

THE COMMANDANT.

BY THE SURGEON.

She was a lady of boundless energy and a newly acquired title, and she had a husband who, having supplied the money, devoted most of his time to laborious efforts to efface himself in the triumphal march towards the distant peerage, the pace of which was being so skillfully forced by his more capable spouse.

When war broke out, she decided to run a hospital, and gave up one of her five "country seats" for the purpose. As she said, "All of my houses have marble floors, so they can easily be disinfected afterwards."

I was the surgeon—at least, I suppose I was—but before the craze for being "interested in the war" had passed off, and the hospital had therefore been closed, I came to the conclusion that I was rapidly qualifying myself mainly as an expert in the dark and devious ways of diplomacy.

Some of the incidents in the career of the hospital are sufficiently amusing to be recorded, but when the final closing down took place I felt a little out of breath, and rather as if I had been acting as referee in a North Country cup tie. I emerged much battered as to reputation, and with a plentiful increase of grey hairs.

The equipment of the place was gorgeous—in many senses. When the problem came up for solution, the third footman (it was before the days of conscription) was sent to bring up three weighty surgical catalogues which had just arrived, and the process of selection took place. This was simple, because the Commandant not only selected all the most expensive items in each section, but also ordered many of them in duplicate, or even in half-dozens, while I stood by and gasped. She even went up to Town to choose the instruments herself, and I shall never forget the arrival of what was apparently the entire contents of about three instrument makers' shops—a collection of useless ironmongery dating from the ark to the present time. Much to her regret, there was no time to have her crest engraved on the handles of the scalpels.

Then the uniforms! We had a nucleus of very capable sisters and qualified nurses, who saved the patients from destruction, and the surgeon from an untimely grave, and they flatly refused to be camouflaged in any way; but there was a long procession of "helpers"—Heaven save the mark!—each of whom did "duty" for about three hours a day—when there were no social functions to be attended

outside. As the Commandant wanted as large a "staff" as possible, and none of her numerous friends had any objection to wearing, or being photographed in, the extremely decorative uniform which she had designed for them, recruiting was not attended with any obvious difficulties.

Oh, those uniforms! They were carried out in a groundwork of some white, silky-looking stuff, with a bordering of various colours, each of which was repeated in the shoes and stockings. The principle of free ventilation was emphasized in the "blouse" part, and the skirts were exiguous. Red crosses were stuck on every available square foot of space, and the caps reminded one of a Breton "Pardon." The situation was aptly summed up by a dear old "brass hat" who inspected us one day. As I was conducting him round the wards, a sort of procession gradually formed of all the available "helpers" in the building. The great man grew more and more perplexed and fidgety, until at last he broke cover with: "If you will kindly shift that beauty chorus a little further off, we shall be able to discuss the treatment of the patients." After his tour of inspection he had to be revived with what the text-books call a "diffusible stimulant" before he could go on to the next hospital on his list.

By a process of mixing up what was, with what was not, I managed to keep the peace in a sort of triangular duel between the Commandant, the sisters, and the helpers, and to get a fair amount of work done in the intervals between entertainments for the patients and the constantly recurrent photographings of the staff, but I never knew what was coming next, or when I would be myself crushed between the upper and nether millstones of surgery and diplomacy.

The first surprise came when I arrived in the theatre just in time to begin on a "list," and found the Commandant sitting there in a uniform (devised for the purpose) resembling that worn by the fashionable contralto when she sings "The Rosary" in costume at a music-hall. She had come as a spectator of the morning's procedure! The sister managed to whisper as she was tying on my mask that it *wasn't* her fault and what *was* she to do, but she was obviously much perturbed. I am afraid that my solution of the problem was somewhat brutal. I had intended to begin with a nerve suturing, but started instead with the amputation of an especially septic leg, which resulted in hasty retreat and sounds of internal commotion in the passage outside!

For a short time at the beginning some of the numerous male staff of the house helped in

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)