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A Promise is for Keeping

by **FELICITY HAYLE**

Fay played a rather
passionate game of Postman's
Knock with Mark at a country
house party, not thinking they
would meet again:

Then she found herself
working under him as a nurse
at her new hospital.



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FELICITY HAYLE



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All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the Author, and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the Author, and all the incidents are pure invention.



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CHAPTER ONE

WITH fingers that were almost too stiff to move, and certainly too cold to feel, Fay Gabriel pulled at the old-fashioned bell. The taximan had already done so once and it had not been answered, so *she* had paid him off and let him go.

Now she began to wish that she had not. The ground was already covered with a layer of snow several inches thick and from the leaden look in the sky it seemed that there was more to come.

There was still no reply to the echoing peal of the bell. So far as she was concerned it was almost the last straw. Stiff with cold, shut outside a house to which she was a stranger, in the middle of a countryside which seemed to consist of nothing but dark trees and white undulating fields—if it had not been for the fact that she had flown in from Australia only that morning she would have felt like turning round and going back again.

That being impossible, she decided to try the bell again, when she became aware that voices were approaching. She could not see over the tall hedge which separated the Victorian Gothic mansion from the road, but after a few seconds hope sprang to life again as two figures turned in at the drive gates and came towards the house.

Two young people, from the sound of their voices, Fay decided. It was not possible to determine their sex, for both wore duffle coats, and had trousered legs with rubber half-boots.

They came up the porch steps and for a moment *a smile*

trembled on Fay's lips as she expected them to offer some greeting. But she found herself staring blankly after them as they passed her as though she was not there at all and went into the house—the door seeming to require no more than a turn of the enormous brass knob. They passed through, still engrossed in animated conversation, and left the door ajar behind them. Fay wondered what she was expected to do next, but at that juncture one of the young people came back. It was a boy, she was now able to observe.

"Have you come to stay?" he asked in a voice no longer animated but distinctly bored.

"Yes," Fay answered readily. "Is Mrs. Travers in?"

"Oh, I expect so. You'd better come in then, hadn't you? Damn draughty with this door open."

Fay stepped inside and deliberately refrained from picking up either of the suitcases which stood at her feet. They were heavy—and she had ideas that even in the latter half of the twentieth century good manners did not come amiss from the male of the species. The suggestion seemed to communicate itself, for after staring distastefully at the bags for a second or two the young man stooped, picked them up and dropped them again resoundingly inside the hall. Then, taking no more notice of them or their owner, he went up the rather fine central staircase, calling out to someone as he did so.

It was distinctly more pleasant inside the hall than it had been on the porch. There was a great open fireplace with a good fire burning in it, and Fay went and stood near it to thaw out a little.

Several people passed fleetingly through the hall, but no one took the slightest notice of her and none had the appearance of being domestic staff. She devoutly wished she had never come. In her wildest forebodings, fed assiduously by friends who wanted to discourage her, she had never imagined a reception like this. She longed desperately for the golden beaches at Waikerooma, with the sun beating down on the bronzed bodies of the surf-riders. When she shut her eyes she could see it all—the fifteen-foot waves with foaming

crests, the shouts of the surf-riders, the fun and sparkle of it all.

"Who're you?" The question made her open her eyes quickly and dispelled the beautiful dream. Fay found herself staring at two children. One of them, a very small girl in a long loose sweater, almost no skirt at all and with thin legs with blue bony knees, regarded her stolidly. The other, a slightly older girl in jeans and a similar sweater, smiled as if with sudden inspiration and cried, "It's the angel child!" and fled through a door at the far end of the hall, screaming "Horsey ! Horsey, where are you?"

Quite plainly, Fay thought, she had arrived at some sort of mental institution, and the words which came from the gnome-like child facing her without the slightest change of facial expression did nothing to discredit the idea.

"Who are you sleeping with?"

Taken aback by the unexpectedness of the question, Fay stammered, "I—I don't know. Why?"

"Well, you must be sleeping with someone," the infant went on. "Everyone does. Cynthia sleeps with Bernard, and Lucy with Derek, and Jill with Charlie—only I think she's getting tired of him, so she'll prob'ly change next week. Mark went to meet you—I expect you'll sleep with him," the child finished, and having settled things to her own satisfaction, apparently got tired of Fay and went off through the same door as the other child had.

Fay gasped, literally as well as figuratively. She had been brought up on tales of the Old Country told by her mother, who to her dying day remained no more than an immigrant in the land which had afforded her husband a brilliant career as author and publisher. Over and over again she had told Fay stories of her own godmother—Mrs. Antonia Travers—tales which had made Fay feel that she knew the old lady—for that was what she must be now, she remembered. But those tales had never included the slightest hint of this bedlam. Old ladies did grow a little eccentric, Fay very well knew, but this—this was pushing eccentricity to the nth degree.

The door at the far end of the hall opened again and this time a businesslike middle-aged woman wearing a white

coat came through. She had a smile of sanity and came up to Fay with apologies. "Miss Gabriel? I'm so sorry—we didn't hear the bell—I suppose you did ring?"

"Several times," Fay told her faintly, almost unable to believe in this apparition of normality.

"We were all busy with the yule log," the woman explained. "We can't get it through the door—but we will, we will!" she laughed happily. "Christmas wouldn't be Christmas to Mrs. Travers without a Yule log! But please do come along—I'll show you your room."

To Fay's intense relief the room to which she was escorted was a small one and contained only a single bed. She did not care for a room-mate—of either sex.

"The house is terribly full—as usual," her cicerone explained, "so we've had to tuck you away in this corner. You're next to the bathroom and the cistern makes abominable noises—I hope you won't mind."

"I sleep very soundly," Fay told her with a smile.

"That's a good thing, I must say, Miss Gabriel—for the goings-on in this house when there's a party here are nobody's business and they go on until all hours of the night. So if you take my advice you'll snuggle down and get your rest—no matter if you hear somebody screaming blue murder!"

"When can I see Mrs. Travers?"

"Ah well now, she never sees anyone between lunch and dinner—and I can't say I blame her either, with this lot on the go all the time. But she said to make a special exception of yourself. As soon as you've had a wash and tidy up I'll take you along to her room for tea. Shall we say a quarter of an hour?"

"That'll be fine," Fay agreed, "but I've forgotten to bring my cases up—"

"I'll send them up for you—and if you want anything just give a shout for 'Horsey'!—Mrs. Horsfall's the name."

Some time later, much refreshed after removing the traces of her long journey, Fay tapped on Mrs. Travers' sitting room door. A crisp "come in" answered her, and as she obeyed she felt that she had stepped right back into the past.

Toni Travers' sitting room had all the gold and white

elegance of an eighteenth-century boudoir with gleaming spindle-legged chairs and bureaux. It must have been left unchanged since the house was built, Fay thought, and then remembered that the house was not that old. That brought back the memory of something her mother had once told her of Toni Travers. She had been a reigning Italian beauty when she had met and married Charles Travers just before World War One. But in the ferment of patriotism which swept the country immediately afterwards, Antonia had become even more English than the English themselves in her efforts to become the typical "county" gentlewoman.

"My angel child! At last—I've waited for you so long! Why didn't you come to see me before?"

In complete contrast to her room the figure who greeted Fay, standing back to the fire on the hearthrug, wearing a tweed suit and with hair close-cropped like a man, was certainly more "county" than anything Fay had been led to expect from her reading of English novels.

If the words of greeting puzzled her a little there was no mistaking the warmth of welcome which went with the outstretched hands and the effusive kiss on both cheeks.

"It's very kind of you to let me come," Fay smiled in response. "Mummy told me so much about you."

As she spoke Fay was noticing that all that was left of the Italian beauty was a pair of over-bright dark eyes and a beautiful bone formation which showed through the tightly-drawn skin of her face.

"I do hope I'm not going to be a nuisance. Your house-keeper tells me that you have a house full of visitors for Christmas."

"I've always got a houseful of visitors," Toni smiled. "I have an enormous number of relations—I've quite lost count of them, and half the time I don't know which is which. So many of them seem to suffer from marriages which have come adrift. I keep open house. Let them come here to sort themselves out—and no questions asked. And there are the children too—poor little mites! They've got to have some place that seems like home, haven't they. Now, come and have some tea. Or don't you drink tea?"

"Oh, indeed yes," Fay assured her. "We drink a great deal of tea in Australia."

Toni started to pour. "Australia, yes—an outlandish place to live. I could never think why you wanted to go there in the first place. But it hasn't changed you, not really. You haven't got that nasty flat accent—"

Fay was going to explain that with English parents and an Australian school she had grown up to the necessity of being entirely bilingual, but Antonia swept on to another topic.

"Mark's a nice boy, isn't he? Quite the nicest relation I've got—in fact I can never quite explain how he crept into the family at all. We're a raffish lot on the whole, you know—but Mark's so respectable and quite dependable. I want you two to like each other very much, angel child. Where is he now?"

"I don't know." Fay stepped into the slight pause which followed the question—she had to make the most of small opportunities like this or the one-way conversation would flow on for ever with Fay getting more and more bewildered. "I don't know—I haven't met him yet."

Toni Travers' mouth fell open in surprise. "You haven't? Then how did you get here? I sent him to meet you. You must have seen him—Mark always does what I ask him."

"Well, I'm afraid he didn't meet me. Perhaps he went to the wrong station or something—"

"Wrong station my foot!" the old lady was emphatic. "He met you at the airport."

"But I told you in my letter that I would be coming down by train—the tourist agency back home fixed all my tickets for me—"

Toni was not really listening any more, but a look of consternation clouded her eyes for a moment. "Oh dear—Mark will be cross," she sighed. "He's always telling me to be more accurate—but I really did think I'd got it right this time—"

At that precise moment after a rather peremptory knock at the door it burst open and a tall man came in. "Toni, you've done it again!" he spoke as he came. "Sent me off on another wild goose chase. There was no such person as your

—oh!" he stopped abruptly as his glance encountered Fay. "Oh—you've arrived, I see."

"Yes—I came down by rail," Fay explained, sorry for the long cold drive he must have had but not inclined to be apologetic since the mistake was none of her doing.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" he demanded, and Fay would have thought he was addressing her but for the fact that his keen dark eyes were fixed on Toni.

"I'm sorry, dear boy," she smiled at him sweetly, "but you know what I am—just a silly old woman. I expect I got things mixed, but it doesn't matter now—you're both here and I want you to like each other. She's just like I told you, Mark, isn't she? Golden curls, violet eyes and the loveliest complexion—pure cream and roses. Just like her photograph, only nicer—" As she was speaking Toni got up and crossed to a table behind Fay and came back again with a large photograph in her hand.

Fay recognised it as one of her mother taken when she had been about her own age, or perhaps a little younger.

Mark glanced a little grimly at the photograph, and remarked, "Yes—she's a little too much like that photograph. And it's stood on that table for as long as I can remember." Then he looked at the old lady again and his expression softened. "Oh dear, this is another of your gaffes, Toni dear. Why didn't you tell me that it was not your angel child I was to meet, but her daughter?"

For a moment Toni looked blank. "Oh goodness! Of course—how stupid of me. I am sorry—please forgive me, Mark dear. Somehow as one gets older the years fly past so quickly. I had forgotten—"

For the first time since she had entered this house Fay felt firm ground under her feet. Sickness, mental or physical, was one thing she did understand, and the realisation that Toni was a little sick in her mind explained so many things that had seemed more than odd. She took charge of the situation at once.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Travers," she smiled. "Mother has always told me so much about you that I feel as if I'd known you all those years too."

"I'll go and put the car away as I shan't be wanting it again to meet you with," Mark excused himself ungrammatically and, abruptly as he had come, disappeared from the room.

Toni Travers settled herself down again in her chair by the fire, sitting very upright and very much in command of things again. "Of course—it was terribly stupid of me. I remember perfectly. You're a nurse, aren't you? And I wrote to my friend the Matron of St. Edith's about you. Was it all right? Did she give you a post there?"

"Yes—and I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for the introduction. By all accounts St. Edith's is a splendid hospital and the experience there will be invaluable to me."

The bright dark eyes, so alive in the old lady's face, studied Fay for a few moments. Then, "You know you're far too pretty for a nurse," she commented. "You'd far better fall in with my plan—"

What that plan was Fay was not destined to hear, for with apparent inconsequence Toni harked back to a previous point in the conversation.

"I've a queer family," she confessed with a smile, "and I can't pretend that I understand or approve of them all—but then I'm an old woman, another generation altogether, so that probably explains it. But Mark's the best of the bunch—I do know that. In fact I don't know how I'd get along without him. You can always rely on Mark," she assured her guest.

The talk went on desultorily for a little longer, and then Toni dismissed her peremptorily, and Fay went back to the little bedroom which had been allotted to her.

She began to understand what Mrs. Horsfall had meant about the plumbing. The party was beginning to take baths, apparently, and the gurglings and bangings which went on *in* the pipes might have been a trifle alarming if she had not been warned.

As she drew the curtains against the night which had already set in Fay shivered. She wished again with devoutness that she had never come to England at all. Why hadn't she been satisfied with the pleasant, comfortable life in the Commemoration Hospital? Nursing was just as worth while

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there as anywhere else, and probably there wasn't much more that even London could teach her.

In a moment of devastating honesty she had to admit to herself that there had been more to her decision to come to England than merely the desire to improve her qualifications. She had been brought up all her life to see the Old Country—Home—through the eyes of a very homesick woman who as the years sped by saw the past through glasses which became more and more deeply rose-tinted. Fay had taken it for granted that England was the same as it had been in her mother's youth—a land of gracious living, of kindness and good manners; of men who were not only all good-looking, but perfectly groomed and chivalrous in the extreme.

Already she knew that she was doomed to disappointment and began to suspect that there might come a time when she would be glad of the rougher manners but simpler honesty of "Down Under."

At the moment, however, there was nothing she could do about it. It was obvious that she would have to fend for herself here. As she had not the slightest idea of the routine of the house she would have to pluck up her courage, go downstairs and try to find the housekeeper, who had at least seemed a kindly soul. The kitchen quarters seemed the best place to try, and she guessed those to be beyond the door through which the children had disappeared.

She had just schooled herself to this task when there was a thump on her door, which opened to admit the head only of the smaller girl she had seen downstairs. "Mark says I've got to look after you," the head announced.

"Thank goodness for Mark!" Fay breathed to herself, and said aloud, "Come in, won't you, and tell me your name."

"I'm Wendy." The head became a whole figure, and Fay saw that the child had changed the ankle socks for a pair of scarlet stockings which made her look more gnomelike than ever. "Who're you? Are you really Toni's angel child?"

"No—that was my mother," Fay replied, wishing she could get rid of the feeling of inadequacy which this child produced in her. "Was that your sister I saw with you in the hall?"

"Helen? M'yes, she's a sort of sister. We've got the same

mother but different fathers," the child went on matter-of-factly. "Helen's father was stinking rich. I don't know who mine was, but he must have been something speshul."

"I see," Fay murmured. "Is your mother with you now?"

"Oh no. Mummy's on a cruise with Singh. She never stays in England in the winter if she can help it. Singh's stinking rich too—he's got a yacht and a palace and all that sort of thing. I like Singh," she finished. "Helen doesn't because he talks a bit funny, but I think he's all right."

"Where do you go to school?" Fay switched over to what she hoped would be a safer subject.

"It all depends," the gnome told her.

"Depends on what? You do have to go to school over here, don't you?"

"Oh yes, we have to go as a rule. But it depends on whether Toni pays the bills, where we go. When she pays up we go to Westcott—that's boarding. When she doesn't we have to go to village schools. What was it you wanted to know?"

"Eh?" Fay was a little startled by the abrupt question, and the child went on impatiently.

"Mark said you'd want to know things—what sort of things?"

"Oh—well, what time is dinner?"

"Supper at half past seven," said the child promptly.

"I see—then I suppose we don't have to dress?"

For the first time Fay had the satisfaction of surprising her visitor. "What d'you mean? Of course we wear our clothes—it isn't *that* sort of supper, like cocoa and biscuits round the fire in our perjamas."

"Thank you." Fay repressed an urgent desire to giggle. This mad household was making her a little light-headed and she wondered what she would be like by the time Christmas was over. She hadn't really met the rest of the party yet. "Is Mark your uncle?" she asked Wendy.

The child seethed to ponder for a moment, and then said, "He's—just Mark." Then, as if with a sudden inspiration, she went, "I'll tell you one thing—he's not my father. If he had been Mummy would've been stuck with him for keeps. Mark's that sort of person."

"Well, that's a good thing," Fay thought fervently.

"Can I go now?" Wendy was already edging towards the door.

"Yes—thank you very much for all your help." Fay was determined not to let her own manners deteriorate to the same level as the child's, but if she hoped to shame her she was disappointed, for the only change of expression in Wendy's face was one of scorn before the door closed behind her with a resounding bang.

Perhaps because she felt so thoroughly out of rapport with her surroundings Fay obeyed the summons of the dinner gong with reluctance and some trepidation. Once through the dining room door, however, all her apprehension vanished. She was in another and much more civilised world.

The long refectory table mirrored the candles which in threefold candelabra intersected its length. More candles shed a soft light from sconces on the walls. The rest of the party seemed already assembled there, and there was a general buzz of conversation as they stood or lounged over the backs of the chairs. They all seemed to be waiting for someone, and for a dreadful moment Fay wondered if she were late, but she was soon reassured. Though there were a few curious glances in her direction there was no lull in the chatter, and she would have felt lost indeed had not Mark come across to her. He was wearing a conventional lounge suit, and though he was the only man dressed in such formal attire the velvet-collared jackets and rather long hair of the other boys were not unsuitable in those surroundings.

"Come along," Mark smiled. "You're to sit next to me—for your sins," and he led her to the foot of the long table.

At her first sight of him Fay had thought him brusque, but now she remembered that he had just come back from a long and fruitless drive. Now she found warmth and comfort in his smile.

"You're looking very charming," he complimented her. "I suppose you are the angel child's daughter?"

"Yes," Fay smiled up at him

"You're very like her," he commented, staring down at

her quite unashamedly and with an intentness which in other circumstances she would have found embarrassing.

"She was much prettier—she was really lovely, always," Fay told him earnestly. Two years was not long and the memory of her parents would last her for her lifetime.

"Then I still maintain you're very like her," Mark said with a hint of mischief in his eyes which brought the pink to her cheeks.

A sudden cessation of the chatter spared Fay any fear that her blushes would be noticed. Everyone's attention was directed towards the door which had just opened to admit their hostess.

Toni wore a plain black dress with a collar of pearls. She looked very different now from the tweed-suited figure standing astride before the fire as Fay had seen her that afternoon, and as she moved to her place at the head of the table with a queenly dignity it was not hard to imagine her as she had been fifty years ago—at the height of her beauty. She still moved, Fay noticed, with consummate grace.

Mark had left her side to escort his grandmother to her place, from which she smiled down the table and said, "Good evening, everyone—I hope you've all been enjoying yourselves today?"

There was a chorus of reply : "Good evening, Toni," and "Yes, thank you." This was evidently a ritual, and as soon as Toni was seated everyone scrambled into their places and the chatter broke out again.

From her vantage point at the foot of the table on Mark's right hand Fay took stock of her fellow guests. No one had thought of introductions and *she* was left to her own resources to fathom out which was Bernard, or Derek, or Charlie, or Nigel amongst the young men present. The girls were a little easier because they were more distinctive. The redhead was Cynthia. Lucy was an ash-blond, and Jill dark-haired with blue eyes. The girl on Mark's other side was the beauty of the party and betrayed her Italian ancestry in her black hair and dark eyes, like Toni's only not so alert. She ignored Fay entirely and addressed Mark continuously with a proprietorial air.

The elder of the two small girls, who was sitting beside

Fay, broke her silence to say in a slight hiatus which had overcome the talk : "Oonagh won't like you—you're too pretty and you're sitting next to Mark."

Oonagh was evidently the dark girl. She flashed a momentary look at Fay, and it was not entirely her imagination that made Fay think the look was malevolent.

"I have to sit somewhere, don't I?" Fay addressed the child, "and after all, I'm beside you too."

Mark had been replying to some remark from his neighbour, and without in the least changing his tone or tempo he apostrophised Helen. "If you can't behave yourself, brat, please go up to your room." Then he went on with whatever it was he had been saying.

Helen attacked the food on her plate in silence for a moment or two. Then she demanded, "Are you a school-teacher?"

"No," Fay answered without vouchsafing any other information.

"Wendy said you were," the child went on.

"Did she? I wonder why?"

Wendy, who was sitting opposite, answered for herself. "Cos you ask so many questions and you're not int'rested in men," she announced.

"Helen. Wendy." Mark did not raise his voice, but it was like a whiplash, and both the children looked at him with something like fear in their faces. They evidently knew they had gone too far, and almost before he told them they were sliding off their chairs.

"You heard me before. If you can't behave like civilised persons you'd better go upstairs." The stern expression did not leave his face until the two small girls had left the room and silently closed the door behind them. Then he smiled at Fay. "I really do apologise. Those two are the most abominably behaved brats I've ever come across."

Fay would have found it difficult to disclaim that opinion herself, but she had no time to do so, for Oonagh, with her languorous drawl, was speaking to Mark.

"You're old-fashioned, Mark. Modern children speak the truth, that's all. They don't believe in humbug nowadays,

you know. Poor little brutes, they've only had half their supper."

"They've had quite as much as is good for them last thing at night," Mark's lips compressed sternly again. "And if someone doesn't take the trouble to correct their manners soon they'll be completely impossible."

After the meal was over the whole party gathered round the great fireplace in the hall while Toni dispensed coffee from a heavy Georgian silver pot.

"We're not allowed in the drawing room until tomorrow, because of the tree," Cynthia told Fay. She was more disposed to be friendly than the others, and Fay was grateful for even the slightest overture which made her feel one of the group. Trying to analyse the situation, Fay came to the conclusion that these people never spoke of the past or the future, but just lived for the moment. Like ships that pass in the night, she thought.

While they were sipping coffee the two children appeared once more, ready for bed now in woolly dressing gowns and well-wrinkled pyjama legs, and looking more like children.

They had evidently come to say good night to Toni, but used the occasion to regale themselves on lumps of sugar.

"Anyone would think you were starving children," Toni demurred as the lumps disappeared rapidly.

"Well, Mark didn't let us finish our supper," Helen explained, while Wendy clamoured for attention.

"Toni—Toni, tell Helen she's got to let me have the electric blanket tonight—it's my turn!"

Toni obviously did not know how to cope with this, and she looked appealingly at Mark.

"It's Helen's blanket, isn't it?" he asked.

Wendy turned to him and, perhaps because she was over-tired and only a small child, her wizened little face puckered as if she were about to cry. "But it's my turn—she promised!"

"Did you promise, Helen?" Mark asked quietly, and when silence was his answer he went on, "Then you must let her have it. A promise is for keeping, you know."

As she watched them mount the great staircase Fay wished that she too could have gone off to her room like the

children. Wishing that, she stared overlong at the children's retreating backs, until a voice with a hint of amusement in it broke in upon her reverie.

"Well, I was right, wasn't I?"

She turned to find Mark half smiling at her, but with a look of enquiry in his eyes. "Yes—quite right," she told him gravely.

Later on that evening, when at last she was in her bedroom, she drew back the curtains of her window and gazed out. She had been brought up on stories of "white Christmases"—nostalgic stories told by two people who were exiles from their own native land.

The favourite spot for the Christmas picnic, she and her parents, was a tiny beach east of Waikerooma; a place so small that their own party, which usually included the Camerons, had it to themselves. It had become a ritual ever since she had been a small child that when the tinned turkey was eaten and the slab of cold Christmas pudding lay indigestibly on top, she should demand to be told stories of Christmas at home, and her eyes would grow big with wonder at the stories of snow which at that time she had never seen, and Yule logs, and frosty starlight.

Well, all the ingredients were there, she thought, eyeing the scene spread out before her. The snow was there, the moon and the stars were all present and correct. The frosty air was needle-sharp, and indoors Fay had seen the great Yule log ready to be put into the huge fireplace tomorrow. But something was missing; at any rate the occasion did not come up to Fay's expectations. "I suppose it's the spirit of Christmas," she mused. "Nobody cares. It might be different if one had a family with lots of relations, aunts and uncles and cousins." And the thought of all those people whom she didn't have made Fay lonelier than she had ever felt in her life before.

By an edict which had gone forth from Toni's room via Horsey the whole household had retired to their rooms by eleven-thirty. Toni liked to hear the church bells ringing out across the valley.

Fay realised that they had started to ring now. Another part of that white English Christmas of her dreams, she

thought, and pushed open the casement of her window a little in order to hear them better. The night air was still and the bite of the frost was keen so that she huddled down into the furry hood of her white dressing gown.

There was some magic about those bells, Fay thought. Under the tower they would probably have been deafening, but coming as they did from across the valley they had all the enchantment of another world, and she lost count of the time she stood by the window listening.

Pin-points of light began to prick the darkness as cars, silent under the voice of the bells, began to leave the region of the church as worshippers came away from the midnight service. Fascinated, Fay watched—saw them twist and turn and disappear from sight. Only two cars took the road which led to the bridge across the river, and one of those turned away at the valley bottom and was lost to her sight. The other came on—and on.

As she watched that last car she realised that she was holding her breath and that made her heart beat a little too fast. "It is—it's coming in here," she told herself, and a moment or two later she caught sight of a long black car as it swung through the open gateway. The headlights reflected back off a bank of snow, and in their momentary gleam Fay saw that the driver was Mark.

A little niggle of—something or other—made her whisper to herself, "He might have told me he was going—I would like to have gone to the service too." But common sense negated the thought immediately. Why on earth should he?

The car passed under her window and round to the garage. She heard the doors close and then in complete silence on the snow she watched him come round to the front of the house.

It was all so quiet that Fay felt like an invisible watcher of some scene spread out on a canvas, of which she was not a part. It came with something of a shock then when the dark figure just under the window stopped his long strides, and throwing back his head called up, "Happy Christmas to you!"

"Happy Christmas !" she called back.

She had not realised how warm his voice was until she

heard it now against the cold silence of the night. It supplied that essential something which had been lacking about this Christmas. It started a glow of warmth in her heart which spread through all her body as she snuggled down under her eiderdown. "Happy Christmas," she murmured, sleep coming fast with the contrast of warmth after cold. "Happy Christmas, Mark."

CHAPTER TWO

IT seemed to Fay that she had hardly gone to sleep before the house started to come to life again. It was in reality about half past six when after being sleepily aware of various bumpings and noises she was forced into full consciousness by someone banging on her door and opening it almost in one movement.

"Who's that?" she asked, yawning as she brought her head from under the sheet.

" 's me. Wendy," a child's voice replied. "Are you awake? Can I come in?"

"I suppose so," she said a little ungraciously—she had been enjoying her sleep and would have liked to continue it. "What do you want?"

"It's Christmas morning—and nobody wants to be bothered. Mark said to try you. I want to open my stocking."

Light from the landing streamed through the half open door and Fay could see the child quite plainly as she stood in its beam. Suddenly she felt compassion. "Happy Christmas, Wendy !" she said. "Come along then—I'll switch on the bed light and then we can see to open your presents—looks more like a pillowcase than a stocking, though."

Wendy made a dive for the bed and flung herself and her pillowcase on it. "It is," she agreed, "but it isn't our real presents. We get the big ones off the tree this afternoon. At least—" she wrinkled her nose—"they're not always big ones. Last year it was, because I had a bicycle, but sometimes it's just something to say that Toni's paid our fees for school."

"And do you like that sort of present?" Fay asked.

"Oh, yes," Wendy sighed. "I like school—I like being with the same child'n all the time and not having to change over again. I hope it's school fees this year. I 'spect it is, 'smatter of fact, 'cos there's lots of things in our pillowcases. Mark fills those, and he always puts in extra when something like school fees is downstairs. Now, let's see—" she started rummaging in the pillowcase. She brought out packet after packet, all attractively wrapped in coloured paper, and in spite of the veneer of sophistication which she had, Fay realised that Wendy was just a child like any other, and she began to like the little girl.

"Ahh!" it was a sigh of satisfaction when the pillowcase was finally emptied and Fay's bed strewn with an assortment of toys, books, paper and oranges. "I have made your bed in a mess, haven't I? Are you cross?"

"No—it's Christmas, isn't it?" Fay smiled, and was taken aback when the child flung her arms round her neck and gave her a series of moist kisses. "Mark was right," she said. "You are nice."

Fay's heart warmed. She was glad that Mark liked her—very glad indeed. Though he doesn't really know me very well, she thought to herself, refusing to let her imagination—or her heart—lead her too far along the daisied paths.

"Does Mark live here?" Fay asked.

"Not all the time. But he comes quite often. Are you going to live here?"

"No," Fay shook her head. "I'm only staying a few days. Then I've got a job to go to—in London."

"That's where Mark lives too."

Fay's heart quickened a little more. It would be nice to get to know Mark better—but London was a big place, she reflected.

"Ugh, it's cold!" Wendy shivered a little, "and it'll be simply ages before we have our breakfast. Can I come in your bed?"

"If you put all the things back in your pillowcase first," Fay told her, and that job soon done, the child snuggled in beside her.

Almost immediately there was another tap at the door. This time it was Helen, plus pillowcase. "Oh, that's where

you are," she addressed her young sister. "Is she being a nuisance? Mark said we weren't to be a nuisance."

"No—come on in and join the party," Fay invited, smiling a little as the thought flashed through her mind, "Master Mark does seem to order everyone about!"

Both pillowcases had to be emptied again and their contents admired or squabbled over a little until there was hardly an inch of bed left visible—and time passed unheeded until there came another knock at the door.

The children cried "Come in!" without giving Fay a chance, and in a second Mark was standing in the doorway.

"Now then, you two," he addressed the children, "I told you not to be nuisances—are they?" he questioned Fay. "Oh, and a Happy Christmas, for the second time."

"When was the first time?" Helen asked, and Fay thought she saw a momentary look of annoyance cross Mark's handsome face. "He really is handsome," she thought, "even with his hair tousled." But his look of annoyance irritated her too. After all, nothing could have been more innocent than that midnight salutation. But she understood the reason for it a moment later when she saw the way the children's minds worked.

"Did he bring you presents too in the night?" Wendy clamoured.

"Of course I didn't, brat," Mark said quickly. "I didn't bring anyone presents in the night. That's Santa Claus, and he only comes to children."

Hoots of derisive laughter greeted this remark. "We've seen you," Helen told him categorically, "but why don't you wear your whiskers?"

"Bill always used to wear whiskers when I was small," Helen remembered.

"Whiskers have gone out of fashion," Mark informed them with a wink at Fay, and then became suddenly brisk. "Off with you, kids, and get yourselves dressed and decent. Breakfast will be ready in about half an hour. Did you want a bath?" he asked Fay.

"Well, it would be nice—but I don't want to take anyone else's turn," Fay said doubtfully.

"That's all right—it's first come first served in this house.

"I'll go next door and run it for you and hold the fort until you come." And with the children at his heels he departed, and Fay could hear him cheerfully humming carols above the noise of the bathwater running.

She slipped quickly into her dressing gown and slippers. In normal circumstances she would have been a little embarrassed at meeting a young man she scarcely knew in the bathroom, but it needed only a few hours in this household to send embarrassment flying.

"Thanks very much," Fay said. "I'll take over now, shall I?"

Mark, who was now silently surveying the steaming, hissing water, turned to look at her, then without preamble he asked, "What's your opinion about illegitimate children?"

Fay was not quite sure whether to treat the question at its face value as a generalisation or whether Mark had some specific case in view, but she dealt with it promptly. "As far as I'm concerned," she told him, "they don't exist. There are illegitimate parents but not illegitimate children."

Suddenly Mark smiled—indeed his whole face lit up. "I couldn't have put it better myself," he commended, and then with a brief nod and a "Have a nice bath," he went out and closed the door behind him.

Even without the hot bath Fay was already feeling warm all through. And from that good beginning the day went on being a good one. She found that if she just accepted oddities as the norm in Toni Travers' house she got on much better and everyone was quite friendly. And the children were definitely on her side now—in fact their partisanship was almost embarrassing at times.

Most of the young people opted for snowballing and the building of a gigantic snowman in the garden for their morning's activity. Fay, however, not enamoured of her first experience of snow and not relishing the thought of getting it down her neck, sought the safety of the kitchen regions.

Here she found a warm welcome from Mrs. Horsfall. "I certainly could do with a bit of help, Miss Gabriel," the housekeeper greeted her, "and there's not one of those others would dream of offering. And being short-staffed over the holidays does make it a headache. We're having dinner mid-

day," she announced, spreading slice after slice of bread as she spoke. "Mrs. Travers didn't like the idea, but I couldn't have got one of the village women to come up this evening, so I told her that it was better for the children not to have a big meal at night. She did accept that—" Mrs. Horsfall sighed. "But she never believes that you can't get staff just for the asking, as it used to be in her young days. Put some ham in those, will you, my dear?" she went on, slapping down a pile of buttered bread in front of Fay. "It is sliced ready. They'll only get sandwiches tonight—with some sweets of course."

"Do you always have a houseful of guests like this?" Fay asked, working fast to keep up with Horsey.

"Not always," Mrs. Horsfall said thoughtfully. "There are times when there's nobody at all—but they're few and far between. The real trouble is that you never know. What with the young ones thinking they can just come and go as they please, and Mrs. Travers as like as not to ask half a dozen guests on the spur of the moment without a word to anyone—well, it makes catering a bit difficult."

"Can't you make Mrs. Travers see that?"

"I've pointed it out till I'm blue in the face and it makes no difference. Sometimes I think it's on purpose—you know, none so blind as those that won't see. The only person who does sometimes manage to register with her is Mark—and not always, at that. But you can't be cross—she's always such a great lady, if you know what I mean."

Fay thought that perfectly summed up Toni Travers. She was already convinced in her own mind that Toni's vagueness had been assumed as a defence mechanism against changes in the old order of things—changes of which she did not approve. But with the years and increasing age the assumption had become a reality.

"Are all these people related to Mrs. Travers in some way?" Fay asked idly as she worked.

Horsey straightened her back for a moment and looked at Fay quizzically. "That's a question we don't go into, and I doubt if Mrs. Travers herself knows the answer to that one. The only one anybody can vouch for is Mark—he's her daughter Margaret's boy—he and his sister and their mother

lived here all together when the children were young. Before your time, of course."

Fay felt rather sorry about that. She would have liked to hear some tales of Mark when he was a child. He would have been a very blond-haired little boy in those days, she thought, which with his dark brown eyes would make a fatal combination.... In the act of putting on the lid of the last of her pile of sandwiches Fay paused. Mark—Mark—Mark—why on earth did her thoughts keep running on that young man? They had only just met, and their paths were not in the least likely to cross again once she had left for St. Edith's. Still, that needn't spoil her stay here at Beechcroft.

Since Horsey did not have any more jobs to give her at the moment Fay left the kitchen regions and made tracks for her room. In the hall she ran into Toni and Mark. Toni was holding a very large bunch of mistletoe and trying to make up her mind where it should hang, while Mark perched on the top of a pair of steps trying patiently to explain why he could not hang it in mid-air and that Toni's idea of driving a nail into the centre of a plaster ceiling was just not practicable.

Toni turned and caught sight of Fay. Immediately her face lit up. "Why, angel child, how delightful to see you! A very happy Christmas to you. I do hope you can stay for dinner."

Fay shot a quick glance at Mark, who was looking down at Toni with a half-amused, half-sad smile on his lips. He caught Fay's glance and his eyes asked her to let the old lady down lightly. He did not need to ask, for Fay had a compassion that matched his own when it came to old folks, especially sick ones.

"Oh yes—thank you very much," she reached up and kissed Toni's cheek. "It's so kind of you to ask me—I'm looking forward to it very much indeed."

Suddenly Toni forgot the importance of the question of where to hang the mistletoe and handed it to Fay. "Here, dear, you help Mark with this, will you, please? I want to see Horsey for a moment," and she disappeared through the baize door.

"Here, let's have it," Mark reached down his hand. "We'd

better get it up before Toni comes back or she'll have other ideas !"

Handing the branch to him, Fay remarked, "I should have thought mistletoe was out of date in this year of grace, and in this household."

"Do you have it in Australia?" he asked.

"No, we never did I think perhaps some old diehards do."

