when there was an air raid. The men had never taken much notice before except to curse sleepily, but now they would all wake up to hurl abuse over the screens, and the Germans would lie blushing and silent, contemplating the irony of having a bomb dropped on them by their own side.

Dawlish had decided there might be a certain piquancy in discovering the good qualities of the Germans. Everyone else was too bigoted to appreciate them. She alone had the discernment to realize their intellect. She became more boring than ever with endless verbatim reports of conversations with them, ending up with: 'Of course, you think it's appalling of me to treat them like human beings, but I've never been able to develop this unthinking, automatic patriotism that everybody goes in for. I can't help seeing them as people, you see.' She would take up any attitude which she thought would disassociate her from the common herd in thought or deed.

We used to tease Dawlish about being keen on them, but the joke turned to ashes on our lips when the Junior, Lawson, announced one day that she was in love with Oberleutnant Himmelheber. She came and cried into the diabetic specimen that I was testing and told me all about it. I suppose she was attracted by the novelty. There were plenty of perfectly good Tommies in the ward on whom she could have sublimated her adolescent desires, but no, she had to go and pick on a German who, by the time he was discharged from the ward, was strong enough to 'Heil Hitler' at Sister as he was being wheeled past her on the trolley.

She went scarlet as if someone had hit her, and a perfect fusillade of oaths was hurled from all sides at the glass doors as the trolley went through.

Siddons leaped out of bed and ran down the corridor in pyjamas and bare feet before anyone could stop him. He lost the trolley after it had gone into the lift, and then retired to bed with indigestion. And all this time, Lawson was in the sluice, crying her eyes out and swearing she would never smile again.

She may not have, for all I know, because the next day I was moved to another ward, and became so oppressed by the unparalleled afflictions of my new existence that, as far as I was concerned, everyone wore a face like a boot.

1916 words