

Chapter IX: St Martin's nursing home; father's friends

I think it was some time in 1919-20 that one of the larger corner houses, or perhaps one should say villas, in Clarence Square (called St Martin's) was taken over by some Services Department and a wooden building added in the large garden. It was staffed by VADs under the command of Commander Younge. In appearance Miss Younge was one of those beautiful, 'ugly' women whose very understanding love outshone any physical body. She was an exceptionally intelligent person, strong enough to cut through any red tape which would hinder the happiness of her patients.

St Martin's was a kind of nursing home for disabled servicemen, mostly what we would now call 'paraplegics'. They were considered hopeless cases and were really sent there to die, that was unless Miss Younge could do something with them. When my father went there for a few months in 1920 there were nearly 50 men there I would think. When we went to live in Cheltenham the number was about 30 – a few had walked out, like my father, but most had left in a coffin. Miss Youngs trained her staff to help the men not to think that their case was hopeless. The VADs were all educated and moneyed young women who gave their job everything they had.

The chief doctor who took an interest in the men was a Dr Suter, who had been head of the local mental hospital. It was the dawning of the 'mind over matter' idea and, knowing that most of these men were intelligent, he spent hours discussing with them how they might be able to make some of their limbs respond to their concentration. It was discovered that some of the men had more control over their limbs in water and they would visit the baths. (Here my father could help.) The men loved and admired Dr Suter.

My father made lifelong friends of Jimmy and Watty. They all three died in the 1950s within about three years of each other. John Watts was born in the Channel Isles (I don't know which one.) As a young man he went to Canada and, when the war broke out, he was doing well and had some land there too. He was of Scottish descent and had a tuft of red hair and a fair skin. He joined the Canadian Scottish and went to France. On a leave he met a girl he had gone to school with and married her.

On going back to France he was blown up. He landed on the back of his neck and definitely broke his spinal cord, among other damage. His legs were in a curled position and so they stayed. He was unable to move or speak. He was taken into a hospital somewhere and the orderlies, deciding that he was dead, went to straighten his legs. He was able to give an unearthly yell which frightened the life out of them. A doctor came and, realising that he was conscious, told him that he was going to run a special pricking affair over his body and he was to blink his eyelid when he could feel anything. It wasn't until the doctor got to his chin that he blinked and the doctor drily remarked that it was about time!

I do not know how many weeks and months he lay in hospital just being kept alive, or how long before he got his speech back. When I first met him his legs were screwed up, with his knees jammed so tightly together that he had a small cushion between them to stop sores forming. He had quite a bit of use in his hands, in fact it was soon after then that he began needlework. He was always cheerful and full of fun. His smart, mean-faced wife never forgave him for not getting killed properly so that she would have had a fat Canadian pension. Occasionally she came to visit him and everyone, including him, would dread it. She came for a weekend, she treated the staff like dirt, she would manage to wear Watty out and she was trying to find ways of getting more out of the pension people. Everyone gave a sigh of relief when she left.

Watty had a wonderful personality. He would joke about his physical trouble and, when he felt a spasm coming on and knew his legs were going to take over ending in a jumping of the knees

together, he would take his cigarette out of his mouth and grin and say 'here we go again!' He was interested in everything that went on and knew all the best plays, films or books. He would play chess with Jimmy or my father. He was fond of cricket, too.

He gave my father the name of 'Dinky' because he was always using the Australian expression of 'Dinky Di!' When the whist night season was on Watty was always MC and would career about the place in his chair managing the whole evening. When one of the earliest large radios was given to the Home, with a grand horn-like loudspeaker, it was Watty who could work it. It was he who explained to me a number of the ideas which Dr Suter put forward and the causes of why our body reacts in certain ways to certain emotions. Sometimes they would put him in a kind of harness which took his weight so that he could go through the motions of walking, but he knew he would never walk again.

Miss Younge hoped to get as many men as possible to be able to live a normal life. It is not possible for us to realize what an uphill fight she had all the time; no one wanted to know – just put them away and forget them now the war is over, etc. In Watty she saw a normal, intelligent young man whose only trouble was he couldn't use his legs. For a couple of years or more, Watty had a motor-driven chair and got about in it quite well. She persuaded Mrs Watts to come to Cheltenham and rent a house for a trial period of three months and have Watty live with her. Watty went all the way on this home business and again made a joke of things. He went upstairs to bed – he would lift himself by his arms up each stair, sitting on each stair of course. Even Mrs Watts said they had fits of laughter getting down in the mornings.

