A Nurse in Action

COLLECTION

EVELYN PRENTIS

A Nurse in Time

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A Nurse in Time

‘It must be stressed from the start that I was not a born nurse. Not every girl is. Not every nurse is either, however wholeheartedly she may throw herself into the project once she gets going. Born nurses can be easily recognised. They have a little something the others haven’t got which never seems to desert them however desperate the circumstances may become.’

Desperate circumstances were something Evelyn Prentis had to get very used to when she began her life as a nurse. It was in 1934 that Evelyn left home for the first time to enrol as a trainee at a busy Nottingham hospital in the hope of £25 a year.

A Nurse in Time is her affectionate and funny account of those days of dedication and hardship, when never-ending nightshifts, strict Sisters and permanent hunger ruled life, and joy was to be found in a late-night pass and a packet of Woodbines.

A Nurse in Action

Surprising Matron as well as herself, Evelyn Prentis managed to pass her Finals and become a staff-nurse. Encouraged, she took the brave leap of

moving from Nottingham to London – brave not least because war was about to break.

Not only did the nurses have to cope with stray bombs and influxes of patients from as far away Dunkirk, but there were also RAF men stationed nearby – which caused considerable entertainment and disappointment, and a good number of marriages...

But despite all the disruption to the hospital routine, Evelyn’s warm and compelling account of a nurse in action, shows a nurse’s life would always revolve around the comforting discomfort of porridge and rissoles, bandages and bedpans.

A Nurse in Time

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A Nurse in Time

My Life as a Trainee Nurse in the 1930s

EVELYN PRENTIS

For Elizabeth, Zoe,
Robert and Madeleine

Chapter One

IT MUST BE stressed from the start that I was not a born nurse. Not every girl is. Not every nurse is either, however wholeheartedly she may throw herself into the project once she gets going. Born nurses can be easily recognized. They have a little something the others haven't got which never seems to desert them however desperate the circumstances may become. They are to be envied.

Mothers of born nurses are just as easily picked out. They spend hours recalling the times their baby daughters sat about in corners playing at doctors and nurses, bandaging up their injured dollies and making poorly teddy bears better. I did none of these things. I never laid a bandage on a doll in my life.

The idea that I should be a nurse was entirely my mother's. It came to her one afternoon while she was in the middle of making the bread. She always made the bread on Friday afternoon. She washed, mangled and ironed on Monday, getting it all done down to the last handkerchief before she went to bed whatever the weather. If the trumpet had sounded on a Monday whoever was blowing it would have had to wait until the last bit of ironing had been folded and laid across the clothes horse to air. She did a bit to the bedrooms on Tuesday which took up most of the day.

On Wednesday she scrubbed, scoured and polished, and all with her bare hands as she masochistically boasted, every nook, plane and cranny in the house, taking in the bits that had been glossed over on Tuesday. And on Thursday, just in case anything had managed to escape her

scrubbing brush and elbow grease, she did it all over again: but this time with greater vigour because on Friday the dust was allowed to settle and the house went to rack and ruin while she got on with the baking. The baking, like the bedrooms, took up most of the day.

As well as bread, vast quantities of pies, cakes and pasties were made on Fridays. My father liked his ‘stuff’ good and wholesome, and well burnt round the edges, and that was how we usually got it. Our oven could be a bit fierce sometimes according to which way the wind was blowing and the quality of the coal we happened to be using. On the other hand if it felt out of sorts for some reason or another, the pastry could come out as pallid as it was when it went in but a good deal harder. Like many other things where we lived, baking days were fraught with hazards.

The question of my career had cropped up yet again at school that afternoon. It had occupied my headmistress on and off for a long time.

‘You will have to talk to your mother about it when you get home,’ she had said nastily, among a lot of other nasty things. ‘You must tell her that you have made up your mind to be a teacher.’ I hadn’t, she had. In spite of her brainwashing I wasn’t convinced. All I was convinced about was that she wanted me out, and fast. This was understandable, I suppose. I was already seventeen and a well-built girl. The sixth form was bulging with girls who were seventeen and well built. She was probably getting desperate for space.

Whatever her reasons, she had made her point. She had finally persuaded me that the time had come for me to tell my mother that I wanted to be a teacher and the prospect was a daunting one. Nobody told my mother anything, least of all me. ‘If there’s any telling to be done round here I’ll be the one to do it,’ was a warning I had heard too often to take lightly. I expected no enthusiasm from her over my

plans for the future and I got none. Her response was short, sharp and decisive. ‘Rubbish,’ she said and got on with the bread while I stood about nervously, waiting for more.

