

### A STRANGE TEA PARTY.

Some months ago I was a patient in one of our large hospitals, and found the life there very interesting. It was so different from anything I had ever imagined, and was more like a busy workshop than a sick room. Precisely at 6 a.m. the lights were turned up and breakfast was served. The patients were washed, their beds made, the floor swept and polished, and everything dusted even to the wainscot behind the beds, at top speed.

At first it made me dizzy and tired to watch the nurses working. They did everything so quickly. They walked quickly, talked quickly, and they never sat down or stopped working until 8 p.m., when the lights went out and the day nurses went off duty, and as they passed through the door leading to the nurses' quarters I could hear the rush of many feet, and the laughing and talking of a hurrying crowd. They never seemed tired, they came on duty briskly, and they went off just as briskly.

One of the nurses was the daughter of Sir Walter Tregonen, who owned the whole of the village in which I lived, and many acres besides. No servant in his house worked so hard as did his daughter Nurse Janet in that hospital.

As a child I had been taught to curtsy to the Hall folk, and now here was I being washed and waited upon by one of them. Truly this is a topsy-turvy world.

My bed was so placed that I could see the entrance to the next ward. I could also see into our ward kitchen, which was really more of a serving-room than a kitchen.

One night, about 12 o'clock, I saw six men enter the opposite ward, walking very quietly and slowly in single file. The first man carried a large brown teapot, the second a milk jug, the third a basin of lump sugar, the fourth some teacups, the fifth some saucers, and the sixth carried a plate of buns. As they passed under the lamp in the corridor I could see their faces distinctly. They all looked very grave and solemn as though they were attending some religious ceremony instead of a midnight tea party, and the one who carried the teapot was the house surgeon in whose charge I was. I watched for some time to see if they would return, but grew tired and fell asleep at last without seeing them.

The next day being visiting day an old school-fellow came to see me who had once been a patient in the same hospital. I told her about the six men I had seen the previous night, and she said: "You must have dreamt it, because no men could do such a thing but the resident doctors, and they would not, as the rules here are fearfully strict. I know, because I was very friendly with one of the nurses here, and she told me that the doctors could not go into a ward except professionally, and they were not supposed to speak to the nurses except about the patients, and if one of the nurses were found speaking

to a doctor there would be a dreadful fuss. The Matron is such a dragon that I am sure no nurse would risk having a tea party in her ward, and if she did do such a silly thing they would not bring their own crockery, as there is plenty in the kitchens."

But I was sure it was no dream, and that night I watched to see if they would come again. At 12 o'clock I heard a board creak, and sure enough there they were. Like the night before, the procession was headed by Mr. Grant, who was a very powerfully built man, but this time they came into our ward. Each man walked quite three yards behind his predecessor, who carried his contribution in both hands, held straight out in front of him rather above the level of his own shoulders, which, with their very grave faces, and their slow and solemn manner of walking seemed more in keeping with some strange religious rite than a tea party. As I said before, I could see straight into the ward kitchen. I could also hear all that was said there. When the tea party arrived the night nurse was boiling some milk. She did not seem at all surprised to see them, merely remarking, "So it is my turn to-night, is it? Well, of course you know I shall have to report you to the Night Sister?" No one answered her. They did not appear to know that she was present, so she left them and they went on with their preparations.

The big man poured some boiling water into the teapot, rinsed it round carefully, then poured it down the sink. He then held it out to the man who had carried the milk jug, who took a spoon and a packet of tea out of his pocket and measured carefully six heaped teaspoons of tea into the pot. Then the big man made the tea, while the milk-jug man, who was small and dainty, took from another pocket a small cloth, which he spread upon the table; he then took the things from the other men and arranged them on the cloth. The cloth was very small and the table very large, so two of the men seated themselves on the uncovered part of the table. The little man and the big one took the only chairs, one man sat on the linseed meal tub, and the last man sat on the floor leaning in a loving manner against my big doctor. The little man poured out the tea, tipping each cup sideways so that the tea should make no noise. He had pretty hands like a girl's, but no girl of my acquaintance could pour out six big cups of tea without making a sound. They passed the one teaspoon round to each other, the last man to use it putting it on the tablecloth. In silence they ate their buns and drank the tea. Then the big man held a large basin—which always stood in the sink—close to the water tap, while the little man turned on the water, the sugar basin man produced a tea-cloth from one of his pockets, the big man washed the cups, the little man dried them and gave them to the cup-bearer, then the saucers, bun plate and milk jug. There was some milk in the jug, which the big man emptied down his own throat. At the side of the sink stood a large plate of tea leaves, which would

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)