

“Chronicles of the Grey House”

(Concluded)

“The weary girl lies down, counting the heavy strokes one by one. Sleep has quite left her. Twelve o'clock strikes, the man departs, tiptoeing past her door, blissfully forgetful of the fact that he has just been hammering on the wall at her head, each stroke making her temples throb again and again. All is quiet now. Blessed peace! She will try lying on her left side this time. But oh! what can this be? Has she slept at all? What a buzzing in her ears! her head must be too low. She has been too long on one side. She will try lying on her back. After all it is the best position, and highly recommended by the faculty. The noise grows more distinct, such a grinding and a crushing! such a talking and a laughing. Surely something has happened; but she is too drowsy to do more than wonder. Two o'clock strikes. She is fully aroused now. ‘I know what it is,’ she exclaims to herself, ‘This is visiting day, and crowds will be passing to and fro the whole afternoon; but the grinding! it goes right through me. Will it never stop? On it goes past my window and back again I have it, it is the lawn mower. They like to have a smooth lawn here, it looks well, and is pleasant and refreshing to the eye. The cost? Only a night nurses’ rest, but that is nothing. ‘Oh!’ she sighs, ‘I did not know how hard it would be to obey and be ASLEEP by 10.30.’ She is wide awake now, and sits up and meditates on things in general and on a nurses’ lot in particular. Apparently the meditation is not soothing, for with a frown she jumps out of bed and looks at her flushed face in the glass. ‘I grow old-looking,’ she mused, ‘crow’s-feet, grey-hairs—is it age or worry?’ She turns away and walks about, then back to bed with a bound, as like a flash of lightning comes back to her mind these awful words: ‘and be in bed and asleep by 10.30.’ She can’t sleep. She has tried her best. Circumstances will not allow her, but at any rate she can be in BED, that is part of rule twenty-seven, and the least she can do, for she promised to obey and she must try. The sun (which had been hidden all day by the clouds) now shone

forth brightly, and penetrated into every corner of the room through the ill-fitting blind, directing its rays with pitiless force on the face of the miserable girl, who can only murmur, ‘no rest, no peace.’ She closes her eyes, places the pillows OVER her head thrusts her fingers into her ears, and by a great mental effort forces herself to lie still. Three o'clock and 4 o'clock have struck, the sun is sinking, the visitors departing. One loud clang and grind, and the giant mower is still. It becomes cooler and darker. Peace at last now reigns. A gentle snore from the bed proclaims that nurse has at last succumbed to the sweet influence of sleep. Half-past four chimes; a bang at the door. ‘Nurse, are you awake? get up; matron says there is a lecture for second-years,’ and the girl shakes the handle of the door. ‘Oh, go away, go to—anywhere!’ shrieks the nurse in desperation. ‘You know that I’m a third-year; the second-years all sleep on the lower flat.’

“Can torture go further? Once more she sleeps. Five o'clock strikes, she has not moved. There is such a contented look on her face, a look of peace not before seen. Half-past five; clang, clang, clang, goes the rising bell. No more sleep for the just or the wicked. The door is rudely opened. The gas is lit, and flares on the face of the startled girl. A rough hand shakes her by the shoulder. A loud voice calls: ‘wake up, wake up nurse; how soundly you sleep. It is time to get up, dinner will be on the table in half-an-hour.’ The girl turns resolutely to the wall. Get up, indeed; not she. But suddenly, to her distorted vision, appears on the wall in letters of fire the last clause of rule twenty-seven: ‘And must be up, fully dressed in uniform and sitting down to dinner at 6 p.m. Is it a dream? Is she awake or asleep? Has she slept at all? Is this day or night? How many hours are there in a day? Her bewildered brain refuses to think; but as with trembling fingers she fastens her clothes unconsciously her lips form the words, ‘How sweet if one COULD obey, and be asleep at 10.30.’”