Just when it began to seem there was no more to come she wiped her hands on a flour bag, brushed a stray hair off her face and looked at me.

‘I’ve been giving it a bit of thought,’ she said, frowning. I don’t reckon much on the idea of you being a teacher. It costs money to go to them training colleges and money doesn’t grow on trees in this house. You’d be a lot better off being a nurse, you’d get paid right from the start and your food as well. As well as which,’ she added, turning back to the dough, ‘nursing’s more ladylike,’ and that clinched it for all of us.

Being ladylike was something my mother set great store by. She had spent a lot of time and trouble trying to turn me into a lady. That the project was doomed from the start was no fault of hers. I was simply never the right material for it. I resented the restrictions that being ladylike put upon me. I resented being robbed of so many pleasures in life. Simple pleasures like going potato picking in the holidays. All my cousins went potato picking and most of my friends as well and were able to earn themselves a tidy income at it, but my mother said it was common and kept me at home which not only got me a reputation in the village for being stuck-up but meant that I was always short of money. I was also short of excitement, and at least going potato picking might have given me more scope.

The biggest thrill we ever had in the village was when Lydia, the girl who slaved for the village schoolmistress, had sat down one night on a cracked chamber-pot and it had broken beneath her, causing indescribable and lasting injuries. Poor Lydia would never be the same again, or so I heard my mother telling my father when she got back from rendering first aid. They exchanged meaningful looks then

glanced across at me and changed the subject. The reason my mother had been sent for in a hurry was because she was the only person in the village who knew anything about first aid. She had followed the doctor and helped him with his maternity cases until she married my father and became a farmer's wife, after which she concentrated her nursing skills on rearing sick pigs and bringing premature calves and lambs into the world. Except when there was an emergency like Lydia.

When the dough that my mother was working on had become as pliant beneath her firm hand as I was, she spoke again.

'Right,' she said, giving the pallid mass a final slap, 'that's all settled then, you can go and be a nurse. As soon as we've got the sugar beet off I'll see about getting you off.' Getting the sugar beet off was of paramount importance. Next to the pigs it was our main source of income and nothing was allowed to hinder its dispatch as the factory kept us to a tight schedule. But at least it was nice to know that my future was settled, and with a minimum of fuss and bother to anyone.

My mother wiped the flour from her fingers, put a clean tea-towel over the dough and set it in front of the fire to rise. She asked for no opinions from me on the career she had so arbitrarily chosen for me and I knew better than to offer any. To this day I seldom offer opinions unless I am invited to, and even then I like to be sure they will please everybody before I offer them. This can cause a lot of confusion among my friends and among my enemies as well. None of them is ever quite sure whose side I am on.

My mother's authority over me was absolute. When she said 'No', which was often, it was loud and clear and not open to question. She never felt called upon to explain an action or defend a decision. It was enough that she had said a thing to make it law. Her method of bringing up children was simple and straightforward. It was based on a

few rules which she applied consistently and unflaggingly. Phrases like ‘Children should be seen and not heard’, ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’ and other unarguable maxims were graffiti which were daily scrawled indelibly on my mind. If ever I showed signs of rebellion, which I seldom did – knowing better – I was sharply reminded of my place in the hierarchy of the family, often with the help of the nearest blunt instrument. She never confused me with indecision and we both knew exactly where we stood, with her firmly on top, and that was the way through use that I liked things to be.

Once my mother had made up her mind that I was going to be a nurse and had weighed up the advantages, she wasted no time in worrying about any possible disadvantages there might have been. That I was in no way cut out to be a nurse was no valid reason for me not becoming one. There had to be a more tangible excuse than that and nobody could find one.

I had had a ‘good’ education, which meant that I had bluffed my way through the scholarship when I was eleven. This entitled me to go to the girls’ high school nine miles away where I spent the next six years battling to keep up with the fee-paying pupils. Academically this was not too difficult.