"Then you've never experienced it?" Mark's eyebrows shot up. "Then it certainly will have its uses for some of us," he said with the impish schoolboy grin which occasionally broke through and was at such odd variance with his usual suave, debonair assurance.

The eating of the traditional Christmas dishes in truly Dickensian weather and surroundings did not disappoint Fay. It was all exactly as her mother had often portrayed for her, even down to the splitting of the Yule log on the open hearth in the hall. The party lingered round that fire between dinner and a welcome cup of tea which appeared about five o'clock when everyone was beginning to shake off the effects of the too good meal they had all eaten. After that the real festivities started with a formal procession headed by Toni, who threw open the drawing room door with a great flourish to reveal the gracious room in darkness except for the myriad twinkling lights on a truly magnificent Christmas tree.

The sight was lovelier than Fay had expected, and she stood for a moment drinking in the stately proportions of the room, the lights of the tree, the gay colours of the wrapped gifts on the tree.

"You look like a child at her first party. How old are you really?" Mark's voice in her ear brought Fay out of her daydream.

"Certainly not a child," she told him, smiling. "I can't help being small. I just didn't grow any more."

"You don't have to apologise. Don't forget that good things come in small—"

Before he could finish the cliché Oonagh, who was standing within earshot and could not possibly have been described as small, interrupted, "For heaven's sake, Mark, make Toni start the distribution. Those kids are driving me mad with their din!"

"Yes, come on, Mark," Helen importuned, "we want to see what we've got!"

Toni gave out the presents herself, but Mark had to hand them to her from the tree.

This was obviously Toni's hour. She was graciousness personified as she handed the gifts to her guests. The children came first, of course, and when she saw the two small girls each receive an envelope at Toni's hand Fay guessed that they had got their school fees paid for another year.

With squeals of delight the children ripped open the envelopes, read the contents rapidly, and then hurled themselves at Toni. "Oh, Toni!" Wendy cried. "You're really fab! Does it truly mean that we can have riding lessons as well?"

Toni nodded. "That's what Mark says you want," she gave a theatrical sigh. "Though I can't think why you want to learn to ride a horse when they haven't even taught you yet how to walk properly."

Each in turn the young people received their gifts. There was a large flat box for Fay, but when Mark handed it to Toni a slight altercation arose.

"This isn't my present for her," Toni objected, and Mark whispered some reply which Fay interpreted to mean that Mark thought that she had been omitted and had himself made good the omission.

Toni's reply was quite audible to the whole room. "Of course I hadn't forgotten—I have it all planned. You had better give it to her yourself." So Mark, looking a trifle uncomfortable, came over and handed her the box.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It was intended to come to you with Toni's compliments—so please forgive if you don't think it quite suitable."

Wendy and Helen were clamouring round her, demanding to help her unwrap her parcel—"You helped us do ours," they pointed out.

Too late Fay interpreted Mark's warning glance. Eager hands had already torn the wrappings from her parcel, and Wendy held up the contents. It was unmistakably a pair of pink nylon pyjamas.

A chorus of witticisms and ribald laughter greeted the

display. The pyjamas were snatched from the child's hands and Bernard was holding them out at arm's length. Oonagh pulled Fay to her feet and the pyjamas were tried against her for size. They appeared to be just right—and that fact called forth another burst of hilarity.

Fay knew that her cheeks were scarlet and she wished she could have remained as unmoved as Mark, who showed no sign of discomfiture except for the fact that he did not meet her eyes.

It was Toni who put an end to the mirth. Fay could not be sure whether Toni disapproved or was trying to rescue her or that she was just plain annoyed at being kept waiting. Whatever the reason she called Mark sharply to heel, and the distribution of presents continued.

At last the tree was stripped of all except its ornaments and the coloured lights, and of course the rather magnificent fairy doll on the top.

There was an instant's silence in which Mark looked enquiringly at his grandmother. She was quick enough to read that glance. "All right, Mark," she said. "I haven't forgotten. Hand me down the fairy, please."

"The fairy? But—" Mark started to demur, but Toni cut him short imperiously. "Please hand it down, Mark."

Mark climbed his steps and unfastened the doll. Toni took it from him and herself advanced to Fay. "There you are, angel child—you've always wanted that since you were a little girl, haven't you? Do take it now with my love and every good wish. May fairyland start for you right here and now."

A burst of applause greeted this little speech and drowned Fay's rather incoherent thanks. She was a little embarrassed at being singled out for what was apparently a great honour, but she was more troubled by Mark's expression. She could not be sure whether he was worried or displeased—and she wished she knew which it was.

Much later in the evening she had an opportunity to find out. This was a day on which Toni's wish was law, and party games had been the order of the day. They had run through the whole gamut—many of them strange to Fay, and indeed to many of the young people, because for the most part they

were the games of Toni's youth and were completely strange to some of the guests. However, everyone joined in with a great deal of energy. When most of them were beginning to flag a little Toni decreed that it was time for Postman's Knock. Fay had heard a lot about this old game from her mother, but had not realised until now that there was no game attached to it at all—it was just an excuse for a good kissing time to be had by all. Like the mistletoe it struck Fay as rather unnecessary in that household where couples were as like as not to be found in a quite uninhibited embrace on the staircase or in the hall.

Fay's first "letters" came from Wendy, who hugged her warmly under the mistletoe in the darkened hall. "I think I like you very much," the small girl confided.

"And I like you too," Fay conceded, "but shall I tell you something? I think you're getting very tired. Wouldn't you like to go to bed now—most of the fun's over, anyway."

"Mark hasn't said so yet," Wendy objected, stifling a yawn.

"I'm sure he'd want you to—if he knew you were sleepy," Fay persuaded.

"How d'you know what Mark would want?" Wendy retorted with a return to her normal sharpness. Then suddenly the gnome-like expression was shattered by a smile which was wholly childish. "I 'spect it's because you like him and he likes you," she decided, and then offered, "I'll go to bed if you'll take me up. It's kind of spooky upstairs by yourself when everyone's down here."

Fay did not contest that point. She could not have denied that she liked Mark—and she hoped very much that Wendy was as right in the other part of her assertion. "Let's go and say goodnight to Toni then, shall we?" she suggested.

It did not take Wendy long to get into bed and she was asleep literally as soon as her head touched the pillow. Not surprising, Fay thought as she tucked in the blankets, since the children had been on the go since about half past five that morning. She herself was beginning to feel pleasantly drowsy and had more than half a mind to slip away to her own bed.

She thought better of it, however, and went downstairs again. She thought that Postman's Knock must still be in

session, since the hall was still in darkness except for the glow from the fire. Since her feet made no noise on the carpet she thought it best to give warning of her approach by a slight cough.

One figure, not two, moved out of the shadows and Mark's voice came to her ears. "Oh, there you are—you've been the dickens of a time. I thought you'd gone off to bye-byes too."

"I did think of it," Fay confessed, "but I didn't think I'd been very long. Wendy dropped off to sleep at once. It's been a long day for the children—and a very exciting one too."

"Do you class yourself with the children?" Mark's voice was teasing. "You look like one—"

"I'm certainly getting a bit sleepy—and it's been an exciting day for me too—my first English Christmas."

"I hope you enjoyed the experience?"

"Very much—" she looked at the door of the drawing room, expecting it to open. "Hadn't you better get on with the game?" she suggested, for he was barring her way at the foot of the stairs.

"Oh, they're playing Consequences now—and my imagination simply isn't fertile enough to cope with their ideas. I was waiting for you to come down—I wanted to explain about those wretched pyjamas—"

"You don't have to," Fay laughed. "They're what Helen describes as fab—and it was sweet of you to think of getting them—"

"You see, we were sure that Toni had forgotten to get a present for you—and there wasn't one on the tree with your name on it. Horsey came to the rescue—the pyjamas had been intended for her niece who's about your size, apparently. We gave the kid a fiver instead, which probably pleased her more. I only wanted to save Toni embarrassment when she found she had forgotten you, but I certainly didn't want to do that at the cost of embarrassing you instead."

"Don't worry—I didn't mind at all," she told him. "I knew why you'd done it and I thought it was rather horrid of Toni not to appreciate what you'd done. I think she had forgotten really, don't you? I don't think she really planned to give me the fairy doll—she was just saving face, on the spur of the moment."

Mark regarded her for a moment in silence while a little whimsical smile played round his lips. Since Fay was still standing on the bottom stair they were more of a height than usual and she could look straight into his eyes.

"That's clever of you—rather frightening, too," he said with mock alarm. "I wouldn't like to have to try to keep a secret from you. No, I don't think it was planned—"

"And you didn't like her giving it to me, did you? Why?" Fay interrupted.

"It wasn't that I didn't want you to have it, especially if you'd always wanted it ... oh no, that was your mother, wasn't it? Toni's getting me all muddled now." He paused a moment, then went on, his voice rather serious, "You see, it's been that same doll on the Christmas tree for more years than anyone can remember. It's been re-dressed, of course, but that's all. It's a piece of Toni's own youth, I believe—it's never been given to anyone before ..." he stared past Fay into the dark corners of the hall as he fell silent.

Fay knew the thought that was in his mind. "You mean that Toni thought she wouldn't want it again? Oh no ! No, I'm sure it wasn't that. It was just a whim—I'm sure it was!"

Mark's eyes came back to her face and he smiled. "You're right, I expect—I'm just being gloomy over nothing. And now let's deal with you—did you think you were going to escape your 'letters' by running off upstairs to put Wendy to bed? I can assure you you're not. I have quite a batch for you."

Fay felt his arms slide round her, and his lips hard pressed on hers. She did not know how long that moment lasted—it might have been a second—it might have been eternity. But it was perfect happiness. She knew that she gave him back the warmth he gave her. Neither spoke—there was no need of words to express that something which flowed between them—or so it seemed to her in the magic of the moment.

A shout of hilarious laughter from the drawing room drove them apart, but no one came out to disturb the silence of the hall. "I don't want to go back in there," Fay whispered. "Please could you get my doll for me?"

He nodded, and in a moment he was back with the tinsel spangles of the doll's dress gleaming in the firelight against the black of his jacket. He gave her the toy with a smile. "Passport to fairyland," he said. "Though I don't think you need one—whoever named you Fay was inspired."

She took the doll in her arms and turned towards the stairs. They did not kiss again, but his whispered "Good-night" was both a caress and a benediction.

Upstairs she undressed by starlight—to have put on electric light would have spoilt the magic. Last thing before she got into bed she propped the doll where it would be the first thing she would see in the morning.

As she nestled down cosily under her eiderdown she was consciously happy—already she was in fairyland. And it was of the essence of fairyland that it knew no time—no past or future, but only an eternal present.

Fay was still wrapped around in the cocoon of her unquestioning happiness in the cold light of the next day, but so far as the rest of the household was concerned it was definitely the aftermath of Christmas. Most of the guests had either drunk too much the day before, or eaten too lavishly of the rather rich fare, or had had insufficient sleep. The result was that tempers were edgy and the general outlook jaundiced.

Mark was nowhere to be seen and the children told her that he was mending the electricity. A somewhat harassed Horsey corroborated this.

"The house has got its own plant. Quite the latest thing when it was put in about fifty years ago, but terribly old now, and it's always breaking down. We should have been on the mains years ago—but Mrs. Travers lives in the past and it's hopeless trying to move her."

Most of the party seemed to congregate in the hall, but the atmosphere was not very congenial. There seemed to be some sort of an argument going on about whose boy-friend was whose. Fay had noticed the previous day a marked tendency on the part of Bernard to make advances to Oonagh much to the annoyance of his erstwhile partner, Christine. As a matter of fact Fay did not think that he had been making much headway, as Oonagh, who was nothing if not

thorough, had been concentrating all her efforts on Mark.

They were having some sort of argument now—Bernard and Oonagh—while Christine glowered. "He is, **I** tell you," Bernard was saying. "He is—and I'll prove it to you."

"**I** don't believe you—and **I** don't care if he is !" Oonagh pushed Bernard's tentative advances away with sultry glamour.

"Oh yes, you do—you care very much. You wait, I'll show **you**!" the young man was smugly confident of his point.

The altercation did not really prick the bubble of Fay's happiness, but she did suddenly feel as though she wanted a dose of clean, fresh air. She caught Helen's eye. "Would **you** and Wendy like to come for a walk?" she asked, and the suggestion was enthusiastically received. "Can we get Bruno too?" they demanded, and a few minutes later the three of them, plus Horsey's big retriever, were out in the cold, crisp air.

The children would have taken her across field paths they knew, but the snow had drifted in the open places and since Fay was not properly equipped for dealing with it she had to insist that they kept to the lanes where a certain amount of traffic had packed it fairly solid.

The children and the dog kept the walk lively and full of interest, but in any event it was a welcome change, Fay found, to get out into the open again after the hothouse atmosphere of Beechcroft.

The afternoon was short, and before they got back the sun which had appeared at midday was already like a big orange sinking below the horizon. Fay, as she walked up the drive, was remembering the impressions of her arrival a few days before and how she had stood outside the closed door wishing herself back in Australia because of the lack of welcome. That seemed ages ago now and she knew that there had been a purpose in her coming here—a purpose she had not dreamed of then. She did not follow that conviction to **any** logical conclusion, but she only knew that it was pre-ordained that she and Mark should meet.

Going from the cold, clear frosty silence of the snow-bound out of doors into the sudden warmth and noise of the **great** hall hit Fay almost like a physical blow. It seemed by

contrast as though she had stepped straight from the peace of heaven into the pandemonium of hell. Just the noise and the unaccustomed warmth, she thought. But there was something else as well. Some sort of fracas seemed to be going on—a sort of free-for-all, it seemed, in which the horseplay was not entirely all good-natured.

Fay was not surprised—tempers had seemed a little frayed before she went out—but she had hoped that they would have improved by now.

"It's in his pocket—the inside one—"

"It isn't—!"

"Yes, it is—here, I've got it!"

"No, you don't—"

"Oonagh! Catch!"

Something hurtled through the air and fell at Fay's feet. As she stopped to pick it up Wendy said, "It's Mark's—they've no business to take Mark's things."

The melee of assorted bodies was falling apart, and to her surprise Fay saw that at the centre was Mark. A very dishevelled Mark with his jacket half torn off him and with his hair most uncharacteristically ruffled. He looked intensely angry.

All these things Fay noticed in a second of time. Then Bernard snatched the opened wallet from her hand and thrust it towards Oonagh. "There you are!" he cried with spiteful triumph. "I told you he carried the kids' photographs around with him! Now do you believe you're wasting your time?"

The wallet had been in her hand for only a moment, but it had been there long enough for Fay to register one indisputable fact. It held the photograph of two small children. Two fair-haired children with noticeably dark eyes ... eyes which would be a rich, warm brown—like Mark's.

It seemed to Fay as though sudden silence had fallen over the hall, but it could have been that all her other senses were drowned in the overwhelming one of shame. For a split second her eyes and Mark's met. His were still very angry. Then she dropped her own glance and walked to the stairs.

Her dream was over. Fairyland was false—as false as hell.

CHAPTER THREE

ST. EDITH'S HOSPITAL in a north-western suburb of London was not a prepossessing building. It was red brick and bad Victorian in architecture, though it did have the advantage of spacious grounds. But the sight of it would have brought comfort to Fay Gabriel had it been in the back streets of some smoke-grimed city.

As the main doors swung to behind her she breathed a sigh of relief. The long vista of seemingly endless stone floored corridors, the tall windows, the inescapable and unmistakable odour of antiseptics mingled with anaesthetics reassured her. Here she was at home. This was her world. Here she was Sister Gabriel, and that other errant self, that other Fay Gabriel and her stay at Beechcroft, could be pushed into the limbo of things to be forgotten like a bad dream when morning is come.

It would take time, of course, for oblivion to become so complete that she could pretend that it had not happened. It would be a long time before she could forgive that other Fay who committed the—to her unforgivable—crime of giving her love unasked to a man who was unworthy. The shame of that realisation would be with her for a long time to come, but she would conquer it in the end, she told herself with determination.

She had not seen Mark again after that fracas in the hall when his photographs had fallen at her feet. She was not quite sure whether it was some innate common decency which had dictated that she should leave. No one seemed to know or care about his sudden disappearance and when

she had tentatively broached the subject to Toni the reply had been a typically vague, "Oh, I expect they wanted him at the theatre—they're always doing that."

Fay did not really mind into what realm he had disappeared so long as their paths did not cross again. She could feel fairly secure now, she thought. Once away from Beechcroft their worlds were not likely to come into orbit again, and for that she was devoutly thankful. She was even glad that she knew him by no other name than Mark—she did not know his real surname, and anyway he probably had a professional one. "So far as I am concerned," she told herself firmly, "he just does not exist."

At the porter's desk she was directed to the Matron's office. There she had to wait in the secretary's outer office while a procession of nurses came and went.

Fay regarded them with interest. They were very like the girls back home—very like what she herself had been a few short years ago. Their reactions to a summons to Matron's office was much the same too, she thought with a smile as she noted the change from apprehension to relief as the girls entered and left the inner room.

Last of all came a young houseman who went in with a very red face but came out with a wink for the secretary and a long, appraising glance for the stranger sitting in her office.

"Matron will see you now, Miss Gabriel," she was told after a few moments, and without any apprehension at all she entered the inner sanctum.

She was a little disquieted, however, to note that the woman behind the gleaming desk was quite young and attractive. In Fay's experience the battleaxe type of Matron was in the long run easier to work with.

"Good morning, Miss Gabriel—sit down, please," the incisive tones matched the voice and the quick glance which seemed to size up all there was to see in one brief instant. It seemed to Fay that the Matron did not altogether like what she saw. She waited while the older woman perused a sheaf of notes she had taken from her desk.

"Yes—I see." After a lengthy pause the Matron addressed her again. "You have come from the Commemoration Hos-

pital in Australia, Miss Gabriel. Now do you mind telling me why?"

It was not a question she had expected, but Fay had no difficulty in answering. "I had risen as high as I could hope to do in my profession. I knew I should have to mark time over some years as a Ward Sister, so I thought it would be as well to get in as much experience as I could. Back home we always regard the London hospitals as the nursing Mecca, so I thought I would apply for a post over here—especially as my parents were English and I had always wanted to visit this country."

"You have relations over here, then?"

"Not really. Mrs. Travers—"

"Ah yes, Mrs. Travers sent you to me, didn't she? Well, I must say that your credentials are excellent—really excellent. Of course I shall be glad to have you on my staff, but—" she paused for a moment to study Fay's appearance again, "it seems that in Australia Ward Sisters are appointed at a much earlier age than is customary over here. I cannot put you in charge of a ward at the moment—"

"Of course not, Matron," Fay agreed. "I shouldn't expect or even want that. I shall have a lot to learn, I expect, about your ways and administration over here. I should be very happy to work as staff nurse."

"Good. I see that you say you are particularly interested in the surgical side. You will be working on the Anderson Ward—pediatrics," she finished uncompromisingly.

The Matron pressed a switch on her desk and spoke to her secretary. St. Edith's might be housed in old-fashioned buildings, but from the appointments of the office Kay gathered that the equipment was of the latest design. "Please ask Home Sister to come to my office."

While the call was being made and answered, Matron had not taken her eyes from a close scrutiny of Kay's whole person. Fay knew that her testimonials were exceptional, but she felt nevertheless that she did not quite measure up to the Matron's requirements, and wondered where she fell short. The next few remarks began to give her a clue.

"Have you many friends in this country, Miss Gabriel?"

"None at all—except Mrs. Travers," Fay told her.

The older woman nodded. "Ah, yes. You will find that there are excellent facilities for recreation here," she went on, "and you will find the staff very friendly. But—" she paused, and now her glance was very hard, "—but whatever impression you may have gathered of our hospitals here, we do not encourage the formation of romantic friendships. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Matron," Fay answered meekly enough, but with a slight smile she could not repress. She could imagine just how much weight that dictum would carry with the housemen and the young nurses!

"May I ask if you are engaged—or thinking of marriage?"

The question took Fay by surprise, but her reply was so vehement it seemed even to startle the Matron.

"No!" she replied emphatically and categorically.

She was not aware that she had given the matter any thought—her reaction had been instinctive. And it struck even Fay herself that it was ridiculous to embrace perpetual spinsterhood for the sake of a single kiss—and a kiss under the mistletoe at that. But somewhere deep down inside herself she knew that if she could not marry Mark she would marry no one.

She did not have time to probe her own feelings any further at that point, for after a tap the door opened and a pleasant-faced woman of about forty entered. She gave Fay a friendly smile, but addressed herself to the Matron.

"You sent for me, Matron?"

"Yes, Sister. I want you to show Miss Gabriel her quarters—she is to be staff nurse to Sister Browning. But as soon as she has got into her uniform show her the general geography of the hospital, and she can report for duty on the afternoon rota."

"Very good, Matron." The Home Sister was imperturbably cheerful, it seemed, and Fay felt reassured as she got up and prepared to leave the room. Just before she reached the door, however, she was called back. "Miss Gabriel?"

"Yes, Matron?"

"I hope you will be very happy here—and I am always available to any of my nurses if they have any problems

they want to discuss with me." She smiled, and with the smile the whole expression of her face was changed.

"Thank you, Matron." Fay warmed to the smile, and followed the Sister from the room.

"She's a dear really," the Sister told her when they were in the corridor. "Has she been lecturing you about not forming any attachments?"

"Yes, she did mention it—as taboo!" Fay told her guide.

"Poor Matron—it's a constant nightmare to her. Our loss of good nurses through marriage is terribly high and there's really nothing she can do about it. All the warnings in the world don't have any effect. You must have given her quite a headache."

"Me?" asked Fay wonderingly.

"Yes. You're too pretty. Matron feels much safer with plain girls."

"I can't think why," Fay said, for in her experience the plain girls were the more determined in their pursuit of a man.

"Neither can I," her companion agreed. "Now this is the Nurses' Home—no men visitors, of course. You're on the first floor—I managed to give you a single as you've been a Sister—I suppose you've been used to your own quarters?"

"I have," Fay agreed, "but I don't want any special treatment because of that. I'm joining here as a staff nurse and I shan't expect to be treated any differently from the others."

"Good girl!" the other commented with a smile. "I'll leave you for an hour, then—to get yourself a bit organised, and then if you'll be in your uniform by then I'll take you round the hospital. I must say it is a bit thick to put you on duty so soon. When did you land?"

"Oh, I haven't come straight from Australia. I got here a week ago—I've been spending Christmas with Mrs. Travers—she's an old friend of my mother's."

The Home Sister's eyes widened a little. "Mrs. Travers? Then you'll know—"

But Fay never discovered who it was she ought to know, for Home Sister was called away by an orderly who tapped at the door.

St. Edith's was larger than Fay had originally supposed,

for there were several separate blocks on the campus, some of which were connected with the main building by covered ways and some which were quite isolated. One of these was the pediatric wing, to which she was allocated.

Fay guessed from its position that it might well be rather isolated from the main life of the hospital, but she was a little startled when she was introduced to a batch of nurses just going on duty, to be greeted with "Welcome to the Seminary !" and "Come and join the hen party 1"

A small puckish girl with merry dark eyes whose name was Fowler, but who seemed to be called Flip for some reason, explained, "We're all women over here—nursing staff, housemen, consultants—the lot. We even have to ring up the main building for a porter if we need one."

"Yes—and a visit from the window-cleaner is an event—but he only comes once in about two or three months," someone else complained.

"Good gracious !" Fay ejaculated. "Is it intentional, or accidental?—the femininity, I mean."

"Supposed to be accidental," they told her, but Flip added, "Tell that to the Marines—I see the hand of our beloved Matron in it."

"You going to be our new staff?" they wanted to know, but before she could answer that or satisfy their curiosity about herself she was summoned into Sister's office.

Sister Browning was a female Friar Tuck—nearly as broad as she was long and of a bouncing cheerfulness. She was at first glance obviously the sort of woman who ought to have had a brood of youngsters of her own. Since, however, she had somehow missed the marriage market she had now achieved the next best thing in having two large children's wards under her care. She adored children and was just the sort of person children would love, Fay thought. This, however, as she later learned to her cost, meant that Sister spent nearly all the time in the wards and left all the dull routine desk work to her second in command—a post which was to fall to Fay's lot.

"I'm mighty glad to see you," Sister Browning beamed after they had been talking for a few minutes. "I haven't

had a staff for two weeks and it's been such a drag. I do hope you'll stay—did Matron tell you the snags?"

"No—are there any?" Fay asked innocently. "She didn't mention any."

"It seems so," the Sister tried to look solemn for a moment. "At any rate my seepage of young nurses is about twice that of the other wards. The girls tell me there are two main snags. First, the all-women staff—even housemen and consultants; and secondly, the fact that they don't like walking across the grounds on dark nights to get to the Nurses' Home."

Fay laughed. "Neither of those will worry me—I'm not interested in young doctors and I'm not afraid of the dark."

"Thank goodness for that," a sigh of relief went out from Sister Browning. "Then I'm sure we'll get on like a house on fire, and perhaps you can instill into these girls the fact that it isn't the end of the world if they're not married by the time they're twenty-one."

"I'll try," Fay promised, but she didn't really think she'd stand much chance of success. Whether because of Matron's warnings against romance, or in spite of them, there seemed to be a greater concentration on it here than anywhere else. Certainly more than in the Commemoration Hospital—but there of course Fay remembered that any girl, however plain or unattractive, could have her choice of a man at almost any age. Over here in England she realised that the balance between the sexes was only just beginning to readjust itself in favour of the girls.

All the same, although she made what excuse she could for them, Fay did get rather tired of men as the perpetual subject of conversation in the common rooms, dining room and even in the corridors.

Long before she had an opportunity of meeting them she knew just which of the housemen were "fun" and which were dull, knew which ones it was safe to encourage and which ones of whom to beware. And the gossip did not stop with housemen—the names of Registrars and Consultants were bandied about.

"Of course," Flip told her seriously as she ploughed her way through an enormous bun with her afternoon cup of tea,

"of course Osborne's by far the dishiest of the lot—but he's married."

"So are lots of the others, aren't they?" Fay's eyebrows went up in surprise, for she had been in the hospital long enough now to know that such things as engagements or marriage were very lightly disposed of in the nurses' quarters.

"Oh, but he's properly married—in fact he's the most proper thing you can come across—"

"He was brought up by a Victorian grandmother," someone else put in. "Still, all the same, I wouldn't mind being married to him. I'd feel so safe," the girl breathed ecstatically.

"Hm. Opportunity would be a fine thing," Flip said tartly.

"Come on, Gabriel," someone teased her, "who's your secret boy-friend? I noticed you've cold-shouldered all the housemen who've tried to date you. Who is he?"

"Mr. Nobody!" Kay forced herself to smile and speak lightly, but she did wish that it did not hurt her so much—all this idle light-hearted banter about men friends and dates. Sometimes she wondered if she could ever bring herself to accept some of the invitations which were pressed upon her—certainly it would make her seem more normal and attract less comment.

Gradually, though, time softened the edges and Fay settled down into the life of St. Edith's. Dates in plenty came her way, and whenever it was possible she chose those which included another couple. Foursomes were safe and would hurt nobody, she felt. If she did accept a solo date she took care that it was an isolated occasion and so she managed to steer clear of an entanglement. She even began to enjoy herself a little, since this was her first visit to London and there were so many things for her to see.

The only exception she made to her self-imposed rule of not getting too friendly with any one of the housemen was Shorty Shaw. He was anything but short and was the sporting type. He it was who took Fay along to the ice-skating club of which he was a member and there discovered that she was almost professional class, particularly in the field of dancing. After that their communal interest excused a succession of dates, though as she became established as a

member of the club, Fay often went there without an escort at all. But whenever it was possible for their free periods to coincide she and Shorty were usually to be found at the club at least twice a week.

One morning, expecting a letter from Australia, she went along to the porter's desk in the main building to see if there were any letters for her. There was one, but not the one she had expected, so tucking it in her bib she was on her way back to the ward when she ran into Shorty. He was not looking pleased with life as he waylaid her.

"It's a damn rotten shame !" he announced.

"What is?" Fay demanded.

"I can't keep our date tonight. Sorry and all that—but blame my new boss."

"Oh?"

"Yes," the scowling young man went on. "You know I told you I was being switched to a surgical firm—well, I would get stuck with the stuffiest of the lot. My new Registrar tells me I'm expected to stand by on call all this week and half of next—just in case there's a theatre call."

"Well, that's reasonable, isn't it?" Fay enquired mildly.

"No, it isn't!" Shorty denied forcefully. "Not when I've been switched a week before I was due—just to suit their convenience—and considering my date with you was fixed before I knew that. He's just being his silly pompous self—it isn't as if he hadn't got two other housemen attached to hold his hand if need arises."

"Oh well, never mind—there'll be plenty of other times. And he wasn't to know, was he?"

"Yes, he was," Shorty was not going to give up his grievance easily. "I told him all about—who and where and why—I told him you'd got to get in a lot of practice if we're to stand a chance in the club championships—but that didn't budge him. From the look on his face I thought he was going to tell me that a surgeon's life had to be a dedicated one—"

"Well, so it has," Fay pointed out.

"Oh, yes—" said the young man impatiently, "but—" he broke off suddenly. "Strewth! There is his lordship, and I'm due in Stanhope to do his round with him. Be seeing you—"

and Shorty was off at as near a run as his long legs and the slippery corridor permitted.

In the staff kitchen of Anderson Ward she found that with five minutes to spare she had time to read the letter she had tucked into her apron. It was from Toni and seemed to be in answer to the bread and butter letter which Fay had addressed to her weeks before. Toni's handwriting was firm and clear, but many of her sentences trailed off unfinished and a lot of the matter was unintelligible because of non *sequiturs*. Obviously Toni was no better, rather worse, and the realisation made Fay a little sad.

One paragraph was unmistakably clear, however. It ran: "Have you been seeing much of Mark lately? I do so want you two to like one another." Fortunately, Fay thought, she didn't have to answer that question, for the rest of the letter made it abundantly clear that Toni would have forgotten she had ever asked it long before a reply could reach her.

She sighed as she put the letter back in her pocket. Life was queer.

Flip came into the room as she was preparing to leave. "What's all that in aid of?" she demanded. "You in love or something, sighing like that?"

"Definitely not," Fay told her sharply.

"Just as well," the other girl opined. "There's another hoo-ha on with Registry. Sister's in the ward and yelling for you to sort it out."

In the ward Sister Browning was coping with a new admission—or rather, a readmission who rejoiced in the name of Paul Jones.

"Oh, there you are, Staff," Sister greeted her. "They've sent this child up without any notes. Registry say they can't find them and that therefore I must have them." Sister Browning was not renowned for her methodical habits and was at perpetual loggerheads with Registry. "But I haven't—I returned them about three months ago when he was discharged. I must have them because Dr. Fisher will be up to do her rounds in less than an hour. Chase them up for me, will you, Staff, and tell them that I'm quite sure I haven't

got the notes. I've checked. And please don't come back without them!"

Fay set out on her task rather unwillingly—she would far rather have stayed in the ward and settled little Paul in, but she knew why she had been picked to go to Registry rather than one of the younger nurses whose job it more properly was. It meant that Sister Browning was not really at all sure of the whereabouts of that file. Fay sighed as she obediently made the trek over to the main building on what she knew would probably be a difficult mission.

Registry were not very helpful. The clerks there had had more than one battle with Sister Browning and were not disposed to alter the verdict which had already been given—the file for Paul Jones had been booked out to Sister Browning.

"Yes, I know," Fay argued. "That was when the child was in before, but Sister sent the file back here when he was discharged about three months ago."

"Yes—and then she asked for it again—"

"Of course she did—when the child was readmitted today. That's when you told her the file was out," Fay repeated the details she had been given.

Grumbling, the clerk went away and came back with another who carried on the argument. "Sister Browning asked for the file yesterday and we sent it up to her."

"Well, it didn't arrive in the office yesterday, of that I'm quite sure," Fay stated firmly. "I did the office work yesterday myself and tidied up before night staff went on, and there was no file for Paul Jones there."

This seemed to be deadlock, and in desperation Fay suggested, "Could you perhaps have sent it to another ward by mistake?"

Registry did not admit to making mistakes, and only after persistent pressing did the clerk reluctantly agree to look up yesterday's list to see who else had requested files just before and just after Sister Browning.

This time there was a considerable pause, during which some telephoning took place. Eventually the first clerk came back. "I'm sorry, Staff Nurse," she said grudgingly, "it seems that the file on Paul Jones must have got caught up with

another batch that was going to Mr. Osborne. We'll get it back and let you have it up later."

"But it's wanted now," Fay persisted. "Dr. Fisher will be starting her round almost immediately and Sister wants that file."

"Well, there's only two of us here now and **I** can't spare anyone to send over for it. Perhaps you'd like to go yourself? It's on the desk in Mr. Osbome's office."

"Where's that?" Fay had no objection to getting the file for herself so long as she got it back to the ward in time for the doctor's round.

"It's one of the offices on the main corridor—near Theatre One. You'll see it—it's got his name on the door. You can just go in and pick it up if there's no one there."

Fay had heard about the privilege accorded to some of the Senior Registrars of having an office put at their disposal. Years ago before the accident wing had been added there had been a number of small examination rooms on the main corridor, and when these were no longer needed for that purpose they were made available to some of the Registrars. She must have passed the doors more than once on journeys through the main corridor without ever noticing the names on the white-painted doors. However, she found **Mr.** Osborne's without difficulty and tapped on it.

A familiar voice called "Come in!" and when she went in Fay was surprised to see Shorty Shaw sitting behind the desk.

"Hullo, what d'you want?" he said with a grin when he saw who it was.

"Hullo," Fay responded, "**I** thought this was Mr. Osborne's office—what are you doing here?"

"Using his desk to catch up on my homework," Shorty told her unashamedly. "What can **I** do for you?"

"Registry say there's a file here—Paul Jones is the name. It ought to have come to us, but there's been some muddle. Can I look to see if it's here?"

"It is—somewhere. Registry just rang through about it. I expect it's got under some of my junk, though."

Fay moved over to the desk to help in the search, and **in**

doing so a filing' cabinet on the short side wall came into her view. For a moment her busy seeking hands paused in their search as she stared at a large photograph on top of the cabinet.

"What's the matter?" Shorty asked, noticing her absorption. "Oh, that—" he followed her gaze, "they're Osborne's kids. Keeps their photograph always on view as a form of protection against the onslaughts of you nurses—"

"Oh, here's the file—" Fay interrupted a little breathlessly.

"Well, don't dash off," Shorty protested. "Stay and natter a bit—looking for a file covers a multitude of sins !"

"Sorry," Fay mumbled, "this one's wanted urgently." And before he could try to detain her longer she was outside in the corridor.

Automatically and almost blindly her feet took her down the main corridor and across the grounds back to her own ward without any conscious effort.

All her faculties just then were needed to assimilate the fact that the children whose picture she had just seen in Mr. Osborne's room were Mark's children. The photograph was a larger reproduction of the one she had seen in Mark's wallet.

A series of crises in the ward kept her too busy for the rest of the day to do more than dully record the fact that Mark was here—somewhere in St. Edith's—part of the same organisation as herself. It was only when she went off duty and back to her room in the Nurses' Home that she began to see things which might have given her a clue. Toni had explained Mark's sudden disappearance from Beechcroft at Christmas by saying that he had been sent for from the theatre. She could not think now why, with her training, it had never so much as crossed her mind that Toni was referring to an operating theatre. It explained too that remark in Toni's letter—not so wide of the mark after all. Indeed it was almost strange that in her two months at St. Edith's she had never accidentally run across Mark. True, their paths did not really cross—and she would see to it that they did not in future.

Just for a moment she allowed her mind to go back to Beechcroft and Christmas. She was trying to remember whether in any of their conversations she had mentioned her profession to Mark. Certainly she could not recall having done so—and she was equally sure that he had never mentioned his work to her. Looking back now it seemed strange how little they had spoken of themselves, their past, their backgrounds. It was as though fate, knowing there was no future for them, had given them that one little island of time in which to know one another so well without knowing anything at all about one another.

Fate was still being kind to her, Fay thought, as she remembered thankfully how separate was life in the "Seminary" from the main hospital. Forewarned was forearmed, and she would take care in future to avoid the vicinity of the Registrars' offices in the main building.

Life settled down to its usual uneventful course again and one day, one week, followed another with plenty of work and plenty of interest. Fay, although once or twice her heart beat a little faster than was normal as some tall, slim figure swung into the corridor ahead of her, never did catch sight of Mark, and she gradually grew more relaxed. She even told herself that it was silly to be apprehensive.

