

A FAITHFUL NURSE

A short story by Mr. ALFRED BAKSH, R.N. (Punjab)

Some time ago there was a girl called Zihri, about 16 years of age, who was the youngest daughter of her parents. She had one sister, who was married to an engineer, working far away in a foreign country. Her parents were killed in an automobile accident. Not a relative did she have, except her sister, from whom she had not heard for years, and she did not know whether she was dead or alive.

After the double funeral had been paid for, out of her father's meagre insurance, there was a little over a thousand rupees left. This Mr. Cecil, her father's best friend, who was appointed guardian by the Court, put in the bank to be kept for the time when she hoped to take her nurse's training in Delhi.

Mr. Cecil could advise her to do this or that, but he had not the means to help her financially. He could, and did, find homes where she worked for board, room and small wages, in order to continue her schooling, but she passed many harrowing and sorrowful days, such days from which there is no escape when one is helpless; but, at last, the longed-for time arrived when she wore the coveted cap and apron of the student nurse. Happy! how happy she was! She did not care if the work was hard or the hours long. She just worked hard and dreamt of the day when she would be a graduate nurse. She did well. She was trustworthy, dependable and faithful. Therefore, owing to shortage of nurses at the time, she was alone on night duty when the fire broke out at two o'clock.

She had charge of thirteen babies and children in the children's ward, which was on the third storey. Everything was so peaceful and quiet, as serene as a sleeping babe in its mother's arms. Only a gentle breeze rustled in the leaves of the tall trees near, like soft sweet music. Nurse Zohri was sitting in her duty room studying the day nurse's report of her little charges. Suddenly she heard people shouting, "Fire! Fire! Fire!" Shrill screams; whistles; shouting; frightened cries fairly splitting the air; running; the crackle of burning wood; smoke everywhere; her little patients crying pitifully, all screaming at once, "Nurse Zohri, Nurse Zohri." There were thirteen small children, all under twelve. She thought only of her duty to the children; thoughts tore through her mind with lightning rapidity. She rushed to the door, and the black rolling smoke drove her back. Slamming it shut, she braced herself against it, as if her slender body could hold out the burning inferno. With a strong determination, throwing herself into the jaws of death, she hurried into the ward again, shouting above the frightened cries of the babies, "Be quiet. Nurse Zohri will save you. Just be quiet. Do as I tell you."

Then she ran to the window and looked down three storeys. Several firemen were raising a ladder. She shouted frantically, screaming orders and waving her arms. They finally saw her and understood, and after a few minutes she saw them spreading a huge net. She ran to the beds and grabbed up one child after another

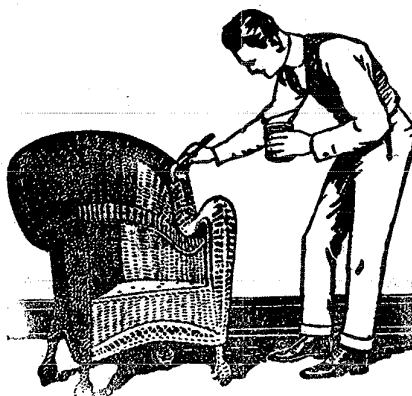
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and carried it to the window. She had a prayer in her heart as she dropped them into the sheet. She did not dare to wait and see whether they landed safely. She saw, at each successive trip, the flames leaping higher from the windows below. The heat scorched her face and arms and hands, but she kept up her determination that the children must be saved, every one. She tore backwards and forwards, and kept counting as she dropped them, one, two, three, up to twelve. The smoke was then so thick that she got suffocated and choked. Great tongues of flame began pushing through the floor. She had no idea where the other child was, or who it could be, but she was determined to save it, even if it meant giving her life. Suddenly she heard a weak, choked cry from the far corner of the ward. It was little Lionel. Choking, stumbling, fighting her way through the fire, she got there. Only a Higher Power could have guided her to him. Snatching him up, blankets and all, somehow she got back to the window. The blazing flames were coming up from the windows below, and the smoke nearly blinded her. She could not see the net, but she must take the only chance. She did not dare to drop poor Lionel, as he was so little and his leg was in a cast. She prepared to jump with him in her arms. Hesitation was a waste of time, so with great courage and determination she jumped along with the child, through the blazing fire. Before she landed, her uniform was on fire and her hair was terribly burnt.

After that she did not know what happened, until days later, when she found herself in a hospital bed swathed in bandages, in such agony that she longed and prayed for death, which seemed preferable to those days of agony when the doctor used to do her dressings.

When she recovered she was presented with a gold medal by the Governor for her heroism. This was poor compensation for the loss of her pretty hair, rose-pink cheeks and hazel eyes, which used to dance with the sheer joy of living. She bore the same name, but her face was scarred out of all recognition, and her arms and hands were as bad or worse. Her hair never grew again, and great was her grief when first she looked in the mirror and saw her scarred face and bulging eyes.

When she was fit for duty, she resumed her training, but two weeks proved that she could not continue it. Whenever she went near the patients they covered themselves in bed for fear of seeing her ugly face, and even the children, who had not wanted her to be away from them some time before, and whom she had saved almost at the price of her own life, cried out, "Go away; go away." Sadly she went and told this to her Matron, who advised her to give up nursing. Every member of the staff had great sympathy with her, but they could not help her, so the doctor in charge very kindly appointed her as her private secretary. She worked with her for some time, but alas! her terrible experiences had made her physically weak; therefore she contracted pneumonia and died, remembering her little patient, Lionel, to the last.