At the end of six years at the high school I had managed to pick up one or two of the nastier habits of the rich and enough of their accent to make me a laughing stock among my cousins and the friends of my village school days who had long since decided that I was nowt but a stuck-up thing and not worth bothering about, but I was still unable to grasp the finer points of relaxed eating which made me equally vulnerable during school dinners. These were referred to as ‘lunch’ by the rich girls. Lunch in our house was the light snack of bread and cheese, a slice or two of currant cake and a jam pasty that my father took with him when he went to work. He ate it round about ten o’clock in

the morning sitting beneath a hedge on fine days, or standing with a sack wrapped round his legs to keep the wet out if it was raining. He cut the food into manageable chunks with the same clasp knife he used for cutting up his tobacco and he drank cold tea from a stone bottle. The birds gathered round him squabbling and queue jumping over their share of the crumbs he threw down for them.

The art of relaxed eating was something my mother had never taught me. Eating was a very serious matter in our house and not something to be undertaken lightly. She was strict about manners, especially about table manners. Not only was I not allowed to talk while I was eating but the least sound to escape my lips through chewing or swallowing was rewarded with a clout, gentle or sharp depending on her prevailing mood, and a sharp reminder to watch my manners in future or there would be more where that one came from. The noise some of those fee-paying girls made while they were eating whatever it was they called it would have destroyed my mother’s faith in the ruling classes.

Being the woman she was, choosing a career for me had given my mother no more headaches than bringing me up had. Both responsibilities were shouldered with the same single-minded purposefulness. By a process of elimination, got through while she was kneading the dough, teaching would have been out from the start. The fact that my headmistress had decreed that I should be a teacher was enough, without any other consideration, to ensure that I never became one. My mother was not the sort of woman to be influenced by what others told her; she preferred to make her own decisions.

Chapter Two

WHEN THE LAST of the sugar beet had been dispatched to the factory and there was nothing more urgent to demand my mother's attentions she turned them to getting me off her hands. Once started she was fired with enthusiasm and suddenly seemed as anxious to see the back of me as my headmistress had been. She threw herself into the job of finding a place for me with all the zeal and much of the cunning of a woman launching her debutante daughter into society.

We were living on a smallholding in a remote and windswept part of Lincolnshire. Our house stood at the end of a long and permanently muddy cart-track. It was supported on one side by two blasted oak trees and on the other by an ancient monument we laughingly called a barn. Immediately next to the kitchen door was a large and odorous pigsty. There was no other habitation within sight of us and nothing to relieve the monotony of the landscape except the London Midland and Scottish railway which ran along the bottom of the garden to the detriment of the plaster on the bedroom ceilings.

Also at the bottom of the garden was the lavatory, or the closet as my father called it, though it bore no resemblance whatever to the American interpretation of the word. It was a rackety wooden building separated from the house by a rat-infested stream. If I happened to be sitting in there when a train rumbled past, the passengers and footplatemen made a point of looking across and waving to me. This courtesy had been made possible when the door

fell off its hinges. My father never seemed to get round to nailing it back on again and it stood to the end of time propping up the water butt.

‘Round the back’ as my mother liked the lavatory to be called was definitely a summer place. In the summertime purple willowherb, honesty and fresh green stinging nettles grew in rich profusion round the open doorway, forcing their way through the floor boards and into the cracks of the seat, thus making it necessary to exercise extreme caution before sitting down. But in the winter it was bleak and dreary, only to be visited in times of desperate need and after the most detailed preparations had been made for the journey. When the weather was bad we never ventured round the back unless we were suitably clad in top-coat, gloves, scarf and a woolly hat. If it was raining we wore our wellingtons and took an umbrella with us. After dark it was necessary to carry a hurricane lamp to see our way safely past the stream. One false step and we were in it up to our knees, churning the mud and sending the rats scurrying in all directions.

Inside the rackety little shack there was a seating arrangement placed conveniently above a zinc bucket. The bucket had to be emptied once a week, or twice if we had visitors or a gastric disturbance. My father always emptied it on Saturday night just before he had his bath. My mother made him bath last.

The great drawback of our lavatory was that it only accommodated one person at a time. An aunt of mine up in the village had a lavatory that could seat three people in comfort. The holes were graduated in size: small, medium and large. I never saw it filled to capacity but there was a richness about it that was lacking in ours. The woodwork was of solid mahogany and there was always a strip of coconut matting down on the floor. My mother used to call this ‘showing off’, but I liked it and thought it made the place look nice and cosy.

As well as guiding our feet past the pitfalls of the stream the hurricane lamp came in very useful for reading the small squares of newspaper that hung from the wall on a piece of string. Up to the time I left home these squares were the only bits of serious reading I ever did. Apart from my school books of course, and quick snatches of *Peg's Paper*.