Sister Browning was very pleased with her new staff nurse, and told her so. "I can't think how I ever got on without you. You won't be asking for a transfer, will you?"

"Certainly not," Fay assured her. "I'm very happy here."

At the back of her mind she knew that one day she would want to take on the responsibilities of a Ward Sister again—but that was not yet. Not for a long while.

Transfers however were very much in the air, and the younger nurses could think of little else. Most of them had done their three months' stint and were either due for a change of ward or else for a return to full-time studies.

Everyone was waiting anxiously for the lists to be posted and keeping their fingers crossed that they would get the transfer they wanted.

"If I don't get a surgical this time I shall go and see Matron!" Flip threatened. "I've done two medicals, geriatric,

pediatric and psychiatric, so it's about time she gave me something interesting."

"Men's surgical for preference, I suppose?" Fay teased her.

"Yes, of course," Flip undisguisedly admitted. "Hard luck you don't get a change—but then you seem to like the old Brown Cow."

A few days later when the lists came out there were moans or rejoicings on all sides. Flip was one of the lucky ones and had got her transfer to Stanhope Ward.

Among the batch of girls who came on to the children's ward there were a number of raw recruits coming on to the wards for the first time, but to balance their lack of experience there was one other of the rank of staff nurse. But she too was new to children's work, and for a week or ten days Fay was not sure whether she was on her head or her heels, trying to keep the ward running and instruct the younger nurses at the same time as correcting the many mistakes they made in the records.

When she got a call to Matron's office one morning she thought it was because of a report she had made on Sister Browning's account of the first showing of some of the new nurses; she was prepared to substantiate the remarks she had made, although they implied criticism of the establishment in the arrangements of the girls' duties.

When she presented herself Matron looked her up and down before telling her to sit down. But it seemed that Matron had not called her in to talk about the report, but about herself.

"Well, Nurse," she began, "how are you liking work in pediatrics?"

"Oh, very much indeed, Matron," said Fay enthusiastically. "I'm very happy."

"Sister Browning thinks very highly of your work, too," there was a slight pause, then Matron went on rather with the air of a conjuror producing a rabbit out of a hat, "So it may come as a surprise to you to hear that I am moving you. Not an unpleasant surprise, I hope," she went on, smiling graciously. "I am short of Sisters. Sister Neames is on six months' compassionate leave. Sister Graham is on sick leave,

and now Sister Rainbow has to have an urgent operation and will be away at least three months. Now you have had experience as a Sister, so I am appointing you as temporary Ward Sister in place of Sister Rainbow. That is to say from Monday next you will be in charge of Men's Surgical, Stanhope Ward."

CHAPTER FOUR

IT did not take long via the grapevine for the news of Fay's appointment to permeate the hospital.

There had of course been no question as to her acceptance. Certainly Matron had no doubts on the subject and though for one wild panic-stricken moment Fay had nearly cried out "Oh no Not Stanhope !" the challenge to her professional pride won an easy victory.

In her inmost heart she had known that this was inevitable right from the beginning. It was not possible even in the seclusion of the "Seminary" that in so enclosed a community she and Mark should not one day come face to face. When *she* had assimilated the idea she could even see that it was better that their meetings should be frequent and in the clear hard light of the ward with Shorty and nurses and patients all part of the picture. Better by far that their meeting should be on an entirely professional basis.

It was not easy to reach that state of mind, however. When Fay emerged from Matron's office her mind and her heart were in a turmoil and she did not tell anyone on the ward what had been the purport of her summons. Sister Browning would be officially informed soon enough, and as for the rest of the staff, their curiosity went unheeded so far as Fay was concerned—not for any reason of unfriendliness on her part, but simply because she could not yet trust herself to speak dispassionately on the subject.

When she went down to supper that evening it certainly did not occur to her either that the news of her promotion

could yet be known, or that it could be responsible for the unmistakable "atmosphere" among her table companions.

There was an unnatural silence in which everyone seemed passionately interested in a most unappetising dish which went by the name of shepherd's pie. Flip was actually reading, or pretending to read, when Fay sat down opposite her.

It was not, however, in Flip's nature to be silent for long. She looked up from her book and demanded of Kay truculently, "You got friends in high places, or something?"

"What on earth do you mean? Of course I haven't," Fay denied with a puzzled frown.

"Well, all I can say is that it looks like it," Flip went on, and then it all poured out. "Lena Banks has done staff for more than three years and she was promised the next Ward Sister's job that came vacant, and now you're appointed to Stanhope and you've not done three months yet, hardly. If that isn't favouritism I don't know what is!"

Inspiration must have come to Fay's rescue then and put the soft answer into her mouth even before she could work it out for herself.

"But it's such a temporary appointment—Sister Rainbow is only expected to be away for about three months. I expect that's why they didn't appoint Banks. It wouldn't have been fair to put her on Sister's duties for a month or two and then reduce her to staff again. But with me it didn't matter because I had already agreed with Matron that I was prepared to work as a staff nurse."

Flip stared at her with a doubtful air. Plainly she wanted to stick up for the rights of Banks, but plainly too belligerence was not in her line at all.

"Could be, I s'pose," she agreed. "Anyway, you didn't ask for a transfer, did you?"

"I most certainly didn't!" Fay told her with such emphasis that Flip's remaining doubts were removed.

"Oh well, they'll just have to put that in their pipes and smoke it, won't they! I believe you—and I say it'll be jolly good working with you again, as a matter of fact. You won't turn all starch and strychnine when you put on your Sister's uniform, will you?"

"I hope not," Fay told her with a smile as she saw the

last trace of animosity fade from Flip's insouciantly expressive face.

She did not linger long over her supper that night, however, but went up to her own room. She needed to be alone to get to grips with this new situation before she dared follow it to any sort of conclusion.

Flip had referred to "friends in high places." Surely, Fay thought, surely Mark could not have asked for her to be transferred to one of his wards? That sort of thing might just conceivably happen in some of the smaller hospitals back home where medical and nursing staff were on very familiar terms, but not here in a London hospital. Besides, why should he? Fay asked as the cold touch of logic descended upon her. If anything, Mark would be more anxious not to meet her again than she was not to meet him. After all, he had kissed her first. "I hope he won't be embarrassed," she thought—and that was not so much for his sake as because she knew that if he did show embarrassment it would be the surest way to shake her own equilibrium.

And then she remembered that he might well be just as much in the dark about her connection with St. Edith's as she had been about his position there. True, he did know her name, but she doubted if Toni had ever thought to mention that she had helped her to a post in his hospital, and even if he had heard of the new appointment to Stanhope Ward he might not associate it with her.

Her final conclusion was that Mark might very well show not only embarrassment but also shock at the sight of her, and she schooled herself to meet it.

As things turned out, she need not have worried. Nothing could have been more ordinary than their meeting.

She had been on duty with Sister Rainbow over the weekend in order to get into the swing of things in Stanhope Ward, but it seemed that Mr. Osborne had not been on duty over the weekend. She knew, however, that he could not fail to do a round on Monday and steeled herself to meet him with whatever degree of recognition that he afforded her.

He came before she expected him and she was at the far end of the ward dealing with a rather difficult patient who was refusing to co-operate with the more junior nurses.

Flip came down the ward with the rapid sliding gait which was just not running and said with a little gasp, "Mr. Osborne, Sister," and with a heavenward turn of her eyes expressed very dramatically her own feelings for the "dishy" Mr. Osborne.

Fay, with a final cautionary word to the patient, walked to the other end of the ward where Mark and Shorty were standing just inside the door waiting for her. Never did the distance seem so long or the floor so slippery.

Mark's face was impassive. "Good morning, Sister," he said pleasantly "You are taking over from Sister Rainbow, I understand?"

"Yes—just temporarily," she told him.

He looked at her with a long searching glance which Fay could not quite fathom and then nodded briefly and said, "Let's take a look at the patients, shall we?"

The round proceeded on strictly professional lines—at least as far as Sister and Registrar were concerned, but Shorty nearly disgraced himself by trying repeatedly to fix a date with Fay by soundless lip-talking. Each time before he could get the message across to Fay, who only greeted it with a frown, Mark recalled him to the patient's notes or condition abruptly, although from all the signs he could not have been aware of Shorty's efforts.

At the end of the round, just before the two doctors passed through the swing doors, he turned to Fay with a smile and said, "I must congratulate you, Sister, on the way you've done your homework. I hope you'll be very happy here—Sister Gabriel." And with that he was gone.

After the round was over and Fay was straightening the files on her desk she suddenly threw back her head and laughed. What had she been afraid of? Just because the whole atmosphere of Beechcroft had been so utterly beyond her ken she had built up all her experiences there into gigantic, dramatic proportions. It suddenly seemed to her absurd that she should have been so troubled by a kiss under the mistletoe. Even for a married man there was no harm in that. And that was all it had been—just a kiss under the mistletoe at a Christmas party.

But even in the clinical atmosphere of her office Fay had

to admit that the experience had left a scar on her. No need for her to feel degraded, though, for Mark had obviously been quite unaware that on her side she had given her love with the kiss. She stood for a moment, remembering—and a little shiver went through her. She was remembering not Beechcroft, but the way Mark had spoken her name that morning. "Sister Gabriel" he had said, but he had spoken it as though it had been her christian name and spelt differently. Like Toni spoke it when she was confused as to whether that was her name and not Fay. It told her nothing, promised nothing, but left her with the tantalising certainty that Mark did not intend that in their new relationship the old could be entirely left out.

Perhaps by reason of the constantly changing stream of patients who pass through a ward, some of them for quite serious operations, the life of a Ward Sister seems to pass more quickly than it actually does, and after only a week on Stanhope Ward it seemed to Fay as though she had been there all her life. And she was loving it. Men patients were of course notoriously easier to handle than women, and in Stanhope they all revelled in a pretty young Sister who was at the same time one hundred per cent efficient.

Fay was lucky too in her nurses. They were all happy to be on a surgical ward, and a men's ward at that, and they co-operated to the full. Fay had just wondered if there would be any difficulties with Flip, for while they had both been on Anderson ward they had been friends almost as equals. Fortunately, however, Flip had the loyalty and the good sense not to presume on that friendship during working hours, and proved herself a most able ally.

Her staff nurse, Kate Moore, might have presented a bit of a problem too, for she was almost twice Fay's age. But she made her position clear from the very first.

"Now don't you be put off, Sister dear, because I'm old enough to be your mother. I ought to have been a Sister myself years ago, and it's my own choice that I'm not. By nature you see I'm a bit of a coward—and so I'm happy to be taking me orders from a chit of a girl like yourself and wondering how you have the guts to be shouldering the burdens the way ye are. And that's the truth of it."

"I shall be very glad of your experience, Staff," Fay told her, smiling up at the homely Irish face as she sat at her desk.

"Aye, I've plenty of that," the other agreed, "and if there's anything about St. Edith's you'll be wanting to know, why Kate Moore's the girl to tell you! I started my nursing days here and it's here I'll be hoping to end them."

"Then St. Edith's should count itself very fortunate," Fay told her, and she was not just being polite or matching charm with charm, for such a record was unusual and she already knew Staff Nurse Moore's reputation in the hospital. "First of all then, Staff, tell me something about our consultants. What sort of men are they—have they any particular likes or dislikes?"

"The two we have at present on this ward are fine fellows—proper gentlemen both. Mr. Snow—he's the senior. Getting on in his sixties now, and a little conservative, some say—never operates until he's quite sure there's no other way out of it. Not so popular with some of the younger patients who want to get it over. They want to be up and about again in the shortest possible time. They don't realise that the good Lord didn't give them all their bits and pieces for no good reason at all. He's particularly down on younger women wanting a hysterectomy for any but the best reasons."

"I'm with him there," Fay said grimly, having had experience of that type of woman in the Commemoration Hospital.

"Then there's Dr. Nash—a good surgeon, but not the manner of Mr. Snow. Never will have, and so he doesn't inspire the same confidence, though he's probably as good if not better with the knife."

"And neither of them have any funniosities?" Fay queried.

"No—both of them very easy to work with," Staff replied, though it was obvious that there was something else she was bursting to say and that the query had come as an interruption. Fay let her have her head.

"Mr. Osborne, now—our young Registrar. He's the man for my money. A real boyo—you mark my words, Sister dear, in a few years he'll be the top of the tree. Lovely work he does—and so neat. Just waiting for his Fellowship

now—once he's got that he'll be away from St. Edith's—more's the pity."

Staff's eulogy of her idol went on for quite a time, and would have gone on longer if Fay had not shown signs of a desire that they should both get on with their work. That brought Kate Moore, with a twinkle in her eye, to her final quip. "But now, Sister dear, don't you be getting any notions into that pretty head of yours—for he's married, is our Mr. Osborne, well and truly married, with the two most desirable children you've ever cast eyes upon."

"Yes, thank you, Staff—I know that. I've seen their photographs."

"Then you'll be knowing they're the spit and image of him with those great dark eyes—"

Fay soon learned how to control Staff's garrulity, as she learned, too, how to control her feelings about Mark. His daily visits to the ward soon ceased to trouble her at all. Indeed, she began to enjoy them, for working with him was a pleasure. He was always so willing to explain his side of a case and so ready to listen when, on behalf of the patient, she put the other side of the picture. He was, she found, intensely interested in his patients as people—they were always so much more than just cases to him, and she was reminded once again of the thought she had had about him at Beechcroft—he had that rare gift of compassion.

It was just as she was going off duty at the end of a tiring day that the telephone in her office rang with that particularly insistent ring which, even before she answered it, Fay

knew it meant trouble.

It was the Sister from the accident wing—Sister Evans.

"Sister Gabriel? This is Accident here. We've got a car smash case here—multiple fractures right leg, smashed pelvis, concussion and suspected rupture of spleen. Mr. Osborne has just phoned through to say he's not sending the patient back here but wants you to admit him to Stanhope. Mr. Osborne is coming over with the trolley almost at once and asks if you will prepare to receive the patient and if possible remain on duty yourself."

The request was unusual, but Fay did not take time to consider that—she was too busy preparing to receive the

unexpected patient. Since the opening of the accident wing these sudden requests for beds in the general wards were infrequent, but Fay had an empty bed and she hurried now to get it prepared. It was just approaching the hour for the change-over from day to night shift, and also supper time for some of the nurses, so that staff was at its lowest ebb and she had to do most of the work herself.

Nevertheless she was at the ward door waiting for the trolley when it was wheeled out of the lift.

The progress of the trolley from the lift was unusually slow, and when Fay saw the reason—the drip stand with its inverted bottle of blood still attached to the patient's arm—she did not need any further evidence of the severity of the case. Mark, still in his theatre gown and mask, walked beside the trolley, his hand on the man's pulse. He looked so white and tired that the thought crossed Fay's mind that he seemed in need of a transfusion himself. Later she learned that he had been operating for three hours in the most exacting circumstances of multiple injuries and a race against time.

Very carefully the porters under Mark's supervision lifted the patient on to the bed and the coverings were replaced. Mark checked the needle in the vein. "Keep the blood going until B.P.'s up to normal—if you can get it up. He's AB—would have to be one of the rarer groups, of course, but the lab have four more bottles in stock and we've sent to the pool for replacements. Don't increase the rate unless you have to. Can you hang on until Night Sister gets round—she may be late, because there's another casualty from the same smash on the women's side."

"I'll stay until I can hand over to her," Fay promised quietly.

With a quick movement Mark removed his mask and smiled at her. It made him look so much more himself that Fay's heart gave a sickening little lurch.

"Thanks, Sister," he said, and then with a glance at the patient and a tightening of his lips he went on, "Some drunken fool who got off scot free ran into him broadside on, it seems. Doesn't it make you sick that a young life can be jeopardised by sheer, selfish irresponsibility?"

For the first time Kay looked closely at the patient's face

and an involuntary little "Oh!" escaped her. She felt Mark's glance shift to her quickly.

"Know him?" he asked laconically.

"No—not exactly," Fay explained, studying the handsome young face under its swathe of bandages, "but I've seen him down at the skating club—he's very good."

"Well, poor devil, he'll never skate again." Mark spoke through compressed lips.

"Is he badly hurt?" Fay asked. "I haven't had a chance to see the notes yet."

"About as bad as he can be," came the bitter-sounding reply. "We've done what we could, but it's too early yet to assess his chances. There's a metal splinter in his head that we've not been able to tackle yet. Don't know how deep it is—a lot will depend on that. Sir Brian will be coming over in the morning—in the meantime we've got to do our darnedest to keep him alive."

Silence fell for a few seconds as they stood on either side of that inert figure in the bed. Mark's ravaged face was bent on his patient, but Fay's eyes were on the surgeon.

"Fellowes was the anaesthetist," Mark said at last. "He'll be over in a few minutes to have a look at him, and we'll both be on call if we're needed. Goodnight, Sister."

"Goodnight," she answered quietly, and hoped that she had not actually spoken the last word of the salutation aloud. **But** his name echoed in her heart.

It was late by the time Fay reached the Sisters' dining room that night, and a very indifferent meal awaited her. However, she was too tired to care what she was eating and enjoyed most the cup of coffee which finished the meal. While she was still drinking it one of the Theatre Sisters came in. "Hullo, Gabriel—how's the accident case? You've got him on Stanhope, I hear."

"Not in very good shape," Fay told her, "but just about holding his own."

"I never want to see another afternoon like this one's been. What on earth's this supposed to be?" Sister Miles was referring to the congealed mess on her plate. "Not shepherd's pie again?"

" 'Fraid so. There was a roast, but it didn't last long. Have you had a rough time in theatre today, then?"

"I'll say we have ! Didn't you hear about it?"

"Only that you'd had two cases from the same car crash."

"That's only the beginning," Sister Miles attacked her meal grimly. "Haven't you heard about Mr. Snow's collapse?"

"No !" Fay paused with her cup half way to her lips. "Mr. Snow? What happened?"

"Well, we were dealing with the man—they'd taken the girl into the other theatre and were getting her cleaned up a bit, but the man couldn't wait, they said. And he was a mess, I can tell you. Fortunately Snow was still here—and we were all on our toes. He decided to tackle the pelvis first—the head plates hadn't come through so we didn't know how bad that was. Snow had just got going when all of a sudden he stopped with the knife in his hand. Osborne was the other side of the table, and he looked up at the pause, and suddenly yelled at me 'Grab him!' "

Fay, who had done a good stint of theatre work at the Commemoration Hospital, could well imagine just what sort of panic must have supervened under the tense efficiency which characterised a theatre when an unplanned operation was in progress. All the housemen crowding to see what the first incision would reveal and the younger nurses tense as they always were at first—fearful lest the patient should die on the table. "Go on," she implored as Miles stopped for a mouthful of food. "What did you do?"

"What could I do?" the other Sister replied laconically "I did as I was told and grabbed Snow round the middle. Fortunately he's a small man and I'm pretty hefty, so I managed to stop him falling forward across the table, but he let the knife slip and it punctured the skin on the patient's diaphragm—"

"What on earth—! Had he fainted or something?"

"Or something, I should think. Looked more like a slight seizure to me. The housemen got him out and I suppose the physicians took care of him. And Osborne took charge of the operation—he looked a bit shaken too, I thought, but he worked like an angel. If that young man survives he'll have Mark Osborne to thank for it."

"What about Mr. Snow?" Fay asked. "Has he ever done anything like that before?"

"No, but he's had us all a bit worried more than once," Sister Miles confessed. "He's getting old, you know—I should think this will just about finish him as a surgeon."

"It will be hard for him to give up," Fay said sympathetically, but Sister Miles cut her short, sensibly, but rather callously, Fay thought.

"Surgery's a job where you can't afford to get old," she philosophised. "You've got to be a hundred per cent fit or else you're out. He's had a good innings. Time he made way for a younger man," she chatted on, tucking into her unappetising meal. "Shouldn't be surprised if this isn't young Osborne's chance."

"Mr. Osborne? But he hasn't got his Fellowship yet, has he?"

"No—but he would have had it if he hadn't dashed off to rescue his grandmother or some such relative who'd had a slight stroke in Italy a few months back just as he was due for his finals. But there's no doubt about his getting his Fellowship and the Board wouldn't let that stand in the way. I bet they'll jump at the chance of giving him a Junior Consultancy and tying him down to St. Edith's for a bit longer. Of course—" Sister Miles finished her meal and her interest in the subject at the same time, "of course if young what's-his-name survives it'll be another feather in Osborne's cap, for he was as nasty a mess as I've seen—so it's up to you, Gabriell!"

It was no more than hospital gossip perhaps, the sort of conversation which was bandied about the nurses' common rooms and dining rooms from time to time without much real foundation. But Sister Miles did have a great-uncle who was on the Board, Fay had heard, so perhaps she did know what she was talking about.

At any rate, when she went on duty the next morning, and, according to custom, looked first at the night report sheet, her eyes flew to the bottom name instead of the top. Geoffrey Wentworth ... condition maintained.

She went into the ward and paid her first call at the bed of last night's emergency admission. Night Sister, she thought,

had been perhaps a little over-cautious in her report. The young man looked a better colour than he had done last night, although the drip was still up. But his breathing was less shallow and there seemed to be a stronger pulse under her fingers.

She was just about to leave the bedside when the patient opened his eyes. They were grey eyes, and just then very puzzled grey eyes.

Then it seemed as though he caught sight of Fay, and after a moment in which the puzzlement in his eyes turned to complete bewilderment and then satisfaction, Geoffrey Wentworth smiled, and then a faint whisper came from his lips. "Always—wanted to know you—" he whispered. "—Never thought I would—you a nurse?"

Fay bent down to catch the faint words and now she patted his hand. "That's right, Mr. Wentworth. You're in hospital—had a bit of an accident in your car. But we'll soon have you right again—nothing for you to worry about. Just rest all you can."

She had been so delighted at the improvement in her patient's condition that she had not noted the shadow which had fallen across the bed as someone came between it and the window on the far side. She looked up to see Mark Osborne standing there and looking—not at the patient as she might have expected—but at her.

"Good morning, Mr. Osborne," she was crisply professional in a moment. "There seems to be some improvement, I think, sir."

He nodded, a little impatiently, she thought. "So I see. Speech clear—how about his eyes—was he focusing?"

"Yes, very well."

"Good, looks as though that splinter must be quite superficial, then. We shall know more when Sir Brian's seen him. How's the blood pressure?"

"Coming on nicely," Fay told him, and produced the relative charts.

Mark nodded. "We'll pull him through," he said.

They did pull Geoffrey Wentworth through, but it was a long haul and even after the worst was over there were repeated visits to the theatre, necessary because the bone of his

right leg, which had been exposed, had become infected and twice had to be chipped, so that although his other injuries were a remarkable testimony to the surgeon's skill Geoffrey Wentworth had to face a long spell of hospitalisation.

"Faith, Sister dear, if you could be on duty all the time we'd have young Wentworth fit and well again in no time at all, for the dear boy fair dotes on the sight of you," Staff told Fay.

Fay frowned a little at the words. She was not on duty all the time and when she was she had twenty-five other patients under her care, all equally demanding of her time.

True, she had a special feeling for Geoffrey Wentworth. Right from the first she had been determined to save him—for Mark's sake. But she had a special feeling for him for his own sake too. She admired the courage with which the young man had faced the future in the knowledge that his splendid physique was gone for ever, that he would no longer be able to take part in all those sports which he loved and at which he had excelled. He would have a permanent limp at the very best, she knew that.

She felt sorry for him too because although in due course he became the "oldest inhabitant" of the ward he was never exactly in his element there. Most of the other patients were older men of the artisan type, while Geoffrey was an educated man, more interested in books and music than public house stories or racing results. He got on well enough with the other patients, but it always seemed to Fay that he was lonely. She wished that Mark would offer him friendship, which would have meant a great deal to him, she felt sure. But in this case Mark, although he did everything in his power to aid recovery, showed no inclination to step over the dividing line of the doctor-patient relationship, and when Fay once suggested that the young man's recovery might be speeded up if he were given some therapeutic consideration, he only suggested that he might be transferred to a medical ward. But this suggestion Fay soon disposed of. The medical wards were more full of old chronics and hopeless cases than the surgical and would certainly have a depressing rather than a cheering effect on her young patient.

Geoffrey had his visitors, of course, but not very many

of them. His parents lived in Worcestershire and came down for a weekend once a month, and his reputed "girl-friend," a very attractive but rather cold girl, was in a ballet company and on tour.

He spent a great deal of his time reading, and Fay often recommended books to him, but the hospital library had its limitations.

"Why don't you try writing one yourself?" she suggested one day, more than half in jest.

Geoff, however, took her seriously and looked up with interest. "D'you think I could?" he asked. "I'd like to—more than anything else in the world—but I've never had time."

"Then now's your opportunity," she said enthusiastically, glad at last to have hit on something which would give him a lively interest.

"I should only make a fool of myself," he shook his head lugubriously. "I'd never dare to submit it to a publisher."

"Why not? You may turn out to be very good—and now's the time to find out, anyway. When you get back to your bank job you won't have the time ... I tell you what—" she offered, letting her enthusiasm run away with her, "I'll vet it for you when you've done a few chapters. I used to do a lot of reading for my father, who was a publisher."

"Was he? Would you really? Oh, Sister, you've made my day!" the young man fairly bubbled over. "Where can I get pens and paper—will the trolley have some?"

"If they haven't I'll get you some," she promised, and busily straightened his counterpane before going down the ward to meet Shorty and Mark who had just come in. To her annoyance she felt her cheeks warm as she greeted him, though her "Good morning, Mr. Osborne," was cool enough. But although no word was said, Mark's glance made her feel that she had in some way been guilty of unprofessional conduct in showing an interest in Geoff's affairs.

Mark was still Registrar, although for many weeks he had been doing a consultant's work. As expected after his temporary collapse Mr. Snow had resigned from his appointment, and now another one had been made. Common room gossip had it that the vacant post had been offered to Mark and that he had turned it down. "Must be out of his tiny mind,"

had been Sister Miles' opinion. "He's consultant standard—and he knows it."

"What reason did he give?" Fay asked, since the subject had been broached.

"I don't know. Someone said that he wanted to get his Fellowship first, then maybe he'd consider it. That's daft, of course, because they can't wait that long. Another tale is that he said he didn't want to tie himself to another three years at St. Edith's. And that's funny too," Sister Miles said thoughtfully, "because he's always seemed pretty happy here."

Fay wondered too at Mark's decision and the reason for it. But she did not allow her speculations to go very far. She never did where he was concerned. Their relationship was very much a matter of day-to-day activities, and it had to be that way.

She was not even sure whether she was glad or not that he had refused the consultancy. If he had accepted it would have meant that she would have been working with him in the same community, perhaps seeing him most days, for the next three years. She was not sure whether she wanted that or not, for in the bitter-sweet taste which characterised their relations she was not sure which was the paramount ingredient.

CHAPTER FIVE

SPRING came and Fay found this, her first English spring, a wholly delightful experience. There was a freshness in the air with the promise of warmth to come in the golden sunshine, and such a feeling of upsurge everywhere that sometimes she came on to the ward feeling that she wanted to dance down it instead of maintaining the dignified gait which her position demanded.

The London parks, to her so small, were like a tapestry woven in bright colours and fragrant with the all-pervading smell of wallflowers and lilac blossom.

The ward, too, was a positive bower of flowers which it was her delight to arrange each morning.

"Sure, Sister dear," Staff Nurse remarked as she watched her for a moment, "it's as lovely as the flowers themselves, so ye are. There's not many Ward Sisters nowadays can spare the time to do the vases, but you make a sight for sore eyes, and your fingers so nimble. Now if I was to take the job over from you it's turning to ramrods all those tulips would be."

"Nonsense, Staff, you'd do them beautifully, I'm sure, and I'm afraid I'm being a bit selfish hogging the job all to myself—you must do them tomorrow."

"No, thank you, Sister—I'll not be showing off me lack of artistic skill. There'd be trouble in the ward from Master Geoff if anybody but Sister arranged his flowers !"

Geoffrey Wentworth loved flowers and it was he who had sent Fay to Kew when the daffodils were in bloom, and later to see the bluebells there. He had said, "Kew at these times

is a must for me. I've always loved it, you see, and it has always been a kind of pilgrimage. I'll have to miss it this year, but **I** should like you to see it. Will you go and see it for me?"

It had been a simple request and one which it gave her great joy to fulfil. She even took in her stride his rather strange condition that she should go alone. And when she recounted her visit to him, in short interrupted snippets when she was doing her ward round, his face lighted up.

"I knew you would love it," he said. "**I** was there with you." But it still looked like being a very long time before Geoff Wentworth would be able to go to Kew for himself.

"How's the book coming on?" she asked, moving his writing things in order to straighten his bed.

"Slowly—very slowly," he sighed. "You see you never give us any peace here for two minutes together. I know it seems as though we lie here all day with nothing to do. It seems like that until you've really got something to concentrate on, and then you realise just how many interruptions there are in a *day*. *Washing, feeding, dressings,* injections, library trolley, doctor's round, patients' chatter—"

"And you want to do the thing properly and have a nice quiet study for the great man's muse to get to work—with a whacking great **DO NOT DISTURB** on the door," Fay teased him, picking up the pad at the same time.

Years of practice in reading MSS had made her a quick reader and assessor of style. She liked the few paragraphs she read under the title "Life's Beginning."

"Is this going to be your own life story?" she asked.

"No, not altogether—" Geoff's eyes searched her face. "**It** won't be biographical—a bit is me and a bit fiction."

Fay scanned a page or two and then gave a professional reaction. "Don't write in the first person. Publishers have a slight prejudice against it unless it's the autobiography of a well-known person. **And** besides, it restricts you to your own factual knowledge—and you can only present your characters from recorded observations of them or from things they say and do in your hearing. As an author, on the other hand, you *can* be omniscient, and what's even better, you can make

your characters behave as you want them to behave. Have you got far?"

She looked at her patient to find that he was staring at her as though he had just had a great illumination. Before he spoke he suddenly seized the looseleaf pad he had been using and ripped off the top pages.

"No, not far. And now I know why I couldn't get on—I couldn't see how I was going to achieve the conclusion I wanted. But you've shown me where I was going wrong. Thanks a lot, Sister—I'll be able to go right ahead now—though I might need a few injections of inspiration from time to time."

She laughed and turned away from the bed, and nearly cannoned into Mark Osborne who had come up silently behind her. "I've arranged for Mr. Wentworth to have some ultra-violet treatment in the physiotherapy department to see if it will induce that leg wound to heal," he said. "Will you arrange his routine to fit in with them, please?"

"Of course sir." Fay was at her most professional—perhaps in order to counteract the feeling she had that in the Registrar's eyes she was being unprofessional in her chat with Geoff. She did not know why he made her feel like this unless it was perhaps his persistent use of the formal "Mr. Wentworth" when everyone else called him Geoff.

"Will you have a look at Mr. Lambert while you're here? His breathing still seems very difficult and he complains of pain in his chest."

This patient had had his gall bladder removed, and having been a very heavy smoker for upwards of fifty years he had not taken kindly to the anaesthetic **it had** been necessary **to** give him.

"Can't seem to get enough air into me, doc," he complained. "Reckon if **I** was allowed to have a good pull at **me** old pipe, that'd clear the chubes a bit."

"Worst thing you could do," Mark told the old man with **a** smile when he had finished sounding his chest. "Now **I'll** get Sister to give you a nice draught of good clean air from time to time—that'll help you." And he gave Fay the necessary instructions to keep a cylinder of oxygen by the man's

bedside and to give him a spell under the tent when his breathing became particularly difficult.

Unfortunately, however, old Mr. Lambert was not always alert enough to tell the duty nurses when he was getting short of breath, so that many of the nearby patients often gave the warning for him. One period, however, when he was almost sure to need a spell under the oxygen tent was after visiting time when he had been talking more than usual. Flip went down the ward to him almost automatically one Wednesday after the visitors had just left and switched on the cylinder, fixed him up under the tent, and then went back to the kitchen to start serving teas. For a moment or two the ward was left unattended, though there were two nurses in the kitchen and Fay was in her office talking to Mark Osborne about a case who was due for operation the following morning.

Suddenly an urgent cry of "Sister !" went up from the ward. In an instant Fay was out of the office—and through the ward door. There was a confused babble of cries, but the first thing Fay saw amiss was Geoff out of his bed and apparently attempting to make his way down the ward, but half collapsing in the attempt.

She and Mark both went to help him, but gasping with the pain he had caused himself by his attempt to use his game leg he panted, "No—no—not me—Lambert ! He's got a pipe under the bedclothes !"

It did not take an instant for the danger to register with Fay, although it seemed to her as though she had turned to stone. With the oxygen pouring out of the cylinder in the confined space under the tent there could be an explosion any second.

She felt as though her limbs had become suddenly as heavy as lead. The distance to Lambert's bed seemed endless miles. She had to get to that cylinder and turn the key—she had to—

Suddenly she found herself flung to the opposite side of the ward—not by the impact of the expected explosion but by a pair of strong hands as Mark thrust himself between her and the cylinder, nearly flinging her to the floor with his urgency.

It was all over in an instant. The danger was past and there was no harm done. Old Mr. Lambert, whose visitors, thinking to give him a treat, had filled and lighted his pipe for him, had concealed it under the bedclothes when Flip came to put him under the tent. He had learned his lesson, though, and there was no need for Mark to read him the obvious lecture—he had been too badly scared.

They turned their attention to Geoff, but on the whole he was rather pleased with himself. The emergency had proved to him that he could walk after a fashion—even though it was pretty painful.

Back in Sister's office Mark turned to Fay. "Sorry for the unceremonious handling," he apologised.

Because she was still tingling from the touch of his hands which had registered with her even in the moment of stress, Fay was particularly clipped in her reply. "You should have left it to me," she said. "It was my job—and Ward Sisters are more expendable than surgeons."

For a moment Mark stared at her with a look almost of incredulity in his eyes, then he threw back his head and laughed. Immediately he became that other Mark—the Mark of Christmas time, a gay and charming companion, now almost obscured by the hospital strata of professional distinctions. "It's the potential value that counts," he told her, "and potentially you're worth more than I am." And with that enigmatic remark he was gone.

"I don't know what's come over young Geoff. Maybe it's because the Lambert scare has proved to him that he's got two legs still, or whether it's the treatment he's getting in physiotherapy—but I've never seen such an improvement—"

"It's this book he's writing—bless his heart, the darlin' boy. Though it's shameful the language you get when it's time to do his dressings—"

It was overhearing that scrap of conversation between her staff nurse and one of the juniors that gave Fay the idea, and without waiting to consider the pros and cons she put it into operation at once.

She went down the ward to Geoff's bed, and this time he apparently did not mind the interruption, for he looked up

from his writing with a bright smile. "Hullo, Sister—I was afraid you had gone off duty."

"Not for another hour," she told him, and went on, "How would you like to go into the side ward?"

"Side ward?" he echoed, not comprehending at first. "D'you mean—a place to myself—free from these everlasting interruptions?"

Fay nodded, smiling a little at his young enthusiasm.

"Show me the way to go ! Do you really mean it?"

Fay nodded again. "Yes. I can't see any reason why we shouldn't put you in there—for a while anyway. It's a small room we sometimes use for private patients—but under the National Health Scheme we don't get many of those—or sometimes for cases that need barrier nursing. But it's empty at the moment, so if you like I'll get Staff Nurse to transfer you there."

"Sister, you're an angel!" and then suddenly his face clouded with doubt. "It will still be under you, won't it?"

"Oh yes, still part of Stanhope," she reassured him.

"Wow! This is absolutely super!" Geoff had reverted to schoolboy slang in his excitement. Then he added, "Could I have my typewriter brought in?"

"I don't see why not—provided you don't overdo it, and take your rest when we tell you to."

"I promise," he beamed. "Sister, you've made my day !"

Geoff's obvious happiness at the move was reward enough, but Fay did find that it gave her a little trouble with the young nurses, who exhibited a marked tendency to disappear into the side ward at every available opportunity. But she could rely on Geoff not to encourage them, she knew. Just then all he wanted was as much time as he could get to make headway with his novel.

When Matron did her round Fay told her of Geoff's transfer and she thoroughly approved. She had rather a weak spot for the young man

"Well, and how is our budding author this morning?" she greeted him

"Very well, Matron," Geoff smiled up at her and then with the smile transformed into a schoolboy's grin he went on, "I shouldn't say 'that, should I, or you'll be turning me out

before I've finished my book—and I don't suppose I'll ever have such an opportunity to write again once I'm loosed on the cold, hard world."

