



Harlequin Romance 1473

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Silent Heart

LOUISE ELLIS



Silent Heart by Louisse Ellis

"Sarah's very good at that sort of thing!"

And Sarah was good—at doing something about everyone's troubles rather than her own. But then, losing one boyfriend after another doesn't do anything for a girl's ego. It hadn't done anything for Sarah Darley's. Why was it, she asked herself, that with the best of intentions everything turned out wrong? Surely it wouldn't be like that again, with Andrew Haynes. The others hadn't really mattered, but with Andrew it was different!

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CHAPTER I

You could see the rim of the sea from the top windows of the Nurses' Home at St Mary's Hospital, Scopdale. It was a great joke among the nurses that patients, if they only knew it, might be better employed breaking an ankle to get a room with a view than to pay extortionate amounts for bed and breakfast to the local seaside landladies. The only drawback to working at St Mary's, from the nurses' point of view, was that while it was easy enough and quick enough to tear down the sloping streets for a quick walk on the beach, it was a different matter toiling up the hilly streets again, especially when you hadn't left enough time to get back.

Sarah Darley stood at the window of her shared room that day, thinking about it. It was a grey day, and you really couldn't distinguish the horizon line, the sky seemed to be hanging so low. Her roommate was lying flat on her back on her bed, reading her latest letter from her boy-friend who was in the Army and was afraid he'd be posted abroad at any time.

' Stop bawling, Victoria*' Sarah said mechanically. ' You can get out there with him as a nurse— nurses are always needed, my father says.' She stopped looking at the sea-line and became a little more alert, watching the white-coats below. Michael should be in view soon. He had said he would telephone her, but each time he seemed to be being held up by something or other. Yesterday someone asked him to switch duties, the day before there was a three-star emergency and everyone was called

back; the day before, what had happened to prevent his ringing her then?

Victoria Lister said, with a sniff, ' You just don't understand, do you? I don't want to go abroad. I don't want to be a nurse in the forces. I don't want Donald to go abroad. I want to stay here and have Donald go on being stationed at Blidbourne because it's nice and handy and I don't want any of it to change.'

' Change is happening all the time,' Sarah said, still in that preoccupied voice, but in fair imitation of Sister Tutor, so that Victoria Lister stopped crying and giggled.

Victoria could cry whenever she liked, and enjoy it because she was one of those happy souls who don't emerge from a session of copious tear-flowing with a blotched face. She said, ' Well, thank goodness he'll still be there for the dance at the Town Hall next week. Oh, it's horrible, living on a knife edge, never knowing when the axe is going to fall! It's all very fine for you and your Michael! He's here in the building! You can see him when you like, just by looking out of the window.'

Sarah could see him. She stiffened, but she didn't. speak. 'Michael was walking along by the side of a redhead, and he was eating her words, lapping them up, not looking ahead with a distracted frown, as he did sometimes when Sarah was at his side.

Victoria swung her legs off the bed. ' The trouble with you is, you're so beastly dedicated. You just set out to do a thing, and once you've decided, you go straight ahead. You never alter your mind, and when you get a difficulty, you just steam-roller over it. I don't know how you do it! '

Sarah didn't answer. She was watching Michael

put his arm around the redhead to protect her from a car that came out of the residents' car park with a rush. The car was a good three feet away from her, but Michael felt the need to put his arm round her and he forgot to take it away. Sarah watched, fascinated.

Something about Sarah's back view made Victoria stop her flow of talk and go over to see what Sarah was looking at. She had a good view of Michael and the redhead before they vanished round a corner.

Oh.' She said it in a queer little voice, catching her breath as she did so. Sarah said, What does that mean?'

'Wondered if you'd seen that happen,' said Victoria, gathering confidence. She always felt better when she was talking. She had a nice voice. Her Donald always told her, with a soldier's pathetic confidence in the advice, that it was always the thing to talk fast and talk your way out of any situation. She did now. Actually it's been going on for a while, but I didn't think you'd mind, seeing as she's your cousin I mean, it's all in the family. Doesn't mean a thing. Anyway, if it did mean anything, I don't suppose you'd mind. That is, you seem to take everything in your stride. Anyway, you could hardly dot her one for pinching your bloke, could you, seeing that Thelma's a staff nurse and you're only a first-year?'

That seemed a very good piece of wit, put in to buck up her best friend, raise her morale, encourage her to turn round with a bright smile and say something like, don't be silly, they're just good friends. Sarah didn't do that. She just went on staring out of the window.

I say, I wish you'd say something,' Victoria begged.

Rose Viney came in from next door with the sketchiest of knocks. What's she supposed to say something about?! she asked. She and Victoria and Sarah had started on the same day and stuck together through thick and thin. Sarah had, as Victoria had pointed out, gone smoothly through, trampling any difficulties as they came, apparently unhurt in the process, and not looking for breakers ahead. Victoria could also have added that being her friends, the other two had been dragged along too by Sarah: dragged out of trouble, dragged along towards that First Year exam that loomed ahead of them all.

She said, a little embarrassed but still mindful of her soldier's advice, She's just seen Thelma Cross being cuddled by Michael Armstrong in broad daylight and she doesn't seem to mind! I can't understand it! If it were me, I'd be raising Cain somehow. Or else I'd be bawling the roof off.'

Rose shook her head at Victoria, warningly. Really, Lister was the end! She acted as if no one else knew what a high romance was, and had no feelings whatever! She went over to Sarah and said awkwardly, 'I say, I wish you'd not mind very much. I mean, Thelma's an awfully decent sort, really. Well, she's your cousin, so she would be! Everyone knows that! I mean, she's just friends with your Michael. She wouldn't pinch him from you . . . would she?'

Sarah turned round then. Her two friends looked anxiously at her, but she didn't look any different from usual. She wasn't good-looking in any sense of the word, nor glamorous. She hadn't Victoria's frail feminine looks and blonde hair that made all men protective—staff and patients alike, of any age.

She hadn't anything like Rose's earnest dark eyes and serious appeal. But she had got something — a sort of unusual appeal that made you feel that her rather well-marked jawline wasn't really pugnacious but interesting, and that her straight black brows weren't really frowning, but just—well, just Sarah! Her nose was short and turned up a bit, and she usually had some freckles and a short hair-cut with a thick fringe, and she didn't care if her hair was ordinary nut-brown. Somehow it went very well with her sort of dark blue eyes, and over all she had a wide generous mouth that slipped very quickly into a heart-warming friendly smile.

It appeared now, that smile. Not quite so warm as usual, but it was there, and Sarah said vigorously, ' I think you two waffle an awful lot. Anyone coming out to the shops before all our free time goes?'

Do you mind if I collect Karen and bring her with me ? ' Rose said apologetically. I hate to do this, but she's been in trouble again.'

Sarah nodded at once. She was the first to generously have their free time intruded upon by some tiresome little P.T.S. girl, but Victoria protested, I say, do we have to? What's she done now?'

