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THE
FRANTIC MISFORTUNES
OF A NURSE



A. M. IRVINE

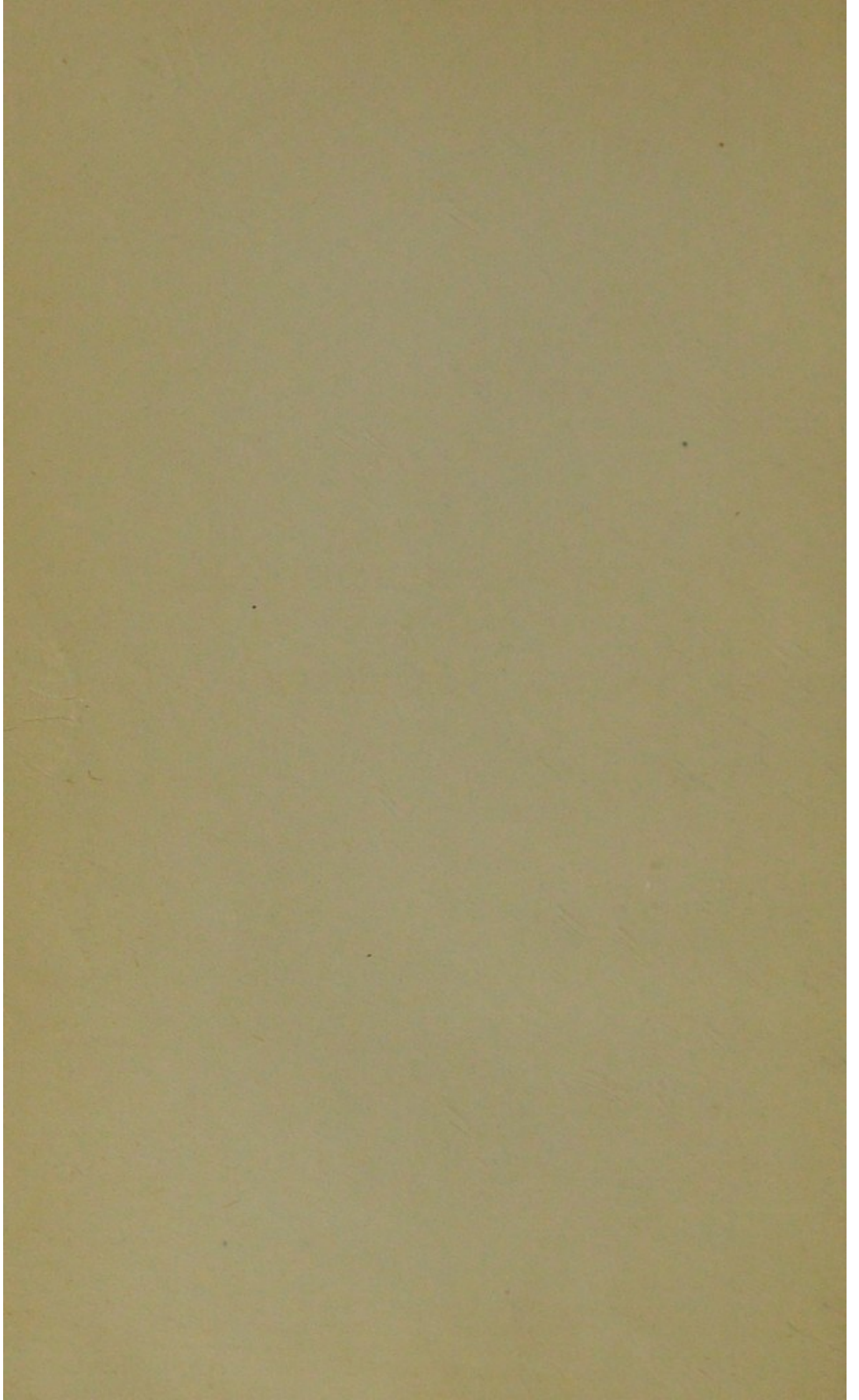
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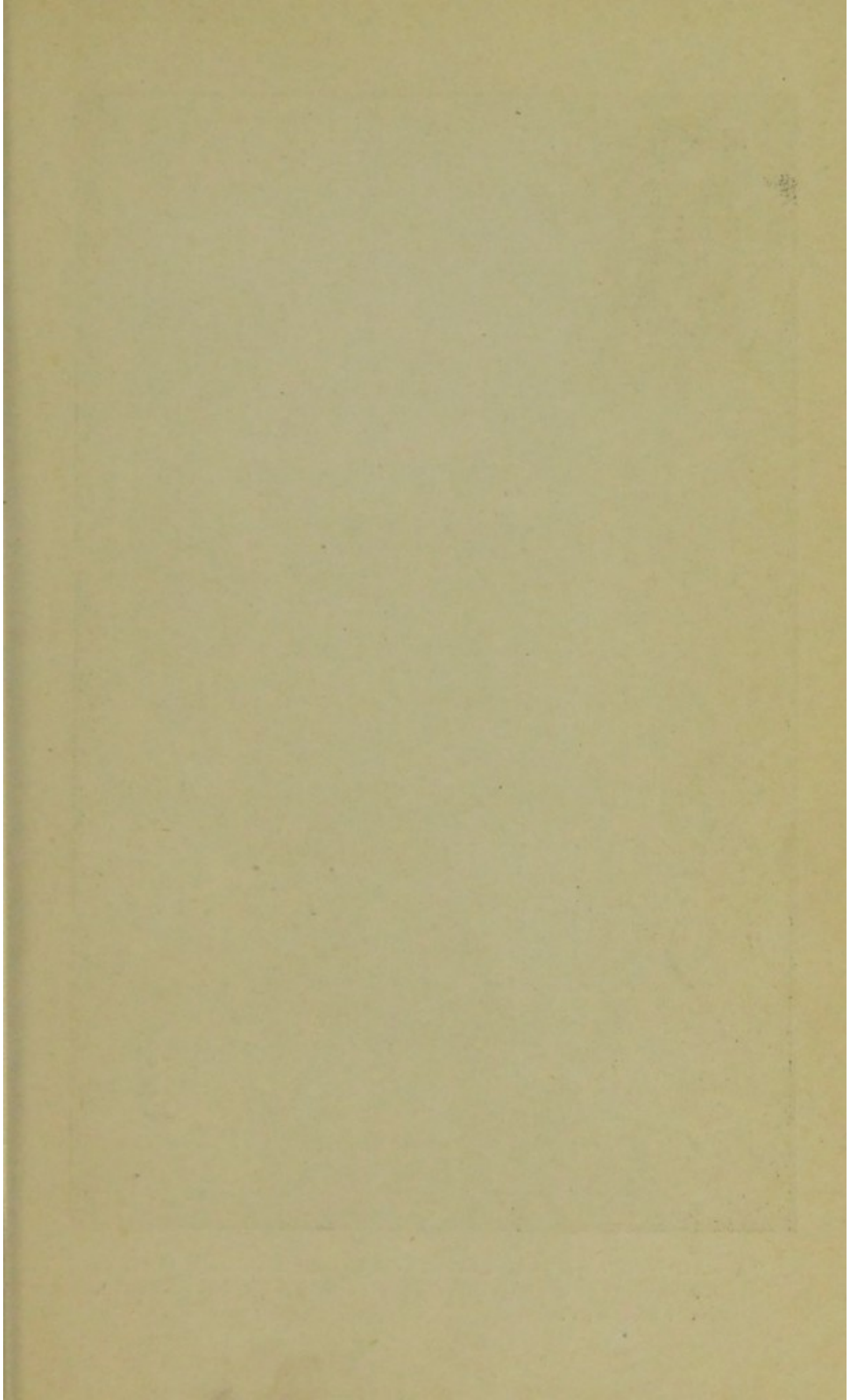
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THE FRANTIC MISFORTUNES
OF A NURSE
OR, THE PROBATIONER







"A MAID BROUGHT IN A TRAY, PAUSED FOR ONE BARE MOMENT TO SAY, 'YOUR TEA, MISS,' AND LEFT ME TO DECIDE UPON MY NEXT MOVE."

THE
FRANTIC MISFORTUNES
OF A NURSE

OR
THE PROBATIONER

BY
A. M. IRVINE

AUTHOR OF "THE SPECIALIST," "ROGER DINWIDDIE,
SOUL DOCTOR," "CLIFF HOUSE,"
ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY P. B. HICKLING

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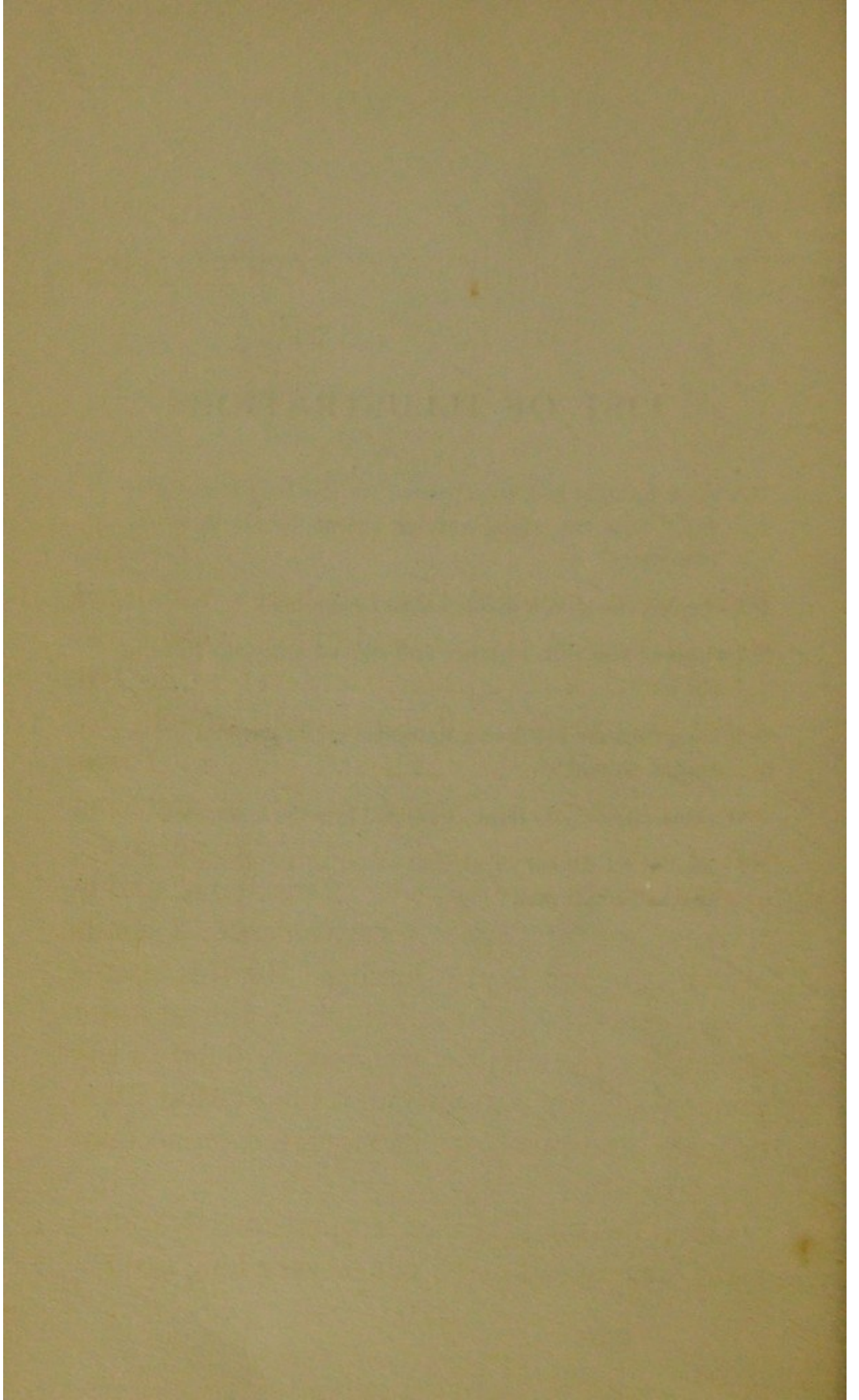
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THE FRANTIC MISFORTUNES OF A NURSE

CHAPTER I

THE OLD LIFE

JUST for a moment my mind has wandered back to the sort of life I used to lead when I was an idle girl with nothing whatever to do but dress, play tennis, and think about myself, my aches and pains, my fads and fancies. I was too well off to be happy—which is anything but a joke in real life. If I could not have exactly what I wanted, when I wanted it, and in spite of anyone else's inconvenience, I made myself a terror to my family. By this simple plan I generally got everything on the spot, for my elder sisters had a wholesome dread of my temper, and my parents had a theory that I was delicate, and must not be thwarted on account of my health.

Can it be true that that tempersome, irrational being was myself—and not so very long ago?

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One day I cut myself with my penknife when I was sharpening a pencil. It is almost too funny to recall the incident now. I went dancing and screaming into the drawing-room, where mother and the girls were reading or doing fancy-work, and a nice hullabaloo I created. Ethel flew for the smelling-salts, while Isabel bound my finger. Father came hurrying in with anxiety written all over his dear, kindly face, and altogether it was quite an occasion. For the rest of the day I was invalided and petted as if something of consequence had happened. I lay on the sofa with half-closed eyes, feeling faint, and Kate, who affected profound medical knowledge (having been through the St. John's Ambulance course), sat beside me with her finger on my pulse.

Another time I had a sore throat (I suppose it was slightly relaxed), and the doctor was summoned in wild haste. I was astute enough to observe certain little signs which indicated the unpleasant truth that he did not think much of my complaint; but at the time it suited my fancy to consider myself in a dangerous state of health, and I performed my part with all the enthusiasm that has since found another vent. Our doctor understood us well enough to treat me seriously. The whole family

THE OLD LIFE

would have been offended if he had spoken the blunt truth. So he suppressed his amusement and prescribed for me ; and my sisters went about on tiptoe, keeping the house quiet, until sheer hunger compelled me to recover.

Another of my illnesses was cured by an approaching picnic, and another by a fascinating invitation ; others were brought on by boredom or temper, and I simply can't imagine how anyone kept patience with me at all. So long as there was some excitement or pleasure to distract me, I was charming ; but if there happened to be anything tiresome that had to be done, my health broke down, not to mention my temper.

Then I made the acquaintance of Nurse Phillips, fell in love with her and her profession, and was seized with a frantic desire to follow in her footsteps.

" You see," I explained to her, " I am not too stupid not to know that I am wasting my life and getting more spoilt every day, though that is really the fault of my family, not mine at all."

She looked steadily at me, and suggested that nursing was a hard life.

" Yes, but how interesting ! " I exclaimed.

" Most interesting," said Nurse Phillips.

THE PROBATIONER

“And so splendid!” I continued eagerly. “Just think of the suffering you relieve—of the lives you save!”

“Yes,” said she, “that is worth consideration. Nursing is one of the noblest of all professions for women. They come into conflict with pain and death—those two terrible forces against which mankind is always struggling; but it requires grit to get through the necessary training, and . . .”

“And you don’t think I possess it,” I supplemented grimly.

“I am not so sure,” she answered slowly, eyeing me with that strong, clear eye of hers.

I did not answer; I stared out of the window, seeing myself in a new light for once.

“There is no harm in trying,” suggested Nurse Phillips, “and if you would take my advice . . .”

“So I will,” said I.

“Then you will begin in a children’s hospital,” said she. “And if you want to know why, I will tell you frankly.”

“Why?” I asked at once.

“Because, though I believe your health is perfectly sound”—I winced—“I am not sure whether, after such an easy life at home, you could face the hardships of the heavy work in a general hospital.”

THE OLD LIFE

“ I should prefer a children’s,” said I eagerly. “ Oh, I cannot think of anything more sublime than nursing little suffering children ! There might be repulsive things to do for grown-up patients, but nothing, nothing at all could repel me if it was done for a little child ! ”

“ You might have to wash them when they first came in,” said Nurse Phillips, in a hesitating tone.

I put on a lip of scorn, and informed her that if there were one task on earth that I should appreciate above all others, it would be bathing poor little mites out of the slums, whose mothers did not consider a bath necessary as a part of their toilet. I can remember to this day her glance at my hands when I made this statement ; I tried to tan them in the sun afterwards, lest anyone else should think they looked so incapable !

“ You mean to try—really ? ” asked Nurse Phillips, after a pause.

“ I do,” I answered firmly.

She studied my face a few more moments, and then she said, very quietly, but in a tone I never shall forget, “ I believe you will succeed.”

“ Then you believe in me ? ”

“ I believe in you,” answered Nurse Phillips.

CHAPTER II

BREAKING THE ICE

To the end of my life I shall remember the extraordinary difficulty I had in making my family believe I was in earnest when I announced my intentions.

Outside the cold spring winds were blowing, and we were sitting round a cosy fire. I had been strangely quiet for some time, but conscious of Ethel's uneasy glances at me. I suppose she was afraid that my unusual silence meant sulks, and she made one or two efforts to rouse me from the new mood. At last, during a pause in the babble of conversation, I dropped the bomb.

"I have something to tell you all," said I, and instantly secured the attention I required for such a serious announcement. I looked round, and they might have guessed by my face that I was in earnest this time; but they did not! "I wish to inform you that I am going to become a nurse."

My sisters burst into a little peal of laughter.

BREAKING THE ICE

"What is the joke?" asked my father, beaming.

"It is no joke," said I; "I have simply told you all what I am going to do with my life."

"Whose nurse?" asked Isabel, giggling. "Shall I be the cook in the same family? And do you think they'd accept Kate as parlour-maid?"

"I am going to be a trained nurse," said I, rather doggedly, "a trained hospital nurse."

"Oh, to be sure!" put in Ethel. "She's just made bosom friends with Nurse Phillips."

"Who is Nurse Phillips?" asked my father in severe tones, as if he wished to annihilate that being.

"She came down to nurse Grace Harding," explained Ethel with fresh laughter, "and Agnes has been following her about like a puppy dog. I suppose she admires the uniform."

"Oh, so that's it!" cried Kate. "But after all, any sort of uniform becomes a little monotonous—even if it is *becoming!*" She slightly accentuated the last word, to point out that a pun was intended, and everybody (except me) burst out laughing again.

"When you have stopped your cachinnations," said I, "I will try to explain why I mean to become—to be—a nurse."

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“So becoming!” echoed Kate, amidst fresh laughter that to my mind was utterly foolish.

I meant to tell them that I was tired of this aimless sort of life—that I wanted to do a little real work in the world—that my mind was set upon a more earnest line—that I wanted to join the magnificent struggle against pain and death about which Nurse Phillips had spoken. But how were such sentiments to be expressed in this atmosphere of nonsense?

“Well,” said I, “I’ve told you what I mean to do, and if it amuses you, laugh away.”

“When are you going?” asked Isabel, wiping her eyes ostentatiously.

“I am going at once.”

“What? To-night? Is the carriage here? Has Williams strapped your box? Isn’t this very sudden? Oh, do wait until we have scribbled down your address!” and so on, and so on. I sat through the fresh cataract of nonsense, striving to keep my unruly temper, and remembering Nurse Phillips’ counsels as to the necessity of learning to control one’s feelings if one would be a nurse.

My sisters were very funny—very funny indeed about it, and how ever I managed to convince them that this was downright, serious earnest and not a good joke, I hardly know.

BREAKING THE ICE

I don't believe they realised it until I had actually gone through all the preliminaries: chosen my hospital, filled in the forms that were sent to me, had my uniform made, forwarded the necessary testimonials, and actually packed my boxes. Had my parents believed it from the first, I hardly think they would have given their consent, since they were under the impression that their youngest born was very delicate, and required nursing herself rather than the responsibility of nursing others. As it was, my mother expostulated with me up to the end, and my father only let me go on the understanding that I was to return at once if anyone attempted to overtax my strength, or in any way imposed upon me by forcing excessive work upon me. "Of course," he mused, trying to comfort himself, "she will be taken care of in a hospital; perhaps it is a good sort of place for her. Health is studied in hospitals, and she will be daily watched by doctors, so we needn't feel anxious about the poor child."

This was a great consolation to my mother, who added that she had often heard that regular work was good for the health, and last time dear Agnes was ill the doctor had said something about supplying her with outside

THE PROBATIONER

interests, so that she might not have quite so much time on her hands. She had not perfectly understood him at the moment, but possibly he meant something of this sort, for he had approved of this move quite cordially when he had given me the necessary certificate of health.

Isabel came to the conclusion that it was only a novel sort of game on my part, and that I should quickly tire of the game. Kate persisted in declaring that it was all for the sake of the uniform, and Ethel wound up the matter by assuring us that we need none of us weep too much when we said good-bye, "Because, you know," said she, "it won't be so very long before we see her again. Let us say two days."

"Or one entire week, at the most," added Isabel.

I did not deign to reply; they should see for themselves whether I were in earnest this time or not.

CHAPTER III

I ARRIVE

THE train drew up, and I alighted, expecting a little bevy of nurses to come rushing forward to greet their new companion, and clamour for the privilege of helping me with my bag and umbrella, not to mention the boxes in the van which had to be extricated from the general confusion.

But not a solitary nurse could I discern on that crowded platform, and I was soon forced to the conclusion that no one had come to meet me. I was puzzled by such extraordinary negligence, and walked up and down the platform several times before I could believe it, until it flashed upon me that perhaps the Matron had made a mistake about the hour of my arrival ; and I forgave her, as I guessed indulgently that she might have had a good deal to do in other ways. Perhaps there had been a few extra accidents, or a very serious operation, or something of that sort to distract her mind. So I hailed a cab for myself, and

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haughtily directed a porter to place my boxes upon it very carefully, and then proudly gave my new address to the driver. He did not seem in the least impressed!

It was a long drive through the strange town, and I became impatient—not nervous, of course. I was tired after the exciting, though short journey, and wanted my tea. My heart beat rapidly when at last we drove in through the gates, and I saw my future home before me. It loomed up large and bare, with rows of uncurtained windows—about as ugly as most hospitals. I caught a glimpse of a white cap flashing by one of the windows, and that gave me a funny little thrill, very comforting after the first impression.

A nice-looking maid opened the door in answer to my imperative summons. On catching sight of my luggage, which the driver was lifting down from the cab, she said, "Are you the new nurse?"

"I suppose I am," said I, in the tone of one who snubs.

She did not seem aware of reproof, but pleasantly conducted me into a large room, furnished with a table in the centre, and chairs stiffly arranged round the walls. There was one easy chair near the fire. Into this I flung myself,

I ARRIVE

and waited, at first patiently, but after a short time without patience. "They are evidently in no hurry," I muttered. "I suppose they have too much time on their hands here; but they might consider me a little, and at least send me in a cup of tea!"

These reflections were disturbed by the quick opening of the door, and I turned in time to see a nurse come in. She wore a navy-blue dress, cap, and apron, which all looked very sweet and smart.

"So you've come," was her greeting. "Had a pleasant journey?"

"Not very," I returned; "it was dusty and crowded, and I had the greatest difficulty in catching my connection."

"Do you feel tired?" said she.

"I do," said I, "very tired—very tired indeed, and I was surprised at not being met at the station."

She looked surprised too—just as if the idea of meeting a traveller were comical! She next inquired whether I would like a little tea, and before I could assure her that I had been on the point of asking for it myself, she added, "I think you may have it."

"Well," said I to myself, "I should imagine that I may! I should just about suppose so!"

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"Come with me," said the nurse. She did not waste time in polite suavities; she issued the command in brief, terse language, and whisked round to lead the way without turning her head to see if I were ready to follow. I went after her through a large hall and one or two long corridors, up wide, bare stairs, and into a pretty little room which pleased me the moment I entered it. "You may sit down," she said (I had done so already), and left me.

Once again I had to wait, this time fuming, for I was not accustomed to this style of welcome. "She hardly knows her manners," I reflected. "She ought to have pushed a chair forward and made a little fuss of me, or at the least have stayed to chat for a few minutes. . . . Dear me, they take their time over things in this hospital!"

It was enough to rouse my temper; but I remembered the counsels of Nurse Phillips, and was looking quite calm when at last a maid brought in a tray, placed it on a table at the other end of the room, paused for one bare moment to say, "Your tea, miss," and left me to decide upon my next move. At first I was inclined to ignore that tray, which certainly ought to have been brought to me. The table

I ARRIVE

close by could easily have been cleared by any housemaid who knew her work, but I decided to bear even this without a fuss, and patiently walked over to the tray and refreshed myself. Then followed another pause, and I was on the point of ringing the bell to draw attention to my existence when the same maid returned, and said, "I'll show you to your room, miss." She did not ask me if I would like to go to my room, or wait to know how I felt about that, and I stalked after her in silent indignation.

We walked about a quarter of a mile through corridors, up and down stairs, and did not meet anything of interest. All was bare, clean, and draughty.

"You had better shut that window," I said, in a tone of authority.

The maid was so astonished that she stopped short and stared at me.

"Didn't you hear?" I asked. "I told you to shut that window; this passage is much too draughty for invalids. . . . Is anything the matter with you?"

The maid had positively staggered, then a sort of convulsion shook her frame, and she began to hurry on with her handkerchief in her mouth. I had not time to shut the window myself, and was nearly stifled with

THE PROBATIONER

righteous indignation. Such disobedience in a maid at home would have meant dismissal; and, what was worse, this intolerable creature was choking with laughter that she evidently did not dare to indulge out loud. She dashed up against a door, which burst open roughly, and muttering, "Your room, miss," turned and fled, wiping her eyes as she went.

This was one way of showing a lady to her bedroom! I was ready to cry with vexation.

CHAPTER IV

I AM A PRO

MY room was evidently by no means mine, as I discovered the very moment I entered it, and saw my boxes at the end of a small bed partitioned off from two other beds by mere curtains. This was such a shock to me that I dropped down on the end of the bed that was to be mine, and decided to go home again by the next train to-morrow morning. What! Share a room with two strange nurses? Never! I, who had been accustomed to the luxury not only of a room to myself, but even to a little dressing-room attached—and had made myself disagreeable at home because two of my sisters had a boudoir also, which had convinced me that no girl ought to be expected to put up without a complete suite of apartments of her very own.

Share a room, indeed—and with two other nurses! Two strangers, whose fathers might have been greengrocers for all I knew!

How long it took me to get over this horrid

THE PROBATIONER

discovery I do not know, but the memory of Nurse Phillips stole in and assuaged my wrath. It also occurred to me that perhaps the conversation of my two companions after we came to bed might be interesting and instructive. We would, no doubt, discuss our cases down to the minutest details; and I would gather all the information that I required from these enthusiastic companions. I imagined myself listening spellbound until twelve o'clock at night, with no tiresome school regulations as to silence after lights are put out to stop us chattering as long as we liked. Finally, I came to the conclusion that it was not bad fun to share a room with other girls, who would very likely enjoy a little harmless fun with me after the day's work was over.

At last I began to unpack my boxes. I found that the accommodation here was insufficient. I had a chest of drawers and dressing-table combined, and in the recess beside the fireplace I discovered pegs, two of which were cleared for me. But there was no wardrobe, no odd shelves or cupboards—and the chest of drawers was small, while there was no mortal place on which to put all the pretty nicknacks with which I intended to deck my room. I had brought enough of these to

I AM A PRO

fill one of my boxes—and I may as well here remark that I never even opened that box all the while I was in hospital. Long before I had finished unpacking my mere clothes I was tired out, and threw myself down on my bed to rest, wishing that our maid had come with me to settle my things, and do my hair, and bring me up some hot water.

Someone knocked and came in without waiting for permission, and I raised my head indignantly. It was one of the Staff-nurses, as I found out later on, and I forgave her—I even smiled a welcome—because I thought it would be so nice to have a cosy chat with one of the nurses.

But she was evidently in no mood for a cosy chat.

“Get up,” was what she said, “and I will show you how to make your caps.”

Was that the way to speak to me? I determined on the spot *not to like her!* Catching her eye, I suddenly raised myself to a sitting posture, and she regarded me unfavourably.

“I wish for another chest of drawers,” I said, now deciding not to show myself too friendly.

She took no more notice of my remark than if I had not spoken, so I repeated it, adding, “And a bookcase.”

THE PROBATIONER

“Indeed,” said the Staff-nurse. “You bend the linen this way . . . tie the strings like this . . . draw it in just there. . . .”

“I have not room in that one for my clothes,” said I, fuming, “and there is no wardrobe.”

“Your boxes will be removed after supper, which is at eight o’clock. Do not be late. You need not change to uniform to-night.”

“I was not dreaming of changing,” said I, but she had disappeared before the words had left my lips.

This sort of thing was enough to upset anyone, and I stamped my foot with fury. Tears of wrath blinded my eyes, but the uselessness of expending so much energy in futile rage occurring to me, I dashed them away, and sat down to make my caps as she had directed. Then I bundled my clothes anyhow into my drawers, and wound up by making myself look as nice as ever I could, in order to create a favourable impression at supper-time.

It was awkward dressing before a wretched little glass on top of a chest of drawers, but when I had done it to my own satisfaction I felt decidedly happier. There was an uncomfortable suspicion lurking in my mind that hospital life was not going to be exactly what I had fancied; still, I suppressed these sus-

I AM A PRO

picious as they rose, and forcibly turned my thoughts upon the sublime aspects of this work. A short reflection convinced me that, after all, I would not abandon the enterprise because I had not a large enough chest of drawers, or even because the Staff-nurse had been rude to me. Whatever hospital life was like, I decided to stay. Other girls had done it, then why not I? Besides, this was only a children's hospital, so the work would be perfectly easy.

The supper-bell rang on these meditations, and I went down, following a troop of nurses I saw in the distance. I managed to catch them up just as we entered the dining-room—they had been hurrying like schoolgirls—I had to run to keep them in sight.

I reached the dining-room last of all. No one took the slightest notice of me. I expected the Matron to come forward eagerly to greet her new nurse, and to apologise for not having welcomed me in person. She did nothing of the sort, but just slightly inclined her head to me, and pointed out my seat. I sat down in my place positively bewildered. I was not accustomed to this indifference; I had never been ignored before in all my life.

“What immensely long passages these are,” I said to the nurse beside me, intending to prove

THE PROBATIONER

by my conversational powers that I was not shy.

“ Yes,” she answered.

“ I had such a tiresome journey,” I confided to put her at her ease. This remark did not require an answer—and it got none.

“ The trains were all crowded, and I almost lost my connection at Bletchley, through my first train being late. Wouldn't it have been awkward if I could not have come on ? ”

“ Yes,” said the nurse ; evidently she was embarrassed ! Perhaps my pretty dress made her fancy that I was someone of importance ! I was determined to melt her—to show that I did not feel myself superior to these surroundings ; in fact, since I liked her face, I was going to make a friend of her !

“ Have we any serious cases in now ? ” I asked, and the feeling that this hospital, and all the cases in it, now belonged to *me* swept over me in a wave of exultation.

“ Pass the salt, if you please,” was the only answer I extracted by this burst of enthusiasm.

I looked up and down the table, and was struck with the businesslike way in which the nurses were dispatching their supper. I did not think it was at all good manners to sit there eating as if we had come for no other purpose.

I AM A PRO

No one made an unnecessary remark, so conversation was at a discount—and to say that everyone was scurrying through the food was not exaggerating in the least. I toyed with my own supper in disgust, and in consequence had merely begun it when I discovered that the meal was over!

As we rose from table, I followed the Matron to the door; I had no opportunity of addressing her, as I sat at the other end of the table. Someone caught my arm and held me back. I turned round indignantly.

“ ‘Pros’ always go last, and you last of all,” said the Staff-nurse who had shown me how to make my caps, and from whose clutch I could not wriggle. “As you are the latest pro, it will be your duty to open the door for Matron every time she comes in or out, and to-morrow you will cut the bread.”

I stood transfixed. Then the nurse to whom I had been chattering at supper came near, and spoke to me in a low tone.

“Another time,” was what she said, “I do not advise you to talk at meals, it is not customary for pros to do so.”

“What? What did you say? What is a pro?” I stammered, with rising passion.

“You are one,” she answered, smiling.

CHAPTER V

DISSATISFIED CURIOSITY

No one seemed to care a bit whether a pro (whatever that might be), was out of temper or not, so I sulked to no purpose that night, and since it mattered not at all to anyone whether my chin were up in the air, or dug into my chest in savage fashion, I presently held it in normal position.

I was "allowed" to return to my room immediately after supper. When this gracious permission was given, I promptly said, "Thank you, but I do not wish to retire; I will take a walk round the wards. . . ." Then I suddenly stopped, and retired!

My boxes had been removed during supper-time, and there was nothing to do but write a post card home announcing my safe arrival. I very nearly sent a long letter instead; but when I had scribbled down most of it, I tore it up. In the letter I had let forth my burning indignation, and had prepared my family for a rapid return to its bosom. It was the sight of

DISSATISFIED CURIOSITY

these words in writing that pulled me up. Besides, what would Nurse Phillips say when I returned thus ignominiously? She was still nursing Grace Harding—and she had believed in me!

I went to bed at leisure, and had time before my room companions appeared for a good, long reflection upon this crisis in my life. I remembered all my resolutions before I left home. I was going to be an ideal nurse—I would spend my whole time in tender ministrations to the little sufferers here; at my approach their poor little white faces would brighten—my voice would soothe them—I would keep them happy, clean, and amused. How I would play with the poor pets—how indefatigable would be my voluntary services! No single moment would I take when I was off duty for selfish pleasures, all my time was dedicated to this glorious work . . .

In bounced a couple of nurses—my future chums and confidants! I sat up in bed eager to make their acquaintance.

“Good evening,” said I, beaming upon them.

They returned my greeting curtly, and began flinging off their clothes.

“Are the beds full just now?” I asked.

“I wish mine was,” muttered Nurse Fletcher,

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while Nurse Morgan uttered a sort of sniff that did not sound encouraging.

“ You seem tired,” said I, sympathetically.

“ Nurses generally are—at this time of night,” snapped Nurse Fletcher in a meaning tone.

“ Oh! Have you had a particularly hard day?” I asked, with interest. “ Were there any *operations*?”

“ Yes,” shortly answered Nurse Fletcher, while another angry sniff came from Nurse Morgan.

“ And were you—either of you—present?” I asked, with awe and eager curiosity. The thought thrilled me; I was positively trembling, and felt very near to the heart of things at that moment. I knew that Isabel and Ethel were ready to faint at the mere mention of such a word, and that the talk of operations was considered an offence against good taste in my former circle. That such things ever had to be done at all was one of the facts of life which did not bear discussing.

“ Of course,” answered Nurse Fletcher, crossly.

“ Both of you?” I persisted.

“ No.”

“ How many operations were there?”

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“Two.”

“Were they bad ones?”

A growl answered, but I was too deeply interested to be rebuffed.

“Are the little patients doing well now?”

“The little patients are doing well. Good night,” answered Nurse Fletcher, flinging herself into bed.

“Oh, do tell me about it!” I coaxed. “I’m longing to hear all the details.”

“And we are longing to go to sleep,” spoke up Nurse Morgan, “so if you don’t mind reserving your catechism for Matron or Mr. Fleming”—a titter came from Nurse Fletcher’s bed—“we’ll just turn over and seek repose.”

“Who is Mr. Fleming?” I asked.

“The house surgeon, of course.”

“Does he live here?”

