

Santa's Accident

Two Christmas stockings hung at the end of the bed, one for my little sister and one for me. The stockings bulged with various interesting shapes and a tangerine and some nuts filled each toe. On the floor beside each stocking was another parcel wrapped in Christmas paper.

Probably hearing our excited chatter, our parents came into our bedroom, pulling their dressing gowns around them and yawning – it was still early. My sister Elizabeth, who is five years younger than me, was probably about 3 at this time. Her extra parcel was about the size of a sliced loaf and after tearing off the paper she opened a box to find a mother duck and 4 or 5 ducklings on wheels, all made of painted wood and joined together with a cord so that she could pull the duck family along behind her as she toddled about. She squealed with delight crying out “Oh Super” and set off for the landing. The duck family trundled noisily behind her, thus waking our grandparents, in whose house we were staying.

I meanwhile, tore the paper off my extra present to find a shallow box about the size of a broadsheet newspaper. Inside, carefully folded and protected by layers of tissue paper lay a nurse's uniform. It was made of white cotton, an apron with a red cross sewn onto the bib, a little white hat with another red cross, and 2 white cuffs. This had all been made by our Mum, who was a skilled needlewoman and who made a lot of our clothes, so the uniform fitted perfectly! I couldn't help noticing a faint perfume on the uniform – one which I had smelt before somewhere.....

During our stay that Christmas various dolls and other toys were all “treated” by Nurse Rees in her new uniform. Bandages were applied to unsuspecting relatives and pulses taken many times. On one occasion a Great Uncle called to say hello and catch up with his brother (my Grampie). Naturally I asked him if he was feeling well or if he needed any medical help? While I was bandaging one of his fingers I told him about the perfume on the uniform. Uncle Bill was quite a story teller and had many tales to tell whenever we saw him. He said “Didn't you hear about what happened to Father Christmas in Bideford on Christmas Eve?”

“No” I said, my eyes wide with astonishment that anything could happen to the dear old gentleman. “Please tell me what happened.”

Uncle Bill then proceeded to tell us all that Father Christmas was doing his usual delivery to a farm just outside Bideford when his sleigh collided with a tractor in one of many narrow lanes that lead to farms in that area. As a result some of the presents on the sleigh were tipped over and a box, containing 17 bottles of scent was broken and the perfume spilt. “That’s probably why your new uniform smell of scent” he said. As an innocent 8 year old I swallowed this story completely and never again questioned why my uniform was unusually fragrant.

The truth was probably not nearly so interesting or imaginative and I never discovered exactly what it was. Looking back however, I think it likely that the fabric that Mum had used to make my nurse’s uniform had been stored in a chest of drawers along with a bottle of the Eau de Cologne which she sometimes wore, and that the bottle had leaked.

This story was absorbed into our collection of family stories and as it had been told with such imagination and indeed kindness by Uncle Bill, I have never forgotten it.

Jan Rees December 2020