Rose flushed. She's been late back twice and Home Sister said she was to go out with me so I could be sure to get her back in time or else she'll have to go to Matron's Office.'

Well, let her!' Victoria protested. Do her good! You pamper that young sister of yours ! '

Karen was only two years younger than Rose, but there was all the difference in the world between the two girls. Karen was giddy and pert and seemed to look for trouble.

Let her come,' Sarah said with finality, so they went out two by two—Victoria with Sarah, Rose with her young sister.

Karen was inclined to be giggly. We did a drawing of the R.M.O. on the blackboard,' she told them.

You little fool! ' Rose stormed at her. What's got into you? Was it discovered?'

Well, yes, because it was terribly like,' Karen stuttered. You know, he looks a bit like a Turk in a harem, so we did a turban on him with a tassel, only he looks a bit like a bruise, too, so we stuck boxing gloves on him. Anyway, we always feel he's going to biff us when we don't listen at his lectures. Well, he does go on so, and he gets so worked up about little tiny germs that don't matter a bit!'

You little clot, can't you see he's terribly clever and you're all frightfully lucky to have him bothering to lecture you at all? They say he's going to soar to giddy heights one of these days, because he's got that little extra something, and everyone at St Mary's will be proud to say they trained here while he was our R.M.O.'

Oh, fudge! ' Karen said rudely. He's just a crusty old bachelor who pretends he's got brains. Half the girls say he'd be a bit of all right, though, if someone really smashing got hold of him and tempted him a bit! '

Rose exploded angrily, outraged that any sister of hers should go on so, but Sarah, looking over her shoulder, asked the practical question: ' What happened to the drawing? Did anyone see it?'

Oh, yes, that's the best bit of all!' Karen giggled. ' Your Thelma had been talking to Home Sister and came in and caught us putting the finishing touches

and she washed it off. Golly, that girl can't half tear you off a strip! I can't imagine how you came to have a cousin like her! And she looks so super, especially when she's dollied up and out on the Casualty Officer's arm.'

She received a kick for that, which effectually silenced her, but Sarah marched on as if she hadn't noticed anything. Victoria turned round and pulled a face at Rose, who with great presence of mind turned into the town's biggest store and made a beeline for the tights counter, with the Town Hall dance in view. They all started discussing how much they could afford and what they needed.

Sarah said suddenly, I promised to buy a little fluffy toy for poor Fred Maddison to give his wife for the little boy's birthday. I think I'll just hop up to the second floor. Won't be long!'

' I'll come too,' said Karen. ' I adore fluffy toys,' but her sister said, No, you won't! You stay here and fork out for your new tights you said you wanted. I'm not paying for them this time.'

They watched Sarah go. What was that about?' Karen said indignantly. I don't need any! '

' Can't you see?' Victoria fumed. She's only just discovered her dear Michael walks with his arm round Thelma in full view of the whole hospital. She took a knock, I think. You can't tell, but I think she covered up for a real blow.'

Well, I think you ought to tell her,' said Karen. She hadn't been in love yet, and thought boys were put on earth for her and her friends to have fun with, and not for any more serious purpose.

Her sister said witheringly, Do you really want Thelma Cross to tear a strip off you? She would, you know! I expect she'll tell Sarah herself—if

there's really anything in it. Myself, I think it's all a bit of a storm in a teacup. That Michael Armstrong is so pleased with himself, he thinks every female ought to swoon at the sight of him. I can't think what Sarah saw in him!

' Well, speaking personally,' Karen confided, ' I think it might be because he looks so masculine, and I know for a fact that he can knock a chap down with the minimum of effort, but he's a bit elderly for my taste.' From the viewpoint of just eighteen, she couldn't imagine what it felt like to be rising twenty-six.

Shut up, infant, here comes the R.M.O.' Rose said tersely. What's he doing in a place like this?'

He terrifies me,' Victoria said with pleasurable breathlessness. Your kid sister's right, you know,' she said, lowering her voice. He really is—well, huge. How tall would you say he was?'

Six foot plus an inch or two, I suppose,' Rose said, her only' concern being whether he had heard about the drawing her young sister had put on the blackboard. ' I suppose he wants the camera department. That's where it used to be! '

Karen giggled as the R.M.O. bent over a stand of bras and girdles on that counter, to ask the diminutive sales girl for the department he needed. ' Perhaps he's buying a bra for Matron,' she said incorrigibly.

I say, do shut up,' Victoria begged her. Someone will heal' you one of these days, and the combined efforts of all your friends won't save you !'

She's always had a wicked tongue,' Rose said, watching Dr Andrew Haynes. Look at that broad back! He's really massive! They say—'

She lowered her voice to pass on what she had

heard about Andrew Haynes and an old love affair that had almost cost him his hospital career. Karen leaned forward to hear, but the other two automatically pushed her back out of earshot so that all she heard was, '—and it was in all the papers, even the local ones! '

' What was? Don't be a meanie, Rose—I won't tell a soul! ' Karen wheedled, but the other two wouldn't tell her.

Sarah will run into him,' Victoria murmured, but Rose said, ' Sarah won't mind. I doubt if she'll even notice him. She doesn't notice anyone but the flirty Michael! I say, do you really think he'll settle for Thelma Cross?'

They were handling tights by then, expertly weighing up cost and colour, length and denier while they gossiped.

She's so gorgeous,' Victoria muttered. That

red hair and those greeny eyes, and she really is well-groomed. If only Sarah would do something with herself ! '

What, for instance?' Rose said, with a practical tone in her voice that was crushing. Sarah's jolly nice as she is, but you can't really groom her type. Myself, I think any man would get a wonderful wife in Sarah. I mean, she's so loyal and staunch and strong to lean on. Know what the patients say about her?'

If you mean Fred Maddison—'

No, not just him, but that awful Bob Tracy and the schoolteacher in the corner—' ' Eric Neal, I know the one! What do they say?' She must have been jolly good to them. They call her the Nurse in a Million. Well, I can honestly say she's never lost her temper on the wards since we arrived.'

She puts up with so much,' Victoria agreed. 'Mind, I don't always agree with it. I mean, if you let patients get away with being a nuisance, you never know where it will end.'

' Same goes for the old Casualty Officer,' Karen put in from behind, and they realized she had been listening all the time. He wouldn't play her up so if she'd been tough with him, I bet I '

' You little horror!' Rose spluttered. Just you dare let that get around and I'll—I'll tell Dad when I write home! I will, I promise you I '

Karen grinned, unabashed. ' It doesn't matter. Everyone knows it. Everyone says so.' She sauntered off, throwing over her shoulder the comment: I bet she's being heroic even now, somewhere, and planning to make her cousin a present of the Casualty Officer on a plate! '

Rose and Victoria looked doubtfully at each other. It was so difficult to know what to do with these P.T.S. kids who wouldn't conform. If Karen gossiped, would anyone believe her? Or would they think it was all the nonsense of the young ones, and ignore it? You never could tell.