I received no answer but an exasperated grunt, and it began to dawn on me that my companions were not in a conversational mood, or perhaps were uncommonly cross individuals, and the thought of retreating home to-morrow morning again glanced through my mind. I certainly was not prepared to tolerate these curt manners from anyone, and my blood boiled when I remembered how Matron had ignored me. No one here seemed to realise that I was

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a person of some consequence—I might have been less than a housemaid for all the notice given to me. Nurse Phillips had not prepared me for anything of this sort ; but then, she had spoken altogether of the work itself, as if those who did it were only a part of the great machinery. I remembered now how very little she had said about anyone in her hospital by name, and this reflection comforted me somewhat. Still, it was not pleasant to regard my own individual self in the light of a tool, and presently I began picturing that self as a rising force in this institution—of such growing importance to it that before very long I should find myself in the most responsible position here, with these two cross nurses ready to grovel at my feet for a word of encouragement ! Yes, and my advice would be asked by the doctors too ; in fact, there was almost no end to the brilliant fiction.

Naturally enough, I did not sleep much that night ; but my room companions slept like logs, their deep breathing annoying me very much. One of them positively snored. If this annoyance continued I should certainly ask for another room ; I could not sleep while such a sound disturbed me.

Hour after hour went by, and not until

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morning was on the point of breaking did I at last fall asleep, just when I had come to the conclusion that I should certainly have to consult the doctor about such insomnia. This conclusion was, no doubt, the influence that finally soothed my wakeful brain to sleep, for I revelled in a doctor's visits, always considering that every medical man was absorbed in the interest of prescribing for my complaints, no matter how slight. The idea of living in a house to which doctors came every day was simply entrancing!

CHAPTER VI

I MAKE THE BEDS

“ TIME to get up ! ”

“ What ! ” I exclaimed, while the night nurse who had run in to wake us disappeared. “ Why, it’s only half-past six ! ”

“ We have to be down by seven,” explained Nurse Fletcher, who had started up, and was vigorously rubbing her eyes, while Nurse Morgan groaned bitterly as she tore herself from her splendid slumbers.

“ Down by seven ! ” I repeated, indignantly. “ Do you mean *always* ? ”

“ Of course. What else did you expect ? Did you think we had breakfast in bed ? ”

“ Half-past six is almost the middle of the night,” I argued, with a little moan, “ and I had only just gone to sleep.”

My complaints met with no sympathy ; the two nurses were already briskly rising, and their movements roused me at last, so that I got up rather sulkily, feeling that this was an imposition to which nurses ought not to submit. When I had

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been here a little longer I should get this rule changed, especially in the case of nurses who were poor sleepers. It was another shock to find that no one had brought me any hot water ; but I smothered the indignant protest that rose to my lips at this discovery, and plunged my face into cold, after which I felt all the fogs of night dissolving in the thought that my life here had now really begun !

It was indescribably thrilling to find myself dressed at last in all the war paint of a full-fledged nurse ! But the time it took me putting my cap on straight, and arranging my hair under it, made me too late to swallow the seven-o'clock cup of tea, or eat my piece of bread and butter. Nobody cared except myself !

I was hurried off to the ward the moment I put in my appearance, without time enough to protest, but I smothered my feelings and went bravely to my new work, confident that I was about to acquit myself brilliantly.

I entered the ward with a curious mixture of dread and delight, and looked round, fairly dazzled by the picture before my eyes. This was the medical ward, as I was informed, and I was glad to hear it, as I had begun to feel a little creepy at thought of the terrible wounds I might have to dress in the surgical. Dear

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little beds and cots were ranged on either side of the room, and in the centre a couple of cradles upon stands. Everything was so fresh and spotless that I decided at once that work here could be nothing but pleasure.

“Now,” said the nurse in navy blue, who had given me my first meagre welcome the day before, and who turned out to be the Sister of this ward, “you have to make the beds on this side. Be quick, there’s no time to waste.”

“Oh, it won’t take me long,” I responded cordially; “their beds don’t need much making.”

Sister did not reply, she only looked at me, and for some reason I wished I had not made that remark. I felt my cheeks burning, and turned to conceal my embarrassment. “Nothing is easier than making beds,” I said to myself; “I’ll soon show her that I am not a lazy worker.” With that I approached my first little patient, and spoke to it in a wheedling tone. “Nursie will make your dear little bed for you, my pretty pet. Jump up—at least—if you can. What is the matter with you, darling?”

“Get away,” answered my pretty pet, glaring at me like a wild beast.

“Oh, no, Nursie is going to make your bed,”

I MAKE THE BEDS

I protested. "Come—can't you get up, darling?"

A shrill scream responded to this tender invitation, and I turned aghast to seek help of Sister.

"That one won't let me make its bed," I stammered out.

"Won't — let — you — make — its — bed!" echoed Sister, and paused. Then she added, "Did you ask its leave?"

Without replying, I wheeled round and took my little patient up by force. I won't say that I did not administer a little shake. I plumped it down upon the rug in front of the fireplace, where another child from the opposite side of the ward had been deposited by someone else. I was stopped by an exclamation of horror, and found Sister hurrying after me, her eyes simply blazing.

"What *can* you mean by taking that child out of its cot?" she asked, shrilly.

"I mean to make its bed," I replied, in much the same tone, for I was losing patience.

"Are you mad?" cried Sister. "Quick, take it back at once. It's got pneumonia—you might kill it!"

"Well, how was I to know that it had pneumonia?" I returned. "I . . ."

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“ Did you not look at its chart ? ”

I began a long explanation, to show Sister that I could hardly be expected to look at a child's chart when I did not even know that it had one, or where it was kept, or how to read it supposing I had happened to observe the thing—but she put a sudden full stop to my expostulations with one look of withering contempt, and I flopped the pneumonia patient back into its bed, and proceeded to arrange the clothes according to my ideas.

It appeared that my ideas were not sported in this hospital in any single particular. That precious bed was not made when I had smoothed the sheets under the wriggling creature, and tucked its blankets neatly down, and turned the pillow, and arranged the quilt so nicely that I stood and gazed at my work with admiration.

“ Do you call that making a bed ? ” asked a disagreeable voice in my ear. It was the Staff-nurse who had shown me how to make my caps the day before, and whose surname was Smith—a fact that proclaimed her inferior origin, and made it very difficult to refrain from rebuking her for venturing to address *me* in such a tone ! I would not deign to answer, and she proceeded to whip off the top clothes, care-

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fully covering my squealing patient in a blanket, and speaking to it in a soothing manner. "Be quiet at once," was what she said, and the child whimpered once, and was quiet.

Then I put the sheets on the wrong side, and of course I couldn't tuck the bedclothes in right at the corners (no one could the first time they attempt this mystery). The charming Staff-nurse followed me round all those seven beds, undoing everything I did, and making scathing remarks all the time. Sheer indignation tied my tongue, and when I had somehow finished the last, I dropped into a chair, completely exhausted.

Bed-making in hospital is no joke !

CHAPTER VII

I LEARN TO SWEEP

SISTER did not say anything when she caught sight of me sitting down, exhausted, after making the beds ; but she gave me a look that brought me scrambling to my feet in as much confusion as if I had been caught doing wrong !

“ You now have to sweep the floor and dust the ward,” she said, swiftly passing me, “ and hurry—it must be done before breakfast.”

“ But . . . ”

Sister’s eye checked the first remark that rose to my lips, I substituted for it a milder question. “ Is the housemaid ill ? ”

She regarded me steadily for a moment, then she said, “ If you have come here to be waited on, you have not found your right sphere.” With that she evaporated, and I snatched up a duster, and dusted the ward, all the while muttering away under my breath, “ Do they expect me to stay here and be housemaid ? Most certainly I am not going to be

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anything of the sort. The idea! Me—a housemaid! What do they think of me? I came here to nurse the children, not to sweep and dust like a housemaid. . . . What is the matter, sweet pet?"

Down went my duster, and I bent over a cot where a little boy lay whimpering uncomforted.

"G'long!" returned the sweet pet, something after the style of my pneumonia darling.

"Oh, very well," I retorted, "cry away—I'm not going to waste my time on a rude, uneducated little ruffian. . . ."

My voice died away in my throat. Staff-nurse Smith was standing there, listening with much interest. "I—I've finished dusting," I managed to ejaculate.

"Is that what you call finished?" she asked, with withering scorn, and pointed to the skirting behind the sweet pet's cot.

"How am I to get behind the beds?" I burst out, indignation supplying me with voice. "Am I supposed to go down on all fours and crawl under? No; that is a little too much, and do it I can't."

"You will have to learn not to answer when you are spoken to," returned Staff-nurse Smith to me—Me!

"I shall have to learn a good many other

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things—by instinct, I suppose,” I was unable to resist saying.

“ There is a brush with a long handle in the kitchen,” said she, cuttingly.

“ How was I to know that ? ” I asked.

Staff-nurse Smith had evidently learned not to answer when *she* was spoken to, for she merely glanced at me, and warfare to the death was expressed in that look.

“ I suppose my instinct ought to have told me that,” said I, “ but it never suggested anything except a duster for dusting. Where is the kitchen ? ”

That was the last unnecessary question which I asked just then, for my profound ignorance and stupidity were brought home to me in the unutterable contempt of her manner. She conveyed to my understanding, without exactly saying it in so many words, that I had no more sense than a silly little child, and needed a nurse to take care of me rather than venturing to pose as a nurse of others. All she actually said was, “ Do you think you can go alone, or shall I call a nurse to take you ? ”

How I found the kitchen, I hardly know, but find it I did, and without any further direction. Rage nearly blinded me, and my voice was stifled ; I could not have uttered another word

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if my whole destiny hung upon it. Somehow I found the long-handled brush, and gathered up a broom as well, for I had to sweep as well as dust. I was rather proud of having thought of that broom myself, without having it expressly mentioned to me, and after I had dusted under and behind the beds in my ward, I proceeded to sweep the floor as well as I could for the weakness in my arms, due, no doubt, to hunger and fatigue. When the bell rang for breakfast at a quarter to nine, I was certain that another ten minutes would have seen me lying on the floor in a dead faint. No one took the slightest notice of my pallor, or expressed the least concern on my behalf.

As informed the day before, I had to cut the bread for all the nurses, being the latest probationer, and in consequence I had not time to satisfy my own hunger; but that did not matter to anyone else. Unfortunately I had already developed a prodigious appetite—quite a new experience, and difficult to comprehend, since here it was neither pampered nor tempted. But I did not care in the least what I had to eat, so long as there was plenty of it! I dispatched an amount of plain thick bread and butter that would have shocked my sisters and astonished my mother. A day's, or even three hours',

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nursing at a mere children's hospital would cure the most delicate appetite, and perhaps be a cure for some other things as well, if a girl were inclined to entertain too high an opinion of herself! It is not flattery that you get when you try to be clever in hospital.

However, I still thought I was rather sharp, to say the least, and went back to the ward after breakfast exulting in the thought that the real nursing must begin now, when my natural gifts would shine forth in all their glory. I longed to measure out the medicine for my little patients, to take their temperatures, to make their poultices, and to exhibit my skill in story-telling and amusing them.

Sister was standing in the middle of the ward, looking at the floor, apparently in surprise.

"This floor has not been swept," she said.

"Excuse me, Sister," I exclaimed, "it has; I did it myself before breakfast."

"Did you sweep it with sawdust?"

"No, of course not, and neither did I sweep it with the ashes out of the grate."

Sister annihilated me with that eye of hers before I had time to make myself any funnier. I shrank away, and discovered a bucket of sawdust somewhere or other, and with it I returned, plentifully sprinkling it all over the

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floor. Both Sister and the Staff-nurse were out of the way for the moment, or I might not have been quite so awfully clever. When they returned I was raising a cloud that had set the whole ward coughing, sneezing, and choking.

Well, I hardly like to mention the graceful reproof I now received. I ought to have known—by instinct, of course—that you have to damp the sawdust before scattering it upon the floor. My self-respect received another severe shock, and it was proved to me beyond dispute that I was little short of imbecile. My back, head, heart, and pride were all aching before the last trace of sawdust had disappeared from the floor, but I had not time to faint, or would have done so without doubt. The moment I had cleared up my mess, I was set to dust the ward all over again, and learned for the first time that only an idiot would dream of dusting before sweeping, since anyone with the most rudimentary sense would know that it is useless to do this part of the work first. I was too depressed even to attempt any excuse, though inwardly I was assuring myself that it was perfectly natural to begin at the top and work down, instead of beginning at the bottom and working up.

When I did dust, I dusted inefficiently ; but

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in that one, fearful hour, I learned to do it better than I ever dreamed it could be done by mortal woman. I had to dust all the window-sills, beds, lockers, and chairs, all the skirting-boards, everything—if not more than everything—and to dust it all at an impossible rate, and thoroughly, and to discover that what is impossible anywhere else is possible in hospital.

Scarcely had I finished this Herculean labour than the door opened, and in came the house surgeon, Mr. Fleming.

I was standing near, smutty of face, my apron soiled, and my cheeks burning, and Mr. Fleming gave me one surprised little glance, and went on with Sister. Staff-nurse Smith took care to inform me that I was the first untidy nurse Mr. Fleming had ever seen, and I had better go and make myself neat at once.

CHAPTER VIII

I MAKE MISTAKES

"COME, don't dawdle," was the greeting I received on my hurried return to the ward, and I levelled a belligerent glance at Staff-nurse Smith that ought to have silenced her. "One would think you had too much time on your hands," said she. "Go and get the children's lunch."

So I was to be cook as well as housemaid!

"What do they have for lunch?" I ventured to ask, adding sarcastically, "Am I expected to know that too—by instinct?"

"You are expected to use your common sense," coldly answered Staff-nurse Smith. "In the kitchen you will see what you have to do on the slate. Do you know what a slate is?"

The sensation of being snubbed was new to me. I cannot say I enjoyed it, and I retreated under this fire. On the way I passed Sister, and discerned the flicker of a smile; it was enough to madden an unfortunate pro, who used to think herself clever.

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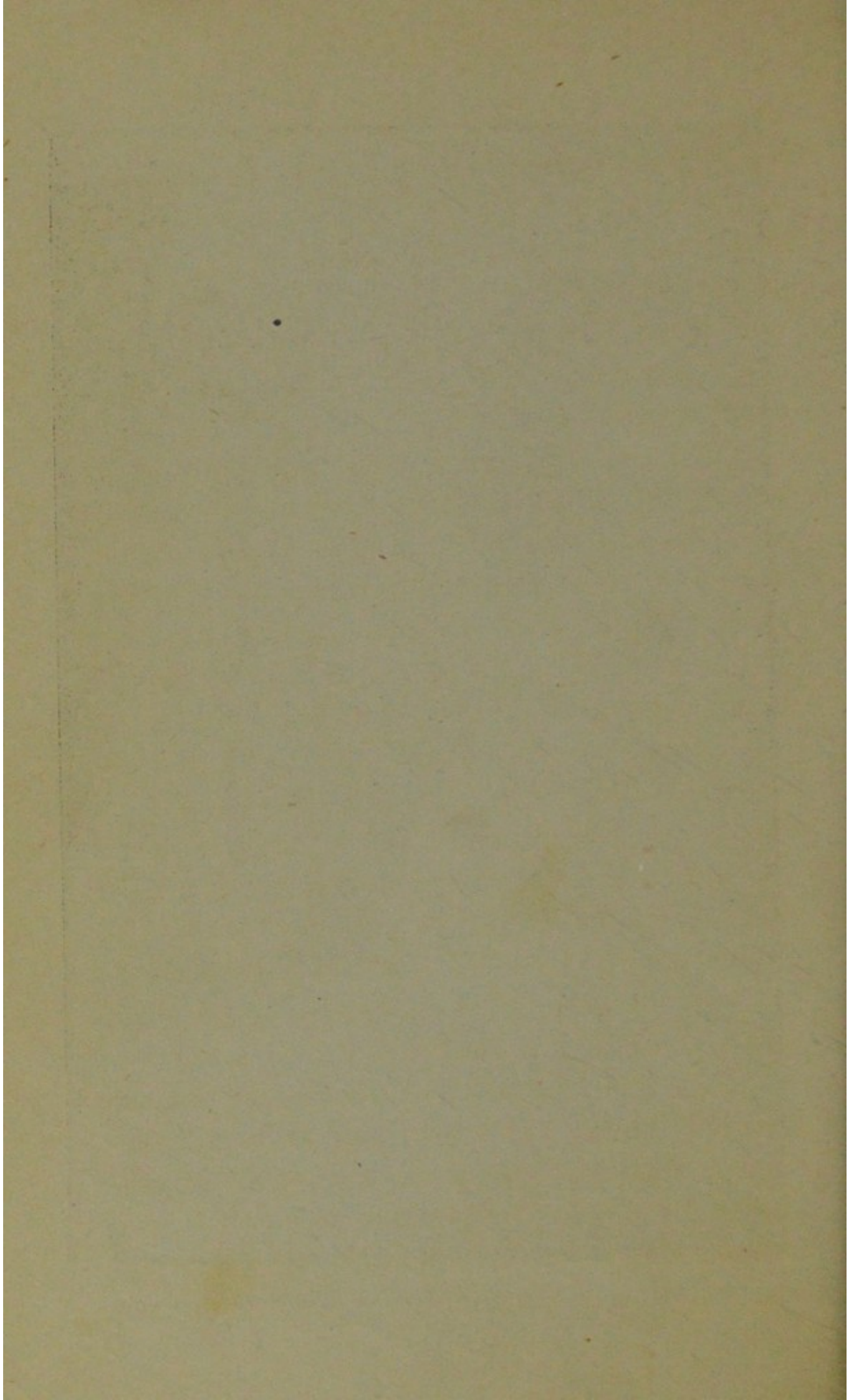
"I'll get their lunch if I die in the attempt," I muttered between my teeth; "and if I don't know how to make it, I'll invent a way. I'll use my common sense for once, so I will!"

The slate to which Nurse Smith had referred was there all right, and I saw put down on it how many children had bread and butter, how many had bread and milk, and what sort of feed each baby had. "Why," said I, staring at the slate, "each baby seems to have a different feed. I suppose that is merely to keep the pros employed! What earthly reason can there be for putting lime-water into that one's, and barley-water into that; and why can't they all have Benger's food one day and Savory and Moore's the next, instead of half having each? I happen to know that either of those foods is equally good, and have not the smallest doubt would do equally well. And I do declare, one baby has nothing except milk and water! I suppose I may as well put on the milk to boil."

This I did, thankful that this was a gas stove, and so would cook everything quickly. I put it on at full power, so that the milk might be boiling by the time I had mixed the different foods. It took some time reading and following the instructions on each different tin, and then



"I WHIRLED ROUND AT A MUFFLED SHRIEK FROM HER."



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mixing the various sorts of flour—or whatever it is—to a smooth paste, and there was rather a strong smell pervading the kitchen when Nurse Smith came hurrying in to know whatever I was burning?

“Nothing,” said I, and wheeled round at a muffled shriek from her.

“Did you ever see anyone so stupid in all your life?” she cried, addressing me, I suppose, as no one else was here. “Upon my word, this is enough to exasperate the Pope! You are about as much use in the kitchen as a mule.”

“I was not brought up to this sort of thing,” I stormed, “and anyhow, what have I done?”

“You’ve burned all that milk,” declared my charming Staff-nurse. “And look—the very idea!—you’ve got on the full force of the gas; and if that enamel saucepan can ever be used again, it will be the eighth wonder of the world. Such stupidity I never came across before.”

“It is the first milk I ever boiled in my life,” said I, obliged to defend myself.

“Then you ought to be ashamed of acknowledging it,” she retorted, and my self-respect received another mortal stab, all the keener for the smirk upon the face of the probationer from the surgical ward, who had just come in to get her children’s feeds, and was

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enjoying my discomfiture with ill-concealed mirth.

I saw her pop a baby's bottle into a saucepan of water to heat it, so I followed her example with one of my babies' bottles as soon as Staff-nurse Smith had carried herself and her wrath away ; but I did not deign to speak to that other pro, much less ask her how to make my feeds.

My baby's bottle immediately cracked ; the silly thing went off bang, and in my despair I ran after Nurse Smith to confess.

" You don't mean to say you've broken a bottle now, and wasted some more milk ? " she ejaculated.

" It was an unavoidable accident," I replied, trembling from head to foot in my violent effort not to burst out crying.

" Of course," said she, " no one can avoid putting a bottle of cold milk into water ten times too hot."

" The water was poured out of the same kettle as Nurse Cotteril had used for the same purpose a moment before," said I, " so it couldn't have been too hot. The glass must have had a flaw in it ; it wasn't my fault."

" How long will it take you to learn not to answer back ? " fumed Staff-nurse Smith. " You

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will now get another bottle for Number Fifteen, and try not to waste any more milk. We don't keep a cow in the kitchen."

Back I marched to the ward kitchen, and this time I took every precaution under the sun. I put my new bottle into a saucepan of cold water, lowered the gas until it could barely heat the thing at all, and ceased all other operations to watch with all the care of one who is absolutely determined not to make another mistake.

Imagine my feelings when *the second bottle cracked!*

Sister found me in tears. This was the straw too much that had broken the camel's back.

"Why, you *stupid* girl," she said politely, as I motioned her towards the accident, "you actually put the bottle in with its stopper on! What else could it do but crack?"

"Sister," I whispered, catching at her in my agony, "I'll buy another bottle; I'll buy any number, but don't, for pity's sake, don't tell Nurse Smith!"

"Why not?" asked Sister, mirth struggling with pity or contempt in her voice.

"Oh, because—because I've made one or two other mistakes, and Nurse Smith doesn't seem to think that I am much good, and . . ."

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“Very well,” said Sister, “skip round and get the lunch ; it’s already five minutes late, and I came here to know why. Come, you do not seem very bright. I’ll show you how to get it ; this is about the simplest thing a pro ever has to do.”

And so it was—as soon as I knew how—but a more humble pro never carried in a tray to a waiting ward, and it was not reviving to see the utter astonishment written upon Nurse Smith’s ugly face when she discovered that this time I had made no mistake !

CHAPTER IX

I MAKE MORE MISTAKES

“NEXT mistake I make I shall give up this frightful life,” I said, as I slammed the oven door upon my first pudding. I was kitchen pro, it appeared, though I had already been worn out with my housemaid duties, and had brasses to polish as soon as my pudding was made. It was only a huge milk-pudding after all, and required no particular knowledge (for I did not suppose it mattered how much tapioca went into its composition), and since no one here could possibly understand how any girl in creation could live over twenty years in the world without knowing how to make a pudding, I had been obliged to manufacture this one as fancy led me. “Now,” thought I, “the worst is over, and all that odious pudding has to do is to cook itself.”

With this comforting thought I applied myself to the next imposition. I had been told to get rags and paste and brighten all the brasses in the ward.

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The paste was there all right, but where were the rags? I knew better by this time than to ask, so I searched through the ward kitchen, and finally discovered somebody else's rags carefully hidden in the corner of a cupboard.

"No doubt my unknown friend will be only too glad to lend me her rags," said I; "it is such a pleasure to be obliging."

Armed with these treasures, I returned to the ward—not to cuddle little sufferers in my arms as I had fondly imagined would be my vocation, or to enthrall them with my wonderful fairy-stories, but to brighten the brasses on their cots!

I started to brighten the knobs according to my own ideas, but to my astonishment the first four knobs of the first cot looked dimmer after I had brightened them—far dimmer than before, and I could not imagine why. I stood frowning and glowering at them, and was on the point of throwing away my rags in disgust, when a nurse, whose acquaintance I had not yet made, came bustling into the ward the very picture of an angry cat.

"Those are my rags," was her amiable greeting to me; "I'll thank you to use your own in future—I've been hunting for mine for the last half-hour."

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“I borrowed them less than five minutes ago,” I retorted, “and I should think that you might be glad to lend them.”

“I am not glad,” she snapped, snatching them away. Then she flung them down in a passion, declaring that I had entirely spoilt them—and to hear her one would imagine that a bundle of old rags was something of priceless value! She flounced away, leaving her rags on the floor, and there was nothing for it but to pick them up and swallow my injured pride.

I began on the next cot, and while I polished—or rather, dimmed—that one, I gave way to indignation once again. Had I come here to rub up brass, to sweep floors, to dust, to cook, to clean up after other people, to be snubbed and corrected and humiliated? Certainly not, and what was more, I wasn't going to submit. If they tried to palm off all this dirty and hard work upon me, I should expose the fraud, and then pack up and go. A nice scandal it would make in the daily papers when I wrote informing the public how nurses in hospitals spent their time! I would not spare anyone—I would tell the whole, unvarnished truth.

“Come—what are you thinking about?”

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Hurry, can't you?" broke in the unpleasing voice of Staff-nurse Smith. "You pros are enough to try the patience of Job; you don't come here to dawdle."

"No," said I, "we certainly don't; I never dawdled less in my life."

"Is that what you call brightening the brasses?" exclaimed Nurse Smith, ignoring my retort. "Upon my word. . . . Great Scott! Is the creature in her senses?"

"What's wrong with them?" I asked, in the subdued voice of one who is choking.

"Wrong with them! What's right with them?" she replied.

"I never polished brasses before in all my life," I burst out, no longer able to contain myself; "you forget that I am a lady. I did not come here as a maid-of-all-work."

"What you came here for at all, I can't imagine," said the Staff-nurse. "You certainly do not seem to possess practical knowledge of any sort; but if you are above the ordinary work of a ward, you had better take the next train home."

"Is anything the matter?" asked the quiet voice of Sister, whom I could only just see through the mist of tears that nearly blinded my eyes. She approached like an overwhelming

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force, and I thought that all was over with me now.

“Nurse Atherton considers herself above her work,” replied Nurse Smith; “I was advising her to pack up and go. We don’t want ladies here—at all events, not the sort of lady she considers herself. She regards her gross ignorance of the most ordinary work as a badge of her superiority—and if you think I exaggerate look at those knobs! That is what she calls brightening them! She has been dawdling round these first two cots for ten minutes at least, with that result!” Nothing could exceed the scorn of her intonation, and my shame became overwhelming when I beheld Mr. Fleming in Sister’s wake. He must have heard every word—he, the house surgeon!

“You have put on far too much paste,” said Sister, addressing me almost kindly, for she must have guessed something of what I suffered. “Try with very much less. Then rub with a will—and be quick. You have sixty-four knobs in this ward to polish at the rate of more than one a minute, so if you take my advice, you’ll set to work without pausing.”

I raised my fallen head, and felt a smile dawning as I seized my rags and rubbed away as if life itself depended upon the rate at which

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I worked—and before I had finished those sixty-four knobs I had learned the right quantity of paste to use!

“You have four children to dress before dinner,” said Sister, as I triumphantly finished the last cot. “I hope you have not forgotten.”

“No,” said I, “I have not *forgotten*, because no one mentioned it to me before, so I . . .”

Sister stood waiting; but for once, though I had the chance, I did not finish my speech. Instead I scrambled away with my paste and Nurse Bright’s rags that were now mine, and scrambled back at post-haste to my children, and by accident began to dress one that was too ill to get up.

It was a little vixen, and bit me, which I considered inexcusable, no matter what was wrong with it. This child, whose name was May—about as harmless and peaceful a name as a child could well have—had the temper of a Judith, and the manners of a savage. I administered a good slap, and told her that if she dared to bite or scratch or kick, I would shake her well.

“What’s that you are saying to Number Five?” struck in Nurse Smith, who haunted me in the hope of catching me making some

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more mistakes, "and what in the name of wonder are you doing to her?"

"I am dressing her," I returned.

"Dressing her? May I ask, what do you mean by dressing her? As for shaking her, well—are you aware what shaking a child with that one's heart disease would mean? They *might* bring it in as manslaughter at the inquest."

I shrank back, for once vanquished even by Staff-nurse Smith.

"You are altogether too clever," sneered Nurse Smith, enjoying my consternation so thoroughly that she became almost good-natured. "Now go and dress the right children, and please do not start upon pneumonia patients—or on that boy over there who has pleurisy."

I dressed the right quartette in the end, but it was with difficulty. Number Ten, a boy whose name was Cecil, wriggled and struggled and fought while I thrust on his clothes until I was nearly exhausted. Sophie, aged seven, howled at the top of her voice, because I was a strange nurse; and Teddie, aged four, escaped three times, and ran naked about the ward, with me after him. That was considered my fault, and I was rebuked for it. The fourth

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child, Edie, screamed at the top of her voice the moment I touched her, and Nurse Smith declared I had been rough, and must have hurt the poor little thing. To hear my quartette howling in concert, anyone might have been excused for thinking the same—and I was not sorry to be ordered off to bring in their dinner.

I was longer bringing it in than was expected, for, when I discovered my pudding burnt to cinders in the oven, I stood stock still a long time, deliberating upon instant flight. It was nothing but the idea that this accident had perhaps saved me from a worse (for who knows whether I might have made all the children ill by the way I had mixed their pudding?) which prevented me thus decamping. When you reach a certain stage in despair, you find things so bad that you become numb. This was my condition when I carried in the rest of the dinner, and went and told Sister that the pudding was burnt.

“Burnt?” she exclaimed. “How could you be so careless?”

“I have been working hard every minute since I put it into the oven, and I didn’t know that the oven was so hot,” I said.

“It was your business to know,” she returned.

I MAKE MORE MISTAKES

“ You must now go at once and make a hasty-pudding.”

“ Yes, Sister,” said I, quite cheerfully, though I had not the remotest notion—not the ghost of an idea—what hasty-pudding was. “ It must be some sort that does not take long to make,” I deliberated ; “ in fact, it must be made on the spot. Its name conveys that much even to my imbecility.”

I found a real, living cook in the ward kitchen, and the sight of anything so beautiful as a real cook—of anything so clever as a genuine servant who knows her work—brought tears to my eyes. I wanted to embrace her ; I was quite ready to seize her hand and kiss it, or do anything equally extravagant, if only she would come to my rescue this once !

“ Do, do please tell me how to make a hasty-pudding,” I implored. “ Oh, cook, you cannot think what a difficulty I am in—and it has to be made at once—and I never even heard of such a pudding. Oh, cook, you cannot think how awful it is to be sent to do something that you can't ! ”

“ Here,” said the cook, roughly, and not without contempt, “ get out of my way, and I'll make it—one may just as well, as try to explain.”

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This was a nice way for a servant to speak to *me*, I thought ; but by this time I was far too abject to resent it openly, and I watched keenly, so that another time I might not be obliged to grovel like this.

Sister glanced suspiciously at the pudding when I brought it in, and I saw her raise an eyebrow, as if ironically surprised to see that I had at last done something right. I did not acknowledge that the pudding was not made by me after all—that was beyond my power, though I am naturally of a most open disposition.

CHAPTER X

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

AFTER their dinner, all the children had to have their faces and hands washed ; and I was expected to get through this performance in time to go down to my own dinner at one o'clock. As they did not begin theirs until well after twelve o'clock that morning, I had not too much time on my hands for this business.

"How disgustingly you eat," I remarked, capturing Cecil with some difficulty. He had fed himself, and fed himself like a savage. From eyebrows to chin he was all over gravy and hasty-pudding. Bits of mince were lodged between his fingers, he had dribbled all down his bib, and I shuddered at the mere idea of cleansing him. "One would think that you were a pig," I remarked, as I grabbed him by the hair of his head, and passed a wet piece of lint all over his face, in spite of his struggles. "Keep still at once. Ten years old, are you ? One would think you were ten months by the

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way you eat. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"No, I ain't!" roared Cecil, fighting with closed fists.

"Don't dare to touch me with those hands," I burst out; "if you do, I'll . . . come, Cecil, be a good boy, dear."

Sister heard only the last part of my speech, I hope.

They were all as bad; their mothers had evidently never taught them, and I felt sure that I should not be able to touch a morsel myself after the task of washing them. But when I did sit down to my dinner, I fell upon it with an appetite that defied the niceties.

The afternoon was spent in making pneumonia jackets, swabs, and covering splints; but I was found so stupid at this work that in despair Sister made me roll bandages instead. Of course, I did not roll them tight enough; but there was plenty of time to go on over and over again at the same one until I got it as hard as a board, after which I had cramp in my hands.

"Come, you have only rolled one," said Sister. "Try again."

My lips opened to protest, and then closed. I set my teeth hard, and rolled another, in spite

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of cramp, after which I did a third and a fourth, though the pain in my fingers was almost unbearable. It was only by reflecting that I was sitting down, and so my throbbing feet were at rest, that I contrived to endure, while yard after yard of lint passed through my strained fingers. Sister merely nodded her head when she saw what I had done at the end of an hour's torture.

At four o'clock the children had their tea, and then came play hour. All who were able to be moved at all were lifted out of their cots and put down upon a huge blanket in front of the fire, while we stripped, aired, and made their beds. Staff-nurse Smith went round with me, and we made the beds together, which took less time than anyone outside the mysteries of hospital life would believe ; then even Nurse Smith yielded to my longing glances over towards the blanket and told me I might go and play with the children if I liked.

This was more to my taste than anything I had been set to do yet, and over me there rushed a glow of enthusiasm as I reflected that *now*, at last, my mission to these poor little sufferers would begin in good earnest. I almost trembled as I approached the blanket where the children were sprawling and kicking, and I caught up a

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baby to cuddle it as I plumped down in their midst.

A child's doubled fist hit me on the cheekbone, but I only laughed at this playful little greeting, though I was obliged to frown at a small girl who kicked me with all her might.

"Nice little girls do not kick, Sophie," I said reprovingly, and Sophie proved that she was not a nice little girl, not only by kicking again, but by putting out her tongue at me. I affected not to see, and cuddled my baby, who was called Jeremiah here, because it was always lamenting. It responded by gurgling in a pleased tone, and thrusting its fingers into my mouth. It had just been sucking them, but I forgave it, as it was not much over a year old.

I felt a little tweak behind, and all the children began laughing in an inane and provoking sort of way; but it occurred to me to laugh with them, and then there was silence.

"Now, shall I tell you a story?" I said. "Once upon a time"—a titter that seemed inapposite broke out, so that I could hardly proceed—"there was a most tremendous monster of a giant, big enough to gobble you all up. . . ." Another choking laugh. I found it hard to tell the tale, which I was inventing on the spur of the moment. "This

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giant," I persisted, "could not get a house to live in, because there wasn't a house in the whole world big enough."

"Was it that big?" asked Teddie, stretching out his arms as wide as he could.

"Much, much bigger than that," I answered, a little disconcerted by the stupidity of the question, and still more so by the frantic amusement of the other children. Edie was rolling over and over with merriment, and Cecil kept behind me, while Sophie divided her time between giggling and pulling grimaces at me. I had an uncomfortable inkling of some secret joke against me, but went bravely on with my story, having always possessed the theory that no child can resist a fairy-tale.

"In the winter the poor giant did not know where to sleep. It was cold out in the open air, and at last he decided to consult the fairies."

"Where was the hat and coat?" asked Teddie.

"What hat and coat?"

"The hat and coat," solemnly repeated the little lunatic.

I looked round, and Cecil suddenly withdrew his hand. He was standing just behind me. The movement of my head was enough to finish the mischief he had begun, and down

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showered my hair, cap and all, while the children shrieked in frantic glee, and Cecil fled with his booty of hairpins.

For one moment I felt cross, so cross that had not Cecil escaped, I should probably have boxed his ears ; but the comical aspect of the trick struck me just in time to save the situation, and I laughed as merrily as any of them, though threatening the fleeing sinner with a fist.