The experiment not only didn't work but Mrs Watts went away and we didn't see her again. She died about three years afterwards.

By early 1924 there were only about 12 men left, including Jimmy and my father. The rest had mostly died so St Martin's was to be closed down and those men remaining were sent to the Star and Garter Home. They left in a special state carriage on the train – among those to see them off were all the Waite family, of course. They joked together but they were broken-hearted inside; they felt it was the end.

I cannot leave Watty here so I must jump ahead to just before the 1939 war. In Churchdown, a village halfway between Cheltenham and Gloucester, there was a bungalow with a cement path all round it. Often in a chair on the path Watty could be found weeding his garden with special long-handled tools. When they went to the Star and Garter, some of the staff went with them and one of the VADs was a charming young woman whose boyfriend had been killed in the war. She and Watty thought they could be happy if they married and set up home and this they did; they were as happy as Watty's health would allow. Jimmy visited a couple of times a week and they had great times. Watty made all kinds of things for the home. The only thing he could not do which would make him very cross – he couldn't use a cigarette lighter with one hand; his thumbs would not work right. As the Second World War came into being the years of sitting caught up with Watty and he was often in great internal pain. He had to take to his bed for good and was only out of pain one day in every three. Betty, his wife, was wonderful with him and, of course, she was a trained nurse.

Towards the end of the war my parents stayed with them a while and the three men could sometimes be together again. My father did quite a few jobs around the house while there. One summer day, staying in Cheltenham, I was able to go over for the day to see them all. My father was about to take the roof off Watty's special shed he kept his chair in and put on a new one. Being a heavy man he was afraid the rafters wouldn't hold him – when he saw me a broad grin came over his face. I was just what he wanted – an 8 stone 4 pounds workmate! I was willing if I had something to protect my clothing. He found me a navy battledress belonging to a six-foot male and,

although I rolled up the sleeves and trousers, I still badly sagged in the middle!

All day long I worked with my father: the long gap of some 30 years of misunderstanding fell away. When I was on the centre of the roof and I wanted to move, I would put my hands between my legs and pull out yards of hanging battledress before I could move. When we had finished and I had taken off the battledress and cleaned up, Betty said Watty wanted to see me. Watty had tears in his eyes, but they were of laughter. Betty had fixed mirrors so that he could see us and he had been watching us all day. My antics with the battledress had made his day!

I last saw him when I went down from Cambridge to Margaret's wedding. My cousin, Dorothy, was by then so crippled with arthritis she could not sit down and could hardly walk. She visited him on the way to the wedding and they laughed and cheered each other up. He died in late 1949 – the first of the three.

To get back to St Martin's and Jimmy Clarke – Jimmy had a grand face, a really classical head and his profile was particularly fine, with a long nose and snow-white hair even at an early age. He had long hands and fingers which could tremble over the piano, bringing forth music 'by ear'. Before the war he had been a great cricket fan, as well as playing the game, and he liked dancing.

He was born in Pinner, near Oxford. In 1920 when I first knew him he could only walk with crutches and then on the tips of his toes like a baby. At first, like Watty, he went about in a chair; in fact, my father would take them both out together, pushing one with each hand. Later he had a motor chair. Then Miss Younge had one of her many inspirations – she got an old tricycle from somewhere and had little things fixed on the pedals to stop his feet from slipping off; he never looked back from then on. Indoors he would walk with one stick in jerks. After a few years he could walk about a room with one hand in his pocket to give a special kind of balance he needed. He rode his trike everywhere. He would never go into a shop but people came out to him.

When Watty was at Churchdown he would cycle to the bus stop, leave the trike there and go on the bus. Betty was always at the stop the other end and, taking her arm, he could walk the short distance to the bungalow. The trike was only the beginning of the plan Miss Younge had for Jimmy.

Toc H was taking an interest in St Martin's – one of the members was a house agent. She asked him to let Jimmy go into his office a couple of days a week to answer the phone and play at trying to type, etc. He agreed. Jimmy took to the business like a duck to water. In a short time he was a fully paid member of the staff. He typed with two fingers and he really had a flair for the business. He was able to leave St Martin's and had rooms with an old school friend, a widow with three children who was running a boarding house. In time he became a partner in the firm. When the widow died, he looked after her children and set them on their feet. I last heard from him in 1955 when I was arranging with him about putting my parents' golden wedding in the local paper and wires were being sent to WA from the swimming club. He died shortly afterwards, and my father nine months later.

