

In the Holidays, F. Scott Fitzgerald

The hospital was thinly populated, for many convalescents had taken risks to get home for the holidays and prospective patients were gritting their teeth until vacation was over. In the private ward one interne took on the duties of three, and six nurses the duties of a dozen. After New Year's it would be different—just now the corridors were long and lonely.

Young Dr. Kamp came into the room of Mr. McKenna, who was not very ill, and snatched rest in the easy chair.

"How's back feel?" he asked.

"Better, Doc. I thought I'd get up and dress tomorrow."

"All right—if you haven't any fever. The X-ray plates didn't show a thing."

"I've got to be out of here day after tomorrow."

"When you get home you better see your own doctor, though I never have felt you were seriously ill—in spite of the pain. We've got a patient downstairs with a dizzy head that we can't find a thing the matter with—there's probably faulty elimination of some kind, but he came through every test sound as a dollar."

"What's his name?" McKenna asked.

"Griffin. So you see sometimes there just isn't any diagnosis to be made. Say, were you in the war?"

"Me? No, I was too young."

"Did you ever get shot?"

"No."

"That's funny—the X-ray showed a couple of things that looked like slugs in your buttocks."

"Oh, that was a hunting accident," said McKenna.

When the doctor left the nurse came in—she was the wrong one, not the beautiful little student nurse, dark and rosy, with eyes as soft as blue oil. Miss Hunter was plain and talked about the man she was marrying next month.

"That's why I'm here on New Year's Eve. We need the money and a girl gave me five dollars to take her place over the holidays. I can't see him but I write him a whole book every night."

"It certainly is some life in here," said McKenna. "The food makes me sick."

"Aren't you ashamed—it's better than we get. You ought to see that little student nurse go for the dessert you left today."

He brightened momentarily.

"The pretty one?" Maybe this was an angle.

"Miss Collins." She proffered him a vile liquid. "You can drink her health with this cocktail."

"Oh, skip it. This doctor thinks I'm just bluffing—me and some other fellow that's dizzy in the head. Name's Griffin—do you take care of him?"

"He's down on the first floor."

"What does he look like?"

"Well, he wears glasses, about your age."

"Is he handsome like me?"

"He's very pale and he's got a big bald place in his mustache. What's the use of having a mustache if you have a bald place in it?"

He shifted in bed restlessly.

"I think I'd sleep better if I got up for awhile—just around the corridors. I could get a paper in the office and all that."

"I'll ask the doctor."

Without waiting for permission McKenna got up and dressed. He was tying his tie when the nurse returned.

"All right," Miss Hunter said, "but come back soon and wear your overcoat. The corridors are cold. And would you please drop this letter in the box for me?"

McKenna went out and downstairs and through many halls to the main office. He stopped at the registry desk and asked a question, afterwards writing down something on the back of an envelope.

Out in the damp, snowless night he inquired the way to a drugstore; he went directly to the phone booth and closeted himself for some minutes. Then he bought a movie magazine and a hip flask of port, and asked for a glass at the fountain.

All around the hospital the streets were quiet and the houses, largely occupied by medical people, were dark and deserted. Across the street the dark fortress of the hospital was blocked out against a pink blur in the downtown sky. There was a mailbox on the corner and after a moment he took out the nurse's letter, tore it slowly into four pieces, and dropped it in the slot. Then he began thinking of the little student nurse, Miss Collins. He had a vague idea about Miss Collins. She had told him yesterday that she was sure to be flunked from her class in February. Why? Because she had stayed out too late with boy friends. Now, if that wasn't a sort of come-on—especially when she added that she wasn't going back to the old homestead and had no plans at all. Tomorrow McKenna was leaving town but in a couple of weeks he could ride down again and keep her out late in a big way, and if he liked her get her some clothes and set her up in Jersey City where he owned an apartment house. She was the double for a girl he once went with at Ohio State.

He looked at his watch—an hour and a half till midnight. Save for several occasions when he had been deterred for reasons contingent on his profession, all his New Year's were opaque memories of whoopee. He never made resolves or thought of the past with nostalgia or regret—he was joyless and fearless, one of the stillborn who manage to use death as a mainspring. When he caused suffering it made his neck swell and glow and yet he had a feeling for it that was akin to sympathy. "Does it hurt, fella?" he had asked once. "Where does it hurt most? Cheer up—you're almost out."

McKenna had intended to leave the hospital before the thing came off, but the interne and nurse had only just spilled what he wanted to know into his lap and it was too late at night to leave without attracting attention. He crossed the street in order to re-enter the hospital by the door of the dispensary.

On the sidewalk a man and a woman, young and poorly dressed, stood hesitating.

"Say, mister," the man said, "can you tell us something—if doctors look to see what's wrong with you is it free? Somebody told me they sting you."

McKenna paused in the doorway and regarded them—the woman watched him breathlessly.

"Sure they sting you," McKenna said. "They charge you twenty bucks or they take it out on your hide."

He went on in, past the screen door of the dispensary, past the entrance to the surgical unit where men made repairs that would not wait for the year to turn, past the children's clinic where a single sharp cry of distress came through an open door, past the psychiatric wards, exuding a haunted darkness. A group of probationers in street clothes chattered by him, an orderly with a wheel chair, an old Negress leaning on a grizzled man, a young woman weeping between a doctor and a nurse. Through all that life, protesting but clinging, through all that hope of a better year, moved McKenna, the murderer, looking straight ahead lest they see death in his eyes.

