

LONG, LONG THOUGHTS.

"Auntie! is that really you when you were a nurse? How priceless you must have looked!"

Did a shadow pass over the face of the old lady, at whom these remarks were shot?

They were sitting, the pair of them, before a roaring fire of Christmas logs examining a faded photograph.

The girl in her short probationer's uniform displayed a generous view of long slim legs in black silk stockings ending up with smart buckled shoes.

"I got up early and sneaked out so that I could wish you all the best for to-morrow and to thank you ever so much for the perfectly *marvellous* nightie. It is just what I should have chosen. How did you know? Just in time, too, for my week-end. I'm spending it with Sinclair's people—they are frightfully well off, and I don't want to look more stuffy than I am obliged!"

The older woman looked down at the bright shingled head at her knee, an expression of mingled emotions on her face—affection—amusement—could it be also envy?

"What sort of a week have you had up to now, darling?"

"Ripping, take it for all in all. Preparations, though exhausting, have their possibilities," she said, with a mischievous grin. "Do you mind if I have a cigarette, Auntie? I know it wasn't done in your young days, I can't imagine that cap and those shoes in conjunction with a cigarette. Do tell me some of your experiences, like a lamb."

Auntie looked thoughtfully into the fire. What did she read there? Two generations between herself and the girl on the hearthrug—There was a twinkle in her eyes as she brought them back to her modern young niece.

"I know, Mary, the old Nursing days seem very absurd to you young people and I'm not denying that in many ways they were, and my experiences would make you laugh, you irreverent young person."

Looking at the picture of her former self she said: "That cap amuses you. Well, it was far from a joke to we pros., for a great part of our scanty off duty was spent in quilting that prim little frill surrounding my youthful face—but the trouble didn't end there, for the cap had to be so arranged that it covered one's ears. Ears like legs had to be used but not seen."

"Auntie! What a scream."

"That neat frock was responsible for the veiling of my legs and had to be three inches on the ground. It was, of course, never intended for the knife board of a bus from which, on one unlucky occasion, I descended, to be met by Sister emerging discreetly from inside. More in sorrow than anger she requested me not to repeat this immodesty."

"Oh help! And I suppose you never dare *look* at the dressers and housemen."

"In my day they were alluded to as the 'gentlemen,' a necessary but undesirable part of the community

where it was not possible to keep pros. and the 'gentlemen' in watertight compartments."

"How deadly! Didn't you ever snatch a word with them?"

"Well," said Auntie with a reminiscent look in her eyes, "there *were*, of course, ways—if you took the risk."

"And if you were caught?"

"You were driven summarily home in a hansom cab, escorted by the matron."

"Oh, Auntie, you'll be the death of me! Are you sure you're not inventing? I'm sure they were all dying to talk to you."

The old lady's eyes became dreamy—her cosy little sitting-room faded into a long corridor dimly lit for night duty, and through the open ward door came glimpses of gay festoons and mottoes testifying to the Christmas season.

Once more she was a youthful nurse in her absurd uniform, taking instructions from the gay, debonair, H.S., striving to appear unconscious of the mischievous blue eyes that dwelt admiringly on her face. "Is that all? I must go into the ward now," she was saying in a voice that had become unsteady. "If night Sister came along—"

"She would gobble you up like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, I suppose. To-morrow—are you listening?—I am giving away the presents off the ward Christmas tree, and when it comes to your turn, Little Red Riding Hood, you watch out and don't let the Wolf see."

Now trot back to the ward, or I shall report you for neglect of duty. I have an awful cold coming on and must hie me to my bed."

Alas! she never again heard that gay, tender voice and the gift never materialised. The young H.S. lay stricken with pneumonia, and no one guessed that the little ring found in his belongings after his death was intended for the demure little night nurse in B Ward.

How many years ago?

"Auntie, have you gone to sleep? I must fly or I shall be late for duty. Promise me not to be dull to-morrow, and thank you again for the lovely nightie, darling."

Shingled head and long legs disappeared in a whirlwind and Auntie was left to her thoughts, and the thoughts of the old are like those of youth—long, long thoughts.

"All to myself I think of you,
Think of the things we used to do;
Sometimes I sigh and sometimes I smile,
But I keep each olden, golden while
All to myself."

The Christmas bells rang out proclaiming the ageless message.

Therefore be merry
Set sorrow aside,
Christ Jesus our Saviour
Was born at this tide.

"Well, nothing can change that, anyway," said Auntie, as she switched off the light. H. H.

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