My laughter was echoed by a deep bass guffaw, and I wheeled round with flaming cheeks to find the grim and awful house surgeon enjoying the children's triumph as much as anyone.

I was appalled, and glanced round to see whether either Sister or Nurse Smith were there to behold the figure I was cutting. As I scrambled to my feet, my apron fell off ; the young imps had managed to unfasten it, and their shrieks of glee resounded through the ward. At the same time I became aware that they had turned my pocket inside out. Mr. Fleming's amusement was so violent that he rolled over like a child, and was instantly covered by a screaming, kicking, yelling throng.

"That is right !" I exclaimed involuntarily. "Give it to him—pull his collar off—punish him well. . . ."

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My voice sank in my throat. Nurse Smith had approached, and if anyone ever wanted to murder me on the spot, it was Nurse Smith!

"You had better go and put yourself straight," she hissed. "I'd be ashamed of cutting such a figure if I were you."

Mr. Fleming extricated himself from the children, and went off out of one door while I beat a retreat through another. Nurse Smith's face was a study, and somehow I knew that I had made a still more hopeless foe of her through this little incident. Mr. Fleming, too, looked so cross that I thought I had vexed everybody all round. But when I returned to the ward after hastily putting myself straight, I was met by the children—no longer kicking and thumping me, but like children welcoming an approved playmate—and I was comforted.

CHAPTER XI

I WASH THE PATIENTS

“ Now then, hurry,” snapped the grating voice of Staff-nurse Smith.

“ What have I to do now ? ” I asked, striving to assume the humble tones of an ignorant pro, while I put down the child who had swarmed up me, and held it down until Nurse Smith had ceased speaking.

“ You have to wash the children, of course. Be quick ; there’s no time to waste.”

“ Oh, that won’t take me long,” I cheerfully responded ; “ I’ll wash the little dears in no time. They aren’t half so sticky as they were after dinner.”

“ You will wash them properly, for the night,” returned Nurse Smith.

“ What shall I wash them in ? ” I asked, perceiving that this performance was of a different nature.

“ In water,” she replied, whisking away with a sneer.

“ Oh,” said I, under my breath, “ in water !

I WASH THE PATIENTS

That at least had occurred to me. I never meant to wash them in milk, for instance. I suppose I'll have to wash them according to my own private ideas. Let us hope that this time my own private ideas may be correct!" With that I turned about in search of washing implements, which I found in the bathroom, and appropriated, dully hoping that this was not Nurse Bright's basin, or anybody else's soap, or water from the wrong tap, or a towel sacred to another purpose, or a piece of lint for bandaging sores instead of washing faces, all of which risks I was obliged to take. I approached the first cot, striving to look more confident than I felt.

"Nursie is going to wash you," said I, turning down the bedclothes and stripping off the patient's nightgown.

It was impossible to prevent it yelling, and its struggles more than accounted for the water spilt in the operation. I had to put my whole strength into the work of holding it down while I rubbed it all over with plenty of soap, and was just congratulating myself on having managed better than could be expected, when I heard Nurse Smith at my elbow, making remarks not gratifying to my pride. I heard that I was next door to imbecile, that one might as well

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attempt to train a poker, tongs, and shovel, that anyone not utterly idiotic would have known that a sick child is washed in a blanket ; and that I had swamped the bed, so that everything upon it would have to be changed. This was, to say the least, an exaggeration.

“ No one told me that I had to put a blanket round the creature,” I burst out.

“ Have you no common sense ? ” she asked, whisking away to get dry bedding, and leaving me to discover which of the blankets I was supposed to use.

I found one in the next child's locker, and proceeded to use it as Nurse Smith directed, in scathing tones. She stood a few moments looking on, and making sarcastic remarks. I never knew before just how clumsy I was, nor how incapable, and when I filled the patient's eyes with soap, I was informed that a more careless, stupid, and self-satisfied ignoramus never existed to her knowledge. She flounced off, leaving me to digest the truth about myself as best I could.

Disheartened, I carried my washing paraphernalia to the next cot, and proceeded to wash the next child in the former one's blanket.

Now, who would have supposed that there was any harm in that ? Yet I heard still more

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of the truth about myself directly Nurse Smith discovered what I had done. I ought to have known that when a child had a special blanket in its locker, that blanket is not to be used for other children.

"How could I have known?" I blustered. "No one mentioned it to me. How was I to guess?"

"Learn not to answer back," was her reply. "A woman with common sense would have known by instinct that the blanket for common use is the one in a nurse's special locker."

"There are a good many things that you are supposed to know by instinct in hospitals," I replied; "but there must be something wrong with mine, I think, judging by the dance it has led me to-day."

Nurse Smith was silent, and I glanced at her. She turned quickly round, but not until I had caught the ghost of a smile upon even her ugly countenance. This encouraged me more than I can tell, for no rational reason; but it was dreadful to be doing one's level best under insuperable difficulties and to receive nothing but blame.

At the end of the day I dragged myself to bed aching in every limb, a limp, disheartened, humiliated, and battered individual. I fully

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intended to cry myself to sleep, to fling off my uniform for the last time, and depart in civilian's clothes first thing in the morning. That I did none of these things was probably due to the fact that just before my head touched the pillow I fell into the soundest sleep I ever slept in my life, fell asleep before I had shed the first tear, and woke in the morning almost dazed by such profound slumbers.

CHAPTER XII

BRAN-WATER, BREAKS, AND OTHER THINGS

THE light of another day in the sky often brings a change of idea with it, and I found myself arguing even brightly that, having lived through the first day of hospital life—and, therefore, of course, the worst day—I should be a poor sort of character to desert my post so promptly. I regarded my silent room companions with admiration, not unmixed with awe. Nurse Morgan had been here two years, and Nurse Fletcher just over one ; they had come through all the snubs and rubs of a probationer's existence without deserting ! What would they think of me if I packed up and went within twenty-four hours ? Besides, there was that trio of laughing sisters to face if I returned either in the two days prophesied by Ethel, or the entire week given to me by Isabel. That I should live through my month's trial, and then bind myself to stay on for three years, was altogether too improbable even to be considered.

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I hurried into my clothes so that I might have time for my early cup of tea this morning, and was one of the first to appear downstairs ; and I literally grabbed the bread and butter, like a starving man who has only a few minutes in which to regale himself. Oh, was I not hungry ? Had anyone ever more eagerly desired the simple fare set before us nurses ? And had I not been foolish yesterday, during my time off, when I took the country road instead of the blessed way that led into the town, where I could have laid in a supply of biscuits, buns, and chocolates ! While I now tried to satisfy nature upon rather stale bread and butter, I rapidly calculated what I could buy that contained a great deal of nourishment for a very little outlay ! Already I saw the necessity for manipulating my funds in this economical manner, for I was not going to apply for support at home, now that I was one of the workers of the world.

Pros do not learn quite everything the first day. This I discovered to my cost before an hour had gone.

I began by breaking a thermometer. Sister told me to run for hers, which she had left in the bathroom, and in my eagerness to serve her promptly, I managed to trip over a

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mat, and the thermometer jumped out of my fingers like a thing alive. It was broken when I picked it up.

"Oh, what, what have I done?" I exclaimed, in bitter woe. "Oh, Sister, I've broken your thermometer!"

"And two babies' bottles yesterday," she tartly replied.

"Oh, Sister, it wasn't necessary to remind me of that," I groaned; "it is bad enough to have a thermometer on my mind to-day."

"You are very fond of replying," said Sister. "Learn to be more careful. Now bring me those medicine glasses."

My hands shook, and as I raised a small tray on which the glasses stood, I knocked one of them over from sheer nervousness. Of course, the odious thing turned a somersault off the table, and lay on the floor in a thousand pieces. I stood and stared at it, speechless; then I raised my eyes and looked at Sister. She looked at me, and neither of us spoke. Then she firmly took the tray out of my shaking hands, and told me to go on with the sweeping. I returned to that work with a broken heart, and swept like one distracted. Sister ignored my presence in the ward for a long time, and if she wanted anything done,

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either asked Staff-nurse Smith to do it, or summoned Nurse Cotteril from the surgical ward—a bitter cut to me, for Nurse Cotteril had not been here much longer than myself.

The only other thing I broke that day was a large basin ; but unfortunately it was full of Benger's food which had been set to digest. It was just ready to be boiled up again for the second time, and Nurse Cotteril came running in to do so—as this was for her ward—when the accident occurred.

“ You stupid thing ! ” cried Nurse Cotteril, flying into a passion. “ Now, what am I to do ? My children are waiting for their feed. Why couldn't you look what you are doing ? Did anyone ever know anything so aggravating ? . . . Nurse, what am I to do ? Nurse Atherton has spilt all my Benger's food, and I wanted it in a hurry.”

Nurse Smith, whom she had addressed, and who was coming after me for something that I had forgotten, wheeled upon me with a countenance before which the most callous would have quailed.

“ You need not tell me that I am stupid and careless and clumsy, and no more use than a mule,” I burst out, hastening to forestall her remarks, “ because I know it by this time.

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I am fully aware of it; I have not the least doubt about it any longer."

"That's a good thing," she replied; "it has saved me the trouble of repeating it. You will now make another basin of food for Nurse Cotteril—and be quick about it. By the way, might I suggest to you that you had better examine your saucepan before you begin, as, if you use one of the saucepans you have burnt, you are safe to burn the new milk. But I suppose you don't happen to know that?"

"No, I didn't know," said I; "I am glad you mentioned it."

She looked at me, and I suddenly stopped talking.

It was almost an unbearable nuisance having to cook for the surgical ward as well as my own; but I could not deny the justice of it, so I set to work to make Nurse Cotteril another basin of Benger's food, and this time I knew a little better how to make these absurd foods. I then had the pleasure of wiping up the mess I had made. While I was at this little pastime, Nurse Smith hurried in and said, "Make some bran-water, and be quick about it."

"Never fear," said I, "I'll be quick; I've

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forgotten how to be slow. Would you mind telling me what bran-water is ? ”

But she was gone, and I was left in solitary possession of the ward kitchen, to invent bran-water myself. Bran-water ? What in the world was that ? What was it like ? How was it made ? Where was it kept ?

I turned round helplessly, and went to the cupboard. Perhaps I should find something there to suggest bran-water, and true enough, staring me right in the face was a large jar, labelled “ BRAN.”

Inspiration, common sense, and instinct all seized me promptly ; but I have since come to the conclusion that inspiration, common sense, and instinct are calamitous in hospital, while you are in the early days of probation. They misguided me again, but I knew it not until too late.

Under the influence of inspiration I pounced upon the jar. Instinct suggested to me to empty half its contents into a saucepan with a handful of salt to season it, and to fill that saucepan up to the brim with cold water ; and common sense led me to put it on the stove to boil. The simplicity of this way of making bran-water commended itself to my pro's mind, and then I hastened to make the

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food I had come here originally to make, which was for the little horror, May, who had been howling for food before any of these incidents had occurred.

My bran-water was bubbling away like fun by the time I carried in the feed for May, and I left it on the stove with a light heart, since it was made with water instead of milk, and might therefore be expected to boil without burning.

“ You have been far too long making Number Five’s food,” said Sister, in the cold and reproving tones that hurt me most. “ You will have to learn to be punctual with feeds—and that child is especially difficult to manage in that matter ; we always have trouble to get her to take enough, and she was actually crying for it twenty minutes ago.”

“ Nurse Smith made me . . . ” I stopped. Sister merely gave me one cutting look, and passed on.

As I approached Number Five’s cot with the mug, the horror, May, who had been crying for her food, turned over on her face, and began crying not to have it. I set the mug down on the locker in desperation, and turned her back again.

“ Listen to me,” said I, through my teeth ;

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"I've brought your food for you, and you are going to take it at once."

"Ain't!" bawled May, attacking me with her nails.

I raised her on my arm, and held her with a grip of iron, while she howled the ward down.

"Stop crying at once," said I, accentuating my words by tightening my grip in a manner that hurt her, for she ceased the shrill crying to whimper in an agonised way that would have touched me to the heart had I not been so desperate.

She clenched her teeth and rolled her head from side to side to avoid the mug I was forcing to her lips.

"If you don't swallow this at once, I'll hold your horrid little nose," said I, losing all patience, for I knew which of us would be blamed if she won.

Another futile struggle on her part, and I had her nose with one hand, while I poured the food down her throat with the other. I stood up with the empty mug almost as exhausted as my patient, who fell asleep instantly.

"What? Has she finished it all?" asked Sister, in surprise, meeting me as I turned from the encounter.

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“Every drop,” said I, in faint tones.

“Capital!” exclaimed Sister, and I met a smile which contained forgiveness and restored favour—and hurried away with the mug ready to sink through the floor with shame. What, what would Sister have said to me had she heard the gentle persuasions I had used to induce May to take that food?

I hurried back to the ward kitchen, looked at my bran-water, and decided that it was about done. I poured it into a basin, and carried it to Nurse Smith.

Never shall I forget her face when I gave her that bran-water—no, never; it was positively awful. I stood nursing the basin and staring stupidly at her.

“Is that what you call bran-water?” she asked, in suppressed tones.

“Yes,” said I, “it is.”

“And may I ask *how you made it?*”

“With bran and water.”

“Try not to be impertinent,” she returned, her nostril quivering. “I repeat my question.”

“I boiled the bran and water together with a little salt,” said I, my voice vibrating with rage, and I could not refrain from adding, “of course.”

“In all my life,” said she, “in all my life

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I never heard of such stupid and profound ignorance. At least one might have expected you to strain this ridiculous concoction; a child of ten would have thought of that."

This stung my dignity to breaking-point.

"Perhaps a child of ten who was brought up to nothing else *might* have thought of it," I burst out, "and perhaps you might have, even when you were a pro, perfectly new to this sort of work. But I was not brought up like you; the work does not come naturally to me, and it is absurd to expect me to know these things without a single word to help me. I . . ."

"Don't dare to answer when you are re-proved," she interrupted more sharply than ever. "Here one of your lessons must be to accept reproof in silence, and now you will at once empty away this mud-pie you have been amusing yourself and wasting your time by making, not to mention the amount of bran you have also wasted, and you will then learn to make bran-water properly."

"Am I to learn by instinct—again?" I asked, choking.

"Since you have none," snorted Staff-nurse Smith, "I suppose I shall have to be explicit, though anyone out of the schoolroom could

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make such a simple and necessary article. Soak a cupful—not a gallon—of bran for one hour, and then strain off the water in which it was soaked. Pour a pint of water on your bran, bring it to the boil (by the way, perhaps you might not know that you boil this in a saucepan, not in a china basin), let it simmer for half an hour, and finally strain it. Above all, carefully avoid the way you made it first, though the simplicity of your way may seem preferable.”

My head spun, and I began muttering the directions aloud as I returned to the kitchen to try again. The simplicity of my way certainly might be preferable, but it had its disadvantages!

“And mind—*no salt!*” called Staff-nurse Smith after me.

“Oh, no,” said I, “certainly no salt.”

“Allow me to suggest,” she added, as a final cut, “that you do not flavour it with sugar, either, or with pepper. Bran-water is neither a pudding nor a soup.”

I did not answer; this time she had crushed me.

CHAPTER XIII

CHOCOLATE, BARLEY-SUGAR, BUNS, AND BISCUITS

DURING my time off on that second day, I would have thrown myself down upon my bed to rest had this been allowed; but it is a stringent rule in hospital that every nurse shall have a certain time in the open air. I was given from two to four to be out this time—the day before it had been from six to eight.

It was a blow to me to find that I was to exercise in the afternoon. My feet were aching so violently that I could hardly limp along, and nothing but the thought of chocolates and buns supported me upon that weary tramp to the town. When I got there at last, I stood deliberating outside a confectioner's shop for quite a long time, half turned away, and then went back to puzzle out the problem in my mind.

“Can I be of any assistance, Nurse?” asked a quizzical voice, and I started round to behold Mr. Fleming saluting me in approved

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style—a fact that rather shocked me, for being a nurse, I had almost forgotten that I was an identity at all.

“I was only wondering whether . . .”

“Yes?”

“Chocolate or barley-sugar contains the most nourishment,” I stammered.

Mr. Fleming had a young moustache, which he now pulled and tried to bite. Then he said, “Er—are you feeling hungry?”

“Ravenous,” said I.

“Then don’t you think you might join me in a bun? I am afflicted like that myself; but allow me to whisper the truth—I was too shy and modest to enter a confectioner’s shop alone, and brazen out the unholy mirth of the presiding genius, unless I had some such excuse as you to offer.”

I gazed at him in consternation, and he opened the door, and stood aside for me to pass in. Then he led me to a table, and issued an order at the counter. I followed like a dumb idiot.

What I ate that afternoon, once I had fairly begun, I do not like to contemplate. Mr. Fleming paid for it all, and supplied me with barley-sugar and chocolate liberally enough to keep me in these luxuries for a week. Then he

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asked me what other sort of provision I deemed necessary?

"I would like some . . . I mean, nothing else, thank you," I gasped.

"Some what?" asked Mr. Fleming.

"Nothing—I said nothing, indeed," was my frantic reply. An innate sense warned me that I had no business to allow the house surgeon thus to favour me, though in my former sphere such an episode would not have seemed unnatural.

"Eh?" asked Mr. Fleming, his eyes twinkling; then he added in a lower tone, "Nurse Smith isn't anywhere about—you needn't look so scared. Er—if I were you, I don't think I'd be too candid in announcing how I amused myself in my time off—at least, I must bind you to deep and deadly secrecy as to my share in the spree. My dignity would be shattered at one fell blow if it were known up there that I had been eating buns and ice-cream all the afternoon. Promise not to betray me."

I looked at him, and then we broke down in laughter, for there was something truly comical in the situation.

"No one else knows my weakness," he confessed, "but I have trusted you with this hideous blemish in my character. For a man—

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and especially a doctor—to acknowledge his craving for buns is one of the main tests of candour. Would biscuits be any help ? ”

I faintly acknowledged that biscuits would be very useful indeed, and he laid in a supply that I assured him would be impossible to smuggle in under my cloak. However, he insisted upon loading me with more than I could carry, and put me into a tram that took me nearly all the way home with my booty. Why I felt so unutterably guilty as I sneaked off to my room with my parcels I really do not know ; but in spite of my open disposition, I did not once mention to anyone what had happened that afternoon, and the thrill of possessing a guilty secret carried me over a most unpleasant evening, when everything was against me, and I went about like a hunted animal, finally crawling off to bed even more fagged than the evening before, and morally still more bruised ; but for that little sense of comfort which the knowledge that the house surgeon was a friend—actually a friend, here, in hospital ! brought to my wounded spirit.

I had been informed by Staff-nurse Smith what I truly was to such an extent that I was at last convinced of it. I now felt unworthy

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to look my family in the face, or I would have fled this life at once; but now I decided to remain here at least one day more, in order to regain a little self-respect before I went home. I felt a sob rising in my throat at the very thought of that word "home." When had I last been there? Were these two days years? Was I still living in the same hemisphere? Were Kate and Isabel and Ethel real people, or had I only been dreaming of them in some imaginary life that had never belonged to me? Where were . . . ?

"Did you notice Nurse Cotteril when Mr. Fleming came into the surgical ward this evening?" broke in the voice of Nurse Fletcher upon my reflections. She was speaking to her chum, Nurse Morgan, but my ears burned, and my private thoughts were brought to a full stop. "It's a joke to see her," continued Nurse Fletcher; "she's as rough as the English Channel with the children as long as no one is looking" . . . (my very soul burned now!) . . . "but the minute a doctor, or Sister, or Staff-nurse appears, sugar itself is not so sweet. And isn't it killing to see her follow the doctors round with the ink-pot? That is her one idea of nursing! But the best part of the joke is to see how utterly they all ignore her. As if a

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doctor would even be aware of the existence of a pro ! ”

Something not unlike exaltation suddenly filled my pro's heart, and I fell asleep on that comforting thought before I had assimilated it ; I, who was a restless, poor sleeper, and once again I remained in unbroken slumbers until the voice of the night nurse waking me proved that another day had begun, though I wanted to argue that it was impossible, for I had only just gone to sleep !

CHAPTER XIV

I AM CARELESS

WHATEVER is inevitable happens. If it is something that must be done, you do it, because you know you have to do it, and in hospital this sense of the inevitable possesses you to the exclusion of almost every other sense. That is why work that is to the natural woman utterly impossible gets done in hospital. There may not be time to do it, but it is done all the same.

I got up, and I hurried ; there was so much to do if I were going to stay. If! My mind shied at the word ; everything in the world seemed to hang upon that "if."

While I was cutting the bread for breakfast, the knife slipped, and I gashed myself right royally. This was an accident I had expected every time I had this duty to perform, for at home I never cut the bread, and was as much a novice at this as at the manufacture of bran-water, or puddings ! I remembered the day when I had cut myself with my penknife at

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home, and the scene which followed. Looking at my first hospital cut, I despised that pen-knife scratch, and lifted my eyes to demand the concern of everyone present. It was the sort of cut I felt sure would have to be attended by a doctor.

“ You stupid girl! Can't you even cut the bread without slicing your own fingers ? ”

That was the extent of the sympathy I got. No one ran for smelling-salts, no one led me to a sofa, no one felt my pulse, or even bound up my wound ; and Nurse Cotteril, the pro who had arrived just before me, looked the image of a sulky dog because she had to take on the bread-cutting task for which I had incapacitated myself. I sank into my chair, and could eat no more, in spite of my appetite, for I was in mortal terror of fainting ; but no one took the slightest notice of my distress.

“ You will now go to Sister to have your hand dressed,” said the nurse at the head of my end of the table, as soon as breakfast was over. “ You will find her in the dispensary.”

It was a long way to the dispensary, and my knees shook as I traversed the distance. I would have liked somebody's arm to support me, but by this time dared not mention my wishes. As I went, I saw the very window

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that I had commanded the housemaid to close that day of my arrival; and I positively felt myself turn pale as I remembered my extraordinary temerity on that occasion. Imagine it—I—a newly-arrived pro—had dared, had ventured to interfere with the arrangements of the hospital! I could almost admire my blind courage on that day.

I entered the dispensary feeling, and no doubt looking, cowed. Sister was reading out prescriptions, or something of that sort, to Mr. Fleming, and the dispenser was rattling bottles behind the counter. They all turned with that look of surprise on their faces which makes a person want to be somewhere else, and I stood, dumb, at the door.

“Am I wanted?” asked Sister.

“I—I’ve come,” I stammered, glancing from her to Mr. Fleming, and then at the floor, “I’ve come to—to ask you to . . .”

“Yes?” queried Sister, not encouragingly.

“To dress my fingers,” I whispered.

“What have you done to your fingers?”

“I seem to have cut them, Sister.”

“Oh, how did you manage that?” asked Sister, as I extended my wounded hand.

“The knife slipped when I was cutting the bread,” I faintly uttered.

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Mr. Fleming had turned round and was writing at a desk ; he took no more notice of me than if he did not know who I was. This cut hurt me even more than the one Sister was dressing.

After she had made me bathe it, she painted some collodion over the two cut fingers, and while she was doing that she remarked that I ought not to be so careless.

I caught my breath ; the collodion smarted to such an extent that I could hardly keep still.

“ There,” said Sister, as she put the collodion by. “ Try not to cut yourself again. Pay attention to what you are doing. What time is Dr. Wood coming, Mr. Fleming ? ”

This was evidently my dismissal, so I retired, nearly dancing, and tears of anguish filled my eyes ; but I uttered not a sound. A pro is evidently expected to endure this sort of trifle in silence—so I endured it.

Upon reaching the ward again, I found that I should have to work at extra speed to make up for the lost twenty minutes, and in spite of excruciating pain in my fingers, I had to go on at express speed—at too great speed, in fact, for I barked my knuckles in my hurry on the sharp edge of a cot I was dusting.

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At this fresh catastrophe two great tears actually fell ; but I dashed them away, writhed once or twice, and went on as if nothing had happened.

It was a day of disaster, as far as my hands were concerned, for I managed to burn one of them by catching up a saucepan that was boiling over, and whose handle was nearly red-hot. How I put that saucepan down without spilling the contents, I really do not know ; but one's fortitude increases at leaps and bounds in hospital, and the lack of all sympathy if one does get hurt provides one with a sufficient reason for remaining silent on that subject—or so I thought, as I muffled my sobs, and went on with my cooking operations.

Who would have thought it possible that I could be so utterly unfortunate as to cut myself that identical day ? Yet this actually happened, when I was cutting the bread and butter for the children's tea. No one saw me, and my first impulse was, of course, to conceal this fresh proof of my carelessness. I screwed my handkerchief round the wound, and finished preparing their tea, when to my joy I found that this slighter cut had ceased to bleed, and I could still use my hand without wincing perceptibly.

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My second bad night in hospital followed these misfortunes. The knuckles and palm of my right hand burned and throbbled, while the cut fingers of my left hand smarted beyond description. The new cut was even more painful than the first two, and as I smothered my groans, for fear of Nurses Fletcher and Morgan, who were snoring away oblivious of my anguish or of anybody else's, I thought of home with a feeling of home-sickness utterly untellable.

Somewhere, far away, my home was still standing, my home where, once upon a time, (was it centuries ago?) I used to dawdle through a life of luxury and ease, to assert myself, to insist upon having my own way, to exact the admiration of a whole circle of friends and relations who were all ready to grant it, no matter for how little reason. What would they think of Sister's stinging voice, telling me not to be so careless, while she was dressing a wound that would have made the lot of them feel faint merely to see? Would they believe their own ears if they ever heard Staff-nurse Smith sneering at me, and telling me that she had never known anyone so stupid, so conceited, and so utterly useless? I, who was always considered clever, who was universally admired!

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“ Well,” said I, moaning, as I rolled over on my sleepless pillow, “ nobody thinks me clever here, at all events.”

“ Whatever is the matter with you, Nurse Atherton ? ” angrily demanded Nurse Morgan ; “ this is the second time you’ve wakened me. Can’t you keep still ? ”

“ My hand is painful,” I answered, longing for sympathy.

“ Well, that needn’t make you disturb others,” she retorted, and turned over to fall at once into profound slumbers.

The night was over at last, and I noticed with some satisfaction that my face was ghastly pale in the morning, but it was all I could do to dress myself with my throbbing hands, and neither of my room companions had the slightest notion of helping me. When we came to our nine-o’clock breakfast, I found myself unable to handle the knife, and turned to Nurse Cotteril in consternation.

“ Would you mind cutting the bread this morning ? ” I asked in humble accents.

“ Certainly I would mind cutting it,” she replied ; “ do your own work.”

“ I can’t—my hands are too sore.”

“ What is the matter ? ” asked Staff-nurse Smith, sharply.

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"I—I'm afraid I really cannot cut the bread this morning," I pleaded.

"Why not?"

"I cut myself yesterday."

"You cut your left hand yesterday," put in Nurse Bright, who had not forgiven me yet for spoiling her rags. "Why should that prevent you doing your work?"

"I—my right hand is rather sore—I burned it a little," I stammered.

"How?"

"The saucepan was too hot—and I—my right-hand knuckles are sore, too."

Staff-nurse Smith snatched at my right hand, and then cuttingly informed me that I was to go to the dispensary again, immediately after breakfast, to ask Sister to dress this hand—and Nurse Cotteril wrathfully undertook to cut the bread—and I received many a black look that was not necessary to deprive me of what appetite I had, since I was so depressed about my second visit to the dispensary that I could hardly swallow a mouthful.

"Now go—and be quick!" said Nurse Smith.

I cannot say that I was very quick, since I could hardly bring myself to enter the dispensary this second time. Sister was generally there at this time of day, but for some reason

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she had not yet arrived, and I found no one except Mr. Fleming.

“Hulloa!” said he, “had another accident?” There was suppressed mirth in his tone, and I answered “Yes,” rather sulkily.

He said no more—Sister was coming in.

“What is it this time?” she asked, with cold surprise.

“It is my other hand this time,” I replied glumly.

“What have you done to your other hand?”

“I—Nurse Smith said I was to show it to you—I don’t know whether it is the burn, or the knuckles.”

“Indeed! So you have burned your knuckles?”

“No, I—I burned the palm, I only barked the knuckles.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“And pray, why did you not come at once to have these wounds dressed?” sharply asked Sister, as she examined my injured appendage.

“Oh, it was nothing to signify,” I assured her.

“Have you no sense?” she sharply asked me.

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I was getting accustomed to that question, so I answered, with dejection, "No, I haven't any, I'm quite certain that I haven't."

A muffled laugh, skilfully turned into a cough, broke from Mr. Fleming, and Sister looked more fierce than ever in her effort not to smile.

"At least you are candid," she said, "but you ought to have known that it is dangerous to go about in hospital with an undressed wound. You might get blood-poisoning by such folly. Whenever you are cut or hurt, or in any way break the skin, you must apply for the remedy at once. Now, disinfect your knuckles carefully before I dress them, and remember that a little cut is as important as a big one from a sanitary point of view."

"Sister," said I, speaking in the smallest voice possible, "I—I'm afraid I—I have another hurt."

Mr. Fleming's cough now became almost dangerous, while I shamefacedly produced my other hand, and displayed its fresh cut.

"What? *Another?*" asked Sister. Even her voice sounded shrill, and Mr. Fleming beat a retreat, and I wished that I had never been born. "In a few days," said she, as she dressed my wounds, "your hands will present a curious

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appearance, if you go on at this rate. Stand still—how am I to do my work while you are wriggling like a child? . . . There, now please be a little more careful in future—I never knew anything so careless as the way you have been slashing yourself—one would think you had never been taught to use your hands.”

CHAPTER XV

I AM MORE CARELESS

BREAKING articles, or burning milk, or spoiling puddings, or cutting one's fingers, or any of the other things I had done, are not the only ways of being careless in hospital. Oh, no! Those were only the beginnings of my carelessness.

First, I was careless about my eye. A child had come with a bad eye that had to be dressed very often, and Sister gave me the task of doing it, after showing me exactly how. She showed me how in a way that hurt my feelings—it was almost like the way Nurse Smith had taught me to make bran-water instead of mud pie. However, I said nothing, but learned my lesson with the greatest attention, and when I was actually dressing little Minnie's eye, I could not help feeling slightly exultant—this was so like the work of a real nurse.

Minnie was eight years old, a poor, half-starved little mortal, who excited my pity from the first, and I always showed myself unusually gentle with her. In return for this, Minnie

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screamed if Nurse Smith ever touched her; she even whimpered if Sister came to her cot, but was tractable with me—a triumph for any probationer—and one day, while I was dressing the poor child's eye, I saw Sister watching reflectively, when my pride reached its climax. Its climax, for it received a prompt and bitter fall.

“There, my poor little pet,” said I, “let Nurse do it just once again . . .”—and I dashed a lock of hair out of the way. It interfered with my sight.

How was I to know that that was the very acme of carelessness? Sister told me so on the spot, and when, a little later, my eye began swelling, instead of receiving pity, I had the contempt of the whole staff of nurses.

“As if anyone with half a grain of sense ever caught a bad eye like that,” sneered Staff-nurse Smith, and Nurse Bright made herself clever at table over my woe, while Nurses Fletcher and Morgan gave me a lively time in our bedroom.

“I suppose you know what happens when the eye reaches that stage?” asked Nurse Morgan, gazing at my disfigured countenance with interest.

“No, no, don't frighten her,” begged Nurse Fletcher, “and we may save her eye even yet,

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if she is willing to undergo the treatment. I heard Mr. Fleming suggesting this to Dr. Wood but Dr. Wood said it would be inhuman."

"What would?" I asked sharply.

"Don't be agitated," returned Nurse Fletcher, "I don't suppose they'll do it."

"It's only an acid they drop into the eye," explained Nurse Morgan, "but, as Nurse suggests, it is not very likely that they'll do it in your case, because you can't bear pain without making such a fuss."

I fumed, but was too much alarmed to show my annoyance until I knew what they meant.

"This acid," said Nurse Fletcher, "burns so intolerably that the patient has to be put into a padded room, or she might injure herself in her agony. Those who can endure pain submit to the torture—otherwise, as often as not, they lose the sight of their eye."

Neither of them showed the slightest sign of laughing, so it was with positive terror that I betook myself to the consulting-room, whither I was sent to have my eye examined. Sister was busy, so Staff-nurse Smith accompanied me.

"What has happened to you this time?" asked Mr. Fleming.

"While dressing Number Seven's eye, she

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must needs rub her own," answered Nurse Smith, with contempt.

"Oh, I see . . . Hum! It's pretty bad, isn't it?" said Mr. Fleming.

"No!" I burst out, terror lending me a voice, "it's not at all bad—it's nothing to signify."

"Well, I'll tell you what—I'll put in a few drops for you."

"No!" I positively screamed, "I don't want any drops in my eye, I won't have any drops in my eye, I . . ."

"*Nurse Atherton!*" exclaimed Nurse Smith.

I ceased, while tears of fright suffused both my eyes, and I shook from head to foot.

"You are frightened," said Mr. Fleming quietly. "Why?"

"Nurse Morgan and Nurse Fletcher have told me about that acid," I answered, gulping, "and I'm too great a coward—I really could not bear it."

"What acid?"

"The acid you are going to drop in my eye."

"And you believed them?"

I started, then a burning blush scorched my face—and that was the last word I said until I left the consulting-room with Nurse Smith, my eye relieved and bandaged, but my whole soul smarting at recollection of Mr. Fleming's

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look when he wheeled round with shaking shoulders to get the drops that would necessitate a padded room!

“What did you mean by refusing the doctor’s treatment?” asked Nurse Smith, in her most acrid tones.

“Oh, nothing—only fun,” I gasped.

“Fun!” repeated Nurse Smith, stopping short. “Do you mean to say that you venture to attempt fun with the house-surgeon?”

“No—not that,” I hurriedly replied. “I was frightened.”

“Frightened?” she echoed, scorn itself ringing through her tones.

“Yes,” I groaned, “some of the other nurses frightened me about it.”

“Really,” snorted Nurse Smith, “really, Nurse Atherton, you are altogether too clever.”

“So it seems,” said I, swallowing hard, and hurrying away.

CHAPTER XVI

AN UNINTERESTING INVALID

NEXT it was my throat.

One morning I woke up half an hour before the right time, with such a sore throat that I could hardly lie still. I slipped out of bed and examined my own throat as best I could in my hand-glass. It looked rather bad, but not nearly so bad as it felt.

What was I to do? If I confessed, as sure as fate I should be told that it was my own fault, and I was very careless, so I decided to grin and bear it—in silence.

It was awful trying to swallow my sorely-needed food; I jumped every time I tried, and had to give up the attempt in despair. So I went to the day's work unrefreshed.

"Is anything the matter with you?" asked Sister, in the tone of one who suspects another of some unpardonable crime.

"No, nothing," I hurriedly returned, "nothing, I assure you."

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Her clear blue eye went through me like a dagger, and I denied it again.

“ Then why are you working in this lackadaisical manner ? ”

“ I—am I ? ”

Sister's eye pierced me through and through, and I hurried from it, and tried to work like a steam-engine. I went at it feverishly, and was soon so done up that I more than once sank down in utter fatigue.

All day long I battled with this growing languor. By dinner-time I no longer desired food. At tea-time I could hardly even bear the sight of it. Sister sat at the urn, and it seemed to me as if her eye met mine wherever I turned.

“ Why are you not eating ? ” she asked me, in those severe tones that strike terror to a pro's heart.