Rose said, ' Sarah's being a long time up there with the woolly toys. Think we'd better go in search of her?'

Victoria, establishing that Karen was still in their view, happily flirting with a young salesman at the fishing rod counter, decided not. ' She wants to be alone, I expect.'

Sarah hadn't gone anywhere near the fluffy toys. It had been so crowded, she had abandoned the idea from what she could see from the staircase. She went on up to the fish tanks and stood in the corner

of the green gloom, staring unseeingly at a stupid but quite beautiful angel fish flapping around among the delicate red tracery of weeds, and thinking about Michael with her cousin Thelma.

It was no use saying there was nothing in it. She had been half watching the thing develop for long enough. Thelma was quite beautiful, and such a nice girl. That was the infuriating thing about it. If her cousin Thelma had been a selfish or catty girl it would have been so much easier to deal with the situation, but Thelma wasn't like that. She was universally liked, and so good to look at.

Sarah fiercely watched the angel fish vanish, and a trail of guppies come out from behind a rock. It was a little like her cousin and herself; Thelma as beautiful as the angel fish, herself as utilitarian as any guppy. Suddenly Sarah was horrified to feel that her face was wet and that she could no longer see the contents of the fish tank clearly. It was a shock that she could cry. Victoria cried, easily, and derived the utmost benefit from her tear-shedding, and it seemed natural that Victoria should cry. But not Sarah,

and her tears were a painful thing. Her throat ached and she couldn't think of anything else but that she didn't want to give Michael up.

She put her hands up to her face, pressing the palms against her mouth to stifle the sound of her crying, in case anyone came. This was awful! Once started, she couldn't stop.

Someone did come, and a reasonable masculine voice said, 'If the fish upset you so much, why do you keep on watching them?'

She blinked fiercely to clear her vision, and saw to her dismay that it was the R.M.O. standing there. She gulped and rummaged in her pockets, feeling

worse than the most untidy hoydenish P.T.S. girl, the hospital's lowest form of animal life, instead of a responsible young woman about to take her First Year exam.

He watched her efforts, and gracefully brought out a beautifully laundered handkerchief and offered it to her to mop her face with. But Sarah couldn't even rise with charm to that little act, for she had found what she was searching for at that moment. Thanks, but I've got some tissues,' she muttered, and hated herself and him and Michael and the lovely Thelma, all in one rush of passion that shocked her.

Well now,' he said kindly, 'how would it be if you found the powder room and sloshed cold water on that poor face, while I order some coffee for us? I could do with some, and I'm sure you could!'

She stared at him. Why, that open face of hers was obviously thinking, why is he doing this to me? He's never even looked at me before, let alone spoken to me!

'Oh, come on, do!' he said, smiling. 'There's a motive behind that invitation. I've got a problem and you look a sensible girl. You might help me. I'm no good with shopping!'

Her face cleared and she was just going to say she'd be glad to help him, when there was a rush of footsteps, and Rose and Victoria appeared at the door, Karen at their heels. Rose and Victoria looked blank and rather dismayed, but in young Karen's face there was only lively curiosity.

Sarah reddened, but the R.M.O. looked round and said smoothly, 'Oh, I see, you're with your friends. Well, never mind, I daresay I'll find a kind assistant to advise me. But do keep away from those fish

tanks in future,' he finished with a comical lift of his rather heavy eyebrows.

'What did he want?' Victoria asked, when they were alone. 'What were you doing in here, anyway? We've been looking all over the place for you!'

You've been crying! ' Karen said unnecessarily.

Shut up, infant,' Rose said automatically. Karen had to be squashed every so often. She had no tact, no sense.

'Did he tick you off?' Victoria insisted. What did you do?'

Oh, nothing! ' Sarah shrugged. 'That is, he thought the fish upset me. I've got a cold coming on, I think.'

That pleasant bit of fiction served whenever one didn't want to discuss private and personal wretchedness, so the others left off, and to cheer themselves up, they went and had a fizzy drink and finished their shopping.

But Karen couldn't forget that the R.M.O. had seemed so friendly to a mere first-year. 'They told me on my first day that he didn't speak to anyone except staff nurses upwards unless one larked about in his lectures,' she complained.

Well, as you do that all the time,' her sister said crushingly, has he spoken to you yet?'

' No. He just tells Sister But that she doesn't keep us in order,' Karen said, and sounded disappointed. I must say he looked awfully like that drawing I did of him on the blackboard—you know, all sort of hungry for female companionship!'

Shut up, you little idiot! ' Rose stormed at her. If someone hears you one of these days, you'll be out on your ear. Do you want that?'

Karen considered the matter. I wouldn't mind leaving if I could get work on TV,' she admitted.

Oh, isn't it awful! Rose moaned. And I've just remembered, we've got you on the wards tomorrow morning. It's your first go. Now you just behave yourself, and if the R.M.O. is anywhere in sight, just you go and hide yourself, so he doesn't remember your past bad behaviour.'

Rose privately thought it was a pity that her sister had to come on the wards so soon, and in the Men's Section at that. You couldn't knock any sense into Karen. At eighteen, she was just an overgrown schoolgirl who could see fun in everything. The chances were she'd have the men's surgical ward in uproar before she'd been there five minutes, with the men they had at the moment.

How will he be on a surgical ward?' Karen asked blankly.

The R.M.O. goes all over the hospital for various reasons,' Rose said crushingly. To the others, she said, How would it be if we briefed her now, in case I don't get a chance later?'

I wouldn't,' Victoria said unfeelingly. Let her get in a scrape and feel the edge of Sister Beamish's tongue. That'll cure her.'

' No, it'll only make it worse for us,' Rose fretted.

Now look, Karrie, there's a nice old man in the corner who's worried sick someone will touch his leg, so don't go near him, so you won't even scare him. You know how clumsy you are I Are you listening?'

Karen nodded, but it was quite clear that she wasn't.

And there's a very young man who is studying for an exam and he's petrified someone will knock

his precious books down because he bought them with his lunch money and that started him getting

How batty can you get?' Karen said, with round eyes. You can't mean it! '

He's got a duodenal ulcer,' Victoria said crushingly. Perf., for good measure, so don't go near him in case he haemorrhages. When you come to think of it,' she said, suddenly, turning to Rose, it's running a risk letting these kids come on the ward at all, don't you think? Remember that scatty P.T.S. girl who knocked all the glass over and it crushed and flew in all directions, and set that man shaking again when they'd gone to all that trouble to get him quite still before they set him in his frame —what was his name?'

' Oh, yes, I remember,' Rose said.

That was the day after Jeffers' young sister was larking with those dressers and they put her in the bath and didn't realize it was so hot—remember how she screamed?'