In the house we relied on oil and candles for any illumination we might need and on coal for our cooking and heating. We were never short of coal. My mother was a miner's daughter and lived in fear that one day, through strikes or some other pestilence, we would wake up and find ourselves without any. Consequently, great heaps of it lay about everywhere; under the hedges, beneath the apple tree in the front garden and blocking up the entrance to the pigsty, and in the washhouse and the barn. We had no coal-house; it had fallen to pieces long before the lavatory door fell off.

The abundance of coal was only partly due to panic buying in the summer when prices were lower. In recognition of my friendly waving from the lavatory seat, the train drivers hurled massive black boulders at me which landed almost at my feet and added considerably to the stockpile. It was usually very good quality and burned the Friday baking even blacker, and made us sweat at night.

We were less fortunate with our oil supplies. The oilman only came down when he felt like it and when all the conditions were in his favour, and even then the quantity he brought was limited to the size of his cart and the willingness of his horse. His area was far-flung.

Being well acquainted with these little difficulties my mother was sparing with the lights and only lit the lamp when we could no longer see a hand in front of our face. Until then we groped about in firelight. This economy put me off the twilight hours for ever. The moment the first

shadowy finger of dusk settles in a corner I rush about turning on every available light. My electric bills are enormous. I am the one all the energy-saving comments are aimed at. I am also the one who gets all the final demand letters.

If the gloaming holds no romance for me, neither do I care much for the autumn, however full of mists and mellow fruitfulness it might be for some. It was on a night in late autumn that my mother began her onslaught of the hospitals. After supper, when she had fed the pigs, boiled the potato peelings and other little delicacies for their supper the next day, battened down the fowls for the night, drawn a bucket of water from the well to see us through till morning and put enough coal on the fire to stoke a small furnace, she settled herself at the table to write her letters. This was not the simple task it would appear to be.

Above the table there was a lamp suspended by a brass chain from a beam in the ceiling. A sudden gust of wind down the chimney or a door slammed in anger was all that it took to set the lamp swinging from side to side, or round and round if the turbulence was violent enough. When this happened the variability of light and shadow that resulted made anything of a close nature such as reading, sewing, and writing letters, full of irritating interruptions. Everything hung fire until the lamp stopped swinging and normal vision was resumed. Even then the writing area of the table lay in deep shadow, causing blots and smudges to appear unexpectedly on the carefully ruled out writing paper.

Though my mother was often driven to seek my help with the spelling of the less familiar words, the style of her letters was all her own. I can never remember being asked how to spell the word ‘truly’ so can only assume she spelt it as she spelt it in all other formal letters that she wrote. These invariably concluded with her earnest desire to remain ‘Yours Trully’. Letters to closer acquaintances and

to me when eventually I left home ended with her begging us to ‘Keep Smilling’, which never failed to make me ‘smill’.

As well as bombarding every hospital she had heard of (and many that she hadn’t), with lyrical accounts of my virtues and scholastic achievements, my mother touted for references from anybody and everybody whose name was of any consequence in the outlying district. Most of them had never set eyes on me. When her importunings were successful and they replied, enclosing their opinions of me in separate sealed envelopes, she steamed open the envelopes and read the enclosures. If there was a word or a phrase that she didn’t much care for she carefully scratched it out and put in something she thought would do me more justice, or she left the space open, probably thinking that what they didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them – or me. When it was all done to her satisfaction she sealed up the envelopes again, making frequent use of the strips of sticky paper that came round the edges of postage stamps. The finished job never quite matched up to its pristine appearance, but that was a small price to pay for the value of the adjustments she had made and their possible swinging of the polls in my favour, and it made the envelopes look more interesting.

After the letters had been written and firmly stuck down with more sticky paper it was my job to go and post them. In order to do this I had to trail up three miles of steeply winding hill before I reached the post office. The hill stood as a permanent memorial to the day I lost my faith.