“ Oh, I—I don't feel hungry, thank you, ” I murmured guiltily.

After tea she passed me on my heavy walk back to the ward.

“ There must be something rather serious the matter with a pro when she refuses her food, ” said Sister.

I did not reply.

“ *Is there anything the matter with you ?* ”

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“Oh, no, nothing—nothing except that my throat feels—a little—sore,” I stammered, conscious that it was no use attempting to evade her.

“Come with me,” said she, and no schoolboy ever went to be caned with a more sinking heart than mine, as I followed Sister to the surgery, where Mr. Fleming was arranging his instruments in ghastly rows.

“Nurse Atherton is complaining of her throat,” said Sister.

“Oh, no, no, indeed I am not!” I broke out hoarsely; “it is the merest trifle—it is nothing to matter.”

“None of your ailments ever do matter, do they, Nurse?” asked Mr. Fleming, reaching down a reflector, and pressing the button of an electric lamp. “That eye of yours, for instance—eh?”

“Nurse Atherton is very careless,” said Sister, in much displeasure.

“Come here, please,” said Mr. Fleming, and his tone had changed—it was just as if Sister’s manner had affected his. “Open your mouth, please. . . . Ah! I’ll have your temperature. . . . This sort of throat,” he continued, turning to Sister while his thermometer was in my mouth, “is not always due to carelessness. It’s one of the regulation hospital throats. I’ll

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paint it. . . . Hum! A day in bed might be just as well," said he, shaking down the mercury in his thermometer.

The disgrace of a day in bed nearly overwhelmed me. I hastened to say that it was quite unnecessary.

"Do not attempt to argue with the doctor," said Sister. "You will, of course, stay in bed when he advises it."

I could not reply; Mr. Fleming was painting my throat with the most odious stuff ever invented. "This should be done every three hours," said he, addressing Sister, not me, "and I'll make her up a gargle, which she can use frequently. If she is not better in twenty-four hours, she had better see me again."

His voice conveyed to my understanding his total indifference to me and my ailments. Somehow, I fancied I had gone down in his estimation on account of them, and I wondered, as I dragged myself along on my way back to the wards, whether doctors generally do despise their private patients as much as this?

There was no sort of interest attached to my illness here—I was not sent to bed like one whose sufferings are of consequence. I was not pitied, petted, or even helped by my companions; instead of that, I was treated like one

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who has wilfully given a lot of trouble, which trouble is resented by all upon whom it falls.

My day in bed was a truly bitter experience. Nurses Fletcher and Morgan roused me to make me get up, and I had to blurt out that I couldn't, I was ordered to stay in bed.

"Whatever for?" asked Nurse Morgan. "A great, strapping girl like you needn't stay in bed."

"I know I needn't, but I must," I answered. "Mr. Fleming said I must."

"Oh—Mr. Fleming! Of course, what *Mr. Fleming* says has to be done," returned Nurse Morgan, in tones that conveyed to my bewildered mind all sorts of double meanings, though I could not for the life of me understand why there was such a sneer in the remark.

"I shouldn't mind a day in bed myself," said Nurse Fletcher. "I've a great mind to go and interview Mr. Fleming on my own account. There's nothing easier than to wheedle a day in bed out of him."

Soon after they had departed, with their sneers and their innuendoes, Sister came to see me. She took my temperature, painted my throat, and was off with scarcely a remark. She had not even time to ask me how I had slept! She did not inquire anxiously what I

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thought I could eat. The contrast between this experience and the desperate fuss that used to be made over the merest trifles at home, struck me afresh, and brought vividly to my understanding what a goose I used to be in the old days. It was some comfort to reflect that I was lying in bed really ill, and making no fuss—I couldn't, it was simply impossible to do it—here!

The hours went slowly by, each more stupid than the last, and long before that day was over I heartily wished myself back in the ward, working away beyond belief for no thanks and plenty of blame.

Sister came at regular intervals to paint my throat, and my meals were brought to me and carried away, scarcely touched, by a maid. I was not surprised to find that my appetite concerned no one, and in consequence returned much more quickly than might have been the case had a bevy of anxious relatives stood round remarking upon its absence. By supper-time I was positively hungry, and when Sister came for the last time to take my temperature, I began by informing her that now I was all right again. I fancied myself especially brave for saying this so soon.

“Yes,” said she, reading her thermometer,

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“ you are practically all right, but don't get up till I see you in the morning.”

I did not reply, but my heart sank. I had expected to be praised, though, after she had gone, it did occur to me that I could not see why. After all, what was so remarkable in a person acknowledging that she was all right again, when she was ?

My room companions came to bed at the usual time, and took hardly any notice of me. Nurse Fletcher just asked whether Mr. Fleming had been to see me, and when I replied, “ No, of course not,” she said, “ Oh, there was evidently nothing much the matter.”

Nothing much ! Well, I suppose a throat that hurt like mine had, really wasn't much—at all events, I had never been a less interesting invalid in my life, and next morning, when Sister, having ascertained that my temperature was about normal, informed me that I must get up at once, as they had a particularly busy day before them, I was thankful that my illness was considered cured.

CHAPTER XVII

A LETTER FROM HOME

A LETTER in Kate's handwriting had lain in my pocket for two entire days before I remembered to open it. We had been especially busy—several new cases had come in, all the beds were full, and there had been a run of operations. So far I had not been invited to the theatre, except once, after an operation for adenoids, when Sister had sent me to help Nurse Bright to clear up. I won't describe that part of my work—only I hoped that it would be a good while before I was called upon to witness the operation itself!

Nurse Bright was cross—she generally was, but so are most Staff-nurses (and no wonder!). This time she was cross because her pro, Nurse Cotteril, had made a scene in the theatre by fainting at sight of this simple little ordinary, everyday occurrence. "She's got no more the makings of a nurse than a hen," remarked Nurse Bright, who might be excused on account of the extra work entailed by a pro given to fainting at such simple little sights. I made up

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my mind that I'd die before I fainted, when my turn to witness an operation came.

I remembered my letter while I was out taking the air.

I had found a country stroll across some fields, and this was an exquisite spring day, when all nature seemed to have sprung into new life. Fresh green leaves spread out their dainty hands from every bough; the grass, which had, until now, looked lank and dead, had suddenly become a vivid emerald colour, and was starred with celandines and daisies. A radiance of sunshine poured down from a sky that seemed as much alive as the world above which it stretched its arch of blue. How could anyone be sad on such a day?

I sat down on the step of a stile and brought out my letter. It seemed almost a pity to read anything that must drag me back to the ordinary life of earth, above all, to the life I had left behind when I came to this new existence. Still, a letter from home is a treasure not to be despised, and I opened mine with some eagerness.

“My dear Agnes,” wrote my sister,

“You have been in hospital a fortnight—positively a fortnight—and still have not come

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home, or run away, or intimated your intention of doing so at once, and we are getting anxious. What is the meaning of this extraordinary conduct? We keep your bed well aired, so you need not be at all afraid of returning at any moment. Come, confess, my dear, that you are sick of the new game, because you know you are—and we are going a bicycle tour with the Hardings next week. Grace is quite well again, and Nurse Phillips is safely out of the place, so you won't have her reproaches to face, and you really must not miss that tour, it is the best fun we ever planned. We mean to be away about three weeks, scouring Wales, and putting up at all sorts of the most fascinating little inns. Dad has consented, because Mr. and Mrs. Harding are coming too, and have promised to take the greatest care of us—and the doctor says this is just the thing to set Ethel up. She's been very poorly—had a relaxed throat, and glands, and we had to sit up all night with her. . . .”

I paused, I am sorry to say, to laugh aloud.

Then I felt a little ashamed of myself, and returned to my letter.

“Of course, we are quite worn out with so much nursing, and would have sent to the Nursing Institute for a trained nurse, if she

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had not been better next day, but she was so weak that at first we never thought she would have been well enough for the tour. We are also getting up some tableaux for the twentieth of next month, and you are to be Boadicea and Old Mother Hubbard—we haven't arranged all of them, and need your help. Do think this out, for it is important.

“Father asks every day when we expect you home, and mother replies that we expect you every afternoon, though you have not yet mentioned your trains. You had better do this if you want the brougham to meet you. Now don't forget that bicycle tour and the charades, but fix the first day possible for returning to the bosom of your bereaved family, and do not try to persuade us that you have had a pleasant fortnight of it, for after the very scrappy accounts on postcards which are all that you have had time to favour us with, we know better, and even Isabel promises not to laugh at you when you return, and mother is planning plenty of nourishing dainties to bring you back to life and strength. You have gone up considerably in the estimation of all your friends. We were not joking when we prophesied your return at the end of two days, and not one of us dreamed that you would really hang on for

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two weeks. Well done, Agnes, but don't carry this ardour to excess.

“ Your loving and admiring sister,

“ KATE.

“ P.S.—We are very anxious about you—you have sent nothing but postcards. Do write a good long letter soon.—K. A.”

It was extraordinary how this letter hurtled me back to the old life. I sat there, my eyes full of tears, with an inexpressible longing for home in my heart. The very mention of the dear home names hurt me. I could actually hear my father's voice asking when Agnes was coming back? I had always been his favourite child, and had not shown myself in the least grateful for his love. . . .

“ Had bad news, Miss Atherton? ”

I started violently. I had heard no step approaching—I had been so absorbed in my thoughts that it gave me a regular shock to hear a human voice speaking to me, and I looked up, scared, with tears rolling unchecked down my cheeks, to find Mr. Fleming just behind the stile against which I was leaning. His face was so alarmed that I suddenly broke into a laugh, while I dashed away the silly tears.

“ What is it? ” he asked, thinking, I suppose,

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that I was fairly hysterical with the trouble conveyed to me by post. He even put out his hand to lay it upon mine, but I snatched mine away, quite aghast at the folly of my behaviour.

“It is nothing—nothing at all,” I hurriedly assured him. “My sisters are going a bicycle tour, and getting up charades, and they want me to come home at once to join them.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Fleming, stepping back, and in that one monosyllable he conveyed to my understanding that he was not only disappointed in me, but also ashamed of having anything to do with such a trivial being.

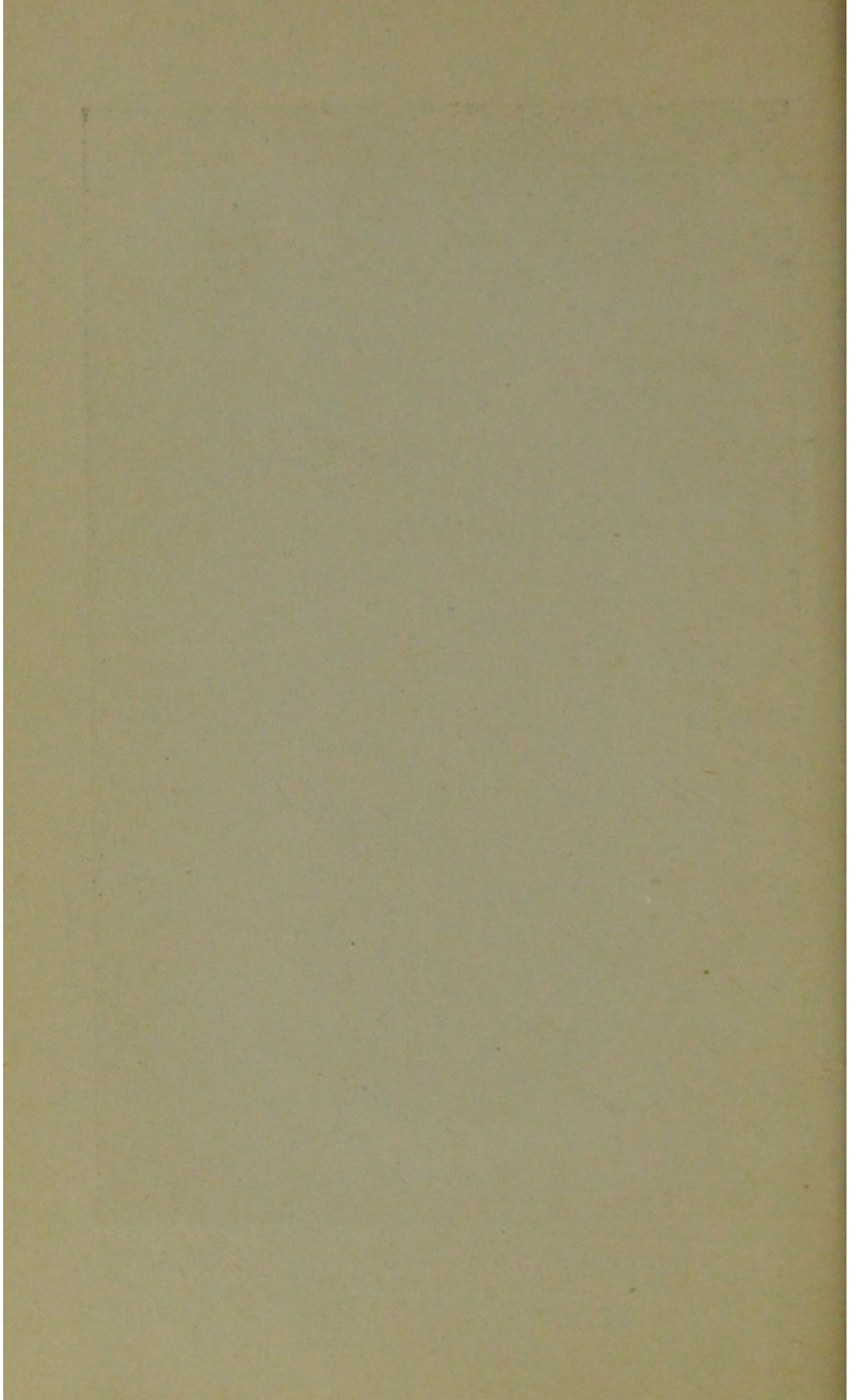
“What I am crying for, I simply don’t know,” I continued impulsively, for I could not bear to be so misunderstood, “I think it must have been just a little touch of *das Heimweh*. My sister told me that—that my father asks every day when Agnes is coming home. That went to my heart, and here—no one cares a straw whether I go or stay, so long as the work gets done. . . . But, what nonsense! Of course it does not matter about an individual, while we are doing real work that is of use to humanity.”

Mr. Fleming glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. I believe he very nearly burst out laughing, and I subsided, with burning cheeks.

“It must be time to go back,” I said, picking



"I WITHERED HIM WITH A GLANCE AND STALKED AWAY, MY
HEAD IN THE AIR."



A LETTER FROM HOME

up my letter and thrusting it into its envelope nervously.

“Do you mean—home?” he queried.

“No, certainly not. Of course I am not going home.”

“But what about that bicycle tour, not to mention the charades?”

I withered him with a glance, and stalked away, my head in the air. I half hoped that he would follow me—but I think now that Mr. Fleming was too wise!

CHAPTER XVIII

CORRESPONDENCE IN HOSPITAL

I REPLIED to my letter from Kate after the manner that letters generally are written in hospital—snatching five minutes from my duties here and there until it was complete.

I had been turned into bathroom pro after that ill-fated fortnight in the kitchen, and I began my letter in the ward bathroom, having hurried through the pleasing task of scrubbing out the bath and all the basins that had been used by other people, and smashing a glass, a crime I felt nearly incapable of confessing—because of some other stupid things I had done here as a start.

“My dear Kate,

“Do not be alarmed about my health, I was never better in my life, though I have signalised myself already by catching a hospital throat, and infecting my own eye, not to mention various cuts and burns, for which I was severely reprimanded. My hands are at

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this moment more like a patchwork quilt than anything else.

“ I am afraid I cannot return home for the bicycle tour—I say nothing about the charades, for by that date I shall either have to return whether I like it or not, or will have signed the agreement to stay here three years. I dare not think of it. But such trifles as bicycle tours and charades . . . ”

“ What are you doing, Nurse Atherton ? ”

“ I have just finished,” was my hurried answer—I did not refer to my letter, which was reposing, crushed, in my pocket. “ I—I am afraid I’ve broken a glass, Sister.”

Sister seemed unable to mention her opinion about this last piece of carelessness.

“ Of course I will pay for it,” I broke out.

“ Of course you will,” said Sister. “ Now, hurry.”

I continued my letter in my bedroom, when I was getting ready to go out.

“ . . . cannot be considered,” I scribbled ; “ they are not worth a moment’s thought when you are at this sort of work. Here we really live, we do not play at life ; and we work—I do not suppose anyone else except a hospital nurse knows what work is—I mean real work, serious, hard work,

THE PROBATIONER

with responsibilities that would overwhelm you if you had time to feel them. You girls at home appear to me like mere children, though you are all older than myself, and I have only been here just over a fortnight. My dear Kate, a single week of this sort of thing adds thirty years to your character.

“Now I will tell you about some of my little patients, as that will be more interesting. There is one awful child here who bites and scratches; she has been very ill—of heart disease, but is getting better now. Her name is May. We generally call them by their numbers. She is Number Five. One day she bit me right through the skin, and I had to have it dressed. The Sister of our ward said it was bad management, and I ought to manage her better, and not be so careless—they always say you are careless if you get hurt, instead of sympathising.

“Number Two, Frank, is a pneumonia case, and whenever he is naughty he howls for his mamma, and then I want to slap him. Perhaps you will remind me of my wonderful resolutions to comfort the poor little darlings who were away from their own mothers—I acknowledge all that, but it was before I knew anything about children. We simply dread their mothers. They always upset the whole batch on visiting

CORRESPONDENCE IN HOSPITAL

days, and we have such a business to get the ward quiet after they have gone.

“Number One is my pet. His name is Jimmy, and he is worth his weight in gold, for he gives no trouble, and is marvellously patient. They say it is because he is not right in his head. I love Jimmy all the same. There is another little atrocity who . . .”

I dared not linger. I heard a step in the passage, and here I had wasted half an hour of my time off, when I ought to have been out, so I dropped the still unfinished letter into my pocket again and scampered.

I had to go down to the town this afternoon, for the stock of provisions laid in for me by Mr. Fleming on that memorable afternoon when he and I ate buns together was now exhausted.

With some difficulty I escaped from the hospital unnoticed, and took the tram down to the town. It was a twenty minutes' drive, and I went on with my letter as best I could from my seat on the top. More than once I had utilised this drive for a private nap—it was quite an ordinary thing for us nurses to take a seat on top of the tram, and stay there, dozing, while it went to the town and back

THE PROBATIONER

twice. It cost a little, but when you are dog tired, you are willing to pay for this luxury, as long as you have a spare shilling.

“... another little atrocity who yells when we give her anything,” I wrote convulsively, “for she never wants her food, and what do you think we have to do in hospital when the children refuse their nourishment? We have to feed them *through the nose!* Generally they give in at sight of the nasal feeding apparatus, after they have been fed with it once. We had to do this to Mary Jane—I believe our Staff-nurse was afraid of doing it alone, and made me help her perform the operation because she daren’t herself. I set my teeth and held her down while Nurse Smith put the horrid tube in her nostril, and fed her through it. It was perfectly awful, but at all events we cured Mary Jane. The mere sight of that nasal tube stops her yells, and she takes her food now as meekly as a lamb. We only keep her alive by cramming her with pints and pints of milk—at home she would have died long ago. Let me advise all of you to submit to me meekly when I return a full-blown nurse, for I know several ways of compelling patients to take their food and medicine. Mary Jane may recover—if she

CORRESPONDENCE IN HOSPITAL

does, they ought to thank me for it, but in hospital you never get your due.

“We are extra busy, there are so many young children all having different feeds every two hours. I don't know how I got through the last few days when I was kitchen pro. By this time I can make any sort of invalid mess that was ever invented. I have not got over the difficulties of being bathroom pro yet, and I am very stupid at learning fresh duties, or so I am told often enough to convince me.

“There is one typhoid case—in the special ward. Don't tell mother if it would frighten her. Nothing but arrant carelessness could make a nurse catch it from a patient, and we love a typhoid case, it is so . . .”

I stopped, as the tram had reached the limit, and as I had that important shopping to do, I had to hurry off. It took me some time wandering round to discover the cheapest shop. What I wanted was, of course, quantity, not quality. My purchases took me longer than I thought, and to my horror I found that I was ten minutes later than I should be in starting home. Fortunately for me, my tram was also ten minutes behind its time, and I just managed to catch it as it started.

THE PROBATIONER

“I’m late to-day,” I panted, bending forward from my front seat on the top to address the driver, “and so are you, or I should have been done for. Now do, for pity’s sake, whip up those truly beautiful horses. Everything in the whole universe depends upon whether I get back in time or no.”

The driver chuckled, and the horrid creature winked. “All right, Nurse,” said he, “I’ve drove these hosses up and down the hill for ten year, as long as there’s been that horspital up above, and I’ve carried you nurses backards and forrards every day of the ten year. You shan’t be late.”

I did not reprove him for his familiarity, because someone was signalling to him to stop, and he affected not to see. Perhaps he was not so bad after all! Next he nearly drove over a woman who was standing on the line with a perambulator, looking the other way, absorbed in watching a quarrel between some boys. She got a good fright, which I considered she deserved, and we did not stop to listen to the harangue of a policeman upon heedless driving. Never before had those lazy horses strained so to get up the hill, and never before had I felt less inclined to pity the poor dumb creatures. I could think of nothing except my anxiety to be in time.

CORRESPONDENCE IN HOSPITAL

And in time I actually was, having taken the last part of my journey from the terminus to the hospital door at a pace that brought me in perfectly breathless.

Mr. Fleming was standing in the hall, an unlighted cigarette in his mouth. He removed it to ask me if anything was the matter ?

“ I am in time,” I gasped.

“ It is extremely foolish to rush like that,” he said, like one who administers a grandfatherly rebuke. “ Punctuality is all very well, but . . .”

“ No one but a pro can know the awful importance of punctuality,” I ejaculated.

Mr. Fleming whisked round and began examining the barometer, as if he were absorbed in its contemplation. Then I discovered that Matron was going by, and in my very heart I blessed him. Had I been caught in an argument with the house surgeon, I should indeed have heard of it again !

Matron took no sort of notice of me—she had hardly exchanged a dozen words with me since my arrival, and I continued my breathless way to my room.

I had no further opportunity for writing that day, but all the next I carried my letter about with me, and took every chance that came in my way for extending its dimensions.

THE PROBATIONER

“... interesting,” I wrote, taking up my tale where it had broken off in a manner you acquire in hospital. “The typhoid boy is not conscious, and Frank is very ill again. He has had a relapse, and they are making a fuss about it, as if it must be somebody’s fault. I do hope and trust that they will not take it into their heads that it is mine! I know I have not done anything wrong, or made any mistake with him; pneumonia is so frightfully serious. There is another child—Ivy—she is Number Eight, and whenever she knows that you are especially busy with anyone else, always begins whimpering for something. They say she is dying—I cannot believe it, she looks perfectly well. We have to go to her the very moment she calls, because she is supposed to be so ill, and she delays us as long as ever she can. Then we get scolded. I dare not stay here writing to you another moment.”

In my time off that evening I finished this immense epistle.

“Matron is so cool. She takes no notice of me—she has hardly said a single word to me since I came. One of the nurses—Nurse Bright—has not yet forgiven me for spoiling some horrid old rags of hers which I borrowed to rub up

CORRESPONDENCE IN HOSPITAL

brasses the first day I came. I am not popular, I assure you, I never was less popular in my life, and I am of less consequence than our little kitchen-maid at home. Please do not be afraid that I shall grow conceited here, there is not the slightest fear—I have forgotten what it is like to be popular. I get more abuse in an hour than I ever had in all my years put together before I came. But I take it as quite a matter of course. I know I am stupid, and have no more wit than a stone—or a slug, which was my Staff-nurse's refined way of putting it.

Now I really must stop, or I shall be caught writing when it is my time "off"—and that would be a mortal sin—just as if we did not get enough exercise running up and down the corridors and wards! I am certain that I walk about twenty miles every day inside the hospital, not to mention those two hours tramping in the open air, which I sometimes take reclining on the top of a tram.

"Your loving sister,

"AGNES.

"P.S.—Everywhere that you see it blotted you will know that I have suddenly thrust it into my pocket. This is the way we write letters in hospital."

CHAPTER XIX

ADVICE

My letter to Kate elicited a perfect sheaf of correspondence from home. My father wrote commanding me to return at once before I had been killed outright. My mother was actually incoherent in her consternation, and commanded me to keep clear of the typhoid case. She said that if I were sent to the special ward to do anything for that patient, I was to refuse flatly to go, and say that my mother forbade it. This made me annoyed with Kate (I had so particularly cautioned her not to tell my mother about the typhoid patient) until I read Kate's second letter, in which she—the most ironical of my sisters, pleaded with me most urgently and affectionately to give up my work in hospital, and come home to a rational life. Ethel and Isabel joined in this general attack, and they got Mrs. Harding to write a sensible piece of advice, which was that I should join the cycling tour for the good of my health, instead of ruining it in the manner I described.

ADVICE

“It’s pretty evident,” said I to myself, “that I shall have to be more careful what I say to them all.”

I was sitting on the stile I had used before for correspondence, having come here for quiet in which to read my bundle of letters. It was much the same sort of day again, except that the first glow of spring had passed, changing the leaves from emerald green to the deeper shades of early summer. I sighed heavily, and longed for a friend to whom I could pour out this new worry.

As if the wish were father to the event, a brisk step came towards me from behind, and I was greeted with the words, “This is the first time you have come here since the day I found you in tears on this identical stile.”

“The—the first time—how do you know that?” I asked, starting up.

Mr. Fleming did not answer, but he leaned over the stile between us, and asked me whether I generally suffered from *das Heimweh* when I received letters from home?

I nodded.

“Are they urging you to join their tour again?” he asked, without the shadow of a smile in his voice.

THE PROBATIONER

“Not only that,” I said, “my father commands me to return home at once.”

“Well?” said Mr. Fleming.

“What ought I to do?” I broke out.

Mr. Fleming considered, twisting his rudimentary moustache in contemplative fashion. Then he said, “You are of age, I suppose?”

All the blood in my body seemed to rush into my head as the startling meaning of his words flashed like a meteor across my brain. My horrified looks must have shown him what were my first thoughts in that moment of revelation.

“I think it is this way,” said Mr. Fleming, so gently that I listened with acute attention. “We always owe our parents the highest duty of human being to human beings, but there comes a time in everybody’s life when blind obedience even to them becomes impossible, if not actually wrong. You see, Miss Atherton, no parent has any right so to thwart or restrain his child that the whole usefulness of its life is checked. Until we are of an age to judge for ourselves, I think we ought to submit to their authority as abjectly as you like, but not when we come to years of discretion. I gather that your home life is not very—well, not very useful to the world, shall we say? If you persist in it,

ADVICE

you are likely to become a superfluous woman—eh ? ”

“ I should be fatally certain to become that. As it is, I am about the most stupid and incapable pro who ever tried with all her might to be clever and capable ! And I cannot bear to go back like a failure, and turn into a superfluous woman.”

“ No,” said Mr. Fleming, “ of course you will not go back. You will write a nice filial little note to your father, telling him that you are sure he would not really stand in the way of your happiness, and that your heart is set upon this work which he wants you to give up—and ask him to withdraw his opposition, because you require encouragement from home—getting so little of it here—eh ? ”

I felt a smile leap to my face. Everything was perfectly simple and straight now. I thanked Mr. Fleming warmly for his help, and gathered up my sheaf of correspondence with a lightened heart.

“ Good-bye,” I said, “ it’s more than time for me to be off. And by the way—punctuality is more important than anything in all the world—if you are a pro ! ”

That was my parting shot, and produced a laugh which rang in my ears all the way home.

THE PROBATIONER

When I was half-way across the field, I heard Mr. Fleming calling after me—"This is rather a nice spot, isn't it?"

"If it is," I muttered, "that may be why you are rooted to it. A *gentleman* would escort me home."

Why his defection in this matter should affect me so strongly I did not stop to analyse, but the reason of it was brought home to me vividly enough before I had crossed the second field.

I came face to face with Nurse Bright and another nurse, and to say that they looked at me suspiciously only faintly describes the piercing looks I received. What, oh what should I have done had I met them here, if I had been accompanied by the house surgeon? I shook in my shoes as they pursued their way, wondering what would become of me even if they found Mr. Fleming at the stile? This was the very last time I would ever take this particular walk, that I vowed as I pelted home.

Not long ago I could not have comprehended these perfectly new ideas, and somehow I felt that they were paltry—but—*I was a pro!* I had sense enough to realise that a pro cannot be too careful in such matters.

That Nurse Bright and her chum did not find Mr. Fleming at the stile I concluded from

ADVICE

two or three deductions. One of these was very staggering.

I heard Nurse Cotteril in simpering tones inform Nurse Bright that she could not go anywhere without meeting Mr. Fleming, and he had followed her to the town that afternoon, and taken her to the picture gallery!

“Well,” sniffed Nurse Bright, “all I can say is that you had better not mention that sort of thing in hospital—if you want to stay.”

(Certainly I should never go to that stile again!)

“It isn’t my fault,” said Nurse Cotteril, “I can’t help being admired—I’m sure I wish I wasn’t.”

What else she revealed I don’t know. I hurried away, with a shudder of distaste.

CHAPTER XX

I AM ALTOGETHER TOO CLEVER

ONCE or twice I did something well. This I gathered from the fact that nothing was said against me. But when Sister actually—actually smiled at me one morning, I was so elated that I could hardly attend to my duties, and I proceeded to knock my wrist sharply against the corner of a locker.

“ If that had been noticed,” thought poor I, blinking hard, for the pain was acute, “ all my prestige would be gone again, and once more I should be in dire disgrace. What a good thing that no one saw ! ” The tears were in my eyes while I thus reflected, for my hand and arm were almost numb by the violence of that blow. Still, what is a blow after all ? Surely one can bear a little thing like that without being discovered and disgraced !

My work did not progress so well after that, the tiresome arm (my right arm, of course, for

I AM ALTOGETHER TOO CLEVER

I am the most unfortunate of all people) being very painful. When the bell rang for dinner I had still to empty and clean the doctor's ward basin—that sacred basin in which the visiting physician washes his sacred hands! I seized it and flew to the bathroom with it.

Alas! Was anyone ever so unfortunate? My arm gave way and I dropped the basin—the doctor's sacred basin—and, of course, the silly thing went and broke. It divided itself at my feet.

This was too, too much, and I stood as one transfixed, in a dismay too great for words.

So in dumb despair I gathered up the remains and hid them, and then crawled away to the dining-room, choking back my tearless sobs. There was a lump in my throat that nearly betrayed me before that row of unsympathetic faces.

“Excuse me, Matron,” said I, hardly able to mumble the usual apology for arriving late at a meal, and I subsided into my seat, a pitiable object that did not require the silent, withering look I received to crush me.

Directly after dinner it would be my duty to confess, and so appalling was the thought that I simply could not swallow anything. What!—tell Sister that I had smashed the doctor's basin!

THE PROBATIONER

How could I possibly articulate the words that would bring upon me that overwhelming accusation of carelessness? For the time this last disaster excluded from my mind the growing discomfort in my arm that was threatening me with further degradation.

Sister was waiting for me in the corridor as we trooped out, me last of all.

"Is your throat sore *again*?" she asked severely.

"No, Sister."

"Then why could you not eat your dinner?"

I raised my eyes, and stared at her in dull despair.

"Why?" she repeated firmly.

"It was because—because I—have had an accident," I stammered. "I—I—I've broken the doctor's basin this time."

"And was that why you could not eat?"

"Yes, Sister," said I; "you see, I knew I should have to confess it to you."

I believe it was a smile that twitched her lips for one moment, but she set them firmly again. "You are very careless," she said, and passed on.

I drew a deep breath, and thought to myself that I had got through it better than I could have dared to hope. Then I hurried back

I AM ALTOGETHER TOO CLEVER

to the ward and set about my work with a will.

A stab of agony in my bruised arm suddenly checked me. Glancing down at my wrist (when no one was observing me) I saw, to my horror, that it looked red in the centre of the bruise, and had a puffy appearance. It was then that I became possessed with the determination *to treat it myself!* This would save Sister the trouble, and me the reproof. Besides, I knew exactly what to do by this time. The skin was broken, therefore a collodion dressing was necessary, and I should be as stupid as I was called if I were not capable yet of putting one on myself.

I had to watch carefully for an opportunity, and found one in the children's hour. As usual, Mr. Fleming came up to the wards to romp with the youngsters. Sister was in Matron's sitting-room, and they were safely stowed away there at tea with some visitors. Nurse Smith was out, and Nurse Bright was in charge of my ward for the time, Nurse Fletcher being compelled to remain in the surgical ward meantime. Nurse Morgan was busy in the theatre, and Nurse Cotteril could be depended on to remain in the wards while Mr. Fleming was about. In short, everyone who might be expected to spy on me

THE PROBATIONER

was safely out of the way, and I darted down to the surgery, and had no difficulty in finding the hospital cure for every wound. I had had it applied to my hands so often that I could have found it blindfold.

It was with a good deal of self-satisfaction that I first washed the bruise in a disinfectant, after which I liberally painted on the collodion, covered it with gauze in the approved style, fixing that down with another wash of collodion, and as I was particularly anxious about this wound, I put on a champion large dressing, which I easily concealed under my cuff, and felt sure that I had at last done something truly clever. The physical pain caused by that dressing was a mere trifle compared with the mental pain it would have been to confess another piece of carelessness, so I bore it nobly—but by this time I was becoming accustomed to anguish.

Not to quite such frightful anguish, though, as presently began to afflict me. It was with the utmost difficulty that I managed to conceal it. Mr. Fleming was romping with my children when I returned to the ward, and he several times glanced in a puzzled way at me. He must have thought that I was sulky, for I saw him shrug his shoulders after Nurse Bright had said

I AM ALTOGETHER TOO CLEVER

something to him, looking at me meaningly while she whispered it. I did not care—I remained as far away from that blanket on the hearth as ever I could, and nursed my aching, throbbing arm, and wondered why I had ever been born.

A sleepless night followed, during which I more than once broke down in tears and groans—but my room companions slept on, and I would not have awakened them even if I had been perfectly, absolutely certain that I was dying. In the morning my arm was swollen to such an extent that I trembled to see it, and every movement caused excruciating agony.

Bedraggled in mind and body, I dressed myself with the utmost difficulty, and went down for my early cup of tea with an ominous sense of impending doom. I could not raise my cup to my lips with my right arm, and had to become left-handed for once. No one was in an observant mood during the few hurried moments of this early morning refectation, so I escaped notice till I got back to the ward.

There the inevitable moment quickly arrived. It was no use even attempting to use my arm, for I could not. I turned my face of shame and agony to Sister, who had come up to the cot beside which I stood in dumb despair.

THE PROBATIONER

“ Sister ! ”

“ What ? ”

“ I . . . ”

“ What ? ”

“ I—seem to have something the matter with my arm. It’s nothing much, but I—I can’t lift Jimmy up to make his bed.”

Sister’s clear, annihilating eye scorched through and through my guilty conscience. It seemed to accuse me of blood-poisoning at least.

“ I put on a collodion dressing myself,” I hastened to say, in self-defence; “ it isn’t anything much, only a bruise.”

“ Let me see your arm.”

With fear and trembling I turned up my sleeve, and cowered guiltily at sight of its shocking appearance. What in the world would Sister say to me now ?

