

1922 - 1925

To suddenly enter a large hospital after the comforts and shelter of home must really be experienced to be believed. I really had the impression that to be a nurse, one went round beds smoothed patients' brows and crept about on tiptoe!

Alas! what a mistake one can make.

First of all, our uniforms. Remember this was 1922 not 1961. Long calico heavy dresses and hard collars and cuffs, black woollen stockings and ward shoes. I was awakened at 6 a.m. by a banging of doors and a voice shouting '6 o'clock, nurse' and all lights were turned on.

My room mate who answered to the name of 'Kipper' (very tall and thin and an extremely small face - she always wore glasses and wore her cap perched on top of her bun and kept on with a large pin!)

'Hurry and dress' said she, and I felt like someone the dressmaker had left on a dummy. My long hair done up in unaccustomed pins felt like a porcupine and on the top was perched my cap. My apron felt like a board and by the time I was pulled in and buttoned up, the 6.30 breakfast bell had gone. 'Hurry up' said my room-mate, but I was busy making my bed. House

'Oh heavens,' said Kipper 'House sister will pull all the bed clothes off when she makes her round - you must make it at lunch-time. Down we trooped to breakfast and as the newest pro, I was put at the end of a long table.

Breakfast was a nightmare as everyone was received in their order of seniority and the poor pros at the end like Oliver Twist got the bits!

When the meal was over and grace said Sister went to the door and as the newest pro was expected to get there first and open it for her, all eyes were looking towards me and I just could not think why, until Kipper gave me a kick under the table and whispered 'Open the door'. I pushed back my chair in such haste it fell over and I ran to the door - 'Never run Nurse' said Sister, 'only in case of fire or hemoerrage! However ~~some~~ sister managed to get out of the door!

So off to the wards. The day's work had begun. My first job was to do the laundry - I had never seen so many sheets, pillow cases, bed pan covers, etc. etc. in my life and all had to be marked down and checked and put into bags and taken to the lift.

Then my first bed pan round! Our bed pan covers were bright red and after a round I came and stood outside the ward door when Sister appeared like a genl from nowhere. 'What are you doing outside the ward, Nurse? Your place is inside!' So with cheeks as red as my bed pan cloth in I went!

Time flew by - dusting, bed-making, 'Always put the bedclothes on two chairs, Nurse'. Taking temperatures, meals, learning how to give medicine, doing dressings and so many things to do, listening to dear old Mrs. P. who was so deaf and always answered her own questions! However, life in a ward is hard but can be very funny too.

We used to have a yearly concert for patients and staff alike at Christmas and one year I had charge of the show. One of our nurses, a big jolly girl, used to sing and play the piano. I had asked her to perform and was responsible for her act. She told me her song was 'Tosti, Goodbye'. The night of the show imagine my horror when Nurse X - who was at least 14 stone - appeared on the stage with a small bowler hat on her head and sang 'Why did Tosti raise his hat when he said

Goodbye? As Matron and all the committee were in the front row, I was on the mat next day.

Just to let the present-day nurses realise how strictly we were trained in my young days I must relate a true story that happened to me in my hospital in 1922.

This was my first night duty as charge nurse of a women's surgical ward. We had had a great many abdominal operations the three previous days and it was the general rule to administer castor oil on the third morning after such cases.

In my rush of work and so many things to remember I gave one poor soul two doses of castor oil. I realised my mistake too late and the unfortunate patient had swallowed this castor oil twice without complaining. When the Day Sister came on duty I had to give her my report on night duty and with a sinking heart reported my dreadful mistake.

Sister, who was elderly and very understanding, just looked at me and explained how serious such a mistake could be and how my patient could have burst her stitches. She then said 'Nurse, we will make the punishment fit the crime'. I must stay on duty until 12 midday and give her every attention she needed. After being on duty since 8 p.m. the previous night I felt very tired but carried on and I am glad to say no harm was done.

Needless to say I never repeated the mistake again but today I believe the ward sister would almost lose her job if such a punishment was given to a young nurse.

Three years seems a long time to be in one hospital but time passed and one day it was over. I had my certificate and after a party - lasting all night - Oh what a party. We had a chicken and put the remains in my wellington boots until morning! The wine we drank out of tooth mugs, while a cracked old gramophone sang out "I'll be loving you, always"!

So ended my three years' training. Next day I left and went for a much-needed holiday with friends.

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I tried many times to break into the music profession after my training in hospital, but somehow everything went wrong and it seemed impossible. I wanted perfection, and without real training in a musical college it was impossible. The new Jazz was now coming into fashion but I could not somehow get used to playing in Dance Bands. I could have made plenty of money at that time but the noise of the saxophone and drums used to put me off.

I remember one incident well. It was a very hot evening and the dance hall was crowded. We started playing "Romona", but after going over it about ten times I got tired and started playing one of Chopin's waltzes. The bandleader got mad and could not make out what was wrong! He stopped the band and I went on playing. All the dancers stopped and there were cheers. Whether it was for my playing or the band I never knew. I was fired on the spot! However, I found great joy entertaining old patients I knew and used to try everyone's piano. That way I made many friends.

I have met so many interesting people during my life but surely the most erratic young man was one I met while I was training in hospital. He was an artist but the poor boy never seemed to make much money at it. His chief joy however was caricatures? and I had known his mother very well in my young days.

She was the widow of an American doctor and somehow always seemed to live in second grade digs and wore second hand clothes. Somehow all this fascinated me and I used to listen for hours while she told me my future. Strangely enough, some of it has come true. I kept a sort of friendly acquaintance with her son, Carl. He used to come to our hospital dances and always I had to lend him £1 to get his dress suit out of pawn! Then later he would sell a picture and retrieve his evening suit until next time. Poor Carl, he fell in love with a Spanish friend of mine and asked me to bring her to meet him for tea one afternoon in 'Lewis's' in Birmingham. As our letters were read in hospital I asked him to be very careful what he wrote. I will quote his postcard which arrived one morning!

"My dear Niece,

I would be delighted to entertain you and your little friend to tea on Saturday afternoon at Lewis's restaurant about 3.30 p.m. I am hoping to do some shopping as I hear the red flannelettes are ravishing. Your Uncle Ted has promised to accompany me.

Yours affectionately,

Aunt Matilda."

- Uncle Ted being presumably a young man for me as I refused to play gooseberry!

I often wonder what has become of the family. They were all so hard up but just delightful.

During my training in hospital I saw my sister a good deal. She worked in an office and lived in digs so we used to meet and talk over the old days. How we laughed when we remembered Sundays at home and Papa taking our photographs on the lawn. This was quite a ritual and we had to have early lunch and be on the lawn by 2 p.m. Father would take his camera and believe me, it was usually teatime before we had been photographed. By this time our faces were set in silly grins and poor Father could not understand why we looked such frights in the pictures!

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Those days we had very little money, so requiring a party dress one time my sister and I decided to buy a piece of material, make it ourselves and each use it when needed. That arrangement did not work out too well as we were always wanting the dress at the same time! Recently my sister came to visit me from the States where she has been living for 30 years. We remembered the dress and had a good laugh but in 1925 it was not so funny and we had many rows as to who should wear it!

Also the two boys next door. They were so handsome and our hearts used to beat when we saw them on the lawn from our bedroom window. One night we decided to have a party in our bedroom as all parents were out. There we were in our flannel nightdresses and feeling very grown up and blasé