

A Breath of Fresh Air

By DENNIS McELDOWNEY

A TWO-BED room in hospital is always a gamble. If you are put in a room all by yourself you may go mad with melancholy; but you could say it was your own fault if you've never learnt to live with yourself. On the other hand, if you're in a thirty-bed ward the racket may nearly kill you; but if you aren't feeling sociable you have at least the chance of withdrawing under the blankets without anyone troubling you; and if you want to talk you can generally find someone congenial. But when there are only two—there he is and there you are, and you have to make the best of it.

So I thought on the whole I could have done a lot worse than Mr. Bull, when I was well enough to be moved from a room by myself, and the Sister hooked my bed up on the extra pair of wheels and trundled me along the corridor. The porter followed behind carrying my locker. The double doors were opened and I was wheeled into position by the window while the stoutish man in the other bed watched me cheerfully. The Sister introduced us and left us nothing to each other across our bedclothes. Mr. Bull looked well and sat firmly against his pillows, reading a digest. He said it was quite warm for the time of year and I asked him if he was getting on all right, and then we were set. There's never any trouble about opening a conversation in hospital, and Mr. Bull was a lucky man. He had a story quite out of the ordinary and he told me about it with a zest that wasn't impaired in the slightest by what must have been a good many previous tellings, and an art that was by now nicely polished.

What he told me was that he had had two operations in three months in the same place. I thought for a minute he meant in the same hospital. And so it was, but that wasn't what he meant. He'd had an operation and they'd sent him home cured, and then they had found he wasn't, and had opened him up again along the same fault-line. Two operations in three months in the same place. He told me about it with illustrative gestures.

"You look well enough now," I said. He beamed at me. "Oh, yes," he agreed, "I look well. But I'm not."

The dinner arrived and we concentrated on eating it. When we had finished he began to tell me about his wife and kiddies. I didn't listen very hard; I lay back and shut my eyes, and his voice tailed off after I had made no response for a few minutes. Through my lids I could see him groping in his locker. He left the room carrying his shaving gear and a towel.

Then the charge nurse came in to straighten my bed, a big, broad-faced girl with the whole collection of stripes on her breast-pocket. "I don't want to have to do this again before the visitors come," she said, "so for heaven's sake keep it tidy. Don't move an inch if you value your life." I promised her sleepily I wouldn't, and asked her to open the window. The sun was shining for the moment and revealing the stuffiness inside.

"I should think so," she said, as she manipulated the pulleys. "It shouldn't have been shut, in any case."

I told her I quite agreed with her. If there's one thing I can't do without it's fresh air, and the beauty of the central heating in hospital is that it keeps the rooms so warm that even in winter the windows can be kept open all the time. When she was gone I drifted very nearly to sleep. I must have been in that state where you are conscious of things happening but they don't penetrate, because when Mr. Bull returned I saw his arm come across the bed and close the window, but it was quite a time before I realised what he had done.

By the time it did penetrate Mr. Bull was a hump on his bed fast asleep. I lay and looked at the closed window disconsolately, but I hadn't been allowed out of bed at all and I couldn't reach from where I was, so there was nothing I could do about it. It wasn't quite as hot as it had been been, because it had begun raining. It always did rain on the visitors when their time approached. I could see them dropping off the tram and hurrying through the gate while around them big raindrops bounced a foot off the road. The more fortunate visitors splashed up to the hospital in their cars. My view was nearly the same as it had been in the room I had left—I could see a little further up the road past the T block but not quite so far in the other direction. It was like seeing the other half of a stereoscopic pair of pictures.

The lift gates were clanging and voices drifted into the room from the end of the corridor, where the visitors were penned up. Impatient patients in the next room were chanting: "Open the door, Richard!" The charge nurse popped her head through the door.

"I suppose you haven't done so badly, seeing it's you," she said, and she popped her head out again. The clamping footsteps were released and the raincoats came rustling along the passage. Before my first visitor sat down I got her to open the window. Fortunately, Mr. Bull was still asleep and didn't notice; and when his own visitors came he was too busy describing two operations in three months in the same place to worry.