“ You—put—a—collodion—dressing—on—that—arm ! ”

I dared not reply, the tone withered up every excuse that might have come to my rescue.

“ You are really quite too clever for your vocation,” said Sister. “ Allow me to ask you *why* you did it, and when, and what possessed you to commit such folly, and how you hurt

I AM ALTOGETHER TOO CLEVER

your arm, and why you did not come to me for treatment as directed ? ”

My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth—I could not speak.

“ Come with me,” said Sister.

Those words of terror struck upon my ear like the note of doom, and I followed with shaking knees. Sister marched on in ominous silence.

“ Sister ! ”

She half turned her head, but did not deign to answer.

“ I—I wanted to save you the trouble,” I faltered.

“ Indeed ! Well, on another occasion you will please remember that this great consideration on your part may give me a good deal more trouble than it is ever likely to save.”

We reached the surgery, and I turned sick with apprehension. I knew myself an abject coward over physical pain, but that was only part of my woe—I should be obliged to face Mr. Fleming with another wound !

“ Sit down,” said Sister, “ I will fetch Mr. Fleming.”

I was thankful that she had not sent me after him for, indeed, I could hardly stand,

THE PROBATIONER

and I sank into a chair as limp a bundle of human misery as ever breathed.

It was some time before Sister returned, bringing Mr. Fleming in her wake, and I was thankful for the respite. It had been useful to me in more ways than one. I had had time to study my part in the approaching scene, and it had fortunately occurred to me that by a fine show of courage (which I certainly did not possess) I might win some appreciation even in this extremity. So I turned with my old fire at their approach, and gave them defiant looks as a little welcome. I was almost certain that Mr. Fleming had been laughing—and this stung me into even better performance of my part.

“Nurse Atherton has slightly hurt her arm,” said Sister; “it is nothing much—only a bruise according to her own account, and she has been dressing it herself most cleverly—she did that to save us the trouble.”

“May I see the arm?” said Mr. Fleming. “Ah—yes—I see, it is bruised, certainly. How did you hurt it, Nurse?”

“I knocked it against a locker.”

“Very careless,” interpolated Sister.

I winced so sharply as those two-edged words cut through my inner consciousness that Mr. Fleming thought he had hurt me.

I AM ALTOGETHER TOO CLEVER

"Why did you jump?" he asked, looking hard at me while he held my wounded arm.

"I—didn't," I whispered.

"We shall have to remove this dressing. It is most scientifically put on, but will have to come off, I'm afraid," said he, "and I'm also afraid that it will hurt you."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," I replied, "I don't mind being hurt, in fact, I—I rather like it."

"You need not talk quite so much," said Sister.

I bore the rest without a sound. I'd never have got over the shame if I had uttered a single cry. It was some help to perceive that both Sister and Mr. Fleming were unable to conceal their surprise at my fortitude.

"Are you going to faint?"

The voice of Mr. Fleming just prevented me signalling myself like Nurse Cotteril was so fond of doing.

"Of course not," I answered, rallying.

"There, that's over," he said, drawing a breath of relief. "Now, Sister, a hot tomen-tation every two hours, and she'll soon be out of pain."

It was some comfort to see that he was somewhat upset over my sufferings, and even Sister

THE PROBATIONER

did not reply that I deserved the pain. Her manner was quite kind when she at last led me forth out of the surgery, my arm in a sling, and the worst of the business over.

“Let this be a lesson to you,” was her last reproach, “for it doesn’t do to be too clever in hospital, you know.”

CHAPTER XXI

I INSTRUCT THE DOCTOR

ALL was silent in the ward. Half the children were asleep, after their midday meal. Even Cecil dozed on the rug, and Sophie had whined herself into a half-somnolent condition. I was left in charge to-day while the other nurses had their dinner.

It was a responsible position. By this time I was not so eager to be thrown upon my common sense as I used to be. But, of course, I did not demur when told off for this watch, and I kept one eye on the clock, calculating at what moment I should be relieved of the responsibility.

The door suddenly opened, and in walked a gentleman, whom I at once decided must be Mr. Fleming's father. What possessed me to imagine that I cannot tell, since the fancied resemblance faded utterly away as soon as I was aware of my mistake.

"Is Mr. Fleming in?" asked this individual.

THE PROBATIONER

"Yes. He is probably in his room," I answered.

"Go and fetch him, please," said the stranger.

"I am sorry, but I cannot leave the ward," I replied firmly.

"You cannot leave the ward?" he repeated in accents of astonishment.

"No," said I, decidedly, "I am left in charge. I cannot leave the ward. Mr. Fleming's room is on the right-hand side of the hall, the second door."

My answer seemed to give the stranger food for thought. He regarded me much as a naturalist might examine a new sort of animal. Then he grinned. "Are you a new nurse here?" he asked.

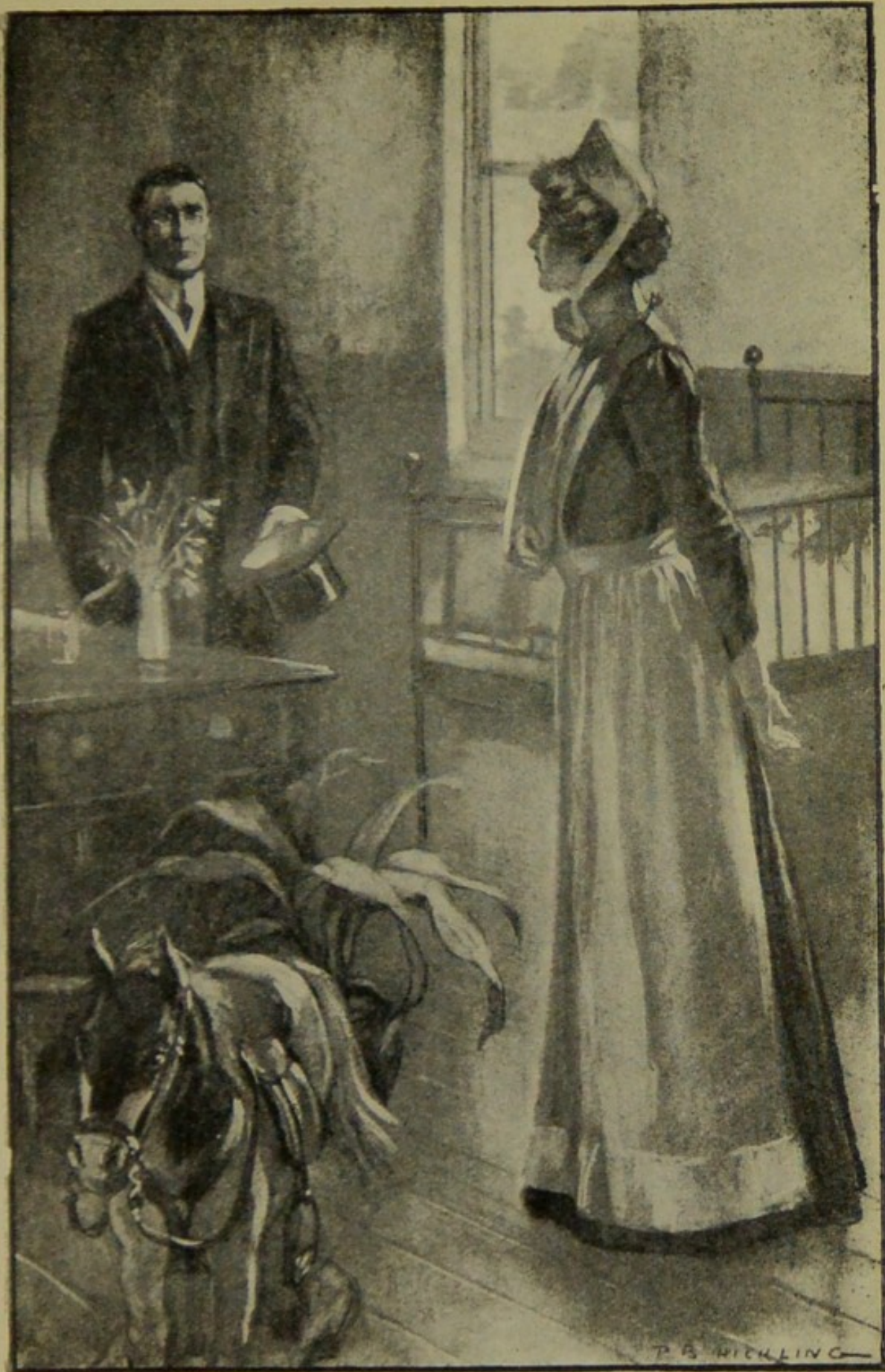
"Fairly new," said I.

"They must be pretty busy just now, I should think," said he.

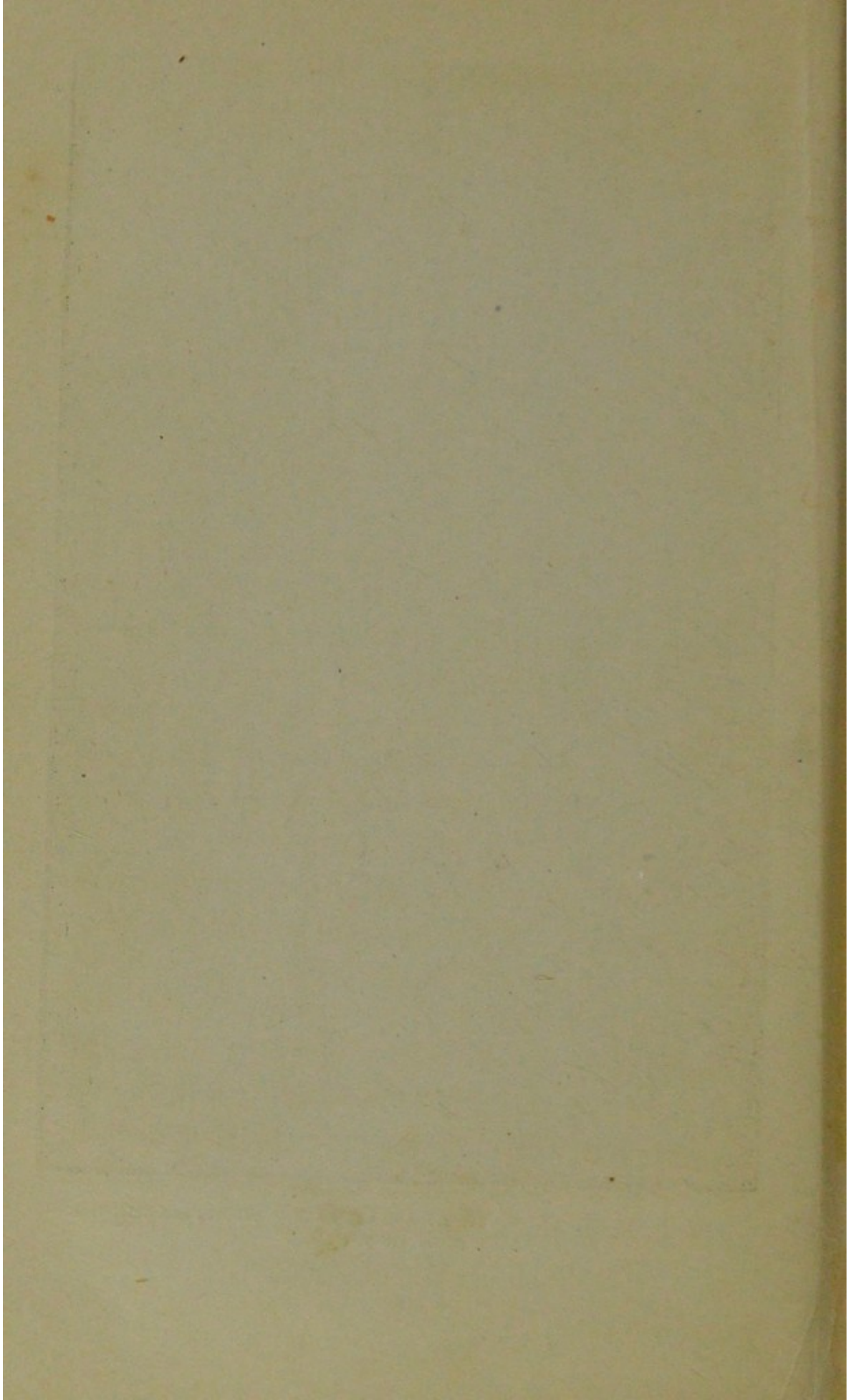
"Yes, we are very busy," I loftily replied, and the pride of possession seized my mind. "Would you like to look round the ward?" I asked.

He eyed me in a curious manner.

"It is all on the newest and most improved lines," I began. "You will notice that the edges of the floor are rounded. That is to prevent dust accumulating in any corner. Dust contains



“HE REGARDED ME MUCH AS A NATURALIST MIGHT EXAMINE A
NEW SORT OF ANIMAL.”



I INSTRUCT THE DOCTOR

germs that might germinate into diseases, if left undisturbed."

"Is that really so?" he asked, with astonishment.

"Yes, it is quite true, and we have to be most particular never to leave a speck of dust anywhere. I know enough about that, for I have the ward to clean every morning. There are no curtains, because, though you may find it hard to believe, they are insanitary things."

"I never thought of that before," said the stranger; "it is profoundly interesting," and he stared in a vacant way at the windows.

"I expect you would be surprised if you knew what precautions we have to take," I continued, warming to my work. "Do you see that bowl over there, on that child's locker? It contains Lysol, and Lysol is a disinfectant."

"Is it?" he asked, gazing at the bowl with fresh surprise, "a disinfectant? Do you mean that it is not for drinking?"

"No, it is for the use of the nurse who attends to that poor little child in the cot. He has a skin disease, and the nurse has to dip her hands in that bowl every time she touches him. No nurse need ever catch the contagion of this, or other similar diseases, if only she remembers her instructions."

THE PROBATIONER

"I see you have your arm in a sling," said the interested stranger. "Did you forget your instructions?"

"Oh—well—no—I happened to knock my wrist, and it was treated wrongly."

"By Mr. Fleming?" asked the visitor.

"No, no!" I exclaimed, and I was about to launch forth into a dissertation upon the virtues of Mr. Fleming, when it struck me that his father might not approve of such warm championship of his son by a mere pro, so I deftly turned the conversation by showing the stranger some of the hieroglyphics on the children's boards.

"That chart," I explained, "tells the patient's temperature. We judge more by the temperature than by any other symptom."

"Is that so?" mused the stranger.

"Yes, it is," I answered. "Ninety-eight point four is the normal temperature. Just look at this child's. He has pneumonia, and has been as high as a hundred and six."

"Is that high?" asked my new friend, whom I liked more and more, he was showing such an intelligent interest in the hospital.

"It is very high—positively dangerous," I informed him, and I dropped my voice to tell him that we were very anxious about this child, as he had had a relapse.

I INSTRUCT THE DOCTOR

“What is a relapse?” asked the stranger.

“It is—it is getting worse again after you are better. . . . Are you wondering what T.D.S. on his prescription means?”

The stranger, with sharply drawn brows, was studying Frank's board, with occasional glances at the little patient.

“It means ‘Three times a day!’” I continued, “and the letters ‘P.C.’ mean ‘After food.’ We have to use these abbreviations in hospital, you know. . . . Oh, here comes Mr. Fleming!”

Mr. Fleming had come in at a run, and stood before the person I had mistaken for his father, gasping for breath.

“Oh, Sir Isaac, excuse me, I didn't know you had arrived. I've only just been told.” Then he wheeled round upon me, and asked, quite roughly, “Why did you not inform me at once that Sir Isaac Lofthouse had come, Nurse?”

I stepped back, and never in my life had been nearer fainting than I was at that awful moment.

Sir Isaac Lofthouse was the great consultant of the district—and I had been instructing him in some of the rudiments of his profession!

“Pray excuse her,” said this great man, “I

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have been well entertained. Now, Fleming, let us get to work at once."

He turned and gave me one flashing smile which I thought would wither up all the emotions I had ever felt, and then he and Mr. Fleming passed out together, leaving me with only one solitary wish in my heart—a wish never to see the face of Sir Isaac again!

CHAPTER XXII

A SLIP

MY imbecile mistake—I did not mince words when I reflected on it—depressed me to such an extent that I could hardly refrain from tears. As soon as Sister and Nurse Smith returned from their dinner, I rose hurriedly to go to mine, glad of escape.

“ You must hurry, Nurse,” Sister called after me, “ Sir Isaac Lofthouse might be here at any moment, and we must have the ward ready.”

I turned to tell her that Sir Isaac had come already, but my tongue refused to frame the words, so I fled instead. I fled at such a rate down the corridor and round the corner that I went bang over on my back, my foot slipping on the polished boards as I swerved aside to avoid crashing into somebody who was coming almost as quickly towards me, and whom I had not been able to see.

“ Oh, have I hurt you ? Have I hurt you ? ” gasped a voice, and a sentence was added which

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referred to the person's carelessness in language that was not parliamentary. "I had no business to be dashing round that corner in this idiotic fashion," he exclaimed, in frantic contrition, as he helped me to rise, rather dazed for a moment with the stunning blow I had received on the back of my head.

Then I burst out laughing—I could not help it, though tears of pain stood in my eyes. "It was I who was dashing round in that idiotic fashion," I articulated.

"I am such a blundering ass," he returned, "and now I've hurt you."

"No, no, Mr. Fleming," I hastened to say, "you must not blame yourself for my stupidity and carelessness. I deserve the bump I got—the truth was I was running away from myself."

"Running away from yourself?"

"Yes, I was so utterly ashamed of myself," I confessed.

"But—why? Was it because I spoke crossly to you about Sir Isaac?"

"No, no, indeed it was not," I assured him, "and if only you knew what a goose I had been, you would have spoken far more crossly."

"I don't understand," said Mr. Fleming, naturally enough.

"I had just been informing Sir Isaac Loft-

A SLIP

house that there are dangerous germs in dust," said I, hanging my head.

"What?"

"And that a hundred and six is a serious temperature," I added, in desperation.

"So it is," answered Mr. Fleming.

"Well," said I, "I rather think he knew that."

"Perhaps he did," assented Mr. Fleming, making a last noble effort not to laugh.

"I—I told him that Lysol is a disinfectant, and what some of the abbreviations on the charts mean, and I wish I had never been born!"

"Don't wish that," said Mr. Fleming, coughing into his handkerchief, and evidently crying rather violently. "The—the merriment of the world might decrease without you, Miss Atherton."

Then he broke down altogether, and I fled again, determining never, never to forgive him for that last saying.

CHAPTER XXIII

NUMBER EIGHT

WHEN I returned to the ward, Sir Isaac Loft-house was going round, accompanied by Sister and Mr. Fleming.

“Tuck up Number Eight again,” said Nurse Smith in my ear, “they’ll be at her cot next.”

“I’ve done nothing else but tuck her up all the morning,” I grumbled, under my breath. “Come, Ivy,” I said to this restless little creature, “do try and lie still for a few minutes. You’ve been picking and pulling at your sheet the whole morning, and it’s very naughty of you. . . . Now, do keep quiet just a moment—here is the doctor coming to see you.”

I retreated, not daring to glance at Sir Isaac, but I need not have feared him—he took no more notice of me than if I did not exist. His keen eye (that had been veiled while I gave him that rudimentary information) was now concentrated upon Number Eight in a steady, piercing look, comprehensive of everything that was ever known about the human frame. He

NUMBER EIGHT

said not a word, and then turned away, shaking his head. He marched straight to Number Two, the boy Frank, about whose temperature I had held forth so learnedly.

“ Well, little man,” said Sir Isaac, “ do you want to play at breathing as hard as ever you can ? ”

“ No ! ” firmly answered Number Two.

“ What, Tommy ? What’s that you say ? ”

“ Ain’t Tommy,” whimpered Number Two.

“ Go away ! ”

“ But I want to see how well you can breathe—just for fun, you know, Billy,” said the great Sir Isaac, adjusting his stethoscope to his ears.

“ Ain’t Billy,” stormed the patient.

“ You don’t say so ! Now, pull in a big breath, and then blow me away ! Won’t it be fun if you can blow me up to the ceiling ? ”

This alluring prospect captivated Frank, who drew in his breath with all his might, and then burst out crying.

“ Never mind, never mind, Albert Edward.”

Frank ceased crying in order to inform the physician that he wasn’t Albert Edward at all.

“ How singular,” remarked Sir Isaac. “ However, I’m certain that you can’t roll over on your face, Solomon.”

For answer, while vigorously declaring that

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he wasn't Sollymonny, Frank rolled over on his face defiantly.

"Oh, so that's how you do it, is it?" said Sir Isaac, clapping his stethoscope to Number Two's back, and then pummelling him de-lusively, while assuring him that this was a new game which all the little boys in England wanted to play, and ending by tweaking his hair and telling him that he was a fine fellow.

"I'se Frank," announced Number Two.

"Oh!" said Sir Isaac, in great astonishment, while he scribbled a new prescription on his board; "now, listen to me, Frank. If you are a good boy and take your medicine without howling, I'll give you a penny next time I see you, and here's one now to encourage you."

Then the great physician turned back once more to look at Number Eight. I had been obliged to tuck her up again, and I had whispered threats into her ear if she dared to ruffle up her bedclothes just after I put them straight with my one available arm.

"Send for her people at once," said Sir Isaac.

"It won't be many hours now."

I went cold to my very spine. What did this mean?

Sir Isaac had gone, with his fateful decrees, and here came Nurse Smith with a screen.

NUMBER EIGHT

I mutely helped her to fix it. "What does it mean?" I whispered, though I knew.

"Dying," answered Staff-nurse Smith, even her voice gentle.

I shivered, and my lips trembled. A few minutes ago I had threatened to shake Ivy well if she dared to pull up her sheet again!

"You won't be wanted here," said Nurse Smith, laying her hand on my shoulder, "you are not accustomed to this sort of thing, are you?"

I shook my head, but could not trust myself to speak. The gentleness of Nurse Smith's manner upset me terribly; it was so unnatural that it brought the tremendous reality to my imagination as nothing else could.

The work of the ward went on as usual, except that one little cot was surrounded by screens, and that a poor woman had come in with white and haggard face, to sit beside that cot on one of the days when visitors were not admitted. I went about whatever light tasks I could perform with one arm, my mind full of that supreme idea. Number Eight was dying—the troublesome, tiresome, annoying little girl, whose fretful voice demanding attention at awkward moments had so often irritated me—whose very restlessness that betokened death had made me

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threaten her shamefully ! She was dying—she was passing away into the unseen world around us, which had never before seemed real or near to me. I cannot explain why, but it made a difference in my feelings towards all the other children, and it raised my ideas of the profession in a most extraordinary manner. We nurses and doctors were fighting together against pain, disease, and death—not in the abstract, fanciful way I had imagined before entering the arena, or in the commonplace way I thought I had found it when there ; but in fearful earnest, and all the while in the very face of death.

Every case we cured was a victory against that dreadful foe of mankind, and here in hospital we were in the very centre of that noble struggle. A fatal case must be, and is, a separate grief to each and all amongst that little army of fighters who are thus struggling for the good of the vast masses outside, most of which go through their lives unconscious of our battle on their behalf.

At five o'clock the child died.

Number Eight had been one of our most troublesome children. She had always called us to attend to her whenever she could interrupt us, no matter what we were about. She had invariably delayed us as long as ever

NUMBER EIGHT

she could. She had been peevish and exacting, and had made a practice of whining for the other children's toys. As she was dying, we had been bidden to humour her in every way, and many a time I had secretly fumed against what had appeared to me foolish indulgence of a silly, spoilt little girl, and I had more than once issued promises of vengeance, which I could only feel thankful I had never dared to perform. The only possible extenuation of my crime was in the knowledge that I had never truly realised that Ivy was actually dying, in fact, I had not known in the least what that means—that a young earthly life was at its close, was actually coming to an end.

My manner to the other little patients altered on the day when Number Eight died. Teddie put out a chubby hand and stroked me—a caress I had never before won, and this was followed by a remark from Edie, that “Nairse” was nice to-day.

“Yes,” said I, swallowing hard, and staring at them through a mist of tears, “but it won't be for long, now.”

“Why won't it?” asked Cecil, shrewdly.

“Because,” said I, “in about a week Nurse is most likely going away.”

“No, don't go,” said Sophie. “Stay!”

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I looked at her, and choked.

“Even if I want to stay myself,” said I, “most likely I shall have to go after all. But don’t let us talk of it. Shall I tell you a story?”

“Yes, do!” chorused the children, and I managed to keep them quiet this time by one of my best fairy stories, spoken in low tones out of respect for That which lay behind those screens.

CHAPTER XXIV

I ASSIST AT AN OPERATION

“GET Number Fourteen’s feed at once,” said Nurse Smith.

All was as usual again in the ward. The screens had been taken away from Number Eight’s cot. All the bedding had been thrown out of the window to a strip of grass beneath, had been aired and carbolised, and the cot was now made up again ready for its next occupant. Number Eight had died the day before, and here was her cot prosaically waiting for a new Number Eight less than twenty hours after she had occupied it! Everybody went about as if that little tragedy had never occurred, and I thought this showed a state of callousness hideous to contemplate. I had not been in hospital long enough to readjust myself as quickly as my seniors could.

Number Fourteen was a baby of three months old, who only weighed five pounds. I had never touched it yet, and had, in fact, something like

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a horror of the poor little thing. Nurse Smith told me now to take it up, and feed it on my knee, and I had the disquieting sense of being watched as I did so, not only by Nurse Smith, but also by Sister. My arm was now out of its sling, and I was therefore considered able to perform my usual duties, which I accordingly did, in spite of stiffness and pain.

I shivered as I bent over Number Fourteen's cradle, and lifted the dreadful little object into my unaccustomed arms. Then the idea that this was a whole human being like myself took hold of my mind, and moved all the thoughts of pity that could be touched by such a pitiful sight. The tiny face was withered up, the hands protruded from its doll's night-dress like claws, and its old, old eyes looked up at me with an expression as if they understood everything in the world. I had to feed it very carefully, for it was inclined to choke at every mouthful, and kept on dropping off to sleep in the middle of its meal; but I made it finish its bottle in the end, after coaxing it, and waking it I don't know how often, and then I very carefully replaced it in its cradle, downright thankful that I had not broken or injured it in any way.

"Oh—has it finished its bottle?" asked Nurse Smith, and she seemed surprised.

I ASSIST AT AN OPERATION

“ Yes,” said I, “ I thought I had to make it take it all ? ”

“ And whatever made you think that ? ” asked Nurse Smith, wheeling round as if to hide her face. Then she added, to Sister, “ Nurse Atherton is becoming quite bright—she has made Number Fourteen finish its bottle.”

“ That’s right,” said Sister ; “ at this rate we’ll pull it through.”

I stood still, listening to what sounded almost like praise with abated breath, but I had not time to enjoy the new sensation, for Matron herself suddenly appeared in the ward, spoke to Sister, and then called me.

“ You are to change and go at once to the theatre to assist Nurse Bright,” was what she said.

My eyes turned to Sister.

“ Did you hear ? ” said she.

“ Yes, Sister.”

“ Then why are you delaying ? ”

I turned and ran to my room to change, but I was shaking like a reed in a gale. Why was I sent to the theatre ? What, what was I to witness there ?

I found Nurse Bright in an exasperated mood. Her arms were bare, and she was placing bowls and buckets in position, as if for some tremendous operation.

THE PROBATIONER

“Oh, there you are at last!” she said. “But you’d better tell me at once whether you intend to flop about fainting and making yourself ridiculous! What? I’ve had enough of pros, upon my word I have!”

“No, Nurse,” said I.

“What?”

“I’m not going to faint, or flop. What shall I do?”

“Fill those jugs with water. Quick! Don’t spill them, now! . . . Count those sponges. . . . You may as well tell me at once whether the sight of an operation will affect your silly pro’s mind or not?”

I had never known her so bad as this, but I hastened to tell her that as I hadn’t got a mind, it couldn’t very well be affected by the sight.

“That’s probably the truest word you ever spoke,” said she, a little less grimly. “I suppose you’ve never witnessed an amputation?”

“Never,” said I, with a sickly smile, as I remembered our delicate feelings at home with regard to such atrocities.

“Upon my word!” exclaimed Nurse Bright, “that idiot has made me late! Flopping right down under the house-surgeon’s nose, and going into hysterics for his benefit. She’s got no more the makings of a nurse in her than a blind rat.

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Pity she didn't hear what he said about her outside! She'd have been convinced that she hadn't captivated him if she had! I think what he called her was a howling fool—which was literally correct. Put that straight over there. . . . Don't touch those towels! . . . Now, acknowledge at once whether you mean to faint or no?"

"Certainly not," I answered, striving to keep the agony of apprehension out of my voice.

"Very well. Come with me. I'll have to put the patient into your charge, while I finish up here. The porter will come to wheel him into the anæsthetic room. You've got nothing to do but keep him amused. He only came in last night, so one nurse is as good as another. I warn you, he's a bad-tempered little urchin, and you'll have your hands full."

With that she led me to the surgical ward, and left me beside a screaming child, who had yelled at everyone who came near him from the moment of his arrival, as I heard the Sister of this ward remark. I could not feel angry with the unfortunate little mortal who was about to be crippled for life, and I let him punch me in the face, which was his first playful little greeting.

"Take me 'ome," roared the bad-tempered little urchin.

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“Of course,” said I. “You’d like to go home, wouldn’t you, Johnny?” I had glanced at his board to see his name, not feeling equal to attempt the jokes of Sir Isaac in that matter.

“Wants ter go ’ome!” wailed Johnny.

“All right, so you shall, as soon as your poor little leg is . . . is . . .”—it would not do to say “off,” so I murmured “better.”

“’Tain’t better,” contradicted Johnny.

“No, but it shall be,” I answered, more brightly than I felt. I bent over him, and whispered, “Shall I stay with you, Johnny?”

“Yes—don’t go away,” burst out Johnny, and I had won the day! By an accidental bit of diplomacy, I had attached the child to myself, and now he would allow no one else to touch him. He screamed at the Sister of this ward, and put out his tongue at the porter when that individual came to wheel him into the anæsthetic room, but he laid hold of my hand and clutched it in a frenzy of apprehension lest I should desert him, and I had to assure him over and over again that I was coming too, before he ceased to struggle against the gentle hands that raised him to take him away.

“He’s taken a fancy to you,” said the Sister, smiling upon me gratefully.

I passed Nurse Cotteril, recovering all alone

I ASSIST AT AN OPERATION

from her faint, or hysterics, and she gave me a look of aversion. "If you can endure the sight, all I can say is that you haven't any feelings," said she. "It would kill me."

"Perhaps I haven't any feelings," said I, and passed stolidly on beside the wheeled ambulance.

"Where I goin'?" asked Johnny. "Are I goin' 'ome?"

"We are first going in to see the nice, kind doctor," said I. "Isn't this a nice passage?"

"No," said Johnny, "wants ter go 'ome!"

"Of course you do," said I, "it's lovely at home, isn't it?"

This method of managing him surprised him into acquiescence, and his little hot fingers closed tighter than ever upon my hand.

"Now, here is another awfully funny room," said I, while my heart hammered away enough to suffocate me. "Just look, Johnny, won't we have a lot to tell them at home about this fairy palace?"

"Go away!" bawled Johnny, as Mr. Fleming came to meet the procession. "Who that? Go away!"

"Oh, no, let us keep that one," I answered; "that's an awfully funny person, Johnny. Shall we keep that one?"

THE PROBATIONER

“ Yes, keep this one,” said Mr. Fleming, with instant comprehension. “ This one gives good little boys some lovely scent to smell, doesn’t he, Nurse ? ”

“ Perfectly lovely,” I managed to articulate.

“ But the little boys generally count up to ten,” said Mr. Fleming, “ only this little boy cannot count, can he ? ”

“ Yes, can,” contradicted Johnny.

“ What ? Really ? What a clever boy ! ”

“ Won’t count,” broke out Johnny, with a sharp, suspicious look around.

“ Never mind,” cheerfully responded Mr. Fleming, “ only I never give my delicious scent to the boys who do not count. Eh ? ”

Johnny was on the point of roaring at this, so I whispered very loud, “ Frighten him, Johnny, by counting ten at the top of your voice ! That’s right—give him a good fright ! ”

My suggestion was followed, and Johnny actually laughed as his shrill voice screaming his figures apparently made Mr. Fleming tumble over from extravagant terror.

“ Now, after that, I suppose I’ll really have to give this dreadful boy a whiff of my scent,” said Mr. Fleming. “ There, Johnny, do you like it ? ”

“ No, take it away,” answered Johnny,

I ASSIST AT AN OPERATION

sniffing at the lint Mr. Fleming held to his nose, and twisting his head to escape it.

“All right, I’ll take it away as soon as you’ve counted ten again,” answered Mr. Fleming.

Johnny began, but before he had got to the required number his voice sank into silence, and I felt his fingers relax their clutch upon mine.

We began quietly moving on into the theatre.

“Have you enough grit?” asked Mr. Fleming. The words were scarcely breathed, no one else could have guessed that he spoke them.

I had not time to answer, but a sort of furious determination to prove myself equal even to this possessed my mind.

A quarter of an hour ago, when I was here helping Nurse Bright, all had been confusion and hurry. Now all was in absolute order, and apparently, Dr. Wood, the visiting-surgeon, and Nurse Bright, and Nurse Morgan, who had appeared on the scene, were all waiting patiently, as calm and cool as if they had been waiting for hours. Another doctor stepped forward quietly, and took up his position at the operating table opposite to Dr. Wood.

Everything was done so calmly that here again one might imagine the most ordinary scene was going forward. By keeping my eyes

THE PROBATIONER

averted, and fighting the tendency to listen with that acute attention which brings suggestive pictures to the brain, and by remembering that my credit depended upon how much "grit" I displayed just now, I got through without being forced to sit down or leave the theatre.

No one took the slightest notice of me, or expressed surprise after all was over that I had gone through my first experience here without wincing—and no one knew that as soon as I was released I slipped away and relieved my overstrung feelings by a violent burst of weeping, which I would have died rather than confess !

CHAPTER XXV

I WIN THANKS

WHEN he came round, Johnny made himself a terror to the ward, and every nurse in it was at her wits' end to quiet him.

“Stop that child's crying,” was the order; but no one could do it, and consternation reigned, until at last, in desperation, the Sister there came and spoke to our Sister, and I was summoned and ordered off to the surgical ward, against all precedent. “It is only in extreme cases that such a course is resorted to,” explained Sister, “but they say you had a soothing effect upon that child, and it is almost a matter of life or death to keep him quiet to-day. So go, and do your best.”

I obeyed, not venturing to express my own feelings in the matter, which showed a marked improvement in my character! Once again my credit seemed to depend upon how I conducted myself through an emergency.

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Nurse Cotteril gave me a sneer as I again appeared in her ward. She did not speak, but she conveyed to my understanding by that one look that she did not think any better of me for having been able to stand the sight of an operation—the first I had ever witnessed—without signalling myself as she did whenever she had the chance.

Johnny's voice crying in shrill and furious protest against his fate rang through the ward.

"Such a thing never happens," said Nurse Bright, as if by this argument she could prevent it happening! "They are always quiet after an operation—they are much too collapsed to cry like that."

"It must be stopped at once," said the Sister, and her eye commanded me to stop it.