Matron rose to the occasion with the charm she invariably used on her rounds. "If we had our way you could stay as long as you liked, Mr. Wentworth—we wish all our patients were like you. Unfortunately they're not, but their need is just as great and we have to make way for them. But you won't be leaving us for a while yet, and when you do you'll have a spell at one of the Convalescent Homes. Have you always wanted to write?"

"Yes, I think I have, but I've never managed to find time for it. But it's becoming doubly important now when I've got to face not being able to do lots of things that used to be so important to me. But don't think I'm feeling sorry for myself—"

"I'm quite sure you're not," Matron interrupted warmly, and to Fay's surprise she did not break off the conversation there. In the ward she never had time for more than a pleasant word or so with each patient, but here in the side ward she seemed disposed to stop and chat for a moment almost on an equal footing. "I'm glad you've found another outlet for your energies, and I hope the book will be successful."

"Thank you, Matron." And then with the diffidence which was part of his charm Geoff went on, "But I'm afraid I'm only a raw beginner and everyone is being far too kind. I shall probably be a complete flop."

"Rome wasn't built in a day," she comforted him. "You mustn't be downhearted if you don't succeed at once. Just keep on persevering—"

"Oh, I'll do that, Matron," Geoff put in enthusiastically. "You see, Sister has convinced me that only through writing can I make things come out the way I want them—so I'll just carry on until that happens."

"And just what did you say to give that young man so much confidence?" Matron asked when they were in the corridor again.

"I just can't remember," Fay confessed. "I know I did try to encourage him to try his hand at writing when he was

rather down in the dumps. And as my father was a publisher I probably gave him a bit of professional advice. I only hope it doesn't let him down!"

As she parted from Matron Mark Osborne swung into the ward corridor and Fay guessed that he had come to do his round. She sighed for the mass of paper work on her desk which would now have to be postponed again.

"Good morning, Mr. Osborne," she greeted him.

"Has Shaw appeared yet?" he asked after he had briefly acknowledged her greeting.

"Not yet."

"Then I'll start without him. I can't think what housemen are coming to these days. Can't they tell the time?"

"Perhaps he got held up on the women's wards."

"Held up my foot!" and Mark strode into the ward to commence the round. Fay gathered that he was not in too good a temper.

That fact did not show itself, however, during his round. He always had time and solicitude for his patients, who felt him to be their friend and talked to him freely and naturally, knowing from experience that he would understand their fears and worries.

That morning old Mr. Lambert was inclined to be tearful, partly from guilt at the pipe episode—though he did not fully understand the danger he had caused—and partly because he was in that state of convalescence when he thought he would never be well again. The old man had been a gardener all his life until he had retired and come to live in London with his daughter. Mark had the right touch and applied it. He asked for advice on the rearing of a certain plant whose name meant nothing to Fay but apparently aroused the old man to an enthusiastic argument.

The conversation finished with the old man saying firmly, "Nay, lad, they're not difficult to rear. Now when I get back to my greenhouse I'll raise you a dozen in pots and you can plant them out in the autumn and next summer you'll have a blaze of colour."

"Done!" Mark agreed, getting up from the edge of the bed where he had been sitting. "But only on the understanding

that you come and plant them for me. Be a nice day's outing for you."

"Aye, it'll be a pleasure—I'll look forward to that. How much longer will I be here, though? I should get the seeds started come next month."

"You will," the Registrar promised, and passed on with a smile to the next bed.

Whether the promises on each side were ever to be fulfilled Fay could not guess, but it had certainly given the old man hope again.

The round finished, Mark stopped abruptly, just short of the ward doors. "What have you done with Wentworth?" he demanded, and there was an edge to his voice.

"I've put him in the vacant side ward," Fay explained. "He's trying to do a bit of writing and the ward is so distracting for him—"

"What absolute rot!" Mark positively barked the words out. "Side wards are supposed to be for patients who need them or for private patients—not for any young fellow who chooses to think he's a literary genius."

Fay matched his irrational outburst with a chilling calm. "There are no such patients at the moment, sir—and Matron approves of the arrangement."

Mark glared at her and then burst into the side ward with an unnecessary amount of noise. His manner to his patient, however, was impeccable, even if it did lack his customary warmth. He studied the notes—with particular interest in the report of the physiotherapy treatment. He asked one or two questions of Geoff and then with a curt "Good !" turned to leave the room. At the door he turned back to the patient. "I think it won't be long now before you're able to go either to Lesterholme or Deemings. Talk it over with your people when you *see* them—we *could* probably arrange to *send* you to whichever is the more convenient for visiting. 'Bye."

And with that he was gone without a further word to either patient or Sister.

Geoff made a little grimace. "I never thought I should be *sorry* to leave hospital," he said gloomily.

"Cheer up," Fay told him. "The convalescent homes are quite nice, and you'd have all the time you want for writing."

"You won't forget your promise to read and help me with your criticism—even if I do have to leave here, will you?" Geoff pleaded.

"I won't forget," Fay promised. "There's always the post—and anyway you haven't gone yet. I don't think it's quite as easy as Mr. Osborne seems to think to get a vacancy in either of those two homes."

The next day was operating day and the ward only saw Shorty. Fay asked him, "How's your boss today?"

Shorty grinned. "Dunno. Haven't seen him yet. Bit shirty yesterday, though—what did you do to annoy him?"

"Me? Nothing," Fay denied. "I thought it was you—because you missed your round with him."

Shorty grinned again. "I don't think a mere houseman's lapses could provoke him to such wrath. Takes a pretty Sister to do that!" And he strode off before Fay could reprimand him.

The following day when Mark came up to Stanhope Ward he seemed to have recovered his usual equilibrium and he completed his round without incident, with Shorty this time in proper attendance.

The big ward finished, Mark paused in the corridor and did not go into the side ward. Instead he turned to Fay and said, "Could you spare me a few minutes in your office, Sister?"

And when Fay of course agreed he dismissed his houseman. "You might go over to the Path. Lab., Shaw, and if they haven't got the results of Mrs. Sturgess's tests, stand over them until they do produce them."

"And if they have got them shall I bring them back here to you?" Shorty was being deliberately mischievous, but Mark was blandly indifferent. "No, you can just leave them in my office, thank you."

Inside the little office Mark surprised her by asking without preamble, "Have you heard anything from Beechcroft lately?"

"No." Fay felt a little breathless from the mental jerk. "Toni doesn't write very often."

"Then you haven't heard that she's had another slight stroke?"

Fay might have replied, "How should I hear if you don't tell me?" but all her concern was for Toni. "I am so sorry. Poor Toni. How bad is it?"

"Only slight, fortunately—but it's the second she's had."

"Has she lost her speech?" That had always seemed to Fay the tragedy and frustration of stroke cases when they were unable to make their slightest or greatest needs known.

On that point Mark was able to reassure her. "She's a little slow at finding her words—but quite clear. But of course with the second stroke—we know what the future must be—"

"It's so sad—" pity made Fay's voice tremble a little. She would have controlled it if she could. That sort of emotion was out of place in the hospital and in her official capacity. But as so often before Fay's heart betrayed her. Swallowing the lump in her throat as she remembered Toni's defiance of age, her upright figure, her bright dark eyes, she said, "Is she at home?"

"Oh yes, she's at Beechcroft. We had to promise years ago that come what might she should live and die at Beechcroft. Horsey is a faithful soul and will never leave her, but she needs a nurse now, of course."

"Have you been to the Agency?"

"Oh yes—her doctor was prepared and there's an ex-Naval nurse with her at the moment, but she is waiting to go abroad again. Which brings me to my point—"

He hesitated for the fraction of a second and Fay looked up at him in all innocence. "Your point?"

"Yes. Would you take the job and go down to Beechcroft to look after her?"

She might have seen where his discourse was leading, but she had not, and her mouth dropped open in sheer surprise.

If she could have spoken, however, an imperious gesture of his hand, worthy of Toni herself at her most regal, would have stopped her. "No. Please don't answer now. Take a little time to think it over. Beechcroft is very pleasant in the spring and summer. The job would not be arduous and you need not be without companionship. I think you know what it would mean to Toni to have her 'angel child' with her. Let

me know when you've decided." And he turned and left her alone.

She did not need time to think over that proposition of Mark's. There was only one answer she could give and that was the one which was spontaneously on her lips. Mark should have known that. No matter how much time she took or how much he tried to involve her emotions with his talk of Toni's 'angel child' he must have known that it would be wrong.

Yet somehow when she went into his office the next morning, in answer to his brief 'Come in' she felt she had to be apologetic as though he were right and she was wrong.

He was sitting at his desk and so had to look up to her, but that did not make it any easier—and Fay resented this feeling of being in the wrong that he gave her.

"Well?" he questioned after a moment's silence in which he completed something he was writing.

"I think you know what I've come about—" Fay began, a little at a loss to know just how to tell him of her decision.

"About going down to nurse Toni?" He worded it the most difficult way he could since she had to start with a denial.

"I'm sorry. But I think you know that it's quite impossible for me to agree to do that—much as I would like to help."

"Why?" he demanded curtly.

"You know the shortage of nurses as well as I do." Fay was beginning to be a little annoyed at his unhelpfulness.

"I was asking you to do a job of nursing," he pointed out mildly.

"Yes—but a job that could be done by an older woman—in fact a stroke case could be nursed by a semi-retired woman. But I'm young and strong—I ought to use myself to the best possible advantage. Here I can look after thirty patients—I can't leave St. Edith's," she finished flatly.

"You mean that you don't want to."

"I mean that it would not be right for me to leave. I promised Matron—"

"I could put it right with Matron," he spoke quickly.

"That still wouldn't make it right."

He shrugged and dropped his glance to the papers on his

desk. "Very well, Sister—if that's the way you feel. But Sister Rainbow will be back on duty before very long, you know."

"Of course," Fay agreed, "but I can still do a useful job here."

He looked up now and said, "Well, if you're determined to stay, we'll say no more about it. Thank you at any rate for giving the matter your consideration."

When she was out in the corridor again Fay found herself trembling all over—with anger, she thought it must be. Why had Mark treated her like that? He had no right to claim her services for Toni—no right at all. And no one knew better than he the drastic shortage of nurses both at St. Edith's and also at all the London hospitals. And what had he meant about her being "determined" to stay? It was almost as though he was trying to get rid of her. That he didn't like having her around "his" hospital. That idea struck Fay forcibly just as she was going through the swing doors to her ward, and being immediately claimed by a summons from her staff nurse she had no time to develop that startling thought further.

Later in the morning Mark came up to do a round with his houseman in attendance. Shorty behind his chief's back signalled to Fay and she interpreted it to mean that the Registrar was not in a good mood—according to his junior's view, at all events.

Certainly from his manner no one would have thought that he and Fay had met before that morning.

When the round was finished Mark halted just outside Sister's office and *said* coolly, "Mr. Snow is sending in one of his private patients whom he wants me to look after. It's a colostomy case and the patient is quite elderly. I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to make your side ward available for its proper purpose, Sister."

Over Mark's shoulder Fay could see Shorty goggling with curiosity about the meaning of this, but she managed to refrain from any comment whatsoever and merely said, "Very good, Mr. Osborne. When is the patient expected?"

"I'm not absolutely certain," he admitted, "but it will definitely be within the next thirty-six hours."

But for the fact that no one—not even Mark—could con-

jure up a private colostomy patient at will, she would have said that it was all part of a plot.

But a plot to what end? Unlikely as it might seem, Fay could come to but one conclusion—that Mark was doing this to spite her for not falling in with his wishes. But that seemed so petty and so unlike him. The only other reason which fitted the case—only that seemed more unlikely still—was that he was trying to separate her from Geoff.

She rejected the second explanation—the first was much more likely. It was very possible, she thought, that her presence was an embarrassment to Mark. Everyone spoke of his uprightness and fidelity. Probably the remembrance of that kiss under the mistletoe was as much pain to him—reminding him always of his one lapse—that he did not want to be constantly running across her, so he was trying to get her posted somewhere where he need not see her—not so often at all events. Poor Mark 1 She felt quite sorry for him—and yet a little glad for herself. For if Mark felt ashamed of having kissed her, then it followed that the kiss must have meant something to him too. That made her happy, and ashamed of being so.

When she broke the news to Geoff his face fell.

"I'll put you in a quiet corner," Fay promised him, "and I'll give you some cotton wool for your ears," she finished lightly.

"It isn't that," Geoff protested. "I don't mind the noise or the other chaps—but in the ward I never get a chance to talk to you properly, without everyone listening."

She did not quite know how to fend that off, but she consoled him by saying, "Well, I can give you the rest of the day in here, I think—the other patient won't be coming in until tomorrow."

But she was wrong there. He arrived that very afternoon, and the news only came up from the porter's desk a few moments before a white-haired man was wheeled into the ward corridor.

With rather flushed cheeks Fay went out to him. This was hardly what she might have been led to expect from Mark's estimate of "thirty-six hours," and she very much disliked being caught out unprepared.

"Mr. Oliver?" she addressed the patient in the wheelchair.

"That's right, Sister," a gentle voice replied, "and I'm afraid I'm being a nuisance, but my housekeeper had to go off earlier than expected, so my doctor arranged for me to come in today instead of tomorrow. **I** do hope I'm not putting you out, Sister."

Fay smiled at the concern in the old man's face. "Not a bit, Mr. Oliver. We'll have your room ready for you in a very few minutes. Meanwhile we'd better push you inside out of the draught."

She pushed the wheelchair into the side ward while Staff and another nurse rushed to help move Geoff out.

"Will this be my room?" Mr. Oliver asked, looking round with interest.

"Yes," Fay told him. "We'll soon have you all tucked up comfortably."

"But this young man—am **I** turning him out?"

"That's all right, sir," Geoff put in pleasantly. "They only put me in here temporarily while it was empty."

The old gentleman looked up at Fay. "Don't turn him out, Sister. It's a nice big room—plenty large enough for two of us. Let him stay—I'd like a bit of company and I don't want anyone put out on my account. You wouldn't mind sharing with an old buffer, would you, young fellow? I'm not difficult to get along with."

Geoff looked at Fay for guidance. "I'd like to stay, sir—and it's very kind of you. But there are regulations—"

"Regulations nonsense!" Mr. Oliver showed sudden energy. "This is to be my room and **I** ask you to stay. Now, Sister, what do you say?"

It was contrary to regulations and Fay knew it was. But it would so plainly make both her patients happy that she agreed, and soon both men were comfortably settled with all the little additional amenities which went with a private ward.

She knew that she would have to defend her action to Matron, but thought she could rely on **Mr.** Oliver's charm to put that right. Mark was a different cup of tea, though, and she guessed there might be squalls when he discovered the position.

She was not mistaken.

"I thought I asked you to have this room cleared," he said with tight lips.

"Yes, you told me to do so," Fay did not mean to imply any criticism by the correction—it just slipped out. "But you also told me that Mr. Oliver was expected within the next thirty-six hours. He arrived much sooner, and I was not told until he was wheeled into the ward. We started to clear out Mr. Wentworth's things, but Mr. Oliver insisted that he should remain."

"I suppose you realise that it is most irregular. Mr. Oliver is Mr. Snow's private patient—that is understood. But Wentworth is a National Health patient and there should be no favouritism shown amongst the general ward patients."

"And none has been shown. Mr. Oliver met Mr. Wentworth and took a fancy to him. Mr. Wentworth is much happier away from the noise of the general ward. I consider that the well-being of my patients is of paramount importance and I'm prepared to defend my action on those grounds." Fay was angry, and strictly professional.

Her words, however, seemed to have an adverse effect on Mark. Plainly he was very angry. For a moment he obviously made a supreme effort at control, but then the words burst out.

"Dammit, woman, can't you see that the young fellow thinks he's in love with you?" And with that he flung through the swing doors and was out of earshot before Fay's astounded "What absolute nonsense !" could reach him.

CHAPTER SIX

AFTER Mark's outburst Fay was a little apprehensive about their next meeting and half hoped that as she was not on duty until mid-morning he would have done his round before she arrived on the ward. But luck was not with her, for he and Shorty arrived almost on her heels.

She need not have worried, however, for all was sunshine and light that morning. Mark seemed an adept at switching from the personal to the impersonal and wholly professional, and in one guise he seemed to have no remembrance of what had happened in the other. He made jokes with the patients—and with Sister across their beds, so that Fay was hard put to it to keep her end up.

She remembered that she had once classed him professionally as an actor and she had not been far wrong, she thought. At any rate he certainly had the ability to lead two entirely separate lives—no, three, she corrected herself: one here at the hospital, another with Toni and the family at Beechcroft—and another with his wife and children. It was that ability she saw quite suddenly was the answer to something that had long puzzled her, the answer to the problem of how he had managed to keep his marriage a secret from Toni—for although the young guests had seemed to know all about it she felt pretty sure that Toni did not. Or—another thought struck her as she stood silent while a lengthy examination was in progress—was she an actor too with the ability to pretend that anything she did not wish to acknowledge did not exist?

"Day-dreaming, Sister?" Mark's voice with a hint of amuse-

ment in it cut across her reverie, but fortunately she had registered his instructions almost unknown to herself, and she was able to refute the accusation by repeating them to him. Shorty gave her a broad wink as though he knew she had got away with a lucky one.

When the ward was finished there remained the side ward to be visited, but it seemed to hold no inhibitions for Mark. He walked in breezily and greeted his patients with a cheerful "Good morning, gentlemen!"

Although, of course, the houseman had already prepared notes on Mr. Oliver's case Mark himself made a thorough examination. He had no need to put his patient at ease, for the old man radiated a serene content which was infectious.

When he had finished and Fay had straightened the bed-clothes Mark perched on the side of the bed. "Well, Mr. Oliver," he said, "we'll do your little job for you, but I'm afraid it will have to wait a few days until we clear up your chest a bit. You've got a bit of bronchial trouble, haven't you?"

"Ah, that's an old man's complaint, isn't it—I smoke too much," Mr. Oliver confessed sadly. "But you know best—I'm quite content to do whatever you say."

"Good," Mark smiled. "Are you quite comfortable here—got everything you want?"

For a moment the old man looked at Mark with a twinkle in his eye, and then he looked at Fay. "Sure—what else could a man want? Waited on hand and foot by a lot of pretty nurses and with good company into the bargain. No, I'll not find fault however long you keep me. Unless—" he paused for a moment.

"Unless what?" Mark queried.

"Unless you could transfer me and young Geoff here—and yourself and Sister too, to my little villa at Lamontella. This is the time one ought to be there—the peach blossom will be out, and—"

"I'm afraid we can't spare Sister," Mark told him with mock seriousness.

"I thought you'd say that." Mr. Oliver was smiling broadly. "But it does seem a pity that the villa should be going to waste. Don't you want a holiday, doctor? I'd like to lend you

the villa—it ought to be used, so if you or Geoff or Sister are taking a holiday, just ask me for the key."

Mark got up. "I'll take you up on that one of these days. Where is Lamontella? Italian Riviera?"

"That's right—and it would make me very happy to know you were there."

"We'll see. It certainly sounds attractive," Mark said. "But our first job at the moment is to get you ready for that operation and the first order is no smoking—none at all."

"Right, doctor, I'll be good. Geoff will help me. It's mostly when I'm alone that I smoke too much—take out my old pipe and light up before I know what I'm doing. You'll stop me, won't you, my boy?"

Mark swung round to Geoff. "I'm afraid it means no smoking for you too—you'll have to get them to push you outside if you want to smoke."

"That's all right—I'm not a heavy smoker, and I can't smoke and write—not when I'm in bed, anyway," Geoff agreed. "Mr. Oliver has been giving me such marvellous descriptions of his villa and the countryside around that I can see it all and feel as if I've been there. It's going to be very handy," he said, picking up his writing pad significantly.

"Picking up copy, eh?" It was the first time Mark had spoken to Geoff about his writing. "Is the hospital going to get into your novel too?"

"Oh, sure thing. You'll all be in it," Geoff told them.

The remark was greeted with good-natured laughter.

"I'll have the law on you if you say I've got big feet," Shorty, who took size twelve, threatened.

"Well, it's the most noticeable thing about you," Mark twitted his houseman, and added, "I wonder if we shall recognise ourselves."

There was no room left for wondering on that point, Fay discovered, when she read the opening chapters of "Life's Beginning."

There was no doubt at all whom Geoff had cast for his heroine.

Time being a commodity which was always in short supply with her, Fay was utilising the occasion of the train journey

to Buckinghamshire to see Toni to read Geoff's manuscript, so that both items could be crowded into her one day off.

Her first reaction when she had heard of Toni's illness had been to pay her a visit, but other things had intervened. Her rejection of Mark's suggestion that she should undertake to nurse his grandmother had made her feel a little awkward about proposing the trip and his outburst over Geoff Wentworth had been a further barrier to an easy approach.

She had felt hemmed in on every side with inhibitions. Her natural impulse to ring up Beechcroft to get a report on Toni's condition had been thwarted by the recollection that Horsey must know by now that she and Mark worked in the same hospital and she would think it strange that she did not get her news through him. But here too there was difficulty. He sometimes switched from the professional to the personal relationship, from the hospital to Beechcroft, but she had never been the first to initiate the transposition and she felt shy of doing so.

Eventually, however, she had nerved herself to make the approach, and it had been easier than she had thought it would be.

"How is your grandmother?" had been her rather stilted opening. She had hesitated to say "Toni" for fear of seeming too familiar.

"She's made quite a good comeback," he told her. "She sits out now and can move around with help. She's still a little slow in speech, and of course vague at times."

"I've been wondering if she'd be well enough to have visitors—whether she'd like me to go down and see her."

Mark's face lit up with one of his flashing smiles which always made her think of sunshine on a lake which until then had been cold and grey. "I'm sure she would be delighted to see you—her angel child! I'm afraid she still confuses you with your mother."

"I have a free day next Wednesday," she suggested.

For a moment a cloud obscured the sunshine of his smile. "That's my operating day," he said. "I couldn't drive you down that day."

"But there's a very adequate train service from Baker

Street," she pointed out, "and in any case wouldn't it be less of a strain for Toni to have visitors one at a time?"

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted a little grudgingly. "I'll be ringing Horsey tonight—I'll tell them to expect you on Wednesday, then. D'you know about train times, and where to change?"

"Oh yes, thank you—I found that out at Christmas."

For a moment Mark looked at her without replying. There wasn't any need of a reply really, she reflected, but he did not seem to consider the conversation ended. "Yes," he remarked reflectively, "the time I failed to meet you at the airport. Things might have been very different if we hadn't misfired then—we might have got to know something about one another on the drive down." Then abruptly his face changed, and he spoke briskly. "I'll tell them to expect you by the morning train, then," and turned on his heel and walked away.

And now it was Wednesday and a beautiful morning in early May. Through the train windows first the suburban gardens, bright with spring flowers, and then the fresh green of the countryside and the hedgerows in full blossom tempted her attention away from the manuscript which lay in her lap.

Once she did bring herself to start to read her attention was held. "Life's Beginning" might be a first novel, but it was good. She read quickly, professionally, and it did not take her long to realise that here was talent in no small measure. The early chapters were touching in their portrayal of a sensitive, imaginative little boy, who emerged as a real child. The adolescent stage was not quite so good, and his account of his first meeting with Jocelyn, his first glimpse of romantic love, lacked vitality and warmth. But those two qualities returned in full and overflowing measure as the story proceeded. He met another girl—at an international skating meeting in the Austrian Tyrol—and this was his "Life's Beginning."

As Fay read on her heart grew cold and heavy and all the brightness went out of the day. Mark had been right. This girl of the ice rink, though her name was different and the setting and circumstances of their meeting fictitious, she could not fail to recognise as herself.

The chapters she had did not go much beyond the first

meeting, but with a sense of chill foreboding Fay remembered that it was she who had told Geoff that he could bend his story's ending to his own desire.

Fay, who had only seen Beechcroft under the snow, was unprepared for the loveliness of the surrounding countryside. Even the Victorian Gothic house itself seemed less out of place with the gentler background of different shades of green. The garden too was aglow with patches of brilliant colour, whereas before it had been featureless under the snow. Unbidden the thought which sprang first to Fay's mind was, "What a lovely place for children to grow up !" and she was thinking not of Helen or Wendy, the present generation, but of children who might have been there twenty years or more ago—of Mark and his sister.

She did not need to go right up to the house, for Toni was sitting, well wrapped up, in the sunshine on the terrace. Behind her through the open french windows Fay could see that the small downstairs sitting room had been utilised as a bedroom now.

Another chair was set out beside Toni's and a small table, so Fay knew that she was expected. Toni had a smile of welcome, too, as soon as she caught sight of her visitor, but Fay was not sure at first whether Toni did indeed remember who she was, or that she was expected, or whether perhaps the charm which had been her chief asset all through her long life was still standing by her.

"My dear angel child!" she greeted her, stretching out her one good hand.

Fay bent and kissed her on both cheeks and was surprised to notice how soft and smooth the old lady's skin was. "How are you, Toni? It is good to see you enjoying the sunshine."

Toni gave a little grimace. "Sunshine—you call it sunshine? It's bright, but there's no hot in it any more."

That was the first sign she gave of the results of her second stroke, that of choosing the wrong word and producing her words slowly. Otherwise, as Fay sat and chatted and listened to her memories, Fay might have been back at Christmas time—except that Mark was not there, nor any of the others.

Horsey, who must have heard voices, came out with coffee and biscuits and stayed a few minutes to chat.

Nurse had gone into the village, she told Fay, but would be back soon—and she was a good soul. There was also a young Italian girl in the house—au pair—because Toni, so Horsey explained, very often found it easier to express her thoughts in her native tongue these days. She too was a nice young thing.

When the housekeeper had gone inside again Fay settled herself to let Toni talk or be silent as she would—not wanting to tire her out with too much talking and content enough herself just to be there. She had not realised it, had not even thought that such a thing could be possible, but she had been homesick for Beechcroft as though indeed she had once been a part of the days into which every now and then Toni slipped back.

Fay tried to take her cues from Toni, but it was sometimes a little difficult to follow her thread of thought, as it veered from the 'present to the past, and even to the future, in a matter of seconds.

There was a tiny stream running through the garden, a pretty sight now, sparkling in the sunshine. Toni's eyes rested on it a moment, then she said slowly, "Mark says it will have to be filled in—it is dangerous for the children."

Since the stream was not more than a couple of inches deep it could not have presented any danger to Helen or Wendy—only to toddlers perhaps. To Mark's children? Fay managed to remain non-committal and did not ask any questions, but she was wondering. Did Toni after all know about Mark's wife and children? But if so, why weren't they at Beechcroft at Christmas—and why had Mark not told her of them? There were no ready answers to these questions, nor to many more she would have liked to ask. She could have asked Horsey many things, but her innate loyalty forbade that. By asking her questions she might have disclosed knowledge which the others did not have.

But Toni was off into the past again. "We must get the tree house repaired," she said. There was no tree house now, though there were plenty of trees which might have held such a child's delight. "Oh—but I forgot. One of the child-

ren fell out and broke an arm. We can't have that happening again?"

"Which one of the children was it?" Fay asked, but for answer she got an entirely different subject. "I'm worried about Mark," Toni told her. "I didn't want him to marry too young—he had his work to think of. But it is time now. He should marry soon. I would like to see my great-grandchildren," she finished with a smile.

Fay's previous surmises were shattered. Toni obviously did not know—or if she did, she had forgotten.

By lunch time the nurse had returned from her shopping in the village and turned out to be a kindly woman in her mid-fifties. The Italian girl came to the table with Horsey. She was young and shy and very pretty, but as yet she could speak little English. Toni, Fay noticed, could take very little food, and she began to realise that Toni's looks were deceptive. She was frailer than she had at first imagined.

All through a long sunlit afternoon she sat beside Toni on the terrace while she alternately dozed or chatted. It was all very peaceful and—yes—strangely enough it was happy. Toni's illness did not in any way seem to have detracted from the graciousness of her way of living, and those about her were normal and naturally cheerful. She remarked as much to Horsey when they were alone for a moment.

"Mark is most insistent about that," the housekeeper told her. "He won't have her illness bring her sorrow or ugliness if he can help it. That's why he wanted you to come and nurse her—though he knew it was all wrong to ask you—but there's nothing he won't do for his grandmother."

The long day drew to a close with the arrival of the car which was to take her to the station. There was a certain sadness in Fay's heart as she prepared to leave. There was the sadness of last times about it. She did not think that she would see either Toni or Beechcroft again. They would soon be just a memory to be treasured along with the memories she already had of that time with Mark. Only already **the** two were getting mixed and she saw herself and Mark **here** at Beechcroft in all the beauty of summer and not in **the** bleakness of winter. She sighed as she realised that this **was** all she would ever have of Mark and Beechcroft—just

memories. And memories, however sweet, do not assuage hunger when you are young.

At the last moment there was a delay which nearly caused her to miss her train. Earlier in the day Toni had told her that she must take back some roses with her to London, but it had been a passing thought and Fay had not reminded her. But Toni remembered and sent Lisa with a pair of scissors to the greenhouse where the flowers for the house were grown, and a lot of voluble instructions in Italian.

The girl came back with a generous bunch of deep red rosebuds which she presented to Fay with a shy smile. "For you wiz love," she said, immensely proud of her English.

Goodbyes had to be hurried then, and at the very last Toni called after her, "You will give the roses to Mark, won't you?"

Fay had evidently misunderstood, for she had thought the roses were for her, but she quickly adjusted and gave Toni the assurance that they should be delivered to Mark at the first opportunity.

The drive through the lanes in the dusk drew the soft shadows of a grey veil over that enchanted day and there was little enchantment in the railway carriage into which she flung herself, only just in time, at the junction. It was the end of a long and busy day, and though she now had the carriage to herself it reeked of stale smoke and the traffic of the day.

She put the roses on the opposite seat where she could enjoy their beauty and live on for a little while in the world from which they came. But she found herself clutching the folder which held Geoff's manuscript—and her problem. A problem which had to be faced.

Since she could not have her dream, ought she to renounce even the memory of it, and accept the reality? The reality was that Geoff loved her—as she loved Mark. But not loving him, could she make Geoff happy?

She could not answer that question and so she decided for the time being to evade it and hoped that time itself might bring its own solution.

So much can happen in the life of a hospital ward in the

space of twenty-four hours that Fay felt, when she went on duty the next morning, that she had been away at least a week. But even before she went on duty she had had to solve the problem of how to get Toni's roses to Mark. One thing was quite certain : she was not going to be seen carrying a large bunch of roses through the hospital corridors and depositing them at Mr. Osborne's office. She could have sent them by one of her junior nurses—but that might have led to a certain amount of whispering and giggling in the ward kitchen or the linen room. In the end she decided to leave them at the porter's desk with an instruction to send them along to the Registrar's office, and she stood over the man while he laboriously wrote on a piece of paper : "From Mrs. Travers."

Nurse Moore was already on duty when Fay came through the swing doors and followed her into the office.

"Ah, there y'are, Sister dear. And did ye have a good day? Faith and I do declare you've caught the sun !"

"Well, I was sitting in it for a long time," Fay admitted, "but I didn't think it would show. It must have got very pallid since I came to London."

"No and indeed you haven't," the staff nurse hastened to assure her. "It's not scorched ye are but just a sort of extra glow. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Very much," Fay admitted, and then added, "Though it was sad too in one way. My old friend is very frail—it may well be the last time I shall see her."

"Oh now, and isn't that a shame—and she such a grand lady too, by the sound of it."

Fay looked a little startled, for she had not told anyone where she was spending her day off, except that it was in the country. Kate Moore, who was not dim, caught the look of surprise and explained, "Mr. Osborne was telling us all about it yesterday—about you knowing his grandmother, and all."

Fay wondered at Mark's indiscretion. There was no harm in it, but any sort of connection between a member of the nursing staff and one of the medical officers always caused a bit of scandal-mongering.

She changed the topic abruptly. "What's in the Report?" she enquired, flicking the book open.

"Well, Mr. Andrews went home—and nearly cried when he went. Old Mr. Bowker took a sudden thrombosis and collapsed. Coronary. He couldn't stand it, of course."

"Poor old man," Fay said softly.

"It's the way I'd like to go meself," Staff Nurse said. "Quick and clean."

"Yes, I suppose so. Anything else?"

"Nothing special. Geoff's definitely on the waiting list for the convalescent home, but it'll be about a week yet, the Almoner says. Oh, and Rainbow's back—at least she will be in ten days' time. She's back in her flat and'll be coming back here, so they say."

"Of course she will," Fay agreed. "I'm only filling her place temporarily. I'm glad she's better again."

But was she really glad? Had her time on Stanhope Ward been happy or unhappy? Would she miss her almost daily meetings with Mark? Or would it be to remove a constant source of nagging pain?

She supposed that she would not know the answer to that until she had tried not seeing him again—it was a question that only time would answer.

And just then she did not have any time, for after the briefest of taps the office door burst open and Mark appeared. "Here, these must be for you," he said, dumping the red roses on her desk.

"But I was told specifically to give them to you," Fay exclaimed.

Mark, who had obviously been going on to say something further, stopped abruptly and regarded Fay with a curious glance. "All!" he said then, which exasperated her by its tone, which carried all sorts of implications without disclosing any of them. Then he grinned boyishly as he said, "Oh, well then, I give them back to you. I'm in Clinic all day today, and anyway, there's no room in my cell—they'd just be wasting their fragrance. You have them." And before she could demur he was gone.

"Aren't they gorgeous?" Nurse Moore admired and sniffed hard. "Red roses."

It was a mere statement of fact, and Fay thought that her imagination was playing tricks when it seemed as though there was an undercurrent of some other meaning which the Irishwoman put into those two words.

After a day off duty there were a hundred and one things requiring the personal attention of the Sister, both in the ward and on her desk. This at any rate was the excuse she gave to herself for not going into the side ward until the morning was well advanced. It was not quite the truth—at least not the whole truth. She had not yet made up her mind what line she ought to take with Geoff. Above all else, she did not want to hurt him—but whether it was kinder to nip his emotions now, while they were still, she hoped, in the bud, or whether it was kinder to let him go on hoping for a while until time and separation did their work she could not be quite sure. Then too she was not clear about her own feelings. She did not love Geoff, but she had grown very fond of him, and there was something heart-warming about being loved.

She had a few moments of most unusual quiet before she made up her mind to visit the last of her patients—a moment when no one knocked on the office door and even the noises from the ward kitchen were muted behind closed doors. She found herself staring hard at the vase of red roses which Staff had arranged on her desk. And she knew that there lay the kernel of the problem of what to do about Geoff. She tried to be objective, cool and clinical in her approach. Mark was not free to receive her love or to give his in return. Mark was a surgeon, and if it were necessary he would not hesitate to cut out any growth that might detract from the good working of the organ it had attacked. Love like some cancer had got at her heart and could grow to no good purpose—so it had to be cut out. Even as she thought it, some pain like a knife turning in her heart made her physically wince. But she had decided on her course of action. She must cut all thought of Mark out of her heart, and to help in that process she would ask Matron if she might return to Anderson Ward and Sister Brownlow. As far as Geoff was concerned she would—temporise.

That decision made, she walked briskly into the side ward.

Mr. Oliver, who was hidden behind *The Times*, quickly dropped his paper when he heard her footstep.

"Come along Sister, do—and put this poor boy out of his misery or his temperature will go up sky-high. How did you like it?"

Geoff looked up from his scribbling with a shy smile and a question in his eyes. But the question was not entirely, she felt, on the merits of his prose and she knew that she had to tread carefully not to commit herself.

"I think it is very good indeed. If this is the first time you've tried your hand at writing all I can say is that you're remarkably good. And you've got a great future before you in the literary field."

"I don't know about that," Geoff said. "It may be that I shall only ever write this one book. But I'm glad you like it—now I can go ahead." And now his eyes were saying "Thank you."

Fay strove to keep things on a practical level. "I'm sure that many publishers would be glad to commission the work on the basis of these first chapters. If you like to get them typed and let me have them, together with a brief synopsis of the rest of the story, I could send them to one or two firms with whom my father used to be in contact."

"There's fame for you, my boy—you've as good as made your name already. Oh, this is exciting! I never thought when I came into hospital that I'd be sharing a room with a famous novelist."

