

One Pair of Feet – by Monica Dickens

Episode 1

One had got to be something; that was obvious. But what? It seemed that women, having been surplus for twenty years, were suddenly wanted in a hundred different places at once. You couldn't open a newspaper without being told that you were wanted in the Army, the Navy or the Air Force; factory wheels would stop turning unless you rushed into overalls at once; the AFS (*auxiliary fire service*) could quench no fires without you, every hoarding beckoned you and even Marble Arch badgered you about ARP (*air raid precautions*).

I could not make up my mind what to be. At first sight the choice seemed so enormous, but a closer inspection revealed so many snags that in the end the trouble was to find something to which I had a hope of sticking.

The Services? I didn't think my hips would stand the cut of the skirt and I wasn't too sure about my legs in wool stockings.

The AFS? I did try that for a while, but at the beginning of the war there was not much doing and I got discouraged with sitting all day in the back room of a police station with six assorted women and a man with a wooden leg.

The Land Army? One saw oneself picking apples in a shady hat, or silhouetted against the skyline with a couple of plough horses, but a second look showed one tugging mangel-wurzels out of the frozen ground at five o'clock on a bitter February morning.

Nursing? The idea had always attracted me. It was reading *Farewell to Arms*, I think, though what sort of hospital allowed such goings on, I can't imagine. Then I saw Madeleine Carroll in *Vigil in the Night*, and that settled it. I was going to be a nurse in a pure white halo cap, and glide swiftly about with oxygen cylinders and, if necessary, give my life for a patient and have my name on a bronze plaque in the hospital corridor. I wasn't going to be a VAD (*voluntary aid detachment*) either, I was going to start training and be a real probationer. We were being tactfully prepared for a long war, and I thought I might at least emerge from it with some letters after my name and an enamel badge on my bosom.

The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that this was the one thing I really wanted to do. I was not discouraged by people who told me that the first year, at least, would be unrelieved drudgery. I wasn't particular what hospital I joined, provided it was somewhere that could take me straightaway. A decision loses its charm unless you can act on it immediately. I wrote to several hospitals and some answered and some didn't, and the nicest reply came from the matron of the Queen Adelaide Hospital in Redwood, a town about fifty miles north of London.

Miss Sarah P. Churchman (Matron S.R.N.C.N.B.) had asked me for references, so I dictated one or two to friends with solid-looking surnames, saying how reliable and intelligent I was, with a gentle sympathy of manner that would make Florence Nightingale look like an SS Guard at Dachau. Sarah P. wrote again, still pleasantly, asking me to go for an interview. She sounded deep-bosomed and motherly, beloved of all nurses and patients and the confidante of doctors in their matrimonial troubles. I prayed that she

would like me.

Once when I was loitering at the bookshops in the Charing Cross Road, I had bought a ninepenny book called *Sister Fairchild's Manual for Nurses*. I took it with me in the train to Redwood to find out what demeanour befitted a nurse. That ninepence was well spent. It's a wonderful book, full of illustrations of nurses in high caps and birds'-nest hair doing strange things with kettles and primitive gas jets. I settled down to 'The Ethics of Nursing. Qualities required of the New Probationer. She must be a woman of intelligence,' I read, 'healthy physique, perfect temper, obedience, punctuality, cleanly habits, able for hard and exhausting work both mental and physical.' I didn't see that I was any of these things, so I went on to 'Dress', which told me that rustling petticoats and squeaking shoes were out of place and that outdoor wear should be neat, modest and not likely to excite comment. I was wearing a navy blue Burberry, low-heeled shoes and a hat that had once been a saucy sailor, but was now harmlessly turned up at the back and down at the front. I seemed to be all right there.

Then my eye was caught by: 'A Nurse's duties to herself', and I read with horror that: 'passing her life amid scenes of sorrow, suffering and the results of what she has been taught to consider sin, she tends to become morbid, introspective and cramped. She must, therefore, off duty, seize every chance of relaxation in any sphere unconnected with her work.' I shut the book hastily, before I could get melancholia.

