

'GOD BLESS YER, NURSE!'

By Marion Roberts

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April 1951 signalled my return to the Midlands after serving as a Nursing Officer in the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps and marriage. My husband, who had been with the Army Education Corps, had obtained a teaching post at Shireland Boys School, where he later set up a Youth Club and a Scout Troop; we had found a place to live at Warley Woods and I took up my post as a District Nurse at the rather grand Edward Cheshire District Nurses Home, 2 Bearwood Road, Smethwick, diagonally opposite the Council House, under the 'beady' eye of Miss High, Superintendent, a small, slight, north-country woman who called 'a spade a spade', stood no nonsense and who ran a tight ship.

The country had still not fully recovered from the war and commodities were scarce, so one had to use one's ingenuity. As clothing still needed coupons, we were issued with our basic navy blue uniform dresses and aprons, which we laundered ourselves, and our navy baratheca caps, but no coats were forthcoming. I already had a Burberry-type raincoat which suited very well for the summer and had my khaki greatcoat dyed navy blue for use during the winter, brass buttons being replaced with a set of navy buttons from Woolworths, in Bearwood. I even dyed my brown army lace-up shoes black!

Each nurse had a bicycle, always kept stored at the back of the Home. Mine was of the 'sit-up-and-beg' variety, with a chain guard, a lamp powered by batteries, a metal carrier, on which to strap my 'bag', above the mudguard over the back wheel, a large basket attached to the handlebars, and we had to do the maintenance ourselves. I became quite adept at using an oil can, puncture repairs, brake pad replacement and properly inflated tyres!

Instead of a 'black bag' we were given a metal case with a navy blue, rain resistant cover, the inside lined with cotton, with cotton bags for dressings and equipment, which we had to wash and boil almost daily. We carried syringes, which we also had to boil between each use, stored in silver-metal lidded boxes. The Nurses Home carried gauze and cotton wool, together with bandages, which we had to wash for reuse, and we had to make our own dressings, baking them in biscuit tins in the oven which we then sealed with sticking plaster to keep the contents as sterile as it was possible to be. All this was an almost daily chore, either done before or after the day's visits. I used to make my own Vaseline gauze dressings, cutting the gauze to size, spreading the yellow jelly between the layered pieces, baking them, again in the oven and I used cod liver oil, either liquid or as an ointment to heal varicose ulcers or bedsore. We also carried a good supply of newspaper to use as a covering for tables, chairs and floors. The Home carried inflatable rubber rings, rubber tubing and pieces of red mackintosh to protect mattresses but other accessories were in short supply. It was a case of 'when in doubt (or where there was a shortage of the necessities), improvise!'

My district was from Cape Hill to Rolfe Street, and I can still recall the bustle, the noise from traffic, engineering works and the railway and the smell from Mitchells and Butlers on brewing day. I also discovered that parts of my district were extremely poor in every respect: poor people, poor quality of life, very poor housing, often with a bleak outlook, (the tunnel-back houses in Unett and Wills Streets and the high, forbidding, brick wall of Guest, Keen & Nettlefold at the bottom of those streets remain in my mind, together with the harsh industrial area around Cranford Street), and little or no prospects. These people had known deprivation before the war and now knew even more, many suffering in the aftermath with little or no money, clothing, household goods or facilities and yet there was a tremendous

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spirit of hopefulness among all those I met. What I also discovered was that on nearly every street and corner was either a ‘huckster’s’ shop, which sold everything from Aspro tablets to packets of tea and just how many ale or public houses there were, some very grand – ‘The Blue Gates’ and the ‘Red Cow’ come to mind, none short of a customer!

District Nursing, I also discovered, was, and still is, a totally different way of caring for the sick, as one goes into individual homes by ‘invitation’, becoming almost an ‘honorary member’ of the family, allowed to listen to all their cares and worries, their joys and sadness, helping where I could to make life better, even in a small way. These were proud people who struggled to keep homes together, but often I had to teach both patients and relatives the basic rules of hygiene and nutrition, not always an easy task when faced with such deprivation. Many cases were incurable: arthritis, either rheumatoid or osteo, chronic chest conditions, including tuberculosis, senility and strokes, which families dealt with in the best way they could and because of these conditions, my basket would often contain pieces of sheeting, towelling, soap, (it was still in short supply, so it was often pieces of Fairy or Sunlight and occasionally Palmolive, that I could beg borrow or steal from friends) and second-hand clothing again from the same sources. In some houses there was a poor water supply, so I often had to get a bucketful from a nearby neighbour, or I would use the water from a previous night’s hot water bottle, reboiled in a saucepan over a small fire, to wash a patient.

Because of the nature of the condition, diabetic patients always took priority on the round as they had to have their Insulin injections before breakfast. I had two such cases on Raglan Road; one, a large man, a former Mayor of Smethwick as I was continually told, who always sat stiffly, by the table in the living room dressed in his dark trousers, Union shirt with a white stiff collar and tie, waistcoat with watch chain, sleeve rolled up, ready and waiting, while his wife stood by, never saying a word, at least, not to me. The other, a delightful little woman, who always had a brew of tea ready, which I had to share, along with her Cocker Spaniel, whose ears always had to be tucked into its collar before it was allowed its dish of tea. Names do not come easily after all these years, but some of the people will always stay in my heart and mind. Nearby, I remember a poor woman, a tiny little soul, totally incapacitated by a stroke, being, or so I had been informed, ‘cared for’ by another woman who would spend the night with her, and whom I often found drunk in a chair by the fireplace where the fire had been allowed to go out. I often wondered at the ‘smell’, apart from that of stale urine, which always assailed my nostrils when I opened the back door. One morning I discovered what it was. Having woken up the ‘carer’, giving her money to put into the gas meter so as to have hot water for bed-bathing, I turned back the bedclothes to discover that my patient was covered in bedbugs! Replacing the bedclothes, I pedalled quickly, up the road to Dr. Hamilton’s surgery, where I gave him the news. Wasting no time, he organised a bed and an ambulance to get her admitted to hospital and the local authority moved in to fumigate the houses as the offending creatures were in cracks in the walls and behind the wallpaper! That was my first meeting with the good doctor, who became a friend and helpmeet with the many problems which surfaced in the area.