They laughed at the old man's enthusiasm and from the broad wink which he gave her Fay gathered that yesterday Geoff had been very much in the dumps with Mr. Oliver trying to raise his hopes for him.

"Hold hard!" said Geoff, but there was a new ring of confidence in his voice. "Thanks a lot—it was good of you to spare the time to read it on your day off."

"Not a bit—it whiled away a train journey," she told him. "Now, what about it? Would you like me to submit it for you?"

"Yes, please. But I think—if you don't mind—I would rather finish the book first—"

"Why, haven't you made up your mind how it ends yet?" Mr. Oliver put in. "Must have a happy ending, my boy. I'm the general public and I like to have a happy ending to my novels."

They laughed again, but Geoff's eyes were serious as he stared at Fay, so that she knew her every flicker of expression would register with him "I know how I want it to end all right, but somehow the characters seem to take over at times and I'm not sure where they're going next. I'd rather wait until it's finished, please."

"Perhaps you're wise," she agreed quietly, and she knew that she and Geoff were speaking of other things than appeared to Mr. Oliver's ears.

"May I let you see the other chapters as they work out? Even if I go to the convalescent home place I could post them to you."

"Of course you could," Fay agreed readily, "and I shall look forward to getting them. Can you arrange about typing, by the way—is your own good enough?" she indicated the little portable on the side table.

They were almost back on the everyday level again, but not quite. When Geoff asked, "Did you enjoy your day off?" there was some underlying intensity which startled her for a moment until Mr. Oliver put in, "Yes, Mr. Osborne was telling us about your visit to his mother—"

"Grandmother," Fay corrected quickly. Grandmother seemed so much less personal than mother, and she went on again to explain her own connection with Toni Travers.

Staff Nurse Moore put her head in at the door. "Matron wants to see you over in her office, Sister dear," she called.

On her way to Matron's office Fay walked as one committed to a certain course of action over which she was glad she had no control. If it had been left entirely to her she was not sure that she would have had the courage to uproot herself from the environment in which she had some daily contact, some glimpse at least of Mark; but since someone else was making the decision for her she would add her little spoke and ask to go back to the "Seminary." That was the safest place of all.

"Sit down, Sister," Matron greeted her with a smile. "You

were off duty yesterday, but I daresay your staff nurse has told you that Sister Rainbow came in. She has reported fit for duty now, but she has a few days' leave over from last year, so I suggested that she should clear those up and take over from you as from Friday of next week."

"Yes, Matron. I'm glad she's fit again."

"You did understand when you took over from her that it was only temporary, didn't you?"

"Oh yes, Matron, I quite understood, and I'm quite ready to go back to staff nurse on Anderson if Sister Browning still wants me."

As soon as the words were out Fay knew that she had done the wrong thing. It was not for her to suggest what her next appointment should be. As she watched the slight look of disapproval which crossed the Matron's face she hoped that she had not jeopardised her chances of being sent back to pediatrics by being too eager.

"We have been very pleased with the way you have run Stanhope," Matron's expression almost robbed the words of their tribute. "The consultants speak very highly of you, so I am afraid Sister Browning will have to continue to cope with her present staff. No, Sister, I think you mentioned when you came here that you wanted to get all the experience you could and that you were particularly interested in surgery?"

"Yes," Fay murmured, her heart beginning to sink.

"So we are posting you as Theatre Sister—junior to Sister Miles, of course. Well, Sister?"

Fay was aware that some words of thanks ought to have sprung to her lips. She was being given a plum—a plum for which most of the other Sisters would have given their ears. "B-but—" she stammered.

"No buts about it, Sister," Matron told her tartly. "It is a signal honour—especially as your appointment was recommended by one of the surgeons."

Outside Matron's office Fay felt as though the floor, the walls and ceiling were all playing tricks with her, spinning round and heaving beneath her feet. But there was the usual to-ing and fro-ing so that she dared not pause even for a

moment without attracting attention, and that was the last thing she wanted.

By the time she got back to her own ward things had steadied down a bit. She thought grimly as she pushed through the swing doors that fate did not intend to let her take the easy road.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PERHAPS because she had looked forward to it with such apprehension Fay was surprised to find how happy she was in her new work. She had always found theatre work interesting, and since Sister Miles was only too ready to delegate responsibility if she could find anyone to take it, Fay found herself completely in control of Theatre Two. She had a good team of nurses and soon had things running as she wanted them, and was repaid by the appreciation of the surgeons. Adam Barton, who had taken Mr. Snow's place, was highly commendatory. He was a breezy Canadian and it was largely due to his bonhomie that the slight sense of strain which Fay had felt at having to work in such close collaboration with Mark soon disappeared.

It was of course part of her job as Theatre Sister to see that her trolley contained everything the surgeon could possibly want and to put the required instruments into his hand. It was always a help if she could anticipate the spoken word and have the instrument to hand before it was asked for. With no one did she find this so easy as with Mark. Whether they liked it or not, they were the perfect team at the operating table.

Mark knew it too, and sometimes when things had gone well he would turn to her and say, "We made a pretty good job of that, didn't we, Sister?"

And because behind the theatre gowns and masks everything became impersonal, she could accept his praise and share in the joy of achievement—and still assure herself that she was not allowing herself to get too fond of Mark.

Sister Miles had told her months before that Mark Osborne was one of St. Edith's finest surgeons, and now she knew the truth of that for herself. From her vantage point of watchful passivity she could assess the work of the various surgeons. Some of them had very great names indeed, but none of them was better at his job than Mark, even though he was a young man yet with his name still to make, and still awaiting that coveted Fellowship.

On the day they brought Mr. Oliver to the theatre his skill was put to the test.

Before she had gone on duty that day Fay had been up to Stanhope to have a word with Mr. Oliver and to wish him well. She found the old man as sweet-tempered as ever, but she had been struck by the deterioration in his condition. She knew that they had had to postpone his operation because of his congested chest condition, but he looked so poorly that the thought had crossed her mind as to whether they had put it off too long.

"I just looked in to see how you were feeling, Mr. Oliver—this is your big day, isn't it?" she had greeted him, trying not to let him see how shocked she was at his appearance and the dread yellowness of his colour.

"Now isn't that just like you, my dear? Now you have made it my big day indeed," he beamed at her. "Mr. Osborne was in first thing and there was a letter from Geoff—have you heard from him lately, Sister?"

"A batch of manuscript arrived yesterday," she told him, "but I haven't had time to read it yet."

"He says he's been getting on with it like a house on fire. I do hope you'll be able to approve it—he sets great store by what you tell him"

"Well, I hope I'm not misleading him, but I think he has a great future before him—"

"Let's hope it is the future he wants!" Mr. Oliver twinkled at her. Even with his operation only a few hours away the old man was still more interested in other people than in himself.

"Well, I'll be seeing you later," Fay told him when her few moments' chat were up. "And I'll come and see you again tomorrow some time."

"My dear, you're very good to an old man—all of you. Especially you and Geoff and Mr. Osborne. I wish he were doing my operation—I'd feel happy to be in his hands."

"You'll be in very good hands, don't worry."

The theatre staff were all ready and waiting for the surgeons in good time. Fay always liked things that way—she only wished that Mr. Barton, who was operating that morning, felt the same about things. He usually arrived at the eleventh hour apologising profusely and breathing hard as though he had literally had to run through the hospital corridors in order to get there at all.

Today was no exception—he was in fact a few moments late and burst through the swing doors with a rather tight-lipped Mark at his heels, protesting violently about traffic hold-ups. Shorty followed them in and winked broadly at Fay.

"Morning, Sister—morning, all," the surgeon grinned round irrepressibly. "Patient ready? Give them the first buzz, then."

The patient was still in the anteroom where the first anaesthesia was given. In a moment he would be wheeled into the theatre and the serious work of the morning would begin.

While a nurse secured the tapes of his gown Mr. Barton studied the notes of his first case. "Let's see, Sister—this is your friend the old man for the colostomy, isn't it? Is Fellowes happy about him?"

"Not terribly," Mark answered for the anaesthetist, who would come in with the patient. "He doesn't want us to be too long. The chest condition didn't quite clear, sir."

"Ah yes. Well, wheel him in."

Silence fell over the theatre once the patient was on the table. Barton at work was a very different person and he became taciturn in the extreme when he was working. Mark was assisting, Shorty held a watching brief and they both stood on the opposite side of the table from Fay and the surgeon.

She was ready and waiting with the instruments he would need and felt again the tingling sensation of alertness which always sustained her through the longest operating sessions. She handed him the instrument he needed for the first incision and he bent over the table.

Barton's head and shoulders blocked Fay's view for the moment and it was only from the expression in Mark's dark eyes and the unnatural stillness in the theatre that she realised all was not well. The anaesthetist's pump sounded too loud and only emphasised the other silences.

For a moment Mark's eyes left the patient and flickered on to Fay's face. Once again she saw that look of compa

for old Mr. Oliver.

Fay could guess what had happened. Opening up had disclosed some further trouble, some growth which was inoperable. In the theatre she was usually divorced from her ordinary human feelings of tenderness, of pain or suffering, but this morning that verdict cut her to the heart. She had become so fond of the genial old gentleman who had never once complained and who never failed in kindness.

She heard Barton's muttered, clipped words, "Better close him up. Nothing we can do. Shaw, will you—"

But before Shorty could step forward to take his place and receive the necessary needle and nylon from her Mark had started to speak. His voice was low and urgent and he seemed to be arguing some point with Barton. She could not hear what Mark was saying, but he seemed to be pleading. "We could bypass—it has been done, sir." He was looking at his chief, Fay saw, with a burning intensity.

"Not on a man of his age or with a similar chest condition—"

"No, but it's worth a try—it would give him a chance—"

"What a chance! We'd be working to a hairsbreadth—I wouldn't care to risk it. Better close him up."

The last word was Barton's, but Fay saw that he did not move away to make room for Shorty to do his work. Instead he called to the anaesthetist, "How's he doing, Fellowes?"

"All right—so far." The reply sounded a little ominous.

Then Barton spoke again. "All right, Osborne—if you think you can do it. Take over—I'll assist."

The whole theatre seemed suddenly to be galvanised into new life as the two men changed places. Without having time to think Fay knew instinctively that she would never

again witness any skill greater than this. Automatically her hands anticipated his every need as Mark, working against time, never made the slightest sign that he knew that a man's life was in his hands and that his safety margin was no more than a hairsbreadth.

The moments seemed agonisingly long and every second Fay expected to hear the dread word from the anaesthetist that time was running out. But it did not come, and Mark, working with uncanny speed and precision, at last straight-ended his back. "That'll do, I think, sir. Shall we close him up?"

"Congratulations, Osborne. I've never seen a finer job than that. Close up, Shaw."

A great sigh of relief seemed to go up from the whole theatre personnel, for the tension which invades a theatre on occasions such as this was almost a tangible thing and infected everyone down to the most junior nurse. All that modern medical skill could achieve had been done for Mr. Oliver. The human element—the will to live—would play the largest part in his recovery from now on.

Mark turned to Fay. He had taken off his mask and without it he looked tired and strained. "I was glad to have you here, Sister, but I wish you were still on Stanhope."

"Why?" she asked him, completely taken by surprise.

"Because then I could be sure that you wouldn't let him slip through our fingers."

"Oh, he won't," she assured him. "Sister Rainbow will see to that. He'll live to thank you for what you've done for him."

Mark's eyes went suddenly sombre. "I wonder if he will," he stopped in the middle of peeling off his gloves. "I wonder if it was the kindest thing to do."

She knew what he meant. "Yes, I'm sure it was," she assured him. "Mr. Oliver loves life. He's old, but not tired or defeated. He'll live to bless you."

"I hope so," Mark replied, and then drifted away and the morning's work went on.

Fay was right about Herbert Oliver. It was only a few days before he was smiling and murmuring his thanks to his

doctors and nurses—and to Mark in particular; for the drama of the theatre had, in hospital manner, soon spread to all departments and Mr. Oliver had heard it all.

As her duty times permitted Fay took to going across to Stanhope most days to have a chat with Mr. Oliver as he climbed slowly up the long hill to recovery. She found that Sister Rainbow welcomed her visits, and the two of them became fast friends.

As for Mr. Oliver, once he was off the seriously ill list Fay never saw him anything but content and with a smile for everyone. He bore the inevitable pain and discomfort with cheerful fortitude and never a complaint. He did not have many visitors and since Geoff had gone he was alone a good deal. He spent a good bit of the time dozing, and read *The Times* or listened to the radio, and faced with equanimity the fact that recovery was going to be a slow business for him.

"Never mind," he would say, "with any luck I should be able to go to my villa next spring. And that," he confided, "is something I never really expected to do again. But I hope that in the meantime some of you, my good friends, will go and keep an *eye* on it for me. Pietro is a good fellow, and his wife the most excellent of women, but I think a little interest occasionally keeps them up to the mark, eh, Sister?"

"I'm sure it does," Fay agreed, "and one of these days I'll take you up on that. Sometimes when I go off duty dog-tired I dream of lying in the sun in the garden of your villa and just lazing and lazing all day."

"I'm afraid you work too hard, my dear." The old man looked at her with concern. "I don't know what we should all do without you ministering angels, but you know I feel it's all wrong that you should be spending your time on us old crocks when you ought to be thinking about a husband and babies."

Fay looked at him solemnly for a moment, and then with a little gurgle of laughter as she remembered some of the conversations which went on in the nurses' quarters. "You'd be surprised if you could know some of the things nurses do think and talk about," she teased him. "But I'm not going to tell you—you're too young!"

Fay usually managed her visits so that they did not run

foul of doctors' rounds, but one morning she had just let herself into the side ward when the door opened and Mark appeared. Since he had neither Shorty nor Sister or her staff nurse with him this appeared to be an informal visit and not part of his regular round. Nevertheless, Fay turned to the door. "I'll come back later," she promised the patient.

But Mark stopped her. "Please don't go, Sister. I only just want to know what this old rascal's been up to. How's that pain you mentioned?"

Mr. Oliver contrived to look like a guilty small boy. "It's gone—quite gone. I think it was my own fault," he confessed. "I shouldn't have had that peach—"

"From the villa?" Mark queried, and Mr. Oliver nodded.

"They were delicious," Fay, who had had her share, explained. "We all made pigs of ourselves."

"And why wasn't I given any?" Mark asked with affected hurt in his voice.

"Because you didn't come and see me on Tuesday," the old man explained. "Pietro had packed the peaches too ripe, or else they'd been too long in transit. They wouldn't keep, so they had to be eaten up. That's right, isn't it, Sister?"

"Umm. They were gorgeous," Fay agreed, "but they wouldn't have kept another day."

"I'll forgive you," Mark smiled, "but don't do it again—give yourself indigestion, I mean."

"I won't," the old man promised. "I tell you what I had this morning that'll interest you two." He fished under his paper and produced an envelope. "A letter from young Wentworth. He says he's doing very well and getting about all over the place on his sticks. Did you hear from him too, Sister?"

Fay would rather not have been asked that question in Mark's presence. She did not have time to make up her mind to a lie, but instead she trimmed the truth. "He sent me another batch of manuscript," she said.

But the half truth did not avail her, for Mr. Oliver had more to tell. "He says he's coming up to town next week. He's going to look in and see me. Will you be seeing him too, Sister?"

The question appeared completely artless and by contrast

her own reply sounded to Fay devious. But it was all she could manage. "I expect I'll have to report on the latest chapters," she admitted.

Actually Geoff's letter to her had suggested a place, time and date for a meeting which had obviously been so carefully planned that she could not well refuse. She was not even sure that she wanted to do so, though when the day came she went to that meeting with very mixed feelings and no definite plan of action.

From a publisher's point of view she felt that the book was going well. The story moved with pace and the reader's interest would be held because it was not made clear what the end was to be. Fay wondered a little sombrely just how far Geoff himself was involved with his story—whether he himself was waiting to see what the end was going to be or whether he had the natural instinct of a good story-teller to keep his readers guessing till the end.

When they met in the quiet restaurant in Knightsbridge which he had suggested she was surprised to see how well he was looking. The sun he had been getting in the Surrey convalescent home had replaced his hospital pallor with a rich tan. He was still using crutch sticks, but from the way he walked Fay guessed that it would not be long before he would be able to discard them.

At first he did not have much to say. But from the way he said, "It's good to see you again," Fay realised that she was skating on very thin ice and if she wanted to remain uninvolved so far as Geoff was aware, she would have to go very warily indeed. But she was not ready to commit herself yet and she knew that at all costs she must conceal the fact that she recognised herself as his heroine and discuss the story and the characters objectively.

At first he did not seem in a hurry to get on to the subject of his novel—indeed he seemed to shy away from it, and Fay knew intuitively that he was afraid that she was going to hurt him. She felt very sorry for Geoff—sorry that he should have centred his love on her, for she knew that she could never return it in the measure he wanted to give. But she had a great tenderness, even a deep affection for him.

"Do I have to go on calling you 'Sister?' " he asked as the meal progressed.

"No, of course you don't. My name's Fay."

"I know," he nodded, "and it suits you perfectly."

It did just cross her mind to wonder how he had known, for at St. Edith's she was naturally called nothing but Gabriel, but she preferred to think that his next question was a non *sequitur*.

"Are you and Mr. Osborne related in some way?" he asked.

She disclaimed with a little laugh. "Oh no, not at all. But his grandmother was my mother's godmother."

"I see," he nodded thoughtfully. "But you'd met him before you came to the hospital, hadn't you?"

Fay strove to sound casual and natural. "Oh yes. I spent last Christmas with Mrs. Travers—that's his grandmother—and Mr. Osborne was one of the house party."

After that they got on to the book. "How do you think it's going?" he asked a little hesitantly.

"Splendidly!" she told him with an enthusiasm that was not simulated. "I think there isn't the slightest shadow of doubt that you'll find a publisher if you keep on as you're going at present."

"I did just wonder if I was being too devious," he confided. "You know—going into too many sort of, well, sidetracks—"

"I'm afraid they're called 'abortions' in the trade," she told him. "But don't worry about them—the more the better! It keeps the reader on his toes—guessing until the last chapter. The course of true love never did run smooth," she finished with a smile.

"So long as it triumphs in the end?" he asked with a bright smile.

"We-e-ll, the public do like a happy ending in the main," she confessed, and then added, "but you could turn it into a very readable novel even without the conventional ending. They say," she went on quickly to mitigate those words, "they say that every great writer must suffer a little. Which reminds me—what happened to that girl of yours—your fiancée, was she?"

"Jocelyn? Oh no, there was never anything serious between us. Besides being a ballet dancer she's mad keen on every

form of sport, and when it became obvious that though I'm going to be all right for most things I wasn't going to be able to keep up with her in sporting activities, she gave me the brush-off."

"I'm sorry," Fay murmured.

"It didn't hurt at all," he told her. "I wish it had, then perhaps I could hope to escape in future."

His eyes were searching her face and she knew that he was trying to read her mind behind it. She wanted to give him what he was asking—happiness, not pain, but she dared not commit herself—not yet. She dared not give him too much hope—although her own hopes had died long ago.

"You may be lucky," she told him with an attempt at lightness.

"Then I can go on hoping?" he asked eagerly, and her heart sank, for it was evident in spite of her efforts that their conversation had gone far deeper than the superficial level at which she had been trying to keep it.

"We all hope not to get hurt," she told him a little bleakly from her own experience, "but life is not always kind." And when they parted she kissed him at his request. It was a cool, sisterly salute on the cheek. It seemed the best way of preventing his hopes from rising too high without killing them altogether.

As Fay was passing through the porter's lodge at the main gates of the hospital that evening a small disreputable car drew up alongside with a great deal of noise. One glance was sufficient to tell her that it was Shorty. She did not feel in the mood just then for Shorty, and she frowned slightly as he hailed her.

"Where've you been?" he demanded.

"Out," she replied laconically. "It's my day off."

Shorty grinned. "Like that, is it? Well, His Lordship's been doing his nut trying to find you."

"Who?" Fay asked, startled.

"The boss. Osborne."

"What did he want?" Fay was frowning even more now. "Surely Miles could do anything he wanted."

"Oh, maybe. But this was private and personal."

"Don't act the fool, Shorty—"

"No—straight!" he stopped her. "I think it's some family trouble. His grandmother—yes, that's it."

"What's the matter with her?" Fay caught her breath.

"Had a stroke or something—wants to see you. But don't ask me why. Anyway, there's a note waiting for you over in your room."

"Then why didn't you tell me so at once instead of blethering?"

" 'S'not often I get a look in these days," Shorty grinned again somewhat ruefully, then added, "How's young Wentworth?"

Fay was startled. She had not told anyone, not even Mr. Oliver, that she was seeing Geoff today.

"Why ask me?" she said shortly.

"Well, that's where you've been, isn't it? Seeing Geoff. That's what His Lordship seemed to think, anyway."

"Damn!" Fay muttered under her breath, and to Shorty, "I'd better get over and see what's in that letter. Thanks for the message."

The note was brief and hastily scrawled on a sheet of hospital paper. It was dated but had no address. "Have just had a message from Beechcroft. Toni has had another stroke. Her doctor doesn't expect her to last more than forty-eight hours. She's asking to see you, but I've been unable to locate you and can wait no longer. Please come down by the eight-forty-five from Baker Street. Will meet you at the junction. Mark Osborne. P.S. Have arranged with Matron for you to be free tomorrow."

Of course she would go to Toni without the slightest hesitation, but Mark's peremptory assumption that she would sent a little niggle of anger through her. At the same time she had to commend his forethought, for it would have been too late now to contact Matron and arrange the necessary alterations to the duty roster.

When she was in the train bound north-westward from London it seemed to Fay that it had been only yesterday or the day before that when she had come out to see Toni. Actually it was six weeks, but the countryside had not lost its freshness in spite of the spell of warm sunshine. Then she had

been reading Geoff's manuscript, and today the problem was just the same. She had almost convinced herself that to Geoff half a loaf would be preferable to no bread at all—that he would be content with what she had to give him. She felt sure she could make him happy and be at least not unhappy herself. He was not the sort of man to demand that she should give up her career entirely. She would still be able to do part-time nursing and look after Geoff as well. Unless, of course, he wanted children— Always at that point Fay's thoughts switched to some entirely different subject. She did not realise that it was deliberate on her part—she did not recognise that she was evading the realities.

Mark was on the platform at the junction. "You made it, then?" was all the greeting he vouchsafed.

"How is she?" Fay asked.

"She's sinking—but things are much as Dr. Nichols said. She may last one, two days perhaps—or she may go quite quickly. She's holding on to see you, though. Seems to have something on her mind she wants to say to you."

"She can still speak, then?"

"Yes—but I should warn you that she has lapsed back entirely to her native tongue. Do you speak Italian at all?"

"No, not a word."

"Never mind—I'll be there to translate—or the au *pair* girl. Toni will understand if you speak to her in English, but she can't seem to get her tongue round it."

Soon they were speeding through the country lanes. Fay stole an occasional glance at Mark's profile as he drove, all his attention seeming to be on the road.

"What's the matter?" he asked at length, and without need of an explanation Fay realised that he had been aware of her scrutiny.

"I thought you looked tired," she said. "Have you been up all night?"

"Yes," he confessed. "But I did shave."

They did not speak again, and soon Mark was swinging the big car through the gates of Beechcroft. This time there was no Toni on the terrace and the french doors to her room were closed. Mark stopped the car at the steps and took Fay in through the front door.

On her last visit she had not passed through the hall at all, and for a brief instant she almost expected it to look the same as the last time she had seen it, with all the Christmas trimmings. Her eyes flew to the chandelier from which the mistletoe had hung. There was none there now.

It would have been startling if it had been there at the beginning of July, but not so startling as to hear Mark saying, "It looks different now, doesn't it?" just as though he had read her every thought. "Have you still got your fairy doll?" He turned to her with a little smile, and when she nodded he went on, "Let's see, what was it Toni said it would bring you? Your heart's desire?"

Fay wondered if he were being deliberately cruel—or whether he did not know how much memory could hurt. He gave no clue, but said instead, "Do you want a wash, or will you come straight in?"

"I'll go straight to Toni, please."

The nurse and the au *pair* girl were both in Toni's room—the nurse with a suitably subdued professional expression, but the young girl with red-rimmed eyes. Mark sent them both away and went up to the bedside.

"Toni—Toni," he said, trying to catch her attention. "I've brought your angel child to see you."

Fay approached the bed on the other side, and it seemed to her that the only thing alive in it was Toni's lustrous dark eyes. Neither age nor the seizures had dimmed them, nor altered their expressiveness. Plainly she was delighted to see Fay, though the few words she whispered were so low that even Mark could not make out what she said.

Fay bent and kissed the waxen cheek. "Hullo, Toni dear," she said. "I'm sorry to find you so poorly. I hope you haven't got any pain?"

Mark bent low to catch what she said, and translated, "She says no pain and that she's so pleased you have come."

Fay smiled by way of reply and took one of Toni's hands in hers. There was a slight pressure in response.

They remained like that for some time, with each of Toni's hands in one of theirs. Then she seemed to try to rouse herself a little. Her eyes sought Mark's face and she whispered a few halting words, then looked at Fay.

"Say yes, you promise," Mark translated urgently.

Obediently Fay spoke the words, "Yes, I promise, Toni," and smiled into those bright eyes. There was an answering gleam in them for a moment—and it was all over.

It had been Fay's lot in her career to witness many deaths and remain unmoved, but now she wanted to cry—but did not dare.

The quietness in the room seemed to have grown heavy as they stood there motionless. At last Mark moved, and released Fay's hand from Toni's fingers. "She was a great person," he said quietly, "and a very wise woman."

Fay nodded. "I wish I'd met her earlier. Yet in some ways I'd known her all my life. Mother used to talk of her so often."

Mark led her to the door. "Send the nurse in, will you? I won't be long."

Fay found the others in the kitchen with Mrs. Horsfall and when she had given her message she stayed for a moment or two with the housekeeper.

"I'm glad you came that last time—back in May," the housekeeper told her. "Mrs. Travers did enjoy it so much—she often spoke of it. But time didn't mean anything to her—she always thought that it was just yesterday that you had come and that you'd be down again tomorrow. We used to let her think that, because she was a bit worried because there were something she had meant to say to you before you left that day, but she couldn't remember what it was. She never did remember, bless her heart, but you may be sure it was some kindly thought. D'you know I don't think I ever heard Mrs. Travers say anything unkind about anyone—though there was plenty of occasion for it, even among members of her own family."

That had been true enough, Fay thought, remembering the Christmas house party. Toni had indeed been very tolerant.

Fay wandered back into the hall just as Mark came out of Toni's room. He came towards her, but stopped in a pool of sunlight which fell through the tall window on the spot where the firelight had glowed on her last visit and they had all gathered round with noise and laughter.

"You'll miss her," Fay said quietly.

"Yes," Mark agreed. "There has always been Toni. As long as I can remember anything it has been Toni and this house."

"Will you keep the house?" Fay found herself asking in the way one does when words and thoughts come with difficulty.

"Oh yes," Mark answered without hesitation. "She would have wanted that."

Toni's wishes reminded Fay, and she asked, "What was it I promised her to do?"

For a moment Mark looked at her in silence. Then an expression strangely at variance with his weariness crept into his eyes. It surprised Fay and she could not read it aright. It was almost of amusement—or mischief?

"You promised to be my wife and the mother of my children," he told her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANGER, white-hot and searing, flared through Fay and left her icy cold. Not knowing that she was speaking, she heard a voice, her voice, dropping words like chiselled pieces of stone into the pool of silence. "You despicable, lying cheat!"

She saw Mark's eyes widen for a moment, almost as though he was surprised. She saw his lips open as though he was going to speak, but she did not give him time.

"I suppose you think it clever to keep your marriage a secret from Toni—because she didn't approve of early marriage. Because she might have disinherited you if she had known. All right, lie away—that's your own affair. But to trick me into making that promise—how dare you involve me in your deceit!"

Mark spoke then, and his voice was so low and quiet that Fay had the feeling that her own voice had been raised, and to add to her anger she felt she had put herself at a disadvantage.

"At least it made Toni happy at the last," he said, "and the fact that you didn't know what you were promising surely absolves you from fulfilling it."

Brown eyes met blue, and neither wavered in their glance.

Then Fay spoke again with chilly distinctness. "Toni wouldn't thank you for happiness based on a lie—and that's what you've made me do. A promise to me is something to be kept—something sacred. And you've turned it into a lie."

"Then we shall have to see what we can do to make it possible for you to keep your promise, shan't we?" Now there

was a distinct and hideous glint of amusement in Mark's eyes which drove Fay's anger to white heat again.

"Never in a thousand years—" she began, and then had to break off as the door from the kitchen quarters opened and Mrs. Horsfall came through.

"The coffee won't be a moment," she said to Fay. "I expect you could do with a cup after your early start." And then turning to Mark, she went on, "Have you drafted the telegrams, Mark? If you'll do that then I can phone them through for you on the other phone while you get on to the solicitors and suchlike."

"All right, Horsey, I'll go and do that right away—if you'll excuse me?" The last words were addressed to Fay, but she did not reply.

"Did she speak to you, Miss Gabriel?" the housekeeper asked in a rather unsteady voice. "She did so want to see you again."

"Yes." Fay felt suddenly drained of her anger and of everything else except sorrow. "Yes, she spoke to me, but unfortunately I can't understand Italian."

"Did she remember what it was she wanted to ask you?"

Fay felt Mrs. Horsfall's eyes on her. She had a feeling that the housekeeper knew what that something was, and her reply was guarded.

"I don't know. Yes, I think perhaps I did—"

"And were you able to put things right for her?"

"I think I gave her the assurance she wanted." Fay knew she was being stilted, but not now or ever would she confide to anyone the impasse into which Mark's perfidy had led her. And in truth in those first moments she hardly knew herself what was involved.

The au pair girl brought a tray of coffee cups and Fay sipped the hot liquid. It seemed that it was what she had needed, for suddenly she knew what she had to do now.

"What's the number of the local garage?" she asked. "I had to get special leave from the hospital and I should get back there as soon as possible. There's nothing I can do here now, is there?"

"No," Mrs. Horsfall agreed, "but won't you wait for Mark

—he's sure to be going back later on. And you should have some lunch before you go."

"Thank you very much—but I really ought to catch the first available train," Fay insisted

As the train, gathering speed, lengthened the miles between her and Beechcroft Fay felt her anger dying. She fought to keep it alive because she knew that once it was gone she would feel shrivelled and empty.

Anger, however, was something at which Fay was not very adept. Reason cancelled it out. Reason and understanding—perhaps most of all understanding. She could understand although she deplored the motive which had activated Toni to want her grandson to stay unmarried until his career was firmly established. She could understand that Mark, out of love for his grandmother, would not want to go against her wishes. But she could understand—oh, how she could understand!—that stronger love which had come to him, making likes and deceit a small price to pay in exchange for it. Yes, she could understand that out of her own experience. But he should not have tricked her into giving that impossible promise.

That was cruel—he should not have made her give Toni that unequivocal "Yes." He should have found some way, some lie that would have made Toni happy yet not have placed the burden on her. Yet even with the thought there sprang up an excuse for him. He had not realised just how much that promise would cost her. She was only gradually becoming aware of the total cost herself.

Back at the hospital she went straight to Matron's office before going to her own quarters. "Come in," answered her tap at the door, and Matron looked up and nodded to her. She was on the telephone and it was only a second before Fay knew to whom she was talking.

"Yes—oh, here she is—she's just come in now. Yes, I'll tell her, Mr. Osborne," and Matron put down the receiver.

"I didn't expect you back so soon, Sister," she said.

"I was in time to see Mrs. Travers—and speak to her. But she died very shortly after I arrived, so I thought I'd better come straight back," Fay explained. "There was nothing

more I could do for her. The nurse is there, and a house-keeper, and an au *pair* girl. It was good of you to let me have the time off, Matron, but I didn't want to be away longer than I needed."

Matron nodded. "I appreciate that, Sister. You apparently left before the date for the funeral had been arranged. Mr. Osborne asked me to tell you that it will be on Monday. Will you be wanting to go down again to attend?"

Fay had not given that question any thought as yet, but she replied at once as though she had, obeying instinct rather than thought. "No, thank you, Matron. I don't know any of the family, and my friendship with Mrs. Travers was very short and mostly through my mother. I should feel an outsider—and I think I should respect her memory better by remaining on duty here."

Matron nodded in agreement. "Thank you, Sister. I don't mind admitting that it would have been difficult to release you again on Monday as Sister Miles goes on leave on Sunday. But of course I would have managed somehow if you had wanted to go."

"Thank you, Matron, but I would prefer to remain on duty. Shall I take over the evening theatres? I think there was a heavy list for today."

To Fay's surprise Matron declined her offer. "No, thank you, Sister. I have given strict instructions that there is to be no duty for you today. You do look rather washed out," she went on, cutting short Fay's remonstrance. "If I might suggest it, why don't you spend the rest of the day out of doors—you look as if you need some fresh air. Get out into the parks or something like that."

Suddenly Fay realised that she was glad Matron had not accepted her offer of duty. Anger had taken its toll of her and she did feel tired and lethargic.

She had not had lunch, but she had no appetite, and a glass of milk and a few biscuits supplied all she needed. Within half an hour she was passing through the hospital gates again.

She had no set plan as she passed the porter's lodge, but the sight of a 27 bus decided her. She would go to Kew. It was neither daffodil time nor bluebell time now, and she had

been there at both those seasons in response to Geoff's persuasions, but there was bound to be something worth seeing, and in any event as it was a weekday the long shady green drives that led down towards the river would be cool and peaceful.

The bus journey through the crowded streets of London provided her with a diversion from her thoughts, but her interest was very detached. The whole day seemed unreal now and if it were not for the pain in her heart she might have thought she had dreamed it all. But instead her thought was, "I wonder if this is what a patient feels like when he knows he has some incurable disease? One just has to learn to live with it, I suppose."

The second crop roses in the Gardens were magnificent and the early dahlias almost incredibly bright and gay, but Fay did not stay long amongst the formal flower beds, seeking instead those quieter parts of the place where, with grass under her feet and leaves above her head, she could think that she was in the country again.

It was getting well into the afternoon now and she had the long ride to herself—except for one other person who was walking in the same direction as herself. Walking—but slowly with the aid of two crutches. She blinked. It couldn't be, because he had gone back to his convalescent home yesterday—but it was—Geoff! And even as she stared incredulously at his back she saw him throw down the crutches and proceed, a little uncertainly, without their aid.

"That was a silly thing to do," she said, catching him up and bringing the discarded crutches with her. "You might not have been able to stoop to pick them up."

Geoff was so astounded at her voice and the sight of her that he rocked a little and might have fallen, but she already had a grip of his arm.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he cried.

"I might ask you the same thing," she smiled. "You're playing truant, aren't you."

"Not exactly. I phoned yesterday evening and told the Matron that I had some business I wanted to see through before I went back—and that I could stay with a friend—so she gave me her blessing. I wanted to see you again," he

explained a little shyly, "but when I went to the hospital they told me you had gone to Mr. Osborne's grandmother."

"Toni Travers, yes. She was my mother's godmother, you know."

"Yes, I remember, you told me about her. But they said you weren't expected back until tonight."

"Well, I came back earlier. I thought Matron might want me to take over some duty seeing that I had all yesterday off. But she didn't, so here I am—getting some fresh air."

"You look awfully tired," he commented.

"That's the result of idleness," she said, for Geoff's grey eyes could be very penetrating and she did not want him to see too much. "Now what was the idea of throwing away your crutches?" she demanded.

"I wanted to see if I could do without them."

"Goodness, Geoff, haven't you been told time and time again that you'll be completely fit and well again—it's only a question of time and patience. But you might have undone everything if you'd slipped and fallen again now."

"I suppose it was silly," he agreed, "but you see I wanted to be sure—well, that I could be a whole man again. It's very important to me. Important to the end of my novel, too," he finished with a smile.

"Well, don't you go taking any more chances like that or I shall have to read the riot act to you!" she said with mock severity. "Here, take your crutches. Shall we go down to the river or go and get some tea?"

Geoff had to return to his convalescent home by Green Line coach which he could pick up in Richmond, so they decided to linger by the river for a while and then have dinner in the town before he had to leave.

It seemed to Fay that some special providence must have planned this unexpected meeting with Geoff, for it was so exactly what she needed. The sunlight, ever getting more golden and mellow as the afternoon wore on, the quiet, and Geoff's company poured a kind of balm over the frayed emotions of the morning and gave the occasion a feeling of timelessness.