Sarah wasn't listening to the other two reminiscing. She was thinking of that time in connection with Michael. She had just met him. It had been a dance. Just one of the monthly socials. No one dressed up, which was as well, because Sarah hadn't got anything special to wear. Thelma had been there, looking lovelier than ever in a plain, plain dark wool dress in a kind of autumn brown. Thelma was like that; she could look expensively turned out in the plainest of things she ran up herself on the sewing

machine in the nurses' sitting-room. But that night, in a sweater and pleated skirt, Sarah herself had captivated Michael and he had kept coming back to dance with her. Michael's arms

round, her—dancing—Michael's mouth close to her ear, saying little bits of lovers' nonsense—Michael going off casually and breaking her heart-

' Sarah!' Victoria said her name really loud. Stop dreaming! It isn't like you! We've just decided to leave this brat to her own resources and if she gets kicked out it will be her own fault. Are you in agreement with that, because we must agree, you know! '

Sarah forced herself to stop thinking about Michael and to consider Karen. She looked at her, and discovered for the first time how really pretty Karen was. She hadn't the rather mature loveliness of Sarah's cousin Thelma, which was based on a superb self-confidence and a really generous and serene nature. No, Karen's prettiness depended on her glowing good health and energy, her rather high cheekbones and slightly tilting eyebrows which gave her an elfin look, and those bright wicked hazel eyes that were literally dancing with mischief.

She wants a hair-cut,' Sarah said, consideringly.

Yes, I know. She peeps through that fringe like a Skye terrier,' Rose said worriedly. ' It's no good, though. I've even taken her to the hairdressers myself to get it cut, but she makes another new long fringe over the top of it the minute my back's turned.'

Eager for life, eager for the boys, that was Karen, Sarah saw with dismay. Karen had a neat little figure, too, and that must surely be new? When she arrived, she had been (or seemed to be) flat as a board, a stripling boy's figure that had seemed so safe. Sarah said, because her friends were depending on her, ' I think she'll be all right. She'll have to be, when you come to think of it. We honestly

haven't time to act as nursemaids. Remember how close the exam is! '

There was a concerted wail, and as they turned to walk back to the hospital, they forgot Rose's tiresome young sister and began to discuss the things that bothered them most. Karen walked behind them, half listening to such words as cholecystogastrostomy, Nupercaine, hypopyon, pulsus alternans, and tachycardia. They were so earnest, those three, so determined to do well. Her sister Rose, of course, wanted to please their uncle, who had been a G.P. before retirement, and Karen knew that Sarah was aching to please her father, who was still a G.P. What Victoria was so anxious about, Karen couldn't think. She was privately of the opinion that Victoria would have left on the instant if her soldier had asked her to marry him before he was posted abroad.

Karen herself had no such terrors. Trouble slid off her shoulders. Some aspects of nursing interested her, such as the making up of the special beds, of which there seemed a ridiculous variety. She had liked the visit to the farm to see all the modern paraphernalia to prove how hygienic they were. But overall, Karen didn't bother her head much about what made other people tick. If they wanted to go mad on hygiene, that was no concern of hers. If they wanted to be ill at the sight of some of the specimens in the biology class, as some of her fellow P.T.S. students were, then that was just too bad. She had no idea of trying to understand such people. Nothing ever happened to her like that. Life slid by with teeming numbers of people around her making a great fuss about very little, while Karen herself bobbed up from trouble like a happy cork on the

water.

That was how she would be on the wards the first time, she was sure. That was how it had been when she had drawn that outrageous picture of the R.M.O. on the blackboard and had forgotten to rub it off. Nothing had come of it, though everyone around her had lived in terror, even her sister Rose and her two friends, Sarah and Victoria. Which just showed you, Karen told herself, with all the self-confidence of her eighteen years, how little these serious types knew about anything.

One thing only she had promised herself. If she could find a rich unmarried patient in the hospital, no matter what he was like or how old he was, she would set her cap at him. Karen was quite sure that her grandmother had been right that day when she had said, 'Stuff and nonsense, money being the root of all evil! Of course it isn't! Evil comes without money, I know that much! The thing to do where big money is concerned is to have a bit of sense and make the best use of it.'

The four girls swung into the Nurses' Home, but before Karen left her sister, she said casually, 'What makes you think I shall be on your ward for my first go?'

'Because we always have bad luck! We're bound to get you I' Victoria said, before Rose could answer.

'Shall I be allowed near the rich patients?' Karen asked innocently, signing herself in. 'That child!' Rose fumed, flushing. 'Not if I can help it, because the only rich patient we've got at the moment is that poor young man in the side ward—Colin Felstead.' Karen nodded, and ran up the stairs ahead of

them. Victoria and Rose had looked after her, worriedly. She had seen that, as she turned the bend at the first landing, but Sarah was still miles away. What was the matter with that Sarah? What had been going on between her and the R.M.O.? Was Staff Nurse Cross really trying to take the Casualty Officer away from that Sarah? Karen's inquisitiveness about people's love affairs was as strong as her indifference to their anxieties 'about anything in connection with work or health. She promised herself she would find out. That Sarah was promising material. She wasn't like the others. Funny how the patients all seemed silly over her, though.

CHAPTER II

Thelma was on Sarah's ward—Patrick Ward, with a nice view of the gasworks over the tops of the grey slate roofs. There, wasn't much chance of a transfer, and Sarah told herself she wasn't going to be so weak. Anyway, there was General Post, and the chances were that she herself would be sent to Women's Medical. She hadn't been there yet, but both her friends had. She met Thelma's serene eyes when she went on duty, and wondered what it must be like to have got your S.R.N. and to be in line to have a ward of your own. Thelma, so good to look at yet so efficient and unflappable, would make a peach of a ward sister.

She would have been very surprised if the men on Patrick Ward had told her what they thought of that. Sarah was their favourite. They liked her vigour and the way she talked to them. Sarah got involved with their private lives. She visited them when their own relatives couldn't come. She was full of ideas for putting their personal tangles

straight. Thelma cared only for the sick and ailing body, and was beautifully remote from the man inside it.

Fred Maddison demanded of Sarah that day, ' Here, is it true, nurse? Knock me block off if you like, but they're saying that ginger staff nurse is lifting your bloke from you! '

Sarah looked very fierce. ' That ginger staff nurse, as you call her, happens to be my cousin, and my mother's favourite person in our family. Everyone is much more excited when she goes home than when I do '

Fred was shocked. Mean to say she lives in your house, with your family? And her after your bloke?'

Fred, I wish you wouldn't,' Sarah begged. ' Your voice carries so and I wouldn't like her to hear what you're saying. She's a very nice person really, and why Shouldn't she live at home in my home? She was brought up there with the rest of us when her parents died abroad. I can't remember what it was like before she came.'

Oh, lor',' Fred said glumly, and shook his head at his neighbour.

That was Will Kennaway, and Sarah was in process of persuading his wife that Will was a much better person to spend the rest of her life with than their flashy lodger, who was a commercial salesman, and good-looking, with a lot of money to splash about. Will said, What's your mum going to say, then, when the Casualty Officer wants to marry Carrots and not you?'