When I was seven I went through a period of agonizing religious fervour which had started when God, with the help of one of my aunts, mended a bit of broken hat elastic before my mother even knew it was broken. My mother wasn’t fond of sewing. The very thought of sewing, she said, was enough to make her want to fall out with her own shadow. It was in my interest to see that she had as little sewing as possible to do. When the piece of hat elastic

snapped between my fingers while I was taking it off for the last time one Sunday evening after church I prayed almost without ceasing until the next Sunday that a miracle would happen and the elastic be made whole. In the best tradition of hymns ancient and modern, God worked in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. A few minutes before my mother was due to take the hat from its tissue paper and discover all, my aunt turned up unexpectedly. She got the hat out, noticed its plight, sewed the elastic back on and sent me happily to Sunday school. It is doubtful whether she ever knew that she had been chosen to be the handmaid of the Lord but I knew, and my faith was made as whole as the elastic until the fiasco of the hill destroyed it almost for ever.

I had prayed as earnestly for the hill to be removed as I had prayed for the hat elastic to be mended, but with less success. It continued to stand there, forming a weary barrier between my home and the village. However good faith might have been at moving mountains it had little effect on hills.

Chapter Three

THE ANSWERS TO the letters were slow at coming in. ‘It’s not a bit of use worrying about it,’ said my mother when I worried. ‘With Christmas nearly on top of them the hospitals will have more to do than sit about writing letters to the likes of us.’ She could have been right of course. On the other hand the postman may have been to blame for some of the delay.

If writing letters was something of a hardship where we lived, getting them delivered was no easy matter either. Like the oilman, the postman only came down the lane when the weather, his state of health and his current work load permitted, he being the blacksmith, the undertaker and the wheelwright as well. Delivering letters was the most exposed of his occupations and came well down in his priorities. Postcards with such trivialities as ‘Wish you were here’ scrawled across them were deciphered and laid aside on his bench with circulars and other unimportant communications until he got round to dealing with them. Telegrams had to be a matter of life and death before he would consent to abandoning a coffin lid in their favour.

Errors of identification between buff-coloured envelopes containing trivia, and buff-coloured envelopes containing things of vital importance often only came to light when an irate tradesman started dunning for his money or the sugar-beet factory was late with the cheque.

Our letters were never brought to the door; the postman flatly refused to bike up the cart-track, and a wooden box had to be nailed to a tree out in the lane for him to drop

them into. The paper boy availed himself of the box as did children delivering messages from their mother to mine. It was one of my first jobs in the morning to get at the box before marauding wildlife made confetti of the contents.

Since there was nothing that could be done about getting me off to be a nurse until the replies started coming in my mother went on with the preparations for Christmas as usual. These included making arrangements for the pig-killing.

On the day booked well in advance – he was much in demand – the butcher arrived with an assortment of well-honed knives and a length of rope. As in home midwifery my mother rushed about keeping him plenteously supplied with kettles of boiling water. I stayed in the house and kept my ears covered to protect them from the raucous squeals of the stuck pig. Living so close to us by the kitchen door, if it had been with us for a long time and I had become attached to it, the noise it made could be very upsetting for me.

For the next few days our house was full of the smell of baking and boiling, of sage and onions, thyme and parsley and fat joints of pork sizzling and crackling in the oven. Steam ran down the windows obliterating the outside world and the noise of grinding and chopping drowned all other noises.

When the fever was over, the beams in our kitchen were festooned with trailing links of glistening sausages, every dish in the house was taken up with something delicious, and on the living-room walls, between the pictures of ‘Betrothed’ and ‘Wedded’, and my uncle Jack who lost an arm in the Great War, hung the huge sides of bacon and the hams that my father had cured in the barn with lumps of saltpetre. And I came out in spots and no wonder at it. I also got fat which was not surprising either.

Meals in our house were never balanced. My mother knew nothing about balancing meals. She cooked what she

knew we liked and plenty of it, and got cross if we left any. Cholesterol, like Judgement Day, was something to be reckoned with later. And when it was too late to do anything much about it.

Because of the poor dead pig hanging from the walls our diet owed much of its bulk to bacon. For breakfast we ate several slices of boiled streaky with hard boiled eggs on the side. My father swilled the meal down with pints of black sweet tea, but I had to drink milky cocoa which often collided with the fatty bacon inside me. My mother was a great believer in milky cocoa for growing children, whichever way it made them grow. She was an authority on what was good for growing children. Once, on the farm where we used to live, she had threatened to report the waggoner's wife to the cruelty inspector for giving her children cereal and coffee for breakfast instead of boiled bacon and cocoa. My mother didn't believe in cereals. She didn't believe in coffee either. There was something a little sinful about both commodities.