In his room he rang for the nurse, had a quick drink and rang again. This time it was Miss Collins.

"It took you long enough," he said. "Say, I don't think I'll go to bed yet. It's so near twelve I think I'll stay up and see the New Year in and all that stuff; maybe go out on the porch and hear the noise."

"I suppose it's all right."

"You'll stick with me, won't you? Want a little port wine?"

Miss Collins wouldn't dare do that but she'd be back presently. She was the prettiest twitch he had seen in a year.

After another glass of port he felt a growing excitement. He pictured "Mr. Griffin" on the floor below, feeling so hidden and secure, possibly asleep. He pictured Oaky and Flute Cuneo and Vandervere strapping on the arsenal; he wished he could be in on the finish but that was no play for a front man.

At a quarter of twelve Miss Collins came back and they went down the corridor to a glassed-in porch overlooking the city.

"I'm afraid this is my last New Year's here," she said.

"What do your care—you've got too much on the ball to go around washing mummies."

At a minute before twelve a din started—first thin and far away, then rolling toward the hospital, a discord of whistles, bells, firecrackers and shots. Once, after a few minutes, McKenna thought he heard the pump sound of a silencer, once and again, but he could not be sure. From time to time Miss Collins darted in to the desk to see if there was a call for her, and each time he kept carefully in her sight.

After fifteen minutes the cacophony died away.

"My back hurts," McKenna said. "I wish you'd help me off with my clothes and then rub me."

"Certainly."

On the way to his room he listened carefully for the sounds of commotion but there was nothing. Therefore, barring the unforeseen, all had gone off as planned—the State of New York's intended witness was now with his fathers.

She bent over the bed, rubbing his back with alcohol.

"Sit down," he ordered. "Just sit on the bed."

He had almost finished the flask of port and he felt fine. There were worse ways to spend New Year's—a job all mopped up, the good warming wine and a swell girl to rub his back.

"You certainly are something to look at."

Two minutes later she tugged his hand from her rumped belt.

"You're crazy," she exclaimed, panting.

"Oh, don't get sore. I thought you kind of liked me."

"Liked you! You! Why, your room smells like a dog's room. I hate to touch you!"

Then was a small knock and the night superintendent called Miss Collins who went into the hall, hastily smoothing her apron. McKenna got out of bed, tiptoed to the door and listened—in a minute he heard Miss Collins' voice:

"But I don't know how to do it, Miss Gleason... You say the patient was shot..."

And then the other nurse:

"...then you simply tie the hands and feet together and..." McKenna got back into bed cautiously.

"Last rites for Mr. Griffin," he thought. "That's fine. It'll take her mind off being sore."

He had decided to leave next afternoon, when the winter dusk was closing down outside. The interne was uncertain and called the resident, just back from vacation. The latter came in after lunch when the orderly was helping McKenna pack.

"Don't you want to see your doctor tomorrow?" he asked.

He was big and informal, more competent-looking than the interne.

"He's just a doctor I got at the hotel. He doesn't know anything about it."

"Well, we've got one more test to hear from."

"I haven't got any fever," said McKenna. "It must have been just a false alarm."

The resident yawned.

"Excuse me," he said—"they called me at two o'clock last night."

"Somebody die?"

The resident nodded.

"Very suddenly. Somebody shot and killed a patient on the floor below."

"Go on! You're not safe anywhere now, are you?"

"Seems not."

McKenna rang the bell at the head of the bed.

"I can't find my hat, and none of those nurses have been in here all day—only the maid." He turned to the orderly. "Go find a nurse and see if they know where my hat is."

"And oh—" the resident added, "tell them if they have that test ready to send it in."

"What test?" McKenna asked.

"Just a routine business. Just a part of your body."

"What part?"

"It ought to be here now. It's hard to get these laboratory tests on a holiday."

Miss Hunter's face appeared in the doorway but she did not look toward McKenna.

"The message came," she said. "It was just to tell you that the test was positive. And to give you this paper."

The resident read it with interest.

"What is it?" demanded McKenna. "Say, I haven't got—"

"You haven't got anything," said the resident, "—not even a leg to stand on. In fact, I'd be sorry for you—if you hadn't torn up that nurse's letter."

"What nurse's letter?"

"The one the postman put together and brought in this morning."

"I don't know anything about it."

"We do. You left your finger prints on it—and they seem to belong to a man named Joe Kinney who got three slugs in his bottom in New York last June."

"You got nothing on me—what do you think you are, a tec?"

"That's just what I am. And I know now that you work out of Jersey City and so did Griffin."

"I was with Miss Collins when that happened."

"What time?"

Catching his mistake McKenna hesitated.

"I was with her all evening—till one o'clock."

"Miss Collins says she left you after five minutes because you got tough with her. Say, why did you have to pick a hospital? These girls have work to do—they can't play with animals."

"You got nothing at all on me—not even a gun."

"Maybe you'll wish you had one when I get done with you down at the station. Miss Hunter and I are engaged to be married and that letter was to me."

By nightfall the hospital showed signs of increasing life—the doctors and nurses back early to go to work in the morning, and casualties of riot and diet, victims of colds, aches and infections saved since Christmas. Even the recently vacated beds of Messrs. Griffin and McKenna would be occupied by tomorrow. Both of them had better have celebrated the holidays outside.

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