That's right, rub it in,' Sarah sighed. She was master of herself now. Tears a long way away, and fury and shame fighting it out in her head, to think the R.M.O. had seen her in such a state in front of the fish tanks. You wait till such a thing happens before you start getting steamed up. And let's consider your emotional tangles if you want to talk—lie back while I put this in your mouth,' and having stoppered his mouth with the thermometer, she took his pulse and told him coolly that the lodger was leaving the district.

Cor, how did you manage it, then, nurse?' he gasped. And what does my wife think about that, eh?'

' She panicked. I laid it on a bit thick, d'you see, You know Mr Stone's visitor?'

' That prize-fighter? He's punch-drunk, poor bloke,' Will said sadly. Not a thought in his head any more. Stupid, he is. You don't want to get near him He wouldn't mean to do you any harm. Act first and try and think afterwards, that's him I '

' And that's what your wife thought, I believe,' Sarah said coolly, entering her findings on his chart. ' He went by while I was speaking, to her, and I suggested that you'd asked him to visit the lodger for you.'

That made Will laugh so much that his stitches hurt. He had had multiple injuries when he had been at work and his ribs were still very sore.

Don't make me laugh, nurse,' he begged. You're a caution, you are! '

She moved on to the next bed, where Peter Roberts was immersed in his books and gently took them away from him while she took his temperature.

Will leaned over. Here, nurse, you know that chap in the side ward? Young chap, looks real ill! I got a sight of him when I got pushed out to the bathroom and his door was open. He's one of the bosses of our factory—well, brother of one of 'em, that is. Rolling in money, he is! Don't it make you sick, all that cash and too ill to enjoy it, and there's me don't know where to turn for some to keep my missus happy—'

Sarah had to ignore that. They weren't allowed to discuss one patient with another. She said quickly, ' That reminds me do you still want to start an oriental fish tank, because I've seen a small one that wasn't too expensive in Colley's Store today,' and she told him the price.

That led her to remember the present she had promised to buy for Fred Maddison to give to his little boy. They were madly expensive, so I didn't get one after all. I'll by the little shop down by the harbour when I go out again, shall I?' And she kept her fingers crossed so that Fred Maddison wouldn't question her too closely about her trip to Colley's so she wouldn't have to admit that her ultimate trip into the soft toys department had been a very quick one after she had got away from the R.M.O.

Thelma stopped her as she was finding a vase for a bunch of flowers brought up by one of the porters for young Peter Roberts. 'I say, Sarah, I've been wanting to talk to you,' she said, and for once her smooth face wasn't so serene and unworried.

Yes, Staff?' Sarah said formally, pausing momentarily with her untying of the raffia round the stems.

Well, not now then, but later. Will you be going out tonight?' No. Mugging up for our exams—all of us.'

'Well, come along to my room, will you? After we've talked, I'll hear you, if you bring your books with you.'

Sarah couldn't see any way of getting out of it, so she said briefly that she'd be there. It would be about Michael, of course. Why couldn't Thelma leave it alone? Had she got an attack of conscience, for heaven's sake?

Michael himself stopped Sarah on the way down to X-Ray to collect a wet-plate. 'Sarah,' he said urgently, I must see you!' He glanced up at the clock. Always Michael seemed to be in a hurry these days.

Oh, no, not you, too!' Sarah fumed. Thelma wants me to go to her room to discuss something tonight as well! '

He stood very still and quiet then, considering her. 'I want to talk to you tonight. Well, you can't go to Thelma's room. Meet me outside as soon as you come off duty. I'll be waiting in the car. Got that?'

The voice of the lover, Sarah told herself ruefully. She had half a mind to refuse to see him, but she never could refuse Michael. She nodded and went smartly to get on with her errand. What on earth should she say to him tonight? Now she was away from his compelling personality she was furious with herself for having handled the meeting like that. Why hadn't she told him she didn't want to go out with him? But it wouldn't have been true. She never could tell a direct lie and he knew it. Well, at least why hadn't she had a bit of pride and pointed out that the whole hospital seemed to be discussing him and his preference for Thelma, and that it was by no means unusual to see him with his arm round her in public? But it would have sounded petty. Very petty.

She didn't have much chance to think about it for the rest of her time on duty, because life was hectic on Patrick Ward. All the men were past the ill' stage and were very demanding, in one way or another. Those in bed were always wanting things — the telephone or the B.P., notes passed down the ward or a drink. Those who were up were so over-helpful that they made as many jobs for the nurses by their accidents. Only the day before, they had lost a good ward maid because Tracy, hobbling about on one leg, had cannoned into her and she had

whooshed on her tablet of soap she dropped, right down the length of the ward, finishing up with the contents of her bucket all over her.

Sarah sighed, and tried to remember the notes she had learned the night before, against possible use in her exam. Nurses who had already taken that exam said it was

easy, a walk-over, nothing to flap about. All those waiting to take it were in such a state of dither that nothing went right. Past the stage of setting up trays and getting them ticked off their list, both Sarah and her two friends found increasingly that the facts they had thought to have learned off and stored away at the back of their minds had floated out altogether and wouldn't be re-learned. She was surprised to find it was time to go off duty and meet Michael.

Now the time had come to see him, she didn't want to go. She was in a different state of dither now. Shaking all over and butterflies in her stomach, determined to take the stand she had decided on, but wondering at the same time how she could force herself to do it. Suppose Michael, who hated to be caught out in the wrong, should deny everything?

She was so busy thinking about this angle of it, that she forgot to slow down at the corner, where the path from the path. lab. joined the side path to the main gate. She ran full tilt into someone coming round, and such was the force of the impact that she bounced off him almost back to the wall, momentarily winded.

It was the R.M.O. He caught her arms and steadied her. ' Good grief, girl, what do you want to pelt around like that for? Did I hurt you?'

' No,' she gasped, and remembered to say hastily,

' No, thank you, sir. Just winded.'

' Where were you going?' he asked, bewildered.

She gently disentangled her arms from his hands, and reflected that if it had been anyone else, considerably less heavy and bulky, she might not have gone such a whack against him. ' Just out, sir,' she said, still struggling to get her breath back. ' All right now, sir.'

He nodded and stood back to let her go. Now she couldn't run because the path came out into the open, in full view of all the hospital windows. She tried to walk sedately, and felt as if Dr Haynes was watching her. He probably had heard by now of the gossip, and might even follow her. There was that second-year who got jilted—what was her name? Stokes, that was it! And she had taken the knock badly and gone off her food and lost a lot of weight, and there had been an awful fuss about it, Sarah recalled. She herself had only just come out of P.T.S. when that had happened and her first sight of the R.M.O. had been one of awe; this, she had thought, was the busybody who insisted on a special check-up and sending the girl home to get well again, and, Sarah told herself, from what she had seen of him, he was at this moment quite capable of insisting on her having a check-up on the score of the gossip alone, if she wasn't careful, simply because he had caught her crying in the fish-tank room. She wished heartily that she had left that store altogether, slipping out of the back way to the park. The trouble was, tears Seemed to take one unawares.