Afterwards she realised that for that afternoon and evening at any rate she and Geoff had changed roles. Formerly it had

been she, in her official capacity, who had applied the right therapy to Geoff's moods of depression or moments of undue optimism. Today it was he who assessed her needs—accurately—and gave her what she needed. She needed quiet, ordinary uneventful things to restore her balance. She needed to think and talk of other times, other places, old, remembered friends in order to help her put this morning into its proper perspective.

They exchanged anecdotes of their childhood and laughed at each other's escapades. He was three years her senior and they had been brought up on opposite sides of the world. But the experiences of childhood were a common bond. Their talk was all trivial and gentle and pleasant.

It was only when dinner was nearly over that Geoff stopped his banter and after a silence which held nothing of embarrassment, but plenty of companionship, he leaned across the table. Now his eyes were serious—but first he asked, "Cigarette?"

"No, thanks," she refused, "I don't very often." And then something made her change her mind. "But perhaps I will now, after all."

When he had lighted it for her, and his own, he spoke again. "D'you remember telling me once that it was only in books that you could make your characters do as you want? Draw them to whatever happy conclusion you had in mind for them?"

"I believe I did say something like that."

"Do you think that it's only in novels that there are happy endings?" he questioned, and his eyes never left her face.

She puffed a cloud of smoke—literally as a screen from his too discerning eyes. "I wouldn't go so far as to say that," she said slowly, "but—well, life does have a habit of tangling the threads."

"Have yours got tangled?" he asked, and the change from the hypothetical to the actual caused her no surprise. It was as though she had known it was bound to happen.

"Yes," she answered simply.

"It's Osborne, isn't it?" he went on, and the dropping of the "Mr." was symbolical of a new relationship, putting them on a basis of equality.

She nodded and scarcely wondered how Geoff should have known.

"He's married, isn't he?" Geoff's tone told her that he had plumbed the depths of her tragedy.

"Yes," she said again, and knew she did not have to elaborate. Geoff would understand the utter irrevocability of that.

They neither of them spoke for a while, then Geoff said quietly, "Don't you think it may be like you said? The threads have got tangled, crossed, for a while. But the main thread goes on past the tangle—don't you think it might go on to a happy ending after all?"

"I don't know, Geoff—I just don't know." And there was something in her voice which told of tears not very far off. For a moment Geoff's hand touched hers.

"I'm sorry, Fay. I don't want to probe."

"There's nothing to probe—nothing at all," she told him huskily. That was true: there had been nothing between herself and Mark which could not stand the most searching light of day. Only why did it hurt so?

It hurt so much that she hardly knew what she was replying to Geoff when he asked her again just as the coach was drawing into the station, "Shall I go for the happy ending, Fay?" speaking ostensibly of his novel.

And not realising the full implications, she had told him, "Yes, Geoff—you do that. Go for the happy ending." Perhaps she still thought that Geoff was the panacea for her pain.

Then he bent and kissed her, not asking permission this time, and kissing her not as a brother or a friend. Though it was necessarily brief, hardly more than a touch, yet his lips were the lips of a lover.

"*Au revoir*, Fay," he whispered. "Thank you for giving me that little gleam of light to travel by."

And then he was gone, stepping on to the coach with something of his old agility.

Mark was not at the hospital for the rest of that week and most of the next. Fay guessed that he was busy with the funeral and Toni's affairs. She was glad in a way not to have

to meet him, yet the longer the occasion was put off the more she grew to dread it. But for the fact that with Sister Miles on holiday she knew the request would have to be turned down, she would have gone to Matron to ask to be relieved of theatre duties.

She would have been ashamed of her cowardice if she had made such a request, but she knew in her heart that it was only Sister Miles' absence which stopped her.

But like most things dreaded the first meeting was not so difficult as she had expected. Mark came into the theatre with Mr. Barton, rather late, and all the theatre staff were ready and waiting. She had taken the precaution of already putting on her mask as though this afforded her some protection.

They wasted no time in getting started, for the first case had already been in the ante-room for some time. Mr. Barton was operating, Mark assisting. That suited Fay and she concentrated entirely on the consultant. That of course was as it should be, and Fay could never explain to herself why on an instant, and it was only an instant, she should have glanced at Mark. It would not have been so bad if at that precise moment he had not been looking at her.

In that brief instant of time she could not fathom the expression in his brown eyes, but it told her one thing—that Mark still had the power to move her strongly—and not to anger. She had to whip that up for herself, for anger was the only emotion towards him that she was prepared to allow herself.

It was a heavy morning list, and inevitably Mark took his turn. Fay found she preferred that, for while she was working to assist him at least she could be certain that he was not watching her from the other side of the operating table.

Just before they broke for lunch, Shorty Shaw did a straightforward appendicectomy. The other two surgeons watched him, talking lightheartedly at the same time, though Fay knew that Mr. Barton's eyes would miss nothing.

"What sort of stitch d'you call that?" he cried disgustedly as Shorty was closing up. "Campfire blanket, I should think! You're too ham-fisted, my lad!"

Actually there was nothing much wrong with Shorty's

effort and Fay knew that the remark was intended more as a joke than a criticism.

Shorty knew it too. "I'm usually regarded as a pretty good needleman," he said. "They're having a stall specially stocked with my embroidery at the Hospital Fete."

Afterwards, when they were disrobing, Mr. Barton brought up the subject of the Fete again, and turned to Fay. "Tell me about this Fete of yours, Sister. What does it entail?"

"I'm afraid I'm as much in the dark as you," Fay told him. "I haven't experienced one yet."

Staff Nurse Fisher put in her oar. She was a middle-aged married woman with no thoughts of promotion who had done a fixed duty shift on theatres for years. "It's the Friends of the Hospital, you see," she told Mr. Barton. "They get up this Fete and Fair in the hospital grounds. Last year they raised nearly nine hundred pounds—and pretty well wrecked the hospital routine into the bargain! But as far as you're concerned, sir, there's only one 'must,' and that's the staff dance in the evening."

"Oh ho!" Mr. Barton twinkled. "With or without my wife?"

"Without, please, sir," Nurse Fisher stated categorically. "We married staff can bring husbands, but wives—no. Matron has to do something to try to equalise things a bit, and every man on the staff who can hobble even if only on one leg has to be there or Matron'll have his blood."

"That lets us off the hook for the evening, then, doesn't it?" Mr. Barton turned to his Registrar. "You'll be there, I take it."

"I suppose so," Mark agreed unwillingly.

"He'd better be!" the staff nurse put in almost under her breath.

Forewarned was forearmed as far as Fay was concerned, and she made a mental note that the staff dance was one aspect of the Hospital Fete which she would not support.

She could of course just have absented herself, but that would have caused a good deal of comment. As it was, fate played into her hands and gave her a good excuse. Flip, who had recently been promoted to night duty in charge of one of the women's medical wards, was one of the unlucky ones who

did not fall due for their night off on the occasion of the dance. She bemoaned her fate loudly to Fay, with whom in spite of the barrier which their difference in rank might have made between them, she was still very good friends.

"I'll take over your ward for you if you like," Fay offered, "and of course provided we can persuade Matron to agree."

Flip regarded her open-mouthed with astonishment. "You must be mad !" she said.

Matron seemed very much of the same opinion when Fay broached the question to her, but since she was at her wits' end to keep an adequate skeleton staff on duty that night she was only too glad to have anyone of Fay's rank actually offering to do duty that Saturday. So an incoherently grateful Flip was able to go to the dance while an equally thankful Fay patrolled her darkened ward.

Actually Fay was being more generous than Flip realised when she offered to take over her night duty. For even in all the years she had been nursing, Fay had never really liked night duty. She had of course subjugated this dislike to common sense and knew she could cope with anything that might occur. Professionally she was quite confident, but inevitably between about two and four in the morning she became a prey to a sense of utter loneliness, or more than that, a deep aloneness. She was not a gregarious person, but if she was awake at that time of the morning and not busily occupied she always longed for someone to talk to. She would have welcomed the flicking on of one of the bed lights from a patient wanting a bedpan or some other little attention. But tonight she had a quiet ward. No one was seriously ill and all her patients were breathing rhythmically, fast asleep.

It was about ten past two when the telephone bell rang. Fay hurried to answer it lest the noise should wake any of the sleepers. To her surprise she realised that it was the external and not the internal phone that was ringing. Then she remembered that the dance would be ending about now—it might be a still grateful Flip ringing to see if all was well.

It was not Flip's voice which greeted her when she picked up the receiver, but a man's with a slight soft Scots accent.

"Good evening—or rather, good morning. Is that Adelaide Ward and is that Night Sister?"

"Yes, this is Adelaide," Fay confirmed, a little mystified.

"Good," the voice went on. "And how are you, Sister?"

"I'm very—" almost Fay fell into the trap of being personal, but she pulled herself up in time. "Who is that speaking, please?"

"Now if I told you my name I'm afraid it wouldn't mean much to you. Suppose we say it's—Angel? or would you prefer Archangel?"

All Fay's suspicions were immediately aroused. The play on her surname made her virtually certain that the caller was a member of the hospital staff. Shorty was the most likely practical joker, but it did not sound like his voice. Ferguson was the only houseman with a Scots accent, and he was far too dour to indulge in even the mildest joke.

The realisation that the person on the other end of the line was probably someone she met in her daily work stiffened Fay's resolution to end the conversation. She said brusquely, "I don't know who you are, but if you've just come from the dance my advice to you is to go home and try to sober up before tomorrow. Goodnight!" and she replaced the receiver—not however before she caught the outraged protest, "I'm as sober as a judge!"

Replacing the receiver was simple enough, but for some minutes afterwards Fay stood frowning a little and trying to fathom the most likely suspects for the joker. It might not of course be one of the medical staff. There were many men employed in the dispensary and on the administration whom she hardly knew, even by sight. Many of them might have Scots accents and a voice which was at the same time sympathetic and yet challenging. Yet she could not think of any possible reason why any one of them should choose her as the object for the joke.

She had only got that far when the phone rang again. She felt pretty certain that it was the same caller back again, but she had of course to answer it in case it should be an urgent call.

"Sister? Now why did you hang up on me? We hadn't really started our conversation—"

A PROMISE IS FOR KEEPING

"Look, I don't know who you are or what you want, but I would remind you that this is a public line to a hospital and it may be needed at any time for emergency calls—"

"But there are five or six lines to the hospital. They're not all likely to be needed at this ungodly hour, now are they? Besides, I am an emergency. I need help."

"What sort of help?" Fay's reaction was automatic, if reluctant.

"I have a problem—" the voice paused, and Fay, regretting her moment of weakness, cut in decisively.

"Look, Mr. Angel or whoever you are. I'm on night duty in a hospital ward and I have twenty-six patients on my hands. It's no part of my duty to help solve the problems of complete strangers—"

"But surely it's the duty of human beings to help one another? And we all have problems, don't we—even hospital Sisters. And they have a habit of looming tremendously large at this hour of the morning, don't you agree?"

That so exactly reflected Fay's own experience that she found herself agreeing before she realised it. There was something about the gentle voice that was not unpleasant ... almost to her own amazement Fay found that she did not want to ring off, though part of her mind still told her she should.

"I thought you'd agree," the voice went on. "Ladies first—what is your problem?"

"I didn't say I had one," Fay contradicted.

"But you admitted it—tacitly, as the novelists would say. Now what is it, I wonder? Boy-friend, perhaps?"

The thought struck her that it was odd he should have used the word "novelist" in the same sentence almost as the reference to a boy-friend. Unless—unless it was someone who knew all about Geoff. She decided to go on talking—it seemed likely the caller would give himself away sooner or later.

"Who said I had a boy-friend?" she countered.

"Oh, come—a young, attractive woman—"

"How do you know I'm young, or attractive for that matter?"

"You have a young and attractive voice."

"That's nothing to go by—I've known old ladies of eighty who sounded delightfully young over the telephone."

"So have I—but I'm sure you're not one of them! What does my voice tell you about me?"

Fay thought for a moment and then admitted, "Nothing. Except that I think I ought to know it, somehow. You've a slight Scottish accent, but I'm not sure that it's natural."

"How dare you! I've more than a drop of Scots blood in my veins, somewhere or other. Doesn't my voice tell you that I'm tall, dark and handsome?"

"Are you?" Fay countered quickly. It was a description she had heard applied to the Medical Registrar—a man named Gallimore.

"I shall admit to nothing less," came the laughing reply. "But back to our muttons—just what is the problem about the boy-friend. Don't you care for him?"

She could have made some light reply to that—have kept the conversation on the same level of airy-fairy nonsense it had been so far. But whether it was a slight feeling of light-headedness from lack of sleep, or that combined with the early hour of morning, Fay suddenly wanted to confide in this unknown voice—as though he might indeed help her solve the problem which was never far from her thoughts these days—a problem which grew more urgent with every meeting with Geoff and with every letter which passed between them.

"I do care for him—very much—" she spoke slowly now, for the words were being wrung out from her heart. She was speaking of things she had as yet confided to no one. "I care, and I want to make him happy—" she paused.

"Then what's the trouble?" the other voice had grown serious too.

"I don't love him," Fay said simply.

There fell a silence for a moment and then the man's voice went on, "I think that's only half the story. There's something you're not telling me. If that were all, I would say marry him if he loves you—and I presume that's what he wants. Marry him and you'll grow to love him. But if that's not the whole story—well, my dear, there are some things which no true woman could ever do—"

"What things?" she asked a little breathlessly in the momentary silence.

"Don't you know? I'm sure you do—"

A light flicked on in the ward—the signal that a patient needed attention. It recalled Fay to her normal self with a jerk. She could not think what she had been doing to allow herself so nearly to give herself away. "I must go," she said quickly. "One of my patients is calling."

"Then of course you must go—but don't worry about me. Just think of me as someone as lonely as you were—two ships that pass in the dark."

"But we never mentioned your problem—" Fay remembered.

"It doesn't matter—it wasn't really important. Good-night !"

The telephone did not ring again that night, and Fay did not really expect that it would.

CHAPTER NINE

THEY were still talking about the dance when Fay went on duty in the theatre on Monday morning. Apparently a very good time had been had by all—and in particular by Shorty.

Staff was teasing him about it when Fay walked in and she turned to her to remark, "You should have seen this young man on Saturday—talk about the life and soul of the party ! You don't know what you missed, Sister."

Shorty, getting tired it seemed of the merriment at his expense, turned the tables. "How d'you know she wasn't having a whale of a time herself? There's no telling what high jinks she was getting up to, there on Adelaide, in the dead of night—eh, Sister?" He gave her the broadest of winks as he spoke and for a moment Fay thought he must indeed have been her unknown caller of the night.

But she was not seriously bothered any longer as to the identity of that mysterious caller. It was enough that he had solved one problem for her and presented her with another which was even more difficult. She knew now what she had to do about Geoff, but how to do it with the minimum of pain to him—that was the question which occupied her mind now.

When the swing doors opened to admit the surgeons only Mark entered the theatre.

"Mr. Barton won't be here until eleven," he announced. "So we'll make a start if the patient's ready." He did not address Fay, but he was speaking directly to her and she realised, with a little inward twinge, that he was smiling at her for the first time since before Toni died. And that smile

told her that the decision she had arrived at was the right one, the only one, without making it any easier to carry out.

For the first time, that morning Fay found it hard to keep her mind exclusively on her work. The uncanny rapport between herself and Mark was not quite complete, and he had to call sharply, "Retractor, please, Sister!" when normally she would have had it ready to put into his hand.

That was during the first case. After that, with a supreme effort, she pulled herself together and there were no more similar lapses.

Mark, however, did not let it pass without comment. As he was peeling off his gloves he spoke from behind his mask. "Not quite on top of your form this morning, Sister? You haven't the excuse of the dance to offer, since you weren't there."

"I should be ashamed to offer that as a valid excuse, anyway," she told him quickly.

Mark removed his mask. "Quite right, Sister—I stand corrected."

It was the nearest they had come to pleasantries for a long time, and Fay felt again that sickening little twinge that was made up of pain and pleasure and was quite unpermissible.

It was difficult in the extreme to tell a man that you cannot marry him when he has not even asked you. But that was the size of the problem that confronted Fay. She and Geoff had never so far stepped out of the realm of the novel as far as words went, but Fay did not try to deceive herself. Geoff's eyes and his kiss had told her that he loved her—and she had allowed him to go on hoping. She had used him, she now accused herself bitterly, to feed her own hunger. But now quite definitely she had to call a halt—before it was too late. She clung with fierce determination to the belief that it was not too late, but she did not allow any consideration to weaken her resolution. She went to meet him with nerves stretched almost to breaking point—and hating herself.

They were meeting at their favourite restaurant—for by now they had established a "favourite"—and as soon as she

caught sight of him she could tell that Geoff was excited about something or other. She could not be quite sure whether it was good news or not.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're on time!" he greeted her. "I've such a lot to tell you and not much time in which to do it. I've ordered already—I hope you don't mind. I tried to choose all your favourite things, but if I've gone wrong you'll have to forgive me this time and I promise to do better next time."

That was her opportunity. She could have told him then that there wasn't going to be a next time—or at least, not on quite the same footing. But she had not the heart to stop him—he was evidently bubbling over with his news.

"I'm sure the meal will be all right," she smiled "But tell me your news."

"I've been discharged from the convalescent home," he told her, "and I'm on my way home. Have to catch the seven-forty from Euston—and I mustn't miss it because Dad's meeting me at the other end."

"That's good news—but I thought you weren't to leave for at least another fortnight. In fact I'd have thought you needed more time before getting back to normal life."

"That's the whole point! I thought I was there for another few weeks yet—in fact I was looking forward to it because I reckoned I could get the book finished there while I still had plenty of free time. But unknown to me, Mum and Dad had been arranging for a cruise—with the blessing of the Matron, apparently. They all seem to think that it's just what I need to get me properly back on my feet. It could be exciting in different circumstances," Geoff said with a slight cloud in his expression. "I've never travelled and I've always wanted to. But—well, it means that I shan't see you for a month. I couldn't refuse after Mum and Dad have gone to so much trouble, especially as they can't really afford it—"

"Good gracious—why on earth should you even think of refusing?" Fay cut in. "It's wonderful of your parents, and it'll be the very thing for you. You can take your portable typewriter with you and there'll be plenty of time on board for you to get on with the final chapters."

Geoff smiled, obviously relieved. "I'm so glad you see it

that way too. I was rather depressed when they first told me, but then I saw that it could serve a good purpose. It's surprising, isn't it," he mused, "the way things do turn out all for the best in the end. You know," he twinkled at her, "I think I owe an awful lot to that chap who ran into me!"

"What—" Fay began, but Geoff was going on, serious now, heedless of her interruption. "If it hadn't been for him smashing me up like that I should never have met you—never have written my book—"

"That's nonsense," she told him firmly, ignoring the earlier part of his remark. "You always wanted to write—you told me so. You always had it in you—"

"No," he said, looking at her very directly with those honest grey eyes of his. "I always wanted to write, yes, that's true. But I didn't have it in me, until you came along and gave me inspiration—and understanding. It's strange—" he switched to another line of thought. "I'd always got along all right with other people—I didn't fall out with them, but I never really understood how they felt, how the things I said and did could affect them. I hadn't any—compassion—I think that's the word that really describes it. It means 'suffering with' literally, doesn't it? And that's what I hadn't the capacity for. But I've learned it a bit now, and a whole lot more besides, and one day perhaps I'll be able to tell you just how much I owe to you—"

It was strange, Fay thought, that he should have used that word "compassion." It was a term she always used when she was thinking of Mark.

Plainly, it seemed to Fay, she could not say what she had come to say. Not now, or the cruise would do him no good at all. Perhaps—who could tell?—perhaps the cruise might widen his horizons again, give him fresh interests. Though even as she thought it she knew that it was a vain hope and not one calculated to ease her own difficulties. She tried to keep the conversation in safe channels

"Tell me about the cruise," she begged. "Where, and when, and for how long?"

"It isn't really a cruise—not one of the luxury ones at all events," he told her. "Dad has a few contacts in the smaller shipping lines, and this ship is one of the Carlisle line operat-

ing with quite small boats and carrying cargo and a few passengers. This trip starts from Southampton in ten days' time. Gibraltar, and along the north coast of Africa, calling at various ports to deliver and take on cargo. Then north to Crete, a bit of cruising round the Greek islands, Sicily, Naples—most of the shore time will be in Greece, I'm told."

"It sounds interesting," Fay commented. "Better than a luxury cruise, I should think—not so organised."

"Yes, that's what appeals to me about it," Geoff agreed. "It sounds very easy-going. We'll finish up at Marseilles and travel home over land, because the ship isn't returning to England—it has to go on down the West African coast."

"Lucky you!" Fay could share the anticipated happiness in Geoff's eyes.

"I wish you were coming," he said, and for a moment the happiness died. "I—I suppose you couldn't possibly get off—?"

"Heavens, no !" she cried. "That really would be the last straw as far as Matron's concerned—she's tearing her hair already, what with the holiday season, two Sisters off sick and another two resigning early in September!"

"It must be nice, though, to be so necessary. My bank seems to be getting on perfectly well without me."

"I bet they'll be glad to get you back, all the same. When do you think that will be?"

"The doc seems to think I should be fit by October."

"Umm," Fay said thoughtfully. "Yes, you'd better go back for a bit—until you see how the book goes. If it's a best-seller you'll be able to resign from the bank and devote yourself entirely to writing. Somehow I can't see you as a bank clerk—I didn't think bank clerks had any imagination!"

He grinned boyishly at the generalisation. "You'd be surprised," he told her. "Some of them dream—but most of them aren't as lucky as I am, and the dreams just remain dreams. Heavens, look at the time ! I'll miss my train if I don't hurry !"

They got a taxi and she saw him off on his train at Euston.

"Write and tell me all about the cruise, won't you," she said, and then corrected herself, "but not so often as to

detract from the book. You simply must get that finished and revised before October."

"Don't you worry, I will," he promised. "I've got it all worked out in my head now, so it'll be all plain sailing. When I get back I'll have finished that part of the story and be ready to start an entirely new chapter, I hope—and minus this thing, too," he scornfully indicated the stout walking stick which had replaced his crutches.

He did not need to say any more. Fay knew perfectly well what he meant—it was written in his face. Geoff had been something of an athlete, proud of his physical fitness, rejoicing in his manhood. He had been too proud to offer himself until he was a whole man again.

A warning shout from the porters told them that the train was about to start. There was no time for anything but a hasty farewell, then Geoff clambered aboard and continued to wave from the carriage window until a curve in the line took it out of view of the platform.

Then, sick at heart, Fay turned and made her way back, a solitary figure amongst the crowd—solitary as she must ever be.

Work in the theatres was rather lighter than usual in August and only more or less emergency operations were done. Many of the surgeons, including Mr. Barton, were away. In theatre Mark did most of the work. He took a week off in the early part of the month and Fay gleaned from various sources that he was down at Beechcroft trying to get some of Toni's things in order. His place in the theatre was taken by another Registrar named Collins. He was something of the hit-and-miss school, which after Mark's precision work did not please Fay at all.

It was during the week that Mark was away from St. Edith's that Fay received a letter in untidy childish handwriting. When she opened it, somewhat puzzled as to the sender, she found that it was from Wendy and written from Beechcroft. The spelling was shocking, but the style was commendably brief and lucid.

"Dear Fay," it began with characteristic lack of inhibition, "We are spending the hollidays at Beechcroft. It is horid

here without Toni. Mark says when we go back to school we can write our letters to you. I will write one and the next time Helen and then me again. Mark says you may not have time to answer but I hope you do. I want to hear all about the hospital. I would like to be a surgeon when I grow up. I don't mind blood. I fell down on the stairs at school last term and made my nose bleed. There was blood all over the place. There is not much to do here that is why I am writing to you. Tim and John are here but they are boys and pretty small and silly. They are sort of cousins. If you can't always answer please make it my week when you do because Helen has a boy's friend and I haven't. With love from Wendy.

P.S. I forgot to tell you Mummy is still on the way."

A little whimsical smile played round Fay's lips as she read—until she got to the bit about the "yot" when she felt a tug at her heart.

Poor little Wendy. Under the thin veneer of hardboiled sophistication she was—at heart just a normal little girl in need of affection.

Fay resented Mark's assumption, however, that she should be the one to supply the affection. She would have preferred to sever all connection with any member of his family. He must know that too, she thought. Or—the thought crossed her mind swiftly and she did not dwell on it—was he perhaps trying to make up to her for something she would never have for herself—something he had denied her?

At any rate, whatever the state of affairs between herself and Mark, Wendy must not suffer, and Fay sat down in her first free time and wrote the little girl a long letter with just a little, but not too much, "blood" in it.

When Mark came back after his brief leave he did not make any reference to the liberty he had taken in telling the children they might write to her. In fact since Toni's death they had had no personal conversation at all. Fay was glad he had realised that this was the way she wanted things, the only way they could continue working together. But even on those terms she was rather less restless and unhappy when he was about the hospital than when he was away from it.

He was back, however, for a mere ten days or so before he was off again to complete his spell of leave. It was about

this time that Matron sent for Fay. She wondered what was in the wind as she made her way along the corridors to Matron's office. She no longer felt the apprehension which younger nurses felt on receiving such a summons, but she did wonder if she was being transferred from theatres to some other appointment and was not sure whether to be glad or sorry at the prospect.

"Good morning, Sister," Matron greeted her with a smile. "Sit down—though I'm not going to keep you long."

"Thank you, Matron," Fay murmured, still wondering what was coming.

"I have just realised, Sister, that you have been with us nearly eight months now and you have not had any leave. It is high time you took some—"

"Oh, that's all right, Matron, I'm quite happy to go on working—"

"Nonsense!" Matron cut in brusquely. "Of course you must have the leave which is due to you—and as a matter of fact you look as if you need it. I should have noticed before. I don't want any more of my Sisters going sick on me—they're too precious. Now I make it you are due for three weeks' leave—and I suggest you take it as from Monday while things are still comparatively slack in theatres."

Fay knew better than to argue, though it was ridiculously short notice and she hadn't any idea about what to do with herself.

Perhaps Matron read that thought as quickly as it went through Fay's mind. "Have you any arrangements?" she asked Fay. "Anyone with whom you could spend your leave? Mind you, I want you to get right away and not just waste it hanging about here."

"No, I haven't any plans," Fay confessed. "I've very few friends over here, but I'll think of something, and I'm quite fond of my own company!" She smiled to give assurance to the words, not wanting Matron to suggest that she should team up with one or other of the staff who happened to be going on leave at the same time.

Such however was not Matron's intention, and as she went on fluently Fay became convinced that she had had it all

worked out beforehand. "Then now would seem to be the time to accept that invitation which your patient in Stanhope was always begging you to take up." She paused for a second while Fay blinked and tried to get her bearings. "Mr. Oliver and that villa of his on the Riviera."

That eventually was what Fay did, unlikely as it had appeared at first sight.

Mr. Oliver was still in the side ward of Stanhope, awaiting the second part of his colostomy. It was Fay's private opinion that they never would get him quite fit enough for that further operation, but of course she did not voice this opinion to anyone. Certainly when he heard that there was a possibility of her going to his beloved villa Mr. Oliver's health seemed to improve beyond all imagining.

He soon had the telephone wires buzzing and in no time at all the whole thing was arranged, including her flight ticket to Nice.

"You know, you're piling up such a debt of gratitude that I can never hope to repay you," Fay told the old man.

"The boot's on the other foot," he said. "I can never tell you how happy it's made me to think of you going to Lamontella. You will tell me how it's looking, won't you? There should be pears and perhaps some late peaches, and Pietro has flowers at every season. I want to hear about the waterfall he was making last time I was there—I've never seen it since it was finished. You will write and tell me, won't you, and take some pictures, perhaps?"

"I've got my camera loaded up with colour film," she told him.

"I wish you'd let them open up the villa for you. Not that you won't be very comfortable in Pietro's bungalow, and not so lonely, as you're going alone. Rose Pietro is English, you know—a Lancashire lassie we took out one year as a maid, when my wife was alive. When it was time to come home Rose told us she was staying on. And it's been a godsend having her there. She'll take good care of you, my dear. I wish young Geoff could have gone with you, though—I don't like to think of you going off on your own—"

"Mr. Oliver !" Fay cried, pretending to be shocked. "You naughty old man ? That wouldn't be at all proper!"

The question of her going alone on holiday seemed to bother her colleagues a lot too. Half of them were openly sceptical that she really was going alone and insisted that **she** was holding out on them, and the other half seemed to **think** that there must be something odd about her if she could contemplate going by herself.

Actually as the day for departure dawned Fay was getting more and more excited at the prospect of new surroundings and solitude—and more and more aware of how much she needed the latter.

She had started and torn up at least a dozen letters to Geoff and she knew she must not delay much longer. She promised herself that the first thing she would do when she **got** to Lamontella would be to write to Geoff. She had already missed his boat at the last port of call, so he would **not** know of her holiday. She would tell him about that—and the other thing she had to tell him—at one and the **same** time.

Her flight to Nice left Heathrow at noon, and even allowing for the time by car from there to the villa she would **be there** before nightfall. She had called a taxi just after **nine**, though, as instructed by the airline, as there were formalities to be gone through when she reached the airport. Fortunately there had been no passport difficulties as she **already** had a British one which was comprehensive. Nevertheless, getting herself packed up and leaving everything in apple pie order in the theatre had been something of **a burden**, and she felt a distinct sense of relief as she watched **the** hospital porter pile her bags into the waiting cab and offer his good wishes at the same time.

"Running away, Sister?" A voice behind her startled her **so** much that in turning to confront the speaker she nearly **fell** off the bottom step on which she had been standing.

For an instant Mark put his hand under her elbow **to steady** her, but he did not keep it there.

No doubt she looked as frosty as she felt. Mark was supposed to be on leave. Why did he have to appear at this

moment? And why did the labels on her luggage have to be so prominent?

"Of course not," she replied coldly. "Just taking some leave which is due to me."

"Good," he replied, undaunted. He was full of sunshine that morning. "Have a good time. Not going all alone, are you?"

She deliberately ignored that question and turned to the porter. "Thanks a lot, Potter," she said, pressing a coin into his hand. But it was Mark who closed the cab door and had the final word.

"I hope you enjoy yourself," he smiled. "You look as though you could do with a dose of sunshine," which told her that he had both read the labels and that her frostiness had not been lost on him.

The cab had to circle the forecourt before it could get out on to the drive again, and as it did so Fay saw Mark walk across to his own car and start it up. His business at the hospital must have been very brief.

"Bother him !" she thought. "Why did he have to turn up just now and spoil everything?" For the sight of him had indeed shattered the sense of getting away from everything which had begun to steal over her. It was a false illusion, she realised now, for whether she liked it or not Mark had profoundly influenced her life. She would not be able to get away from him—ever.

Lamontella was all and more than Mr. Oliver had promised. It was not a holiday resort—the tiny bay was too strewn with jagged rocks to make it attractive for tourists, and there was only one passable road through the place—the coast road—and that did not really touch the village

It looked as though at some time in the far forgotten past the land on that section of the coast had cascaded into the sea, and only little by little had the local inhabitants managed to subdue nature to their needs. There was no main village street, for the place was built in a succession of terraces with the newer villas on the higher terraces while the old cottages, each with its little plot of land, nestled on the lower ones. There were vineyards, small ones worked by families who made their own wines and sold them locally;

fruit, vegetables and flowers were there in profusion, and goats and hens, but practically no cows, since grazing land was scarce.

Mr. *Oliver's villa—the Villa Inglesa as it was known* locally—was on one of the higher terraces commanding a magnificent view over the rooftops and the vineyards to the sea. The Mediterranean was doing its best just then to live up to its reputation and was unbelievably blue by day and silver under the light of the moon.

The terrace was lined with peach trees—as plane trees might border an English road, and Fay understood Mr. Oliver's raptures about Lamontella in the spring when the fruit trees would be a frothy mass of pink blossom. But even now at the end of the summer Lamontella provided all that Fay needed. Rest and quiet—she had not realised just how much she was in need of those things, nor how tired she had been. Tired not so much with physical work, though she had had plenty of that, but tired as a result of the emotional strain under which she had been living.

Now that she was no longer under the necessity of spending days filled with activity, Fay found herself becoming positively indolent, and for the first few days she was content to do little more than sit on the spacious loggia of the Pietros' bungalow and watch the changing effects of sun and sea and sky.

The bungalow, built in the gardens of the villa, was modern and comfortable, and as clean as a new pin. The wide loggias which surrounded it on all sides made it possible to sit out of doors at all times of the day, choosing the shade or the sun, whichever she preferred. The Pietros were kindness itself, delighted it seemed to have a visit from anyone who knew their dear "Patrone", and on Rose's part the added pleasure of being able to converse in her native tongue. In spite of her lack of Italian Fay had found no language difficulty—her own fairly fluent French and the fact that most of the villagers had at least a smattering of American English made the ordinary necessary intercourse of the everyday quite easy.

Life was so pleasant away from St. Edith's and a new question began to creep into Fay's mind. Why should she

ever return there? Would it not be better to cut right adrift from the hospital and the bitter-sweet torment it must hold for her all the time Mark was there? She could return at any time to the Commemoration Hospital, she knew without a shadow of doubt. But she felt a kind of moral obligation to Matron and St. Edith's. They had been good to her there, and although she had given no written undertaking she did feel some sense of obligation to give them a longer service.

"I won't think about it now," she told herself. "I won't make up my mind yet. I must concentrate on that letter to Geoff."

But somehow the idle days passed and the letter did not get written. It was with a shock that she looked at the calendar one day and discovered that the Wentworths would already have landed at Marseilles and have started their overland journey back to Dover.

It became a matter of urgency then to get the letter written, and Fay sat late on the loggia trying desperately to write what had to be written without hurting Geoff too much. It was not easy, and long after Rose had switched on the lantern light over her head Fay sat with a blank sheet of paper before her. She forced herself to take up the pen and write something—anything. Perhaps it would be easier if she once made a start.

"Dear Geoff," she wrote, "I expect you will be surprised to see from the address where I am. Matron insisted that I should take some leave which was due to me and as I had no time to make any other plans I decided to accept dear old Mr. Oliver's invitation to come to his villa—"

It was easier to start with the commonplace, the trivial, but she must not delay too long—it would only hurt Geoff more.

"... I am not staying in the villa itself but in the gardener's bungalow which is in the grounds. I can't tell you how beautiful it all is here—"

For a while that beauty of the night, the warm air scented with the mingled perfume of a hundred different flowers acted like a narcotic, causing her fingers to fall idle and her

heart to swell with sadness so that even breathing seemed an effort.

Far below on the coast road *she* could hear the sound of an occasional car, and nearer the sound of a man's footsteps. Soon there would be more footsteps—the villagers returning from the inn. The realisation of the passing of time drove her back to her letter.

"All this beauty," she wrote, "somehow makes what I have to tell you all the harder—"

She was concentrating hard now, intent on her task, so that she had not realised that the footsteps had come right up to the loggia until a man's voice spoke almost at her elbow.

"Hullo, Fay darling—"

"Geoff I" she cried in utter amazement, scattering her papers as she jumped to her feet.

He moved quickly, without sticks now, up on to the loggia, and had her in his arms kissing her as once she and Mark had kissed under the mistletoe at Beechcroft, only now the passion was all on one side.

She broke away, knowing that she should not have let him kiss her like that, but afraid to end it too abruptly, because even now she had a great tenderness for him.

"How on earth did you—"

He anticipated the question and seemed eager to talk. "Mr. Oliver wired the ship and told me that you were here. He didn't actually tell me to come and find you, but I know he thought and hoped that I would. Oh, Fay, it's good to see you again! You don't know how long these last weeks have been. And even now I'm horribly pushed for time. The parents have made so many plans and I couldn't bear to upset them. But I managed to get away for tonight and half of tomorrow. Just long enough to come and bring you the final chapters. I had to come," he finished.

"Tell me about your trip," she said breathlessly.

But he brushed that suggestion aside. "I've told you plenty about that in my letters. I want to hear about you—and I want most of all to read you the last chapters. Is it too late? Are you tired? Can I read to you now?"

"It is late," Fay tried to find some excuse. "Won't it do tomorrow?"

"I would much rather tonight," he pleaded. "It's terribly hot—too hot for sleep, and they say there's going to be a storm. Can't I, please?"