The train swung round a curve and in a moment we were drawing into the station. It was quite a long walk to the hospital and by the time I reached the gates I was determined to be accepted. I was not going to have had this uphill walk for nothing. To visualize the geography of Redwood, you must imagine the hill on which the town is built as a rather squat pudding and the town as a sauce which has been poured over and run down the sides. A currant in the sauce has remained sitting right on top of the pudding and this is the Queen Adelaide Hospital. The sight of it as I crossed the road to the main gate did nothing to put me at my ease. Illness is ugly enough, Heaven knows, without its headquarters emphasizing it – large and square and grey, with symmetrical oblong windows and a slate roof from which tall iron chimneys pour dark brown smoke. Like most hospitals, it is impossible to find the way in. The main door is tight shut and says NO ENTRANCE, another says X-RAY. NO ADMITTANCE WITHOUT A GREEN CARD. At last, in a corner, I saw a notice that whispered 'Enquiries and Visitors' and I made for it. I came to a sort of glass ticket office, which must have been built round the vast man who sat palpitating inside. His blood pressure seemed terrifying, but I supposed the hospital knew about that.

I had to show him the Matron's letter before he would believe that I had an appointment with her. I imagined that he adored Sarah P. and had constituted himself her bulldog to keep off annoyance. Following in the direction of his pointing arm, I went down a corridor, turned a corner and was immediately lost. I plunged down a passage at random, wandered for ages up and down stairs and along stone corridors, when, pushing through some swing doors, I suddenly found myself in a ward full of beds. A clamorous woman with great shoes bore down on me.

'I'm in charge here,' she cried. 'You can't come breaking into the ward like this. Who do you want to see? You can't see them now.'

I thought of bursting into tears and saying 'I've come to see me Mum.' She was saying, 'You can come back on Wednesday.' Today was only Monday, and I thought how awful if I really had wanted to see me Mum.

'Please,' I stammered. 'I want to see the Matron. I can't find the way.'

'Good gracious!' Her eyebrows shot up. She turned and clicked her fingers at a scurrying girl. 'Nurse Rogers! Show this – er – show the way to Matron's office and come straight back. Quickly, Nurse. You've got plenty of work to do here without jaunting over half the hospital.'

Nurse Rogers scuttled through the doors without looking to see whether I was following. I kept her in sight with difficulty. At last I found her waiting for me outside a door that said 'PRIVATE' across the top.

'Here,' she panted, and was off like a water-rat. I hoped that I should never be sent to that ward. I should never stand the pace.

I knocked on the door and waited, wearing a polite face. No answer. I knocked again, and then again a bit louder. At last, I put my head into the room, leaving my body still politely outside. There was nobody there. I leaned against the wall in the passage, wondering whether I had come at the wrong time or even on the wrong day. Still, I was determined to see the Matron if it meant propping up the wall till night-time. I waited nearly an hour, and was just beginning to feel really sorry for myself when there was a clack-clacking on the linoleum at the end of the corridor.

The figure that approached was like a plucked boiling fowl. This couldn't be the Matron – not with that corrugated perm, those horn-rimmed spectacles and that scrawny neck. She was quite young – well, not old enough, anyway. This couldn't be Sarah P. Churchman. Where was the bosom, where the benevolent, understanding smile? She paused and said, 'Yes? What is it?' I told her what, and she said: 'Come in. You're early,' and went into the room, her back managing to convey that I should have opened the door for her. She looked sparer than ever seated behind her big desk. She seemed vaguely scornful and only acknowledged my answers to her questions by writing scratchily. She didn't even say: 'I'll let you know,' or any of the things with which people usually conclude an interview. She simply said: 'Very well, thank you,' and swinging open a ledger, busied herself with some accounts. I plodded out, started off despondently in no particular direction, and surprisingly, found myself almost immediately back at the bulldog in his glass kennel. I realized now why he had been so sceptical of my appointment. Sarah P. was obviously not much of a one for callers.