

Bertie: A Sketch.

He was not an attractive child at first sight. I do not think any of the amiably-disposed lady visitors who came to see the hospital ever took a fancy to him. But, you see, he was a "run-over," and every run-over small boy has a right of way straight into the heart of a nurse. There is a charm about them, as we nurses know, but I cannot tell you whence it springs.

"Bert" was admitted one drowsy August afternoon. We heard the familiar clang of the big gate, and a convalescent patient who came in from the balcony because it was tea-time announced that an ambulance had arrived. The usual unmistakable sounds reached us from the casualty department, the ward telephone gave notice of a case, and Bertie was carried in, wailing loudly, attended by distracted relatives and ticketed with the legend: "Fract. jaw, comp. fract. humerus."

Now it would not be surprising if a small boy with such a list of ills were very mournful, and we did not expect a cessation of his cries that first evening while the pain was so bad and the process of being washed and settled in bed was so new and strange. But experience had taught us that in the accident ward weeping endures but for one night, or, at most, two. We have reason to be tremendously proud of our patients, both little and big. I believe that many a poor chap who, amid other surroundings, must have given way to depression, was encouraged to show a brave front by the cheerful philosophy of his fellow sufferers. When, therefore, several days and nights passed and Bert's pain and discomfort were reduced to a minimum, we felt hurt that he still maintained a distinctly pessimistic attitude towards nurses and patients. His hoarse and dismal cry was almost continuous while he was awake, and this, notwithstanding many efforts to make him look on the bright side of things. Toys of all sorts, pictures, yes, and pennies, most dear of all playthings to the London street boy, failed to interest him. Even Tommy ten's statement, "There's a copper coming to tyke you away if you myke such a row," did not improve matters.

After nearly a week the inevitable thaw came. Probably the admission to the next bed of Johnny, aged three, suffering from burns, helped to work the miracle. Bertie would lie for hours staring at Johnny, too interested to cry, and perhaps, also, too dignified to mingle his cries with those of a "byby." His first spontaneous remark, "Ain't 'e a little 'un!" referred to Johnny seventeen, and was delivered with the slow emphasis which marked his utterances.

The next steps in Bertie's development followed rapidly. He became interested in the other patients and the nurses, finding out everyone's name. He sang funny little bits of songs in a quiet way, and very often wore a smile. The smile completely transformed his stolid little face. The tone of his voice changed, becoming less gruff, though his laugh was for some time very strange and weird. We came to the conclusion it was because he had not been used to laughing. Before long Bert entered into the life of the ward as keenly as anyone, and became an authority on the hundred and one events that go to make up a hospital day. He might be heard on visiting days relating to his father choice scraps of news, such as: "Daddy thirteen 'ad hopperation yesterday and 'e never said nuthin', and 'e 'ad 'is breakfast this morning," or "See that bloke in 6 bed? 'E came in on Saturday night, an' 'e kept us all awyke, 'ollerin', 'e did."

We knew that Bertie's relations were pretty low in the social and moral scale; "past praying for," in the words of one who knew many things about them. "Father" had been in prison more than once. "Mother" was always unkempt, and often alcoholic. On one occasion she was so drunk and disorderly that she had to be gently and firmly removed from the ward, earning for herself from Tommy ten the *sobriquet* of "naughty lydy."

Notwithstanding "Father's" bad record, it is noteworthy that his conduct on visiting days was beyond reproach. He wore a subdued air, as of one in church, and would sit by Bert's bed, listening with rapt attention to tales of the strange things that happen in hospital.

One day we had such a run of bad accidents that some of the old patients had to be moved to another ward, and Bertie was one of those. His grief was simply harrowing. Though he did not show the sullen reserve of early days, yet he became thoroughly miserable, and his queer nature refused to accommodate itself to new surroundings in H-- Ward. He had won his place with us through much tribulation and was not going to forfeit it. Sister H----- certainly had grounds for calling him "a very difficult child." It was a relief to us all when, at the end of a week we were able to take Bert back. Now it was that he blossomed forth into a thoroughly happy and lovable boy. He did not shout, or chatter loudly, as most children do. No, he remained somewhat stolid, but with a beautiful content which was good to behold, as his deep, slow laugh was good to hear. At bedtime of the day he came back to us, he said: "It ain't 'alf alright in 'ere, Sister." And Sister agreed with the sentiment.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)