The bell went, the visitors lingered, and left to go into another shower, and they piled into the tram until I expected to see it give at the sides. The nurse came around with the thermometers and while we held ours in our mouths and took an occasional surreptitious look Mr. Bull and I talked, and they popped up and down with the movement of the words. I had begun to think he was a little self-centred, but now I revised my opinion. He asked me about my op. and listened to my description of it with a most intelligent interest, putting in pertinent questions here and there. Yet I was a bit worried again when I suddenly became aware that he was shivering violently. Shivering rather ostentatiously, in fact, I thought, when I gave him a second look.

"Chilly, isn't it?" he said.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "Doesn't seem bad for the time of the year. The heaters keep us warm."

"There's such a draught, though," he said.

Well, I didn't think there was, so I didn't offer to let him shut the window. I just said mildly I liked a spot of fresh air and left it at that, and he didn't have the face to do anything about it. Or perhaps he was too kindhearted. Anyway, the window stayed open for a while. Until I had a doze before tea. I must have gone really to sleep this time, because I didn't notice anything until one of the junior nurses came around with the tea, a sharp little chit who would one day make one of the less popular sisters. She looked up and said, "Why is that window shut?"

I looked and there it was, not even open a crack. I didn't say a word. Mr. Bull made a feeble protest. "It's so cold," he said. The nurse said, "I suppose you two babies would like me to wrap you in cotton wool." And she opened the window and sailed out the door. I felt quite sorry for Mr. Bull.

I spent the next hour or two thinking up and bringing ready to my tongue-tip all the arguments I could think of to prove the virtue and necessity of a flow of fresh air and to scout the idea that there was any such thing as a draught. I collected quite a battery of arguments and began to feel even more sorry for Mr. Bull. But in the end I didn't have to use them. He was easy-going enough to prefer discomfort to having a fight, and he left the windows alone from then on.

Which was a considerable relief to me because I wasn't at all sure how much fight I would have had in me when it came to the point. I prefer a quiet life myself. His acquiescence made me feel so friendly that I was glad there was a heavy frost the next morning and I could allow the windows to be shut for a short time. He looked a little pathetic when I had them opened, but when the Sister came around he asked her for an extra blanket, and after that he was quite happy and we got on famously. He got rapidly better, helped by the fresh air, I've no doubt, and was discharged in a few days. The last I heard of him he was going along the corridor telling the taxi-driver who came up for his luggage that he'd had two operations in three months in the same place.

I was sorry to see him go. For one thing it meant I would have another room-mate and I wondered if I would have the whole fight to go through again. I was left alone most of the day to think about it, and then after visiting hour the double door was opened and I watched from my bed while the new man was trundled in. His name was Palmer, and he looked pretty sick, all yellow and shrunken. But this didn't keep him from talking and there was nothing feeble about his mind. He started straight in on politics. His views weren't exactly my views, but he had



"TWO OPERATIONS in three months in the same place"

a look in his eye which kept me from saying so. I decided straight away he was the kind you'd want to avoid having words with, although he was cheerful enough.

So you can imagine how relieved I was when he looked at the windows and said, "Thank heaven to see some windows open. The fog they can produce in some of these hospital wards is unbelievable. The Sister comes along and throws them open and as soon as her back's turned they're slammed shut again, and the patients lie there stewing in their own steam. And the more you'd think they'd need oxygen to keep their lungs pumping," he said, "the more scared they seem to be of it."

I agreed with him fervently. From more of his talk I gathered he was an ex-army type; but he didn't say much about himself. He didn't even avoid talking about himself. He just had subjects he thought more urgent.

The next morning was really chilly, after a frost. The kind of morning I shouldn't have minded having the windows shut until the sun was at full strength, but all things considered I was glad enough to see them open. The morning paper said there was an air-flow crossing the country from the polar regions and I could quite believe it. I was up and about by then, and I took the paper on to the balcony in search of some sun, and sat there for a while watching the trotters' exercising on the racecourse over the road. They disappeared into a mist as they entered the back straight. But it was too cold; my breath streamed before me and I was soon driven back to bed. Mr. Palmer looked pleased to see me.

"Isn't it hot," he said.

I said I hadn't noticed it. He said he couldn't sleep all night for the heat.

"Those heaters aren't on, are they?" he asked me.

I said, "I should think they are."

"No wonder I've been feeling so terrible," he said. "I can't stand central heating. It takes all the stuffing out of me. Turn them off, will you."

I couldn't say a word. I knew who was the stronger character this time. I climbed out of bed and turned them off; and when the Sister came around I asked her if I could have another blanket.