Michael blared on his horn just as she shot out of the gates. Sorry! Didn't know you'd arrived,' he said shortly, holding the door open for her. And

then, most unreasonably, he said, Good heavens, didn't you even stop to change? Now we can't go to our usual place for a meal.'

' I've had a meal, and you didn't say you wanted me to change!' she retorted. You said come straight off duty!'

I meant don't stop to gas for half an hour with those crack-brained friends of yours,' he said, very much up to form. Sarah thought, in bewilderment, that if she hadn't seen him with his arm round Thelma, nor heard the gossip, she would imagine that everything was as it should be between herself and Michael.

Michael's favourite restaurant was the Royal Hotel in Queenscliffe. Sarah knew he wouldn't take her there now. She wondered idly where he would settle for, for although she had already had her meal, she was always hungry, and he would be very bad-tempered if he had to talk before eating.

He settled for a quiet inn just outside Amble-thorpe. Sarah guessed that at least they would serve a decent steak or cut off a joint, and that would put Michael into a better mood, and here it didn't matter much that she had no make-up on, and that her uniform had badly needed brushing.

Still, it was soothing, and they both reacted to it. There was little traffic on this road; just the cars going to and from the coast. Not even a lot of cars pulling into the open space in front of the Green Man. And when they got out of the car, the silence hit them, it was such a marked contrast to the noise of Scopdale.

Sarah brightened and sniffed the evening air appreciatively. Mm, lovely. I can even smell the

sea . . . I think! ' she grinned up at him. No petrol fumes, anyway, and I've just been reading up for my exam just what petrol fumes do to a girl's morale.'

He murmured, Shut up, Sarah,' and pulled her to him, in the shelter of the car, and kissed her, just as he had kissed her in the beginning of their acquaintanceship.

They were both a little shattered when they came out of that clinch. Sarah was puzzled, too. To start all that gossip about Thelma, and to kiss Sarah again like that, was a bit much! But before she could say anything, Michael muttered, Let's go inside and eat. I can't take too much of that sort of thing on an empty stomach,' and he took her arm and marched her inside:

The place was warm, and redolent of the smell of wine and beers and the rich odours of roasting. They were shown into the restaurant, which wasn't very large; just a dozen tables. They were almost alone, except for an elderly couple at a far table, and two young people so much in love, in a corner, that they hadn't noticed Sarah and Michael come in.

Michael ordered drinks, and then turned to her. Look, I know what you must be thinking, Sarah. It's bristling all over you ! You must be thinking I'm all the—'

' Michael, don't. We'll quarrel,' she begged quickly.

No, we won't. Because I just want to tell you a few things. I've heard the gossip and I was livid. I ought to have known a chap can't look at anyone without people starting to talk. But, Sarah, there's nothing in it! '

She raised painful eyes to his, questioning him, begging him for the truth. He shook his head.

' I couldn't kiss you like I did just now if it was all over, silly! Could I?'

' I don't know,' she said slowly. You're always so busy lately—'

Well, that's true ! It doesn't mean I'm going off you ! Oh, I know Thelma's so gorgeous a chap just has to look at her, and you know very well, love, that I've always had a roving eye! But the fact is, you're the one I need. You may not be a raving beauty, but that tongue of yours keeps me up to scratch. Besides, I can depend on you, and that's what a chap wants.'

The drinks came, and Sarah sat staring at the tablecloth, cheeks scorching, asking herself in confusion if this was the sort of avowal she really wanted. And if this was what Michael himself would always want. He might very well be feeling just as he said, at the moment, but was there no more in it? Or was it a pointer to the way things were going?

He was the first man she had ever loved, and she had nothing to judge by. She heard him say,

Sarah, you do believe me, don't you? Oh, I know I took Thelma to the flicks one night—' and as Sarah raised surprised eyes to his, Oh, lor', didn't you know that?' he cried in dismay. Well, the fact was, you were on duty and I wasn't, and I was in a hell of a mood and Thelma was off duty and she's your family, and there seemed no harm in giving her a lift into town. Then she said she was going to the pictures, and we sort of drifted into going together. That was all there was to it.'

You might have told me,' she began, but he hunched an impatient shoulder.

Look, love, can you see me ringing you on the wards from Blidboume Post Office to ask if you minded me going into the flicks beside your cousin? At that time she was insisting on Dutch treat!

"You might have told me afterwards,' she said.

But of course that wasn't like Michael. She had always known he had stiff-necked pride, hated to feel he was in the wrong, stormed ahead in his own fashion and glared at everyone with a take-it-or leave-it scowl. It was no different in any way, except that this was her own cousin and she was hearing about it because people were gossiping, hazarding guesses as to which of them—Sarah or the lovely Thelma—would get the handsome Casualty Officer in the end.

Sarah hadn't stiff-necked pride, but she had something equally fierce deep inside her. The sense, that practical sense, of what was right and wrong, and there seemed to be nothing right about this. It struck her, sitting there looking at Michael, flushed, preparing for battle or ready to kiss her until she was silly, whichever way she turned it, that there would be no happiness in it for her, in the future, and probably not for him, either. Whatever he thought he needed in her was all very well, but he had always had an eye for the pretty ones, and Thelma, as well as being pretty, was, after all, a staff nurse already, and likely to make a brilliant career in any hospital. She was the right sort for Michael.

But she couldn't be sure how to conduct it tonight, especially as Thelma had also wanted to talk to her. Suppose Thelma didn't really want him, and Michael knew this? Part of Sarah was sorry for Michael, who was burdened with such good looks,

and not an awful lot of the practical in him. Impulsive, yes, and over-ready to fight, but was he really steady underneath?

He put his hand across the table and covered hers, and for the moment it was her undoing. ' Sarah,' he pleaded. Sarah, let's let it be as it always was! '

The food arrived, so Sarah nodded, and let him eat. Now he was very happy. He talked about Casualty and the Social Club, his father and Sarah's parents, the holidays, anything. Anything to show that there was nothing in the gossip and that Sarah wasn't to think another thing about it.

' But what about Thelma?' she forced herself to ask at last.

He hesitated, then said firmly, ' That's what she wanted to tell you, I expect! That we both felt pretty badly about it and wanted you to know it was all right.'

Sarah let the swimmy sensation pass, before answering. All last night, all today, she had been forcing herself onwards, towards telling Michael he could consider himself free, but she hadn't expected this attitude from him.

After the cheese board had been taken away, he said, Let's go for a spin. How long have you got? Well, if we can't, make it back in time, you can get in through the

Medical School, can't you? It won't be the first time you've used the cellars, old girl, I bet!