Dinner was a hearty midday meal of savoury suet pudding or Yorkshire pudding served as a sort of hors d'oeuvre before the main course, followed by a stack of vegetables and meat, and for afters something like a jam roly-poly or a spotted dick. Whichever it happened to be, we ate it liberally coated with rice pudding or rich egg custard, plus an extra layer of hot jam or marmalade.

For supper, to make a change from bacon, we had boiled ham accompanied by great slabs of thickly buttered bread, two sorts of cake and Bakewell tart or a piece of apple pie to round off the meal. This left ample space for bread and cheese and cocoa before we went to bed.

To combat the spots that covered my chin my mother gave me massive doses of brimstone and treacle every Saturday night after I had had my bath.

On Saturday night a tin bath was brought in from the wash-house, a couple of kettles of boiling water were

thrown into it, the temperature brought down to a degree or two above freezing point and we dipped ourselves in and out of it as fast as we could. Like going round the back, bathing was something we did from necessity. It was never a luxury to be lingered over. In spite of the fire that expended its energies halfway up the living-room chimney, our kitchen was a very draughty place; the wind whistled through the back door and the window frames.

The reason Saturday night was chosen for our ablutions was so that we and our underwear would be without stain for the Sabbath. This weekly purification may not have been so necessary for my father, who in my memory had never set foot inside a church, but for my mother and me, who both sang in the choir, it was important that we at least set out clean. Whether we stayed clean or not during the three-mile journey depended to a large extent on whether we got a puncture somewhere along the way. Getting a puncture could ruin a good bath. It could ruin a lot of other things as well, including tempers.

Not only did my mother sing in the choir but she cleaned the church, polished its brasses, did its flowers, washed its surplices and made its vicar's life a misery. He was terrified of her. She bent him to her will whenever a decision had to be made, whether it concerned the hymns we were to sing on Sunday or where we should go on the choir outing. We always went to Skegness; my mother couldn't abide Mablethorpe or Cleethorpes.

The gentle vicar must have spent many weary hours in his study every week vetting his sermon and the hymns for words that could jeopardize their message. My mother didn't approve of words like 'bosom' so whenever we sang 'Jesu lover of my soul' she stopped singing immediately before the anatomical detail in the second line was due to crop up and resumed in full voice once the gathering waters were reached. The abrupt cessation of her powerful contralto voice brought the choir boys into direct

confrontation with their bosom fantasies and the singing became very erratic until she restored order by whacking one or two of the offenders over the head with her hymn book. ‘Bowels’ caused the same happy confusion. The vicar had to choose his Old Testament readings with extra care.

It was during choir practice that I first heard about sex. Brian Taylor gave me the details during a short interval between two psalms. He seemed well up in his subject and with one or two reservations about the vicar and my parents I believed every word he told me, but not for long.

Every week a small magazine called *Peg’s Paper* was dropped in the box down the lane. It was only after Brian had drawn aside the fig leaf enough to give me a fascinating glimpse of what lay beneath that the covers of the magazines started to interest me. The pictures on them were invariably of a young woman and a tall dark and handsome young man clutching each other from a distance of about six inches. What they were saying could only be guessed at from the agonized – passionate – rapturous or just plain stupid look on their faces. Until Brian’s startling revelations about the behaviour of adults I had never given the covers a second glance, dismissing them as soppy. But after that, it all took on a new significance for me. When I had fetched up the magazines with the *Nottingham Journal* and anything else that might have been in the box, my mother grabbed them off me and stuffed them under the cushion of her rocking chair, presumably so that my already tarnished innocence should not be corrupted further by their contents. Alas for her good intentions, I had usually read enough coming up the cart-track to whet my appetite for more. Whenever I got the chance I tucked one of them up my knicker leg and went round the back to have a quick read; either by the light of the sun or the hurricane lamp. It was when I came to the bit where the young lady, blushing rosily, was astounding her equally naive young husband with the news that a little stranger was shortly to bless

their union that it occurred to me that Brian had been having me on. When I tackled him about it later he had to admit that he also had been misinformed. For why – we asked ourselves, if the husband had done all he was supposed to have done to implant the little stranger – would he need to be warned of its impending arrival?

It was a long time before all the mysteries were unravelled for me. The few details that Brian had given me, which turned out to be surprisingly accurate, plus the bits I picked up at the back of the school bus and in the hockey shed on wet days, were all the sex education I ever got. If our mothers knew anything about such things in those days they kept it to themselves and the facts of life our teachers taught us were not nearly as interesting.