Nurse Morgan was bending over Johnny's cot, perspiration streaming down her face, while she put forth all the force of her nature to invent a way of quieting the obstreperous patient. I was startled to see screens round his bed, and thought of Number Eight, but I said nothing. My self-control was becoming remarkable!

"Here I am, Johnny," said I, in gay, un-

I WIN THANKS

concerned tones which some kind genius lent me for the occasion. "See, I've come to take care of you—isn't it fun?"

Johnny turned at my voice, and ceased to howl for a moment, then made a feeble struggle to get to me. Nurse Morgan, without jealousy, suffered me to take her place.

"Now we're going to have a jolly afternoon," I said, "aren't we, Johnny?"

At this he began to cry again, though not so violently, and I was conscious of a little movement of despair amongst the watchers, but yielding myself up to the inspiring genius that had guided me so far, I said, "Oh, stop that noise, Johnny, or I shall have to go. . . . Now I'm going to tell you a story. It is about all sorts of things that went to sleep. It is about a butterfly that was flying in the sun, but it went to sleep. It was flying over the flowers, and all those flowers went to sleep. Then a little boy came out, and he felt so tired that he sat down in the sunshine, and shut his eyes, and went to sleep, and a dandelion at his feet got tired and shut up its yellow petals, and it went to sleep, and a little dog came out, and he said, 'Oh, dear, what a drowsy afternoon it is, I am too tired to stay awake,' and he curled himself up, and his eyes closed, and his head

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nodded—like this—and in a minute he was fast asleep. Then the leaves upon the trees began curling up, which is their way of going to sleep, and it grew quieter and quieter. . . . hush! . . . and the sun slipped down the sky, and laid his head in the water, and fell fast asleep. . . . Do not make a sound, or you might wake them. Shut your eyes, Johnny, and then you will see just how they did it. . . . hush! . . . all the world is fast asleep, and we must not make a sound, and this is the drowsiest and the stupidest story you ever heard in all your life, but it has worked the charm.”

There was a soft shuffle, as of nurses slipping away, and I was left behind the screens with the obstreperous patient, now as quietly asleep as an operation patient ought to be.

Not until it was time to go off duty for the night was I removed, and then the Sister of the surgical ward came to me and said—“Thank you,”—and I retired to my bed in such a ferment of joy because someone in hospital had actually acknowledged my services with thanks that my head was almost turned. I could not refrain from mentioning the extraordinary circumstance to my room mates.

“Sister actually thanked me when I came

I WIN THANKS

off duty," I said to Nurse Morgan, beaming upon her in a patronising manner.

"Whatever for?" asked Nurse Morgan.

I shrank back, well snubbed, and said no more, but I decided to write a particularly thrilling account of my adventure for the benefit of my sisters. I thought it would be good for their nerves to hear a few details about theatres in hospital, and might add to their respect for me. I should lay especial stress upon my success in quieting Johnny, to prove what a capable person I was after all, and I would conclude by mentioning that I *had been thanked!*

CHAPTER XXVI

A REVELATION

“LET me tell you a secret,” said Nurse Cotteril.
“I’ll come out with you, if you like.”

I did not want Nurse Cotteril to come out with me, I did not like her, but as I had no excuse to offer, I assented, and let her spoil my nice country walk with her company and her manner of conversation.

“One must have a confidante,” said Nurse Cotteril, “and there’s no one here I could consult.”

This touched me, and I turned impulsively to her, saying, “If I can be of any use, by all means consult me.”

“Well, it’s this way,” said Nurse Cotteril. “If my engagement were known, I’d be sent away. But it’s awfully awkward living in the same building with the man you’re engaged to, and keeping the matter a secret—isn’t it?”

“What?” said I.

For some reason my heart was galloping like a pony. I felt her eye upon me, and all the

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force of my nature gathered together to protect me in this moment of revelation.

“ You see, I certainly would have to go, if it were known, and perhaps — perhaps — Mr. Fleming.” She whispered the house-surgeon’s name into my ear, and gave a little smiling, guilty look round to make sure of our perfect privacy.

“ Why ? ” said I, without a tremor, though I felt as if she had stunned me.

“ Didn’t you know that nurses are not allowed to engage themselves to anyone living in the hospital, or to any of the doctors or students that visit ? If they do, they are sent away—and I’ve made up mind to be a nurse. Nurses have more variety in their lives than governesses, or any other sort of women. They go into all sorts of society, and meet all sorts of people, and get more familiar with them than would be possible under any other circumstances.”

“ But,” said I, my brain in a whirl, “ if you are going to be married, what is the use of finishing your training ? ”

“ Mr. Fleming couldn’t marry yet,” answered Nurse Cotteril, “ he’s only at the start—and I’m not willing to give up the best fun of my youth in order to settle down into the humdrum life

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of an old married woman. . . . Please don't walk so fast, I can't keep up with you. . . . Oh—excuse me—I'm sure you won't mind, after what I've told you, but—I see *him* in the distance, waiting about for me. Would you mind? . . .”

For answer, I turned and pelted away in a different direction. I had not seen Mr. Fleming—but then my eyes were not, perhaps, so keen as the eyes of his expectant bride. I dashed off towards a little private wood, and disregarding the warning notice that trespassers would be prosecuted, scaled the fence, and hid myself amongst green leaves and bracken to face alone this appalling revelation of my life.

Yes, no longer could I doubt it! I had allowed myself to care a great deal too much for Mr. Fleming! I had all unconsciously slipped down that alluring path of life's young love. I had not dreamed it—it had come in this awful way, through hearing that the strongest antipathy of my nature was for the very person who had most attracted the man I had allowed myself to care about so foolishly and so much! How could it be? How was it possible that Mr. Fleming, who had only the day before called Nurse Cotteril a howling fool—a *howling fool!*—was able to speak so of the woman he loved?

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This baffled me, but it was no use dwelling upon the rudimentary and savage comfort to be found in depreciating Nurse Cotteril, or reflecting on his expressed contempt for her. After all, she was the woman he had chosen before all others as his most intimate and dear companion for life.

I looked round, my eyes dry, and the sound of a harsh laugh in my ears. It was not a nice sound, and I was ashamed of hearing myself laugh like that. My eyes sank as if confronted by something I dared not face. The birds were making the air thrill with their ecstasy, sunshine was pouring down and filtering upon me through the leaves, and I could see a cloud of insects dancing in these rays of light and joy. After all, was it not a beautiful world, and I a fortunate being to find myself in a position of some use to those who suffered?

I had been a weak and foolish girl when I entered that wood—I came out of it a resolute woman—or so I thought when I at last emerged, positive that my whole character was changed, as by a miracle.

Yes, I was now devoted to my work for the work's sake alone, and would no doubt be able to do it ten times better through having spent that hour of revelation in the wood.

CHAPTER XXVII

MY HEART IS BROKEN

MR. FLEMING was standing at the hospital door, smoking, when I returned. He threw away his cigarette at sight of me, and gave me one of those kind, beaming smiles which would have stirred my pro's blood but for that revelation!

"Oh, so Nurse Cotteril has come in!" I said.

"Nurse Cotteril?" said he, as if puzzled.

I turned and concentrated an amount of indignation and reprimand in the glance I levelled at him that apparently fairly staggered the house surgeon.

"How have I offended this time?" he asked.

Disdainful and haughty, I swept past him, and I despised him for twisting his moustache in that manful style. He was nothing but a boy—a mere boy—I repeated to myself, scornfully, to cure the pang which contracted my silly heart as I turned my back on him.

Pros have not time to indulge in matters of

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sentiment, and I hurried back to my work, assuring myself that it came before anything else in my estimation.

Sister met me with a surprising order.

“Go to bed at once,” she began, and I stepped back, for an instant haunted by memories of naughty childhood! “The night pro is ill,” continued Sister, “and you are to take her place.”

“Oh,” said I, “it is evident that I am to get every experience possible in my month here. I shall have a great deal to tell them at home when I return.” I stopped short, having caught Sister’s eye. “*If I return,*” I added hastily.

Sister merely told me again to go to bed at once, and to sleep until eight o’clock, so I obediently retreated, and feeling foolish, proceeded to undress and go to bed. To bed—but not to sleep, for how could anyone sleep in the middle of the day with the sun shining and the birds singing, not to mention the perpetual noise that echoed up and down the long corridors? However, it was a rest, and my feet were always aching here, though Nurse Smith had assured me that in this hospital we did not know what work was! I wondered whether in the hospitals where the nurses really do

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know what work is any of them ever come out alive at the end of their training ?

I now had time—too much—in which to face the disappointment which was to ruin my life's happiness. My mind went travelling back over all the intercourse I had ever had with Mr. Fleming, and I began to show myself how very little foundation I had for having built up a single hope from such brief and unmeaning scraps. True, I had not consciously thought of him in that way until an hour ago, at the moment when another happy pro announced to me her engagement to him. That it was ridiculous to make the slightest trouble of this I knew well, but . . . well, I could not deny that most of the glow had been rubbed off my sojourn here, that Mr. Fleming's occasional kindness to me, and his sympathy when he had helped me with his advice (which advice, by the way, I had followed, and was startled to remember had met with no result, I not having heard again from my father since I wrote the filial little letter to him according to Mr. Fleming's suggestion)—the note of consternation in his voice when he thought he had knocked me over in the corridor, his one little whisper that had put me on my mettle in the theatre, and the various times when he had accorded me

MY HEART IS BROKEN

the encouragement of a human smile in this place where such things were rare—all these things crowded into my mind as some excuse for a pro, in the atmosphere of blame and lack of appreciation which surrounded her.

“What I mind most,” said I, groaning, “is, that he has chosen—her! Her of all people! Why, I’d rather he had asked Nurse Smith!”

Then I found myself laughing, for Nurse Smith was ten years older, and ugly into the bargain! But she was a good nurse, and no one could accuse Nurse Cotteril of being that! Why, she was the laughing-stock of all her fellows. Perhaps Mr. Fleming had been conquered through pity—perhaps he had been fascinated by her hysterics! Do men really like emotional, hysterical women? Does their strength go out to protect and love the weak—and the weaker the better?

My good sense repudiated that idea. I knew that the day is long past when any such nonsense sways the masculine mind. No man of sense could be attracted by weakness of character or body. The silly woman, without an idea in her head, must be a dull companion for one’s entire life.

No, he could not have liked her because of her hysterics. It must have been her hair,

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or her eyes, or . . . but how was I to guess? I only knew that my heart was broken.

I began to feel hungry, and had to acknowledge it to myself, in spite of my broken heart. It was the usual time for tea, and I became positively ravenous at sound of the tea bell, but I had to lie here starving, with only a handful of biscuits to assuage these pangs. I was rather ashamed of eating them, since I knew that a broken heart has no business in a hungry body, or a hungry body with a broken heart, and I was haunted by the fear that perhaps, after all, my heart was not broken as badly as I imagined.

I was just growing a little drowsy when they came and called me, and told me that my *breakfast* was ready. It was about eight o'clock, and I got up reluctantly, knowing that in an hour or two I should be dying to go to sleep, and now considering myself a very stupid pro indeed for having kept awake all this time.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BEFORE NIGHT WORK BEGAN

NURSE DUNLOP, the night super, Nurse Talbot, the second night pro, and I, sat down to 'breakfast' together.

Nurse Dunlop was silent and morose. It struck me that perhaps that dark-eyed woman with the line between her brows had had her heart broken—like mine—when she was younger. If so, I might be excused for eating so well, since her appetite had evidently survived her trouble. Nurse Talbot was a little shrinking creature, with a plain face, and the look of a hunted animal.

"Are you aware," said Nurse Dunlop, addressing me, "that if a nurse goes to sleep on night duty she is subject to a heavy fine?"

"No," said I, "I never heard of that."

"Well, mind," said she, rising, "that you do not go to sleep."

I managed to conceal my first yawn.

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Nurse Talbot branched off in the direction of the surgical ward. Nurse Dunlop went with me to the medical. She had a little conversation with Sister—evidently about me, for their eyes were turned in my direction, and it was a relief when they left the ward together. Just after that Nurse Smith too went “off,” and I was left in solitary charge of the ward. As the sound of her footsteps died away, a sense of the weird took possession of me. My heart fluttered like a bird’s, and the windows seemed to stare at me with great, threatening, black eyes. I could hardly endure them, or the thought of the dark grounds outside, and I wished that someone would come. The whole hospital had suddenly fallen so silent.

This wish and its fulfilment were twins, for a quick, firm tread that I knew now broke upon the stillness, and Mr. Fleming came in, looking remarkably cheerful, which I felt was natural enough to a man who had just become engaged.

“All serene?” said he quietly.

I stood and looked at him, and he flashed a sort of amused smile at me.

“Am I forgiven?” he asked.

“Forgiven?” I repeated stupidly.

“Yes—you are offended with me, aren’t you, Miss Atherton?”

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I felt upset merely because he had called me Miss Atherton, instead of Nurse, and I remembered now that he often did so—when we were alone! But I must not forget for a single moment that he had become engaged to Nurse Cotteril! Why this made such a stupendous difference in our intercourse I did not stop to decide.

“No, sir, of course not,” I answered as stiffly as ever I could.

“Oh, yes, you are,” boyishly returned Mr. Fleming, “and I believe it is because I laughed at you for having instructed Sir Isaac. But you would forgive me if you realised the remorse which has wrung my heart ever since.”

I felt my lips twitch, not with a smile, but with a strong desire to cry. Was Mr. Fleming nothing but an arrant flirt?

“Do you know,” said he, coming a little nearer, “your eyes are as full of reproach as ever they can be. What have I done, Miss Atherton? Surely you are not one of those huffy people who feel resentment for a little good-natured chaff?”

“Oh, please, do not think that of me,” I broke out, unable to stand that. “Believe me, I am not offended, indeed I am not, of course I am not!!”

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"Is everything all right in here?" asked Mr. Fleming, with a sudden and remarkable change of tone. It was the distant tone of the doctor addressing a pro as he made his final round of the wards.

"Yes," I answered unsteadily.

"How is Number Two's temperature?"

He moved over towards little Frank's cot before I had collected my wits.

"Why don't you go with the doctor?" asked Nurse Dunlop, whose entrance had worked this sudden change.

"Oh, I—forgot," I stammered, hurriedly following Mr. Fleming. He was studying Frank's chart with grave attention.

"Has he . . . hum! . . . yes. . . . He'll do," said Mr. Fleming, looking down at Frank, who had rolled over on his face, in which position he had not slept until now.

"I see, Number Fourteen has gained a pound this week," said Mr. Fleming, approaching my especial baby. "Good! . . . Number Five is not getting on?"

"No," I answered, "poor little May is much too good the last few days, it makes us feel very anxious." I but voiced the general opinion here, but Nurse Dunlop rebuked me sharply for venturing to joke with the house surgeon—a

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rebuke he must have heard as he left the ward, unless he was very deaf.

“Prepare Number Fourteen and Number Fifteen their feeds at once,” she concluded, and I departed rapidly to do it, covering another yawn from Nurse Dunlop’s view, and wondering in a sleepy way what Numbers Fourteen and Fifteen were taking now? Then it flashed upon my drowsy mind that Number Fourteen was my own especial baby, who had gained a pound since I had been told off to give it its feeds.

Making their food roused me up beautifully, but it was hard to find things now, for I had been bathroom pro more than a week, and the kitchen pro had altered nearly everything in the kitchen. Nurse Dunlop came after me to inquire whether I meant to stay here all night? And she hustled me out of the kitchen before I had time to reply that the babies’ bottles were both ready now.

“The bell is ringing,” she said, “and you must answer it, as the servants have gone to bed by this time. Now be quick—it may be an accident. You must take the patient into the receiving-room, and then tell Sister. She hasn’t gone to bed yet, as I happen to know.”

I turned to obey, a cold shudder running

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down my back. Out in the lonely corridor I stood shivering for a few moments, petrified by the horror of a sudden thought, WHAT was I going to see? Had some dreadful accident occurred? How could I go alone to open that distant door?

The bell rang again, and I flew, not only because it was best to get it over, but also because I had a wholesome dread of Nurse Dunlop's voice behind inquiring what kept me? It would never do to have to acknowledge an attack of nerves to the night super!

I flung the door open, and there stood a man with a little boy in his arms.

"What is it?" I asked, commanding my voice with some difficulty.

"I've brought our Billy," answered the man, in a gruff, hoarse voice, and he shuffled past me with his burden. He did not wait to be invited.

"Perhaps you had better come in," I said.

As the man had done so already, this did not require comment on his part, and got none. "Come with me," said I, still trying to take a leading part in this tragedy or comedy, whichever it might be. "Come in here, and I'll bring Sister to you."

The father of Billy sat down with a jerk,

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gripping Billy hard as he did so, and it entered my heart that the poor fellow did not like to leave his little son to the mercy of all the strangers here.

“Is Billy very ill?” I asked.

“Aye!” snarled the man.

“Poor little fellow,” said I, “he’ll be well looked after here.”

To this Billy’s father made no reply.

“And he’ll be very happy—very happy indeed,” I added eagerly.

Billy’s father gave me a slow, resentful look, and I retreated, fairly baffled in my attempt to comfort. I almost ran into Mr. Fleming, who also had heard the bell, and had come to see what was wrong. I received another of those kindly human smiles which had played such havoc with my feelings lately, and I retreated still more quickly on account of it. “I must not, oh, I must not notice,” I whispered to myself, “it’s wrong to allow myself even to think of Mr. Fleming now!”

Sister had gone to her room, and I knocked at her door with an exaggerated feeling of remorse. “Oh, Sister,” I called, “I am so sorry, but a case has come in.”

“Why are you sorry?” asked Sister briskly, as she opened the door.

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"Because," said I, "you were going to bed, and I have to ask you to come down to the receiving-room instead to interview a new patient."

"That's nothing unusual," remarked Sister.

"Do you mean that you are often disturbed after you've come to bed?" I asked, aghast.

"Of course," said Sister.

"Oh, how perfectly awful!" said I. Then I informed her that it seemed like the refinement of cruelty.

"But why?" asked Sister.

"If I were kept from my bed for ten minutes, I'd feel ready to cry," said I, "and I'm only a pro, but you have the whole responsibility of the ward upon your shoulders."

Sister laughed, as if it were quite a joke to think of anyone being concerned on your behalf in hospital. Then she patted me on the shoulder in a friendly manner, and at the touch of her hand I felt my eyes fill with warm, soft tears, and my heart with a flood of affection—I was becoming almost as emotional as Nurse Cotteril!

Sister ran down to the receiving-room as fresh as a lark, with her book and pencil, and took down the particulars of the case in a business-like fashion, without the slightest sign of

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weariness. It was a particularly pathetic case. The child, who seemed scarcely conscious, and rolled his head from side to side, had been ill for at least two days, and his mother wasn't able to attend to him. We heard afterwards that she was too tipsy to do so, and the poor father, coming to his wretched home that evening, had found his wife dead drunk, and Billy screaming on the bed, as delirious as ever he could be. He had done what he could, in his ignorant, clumsy way, and had at last, in despair, brought the raving child out a good two-mile walk to take him to the hospital. The night air and steady motion had quieted Billy for the moment, but Mr. Fleming, who had taken his temperature and examined him, looked very grave as he stood and watched while Sister jotted down the name, age, and address, with all the other particulars that are required. Presently he stepped up to the group, and raised the child's eyelid.

"W'at's the matter with 'un?" blurted out the father.

"I'm afraid we can't tell yet," answered Mr. Fleming, "but we'll hope it is nothing very serious. Come round to-morrow and perhaps we can tell you."

Billy's father glared savagely at the house

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surgeon, and clutched Billy harder than ever.

“Go to the linen-room and ask Nurse Dunlop for the things you will need,” said Sister, “and then you will give the patient his bath, and put him in cot eight.”

“Yes, Sister.”

I had wakened up splendidly until now, but as I ran, or rather stumbled, away to ask Nurse Dunlop for the things I should need, I saw everything through a mist. It could not be eleven o'clock yet, but I was already becoming heavy with sleep! This would never do, and I roused myself with a gigantic effort.

Nurse Dunlop favoured me with a suspicious glance as she handed out the vest, night-shirt, and jacket which Billy would wear after his bath, and told me to look alive, and be quick, as I had not begun the night's work yet.

Not begun it!—Why, I seemed to have been working for hours upon hours, in a hurry all the time!

Having placed all ready in the bathroom, I went for my patient. Mr. Fleming was still there, talking to the father in kind, cheering tones. “You may be sure that everything in human power will be done for Billy,” I heard him saying; “he will be splendidly nursed and

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doctored, and all the children are as happy as kings. You couldn't have done better than to bring him here—this is just an ideal place for children—isn't it, Nurse ? ”

“ It is a glorious place for children,” I responded. “ Now, may I take Billy ? ”

The man stood up, a sort of dumb terror stamped upon his face, and I took Billy from his arms. Fortunately, perhaps, the boy was too ill to notice that a stranger had him now. I walked across into the bathroom, and the father walked after me.

I sat down with Billy on my knee, and gazed at the father, waiting for him to go. He looked back at me, and did not stir. What was I to do ? I was just beginning to say—“ Would you mind taking leave of Billy now ? ”—when it flashed across my sleepy mind that the parents always take the children's clothes away with them, so I changed the end of the sentence into, “ taking that chair while I undress Billy.”

The man stared at the chair. Then he said, “ Where shall I take 'un, miss ? ”

“ Sit on it,” said I hastily.

He gave me one pitying glance, and remained standing, so I began undressing Billy. The father presently advanced and gave me a helping

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hand, which I did not want—but I noticed that the hand trembled, and touched the child tenderly, so I said nothing.

“There,” said I, “that’s all,” as I removed the last rag.

The man did not understand this gentle hint, and took no notice of it. He stood and watched me lift Billy into the bath. “Next,” thought I, “he’ll be helping to wash him!” This was too much, so I turned round and said aloud, “Had you not better wrap up his clothes and take them home?”

He put up his hand, and rubbed the back of his head, then it at last dawned upon him that I wanted him to go, which seemed to astonish him. However, he decided that perhaps he might as well, and he bundled up the clothes together under his arm, and turned to look once again at Billy. He stood irresolute at the door a minute, then shambled back to the side of the bath, bent over, and gave the boy a loud, long kiss. With that he beat a retreat, keeping his face away from me, and I found difficulty in smothering certain feelings it is better not to cultivate in hospital if you want to look cheerful—and, of course, it is a nurse’s primary duty to bring good cheer into the ward by her bright expression.

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As the door closed behind Billy's father, I became aware of Matron's presence—I had not seen her come in. It is alarming, I can tell you, to find yourself watched by your Matron—and I was particularly nervous before her, not having yet made her acquaintance except by sight.

“You should have told the man to go before.”

“Yes, Matron.”

The fact that I did not attempt an excuse astonished even myself, for until quite lately I should have argued the matter with anyone, yes, even with Matron herself! Instead, I meekly lifted the boy out of his bath, and dried him.

“Look at his ankles—they are black,” said Matron.

But I had not been in hospital quite a month, and was not ready to receive this accusation without a gentle protest, so I said, “I think, Matron, it is the shadow you are mistaking for dirt,” and I seized the child's foot, and held it up in the light. As she could not pretend that I was wrong, she contented herself with giving me a reproving look, and left me.

Having settled the new Number Eight in the empty cot, I sat down, more dead than alive,

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and longed to put my head somewhere and go to sleep.

“Come, hurry,” hissed the voice of Nurse Dunlop out of the shadows, “you have not begun the night work yet!”

“Not begun it!” I exclaimed. “Why, I’ve been at it for hours and hours. . . .”

“You have not begun it,” she repeated decisively.

CHAPTER XXIX

NIGHT DUTY

“NOT begun it!” I gasped, rubbing my eyes, “er—what is it? What have I got to do?”

“You have the walls to wash down.”

I started, and stared defiantly at Nurse Dunlop, looking as wide awake as I possibly could. “Oh, yes,” said I cheerfully, “yes, of course.” Then my heart sank. Whoever heard of washing down the walls at night? Still, I did it, though it is my belief that I did most of it in my sleep. The effort to keep awake was becoming an agony.

“Look alive, you have the linen to count,” said Nurse Dunlop, on the next of her visits, “and after that you have to get our meal. Allow me to suggest, when you do get it, that you make the tea black strong, otherwise you’ll be dropping off to sleep before you’ve half done the work.”

“Such strong tea is injurious,” I murmured,

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sleepily, and I do not think I *did* look alive, but I counted the linen, and counted it wrong, as afterwards transpired—privately, I do not think that was much wonder.

Nurse Talbot hurried into the kitchen while I was frying bacon for our meal.

“Make the tea black strong,” said she, and hurried away.

I followed this double hint, in spite of my conviction that black strong tea is injurious. So it is—but how else is a nurse to keep awake a whole night?

It was a blessed rest to sit down to the little meal, and I was enjoying it thoroughly, when one of the children began howling.

“That’s Jeremiah,” said Nurse Dunlop, “and he must have his feed.”

I said nothing, but got Jeremiah’s feed, and held him up in bed while he took it. He took it as slowly as possible.

“Come, Jeremiah, hurry!” said I, striving not to show my impatience.

Jeremiah stopped, and stared at me.

“Go on, Jeremiah!”

He put up his fingers and clutched the cup I was holding to his mouth, and before I could liberate it, he had managed to spill half the food over his cot.

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When I returned to my bacon, it was cold, but that did not matter, of course.

"Now cut the bread and butter for the children's breakfast," said Nurse Dunlop, "and you, Nurse Talbot, must go and sweep out the theatre." With that she departed to the surgical ward.

"Nurse—oh, Nurse," whispered the other night pro, "*would* you mind walking with me to the theatre?"

"Why?" I returned.

She shuddered.

"Oh, of course I will," I suddenly exclaimed, "it won't take a minute."

So I walked with her down the long corridor, and she grasped my arm. "I'm too nervous to be a nurse," she confided to me, "but I could no more give it up now I've begun than I can give up breathing."

"I can understand that with all my heart," I returned.

"I've had a hard time of it," continued Nurse Talbot; "one is always driven and driven here—but you've found that?"

"Oh, yes," said I, "still, I can understand that it is necessary. We must be trained, you know."

"Of course we must—but I do make mis-

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takes, and there is so little to encourage one here."

"Still," I argued, taking up the cudgels on behalf of the hospital as if my own credit depended upon its defence, "nurses are not exactly schoolgirls, who have to be praised and patted in order to make them work at all—they are women, doing the world's work, and taking the world's buffets, and . . ."

I broke off to yawn, but I thought in a drowsy way that I had made rather a fine speech that time.

Three o'clock struck just as we entered the theatre.

"Ugh!" shuddered Nurse Talbot, "fancy sweeping down this horrid place at this time of night! One can almost see the ghosts of all the limbs . . ."

"For pity's sake, stop!" I exclaimed. "I've got to return alone down that ghastly corridor. Now I must be off—imagine how Nurse Dunlop would smile if she caught me here with you!"

I hurried—not only on account of Nurse Dunlop's smile, but also because I did not feel like dawdling in the dark corridor. Every window I passed, my heart jumped, and I kept turning to make sure that I was not followed.

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Worse than all, an earwig dropped on me suddenly, and if there is one thing that I object to in broad daylight, it is earwigs—at night, when you are all alone in a huge place like this, they are unspeakable.

I reached the ward kitchen safely, and proceeded to cut the bread and butter for the children's breakfast.

There was plenty to do after this. The kitchen had to be put spick and span, and at four o'clock I had to begin dressing the children.

I started on the babies. Number Fourteen whimpered, but was too small and weak to make much fuss. Number Fifteen protested in such a manner that Nurse Dunlop came scurrying in to see if an accident had happened. "One would think you were killing a pig, by the noise," she said. "Why can't you wash it without enraging it like that? . . . Here, give it to me—anyone can see that it's the way you handle the poor little thing."

Number Fifteen nearly screamed itself into a fit when I transferred it to Nurse Dunlop's better accustomed arms, while I proceeded to Number Five's cot, May having awakened—as any human being with ears might be expected to awaken with such a clatter going on.

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Number Five regarded me with dull complacency, and offered no resistance to my services. This collapse of character in May shocked me—I should have liked to see the naughty and belligerent defiance of her past grimaces—I should have liked to be bitten or scratched as was the little savage's old custom, and I sighed when I left her cot uninjured.

As Number Fifteen had made up for Number Fourteen's mild behaviour, so did Cecil make up for May's. I had never known him more determined. He struggled with me with all the strength of his ten years, informing me over and over again that he would not be washed.

"Indeed," said I, "I fancy you are mistaken, you naughty, bad little boy. Keep still at once, for washed you shall be, whether you like it or not."

I was fairly exhausted when I at last had got Cecil tucked up again, but had not finished my difficulties, for at my approach Frank sent up a shriek for his "Mumma!" and began coughing violently as his lungs were not in the right condition for shrieking.

I was frightened, and had to hold him up firmly until the paroxysm was over, after which

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he was too much exhausted to offer any effectual resistance, though he kept on whimpering because, as he said, his 'mumma' never washed him at home.

"Then be glad you are here, where you can be kept clean," said I sharply.

I went on from cot to cot, so tired that I could have wept from self-pity if I had had time. Mary Jane played up something like the boys, and Edie cried. Nurse Dunlop made remarks upon how badly I managed children, which hurt my feelings, as I had prided myself so fondly upon my capital manner with them.

"*You* are a good boy, at all events," I said to my pet Jimmy. "You give Nurse no trouble at all, and good little children who do not cry nor fight their nurses will get well quicker, and then they can go home again ever so soon."

"Don't want ter go 'ome," said Jimmy, "want ter stay 'ere, I gets puddin' for dinner 'ere."

I was a little shocked by these sentiments, but had not time to draw a moral lesson for Jimmy's benefit. Nurse Talbot was calling me to be quick and get the children's breakfasts.

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The rest is a blur in my memory, until suddenly I became aware that the blessed, blessed day nurses were coming "on," and I had nothing more to do except to give in my report.

I will draw a veil over Sister's remarks when I was obliged to confess the full extent of my night's breakages and mistakes—they fell upon callous ears, for I was too sleepy to care even for Sister's rebukes. She saw this, paused, and advised me to go to bed at once.

CHAPTER XXX

EXIT NURSE COTTERIL

THE night pro, whose place I had filled with my usual success (!) made a rapid recovery, and I was put on day duty again, with mixed feelings. There were many things I liked about the night work, and I had made quite a chum of poor Nurse Talbot, while even Nurse Dunlop became friendly on the third and last night. I had run to her aid more than once when I need not have done so, and we had actually had some fun at our midnight meal—a refreshing variety to our more strenuous labours.

It is curious how wide a difference there is in the work and moral atmosphere of day and night duty. When I returned to the ordinary, daylight work, I suddenly remembered that my heart was broken—somehow, I had forgotten that item, but it returned upon me with all the more force for the interlude, and I felt depressed at thought of facing the day with all its worries, troubles, and anxieties. Besides all this, I found to my consternation that I had

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but two more days before I must either return home, a failure, or—impossible thought to face!—sign on for the three years' training here!

“You have a melancholy expression,” said Sister, rather drily. “What is the matter?”

“Nothing, Sister,” I answered, with a sigh.

“Then why so gloomy?”

“Well,” said I, my old spirit suddenly reasserting itself, “it is not much wonder after all, because I have enjoyed myself here so much, and I am going home in two days.”

“Indeed?” said Sister, lifting her eyebrows.

“Yes,” said I, “in two days—then I shall have been here a month.”

“I see,” said Sister.

My face fell. “You will all be glad to get rid of me,” said I, “so everyone will be satisfied.”

“Everyone?” queried Sister.

“Yes,” said I, “my people have written to me, urging me to come home, so, as I am wanted there, and not wanted here, it must be important to return to my right sphere.”

“I see,” said Sister again.

The doctor's arrival interrupted this interesting conversation, and I turned away with a lump in my throat. “If she had only said she regretted it,” I muttered, “or if she had given me the slightest idea that I was any real

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good, I wouldn't have minded so much, but it evidently makes no difference at all to her whether I go or whether I stay, or what becomes of me ! ”

Something was wrong with the hospital that day, there was a suppressed excitement amongst my seniors, and when Mr. Fleming came round, he had a countenance of thunder. I had not seen him since that first night on night duty, and he took no notice of me, but went round the ward with Sister looking as savage as a wolf.

“ Is anything wrong ? ” I had the temerity to ask Nurse Smith.

She sneered at the curiosity of pros, and did not tell me, but I knew in the afternoon, just after I came in from my two hours off. I was returning to my room, when a door burst open, and Nurse Cotteril appeared, her face disfigured by crying, and a furious look in her eyes. She beckoned to me violently, and I went towards her, anything but charmed to be made her confidante again.

“ Come in—come in just a minute,” she whispered hoarsely. “ I must tell you—such a shame—such a burning shame ! Do you know, Nurse Atherton, I'm being sent away ! Yes, sent away—and all because of my engagement ! For nothing else—I tell you—they've

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actually given me the sack, and I'm just off—and I w—won't be able to—to—to see *him* any more—and oh, isn't it a shame ? ”

“ Do you mean . . . ? ”

“ Yes, I do—think I'd tell you such a thing if I didn't mean it ? But he's promised to be faithful, though we shall be parted, he's sworn to remain true to me. But oh, Nurse Atherton, do not, do not, I entreat you, breathe this to a living creature—it might tell against—him ! They'll say I've gone because I didn't suit—but it isn't—it's because I became engaged to the house-surgeon ! ”

I stood like a stone image, and she suddenly turned upon me roughly.

“ There—go away—much comfort you give a girl who is in this trouble. I don't want you—go away. My cab is here.”

Without playing the hypocrite I could not have told her that I was sorry, or sympathised with her, or said that I should miss her, or any of the things that might comfort a girl in her sort of trouble ; and when, a few minutes later, Nurse Cotteril drove away in the cab, the whole hospital seemed lighter, brighter, and more wholesome to me. I fled to my room, hurried into cap and apron, and was tripping back to my work with an irrepressible smile upon my

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face, when I met Mr. Fleming coming from the wards.

“Oh!” I exclaimed involuntarily, as he stopped me with one of those smiles I had learned to dread, “then you have not been to see Nurse Cotteril off?”

He stepped back, his face instantly clouding.

“Forgive me,” I hurriedly exclaimed, “I didn’t mean to say it!”

“Say anything you like—she’s gone,” said he, “but—never mention her name to me again.”

I hurried on, fairly bewildered.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE STAMP OF FATE

IN spite of a pro's nightly fatigue, I sat up for half an hour that night, reading a little budget of letters from home which had lain in my pocket all the evening. Somehow, I could not follow my usual plan this time—I could not wait until my time off next day before opening the envelopes.

“Who is the correspondent?” asked Nurse Fletcher, adding, “Well for you that Nurse Morgan is late to-night, or she'd object to the light being kept on so long!”

“Oh, I hope it doesn't bother you,” I exclaimed, “but these letters are so important. And I've only got one more day!”

“What do you mean?” asked Nurse Fletcher.

“The day after to-morrow,” I tragically returned, “is the day when I shall either have to return home, or sign my papers to stay here for the three years. So I've only one more day in hospital.”

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“Do you mean to say that you’re going to give up?” asked Nurse Fletcher.

“I shall not be given my choice,” I answered, with depression, “I am the stupidest pro who ever imagined herself capable of becoming a nurse—but I’m quite ready to hear the news that they can’t make anything of me here—it won’t be a shock, I know it without being told. And my people urge me to return home.”