All Sarah's better judgment urged her to refuse. 'What about Thelma?' she said again. I promised her I'd go to her room and talk. She's waiting in for me! '

Michael looked uneasy. 'Least said, soonest mended, in my opinion,' he offered. 'That's the

trouble with you girls—always talking All women talk I My mother, bless her, is just the same! Talk a chap's head off. You oughtn't to get like the others, Sarah. You're different. For heaven's sake, don't change! I depend on you.'

'I can believe that,' she said dryly, and he had the grace to blush.

Well, have a heart, Sarah! A chap lets his eyes wander at a pretty girl sometimes. I warn you, I shall always be like it, but at rock bottom it's you and only you, who really counts. Doesn't that mean anything?'

Well, did it?' she asked herself, and she knew very well it meant everything. Michael had always had first claim on her, day in and day out since she had first seen him. He coloured her existence at the hospital; he was the one she admired, felt like mothering, and leaned on where her career was concerned. Hadn't Michael been the one to urge her through P.T.S.? Hadn't he been the one to thrill her, with his deft hands, in Casualty, that disastrous first turn she had had in that hectic department? Sarah often felt that she had fallen in love with his hands first, Michael himself afterwards. Young men with good looks weren't so rare at Scopdale just then, but a Casualty Officer like Michael wasn't so easy to get. His heart and skill were in the job.

Yes,' she said steadily, I suppose it does.'

Well, then! Come on, let's go, Just a little drive.'

A little drive, on a night like this, in a place like this, with Michael, meant a lot of stops on the way, and a lot of kissing, and sweet murmured assurances that all was well between them. Sarah sometimes thought Michael could kiss out of her what wits she

had. She felt sick and stupefied and dangerously elated when he at last took her back to Scopdale, back to the grim buildings and dark streets, the noise and the bustle, the lighted windows of the hospital, the casualties still going in and the ever flowing movement of staff from this block to that, no matter what hour of the day or night. It brought her back to her senses, the sight of the hospital, and it reminded her of how wretched she had been for the past forty-eight hours.

Michael grabbed her hand. All serene, love?'

he asked, grinning outrageously at her before dropping a kiss on the tip of her uptilting little nose.

'I suppose so,' she said.

Well, it's okay by me, I don't mind telling you! I thought I was going to get a black eye, the way you looked at me when you first shot out of the gates tonight. Go on, clear off, or you'll be late signing in.'

He gave her a little push, and she was too indignant to answer. As he drove off she realized he had got her back to where they had been at first, without really clearing the matter up at all. He could flirt with Thelma or anyone else, and if Sarah herself didn't hear about it, she would never know. Clearly Michael didn't think it would be worth mentioning.

CHAPTER III

Rose and Victoria were feverishly mugging up their notes and asking each other the sort of questions they thought would come up at the exam. Rose was sprawled all over Sarah's bed, but on sight of Sarah at the door, she got up.

She glanced a second time at Sarah, asked herself if she dared say it, decided she dared, and remarked with a casualness she didn't feel, 'Your cap's askew and your lipstick is smudged.'

Victoria looked up with interest gleaming in her eyes. Been out with Michael? Talked you back into it, has he?' Victoria didn't care. She always took risks, even with her best friend.

'For the moment,' Sarah said carefully. 'I've got to go down to Thelma's room. I don't know what for.'

'We do,' said Victoria. 'At least, we can guess. She's been up after you. Livid, she was, when we admitted you'd gone out instead.'

Rose interpolated, 'Someone else told her they'd seen you go out in Michael's car. Not us. We didn't know.'

Sarah tore off her coat and cap and went. Thelma didn't like being kept waiting. She never had. She might smile nicely, but those green eyes of hers could look pretty unfriendly all the same.

Sarah wished she could make up her mind about Michael. On the way down, she briefly remembered his kisses and shook all over, but it was no use. If she married him, knowing now what she did, she would never be sure, no matter how much he might

kiss her and reduce her to this sickly state.

Thelma., opening the door before Sarah got there, said briefly, 'Recognized your footsteps. Where have you been?'

So it was to be like that. Big sister, just like at home. Only Thelma wasn't a sister, just a cousin, and Sarah didn't feel very friendly with her at that moment. She kept seeing Michael's arm going round Thelma, in full view of the Home windows, protecting Thelma from an approaching car that wasn't all that near as to be dangerous.

So she said, 'Out,' in the mulish way she did sometimes.

Thelma pushed down her irritation and said, 'With Michael—I don't care, kiddo. I just don't want to waste any more time, that's all. How is it between you two?'

And then she looked at Sarah who, in spite of cleaning up the smudged lipstick and applying more, still looked as if she had been well and truly kissed, much kissed. Sarah's eyes were swimmy and bemused, and she wasn't quite so brisk in the way she was speaking. 'Oh, I see,' Thelma said softly, and promptly altered her tactics. She was not for the world going to admit to her junior that she was aching for Michael, who had apparently altered his mind and gone back to his first love. Well, stop fooling about like a silly kid, and make up your mind to stick with him, and not give rise to so much gossip,' she said severely.

Sarah's indignation thrust through the veil of bemused elation. That's a good one! It was you started it!

She hated herself for falling for that one. Thelma, at home, in the past, had often provoked her into

making a childish remark like that, and getting out of the situation with dignity. Besides,' she couldn't help adding, people are bound to talk when they see the Casualty Officer walking with his arm round a staff nurse when he's supposed to be engaged to a little first-year.'

It was mean, she told herself, but she had to hold her own. She wasn't going to let Thelma hide behind her protocol all that much.

Thelma went very red, which didn't suit her at all, and then whitened. ' You scored there, didn't you?' she said silkily. ' I can't help it when the gentlemen get protective about me. It's my type. It's always been the same. But it doesn't mean very much to me—certainly not enough for me to appreciate people saying I've stooped to pinch a first-year's man. That was what I wanted to speak to you about. See that the gossip stops, duckie, because it appears to be circulating largely in your year, and I don't like it.'

Sarah was furious, but there was nothing else she could do when Thelma went senior on her. She smarted about it all the time she was getting undressed for bed, and she was still smarting about it the next morning on the ward. This was the day when they were to expect Karen on the ward, and that wasn't going to be very funny, either.

Sarah was taking the washing bowls round when Bob Tracy said to his neighbour, I reckon if you was to ask our little Nurse Darley, she'd do it, when she goes out next, wouldn't you, love?'

' What's that, Mr Tracy?' No matter how sore Sarah was over her own private problems, she always believed in putting on her best cheerful face.

During her first week on the wards she had had a mild infection and been isolated in the sick bay and she had seen life from the patient's eye view. Never again would she be forgetful of how the patients saw her, never again would she let them see her being irritable or put out in any way, she had promised herself then. Now she even managed to smile at him, though he was the most difficult and tiresome patient they had had for weeks.