Not only did we bike to church twice on Sundays, and in the afternoon as well if there was anything worth going for, but my mother and I never missed any of the entertainments it laid on for our pleasure. These included harvest suppers, christenings, funerals, weddings and the annual village social. This was the highlight of our lives.

As well as playing games, each of us was expected to oblige with a party piece. None of us needed any encouragement to comply with this condition of entry; we would have been bitterly disappointed if we had not been asked. I recited ‘The Way through the Woods’ which never aroused much interest, and my mother sang ‘Let the Rest of the World Go By’ which did. Years later when the song got back in the charts I astonished my teenage daughters at the speed I picked up the words. I didn’t like to tell them how long it had been around and how good their grandmother was at singing it.

It was while we were playing musical chairs one evening that the baker’s daughter ran screaming into the Victory Hall to tell us that the mail train had fallen over in a nearby field. We hurried down the dark lane to where the great engine lay on its side in a ditch with pitiful indignity. The

older children among us were given the responsibility of standing on the running boards of cars belonging to the gentry, holding down quickly improvised stretchers on their way to the hospital. Others simply knelt on the railway bank and held people's hands. There were many dresses, *crêpe de Chine* and other more sophisticated ones, that would never be worn again when that night was over.

For me the accident was a foretaste of things to come. If only I had been a born nurse I might have learnt a lot of valuable lessons from it. As it was, all it did for me was give me nightmares for a long time after, which surely should have told somebody something. It didn't, and the plans for turning me into a nurse went on regardless.

Chapter Four

CHRISTMAS WAS OVER and the last of the plum puddings had been wrapped in a clean cloth and stored away for Easter Sunday before the official-looking letters started to be dropped in the box. When they did and we studied them it was soon obvious even to us that the voluntary hospitals had not been impressed by my mother's account of my virtues and scholastic achievements; neither had the repair jobs with the sticky paper nor the amendments to the testimonials done anything to influence them in my favour. In every case they had expected more than I was able to offer them. Their letters were polite but chilly; they all added up to the same thing – they didn't want me. Their rejection of me upset my mother very much. She boiled up more at every one she read. 'It just goes to show,' she grumbled furiously, 'you never can tell about some things. And after all the sacrifices we made to send you to the high school and the nice things I put about you in the vicar's letter you'd have thought they'd have jumped at you.'

She would have stormed even louder and certainly a lot longer if the salary they were offering had sounded more promising. As it was, it started at twelve pounds a year and rose in barely perceptible annual increments to reach a less than staggering climax of twenty pounds at the end of three years. Even I, unversed as I was in high finance, saw nothing enticing about it. I was later to learn that the honour of becoming a voluntary-trained nurse was supposed to be sufficient recompense in itself without the added bait of inflated salaries. This propaganda put about

by voluntary-trained nurses made them snobby with the rest of the profession for a long time.

Their proud boast was a left-over from the days when nurses worked for love or gin – never both. It was only after the Second World War, when a new Health Act paved the way for revolution in the hospital service, that the two started to merge, and even then it was a long time before people came round to believing that nurses could work for love and still enjoy a little gin on the side, or at least enough money to pay for the gin if their taste ran in that direction. Miss Nightingale undoubtedly did wonders for nursing but not so much for nurses. When she went, she left behind her an image of a winged and haloed angel who could never be tempted by anything as filthy as lucre. Nurses are still fighting to live down that image.

The letters from the municipal hospitals were much kinder to me. They were more tolerant with my shortcomings, and being state-aided could afford to be more generous with their money. They lured my mother on with dazzling offers of eighteen pounds a year to start with, rising to twenty-five on the day I became a State Registered Nurse with all its accompanying responsibilities.

‘That sounds a lot better,’ she said. ‘What with your food and washing thrown in as well.’ She read and reread the letters looking for hidden snags and it was to a municipal hospital that she finally presented me for inspection.

Throughout the interview I never once opened my mouth. I didn’t have to. My mother said all there was to be said. She answered questions and made promises in my name like a good conscientious godparent, occasionally glancing across at me as if expecting some support but never waiting long enough to get any.

I listened to what she was saying with acute embarrassment. By no stretch of the imagination could I have fitted the identikit she was drawing of me. One look at me was enough to tell anybody that I was not the unselfish