“I thought you had more grit,” said Nurse Fletcher.

At the word “grit” I started. That was the word with which Mr. Fleming had supported me through the ordeal of witnessing that first operation.

“In fact,” added Nurse Fletcher, “we thought you were as plucky as they make them.”

It sounded a little, little bit vulgar, but I never heard more heart-stirring praise in all my life before. My letters dropped from my hand, and I turned to her in complete and utter astonishment.

What might have passed between us after that I really cannot imagine, but Nurse Morgan’s entrance interrupted the conversation, and I retreated behind my curtain, and tumbled

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into bed in a tumult of feeling. In the same tumult I rose next morning, and found difficulty in concealing my agitation. As I entered the ward that morning, realising acutely that upon the decision of the morrow must depend the future course of my whole life, I felt a wave of emotion sweep through my mind, stronger than any other I had ever known. What if I laid my head to-morrow night upon the downy pillows in my own dainty room at home? What if this large, airy ward were soon to pass away into a dream of the past, and my old life were to be resumed, that life of gaiety and trivialities, whose greatest interests were such things as bicycle tours or charades? The earnest appeals from my sisters to come back to all that nonsense lay burning in my pocket now. Ethel had written in an agony of apprehension lest I should injure my health here, or forget home, or get out of practice in such fearfully important matters as dancing, tennis, or rinking. Kate had written facetiously to say that she had half a mind to try hospital life herself, as it must be very fascinating, or it could not have kept me at it for one entire, solid month, and she felt impelled to come and discover for herself the meaning of my infatuation. Isabel had written plaintively—"I cannot

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understand the fun of being hard at work all day for little thanks and much blame, neither do I believe that anyone could persuade me—no, not the Matron herself—to touch that awful little baby that weighs less than nothing, and that you have to find with the help of a microscope.”

These words returned to my memory while I was feeding the poor baby. It had gained another pound, as we found when we weighed it this morning, and so great was my triumph that I forgot myself, and clapped my hands like a child. Nurse Smith subdued these exuberant spirits with one withering glance, and then I began remembering the letters I had received from my father and my mother, and crept away, hanging my head.

My dear old Dad had written in low spirits. He had said that, in response to a letter he received from me about a fortnight ago, he could only say that he felt it wrong to stand in the way of his child's wishes, provided I truly understood them, but he urged me to consider how serious it would be to bind myself to remain anywhere for so long a period as three years, gently reminding me that none of my enthusiasms ever lasted very long, and it was painfully evident that my work as a nurse was strenuous work,

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of which it was inevitable that I should tire quickly. He informed me that I need not fear for the future—it was not as if I should ever want, and he would increase my allowance at once, if that was the trouble. Altogether, it was a letter that opened my eyes wider than they had ever been opened before as to the utter waste of my former energies, and the dreadful dissipation of every quality in my character that was worth cultivating, in that whirl of self-centred gaiety and nonsense which had comprised the whole of my existence in the old days.

But it was my mother's letter that went into my very soul, and lighted up my mind like a revelation.

“ My little girl,” she wrote,

“ I have not said much until now. As you know, all your sisters are much opposed to the idea of losing you, as they call it, and as it will be in fact—to them—if you remain in the hospital, and become a nurse. I will not attempt to influence you in your decision (if that is left to you) beyond saying that should you remain steady to the purpose I believe has entered into your life, your mother will give you her heart's best wishes, and be thankful

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that one child of hers has elected to become of use to the world, instead of frittering away her youth in senseless pleasures. I never spoke to you like this before, and at the outset even opposed you ; but I had no idea that this was anything more than one of your sudden impulses, which I feared might affect your health injuriously. I send you this line to assure you that you will meet with no opposition from me now, but only with the encouragement for which you asked so nicely, and that your mother warmly approves of your wish to work."

Mr. Fleming appeared, as if in a hurry. " I'm extra early," I heard him saying to Sister, " but I'm just off by the ten-twenty. I'll be back soon after ten to-night."

With that he hurried round, merely glancing at each patient, and never once looking in my direction. I could hardly believe it when his rapid progress round the ward was over, and I knew that he had gone—for the day ! So my chances of seeing Mr. Fleming were over ; that, too, was done, a closed chapter in my life. The stamp of Fate seemed set upon my hospital career. *No doubt he had gone to see his fiancée !*

But I had not time to reflect, though that idea hit me like a blow. I had to run to Number

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Five, and when I got there, was rewarded for my promptitude in answering her call by a savage bite. May, the little wretch whose goodness had filled our minds with apprehension, had become herself again sufficiently to bite with all her might, and I was so delighted by this sign of returning health, that I ran across the ward to Sister, who was sitting at her table, making entries in her book.

“ Sister ! ”

“ What is it ? ” she asked, without looking up.

“ Oh, Sister, May has bitten me,” I cried.

“ Indeed ? Very . . . ” She was just going to say “ careless,” when she caught sight of my radiant face, and stopped.

“ She must be better,” I eagerly confided, “ it was such a vicious bite.”

Sister began to smile, then she actually laughed. “ Is the skin broken ? ” she asked, quickly recovering herself.

“ No,” said I, examining my hand.

“ But surely it is time for you to come to me for another collodion dressing ? ” she suggested, whether playfully or ironically I could not tell.

“ Yes,” said I at once, “ it is high time ; I’ll try to remember this when I am cutting the

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bread." Then I added, before she had time to reprove me, "I had better take this opportunity—it may be the last."

"The last?"

"Yes," said I, "my month's trial ends to-day."

"Well?" said Sister.

"That's all," said I, with depression.

Sister looked straight into my eyes, and then she took my breath entirely away by inviting me to tea with her that evening! I could hardly believe my ears, and stood stock-still, unable to answer.

"Well, will you come?" she asked.

"Yes," said I, "yes, I will,"—and began to beat a retreat. Half-way across the ward I remembered my manners, and scurried back to her in a panic. "Thank you," said I, as she raised her head inquiringly.

Sister looked hard at me, apparently surprised, then she returned to her book-keeping, not taking the trouble to reprove me. I was thankful to Nurse Smith at that moment for calling to me to hurry, as Jeremiah required attention, and Billy was feebly calling "Nairse," while Cecil had got to be dressed in his own clothes at once, since his mother was downstairs, waiting to take him home.

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“If I had been staying,” I reflected, “I’d have dressed Cecil with enthusiastic joy, for a more tricky youngster I never had to manage. It’s like my luck to have to go just when everything is getting easier and easier.”

This reflection by no means raised my spirits, which were gradually sinking and sinking as I realised more fully what it would mean to me now to lose all the experience I had gathered here. The stamp of Fate seemed set indeed upon my whole career.

CHAPTER XXXII

WINDING UP

IF permitted, I would willingly have given up my hours off that day. All my children behaved like lambs, or angels—except May, whose return to health was celebrated by a perfect frenzy of wicked temper which I marked with untold joy. “You know,” said I, addressing the young fiend, “you are the very worst little girl who ever came here, and when you are a bit better, you will be punished for behaving like this, but to-day,” I added, lower, and glancing round to make sure that I could not be heard, “Nurse is so delighted to see you in this tantrum, because it proves that you are so much better, that she is going to give you a sugar-plum for having bitten, scratched, and pinched her.”

May ceased attacking me at these words, and I smuggled a bit of barley-sugar into her mouth, knowing that I had no business whatever to do anything of the sort. Still, how could

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it matter now, when I was winding up my career ?

“ You are going to get well,” I continued, “ and though I am convinced that it would be a great deal better for everybody belonging to you if you didn't, I am just as glad as ever I can be to think that, after all, we have cured you.”

At this May put out her horrid little tongue at me. She could not have understood my remarks, but this was one of her endearing habits.

“ You deserve to have your ears boxed,” said I. “ Here's a doll for you—vent your spite upon its inanimate frame—but if you break it, you shall not have another toy all day.”

“ Nairse, nairse ! ” Edie was calling from her cot, “ wants to get up, Nairse.”

“ All right, I'm coming to dress you, duckie,” I responded cheerfully, and the little creature leaped into my arms, and clasped me round the neck with all her strength. It may have been an attempt to strangle me, but I took it for a caress, and held the thin little frame close, while I felt my eyes moistening. Next I dressed Teddie, and he wriggled and babbled in a way that might have made me impatient on an ordinary day, but to-day, while I was

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winding up my career in hospital, the sound of his silly little voice was music in my ears.

Then I had to go and dress Number Seven's eye. This had been a task I would have evaded had that been in my power ever since the fatal day when I had infected my own eye while bathing Minnie's, and to-day I very nearly signalised myself in the same ignominious manner, for Minnie turned to me while I was doing the painful little operation, not to fight or struggle, but to stroke my hand, while she crooned out, half crying, that she loved me better than any of the other nurses. This unexpected tribute so affected me that I was in the very act of dashing away a tear, when a slight movement behind brought me to my senses in the nick of time, and I blinked away the tear, instead of rubbing it away.

My pet Jimmy was better behaved than ever that day. His vacant eyes wandered round in an unmeaning, meandering way, and he went on smiling foolishly while I tended him. Even Sophie was subdued, and when I told her that most likely Nurse was going away to-morrow, she contradicted me flatly and vigorously—which was the most exquisite flattery to my sore spirit.

Jeremiah had just begun his lamentations

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when I was supposed to go off. It was my last day, so I turned at the ward door and ran back.

“What have you come back for, Nurse Atherton?” asked Nurse Smith, with asperity.

“Oh, do, do let me comfort Jeremiah,” I pleaded, “just this one, last time!”

“Then be quick about it,” grunted Nurse Smith. That was a great concession from her, and I felt fond of her—yes, even of Staff-nurse Smith! I felt as if I’d rather hear her cross voice telling me that I could do nothing without bungling than all the rhapsodies of my entire family, admiring whatever I did in the superlative degree!

She would not let me enjoy Jeremiah very long, however, so presently I had to go and dress for my walk, just as if this were an ordinary day! I went quickly, in the end, too, for May had just begun piping up that she wanted Nurse to come and give her another lolly! “What’s that you’re asking for?” inquired Nurse Smith sharply.

“Want that nurse to give I another lolly,” squealed May, and I fled, to the music of a scream of rage from Number Five, and terrified lest my illicit indulgence of this morning should be exposed, and I disgraced.

As I stepped out into the dazzling radiance

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of the summer day it occurred to me that to-day I might wind up this part of my career most completely by visiting that stile round which so many memories clung. Mr. Fleming was away, so there was no longer any need to avoid it, and the walk there was through the prettiest and loneliest part of the country round. I trod the old path, feeling more and more depressed at every step. Ah, how different had been my feelings when last I walked this way! How sad to be leaving it all, just when I was becoming so accustomed to it!

On I went, and memory reproduced the scenes, down to their minutest details, which had transpired here before. It was with a pang that cut into my heart like a knife that I recollected those comforting words I had heard when last I sat upon this stile.

“And after all,” I soliloquised, leaning back against the wood on which *his* hands had rested, “I am going to become a superfluous woman once again! Of course I am—even if I *could* stay here now, they wouldn’t have me at any price. The mere fact that they have stopped correcting me proves that they consider me hopeless. I am going home again to my useless, self-centred life. I shall never again do anything except play tennis while I am young, and

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patience when I am old, and the world will be no better for my whole existence. I—I—I don't want to be alive if I can't do any mortal good in the world—it isn't worth while; it's awful to be an encumberer of the ground while there's all this suffering and sorrow, and so much that might be done to relieve it."

I broke down, and two great tears splashed on the stile on the very spot where his hands had rested when he had said those never-to-be-forgotten words—"I gather that your home life is not very—well, not very useful to the world, shall we say? If you persist in it, you are likely to become a superfluous woman."

"But I can't help it," I whispered, through my tears, "I'd stay, oh yes, indeed I would, if they would have me; but they won't let me—I'm too utterly stupid ever to make a nurse. Haven't I been told so until I know it by heart?"

I shut my eyes, and it was lonely. I don't think I ever knew what loneliness meant until that moment. There was no one here to-day to look into the heart of the wood with me, and notice the carpet of blue hyacinths springing up through the ruddy earth, or to listen to the soft whistling of the wind in the boughs, and admire those fleecy clouds against the utter

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blue of the sky. My self-pity had almost reached a climax, when another idea crept into my mind. Perhaps I was to be a lonely woman—perhaps it was decreed for me that I must go through my life in solitude of heart. But even so—why, there was always something worth doing in this world! It is not only in hospitals that a lonely woman can cease to be superfluous! The idea inspired me with hope and determination, and I sprang to my feet, my tears dashed away, and a new purpose filling my whole mind.

Yes, whether it was to be as a nurse, or as a girl at home, or as a lonely woman going through her life without the necessity for earning a mere living, I would not be superfluous, and need not be, for while there is poverty, woe, sickness, or any other sort of trouble to assuage, or work to be done, no man or woman ever created need be superfluous to the world!

With this thrilling thought as the new impulse of my life, I turned and ran back to the hospital, without shedding another tear, or leaving another useless regret behind me.

CHAPTER XXXIII

I PLAY THE EAVESDROPPER

RENOVATED by my inspiration at the stile, I re-entered the hospital positively in gay spirits, and remembered with a thrill of satisfaction that I was to have tea with Sister this afternoon!

To have tea with Sister was a sign of such unprecedented favour that I felt myself raised to a pinnacle of superiority, and carried my head very high. It is true that all the while I had been here I had received no other sign of favour—not any of any sort—but this made it all the more impressive when at last I had obtained one, and I wanted to publish the affair to all whose jealousy might be aroused, or who required the implied snub to keep them humble, if they had never been asked to tea themselves!

Now, Nurse Morgan had snubbed me this morning; she had spoken plainly, and told me that if I was going home to-morrow, the hospital would still go on just the same, so I needn't fret—and it dawned upon me that it might do

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her good to hear that I was going to tea with Sister this afternoon. As she was theatre nurse, she would probably be in the theatre, I reflected, and darted off in that direction before undressing from my walk.

It was a daring thing to do, but nothing seemed to matter quite so much to day, since it was my last day, and I had two minutes to spare before I was due in the ward, and nobody was about! I scurried off down the passage to the theatre, and peeped in.

The door was ajar, but the theatre was empty.

“Of course,” said I to myself, “she has gone to the furnace-room.”

Well, it would not take long to dash down the corridor after her—and it would be so very good for her to know—and I felt surprisingly anxious for her good—therefore I sacrificed some more of my precious moments in order to improve the character of my room companion. It needed improving; it was really rather kind of me to take all this trouble for her moral welfare.

No one seemed to be about, and I ran lightly and swiftly down the corridor, and through the swing doors leading to the passage in which were a storeroom used by Matron, and a pantry.

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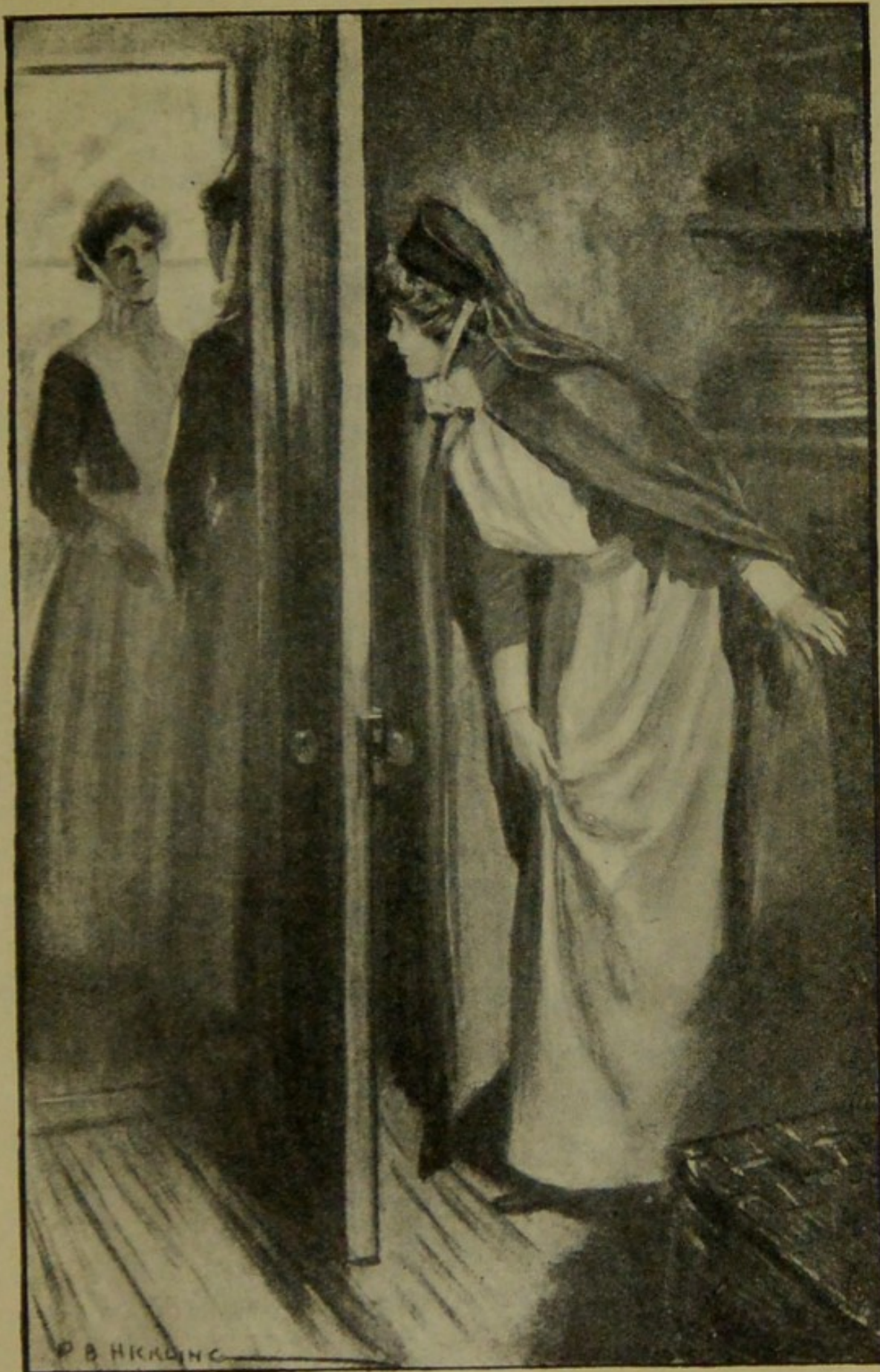
Beyond these was the furnace-room, where I expected to find Nurse Morgan.

The door of the pantry was closed, and it was most unlikely that Matron would be there at this time of day, but I scampered by with guilty fears, persuading myself that the sense of danger added a little spice to my adventure, and that I really rather liked it. But . . . when the door suddenly opened, I felt nothing except abject, crushing, overwhelming terror, and without stopping to think, I slipped into the storeroom and hid there, thankful that its open door had afforded me this shelter, though instantly afterwards the amusing possibility of being caught in here presented itself to my imagination, and my heart began beating loud enough to be heard, as I fully believed, by anyone outside.

What should I say if she came in through the open door and asked me why I was in here? A nice, sensible reason I should have to give—and a nice, wise figure I should cut! I imagined myself saying, “I came to tell Nurse Morgan that I am going to tea with Sister this afternoon.”

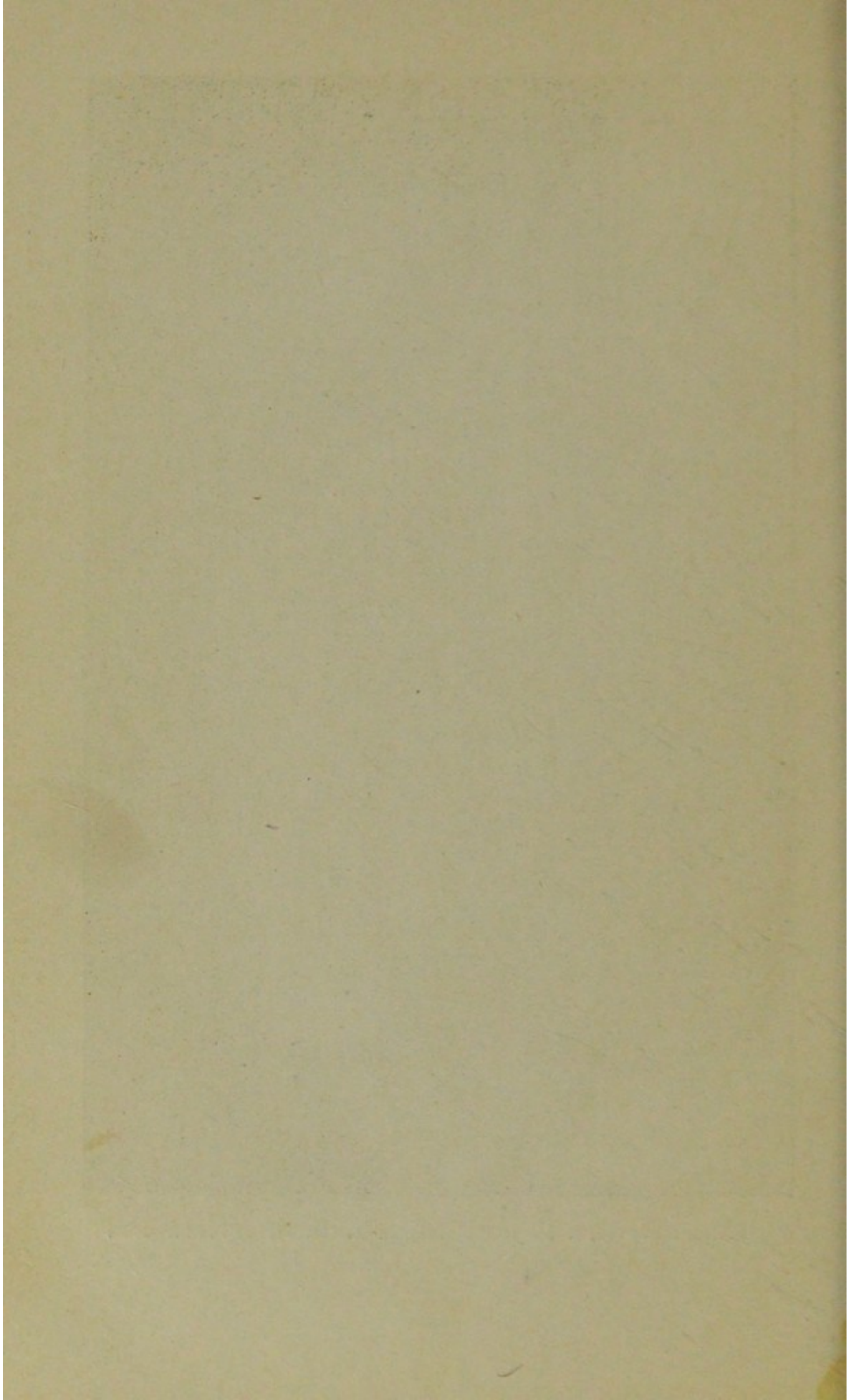
Supposing she did not believe me . . . ?

This appalling suggestion of my brain almost made me swoon. What a terrible idiot I had



"WITHOUT STOPPING TO THINK I SLIPPED INTO THE STOREROOM."

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been to hide in here at all! It would have been better to be caught on my insane errand out in the passage—but in a storeroom! How could Matron imagine anything except that I had come to steal the provisions?

Then I heard voices—the voices of Sister and Matron. They stood just outside the door, and I was barely hidden from their eyes. Through the hinges I could distinctly see the gleam of Sister's white apron, and every single word they said, as they conversed in subdued tones, was as distinct as if spoken to me direct. It was absolutely impossible to reveal myself—I had not the courage—I couldn't have done it, and I do not think any pro on earth would have dared, under the circumstances; so I was obliged to overhear a conversation that astonished me beyond anything that had happened since I came to this hospital.

“She has the makings of a first-rate nurse,” Sister was saying, “which is as astonishing as it is surprising, since she came from that class.” . . . My ears burned, for I knew *I* had come from the class of non-workers, who do not supply many first-rate nurses to the world! . . .

“No,” assented Matron, “one doesn't often find it. She signs to-morrow, doesn't she?”

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I started violently ; almost I knocked over a plate—almost, but, fortunately, not quite !

“ Yes—unless she elects to return home, as she has twice given me to understand she will, though I believe it is because she thinks we will not have her ; in fact, she told me plainly that she knows she is not wanted here, and that we shall be glad to get rid of her.”

“ Did you disillusion her ? ” asked Matron, rather sharply.

“ Of course not,” answered Sister, “ it would never do to let a pro think too much of herself ; in all probability she would at once become too conceited to do good work—but while that child continues humble, I can do almost anything with her. I don’t mind telling you that she is quite the most promising pro I have ever had in the ward.”

At this I felt difficulty in remaining hidden. It was getting too hot in here ! My heart hammered away such a tattoo that I can hardly understand how I remained undiscovered to the end. *Could* they mean me ?

“ And I suppose you know how pluckily she conducted herself in the theatre the other day ? An amputation is rather a severe test as the first there, but she went through it without making the least fuss, and managed the patient

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capitally afterwards, when none of the nurses in the surgical ward could manage him. I had to spare her all the rest of the day."

"How can you prevent her going?" asked Matron. "It is not every day we get hold of a promising pro, and it seems that it would be a thousand pities if this one gave up."

"I have asked her to come to my room for tea this afternoon," said Sister. And I nodded my head—they meant me, and no one else, and the only pity was that Nurse Morgan was not standing here with me, listening to my praises!—"I shall first find out whether she cares as much for the work as I feel sure she does. Then I shall say the decision will in all probability remain with herself, on condition that Mr. Fleming passes her as sound in health. I will not appear anxious one way or the other."

"No," warmly returned Matron; "on the contrary, it is much wiser to discourage them a little. Don't let her imagine that we should be sorry to lose her, or the consequence will be that she will become too uppish to be taught. But don't let her go—be sure you don't."

"I certainly won't—if I can help it," answered Sister; "especially as we shall have to train a new pro, now, in place of Nurse Cotteril."

"Do not mention that name to me!" cried

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Matron. "She was a disgrace to the hospital. But come, Sister, there are several things I want to consult you about in my room. This door ought to be kept shut."

The door behind which I was hiding shut with a bang, and I cowered down. When I looked up again, undiscovered, the passage was deserted, and with the utmost caution I stole out of my hiding-place, hardly knowing whether I were on my head or feet. Needless to say I abandoned the idea of telling Nurse Morgan that I was going to tea with Sister; in fact, I had never been more utterly ashamed of myself in all my life, and escaped from my hiding-place with the feelings of a prisoner escaping from his cell, who is in momentary terror of being caught by one of the warders.

CHAPTER XXXIV

TEA WITH SISTER

"You are nearly ten minutes late," was Nurse Smith's greeting to me.

"Yes, Nurse," I answered sorrowfully, "I—I am."

She gave me a cutting look.

"Give I another lolly," broke out Number Five, in shrill and determined accents. "Nairse—Nairse—Nairse! Give I another lolly! Give I another lolly!"

"She has gone on like that all the afternoon," said Nurse Smith.

"Has she?" said I. "What can she mean?"

Little Billy here came to my rescue by a feeble cry, at which Nurse Smith jumped round. No one could tell why, but even Nurse Smith had her soft spot, and this showed itself towards poor Billy, whose small and worthless life we were snatching from the grave, in order to preserve it for a wretched home, presided over by a drunken mother. It may be that his silent, rough father, who came on each visiting day

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to see him, had touched the heart of Nurse Smith, for it was pathetic to see the man sit there staring at Billy and never uttering a complete sentence. Billy's mother remained conspicuous by her absence.

"Give I . . ." began May, and stopped. I stood looking at her, so she contented herself with pulling a hideous grimace at me.

A little later I was knocking at Sister's door, but in spite of all I had heard, I was not elated now, and I could no longer look Sister in the face.

This was the room to which I had been led on the day of my arrival. Once more I was to have tea here. This time I did not drop into the easiest chair in the room—I took the hardest and least honourable.

"Well," said Sister brightly, as she poured water that had been heated over a spirit lamp into the teapot, "so you are leaving us to-morrow?"

"I don't know, Sister," I mumbled; and then, an irresistible attack of my old spirit once again taking full possession of my breast, I dropped the humble tone, and corrected myself. "At least, yes, I do. I know perfectly well."

"Wouldn't it be a pity?" suggested Sister.

"Yes," said I, "it would, because I have the makings of a first-rate nurse."

TEA WITH SISTER

Sister stopped pouring the water to stare at me. I never saw anyone look more surprised than she did at that moment. "You seem to have a fairly good opinion of yourself," she said presently.

"Yes," I nodded. "It doesn't do to let a pro think much of herself, for fear she should become too conceited to do good work; but I am quite the most promising pro you ever had in your ward."

"*What?*" breathed Sister.

"I was very plucky when I witnessed that first operation," I continued, without pause for thought; "I bore it without making the least fuss, and managed the patient capitally afterwards. It is not every day that you get hold of such a promising pro, and it would be a thousand pities if you allowed this one to give up."

"What?" echoed Sister. "What?"

"Still," said I, "it is wiser to discourage me a little—you had better not appear too anxious to keep me, and, above all, don't let me imagine that you would be sorry to lose me, or I might become too uppish to be taught."

Sister sat down.

"But don't let me go—be sure you don't;

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especially as you will have to train a new pro in place of Nurse Cotteril."

Silence fell then. Having been wound up to this pitch, my works suddenly ran down.

I dared not look at Sister, but I knew that she had once more stood up, and finished filling the teapot. Then she said, "*Where were you this afternoon?*"

"In the storeroom."

"What brought you there?"

"I thought Nurse Morgan was in the furnace-room, and that it might be good for her to know that I was coming to tea with you, because she snubbed me this morning, and I wanted to show her that I was of some consequence after all, though I didn't know I was of quite so much consequence. I hadn't time to hide in the furnace-room, you came out of the pantry so suddenly. That was why I happened to be in the storeroom—I wasn't there to steal the cakes, I wasn't indeed—and I couldn't shut the door, or you would have discovered me."

For once Sister was perfectly nonplussed—for the first and only time since I knew her. Then she gave in, and laughed. And when she began, she could not stop. She laughed until tears ran down her cheeks. I joined her. The

TEA WITH SISTER

room rang to the sound of our mirth, and my spirits went up like a balloon.

“It is hardly necessary to ask if you are going to remain with us,” said Sister at last.

“No,” I answered, “I am far too promising a pro to be allowed to go away. I couldn’t think of doing such a thing!”

CHAPTER XXXV

I TAKE IT OUT OF STAFF-NURSE SMITH

THE tumult in which I had risen the day before was as nothing to the perfect tempest of feeling that raged in my heart on the morning when I was to sign that agreement which would irretrievably decide the future course of my life. I could not help drawing back almost in terror from thought of the serious and fateful interview between Matron and me this day.

A letter from my father came that morning, and in spite of the usual rush I stopped to tear it open. I *must* see what he had to say before my final decision.

“ My dear Agnes,

“ Your mother and I have talked over your future career together, and she urges me to send you a line of encouragement at this crisis. I have opposed her until the last minute, when we had a visit from the house-surgeon of your hospital . . .” (The letter almost dropped from my hands! Then I snatched at it, my

I TAKE IT OUT OF NURSE SMITH

heart palpitating feverishly). . . . " who called on us an hour ago, as he was in the place, and assured us that you were in earnest, and cut out for a nurse. We were delighted with him, and he has persuaded me that not only should I withdraw my opposition—(as I did, reluctantly, in my last letter to you), but that I may safely and happily consign you to the career of your choice, satisfied that you are not making a mistake in electing to remain for your three years' training, or I in expressing my approval. Mr. Fleming has given us so bright an account of your life in hospital, which he admits is full of hardships that you bear cheerfully and with capital spirits, that I can only add how happy I am to be able to picture my last and dearest child in such happy surroundings, and with the incentive of a noble object in life to support her through whatever is hard while in training. It was exceedingly kind of the house-surgeon to spare time for this call, but he says there is difficulty in procuring efficient nurses, and that one of the staff has lately left in unpleasant circumstances, so he thought it would be a pity for the hospital if obliged to part with so promising a probationer as my little girl! He also said that he understood I had not quite approved of my daughter's

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work—and he was right, as you know—but I can now only assure you that however I may have objected in the past, Mr. Fleming has removed those objections completely, and left me not only well pleased with my little girl, but also proud of having a daughter of so much use and so capable . . .”

“What are you doing, Nurse Atherton?” asked the sharp voice of my Staff-nurse, and I thrust the letter into my pocket and turned to her with flaming countenance.

“I—I was only reading a letter,” I answered.

“Reading a letter! At this time of morning!”

“Yes,” said I, “I really had to, Nurse; you know, I have to go down presently to see Matron about—about whether I am to stay or not, and I had to see what my father had to say, as he has not liked my work.”

Nurse Smith stood listening with unusual patience. “Well,” said she, “I suppose you’ll hardly give up?”

“Why not?” I asked, unable to subdue a wild impulse to enjoy a little piece of fun with Nurse Smith for once, and I dropped my eyes, and sighed, as I added sadly, “I’ve been told so often that I’m good for nothing, and that you might as well try to train the poker, that it’s

I TAKE IT OUT OF NURSE SMITH

enough to convince anyone that I'm no use as a nurse."

"Tut-tut!" growled Nurse Smith. "You're easily discouraged, I must say."

"But I've so very little sense," I continued, "and have not the faintest, slightest idea of doing anything right."

"That all comes with practice," she returned. "One learns by mistakes."

"Oh, yes," I sighed, "when one has any sense at all—which I haven't."

"To know that you are stupid is the best chance you have of mending."

"No," I mournfully contradicted, "it simply convinces me that I am too utterly, hopelessly incapable ever to make a nurse at all—and that's been proved to me over and over and over again, until, as I have told you, it has sunk in, and become a matter of conviction."

"Come," said Nurse Smith, "don't be downhearted, but make up your mind to improve. I shouldn't wonder if we made a nurse of you yet, provided you are willing to try again."

This was such a tremendous concession from Nurse Smith, that I almost betrayed myself by laughing. Then we were interrupted by a call from Sister. Mr. Fleming was coming round on his first visit to the ward.

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It was not my duty to accompany Mr. Fleming when he went round, but he deliberately called me to make inquiries about Number Fourteen. He wanted to know how often I fed it, what I gave it, the exact quantity, and various other items about its health, which I supplied with nervous precision, not venturing to look at him, though I felt conscious of his eye piercingly fixed upon my face, and trembled lest it should discover the profound secret of my heart, which it was my duty to suppress and strangle—a duty that became harder with every mention of his name, or glimpse of his presence, or sound of his voice.

He stood there, apparently inventing questions in order to delay, until he could think of no other, when he went on to the next cot, and I slipped back to my work without having met his eye.

That encounter disturbed me terribly. A new problem was presented to my brain for solution in these rapidly-closing minutes before I must decide that momentous question of my future career.

Would it be right for me to stay here, considering my feelings towards Mr. Fleming?

All the complications and moral difficulties of the position presented themselves to my

I TAKE IT OUT OF NURSE SMITH

tortured imagination, while I mixed feeds, or dressed children, or rubbed brasses, or fulfilled the innumerable duties that fell to my share. There was not a single spare moment for quiet reflection, and immediately after dinner I was to have the momentous interview with Matron!