Among those I remember well were a Mrs. Kimberley, a big woman with doll-like features, crippled from an arthritic spine, but always with a smile, who suffered painful varicose ulcers on both legs and who always insisted, after my twice-weekly ministrations were done, that I partake of a cup of tea with tinned milk and a bun, which she kept on a saucer, under a basin, and which she would proudly uncover with a cry of ‘There! That should keep yer goin’ for a bit!’; and a pale shrunken man, with a severe chest condition, who did not speak very much and who lived alone in the next street in a dark, very damp kitchen by a black-leaded range and its small fire, its one window still covered with the criss-crossed sticky y

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tape used as a precaution against flying glass from bombing during the war. All he seemed to have was an old, wooden armchair, a deal table and a pegged rug on the broken-tiled floor, some bits of domestic necessities and a truckle bed in the corner, but he still proudly wore his bar of medals from the first World War on his chest and always insisted that I pin them back onto his clothing after I had bathed him. I often wondered if he wore them to bed, but I never asked and he was to die a short time later in hospital.

Horses intruded into my nursing life during this period. One, harnessed to a milkman's cart, standing quietly by the kerb, suddenly, as I walked towards a garden gate to make a visit, came across the pavement, dragging the cart and fastened its teeth on the shoulder padding of my greatcoat, tearing the stitching. My shouts brought the milkman running, berating his animal in the richest language I had ever heard, pulling it away and apologising for what had happened, totally at a loss to explain what his 'oss' had done. 'Quiet bugger 'e is as a rule and yo' such an angel an' all!' My other encounter of the equine variety was when I was asked to take over a case from one of the midwives. The mother, recently delivered was running a temperature, so she could not continue to visit. The house was one of a row of Victorian villas. There was no response to my knock so I tried the door, which was unlocked. Once inside, I called out loudly, but there was no response, so I decided to try the rooms and got a shock. In the front room was a tethered horse! I retreated quickly. Each room I tried, nothing, until I got to the middle room upstairs. Calling out again, I got a reply 'In 'ere, love!' Opening the door, I was greeted by two Alsatian dogs which had been lying on the bed occupied by the mother and found a cat was sleeping on the blanket covering the baby, whose 'cradle' was a drawer! It took several minutes to get the animals into other rooms before I could even assess the situation, much less deal with mother and child! My report to my supervisor later that day that the husband was a rag and bone man who stabled his horses inside 'for safe keeping' brought raised eyebrows, some gasps of disbelief and an assurance that the authorities would move in straight away.

In another Victorian house I came across two sisters, spinsters, who had seen better days as teachers, now in their eighties, living in mould-ridden gentility. Their home had once been well furnished and proud, but senility had made them forget their surroundings, that they had to feed themselves and wash and they did not appear to see what was happening to them. Miss Florence, the elder sister, with a breast cancer, wore a blue sash across her chest together with a large brooch, a 'decoration', which she said that the King had given her and a big hat with a feather. Her sister, Miss Frances, with severe septic toenails, doodled continually on sheets of paper. These, she insisted, were her 'memoirs'. I discovered they had no family left, only a little money, which they kept in a biscuit tin under the bed, and only went out if it was absolutely necessary. The situation was beyond what I could do, so I went immediately to a telephone, and we managed to get these two poor souls the care that they desperately needed. Social Services were in their infancy at this time, just beginning to get together the resources needed to help the sick poor and bewildered souls such as these. Meals on Wheels were in their infancy, too, but an improvement in people's lives was starting to dawn.

Victoria Park was a green oasis for me and I always tried to make my way back to the Nurses Home along its paths each day. A short rest on one of its seats helped me clear my lungs and mind, putting into perspective the concern I felt for the proud people who lived in my district. Stoic, outspoken but steadfast and often funny, I loved them all.

District Nursing though, didn't always finish at 5pm, occasionally when a patient was dying, I had to return to the house at night in order to make the patient comfortable and to give the morphine needed to ease those last hours. We often saw the patient right through

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until the very end and relatives were always ready to help where they could, grateful for our presence, often offering a gift which they could ill afford.

I was privileged to have 'gifts' given to me twice a week! Every Tuesday, the lodge-man from Scribbans, on the corner of Suffrage Street, would be outside with a bag of cake and biscuits, and each Friday, one of the staff from Marsh & Baxter, pork butchers, would be on hand to present me with a pound of pork sausages and bacon as I came past the store on Cape Hill. I have never forgotten their 'God bless yer, Nurse' as I took their kind offerings. Dewhurst's and George Mason's always saw me 'all right' at the weekend, too, when I presented my shopping lists.

Under Miss High's leadership, the nursing team made great improvements in patient care and new drugs and treatments were starting to improve the health of the people of Smethwick. We had Sulphonamides at first, to use against infections, Penicillin injections took over and the first drugs against tuberculosis: PAS, and Streptomycin became available, as many patients suffering from this disease were nursed at home.

Miss High was much saddened when I told her two years later that I was leaving; my husband had secured a new post and was returning to his native Wales. I was also saddened to be leaving a place I had come to love. Names of many individuals may have gone from my memory after these 57 years but their 'individuality' and that phrase 'God Bless Yer, Nurse!' remains and reminds me of an indomitable spirit which I hope still exists today.



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