Again to return to St Martin's: Miss Younge and her staff worked hard to bring a little joy into the lives of those men, so many forgotten by their friends and relations. In the winter she ran these whist sessions which were held in the long wooden ward in the garden where the bedridden men lived. Relations, friends, and VADs made up the ladies. If there were not enough men to make full tables, Miss Younge would call on the chief men of the police. I've said before that Watty was MC. It was not an easy job, as a couple of tables were always rather slow. There was one man who insisted on holding his own hand. His hands shook so much that it took him a long time to take a card from his other hand. Then there was another very clever man who really couldn't use his hands

at all. They had made him a special platform with a ledge. The losing lady would be beside him handing each card up as it was dealt so that he could see it but she couldn't, and with both hands he could just lift it and put it face downwards on his platform. When he had placed them all, play would begin. He always remembered exactly where each card was and pointed to it when he wanted it played. I loved being at his table because he was a very clever man. Only one thing was banned from St Martin's – *pity* – pity in thought, word, deed, or expression. Again, of course, Miss Younge and many of her staff came from influential families and she was able to arrange things for those handicapped men which could be taken for granted these nowadays.

She arranged with the necessary authorities that, when out in their chairs, the men could go with free access and all possible help, to all sports, theatre and films. If anyone wanted an expert on chess, for instance, one was found. She knew that Marie Hall, a famous violinist, had married, retired, and lived in Cheltenham. She asked her to come and play one evening and she played pece after piece.

But Christmas time was when Miss Younge showed her *real* genius. Every detail was planned. The wards were decorated exquisitely with mistletoe over each bed. The big yard was again the centre of all the party arrangements and festivities. There was a huge floor-to-ceiling Christmas tree with decorations, lights, and large presents for everyone. Christmas morning, all the men had a pile of really beautiful presents, each well thought out – just the kind of pullover he wanted; for another, just the book he had been thinking he would like to read, etc. Early Christmas day afternoon all relations and friends (all the Waite family) were invited to a party. What sort of party could you have for disabled men whose people had forgotten them? For that is what they were. Men like Jimmy went home to their people (he went to Pinner every Christmas). Here Miss Younge was truly inspired.

Cheltenham, like most towns, had a pantomime at Christmas time. Have you ever thought of what happened to the people in the pantomime on Christmas day? They are in a strange cold town, in cheap digs, they cannot be with their families because early Boxing morning there is the last rehearsal before the show at 2pm. Miss Younge sent an invitation to the *whole cast*. Cold, chilly and miserable, they would arrive after a meagre bit of dinner, and suddenly they were shot into this gaily decorated place with its huge Christmas tree winking at them and two incongruous Father Christmases dashing about in wheelchairs... The men in beds with ridiculous hats and mistletoe hanging over them and broad grins on their faces... The ice was broken with a terrific bang and a whale of a time was had by all.

Long before tea arrived, or the presents given out, the piano was opened and we were entertained as only pantomime people off duty can entertain. On the tree were specially chosen presents for all invited, and then Miss Younge had loads of presents for the pantomime folk, so that everyone had something good. The Father Christmases delivered each present and you can be sure they made the most of their duties. I remember one year, one of the comics discovered that one of the men and he were in the same trenches or something, and they sat and drank whisky all evening. Miss Younge, of course, was a little blind on that side of her face that day! Geoffrey and I took great interest in the pantomime folk and would tell our favourites that, on a certain night, we would have the front seats of the stalls and hoped they would be able to see us.

There was one other young man I was interested in at St Martin's. He was one who was able to walk away and, I think, lived in Gloucester. He could not bend or sit down. I first met him when I went with Jimmy and Watty to a cricket match. He came along and said he was tired of standing and, by leaning against the wall, was able to get himself lying on the ground. Out of one of the many little private doors in the wall there popped a dear little old lady with some titbits for the men. She told him off for lying on the damp grass! Some 20 years later, on a bus between Gloucester and

Cheltenham, there he was, going to visit Watty. He was only 16 when he was hit in the war.

It was Miss Younge who told Mother that Watty and Jimmy had taken her seriously about being godfathers to Margaret. So Margaret was christened in All Saints Church because there was a ramp and they could get into the church.