First I pictured the increasing battle with my own foolish heart that had given itself away, unasked! I imagined the distance between poor Nurse Cotteril and her fiancé, and how awful it must be for her to be separated from him. But she had his promise—he had sworn to be faithful to her, and I was as sure that Mr. Fleming would never fail to keep his word as I was that the sun would rise at the right time. No, for Nurse Cotteril's sake I need not scruple to remain; and I must not, must not allow my mind to dwell upon her unworthiness for such great bliss. I had nothing to do with that.

Through all the distractions of my busy morning, my mind was working in quite a logical manner, from point to point, and by dinner-time it had reached the point at which it had to consider the future beyond these three years of training. If I turned my back upon the hospital now, because I was afraid of ruining my own happiness hopelessly through staying

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too near one person who belonged to another person, I would also be obliged to turn my back upon all the use I could be to the world as a nurse—and that I was cut out for one had been satisfactorily demonstrated! Perhaps it would be more in accordance with right action to stay, and fight down my folly, and throw all my energies into the work that was still waiting to be performed—a work that must bring interest and enthusiasm into my life in spite of any other disappointment?

My reflections were cut short by the general rise from table, and Matron turned and looked at me.

CHAPTER XXXVI

I PUNISH MATRON

As I prepared to follow Matron, a hand touched my shoulder. I looked up, and it was Sister.

“Just one word,” she said in my ear. “Listen—do not on any account let Matron know that you overheard our conversation. Tell no one. You had no business to overhear anything, and you must bear the consequences, however awkward. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sister,” I answered, thankful that I had not yet mentioned that episode to anyone else, and determined by no sort of sign to let out the secret.

Matron led the way to her sitting-room, and I followed, inwardly determined to act my part even better than I had done it with Nurse Smith! I could not control a wild spirit of mischief that was leading me to punish those who had depreciated me though all the time thinking me a capital worker. My spirits rose at the mere thought of a pro daring to punish a

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matron, and it was with difficulty that I suppressed a broad grin which had spread upon my features while Matron's back was turned to me, in order to look humble and depressed, as befitted the expression of a pro come to declare herself a failure.

Mr. Fleming was standing at the window of Matron's sitting-room, and he turned round and bowed in a distant fashion, whether to Matron or to me I could not tell. He advanced and laid his stethoscope on the table, then put a chair for Matron.

"Sit down," she said to me, in a stiff, cold way that was intended to convey to my pro's mind how thoroughly indifferent she felt as to my existence.

I did so, preserving my humble and depressed expression, but inwardly more than ever determined to take it out of Matron for this! I was acutely conscious again of Mr. Fleming's piercing eye striving to attract my attention, though why he should do so, I could not imagine. Anyhow, I fought against it, and would not look at him. Had I done so, I might no longer have been able to act my part.

"You have come to sign this agreement," began Matron; "that is, if we consider you capable of being trained at all." This was said

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in the tone of one who is perfectly certain that the pro before her is incapable to the last degree.

“It is no use,” I answered. “I have been informed already that no one could make a nurse of me. Do not trouble to repeat it.”

“Indeed?” said Matron. “And may I ask who has informed you of that?”

“Everyone,” I answered, without raising my eyes an inch—I dared not, I was so near breaking down in violent laughter, which was strange, for I was in the presence of Mr. Fleming, and that alone might have turned all my laughter into tears, had I been less under the dominion of this irresistible spirit of mischief that prompted me from moment to moment.

“So I am to conclude that you do not wish to stay?” asked Matron, not quite easily.

“I cannot stay where I am a failure,” I answered, and my voice trembled with real emotion, though that was not the emotion she imagined.

“With perseverance, you might improve,” said Matron.

“Had I been capable of improving, it would have shown itself by this time,” said I.

“A month is a short time,” said Matron, still more uneasily. She could not, with dignity, show herself in any way anxious to keep a

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pro,—especially a pro like me, whom it was so necessary to subdue.

“ It is long enough to test a girl’s capabilities,” I replied, “ and as mine are so conspicuous by their absence, I don’t think I need waste any more of your time, or anyone else’s in the hospital, by proving that I am not cut out for this profession.”

“ Then you mean to give up—already ? ” burst out Mr. Fleming, as if he could no longer contain his astonishment.

I did not answer ; I fidgeted with my cap-strings, and looked away.

“ Is that so ? ” asked Matron.

“ What is the use of remaining where one is not wanted ? ” I asked, to avoid answering.

“ Surely that is not the question,” returned Matron, and she could no longer disguise the complete uneasiness which I had roused, and appreciated to the full—“ surely it is more a question as to whether you have sufficient persistence of character to go through your training, and strive to succeed where you may have failed during this month of probation ? ”

“ I don’t know whether that is the question,” I answered, sighing. “ I thought it was simply either to sign for my three years (which I might

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have done had I been told that I was any use at all)—or to elect to go home instead.”

“If we consent to try you . . .?” began Matron, and stopped.

“You have tried me—for an entire month,” said I.

“A month is not very long,” said she.

“It is long enough to be perfectly convinced as to one’s capabilities,” I stoutly maintained, “and I have never passed a day here without being informed in plain and unmistakable language that I am no good at all, and it is a hopeless task attempting to train me. I have learned my lesson well—as I prove by giving up, though I tried my best. But as it was my best, the case is more utterly hopeless than ever. I bungle all my work, and do everything wrong, and have no common sense in my composition, and . . .”

“Pray allow me to put in a word for Miss—for Nurse Atherton,” burst out Mr. Fleming. “I might be allowed to say that as far as my observations go, she is exaggerating, or is, perhaps, a little depressed this morning. I have not noticed any such frantic bungling in her work, in fact, in one or two cases she has succeeded admirably, to my knowledge. I might quote her management of Number Fourteen,

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who was placed under her almost sole charge, as I understand."

Matron turned to me, a little hope glimmering in her eye. Perhaps she would win her point without loss of dignity!

But I was relentless.

"It is very good of Mr. Fleming to speak for me," I said; "but he cannot know anything about the general failure of my work. Nurse Smith and—and—Sister—have told different tales."

"They have not complained of you," said poor Matron.

"On the contrary," I contradicted—(yes, I, a pro, contradicted Matron!)—"on the contrary, they have never ceased to complain of me since the day I came here until yesterday. I acknowledge, they have not said anything to me to-day, but I suppose it isn't much use correcting a pro who is on the point of leaving."

"So you are determined to leave—to confess yourself a failure? Though"—and poor Matron swallowed the bitter pill—"we do not consider that, Nurse Atherton. In fact, we—we are willing to keep you here if you wish to stay with us."

"That is extremely kind of you," I retorted; "but in my opinion nursing is far too important

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work to be undertaken by anyone so utterly, so awfully stupid."

"Who has impressed you with this sense of stupidity?" asked Mr. Fleming, wrath smouldering in his tones.

"Yes, who?" asked Matron eagerly.

I raised my eyes at last, and looked from one of them to the other. Then I dropped them again, and asked a little hurriedly, "Do you mean to imply that in your opinion, Matron, I am not quite so painfully stupid?"

"I have never been aware of it," she answered, eating her humble pie in gulps.

"Quite the contrary," commented Mr. Fleming, still angrily.

"Then you think that I might make a nurse, some day?" I relentlessly pursued.

"Of course," she granted.

"But that isn't enough," said I, with growing fervour; "I could not stay unless I thought that I might even make a good nurse. I cannot bear to do anything, unless I can do it thoroughly."

"That is the spirit in which to learn," said Matron.

"And do you think that I have the makings of a good nurse, a positively good nurse?" I persisted.

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It was hard on Matron, but I felt that I owed her this revenge. She had instructed Sister on no account to allow me to know what their real feelings about me were, and I was forcing her to express them herself!

“I cannot see why not,” said Matron, and paused. Then she added, looking me frankly in the eye, “As far as I have heard, you are a promising enough probationer, Nurse Atherton, and I see no reason why you should give up because you have not received much encouragement so far. Our best nurses go through the same course, and become good nurses through repeated failures or mistakes. But I suppose you hardly expect us to praise you for making mistakes?”

This would not do—she was turning the tables upon me with a vengeance!

“I have long ceased to expect praise,” said I, “and agree with you that it would have a bad effect. But, Matron, believe me, I am not a foolish girl who cannot get on without approbation—I only want to know whether I am fit to attempt the strenuous work of a nurse. To my mind it is far too serious to be undertaken lightly, and only those who have the right qualities should enter such a field of labour, because life itself so often depends upon good

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or bad nursing, and I don't think there is any responsibility much greater."

At this I received one of the tremendous surprises of my life. Matron rose from her seat, and laid her hand upon my shoulder.

"I will not let you go," she said impulsively, "I want you here. That is what I want—it is the very thing I want. You must on no account leave us, Nurse Atherton."

It was too much—I had not intended to force such a confession, and it was given so warmly, so frankly, that it overcame me. I had been worked up to such an extent that I could no longer contain my feelings, and I broke down in tears.

"Come, come," said Matron, "do not cry, my dear. Believe me, we have not really treated you unkindly."

"Oh, I know it," I burst out, "I feel it down to the bottom of my heart, and if you only knew what you have done for me here, you would understand how grateful I shall be to you all to the very end of my life. May I sign that paper now, Matron? I—I won't keep you any longer. You have been so good—so patient!"

"There is one small preliminary," said Matron. "I suppose you know that you have to be examined by the doctor—a mere matter

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of form. That's right, my child, you look more like yourself when you smile. Now, just let Mr. Fleming listen to your chest."

"As sound as a bell," was his verdict, uttered with much satisfaction as he put the stethoscope away. Then he paused, and looked at Matron. "She has worked hard—isn't she entitled to a day off? It wouldn't do her any harm—overwrought a bit, you know."

"She shall have to-morrow," immediately and cordially responded Matron. "She shall have from eleven o'clock until six."

At first I listened with enthusiasm, then my heart sank. I had not time to go home and back between the hours of eleven and six, but I would not attempt to force a further concession from Matron now, she had roused my feelings of gratitude to such a pitch.

"Please do not trouble to spare me," I said; "I do not know where to go, or what to do with all those hours."

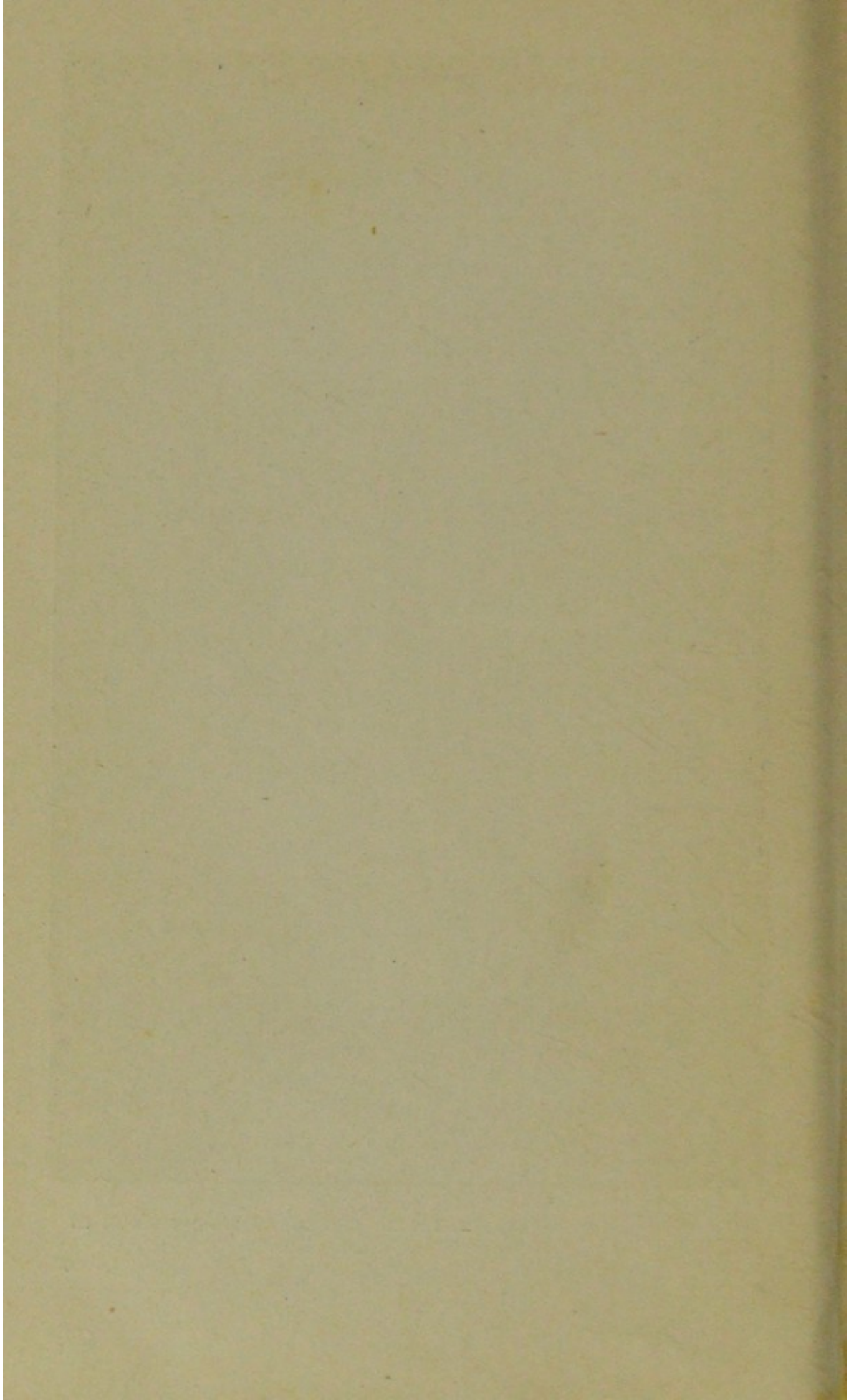
"Why not go to Silver Dell?" suggested Mr. Fleming.

"Where is Silver Dell?" I asked.

"It is a dell so named because of the silver birches which line its banks, and the stream which trickles through like a band of silver. You take the train to Starchley, and the dell is



"I GAZED AT THE FATEFUL PAPER, AND SCRAWLED MY NAME IN
THE SPACE SHE INDICATED."



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easily found upon inquiry. It is the sort of spot to suit you, Nurse, and there is a rural cottage where you can get something to eat—and the perfect certainty of not meeting another human being except the old woman who keeps that cottage, and delights to make a dish of bacon and eggs for the odd traveller. The dell abounds in such wild flowers as anemones . . .”

“ Oh, how perfectly exquisite ! ” I exclaimed. “ Oh, yes, I would like the day off to-morrow, please, Matron ! ”

She laughed.

“ Now,” said she, moving to the table, “ there is this document to sign.”

I sat down, gazed at the fateful paper, and suddenly scrawled my name in the space she indicated.

The deed was done. I sat a moment staring at my signature, and then, trembling from head to foot, quietly took my departure.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A CONVERSATION BEGUN

AT precisely eleven o'clock the next morning I went off duty.

"Where are you going?" asked Nurse Bright, meeting me in the corridor.

"I'm going to Silver Dell," I answered gaily.

"Why didn't you tell me a day or two sooner?" she asked. "I might have arranged to come with you."

I opened my eyes at this in downright astonishment. What! Nurse Bright, whose rags I stole the first day I was here, offer to come with me to Silver Dell!

"Oh, I am sorry," I exclaimed. "I never once thought of such a possibility. But Matron only gave me leave yesterday."

"Never mind," said Nurse Bright, smiling—yes, actually smiling—at me! "Perhaps we may have a little excursion together some day in the future."

"Oh, I do hope so," I returned enthusiastic-

A CONVERSATION BEGUN

ally, for I liked her, in spite of those rags, and had always regretted the breach.

I started off on my lonely excursion, wishing with all my heart that Nurse Bright had been with me. That little episode in the corridor, when I could not but feel myself forgiven for the rags, had made me want a companion to share my pleasure. I should have liked above all things to take Nurse Talbot with me, and had already asked her if she could manage to come, but as she was on night duty still, and would not be permitted to give up her hours of rest, I had to go without my chum. I believe I should have been willing to take Nurse Morgan herself, in spite of her chuckle over my value to the hospital, which had been her reply to my impressive announcement in our bedroom that I had signed the agreement to stay here for three years.

It seemed fated that I must take the little excursion alone, and afterwards I shuddered at the thought of how many plans I had made for fitting myself up with a companion. But as I wended my way to the station, I much regretted that there was no one with me to share the fun.

Not that it could be fun, though, for whoever makes fun all alone? At the booking-office I

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hesitated, and as nearly as possible changed my destination. Silver Dell was a particularly lonely spot—Mr. Fleming had told me that I should be safe to meet no other human being there except the old woman who kept the cottage. It was not a very lively prospect!

A movement at the other side of the booking-office drew my attention sharply to the necessity of taking my ticket at once, and I stammered out—"Return, Starchley,"—unable to think of any other station at the moment.

"Well, now, I suppose I've got to go there," I muttered, walking on to the platform, and envying the other passengers, all of whom seemed accompanied by friends or family. Oh, if only Matron had said ten till ten, I might have had time to run home for an hour. Then I started, for the thought flashed into my head that Mr. Fleming could not have had time to do anything else the day before yesterday except travel to my home, pay the short visit, and return. Whatever had made him take all that trouble for me? Oh, it could not, could not be merely for the sake of winning my father's consent to my residence at hospital for my three years' training! It was too utterly, completely impossible to imagine such a wildly improbable object for his long day off. He *must*

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have had other business in the place, and just spared time for that passing visit. Yet how kind of him, how considerate, how nice to take even that much trouble for a mere pro, whose very existence could not have mattered in the least to him, especially now, when he had just become engaged to be married. No man can be supposed to care the snap of a finger about any other woman except his bride elect at such a time.

My excursion to Silver Dell was at his suggestion, and my heart gave one little sharp beat when that occurred to me, coupled with the knowledge that I had almost gone elsewhere! I was ashamed of remembering how nearly.

When my train steamed in, I took a seat in a frantic hurry, lest by any chance I should fail to get to Starchley in time to go to Silver Dell. It was a lonely excursion, but, after all, there was a little comfort in thinking that it had been planned for me by that kind house-surgeon, who was able to think even of me at this eventful period of his own life. How nobly unselfish! How truly good of him to show such sympathy for a mere pro who was nothing to him!

Well, I should explore Silver Dell accompanied by the warm little thought that Mr. Fleming had sent me there, and had said that

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it was the sort of place that would suit me!
(How could he possibly tell that?)

Starchley was the first station at which my train stopped. It could not have been more than six miles along the line. I alighted, feeling less lonely than when I got in, though no one else appeared on the little wayside platform, and I was the only passenger for this destination.

"Can you tell me the way to Silver Dell?" I asked the solitary porter who took my ticket.

He looked bewildered, then slowly informed me that it was the first turning to the right.

"How far?" I asked.

"Well, it might be two mile, or it might be three," he replied vacantly, adding, "or it might be less."

I took the first turning to the right, and walked along a lonely country road between high banks studded with every sort of exquisite wild flower that blows. Dust lay thick in the lanes, but the banks and hedges were clean, as if undisturbed by traffic. For over a mile I walked on without sight of man or dwelling-place; then I came to a cottage, and inquired for the dell.

"You're almost there, miss," answered the old woman who had come at my knock, and I

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knew at once that this was the cottage where I was to ask for bacon and eggs. She directed me across a field, and reluctantly let me go on while she prepared my meal. A stranger was evidently an event in this part of the world.

Suddenly I came upon Silver Dell.

The woods that bounded the great field I had crossed hid Silver Dell from the public eye, but I climbed a high fence, and followed a small pathway through the trees, and in a moment the beautiful spot—surely the most beautiful in all the world—was revealed to my sight. I stopped short and gasped as I stood above the dell, looking down in sheer amazement at such beauty.

Silver birches, in all the grace of their shimmering leaves and delicate boughs, climbed down the steep, irregular banks, and seemed to bend above the silvery stream that babbled amongst the stones at the bottom. Below my feet I could see a small cascade leaping from rock to rock, in a shower of spray and froth. There was one grassy hillock in the dell exposed to full sunshine, and there I knew I should find many flowers. I wanted to climb down at once, and begin to fill my hands with those sweet spoils, but knew I had not time until after I had partaken of that dish of bacon and

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eggs, about which I was already feeling rather keen !

But for a few moments more I might feast eyes and heart upon the lovely picture below me, only feeling that to complete my satisfaction it was necessary to have a human companion who was also smitten with the charm of Nature's exquisite work. I gazed and gazed, and felt my eyes filling, for this spot brought home to me in some mysterious, vivid way, how very lonely I was this day, and how solitary I felt, and how much I longed for a friend.

"Why that sigh?" said a human voice behind, and I started round, more electrified than frightened. "What? Tears? Oh, why?" exclaimed the voice, and I found myself staring in dumb stupefaction into the very face of all faces that I had been wishing to see here, though I had not realised it until the fact presented itself to my mind through its fulfilment. "Is the dell so disappointing?" gently asked Mr. Fleming.

I could not reply, I could only stare and stare, like a dummy.

"You do not seem to have expected to find me here," said Mr. Fleming, with one of his old, boyish smiles, and he chuckled aloud. "But

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whatever should I have sent you here for, if I hadn't intended to come too?"

"I—you . . . what?" I stammered.

"Didn't you guess?" he asked, looking straight into my eyes.

"No! How could I?" I exclaimed, stepping back, while I felt a perfect tempest of blood attacking my face from chin to brow.

"I suppose you don't know where I went the day before yesterday?"

"Yes," I breathed, "my father told me you had called on him to—to persuade him to withdraw his opposition, and he said that you had convinced him that he was doing right, not only in permitting me to remain for my training, but to encourage me to do so; and I have to thank you very much, Mr. Fleming, for having spent so much time as you evidently did wring out of your short visit to—to the place where I live, to take all that trouble for my sake."

Mr. Fleming was silent, looking steadily at me, and I grew more confused every moment.

"It was indeed very good of you—especially just now," I said, rather wildly.

"Why especially just now?" asked Mr. Fleming.

I gasped.

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“Why especially just now?” he repeated steadily and with determination.

“Why, because—because . . . because of *her*,” I ejaculated.

“Because of whom?” he asked, and now his voice was positively stern. “Miss Atherton, I must know what you mean, and I will.” This was said in such a manner that I don’t believe anyone who was ever born could have refused to tell him exactly whatever he chose to ask.

“Nurse Cotteril,” I faintly responded.

“Nurse Cotteril? What about her?” he asked, in a fury. “Come, Miss Atherton, I mean to know what this signifies. I am not going to be plagued with that Nurse Cotteril upon the principal holiday of my life, but I mean to know what you insinuate.”

“I ought to have congratulated you,” I said, low.

“Congratulated me? Why?”

“Because of your engagement,” I answered, turning away, and shrinking, for Mr. Fleming looked so angry that I was afraid of him.

“My engagement? What engagement?”

“Your engagement to Nurse Cotteril,” I managed to articulate. “I know all about it, Mr. Fleming, because she told me herself; she told me the day she left that it was

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because of that that she had to go, and I had not the courage to congratulate you ! ”

There was silence, during which I could no more have looked at him than at Nurse Cotteril, who was beyond our vision. The cascade continued its everlasting game beneath us, and the silver birches rustled their leaves in the light breeze, making the sound of soft hands clapping in perpetual joy.

“ Oh—I see—I understand,” said Mr. Fleming at last, in a low tone, and he drew a deep breath. “ Miss Atherton—or let me call you by your sweet and suitable Christian name this once—Agnes—I think I understand at last. So that was why you would not look at me ? You thought that I was engaged to Nurse Cotteril ? You believed a single word spoken by that abominable woman ? ”

“ What ? ” I almost screamed, and started back to stare at him in unutterable amazement. “ Isn’t it true ? ”

“ No,” said he, “ it is a downright, black, and fiendish lie.”

“ But—she said—she said herself that—that—that she was being sent away from the hospital because she was engaged to marry you ! ”

“ And do you always believe every single word that anybody speaks, Agnes ? ”

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I did not reply, I was so shocked.

“It’s a pity—oh, indeed it is a pity,” burst out Mr. Fleming, “ever to have to destroy the simple faith of a simple, straightforward nature, but, little Agnes—(forgive me—I must call you by your name to-day)—it doesn’t always do to believe everything too implicitly in this complicated world. There are people who do not speak the truth. Will you believe me now, after saying that, if I tell you the truth about Nurse Cotteril?”

I mutely assented, leaning back against a tree, for I needed support, my brain was in such a whirl.

“This is what happened,” he said. “Nurse Cotteril, who was an odious woman, had never ceased to persecute me with unwelcome attentions. If she could not force my attention any other way, she tried fainting, or hysterics, or something, and was able to feign illness so successfully that I was several times obliged to attend her, though practically certain that she was malingering. I could hardly go out without meeting her, and the number of excuses she made for running down to the dispensary when I was there could not be calculated. At last—the other day, her behaviour went beyond all bounds. She had come round behind the

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screen in the dispensary, and was actually attempting to seize my hands, when I lost my temper—I do that occasionally.”

I nodded, while my heart seemed to leap and bound like the cascade, and Mr. Fleming laughed softly.

“Well, I did lose my temper that time, anyhow,” he said. “I shouted—if I didn’t positively roar—at her! I bellowed forth that unless she left me at once I’d report her to the Committee, and it was at that crucial moment that Matron happened to enter the dispensary, while I was pouring forth a volley of violent indignation that certainly ought to have overwhelmed the most brazen of the brassy! As you may imagine, Matron relieved me of the necessity of expressing myself any further, and made short work with Nurse Cotteril. But I did not dream that she would leave—that—sting behind.” His voice sank, and I heard a little quiver in it. I gazed hard down the dell, trying not to let my ever-ready tears spring up into my eyes. “And you believed her? You believed that unmitigated wretch?” he asked.

I looked up at him, and one of those unruly tears overflowed.

“Agnes!”

THE PROBATIONER

“ Oh, don't, don't, please don't ! ” I whispered.

“ Tell me one thing,” he begged. “ When did that villain first announce the lie ? ”

“ It was the day before I was put on night duty,” I whispered.

“ Ah ! ” breathed Mr. Fleming. “ Then, I understand ! I understand ! ”

“ What do you understand ? ” I asked, trembling.

“ The reason of the change in this transparent countenance,” he replied, smiling down at me in a way that was like a flood of sunshine suddenly poured out upon the frozen earth, softening and reviving it with its warm rays. “ Now,” said he, drawing back, and evidently exercising self-control, “ if you are as hungry as I am, you will be ready to defer the rest of our conversation until after that meal of bacon and eggs which our old woman is preparing for us.”

“ For—us ? ” I asked.

“ Yes, didn't you hear the sound of a bicycle just behind you when you turned from the cottage to the dell ? Eh ? ”

I glanced at him, and broke into a happy little laugh. How little I had dreamed of any such bicycle following me !

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“Most certainly I did not,” said I. “I should have been most alarmed if I had known that I was followed by a bicycle.”

“I made love to the old woman,” continued Mr. Fleming, “and got her to promise a double supply ; and unless I’m mistaken that appetising meal is waiting for us in the cottage at this moment.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE CONVERSATION'S CONCLUSION

“IT’S simply a wonder that there aren’t at least three of us here,” I said, when we had finished our delightful rural dinner, and were waiting to pay the old woman before we went to explore the dell.

“What?” asked Mr. Fleming, with a note of alarm in his voice.

“I invited the whole hospital to accompany me,” I answered. “I didn’t want to come alone—I didn’t think it would be very cheerful all alone. So I asked Nurse Bright, and Nurse Talbot, and I would willingly have brought Nurse Fletcher, perhaps even Nurse Morgan, not to mention Nurse Smith or Sister, or, above all, the Sister of the surgical ward, whom I love, because she was so very nice to me.”

“And you have had to put up with me, instead?” said Mr. Fleming. “Here, Betty, we’re waiting for you. The feast’s mine. Charge me anything you like—I haven’t the

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ghost of a notion what you ought to charge, so here's your opportunity! What? Nonsense, say twice as much!"

What he really gave her, I don't know, but Betty seemed more than satisfied, and wished us good luck, and suggested that we should come back for another dinner some day, so I feel sure that she was no loser. It was old Betty's manner, and the wink of her wicked old eye that brought me to my senses, and revealed to me how very incorrect was this whole proceeding. I was shocked at the very thought of what I was doing, and a little panic-stricken.

"What now?" asked Mr. Fleming, following me out of the cottage.

"Oh, Mr. Fleming, we—I—I . . ."

"What is it?" he asked, half amused, and half concerned.

"I've just thought of something," I stammered, "I . . . I . . ."

"Out with it," said he encouragingly.

"I'm afraid we—I shouldn't be here—with you."

"No," said he, "that's very evident—but you couldn't help it, you see, so all the blame is mine. But we haven't finished that conversation yet, and I've a fancy to finish it in the dell. Let me help you over this high fence."

THE PROBATIONER

He took my hands in a firm and masterful way which defied resistance, and I felt myself trembling as he lifted me down beside him. "This is the best way down," he said, "it's a little steep, but I can help you."

He certainly did help me—more than was quite necessary, but I was as meek as a lamb, for I had been overwhelmed by the thought of what I was doing, and how completely out of order it was. Still, as he said, I could not help it, and, after all, what companion on earth should I prefer to this sympathetic, thoughtful, and manly young fellow, who had entered the most noble profession that there is, and had done brilliantly well in each examination so far, and was destined to a high place in the ranks—as was prophesied in our hospital? How could I be anything but proud because he had chosen to follow me here in order to have this conversation?

"This spot will do," said Mr. Fleming, looking round with satisfaction. He had brought me to a sort of natural arbour, where we seemed remote from the whole world, half-way between sky and earth, and with no other sound to distract us except the delicious trickling of water in the distance. I obediently sat down in the spot he indicated, and he settled

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himself upon the great root of a tree close by, and looked at me. "I am not going to beat about the bush," he said; "I am going to tell you straight out that I love you with my whole heart and soul, and mean to marry you some day."

This was too startling to be contradicted, so I merely stared,—I am afraid, with my mouth open.

"I know," he continued, and his voice shook a little now, "that I am not yet worthy of your answering love, Agnes, but I mean to deserve even that, and it will be a grand incentive—it will help me to put forth all my powers, if you will just grant me one shred of hope to help me over the intervening time. . . . Nonsense! I am not going to ask—I mean to have it—I claim it! You've been in hospital long enough to understand that you have to submit in abject obedience to your superior officers, with the house-surgeon at their head. Even Matron has to obey me!"

He chuckled, and I cannot say that there was any sign of the humble suppliant about him at that moment. He had a look of radiant delight, which melted into boyish glee at sound of Matron's name.

"Well," said he, "what have you to say, Agnes?"

THE PROBATIONER

“ You haven’t left me anything to say,” I answered, finding my voice with difficulty.

“ Of course,” he continued, coming nearer, and taking my hand gently, “ you and I cannot be engaged while you are training here. That would mean the painful necessity of sending you home, because nurses are not allowed to engage themselves inside the hospital. Besides that, you and I could not get married for four or five years—I have my career to carve out, and you have your profession to learn, and I should be disappointed in you if you were willing to throw it up for the sake of a mere house-surgeon. Now, don’t argue, Agnes, all you have to do just now is to listen, and submit, because I know you better than you know yourself. I am informing you that you and I are not engaged, though we are going to be married some day. In short, I am informing you that there is no sort of difference in our relationships, except one secret golden memory of this hour which is all we can expect from the hand of Fate until the still more golden day when we can, perhaps, become engaged to be married—eh ? ”

I remained speechless.

“ This isn’t a bad spot, is it ? ” he asked, edging still nearer.

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"It is rather pretty," I granted, in a whisper.

"I mean to have a trophy of this spot," said he. "But you must choose it."

"Then I will give you a silver leaf," I replied.

"A silver leaf with a golden memory," said he, receiving the trophy, and placing it in his pocket-book. "Thanks!"

"I would like a leaf, too," said I.

He looked at me, and his face beamed. I took the leaf he chose, and put it in my purse.

"Now, Agnes," said he, "you and I are going to understand each other thoroughly. We'll have no more doubts or mistakes—or Nurse Cotterils—to divide us. We are cut out for each other, and the whole glorious future is before us, but for the short present we shall have to be very circumspect, you know! If you can trust me as I trust you, there will never be another uneasy moment between us. Do you think you can?"

"I trust you absolutely," I burst out.

He paused, to gaze at me with something like rapture in his honest face.

"All right," he said then, "so that's settled. Now we have to consider the weighty matter of our present circumstances. You are a probationer and I am house-surgeon in the same hospital. It won't do for me to show any

THE PROBATIONER

favour towards one of the nurses, or for you to invent excuses to come down to the dispensary when . . .”

I stopped him indignantly. “How could you think I should ever dream of such a thing?” I asked.

“Forgive me—receive it as a joke, Agnes. I’m a bit too happy to refrain from that reprehensible habit. So you’ll understand that you and I cannot appear more than friendly—but sometimes we shall pass each other in the corridor, or in the wards, and I hope you will occasionally send me a wireless message out of those blue eyes that can say so much without the necessity of language? Then there’s that stile—but I’m afraid you don’t like that stile?”

“I do,” I whispered.

“That’s right,” said he. “There’s a most convenient little coppice on the other side of that stile—but I’ll leave you to guess why it is so convenient. I’m not suggesting that you or I should do anything surreptitious, only, occasionally the best fighters have to retire before the enemy, and we might happen to meet accidentally now and then, when you are off duty. We shall have to be satisfied with such small crumbs of happiness, until the day when we become engaged!”

THE CONVERSATION'S CONCLUSION

I felt that these small crumbs of happiness were a sumptuous feast to contemplate.

“Do you know that it is time for you to walk back to the station?” he said, consulting his watch. “I can’t have you hurrying, Agnes—I strictly prohibit that evil habit—as your doctor, of course, since I have no right, unfortunately, to command or even admonish in any other capacity. But—some day . . . !”

I laughed. He tried to look so ferocious.

“Come,” he said, “we must say good-bye to Silver Dell.”

We stood together looking down the dell, and then Mr. Fleming raised my hand and held it a moment against his lips. He gave me no other kiss—but of course he did not, for we were not engaged.

“Do you think you’ll be able to go through your three years without faltering?” he asked, as we turned away.

“I hope so, from my heart,” I answered; “and it is such a happy heart, that there is no room for fear in it.”

“That’s right,” he answered. “I’d be disappointed in you, Agnes, if you gave up. Wait just a minute—my bicycle is round at the other side of the cottage. I’ll walk with you most of the way, but as, for the present,

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you are only a probationer—a pro, as you call it—it won't do for you to be seen by outsiders walking with the doctor!" This seemed to tickle him, and he went off for his bicycle chuckling. I heard him murmur something derogatory about pros being too uppish altogether.

When he came back, I had a question to ask him. "What if I had given up?"

"It wouldn't have been you," he answered, looking down into my eyes.

We walked together through the lane that had seemed long to me when I trod its dusty path before, but which seemed far too short now, until we reached the cross-roads, where we parted, he to ride home upon his bicycle, and I to return by rail. I stood and watched until he was lost to view, waving his cap high in the air, and then I turned away alone towards the little station of Starchley, with a heart as gay as a sunbeam, and the whole rosy future before me, no longer solitary or sad, but full of splendid work, verging towards the supreme happiness of human life.

THE END.

