

When I was in Plaster

By

Gurdeep Dhindsa

"The treatment of Spinal Caries these days," the sister-tutor was speaking to a class of student nurses, "is comparatively easy. The patient has just to lie in a plaster bed for a varying period—may be up to two years or more. It is mostly the poor nurses who have to suffer, more than the patient, in looking after him—attending to their backs, looking after their feeding and the all important urges of nature...and...and..."

I was lying in my plaster bed half asleep. It was a July day—the sick room was as hot as an oven,—the wind nothing but a furnace blast. My bed was under the fan which was whirling at top speed and yet I could



Gurdeep Dhindsa

not sleep. It was too hot to sleep. I was awake, and my imagination carried me back to the lecture room where the sister-tutor taught me the treatment and nursing care of Caries of the spine, three years ago. I smiled when I remembered, "A patient has just to lie"—as if lying was something equal to doing nothing.

Of all people ask me! I entered the blessed sick room attached to the Family Wards, V.J. Hospital,

Amritsar, one fine morning to remain there, but for how long...Who knows? As I was being taken up the stairs to my room, I felt as if I was leaving the world below and going to a world entirely new. At the time, I did not realise what all this might mean. The words of my sister-tutor gave me courage—"the patient has just to lie".

Soon, however, the truth flashed across my mind. It was the beginning of November, when I entered the fated plaster bed—that was to remain with me for fourteen months. My friends came and talked of their programmes, their changing duties, their non-stop accounts of experiences, but I was there 'just to lie'—heaving sighs and feeling the oppression from above, though the weight was underneath. I would dream of my uniforms, my duties and my activities—I would find myself working day and night serving patients, looking after their needs, getting work out of my juniors, obeying my seniors—and as I would smile and try to make a move, the plaster bed would give me a firm grip—reminding me that I was not to move but, 'just to lie'.

My friends would come and talk of the full moon, new songs, the social functions, Diwali, Christmas and all the fun they were having but I—away from the halla-hoo and the joyous shouts—was in my sick room 'just lying'—marking the days on the calender and telling myself—"Don't worry, there goes another day into eternity."

I started reading novels—then I began devouring them—and finally got tired and left them alone. But my Ferguson Radio remained my friend throughout, giving me the melodious tunes from films which I could not go to see; or news of places

I could not visit, of people I could not meet.

The winter came with all its chill but my companion was my plaster bed—if it was very cold outside it would get cold—no amount of the heating of the room, with the small heater I had, could make any appreciable difference. The quilt lost its old proven charm and warmth it was supposed to have. It was cosy—but I could not enjoy the cosiness, it was warm—but I could not appreciate it. I felt cold—cold to the bones.

Lying in the room day in and day out, I could tell you that in the windows there were twenty-two panes of glass, the mango tree in front of my window blossomed twice and twice it bore fruit. The kite living there came back to the nest four times a day and in all one hundred and thirteen birds flew past my window. But the obsession of 'lying' made me weary of all that and I came to myself—to seek pleasure within me—novels, religious books, records, gossiping—everything having failed.

I made my friends bring shoes for me—for I hoped to wear them when I got well and could walk. I got the latest cut-pieces and shirt pieces to remain 'in touch'—all in the hope of coming back to the place I belonged to—to the world below and to my world—back from the semi-celestial position as it were, up-stairs.

The summer came, bringing another present, the sweat. The scorching heat would make me perspire, and my plaster bed too; the heat made us both hot. I would sweat, sweat and sweat. At times I thought that it was an attempt on the part of my body to wash the plaster away. Next came the prickly heat with all the scratching in it. How I felt—only I know. As I scratched, I would shout '*Is it just lying?*'

It was a great trial to watch my own B.S.R. week after week. One cannot imagine how a few millimeter could matter to me. A slight fall meant a step further to getting well, getting up and walking. Oh! how I wish I could walk. I would often think that I would give anything that would allow me to walk. And, finally when I tried to walk, I could not. My muscles just would not obey me—I *had forgotten how to walk*. I could not sleep when my plaster was removed, for I could not feel that reassuring touch, the blissful support of my plaster bed. It had really become a part of my physical self.

I was operated upon finally and then one day the X-ray revealed that the bone graft had taken well. I was made to sit up. I was brought out of my room after a year and a quarter. It was full moon. Everything looked so unreal, so strange. I thought it was a pleasant dream that would soon fade and I wanted to imbibe as much of the moonlight as possible in that small period. I was afraid lest I should wake up and the dream vanish. But it was a wonderful reality for I was really out in the moonlight. I wanted to shout to the world from the house tops that I had come back—I had come back. My joy was limitless.

In all this period whether I was battling with my plaster, or fighting with death after my operation, or laughing and sitting in the garden, my sister nurses helped me, and shared with me my miseries, my plights, my sufferings and joys. At least there the sister-tutor was correct, "the poor nurses have to suffer more—at times more than even the patient himself—in looking after them, attending to their basks, looking after their feeding and the all important urges of nature...and...and..."