He was pleading like a small boy, and she could not deny him.

He read well—and he had written well. His last chapters far excelled the beginning of his book, even. His understanding, almost uncanny at times, seemed to have grown as he lived with his characters. His treatment of the plight of his heroine, who cannot have the man she loves and who does not love her, but finds eventual fulfilment and happiness with another, lifted the story out of the hackneyed and into the realms of real life. The girl's pain was real pain—how real to Fay!—and the solution part of the common-sense acceptance of everyday life. It was not exaggerated, not idealised. It was real—all too real.

When he had finished reading Geoff looked up—slowly and almost reluctantly.

Fay knew what he wanted her to say, but she could not speak. The air seemed to have become unbearably hot, almost unbreatheable, and there was a rumble which was distant thunder above the heavy beating of her own heart.

"You're crying, Fay!"

She put a hand up to her cheek and found what he said was true.

"Why?" he asked gently.

She jumped up, not heeding her wet cheeks, trying to break free from some imprisonment which held her in a gigantic pressure. "It's all wrong, Geoff—it can't end like that! I'm sorry—I'm sorry, but it can't!"

Now she was sobbing, great choking sobs that she could not hold back. When at last she checked them the hot, heavy air on the loggia hung silent.

She turned to Geoff and saw that he had picked up the sheet of notepaper which she had scattered when he first came.

"What were you going to tell me, Fay?" he asked in a dull, flat voice.

"*This—*" *she said*, her voice breaking. "This—that it can't be as you wish—that there isn't any happy ending for you and me."

"But you said—you said I could hope—"

"I know. I know, Geoff, and I was terribly wrong to let you think that. But I hoped it might come true—I hoped I could make you happy—but I can't," she finished in a whisper, and then out of her great pity she forced herself to go on. "I wouldn't have done this to you, Geoff—I didn't want to hurt you—and I know how much it hurts! I daren't ask you to forgive me now. But please believe me, Geoff, that it would have hurt you far more in the end if I hadn't told you now."

"But why?" he asked, and his voice was tired and bleak. "Why? He's married."

"I know," she agreed dully. "I know I can never have any part in his life—just as I know I shall belong to him for always—no, Geoff, not that," she said quickly as she saw the anger flash in his eyes, "but I made a promise once—a promise I can't keep but which won't let me ever belong to any other man. That promise did something to me ... how can I make you understand? Only a woman could feel what I felt for him—in my heart, in my mind—and in my body—I belong to him."

There was a silence between them in which the rumbling thunder became a little louder. "He cannot understand," she thought. "How should he? Only another woman could understand."

"Don't you see, Geoff, that feeling like that I can't marry anyone, especially you, because I care for you so much. I can't be any man's wife. I should be no better than your mistress—and that would degrade us both."

He did not make any reply. She heard the rasp of paper being viciously torn and she saw the pieces of her letter scatter over the loggia.

"Shall I see you again?" he asked in a voice she hardly recognised.

"Only—only when it doesn't hurt you any more," she told him, full of pity, and yet unable to help him.

"Then it's goodbye," he said, and she did not reply.

She stood motionless while his footsteps echoed away into the night silence, for by now it was very late and there was no traffic even on the coast road.

A little time after he had gone it seemed that the storm gathered force suddenly. Great drops of rain began to fall, at first singly and then in a cascade hissing on the hot earth and sending sulphurous vapour into her nostrils. A great fork of lightning cleft the sky, followed by a clap of thunder which seemed to rock the very earth. It sent her to the refuge of her room, but there was no peace there either.

CHAPTER TEN

THE storm lasted for hours, and Fay did not think she slept at all. Suddenly, though, it was daylight, and Rose, after a tap at the door, was entering with a tray of morning tea.

"I let you sleep on a bit, miss," she said. "After that dreadful night I thought you'd need it."

Prompted by those words, Fay glanced at her clock. It was half past eight—and Rose usually brought the tea at seven.

"I'd no idea I'd slept at all," Fay admitted. "Certainly I had no idea of the time. You look awfully tired, Rose—I think I ought to be taking tea to you, not the other way round."

"I'm a dreadful coward, miss," Rose admitted. "When we get storms like that all I can do is to get under the bed-clothes and lie there shaking until it's over. Last night was the worst I ever remember. But I'm so ashamed, miss, at not coming to see if you were all right."

"Well, I must admit I didn't sleep much. But I'm not really worried by storms—"

"Pietro reckons there must have been an earthquake or landslide somewhere or other. Did you feel the whole place rock with that first thunderclap, miss?"

"Yes, I did." Fay remembered now, though she had not been analytical at the time. "He could well be right. Was there anything in the news this morning?"

Rose looked even more worried. "Our radio wasn't working, and there's no papers come through yet, miss. Pietro's gone down to the village now—we'll know more when he

comes back. I do hope your friend got away before it really broke. The lightning was terrible. I could see it even with my eyes closed under the sheet!"

So Pietro and Rose had been aware of Geoff's arrival. But Fay had nothing to hide. "Mr. Wentworth shared Mr. Oliver's room in my hospital," she told Rose. "And as he was at Marseilles he dropped over to see me. He walked up from the inn. I should think he was back there before the storm really started."

"Oh yes, I daresay he would be—and that's a good thing. I'm afraid we can't ring up to find out, though, because the phone's dead too."

Fay dismissed Rose, telling her that she would not want any breakfast that morning. Then she drank the tea—three cups of it one after the other, in an attempt to clear her tired brain. She had never felt so exhausted in her life, and she knew that the cause was not the storm nor her lack of sleep, but purely emotional. She did not like that; she did not approve of it. But the fact remained—her feelings were stronger than her will, and it was the battle between them which had exhausted her.

The tea did at least have the effect of making her a little less lethargic, and immediately she had finished drinking it she jumped out of bed, bathed and dressed as though she had a train to catch instead of a quiet day with nothing in particular with which to fill it.

By the time she had finished she could hear voices from the kitchen regions. Presumably Pietro was back from his trip to the village and she went along to see what news he had brought.

Pietro was almost in tears and excitedly voluble. "Have you seen, Mees Gabrielle," he gesticulated wildly, "have you seen my lovely garden? All ruined! And my waterfall—I make it especially for the *patrone*, and he has never seen it yet. Ah!—it is tragedy." He propelled Fay on to the loggia, and she saw what he meant. The garden was a shambles. Branches had been blown off the trees, many of the smaller ornamental ones had been uprooted, and everywhere there was water. The little stream which Pietro had turned into his waterfall had become a sizeable river, its muddy water

having spilled over most of the flower beds, and but for the loggia steps it must have come into the bungalow. There in the open she realised that the rushing noises which she had thought were just in her own head were in fact the noise of much water moving down from the mountains. She looked with fascinated foreboding at what the storm had done to the mere trickle which Pietro had dammed to make his waterfall and shrank from the thought of what it might do to the larger streams.

"Did you get the papers?" she asked. "Was there any news from outside?"

"No, no." Pietro dismissed the question. Even catastrophe in the next village would have left him unmoved at that moment, he was so full of what had happened in his little world of Lamontella. "Giacomo's new vineyard—all gone 1" he made a sweeping gesture with his arms. "All washed away in the river. Papa Antonio's goats have broken their tethers—the water, do you see, made the stakes loose in the ground—and they are just gone—pouff 1 No sign of them at all."

He would have gone on all day about the little local tragedies, but Fay wanted news of the outside world.

"It will come later—later," he promised. "I will go down to the village again to see if the papers have arrived, but there may be a—what you call a landslide, yes?—on the road from Nice. The papers are printed there and they come in by road. The radio will be working soon, perhaps, when they have time to make the adjustments, but they say at the inn that they have heard the lightning had struck the mast."

But Fay decided she would go down to the village herself to find what news there was from the outside world. That at least was the reason she gave to herself. She was only just beginning to realise the depth of the loneliness which had started last night for her. Until then her decision had not been irrevocable, and she had not looked beyond it, had not tasted in anticipation the dry sterility of loneliness which would be her lot from now on. But this morning she felt it in full measure—felt it and could not bear it. One half of her panicking brain said, "Perhaps Geoff will not be gone—perhaps it's not too late—"; but the other half knew that what she had done was right. "There are some things no true

woman can do—" she remembered the words, and it calmed her a little. "I'm being tempted to be a coward," she thought, "but if I hang on the strength will come. I'll get used to it in time."

The thing to do was to be busy. That was the cure—so busy that she would have no time to think about herself, no time to repine for the things she could not have. "I'll go home," she thought, and was surprised to find that she meant England and not Australia as "home." But then she remembered Matron. Matron had ordained that she must have a holiday and would certainly not be pleased for her to get back to work before her leave expired and upset the rotas worked out for her absence.

"I can't stay here, though—there's not enough to do," she decided.

Going down to the village proved to be a more hazardous undertaking than Fay had bargained for, and soon she found that she had to concentrate all her thoughts and attention on negotiating the steep steps and cobbled paths which led down from one terrace to the next. They were all covered with a slippery slime of earth washed down by the torrential rain and overflowing water butts. As she got lower an obnoxious smell reached her nostrils. The nurse in her was alerted at once and painted a picture of what had happened. There was a main drain through Lamontella, but she guessed that few of the older houses and cottages would be connected to it. They probably still had old and inadequate cesspits which had now overflowed.

Last night's storm was not over. The worse and more dire results were yet to show themselves. She wondered what was the state of public health administration in Lamontella.

She felt impelled to hurry, and made what haste she could to the lower terraces. The post office, the council offices and the inn were all close together, and this morning it seemed as though the entire population of the village was collected outside one or other of them.

From the activity both inside and outside the council offices Fay gathered that the local elders were alive to the dangers of the situation. Large handwritten posters were being put up and distributed round the village. Fay's know-

ledge of the language had not progressed very far as yet, but she was pretty sure that they said "Boil all water!" Several of the small refuse carts which were used to surmount the difficulty presented by the steep terraces were out, and men with shovels were clearing the streets. Suddenly with a great deal of noise the tiny fire engine emerged from its garage, and Fay guessed that its task would be to hose down after the shovellers.

Obviously Lamontella was coping with the disaster. Breathing a sigh of relief, Fay turned into the post office. It was some time before she could get to the counter to have a word with the postmistress, who spoke English.

"Is there any news through yet?" she asked.

"No papers yet, [Gees, but the telegraph is working now. It seems we here in Lamontella have escaped lightly, thanks be to St. Peter—" St. Peter was the patron saint of the village. "But there is much damage between here and Nice. Roads have been flooded and cars stranded and there are many trees fallen. There is talk of great trouble farther east, though."

That was all the woman could tell her, and Fay thanked her and pushed her way through the crowd again, making her way unhesitatingly towards the inn. She knew there was a barmaid there who spoke English, and she had to have news of Geoff. She had to be sure that he was safe—that he had indeed gone back to the inn before the worst of the storm broke and had not gone wandering into the night because of what she had done to him.

The young woman produced from the back quarters of the inn appeared white-faced and still bearing the signs of the night before. But she was only too ready to converse with someone in her own tongue, for she was another English girl who had married an Italian.

"Mr. Wentworth, miss? Lovely man. Yes, he got in last night before the storm really got going. He was a bit wet, but nothing to worry about—or that's what he said. Went straight up to his room."

"He was to have left this morning, wasn't he?" Fay's heart, going its own wayward road, beat a little faster, but she was glad to hear the other girl reply, "Yes, miss—going

back to Marseilles he was. But as that didn't seem likely by road he got Ricky—that's Ricardo, my husband—to drive him into Pandeterra. There's a local airfield there, and Ricky's brother is a pilot, and he took Mr. Wentworth with him as he'd got a delivery for Marseilles. Bit of luck, reely, because otherwise poor Mr. Wentworth wouldn't have caught up with his people and I bet they'd be worried stiff about him, seeing all the bad news there is floating around."

"What other news have you heard?" Fay asked.

"Nothing definite—you know what these Eyeties are. All crossing themselves and calling on St. Peter. But I reckon as how there's been a pretty big disaster somewhere."

The full news did not come through until about midday, when the local relay station recommenced broadcasting. The story was one of widespread disaster, with the centre of the storm over Yugoslavia, where in the mountainous area a whole small town had been swallowed in an earthquake with the rescue work now hampered by floods. The International Red Cross had declared an emergency and volunteers were urgently needed to report to local centres as soon as possible.

Fay felt a strange sense of release as though this was what she had been waiting for. Even Pietro was shaken out of his parochialism by the magnitude of the disaster. He and Rose did all they could to speed Fay's departure. The nearest Red Cross Headquarters was in Nice, they told her, and immediately Pietro was on his way down to the village again to discover if he could the possibilities of getting through by road. While he was gone Fay condensed a few necessities into one small bag, while Rose cut masses of sandwiches which she packed into a satchel. "You never know when you'll get anything to eat again," she told Fay, becoming suddenly all Lancashire again, "and no one can work on an empty stomach, I always say."

Almost before the bag was packed Pietro was back, panting from his exertions. Yes, cars were getting through, he told them as soon as he could speak. "Ricardo—at the inn, you know him, mees?—he will take you into Nice as soon as you are ready. He will not charge—it is what little he can do to help."

In her present mood that touched Fay. She was so very

conscious of the need to help someone—and she knew she was fortunate in that, in this hour, she had much to give.

It did not occur to her at the time that her experiences of the evening before, the storm, and an almost entire lack of sleep, were not the best preparation for the arduous mission on which she was setting out. She only marvelled later that she could remember so little of the various stages of the journey which eventually landed her, in an incredibly lovely dawn, at an airfield near Dubroca, the stricken town. Somewhere en route since she had left Lamontella her credentials had been checked and she had been fitted out with overalls and a first-aid bag. She did not remember where this had been done. There had been coffee, hot and strong, on the plane which had helped to dispel the sleep which threatened to overcome her at any minute, but it was the sight of the stricken town which had been Dubroca which finally alerted her every sense, every fibre of her being.

She had never seen, nor in her wildest thoughts imagined, such a scene of utter destruction which met her when the rumbling, jolting truck brought them to the site of what had until two nights ago been a flourishing little town. There was not a single house left intact. There were piles of masonry and timber everywhere, and the lower part of the town where the railway station had been was completely flooded. From the air she had seen a large crack which had seemed to split the entire place into two and now that she was nearer she knew that that crack must have fractured the gas and water mains and the main sewer. An undefinable stench lay heavy over the whole place, and the air was filled with a cacophany of sounds, from the wailing of lost children to the piercing screams and low moans of the injured. A swarm of sweating men like a colony of ants crawled over the debris trying to extricate the numbers of people still trapped. Another band of men and women sorted out the dead and dying from those who had a chance of life.

Every local doctor and anyone with the slightest medical knowledge was there already, but they were lost and panic-stricken in the face of a disaster with which they were not equipped to deal.

It was a question of the most elementary first aid. Supplies

were desperately short and they had no anaesthetics beyond blessed unconsciousness and a limited quantity of morphine. Casualties had to be dealt with where they were until the fleet of lorries and trucks co-opted as ambulances could carry them off to hospitals, often many miles away. The shortage of water was acute, and such as there was had to be bailed before it could be used for any purpose.

By midday the Big Top of a circus which had been pitched a few miles away appeared in their midst, as if by magic, reeking of carbolic which was probably the only disinfectant to be had in large quantities. It was better than nothing and at least provided some shelter from sun, which since the dawn had risen higher and higher like a brass ball in a steel-blue sky.

The hours passed, and Fay hardly noticed them go. The passage of time was marked only by such things as the arrival of the American team, flown straight from Germany, and with them a blessed relief to the shortage of medical supplies. Then the word went round that the first section of the field hospital was in position, and that by nightfall there should be a workable operating theatre.

Fay found that she was allocating nationality more on the basis of how the teams worked than on their speech. The Germans were unflappable and effective, the Swiss meticulous, and under normal circumstances she guessed they would be perfectionists. The French and Italians were full of nervous energy which soon exhausted itself, and the Americans confident and utterly tireless. As yet there was no British team.

Fay found herself working alongside an Italian woman doctor who reminded her of Toni. She had the same lustrous dark eyes, the same poise and indefinable air of breeding, which made her stand out among the motley crowd of workers. She spoke fluent English, and soon she and Fay were working together as if it had been the habit of years.

Night came, and they were still digging out victims from the ruins of the town, and there were scores of less desperate cases who had as yet not been attended to. But the Commandant had taken control of things now and wisely conserved his forces. Fay and her doctor were ordered to take a few hours' rest and thankfully they slid on to a pile of straw

leaning against the wall of the tent. The smell of carbolic was thick about them, and Fay knew that after that night, whenever she smelt carbolic she would see this scene again—this nightmare now lit with hurricane lamps plus a few naked electric bulbs fed from a generator lorry. She would remember it with horror, and yet with a kind of pride as well—pride in the courage, fortitude and inherent goodness of people, both the injured and the helpers, which could rise above the petty differences which so often separated nations. It was a pity that it took such a calamity to bring out those better qualities, she thought tiredly.

At first they were too exhausted to sleep. Nerves and faculties which had been stretched to breaking point for so many hours could not relax easily, and so they talked.

"You remind me so much of an old friend of mine who died recently," Fay told her companion. "She was Italian too, and I think she must have been just like you when she was young."

"Where was she, this friend of yours? What did she do?"

"She married an Englishman and went to live in England where she had large numbers of children—grandchildren and great-grandchildren as well."

"She was fortunate, this friend of yours. Great-grandchildren—Madonna!"

"Haven't you any children?" The question was out before Fay could stop it. Had she been less tired she would have recognised from the tone of longing in the doctor's voice that it was a question best left unasked.

"No, I was too bad to be given children."

"Too bad?" Fay echoed, startled.

"Yes," came back the reply out of the darkness, which was partly due to insufficient light but even more to the onset of sleep. "My mother died when I was fourteen, and as she was dying she said to me, 'Francesca, it has always been my dream for you that you should enter a convent and become a nun—one of the Sisters of Mercy perhaps.' The thought had been in my mind too, and from that moment it became my determination. When I was eighteen I went to see the Superior of a convent near my home, and I was accepted as a postulant. Before I retreated I went on a round of visits to

say goodbye to my relations, and at the house of one of them I met Paolo Renati." She sighed. "And that, I am afraid, was the end of my religious profession. Paolo and I were married within three months—and in another two he was dead."

Even amidst the scenes of death and tragedy in which she had passed the last twenty-four hours this seemed to Fay the paramount of all tragedies, and her sympathy was in her voice. "I am so sorry, but—" she hesitated a moment and then plunged on. "But you were young—didn't you ever think of marrying again?"

Very quietly the other woman said, "No—you see I had to accept my punishment. I had broken my promise to dedicate myself to the service of God. So I did the next best thing, as it seemed to me, and dedicated myself to the service of man; and I studied to become a doctor. It is a good profession—" Francesca Renati's voice trailed away, and she slept.

But Fay had been stung into wakefulness by her companion's story. There crept into her mind a kind of envy and she wished that she too had the kind of faith which could tinge the pain of self-sacrifice with its own light.

But it was not an attitude of mind which could be achieved in ten minutes, and within that time Fay too slept.

She woke suddenly, and for the moment was completely at a loss as to her surroundings. It seemed almost like the **prolongation** of some nightmare. There was a crescendo of activity all around her which for the moment passed her by. It was only a matter of seconds, however, before she too was caught up in it. Francesca was shaking her. "Wake up—wake up, Sister!"

"W-what's happened?" Fay asked, confused still.

"They've just found another fifty or so casualties. They must have been sheltering under the railway bridge. They were trapped when the bridge collapsed—and then the water rose. No one thought there would be anybody alive there—but some of them are, though what shape they'll be in the good God only knows. I wish I were not so tired—but if I take alcohol I get even more sleepy."

"So do I," Fay confessed, "but I expect you'll be all right

when the moment comes. I know it's easier for me—I haven't the same need for precision as you have. I don't know how you got through yesterday—but you'll do it again when the need comes."

They were ready and waiting at their post when the casualties started to roll in. Perhaps because she was a woman, the first case they had to tackle was particularly difficult. It was a young woman, hardly more than a girl, pregnant, and with internal injuries which could only be guessed at since she was unconscious. Miraculously the child in her womb was **still** alive.

The decision whether to try to save the mother or the child was a difficult and heartrending one, and Fay guessed that some of the men had shied from it and left it to the tired woman beside her.

Francesca's eyes, so like Toni's, were tragic above her mask. "I can't save them both," she groaned. "I'm not sure that I can save either—"

What her decision would have been Fay never knew, for at that moment a voice said, "Shall I take over, doctor? That's a sticky case you've got there, and I've only just flown in. I'm fresh, and you're tired."

Fay was tired too—but not only that; it seemed to her that she must also be asleep and dreaming.

The voice was English—and she knew it, could never mistake it. It was Mark's voice.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said quietly, while all she could do was to stare at him as though stupefied. But after a moment her common sense came to her aid and she realised that this was no unexplainable miracle; there had been an international call for help, she knew, and Mark was the sort of man to answer such an appeal.

"You know this doctor? He is good, eh?" Francesca's eyes were bright and questioning, even though tired.

"We work at the same hospital—he's my chief. He's a very good surgeon," Fay told her.

"We're a team at **home**," Mark put in. "Sister Gabriel is my other right hand."

"Then I will gladly hand over to you," Francesca sighed exhaustedly. "I am not at my best at the moment, and this

girl needs all the skill possible. You operate while I go to try and organise an incubator. We shall need to get the child into one at once if you can succeed in keeping it alive."

"I'll do my best," Mark promised grimly. "We'll have to work here—she can't be moved any more." He turned to Fay. "Ready, Sister?" he asked in his most professional voice. It spurred Fay on as no amount of friendly sympathy would have done, and her response was immediate and automatic alertness.

"It'll be a Caesar, of course," Mark spoke to Fay, and called to the American anaesthetist, "How's things with you?"

"B.P. and pulse good enough. But for Pete's sake be as quick as you can—supplies are still short."

"Right." Mark wasted no time, and soon for Fay it was as though they were back in the theatre at St. Edith's. Mark did not appear to be hurrying and worked with all his usual skill and precision, but Fay realised soon that he was working under pressure. The sweat collected on his forehead and she wiped it away herself—there being no junior here to do it for him. There was no junior surgeon either—Mark had to be his own dresser.

"I hope that woman comes back soon," he muttered as he worked. "I can't spare you to take over the child. Who is she?"

"Her name's Francesca Renati," Fay told him. "She's good. She won't let you down."

"Hope not—" He worked on for a while, then in a short pause while she wiped his forehead he asked, "How many does this place hold?"

"I don't know—but there's supposed to be another bay coming, and the Americans get them up in next to no time."

"Good. This girl's not going to be able to be moved over these damn roads when I've finished with her."

The child, a boy, was brought alive and had nearly gone its full time. "He'll be O.K.," Mark stated jubilantly as a loud protesting wail indicated a lusty pair of lungs.

Francesca was back in time to take the child from Mark, triumphant with her news. "I've found an incubator only ten miles away, and there's an ambulance waiting," she announced.

"Good work," Mark commented. "I don't think by the

looks of him that he'll need the incubator for long. Can you see to it—get him through into safe hands?"

"Anything for His Majesty the Baby," Francesca agreed, her tired dark eyes sparkling.

"I'm glad she's got that job," Fay remarked when she had gone. "I don't suppose I'll ever see her again—but I'll miss her. She reminds me so much of Toni. But she's had a great tragedy in her life."

"Wonderful the way you get to know people in an emergency, isn't it?" Mark replied. "Something unleashes one's inhibitions, I suppose. Ships that pass in the dark."

"Night," Fay corrected.

"Night," he assented as he bent to the much grimmer task of patching up the mother so that she should not merely survive, but that her life might be bearable. Fay stole a look at Mark's face—all that she could see of him were his eyes, but they told her enough. She knew of old how he hated to lose a patient and most of all a young patient—and she knew that he would use every ounce of his skill and determination to save this young mother.

He was still working when the Commandant approached. "Mr. Osborne?"

"Yes—I'm busy," Mark snapped, at a crucial point.

"I can see that," the American drawled. "But we've got another bad one in the next cubicle. My men are tired and they say you're the best of the new bunch. Leave someone else to close up for you and come and see what you can do next door as soon as you can—time's pretty short for him."

Mark swore under his breath. "What is it?" he asked.

"Man about forty—splintered ribs, perforated lung—splinters all over the place and no one can get 'em out."

"O.K. I'll be with you as soon as I can."

That "soon" came far too quickly for Fay, for by the time Mark straightened his back and said "She'll do," no assistant had appeared to take over.

"You can do the final closure, Sister—well, what are you staring at? You've seen it done often enough, and women are supposed to be better at needlework than men, aren't they?" And with that he disappeared.

For a panic-stricken moment Fay stood with the needle

she had prepared trembling in her hand. She looked at the anaesthetist, who was regarding her impatiently. He would have had more experience than she would, but then she could not take on his job, so she nerved herself to begin.

As she did so Mark's head appeared for a brief instant round the partition. His eyes commended her, though he said nothing of that. "When you've finished that," he said, "go and get some rest. You look all in." He turned away, and then appeared again. "Oh, remind me that I've something to tell you some time."

Before she had quite finished the Commandant was back. "How's it going?" he enquired. "I want this cubicle as soon as possible."

"Practically finished," she replied. "Mr. Osborne said this patient ought not to go for transport."

"Nowhere to transport her anyway. The orderlies are just coming—they'll squeeze her in somewhere here. Better knock off for a bit, Sister—you didn't nearly finish your rest period."

This time Fay dropped asleep immediately and slept the deep, untroubled sleep of a child in spite of the discomfort and the noise of her surroundings. When she woke, roused by a voluble French Sister who wanted to take her place, she got up with zest, ready for another good day's—or was it night's?—work.

This time she was allocated to one of the stolid German doctors, and in spite of language difficulties they got on well together.

During the night the flow of fresh casualties ceased and word went round that there were not likely to be any more. But since only the most urgent of the cases had been dealt with so far there were still many more waiting for attention, since the effect of their shots of morphia was wearing off.

There was still plenty of work to be done, but as the dawn was just coming the Commandant appeared and told Fay and the German doctor to knock off. "Everyone's getting tired," he said. "We'll have to work shorter shifts."

Fay went outside to breathe the cool, clean air which was coming to them across the rolling foothills. Already above the tops of the mountains there was a pink glow which increased every moment as she watched.

She had not seen Mark all that night. It had been enough to know that he was here, and that they were working together in the same cause. As she stood there she saw two stretcher-bearers come out of the hospital tent and make their way to the shed where the dead were housed until the bodies could be taken away, or perhaps buried in some communal grave on this quiet hillside. So many of the townspeople had been casualties that it was more than likely there would be no one to identify the dead, and they would go to a nameless grave.

For the first time, relieved of the necessity of doing something actively to help, Fay felt the tragedy of it all, and was ashamed that she had felt her own troubles a burden. "After all," she thought, "Mark is alive, and I am alive, and we can still work together." What right had she to ask for more when others had so little, and some had lost all they had?

She turned away from the glow to the east, her heart fractionally lighter. On her way she passed the Commandant, who growled, "Go and get your rest, Sister—we'll be needing you later on."

"Yes, Commandant, I'm on my way," Fay smiled at the weary man. "Is Mr. Osborne off duty, d'you know?"

"Osborne?" the man barked irritably, and swore under his breath. "Why are people such fools? Why didn't he stick to his job? One of the best men here, and the damn fool has to go and look at a case in the ambulance and get his hand trapped in the door."

Fay caught her breath. "His hand? Is it bad?" she asked. "His—his right hand?"

"Plenty bad, I reckon. Can't cope with unnecessary casualties here, so he put himself aboard a plane that was going out. Guess he'll get it dealt with back home."

The Commandant turned to walk off, but something in Fay's face made him pause. "Wasn't Osborne's fault," he said gruffly. "Faulty hinge on the ambulance door—those machines have taken a beating on these roads, I guess."

"Which hand?" Fay's voice was almost inaudible, but in any event the Commandant had walked away. "Dear God, let it be the left!" she breathed ... suddenly the lovely morning had turned to night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FAY slept the sleep of exhaustion, but it did not refresh her. When she woke, with a raging headache and a bewildered mind, she found herself repeating over and over again to herself, "Ships that pass in the night." And as she pulled herself together all the events of yesterday came back to her, and she remembered that it was Mark who had said that yesterday. Only he had not got it quite right. What was it he had said?—"Ships that pass in the dark." Yes, that was it—and she had corrected him.

As she remembered that little incident which had seemed so insignificant at the time, something tugged at her brain. Someone else, she seemed to recall, had made the same misquotation of that saying. When and where had it been? It was not important—she had far more urgent things to trouble her now—but the half-recollection would let her have no peace. As she bathed her face in cold water, which did help to freshen her and clean her brain a little, the word "night" seemed to take on some special connection with whatever it was she was trying to remember.

Then suddenly it came back. She paused for a moment, halted in mid-action as she was transported back in time and space—back to a darkened ward and the ringing of a telephone, startlingly loud in the silence. And a voice with a rather phony Scots accent—a voice which had used that very phrase, "Ships that pass in the dark."

So the night caller—it had been Mark. The problem of the caller's identity had teased her for a time, but its solution did not help. It only presented her with another completely

unanswerable question. Why should Mark have rung her on the night of the dance? Especially as just then they had been at daggers drawn ...

Realising that this was a question which could not be answered at the best of times, and certainly not in her present exhausted state, Fay put it firmly from her and reported to the Commandant's quarters. She found him just going off for rest and realised that he had hardly been off duty at all during the whole of the crisis, and it was small wonder that he had had scant sympathy for Mark's accident.

"Ah, Sister Gabriel—just the woman **I** want," he greeted her.

"Yes, Commandant. Where do you want me to report?"

"In the first place I want to know—how long can your hospital spare you?"

"I was on leave at a place near Nice," she told him "I've another six days of leave yet, I think." She could not be sure, for truth to tell she had lost count of the days.

"Right," he said brusquely. "I'd like to keep you here for a bit—probably longer than that—and you won't be fit for duty when we've finished with you!" For the first time Fay saw the glimmer of a twinkle in his eyes. "I want you to take over the hospital section here. The casualty work has pretty well stopped now. We've still a lot of people to move **to** homes or hostels of some kind—hand them over to the welfare services, in other words. But there remain the cases which we can't move. Most of them will die, poor devils, but they've got to be cared for in the meantime. Bit of a thankless task, I'm afraid, and I've only got the most motley crew of nurses to offer you, but you'll manage, I think."

"Yes, Commandant," Fay agreed. "**I** had better get **in** touch with my hospital, though."

"We'll do that for you," the man pulled a sheet of paper towards him. "St. Edith's, London—that right?"

"Yes."

If she would have said more he gave her no chance. "O.K. You have full authority. Arrange rotas—but you'll be the only qualified Sister. Spare yourself all you can. You're shockingly short of equipment, but we may be able to ease that in a day or so."

The care of the sick, whether they were destined for death or recovery, was part of Fay's vocation, and she did not jib. But to be cut off from the outside world without contact, without news—without news of Mark, in particular—was hard indeed to bear. Nevertheless, as the interview seemed to be ended she turned to go and take up her duties in the hospital building. As she did so the Commandant halted her.

"Oh, Sister—" he said, and she turned to find him regarding her with tired, sympathetic eyes in his rather podgy face. "You were asking about young Osborne, weren't you? Well, I'm sorry to say that it was his right hand. A great pity—he was a fine surgeon—"

Fay did not hear any more. She was conscious only of the great kindness in his eyes before unshed tears in her own blinded her as she turned with a whispered, "Thank you, Commandant," and left him. She knew that whatever might happen in the days to come she would have to face nothing worse than this, for what had happened to Mark was something worse than death.

The work Fay had to undertake for the next two weeks was indeed gruelling, and not made any easier by the fact that the nurses she had to work with were none of them English-speaking, and had little training for the most part. This meant that she seldom or never got an unbroken rest period. In all she did she knew she had the support and approbation of the Commandant, especially as under her care several patients who had been considered as unlikely to recover were indeed brought to a condition where it was possible to move them to other hospitals where they could receive the specialised treatment needed.

One other bright spot, too, was the young mother on whom Mark had operated. She made a wonderful recovery, aided of course by the news that her child was doing well and waiting for her in a hospital not twenty miles away. Her young husband too, who had had both legs broken while he was working as a volunteer with a rescue party, was making good progress, and for that one little family at least there was hope of a brighter future.

But the shadow that the disaster had brought would hang

over the place for a long time to come. Almost it might be said that Dubrocja had ceased to exist and the survivors would have to be absorbed into other townships. It was the end of a whole community.

Francesca Renati came out to the emergency hospital once—to see the mother of the child. Her visit luckily coincided with Fay's duty. They exchanged addresses, and it was Francesca who brought up the subject of Mark.

"Your friend—Mr. Osborne, isn't it? I hear he had an accident. Was it bad?"

"I'm afraid so," Fay told her. "I've only heard what the Commandant said, and what one of the ambulance men told me, but it seems that his right hand was badly crushed—trapped in the ambulance door."

"That is bad," Francesca's dark eyes expressed her concern. "For a surgeon—and a surgeon such as he was!—that is very bad. What will he do if he cannot operate again?"

"I don't know," Fay answered bleakly. It was the question she had been asking herself all along. It might not be as bad as that, but doubt was no less torturing than certainty.

"But you will be married just the same when you go back to England?" Francesca queried.

"Good heavens, no!" Fay spoke so sharply that the other woman jumped. "He's married already."

Francesca looked completely baffled. "But you love each other—" she protested.

"I don't know what makes you think that." Fay struggled to keep her voice steady and matter-of-fact. "I may have made a bit of a fool of myself in letting myself care for him, but I can assure you that Mr. Osborne is a very happily married man with two lovely small boys."

The sympathy in Francesca's eyes was so real that it made Fay's hurt more intense. "How sad, how very sad. It is worse for you," *she* sighed deeply.

Fay knew what she meant. Her man had died—and there was something irrevocable about death which made it bearable; more bearable than the terrible longing which possessed her at times. She was glad that Mark did not have to suffer that.

She still could not begin to explain to herself why Mark should have given Francesca, as an observer, the impression

that he cared. Why had he bothered to ring her up on the night of the hospital dance? How had he so exactly gauged her mood of utter loneliness so that she was glad to talk to a stranger? How had he managed to put his finger so accurately on the one thing which made marriage to Geoff impossible for her?

But she had no time to answer any of her own questions—if indeed they were answerable at all. She was getting more and more tired, although she herself hardly realised it. She knew only that there was no joy, no sense of achievement in her work any more, and she could not envisage anything beyond the field hospital. It seemed to her that she had come to the end of all her ambition here.

It was only a few days after Francesca's visit that the Commandant sent for her.

He had been a bit of a martinet and a slave-driver while the emergency lasted, but now that things were easing up the essential kindness of the man was showing through. He looked at Fay with keenly scrutinising eyes for a full half minute before he spoke.

"Feeling tired, Sister?" he enquired, and reaching out took her wrist between his fingers. What he felt there did not seem to please him, for he brushed aside her disavowal, saying, "Umm, I can see you are. Well, we'd better send you home, I guess."

Fay started to say that she was not too tired to stay as long as there was a need for her services, but plainly the Commandant was not listening. He was ruffling through a sheaf of papers.

"Let's see—there's a plane leaving for Nice in the morning—we'll put you on that. Be ready to leave here at seven-thirty. Transport will be laid on, and a car will meet the plane in Nice to take you to—this place where you were staying."

Fay blinked. She could hardly believe in the efficiency of the big American. He must have decided on this course before he sent for her.

"Thank you, Commandant—" she managed to put in, "but I'm really not so tired as all that—I can stay until you can get a replacement—"

"You'll do as you're told, Sister," he said brusquely, but the twinkle in his eye belied the sharpness of his words. "We shall clear all cases out of here in two or three days from now, and they are sending me a Sister—Assistant Matron, rather—from the hospital at Brenska. We shall cope. Now your instructions are to return to Lamontella and stay there for another two weeks before returning to your hospital."

"But—"

"Your Matron's instructions. Argue it out with her later if you want to—but if you take my advice you'll make the most of the opportunity to catch up on lost rest and general strain." He got up, indicating that the interview was over, or so Fay thought, but instead he took her shoulders between his hands. "You've done a very good job of work here, and it will be recorded. I'm not all that good at saying pretty things, Sister, but—well, thanks, and good luck to you. I hope you find that things aren't as bad as you fear for young Osborne."

She turned and left the office rather hurriedly. Suddenly she felt that tears were too near the surface for her to remain.

It was not until she was on the plane next morning, however, that she realised just how lost and purposeless her life seemed now that she was leaving behind the scene of tragedy which had filled it for the past weeks. There she had been needed, there she had had something to give where it was most needed. By contrast the future seemed to hold no place for her ... she checked on the thought. "That isn't true!" she told herself. "You're a nurse—there is always a need for you." But in her heart she knew that what she really meant was that the one person who made up her world had no need of her love.

It seemed no time at all after the plane took off before Fay realised that she was being told to fasten her safety belt as they were coming in to land at Nice.

All the arrangements for the return flight had gone without a hitch so that Fay, tired as she was, scarcely bothered to wonder who had made them all. It did occur to her in the car which was taking her from Nice to Lamontella that she had not warned Pietro and Rose of her imminent arrival,

but when she got to their bungalow she found that they were expecting her.

"Oh, miss, I can't tell you how pleased I am to see you! I began to think you'd never come back from that dreadful place. What a time you must have had—and my word, how thin you've got! And as white as a ghost. We've been hearing all about it—"

"*Si, si*," Pietro put in, his dark eyes looking at her with the adoration of a faithful dog. "We hear how brave you are—and how you work day and night to save those poor souls. So very brave—"

Fay was unprepared for this respect which her absence seemed to have turned to near reverence, and she had to stop them.

"There was a great band of helpers—all sorts of people, all doing wonderful work," she told them. "I didn't do it all on my own, you know!"

It was obvious that this point was unimportant as far as Rose was concerned. "Well, we mustn't keep you standing talking when what you want is a nice cup of tea and then bed," she stated categorically. "Did you have lunch, miss?"

"Yes, thank you—at the airport. But a cup of real tea would be gorgeous. I can't think how the Americans get along without it—or Continentals either," she remembered that Pietro never touched the "stuff."

"I'll get it in two shakes of a lamb's tail!" Rose promised, and disappeared towards the kitchen, calling before she went, "There's letters for you in your room, miss."

A moment later she came back and put her head round the door to say, "Mr. Wentworth telephoned three times enquiring for you, miss, but he didn't leave any message. He just wanted to know if you were back or when we expected you, but of course I couldn't tell him—seeing as I didn't have any news myself about that till yesterday."

It was in Fay's mind to ask from whom the news had come, but she could not be bothered, and at that moment she was sorting through the pile of letters which awaited her, refusing to admit, even to herself, that the handwriting for which she was looking was Mark's. Her depression deepened a little when she saw that there was no envelope addressed

in his rather individual hand, until she remembered seconds later that Mark had injured his right hand and so he could not write.

After the tea there came a hot bath and bed—and Fay had never appreciated before how luxurious these everyday things were. But she did not ponder on her lack of gratitude for them long before sleep claimed her.

When she woke she thought at first she had slept only a short time, for it was still not quite dark. It was only when Rose tiptoed into the room that she learned that she had slept round the clock and a bit more.

When she learned that she decided to stay where she was and accept Rose's suggestion of a tray meal. She had forgotten how good food could taste when cooked the way Rose cooked it, and when she had eaten she found that she had no desire to do anything else but slide down in the bed and go off to sleep again. She would read her letters tomorrow—that was time enough to catch up with her everyday world. Just at the moment she was in a kind of no-man's land which, if it was sterile and offered little hope of fulfilment, at least was undemanding.

The next morning, feeling more or less her normal self again, though disinclined for any great physical exertion, she tackled her letters without particular interest.

There was one from Geoff and she opened that first, because she was so full of feeling for him.

"My dearest," it began,

"I am so sorry at the way I left you the other night. I'm afraid I was just being selfish and thinking only of myself. I know so well what you are suffering but there does not seem any way I can help. I should not feel so bad if only I knew there was a chance of happiness for you—but as it is it seems such a waste—such a wicked waste . . ."

She sighed deeply. She could understand too. She had the same yearning that he too should find happiness in spite of her—and with more reason, she thought, since it was all her fault.

She was ready enough to accept the blame, but there was nothing she could do to help she thought, as she turned to her other letters.

Many of them were congratulatory on her exploits, and she found these vaguely embarrassing. She knew she had done only what her training had qualified her to do—nothing more than any of her colleagues would have done if they had been more or less on the spot as she was.

For a change from their eulogies she turned to an envelope in Wendy's large, childish hand. It went straight to the point, as usual.

"Isn't it orful," she wrote, "about Marks hand. He is very deprest as he wont ever be able to oprate again. I am going to grow up ever so quik so as to do it for him but I didnt have to have my school skurt made longer this term as I thort I would. I have been eating all my poridge too. I think you should come home and cheer Mark up it will be ever so misrable at the Chrismas holidays if you dont hurry up."

Christmas holidays—they were a long way off yet. The children had only been back at school a week or two. But the mere mention of Christmas still had power to move Fay with the sweetness of the rapture which she had known at Beechcroft—so short-lived and yet never to be forgotten.

She came last of all to Flip's letter—it was the bulkiest, and would, she knew, put her completely in the picture with regard to the world of St. Edith's, to which she must return soon.

She was not disappointed. Flip's letter told her all the hospital scandal—including the sudden departure, unexplained, of one of the junior Sisters. Rumour had it that she was pregnant—but rumour remained unconfirmed.

"You won't be surprised to hear that your Mr. Osborne got his Fellowship. He was appointed to St. Giles—but with this awful injury to his hand I suppose that's put paid to his consultancy ..." So the news of his Fellowship was what Mark had wanted to tell her, Fay's brain commented as she read on. "But my next bit of news will shake you rigid," Flip continued.

By the time she had read to the end of that letter Fay was more than shaken. Stunned would have been a better word. Stunned and bewildered—not quite sure whether she was riding for the crest of a wave or whether she was slipping into the trough and about to be engulfed.

Her first impulse was to pack and return to London imme-

diately, but on more sober reflection she realised that Matron was right to tell her to stay at Lamontella for a while. She did not feel at all equal to a full day's duty at the moment, now that the emergency had passed and reaction had set in. Better to make the most of the last days of a summer which lingered on and was conducive to lethargy and the sense that time itself was standing still.

This, however, was a false illusion, and on the morning she flew in to London Airport it was a crisp October morning. The sun was still golden but the leaves, touched by an overnight frost, were coming down in showers, so that from the plane the three-lined roads and fields seemed carpeted in russet gold.

She was not due to report at the hospital until the next morning, so that she had the whole day before her, and as she stepped on to the tarmac she wondered what she should do with it.

She was not expecting to be met, so she did not even glance at the little crowd of people who were there to meet other passengers off the plane, and was nearly taken off her balance when two small figures rushed at her with hugs and cries of welcome.

She had to look at them twice before she could recognise Helen and Wendy. In their school uniforms they looked more nearly normal children than she had ever thought they could.

"Good gracious, Wendy—Helen—however did you get here?" she managed to ask when they had stopped squeezing the very breath out of her.

"Mark got us the day off," Helen explained.

"And he got an aunt to bring us—she's over there."

"She's a University aunt," Helen corroborated.

A youngish woman detached herself from the little crowd of onlookers and came up to Fay. "Welcome back home, Miss Gabriel," she smiled pleasantly. "I have been hearing all about the grand work you've been doing in the Yugoslavia disaster. My name's Joy Ainsworth, by the way."

"These are for you—" Wendy thrust a bunch of choice rosebuds at her.

"And these are from us," Helen followed suit with an expensive-looking box of chocolates.

Wendy wrinkled her nose. "Well, Mark paid for them really, she admitted, and her half-sister gave her a violent dig in the ribs.

"We weren't to say that!" she hissed.

To save the children embarrassment Fay did not pursue that question further, but subconsciously her brain registered the fact that Mark had taken pains to find out what plane she would be on and to send the children to give her a welcome—though he was not prepared to take the responsibility of giving her presents.

Miss Ainsworth was talking as they left the runway and made for the terminal buildings. "I have to see the girls back to their school by six tonight—which means leaving Charing Cross by the five-ten. In the meanwhile I think I'm expected to disappear so that they can have you to themselves. I don't know what they're planning to do, but I daresay they'll let you know in due course. Provided you haven't any other arrangements, of course," she finished.

Once again Fay detected Mark's lordly hand behind this, but faced with the children's eagerness she could not possibly plead any other arrangements—and besides, it would not have been true.

"Let's all go and have something to eat first, shall we?" she suggested.

Miss Ainsworth declined. "If you don't mind," she explained, "I have a lot of shopping I should like to work in this morning, but if you like to trust me with your luggage I've got to look in at the office—I can leave it there, and your beautiful roses too. It would be a shame for them to die for lack of a drink."

"That would be kind of you," Fay said gratefully. "Then I'll meet you at Charing Cross at five, shall I?"

Fay had had a very early breakfast and the children were quite prepared to have an early lunch so as to leave the rest of the day free for whatever it was they had in mind.

"We'd like to go to the Zoo for a part of the time," Helen announced.

"Right," Fay agreed. "And after that?"

"We want to take you to see a friend of ours."

"A school friend?" Fay queried, and then corrected her-

self, "Oh no, of course all your school friends would be at school now. Who is it, then?"

"It's someone who discovered our school," Wendy explained. "It was why we went there, because of her. I say—do you know—" her voice became suddenly tragic, "Toni didn't have nearly as much money as she thought she had. Mark might have to sell Beechcroft—and we don't know who's going to pay our school fees—"

"Shut up," Helen admonished. "Mark *says* it'll be all right about our fees."

"What's your friend's name?" asked Fay hurriedly. She could not bear the look of sadness on Wendy's expressive little face that the thought of Beechcroft being sold had brought. She knew that it was the nearest to "home" either of the children had ever known.

"Margaret," Helen answered her question. "Come on, we'd better hurry if we're going to have lunch and go to the Zoo."

In spite of the fact that it had been their own choice neither of the girls seemed very interested in the Zoo. In fact their main concern, or so it appeared to Fay, was that they must leave precisely at half past two to get on the Underground which would take them to Hampstead where their friend lived.

"You mustn't be too disappointed if your friend isn't in," Fay suggested tentatively. "I mean, if you didn't tell her you were coming."

"Oh, she won't be there," Wendy burst out, "nor the boys either—they'll be at school."

Fay stopped in her tracks for a moment. Suspicion had perhaps been a little slow to dawn, but now it grew to full certainty in the space of seconds.

"Then who is it we're going to see?" she asked.

"Oh, bother—that was going to be our s'prise," Helen looked daggers at Wendy. "Only she's gone and spoilt it now."

"Oh no, that's all right. I won't try to guess who it is until we get there," Fay promised, and she was humouring not the children, but her own whim.

They turned in at the gate of a substantial house with a

well-kept garden. The children led her round the side, seeming familiar with the geography of the house as well as the habits of its inhabitants.

At the back of the house, which faced the west, there was more garden and a sun room had been added. Sitting in it now and getting the full benefit of the afternoon sunshine was a figure whose dear familiarity stopped Fay in her tracks.

Helen pushed open the door of the sun room with a triumphant flourish, but whatever announcement she had planned was cut short.

"You imps of Satan !" Mark cried, jumping to his feet and glaring at them with anger which was not at all simulated.

"Hullo, Mark, how are you?" Fay spoke almost carelessly, not willing to betray how her pulses were behaving. "Or should I call you 'sir'?"

"Don't be a little idiot," he said gruffly. "Come and sit down." And with his good left hand he pulled another basket chair forward.

"Thank you." Fay sat down gratefully, her legs feeling suddenly too weak to hold her.

"As for you two," he turned to the children, "you—"

"We'll go and make you some tea," Helen offered. "I don't 'spect there's anyone in," she went on artlessly.

"You know jolly well there isn't. You planned all this very carefully, didn't you?"

"We meant well—we really did," Wendy assured him, suddenly flinging her arms round his neck and giving him a noisy kiss. Then she skipped out after Helen before he could do anything more about it.

"Yes, they really did," Fay said when the door had closed behind them.

"Did what?" Mark enquired, and Fay had the feeling that he was trying to avoid meeting her eyes.

"Mean well—so we mustn't be cross with them."

"Well, if you're prepared to forgive them, whom am I to quibble?"

"I'm glad to know how you are—and to thank you for the reception committee," she said, watching his expression to try to get at the thoughts behind the mask he was wearing, for her benefit, she had no doubt.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I thought someone should mark the auspicious occasion of the heroine's return," he said.

Fay felt her cheeks flush with annoyance. "I can't think what all this ridiculous nonsense is about—I was only doing my normal job—"

"Under very trying conditions," Mark put in, and then added, "That Commandant fellow seemed to think it was something to write home about, anyway. His report sang your praises to the skies."

Fay's annoyance faded away as quickly as it had come. It puzzled as well as amused her slightly to notice, as she had noticed once before, how Mark showed a childish and quite uncharacteristic jealousy whenever another man appeared to notice her.

"That's more than he did of you," she told him, smiling a little. "He seemed to think that you crushed your hand purposely to spite him—" then she could keep up her bantering tone no longer. "How bad is it?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I'm not the first man to lose the ability to do the work he wants to do, I suppose. But right now I'm not taking it very well. It means the end of all I've ever worked for—all I had hoped."

"Oh, surely not," Fay put in quickly, because she could not bear to see the look of desolation on his face. "Your hands are not your only asset—you have a brain, you know. There are other fields of medicine."

"Oh, yes," he agreed, "I shall be able to write prescriptions in time, and become a Civil Servant."

"G.P.s are very necessary," she reminded him "You shouldn't scorn them."

"Sorry," he smiled bleakly.

"You've got your Fellowship—you could teach," she reminded him.

"I suppose I could," he agreed, "but I could do that when I'm sixty-five."

He was not in a mood to be comforted, and Fay could understand that. She herself had refused to accept second best, so why should she expect him to do so? She turned the talk into other channels.

"The children tell me that you're having some difficulty with Toni's finances "

He seemed willing to talk on that subject. "The trouble is that the will was made a long time ago, and assets are a bit short to meet all the legacies and benefactions. I'm afraid it might eventually be necessary to sell Beechcroft—and anyway, it's hardly a suitable location for a general practice, is it?"

The children came back then with their tray of tea and biscuits, and hearing the last remark bombarded Mark with protestations.

"Oh, Mark, you mustn't sell Beechcroft—not before Christmas, anyway. There wouldn't be anywhere to go for the holidays."

"You'd have to come here," Mark told them. "You won't be without somewhere to go in the holidays, I promise you that."

"But it's not nearly as much fun as Beechcroft," Wendy wailed.

"I know," Mark agreed. "But we'll have to see. Anyway, it won't be before Christmas—we'll have Christmas there this year."

"Oh, goody !" Helen hugged him, while Fay poured tea and was surprised to find how her hand shook.

"Can we have a friend each to stay at Christmas, Mark?" Wendy enquired.

"Yes—but not more than one each," Mark conceded, and then added, "but I shouldn't think you'd find any of your girls wanting to go to strangers for Christmas."

"I know who I'll ask," said Wendy.

Time seemed to have wings, and soon they had to leave. She and Mark were alone for a moment while the children went upstairs to the bathroom, and she said, "D'you remember that first day you came to Dubrocja you told me to remind you that you had something to tell me?"

"Did I?" he said bleakly.

"Yes," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "What was it, Mark?"

"I expect it was the Fellowship—and my appointment. I

was rather full of it at the time. It doesn't seem to matter very much now," he replied, averting his eyes.

"Was that all?" she asked, and now the very intensity of her voice and eyes compelled him to look at her.

There was a tiny pause. Then Mark said, "That was all—so far as I can remember."

It was a lie. She knew it was a lie, but her pride would not let her face him with it.

For Flip had divulged in her letter that Mark's "marriage" was a story invented by himself, dating from his student days, as a protective covering against distraction and the predatory instincts of the nurses—the whole story bolstered by the photograph of his sister Margaret's children.

But if Mark himself did not want to tell her this, then the fact that he was free was of no use to her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BY the time she got back to the hospital that evening the golden, mild autumn day had gone and there was a cold drizzle in the air which exactly matched Fay's mood.

The porter who came out to collect her bags gave her a broad smile. "Welcome back, Sister I" he greeted her. "We've been hearing lots about you—St. Edith's has gone up a peg or two all on account of you, I can tell you. Home Sister wants to see you first thing, before you go up to your quarters. I'll just ring through and find out where she is, Sister."

A puzzled frown knitted Fay's brows as she waited for the man to telephone. She wondered what on earth Home Sister could want with her before she even got herself unpacked.

She soon found out however when she got to the Home Sister's office.

"Hullo, Gabriel," the other gave her a friendly smile. "My word, you've had some adventures, haven't you? I shall expect to hear about them all later on—but right now I'm due off duty. I've only been waiting to tell you that while you've been gone Sister Wilcox has left us—"

"Oh yes, I heard she'd gone."

"Yes. Well, she had one of the flatlets, as maybe you know. Matron wanted you to have it, so we put the new staff nurse in your old room. I'm afraid we had to move your things for you. I did most of it myself, so I hope you won't find anything lost."

"Oh, thank you very much, Sister, I'm sure everything will be all right."

"Yes—well, we thought you'd like to have it—a bit more room to spread yourself! Here's the key. You're doing afternoon theatres, by the way, so that'll give you time to shake down. You don't look all that fit, by the way—ought you to be back yet?"

"I'm perfectly all right," Fay assured her. "I'm a bit tired. I made an early start for one thing and I've been toting a couple of kids round town all day."

"Very wearing," agreed the other.

"Sorry about that, Wendy," Fay murmured to herself as she put the key in the lock of her new quarters. "You weren't any trouble, and you did mean well," and her lips twisted in a little wry smile as she remembered the children's efforts.

The flatlet provided a little sitting room with a kitchen alcove, and the privilege of entertaining there. At any other time Fay would have been delighted with her change of quarters, but that evening it meant little to her.

She passed into the bedroom. Home Sister had made a good job of disposing her things about the room—too good, in fact; for propped up against the pillows at the head of the bed stood the fairy doll which Toni had given her last Christmas. It was a reminder she could well have done without at that moment.

She remembered the wish that had gone with the gift—that she might have her "heart's desire". Poor Toni, that really wasn't in her power to give, although—knowingly or unknowingly—she had worked to that end even when she was dying.

As she was not on duty the next morning Fay took the opportunity to go over to Stanhope Ward. After a few minutes with Sister Rainbow she went into the side ward to see Mr. Oliver.

She found him looking very much better and promoted to sitting up in a wheelchair for most of the day. Shorty was chatting with him and when he saw Fay he broke into a delighted grin.

"Welcome home, Sister dear. The world of St. Edith's has been a dark place without you all these long weeks. You look as lovely as ever—we feared you would come back hard-

visaged and battle-scarred ..." he flowed on, inconsequential as ever.

Mr. Oliver shook her hand warmly and continued to hold it. "Privilege of old age," he explained. "I never dreamed of what I was letting you in for when I persuaded you to go to the villa. But it seems I did a good service to those poor folk in the disaster area—was it very bad?"

"Pretty ghastly," Fay told him "The pioneer people had the worst time, of course, trying to get the victims out of the shambles that was all that was left of their little town. We were desperately short of every sort of drug and equipment to start with, but that got better in time. It was just a hard grind and some rather bad casualties."

"And then my revered ex-boss has to go and add to it by smashing his hand up. That'll lam him to go chasing off after pretty Sisters, eh? He's copped a packet, though, poor chap," and with that Shorty drifted off.

When the door had closed behind him Mr. Oliver said gently, "He's a very insensitive young man, I'm afraid."

"Just juvenile. He'll grow up in time—I hope," Fay excused him.

"Mr. Osborne looked in to see me before he left hospital after his own operation," Mr. Oliver went on. "He does seem terribly cut up about it, I must say. And it was all because he was being more than conscientious—"

"How did it happen? I was almost on the spot, but I never did hear exactly what had happened."

"He didn't go into much detail." Mr. Oliver settled down for a chat. "From what I can gather, there was a badly injured man brought in and Mr. Osborne heard of it from the driver of the ambulance. He was a semi-trained chap, and it was his opinion that the man didn't stand a chance. Mr. Osborne didn't think it right to accept the driver's opinion and went out to see for himself whether anything could be done. The ambulance had been knocked about a bit with the bad roads, and instead of the door staying open as it should have done it swung to as he was stepping up into the vehicle, and trapped his hand in the hinge space. They're heavy doors, as I expect you know. Pretty well broke every bone in his hand, I believe."

Fay shuddered a little. "A terrible thing to happen to a surgeon." She spoke more to herself than to the old man.

"Yes, it is a tragedy," he agreed, and then went on almost pleadingly, "but it isn't the end of everything for him, surely. He seems to think that there's nothing left in life for him—as though he hasn't anything to give any more ... am I being a silly old man?" he finished with a quizzical glance.

Fay smiled, although she did not feel very much like smiling. "No," she said. "You're being very understanding. I think it's Mr. Osborne who's wrong. There are lots of things he can do—plenty he can offer. Teaching, for one thing—"

"Then you tell him so, my dear," the old man patted her hand enthusiastically. "He'd believe you—because you know about these things."

As she went through the corridors back to her own quarters to get ready for duty the ward dinners were coming up in the great trolleys. The savoury food made her feel a little sick—or that was the explanation she gave herself. But actually the cause of the nausea went deeper than that.

She was sick at heart—and with herself. She had said to Mr. Oliver that Shorty was insensitive, but she saw now that she herself was guilty of insensitiveness—and more.

She had tried to apply the approved therapy treatment for Mark's dilemma in encouraging him to consider the possibilities which lay before him, but she had not recognised that his need went deeper than therapy could touch.

Her mind went back over all those long weeks and months of heartache since last Christmas—and she could find in them nothing but blame for herself. She should have trusted Mark. He had told her, just as plainly as she had told him. That kiss under the mistletoe at Beechcroft had been a token of love mutually given. But she had mistrusted it. She had believed the evidence of other people without ever giving him a chance to defend himself. She had insulted him—called him a cheat and a liar. It must have seemed such a harmless deception when he first entered into it—and so very understandable. She knew only too well how difficult the attentions of the nursing ranks could be to an unattached young doctor. Perhaps he had promised Toni not to marry until he had made his way secure in his profession—because Toni had not

approved of early marriages. She could imagine now how it had all arisen. Just the photographs of the children—resembling him as children so often do resemble their uncle—and the world had assumed the rest.

With the years the web had grown thicker and more tangled, so that he had been waiting until he left St. Edith's to break free from it. Flip had said something of this in her letter.

And—still seeing it from Mark's point of view—he must have known that once the story had leaked out it would certainly have reached her ears, and yet she had not so much as hinted at it. Small wonder indeed that Mark himself had not made any reference to it. No doubt he wanted to leave the way open for her to escape from what she had told him last Christmas since, in his own eyes, he was now condemned to failure.

Now, it seemed to her, it was too late.

Mechanically she started to change into her uniform. If she were not quick she would be late for duty. But as she was changing she caught sight of the doll which was still propped up on her bed since she had not yet found a home for it. She stopped dressing for a moment and stood still, struck by a glimmer of an idea. Perhaps it was not too late after all. ...

A plan did not immediately present itself, but her aim did not waver. Somehow, by hook or by crook, she had to meet Mark again—and at Beechcroft. She had an unshakable conviction that their happiness—hers and Mark's—was somehow bound up with Beechcroft where they had first met and unknowingly recognised their love.

The hospital was having a busy time that winter, and they were understaffed. The theatre teams found themselves doing extra duties; there was little leisure in which to come to grips with the problem of how to get to Beechcroft again—and at Christmas time.

There were other things too making claims on her time and thought. Geoff, for instance. She narrowly missed running into him on several occasions, for he still came to see Mr. Oliver quite frequently.

Then one day the inevitable happened and she ran into him in the corridor as *she* was going off duty. He stopped her, smiling. "Hullo, Fay," he said. "How are you?"

"Very well," she told him. "And you?"

"Not a trace of a limp, as you can see," he smiled down at her.

"Are you back at the bank?" she asked, taken off her guard and a little embarrassed, for she knew from Mr. Oliver that he was not.

"No," he said. "The publishers have been extraordinarily generous to me and have made such a good advance on the book that I was able to get it finished instead of going back to work. It seemed to fill a need in the spring list—so I've been lucky."

"Publishers," Fay said decidedly, "are never generous. If they've made you a good advance it means that they something pretty good in your book. My congratulations—it's going to be an enormous success."

There was a touch of wistfulness in Geoff's eyes as he acknowledged her compliment. "I changed the ending, you know."

"I'm sorry, Geoff," she said quietly, and all her embarrassment was gone now. Geoff was too sincere—too big a person not to be able to accept the denial of his own hopes as more than something to be put aside in their friendship.

"Don't be sorry. It was something I had to learn. D'you remember my first efforts at writing—here in Stanhope?"

"I do indeed," she smiled at the memory of days that seemed so very far away now.

"You told me then that I was trying to write about something I hadn't experienced. You were quite right—I didn't know what love was like until a little later. I'd never loved before. I'd never known any real sorrow before either—so perhaps that was something I had to learn too. At any rate, the publishers seem to like the new ending."

"You're very brave, Geoff," she said sadly, "and you're kinder than you ought to be in letting me off so lightly."

"I had hoped to hear good news of you before this," he said. It was his way of telling her that he knew about Mark's true position.

"There are difficulties." She spoke slowly as those difficulties loomed up once again in her mind.

"I know," Geoff nodded. "But nothing—and especially not pride—ought to be allowed to stand in the way of complete happiness."

Perhaps that was the spur she had needed, for quite suddenly her heart felt lighter. "You're right, Geoff—and I think I've swallowed mine completely."

"Let me hear from you sometimes, will you?" Geoff's eyes added their message to the request.

"I will," she promised, "and don't forget to send me a copy of the book!"

Fay went straight back to her flatlet and wrote a letter. Choosing her words rather carefully, she made two or three attempts before she got the whole thing simple enough and yet not too obvious.

Then she settled herself to wait for the answer. It took longer to come than she had hoped, but was eminently satisfactory when it did arrive.

Wendy wrote with her usual commendable lucidity, on a rather grubby ragged-edged sheet which appeared to have been torn from an exercise book.

"Of cors I havent got a girl to come back for Christmass. I thort you new it was to be you. Wont it be fun. Its my turn to rite to Horsey next week so I shall tell her about our secrit plan. She wont tell ANYONE Thank you for the paper and stamp. I am saving the paper for next time I rite to Mark to make it look smart and I no you wont mind this paper wich I am riteing in prep time. Love and kisses from Wendy."

There followed a long line of giant X's.

Fay felt a little thrill of excitement run through her. She did not know, she could not, dared not hazard a guess as to the ultimate success of their "secrit plan" but it was a first step. There were five long weeks until Christmas. But, she realised with something of a shock, there was a good deal to arrange in that time; notably and foremost to arrange with Matron that she should have Christmas leave.

As the train rattled on into the darkness Fay exerted her

will power to relax. Christmas leave had not been easy to get. Matron liked to have as many of the staff on duty as possible, and since Fay had not been there the previous year it was not without reason that Matron was rather sticky about it. Fay had not dared to tell her where she hoped to spend Christmas, though had she done so, Fay had a shrewd idea that permission would have been more readily forthcoming. As it was, her plea had been that she had been asked to spend the holiday with friends with whom it was probably the last Christmas they would have in their old home, which was of course true. Even so, she felt she had said too much and that in all likelihood Matron knew that Beechcroft was to be sold.

The theatre had not closed down until half past two and Fay's train left just after four, so life had been hectic for her that day. She was very tired—it was not often that she admitted that, or had need to do so, but she did now. But she told herself that it would be all right when she got to Beechcroft; all right or all wrong—but she could not admit the possibility of the alternative.

She must have dozed a little, for in no time at all they were at the junction and she had to seize her baggage and tumble out of the train.

Most people travelling for Christmas had done so earlier in the day, or would do so later after Christmas Eve parties, and she had no difficulty in getting a taxi. The countryside was very quiet that evening—not at all as she remembered last year when the things that stood out most vividly in her mind had been the ringing of church bells in the cold, frosty air, and car headlights lighting up the white blanket which lay over fields and roads and hedgerows alike. That, and the sound of Mark's voice coming up to her from under her window.

This evening it was mild and later the night would be black and silver, for already the moon was coming up.

She dismissed the cab at the end of the lane leading to Beechcroft so that her arrival should be unheralded. By pre-arrangement with Horsey she made her way round to the back of the house, and found an excited Wendy waiting for her behind the back door.

"Oh, angel child, I thought you were never coming!" the little girl gave her a tremendous hug of welcome. "I'm glad Mark didn't know you were coming—I wouldn't want him to suffer the agonies I've been going through," she announced.

"Is everyone else here?" Fay whispered as they crept noiselessly up the stairs.

"Yes, most of them—except Bill."

"Who's Bill?"

"He's John and Timmy's father—you know, he's married to Margaret and she's Mark's sister. He's in the Navy. His ship only got in today and he's motoring up from Portsmouth. We shan't get any sense out of Margaret until he arrives—she does get so excited when he's coming home," Wendy confided in a maternal tone that came oddly from her skinny little frame.

"Who else is here?" asked Fay, suppressing a smile.

"There's Sandra—Helen's friend from school. We don't like her very much, but she was the only one who could come, and we had to have someone after asking Mark if we could."

"Oh dear, I don't know any of these people," sighed Fay.

"Well, you know us and Mark, and I 'spect you've heard of Margaret. And oh, Bernard's coming too. But he's ever so different from last year. He's got a job."

"Good," Fay commented. "By the way, what's my name supposed to be?"

"You're my friend Elizabeth!" Wendy giggled.

"Why Elizabeth?"

"Because I think you're the Queen—the Queen of my heart, and Mark's," Wendy told her, and Fay bent and kissed the child so that she should not see the mist of tears which came over her eyes. "Pray God she's right"—the prayer, unspoken, went up from her heart.

As soon as she was ready they went downstairs. The house was alive with voices again, but as soon as they turned into the gallery she saw that there was no one in the hall except Mark who was standing in front of the fireplace staring moodily into the flaming logs. It was just as it had been last

year, only then Mark's right hand had not been strapped and splinted.

He turned at the sound of her steps down the stairs, and she saw the look of blank astonishment on his face give way to one of sheer happiness. All the strain and tension she had seen at Hampstead melted away as she watched him

"So you've really come ..." he began, but then Wendy danced up to him.

"This is my friend—you know, the one you said I could have for Christmas."

"But you said she was called Elizabeth and was eight years old—" Mark gave himself time to recover from his surprise by ruffling Wendy's hair and pinching her nose.

"Well, Elizabeth is the Queen's name," Wendy expostulated, "and I don't know how old people are, it's rude to ask grown-ups anyway."

"I hope you're not going to be cross with her," Fay said tentatively.

"Cross!" Mark gave a short laugh. "I shall never be able to thank her enough for bringing you back! You and I and the children are about the only link with Toni's last Christmas."

Other voices broke in on them then, and Fay found herself being introduced to a tall golden-haired young woman with Mark's dark eyes which would have proclaimed them brother and sister anywhere.

"I'm so glad to meet you at last," she smiled warmly at Fay. "I've heard so much about you from Toni—and from Mark."

Mark cut in quickly, "I'm afraid, my dear, that Toni's stories were of Fay's mother. She was the original angel child. Toni got me hooked on that one too—"

"Oh well, never mind, the description is very apt." Margaret smiled again at Fay, who said, "Except that I'm neither an angel nor a child!"

They had supper then—a much more informal affair than it had been last year. Bill had not yet arrived, but Margaret said not to wait for him. Her two boys, John and Timmy, had already gone to bed—evidently they were brought up on more conventional lines than Wendy and Helen—so Fay had

to wait until tomorrow to get her first sight in the flesh of "Mark's kids."

She felt no impatience for tomorrow, nor any dread of its outcome. Tonight she felt a sense of complete peace and well-being and so far as she was concerned it could go on for ever.

After supper bedtime for the three little girls began to be talked of, but nothing was done about it until Bill Sloan arrived. He was a typical seafaring man, with the bluest of eyes and a face that radiated cleanliness and good temper. After he had been introduced and made himself pleasant all round Margaret bore him off, and Fay guessed that they would not be seen again that night. Bernard too—a new Bernard with close-cropped hair and the neat dark suit of the young business executive—and Lissa, the nice ordinary girl he had introduced as his fiancée, had lost themselves somewhere in the house.

It was not surprising therefore that when Fay came downstairs from finally getting Wendy, Helen and Sandra into some sort of mood for sleep, she found Mark alone in the hall—just as she had done last year.

She had the feeling that he had been waiting for her. It was all so like last year—except that this was still only the eve of Christmas.

She went towards him and it was she who spoke first. "Are you going to church tonight, Mark?"

"No," he said, and waved his splinted hand. "This thing will be off soon, I hope, so it didn't seem worth while to get the car altered, but as it is at the moment I'm not too hot as a driver."

"I'll drive you over if you like," Fay offered.

He looked at her sharply and then shook his head. "No, you're far too tired. I wouldn't mind betting that you came straight off duty."

"I did," she admitted.

"Then it's bed for you, my dear. I didn't know you did drive, by the way."

"There are a lot of things we don't know about one another." Fay perched herself on the broad fender seat and stared dreamily into the fire.

"Last year I thought we knew everything." Mark spoke softly so that she was not sure whether she had heard him aright. Nevertheless she answered,

"I think we did."

"Then why did you distrust me?" Mark's voice was challenging now, a demanding, insistent voice.

She did not reply at once and when she did speak she had no real answer to give him. "I don't know," she said simply, and then after another pause she went on, "Perhaps I didn't trust myself. You see I'd never done anything like that before—falling in love with a man whose name I didn't even know. I didn't know who you were or what you did or anything about you—except that I loved you."

He gave a short laugh which was not without bitterness. "That was typically Toni. I went all the way to London to meet a middle-aged woman who was coming by plane. And when I got back I found you ..."

The warmth of the fire glow which was all about them was as nothing compared with the warmth which was stealing over Fay's heart. But before it was quite engulfed she had to ask, "Why didn't you tell me? I wouldn't have given your secret away."

"I don't know," he admitted, "except perhaps because I was narked that you hadn't trusted me—judged me without even a question. If only you'd asked me I would have told you like a shot. But you just—shut me out. I couldn't get inside the barrier you'd put up—"

"It was hell," Fay admitted.

"I know," he agreed, and then with his good hand he pulled her up from her seat and into his arms. "But it doesn't have to go on being hell, does it?"

Hell was turned to heaven for long minutes while their lips met as they had met once and only once before. The old understanding was back and there was small need of words. At last, still holding her close, Mark said, "I'm afraid there's no mistletoe this year. I didn't think Bernard and his Lissa needed it—and I didn't know you were coming."

"I was determined," Fay laughed a little tremulously, "and so was Wendy. But we don't need the mistletoe either."

"God bless Wendy," he said, and then loosing her just

enough to be able to look down into her face he went on, "Do you know you've presented me with an even bigger problem than you did last year? There isn't a present on the tree for you! Unless you'd like the dolls' sewing machine intended for Wendy's friend 'Elizabeth.' "

"Don't worry," she told him. "I've brought my own, and Horsey has put it on the tree."

"Your own?"

"My fairy doll, of course."

"But Toni gave you that last year."

"Yes—but she only gave me half the present she wanted me to have. Do you remember what she said when she gave it to me?"

"Yes—something about it bringing you your heart's desire, wasn't it?"

Fay's eyes were starry bright as she looked at him. "That's it. Toni couldn't give me that—though she did try. But when you give me the doll tomorrow, will you give me the other half of the present?"

"Yes," he sighed, pulling her close again. "But haven't you got it now?"

"Only the beginning."

"What more do you want, you greedy woman?"

"I want you to propose to me," she said meekly, and then added more seriously, "and I want something else too. I'd like you to tell me that by some means or other we can keep Beechcroft and that it will always be a real home for Wendy and Helen as long as they need it."

"Bless you," he kissed her again. "Are you prepared to take them on as well as me?"

"Of course I am," she told him. "But most of all I want to know that I'm keeping my promise to Toni—and that one day our children will be playing on the lawns of Beechcroft—just as she dreamed."

"Amen to that," said.