' You said you were going to get a little soft toy for Fred Maddison here, he reminded her, and as she nodded, at the same time starting to wash Eric Neal who had his leg strung up by a weight and pulley, Bob Tracy was encouraged to enlarge his theme. ' Well, do you reckon you could find something for me to give my sister? It's a bit tricky. It's got to be small, to go in an envelope so she don't know what it is and can't guess till she gets home. What d'you think?'

Sarah said, Mr Tracy, I don't know what your sister would like! Is it a birthday present? How much do you want to pay for it?' Her smile broke again. And what's it got to do with Mr Murray?'

Same goes for his boy. It's got to be small and flat so he won't be able to guess.'

Eric Neal, who was a schoolteacher, and rather out of the conversation of the other three as a rule, broke in: You really are the end, you chaps, putting Nurse out like that! She doesn't get much time, and how does she know what you want to buy for your families? Why don't you send through the post for something?'

That's only because you want a book bought and haven't got the nerve to ask her!' Bob Tracy said scathingly.

Anyway,' Eric Neal went on, all your gossip was wrong—she'll want to have all her spare time with that young Casualty Officer, so leave her alone.'

He looked at the ceiling as he talked. Sarah slowly reddened. The others watched her, as she deftly replaced parts of the blanket over her patient. They could see her

through chinks in the screen, Bob Tracy chuckled. Word has gone round that that ginger staff nurse told someone else that you'd managed to hang on to him That's what he means! Why don't you get him to drive you round in his car? Make a change—won't it?'

Sarah finished her washing, quickly, deftly, and smiled at Eric Neal. 'What's the title, author, publisher, price of the book you want?' she asked briskly. Write it down. I'll come back for it.'

Thelma passed her, and because all the men were looking at her, she smiled winningly at Sarah, and passed on. No one would think that they had had that awkward scene in Thelma's room, over Michael.

Karen and another girl from P.T.S. came up half way through the morning. They were in a desperate rush, clearing the ward for Matron's round. Sister Beamish was in the middle urging everyone on. The junior knocked over someone's jug of lemon barley water and was angrily picking up bits of glass. Thelma was smiling her way round her tasks, but her green eyes were like chips of glass because Sister, who had been spoken sharply to over the telephone by a relative of a patient who couldn't be discharged, took it out on her. The new ward maid hadn't a clue what to do and was purposely going slow, and Jelks, the least lovable of the porters, had forgotten to pin back the ward doors securely

for the trolley to come through and it had hurtled back with a crash, knocking down one of the screens.

Karen stood back, the other girl by her side, watching it all with excited kitten eyes. Sarah, noticing her, also noticed that the other girl was Olive Jermyn. She had forgotten about her. Olive Jermyn came from Sarah's own street, three doors down; an unlikeable, self-effacing girl with a pretty if vacuous small-featured face, naturally curly hair, a cap that never came unstuck, and dear little hands that obviously weren't made to do nasty things like slopping out the bathrooms and doing the specimens. Sarah felt that Fate was being a little too unkind today, because Olive's mother had more or less forced Sarah to promise to keep Olive under her wing when she came on to the wards.

Sister said, You two gals there! Don't just stand there—plenty for everyone to do Go and lend a hand tidying the lockers—if you can ! '

Everyone had now been washed who couldn't wash himself, but one of the up patients was missing. Sarah shot out to find him He was a quiet man, a business man who kept himself to himself, but since he had been allowed to go out to the bathroom, he seemed to think he could wander around and look in at other wards. Sarah found him opening the door of the side ward where Colin Felstead was.

Come along, Mr Smith, back to bed. Matron's round starting any minute. You can do as you like after that,' Sarah said recklessly.

But bless me, I only wanted to look in on that chap and say good morning,' he protested. 'No harm in that, is there?'

Wouldn't be if he was well enough to appreciate it,' Sarah agreed, but he isn't, you know.'

'What's wrong with him?'

Come along. Tell you tomorrow,' she promised. Anything to get him back to bed. On the way she caught a glimpse of Karen vanishing into the linen room, and Olive staggering out with a bowl of soapy water someone had left behind on the ward. Any minute now, Matron—a tiny, pin-neat little woman with a sweet tired smile and the most waspish tongue in the world—would appear. Sarah exerted all her strength to

push Mr Smith towards his bed, so that she could go and supervise that bowl of soapy water, when all of a sudden, Crash! Everyone looked agonized and Sister hurried to the door, driving before her the new ward maid and the porter, who was still arguing about his trolley, to where Olive sat in the middle of a spreading puddle of water, her P T S uniform of pale mauve nylon rapidly sucking up more water until she was wet all over. She was crying.

Get up, girl, for heaven's sake!' Sister stormed. At the end of the corridor, the lift stopped, and Matron appeared.

Funny, Sarah thought, how one little person could terrorize everyone so much. Sister was much taller than Matron, but she looked like a scared rabbit as inexorably that small belligerent figure came with measured tread down the corridor.

Olive wailed, ' I'm only over from P.T.S.—my first day—and she gave me this heavy bowl to lift and I'm not supposed to lift heavy things!'

Matron stopped to look at the mess, and at Olive, then at Sarah and all the horrified faces in the ward beyond, and then at Sister. Who was responsible for this, Sister?' Matron asked silkily.

Olive dragged herself to her feet, slipped on the

soap and sat down again. Sarah, fascinated, thought she was going to point at Sister, but even Olive knew better than that. True to form, she pointed at Sarah. ' She did!'

Matron stepped daintily round the edge of the wet. My round, I think, Sister,' she said coldly. And perhaps you can manage to clear that up before the surgeons arrive.'

Thelma came out and got a mop moving, the minute the ward doors had closed on Sister and Matron. Somehow this corridor had got to be cleaned and spick and span by the time Matron emerged again, and that would be in four minutes flat. Webber, a reasonable porter, who had been lurking since he had heard the crash from the stairs, came with a mop of his own and helped clean up. Sarah pushed Olive into the sluice for the moment. The junior dashed out looking frightened, and said, ' I forgot the rubber gloves in the sterilizer—they look like a pudding!'

Sarah pushed her back and told them to keep in there. She got a cloth, and everyone worked at fever heat, and melted back into the kitchen as the ward doors opened and Matron emerged.

She stood and looked at the floor. Sarah thought it was a minor miracle that they had all cleared that huge space up in such a short time. Matron, baulked of her prey, could find no fault anywhere. All was mopped dry, clean, pin-neat, quiet. And then, quite suddenly, Karen laughed.

She had a distinctive, rather whooping sort of laugh that made others want to join in. The men; susceptible to infectious laughter always, started to titter. You could hear them though the ward doors were closed. Sister's face registered agony. Matron

looked at her and at the closed door behind which Karen had been told to hide till Matron had gone.

Matron said coldly and clearly, but with that pretty smile of hers, We can't have the nurses suffering for want of work, can we? That girl who laughed had better clean this floor again. It doesn't look quite dry.'

Sarah was furious always at injustice, and she couldn't keep her tongue between her teeth. She never could. Oh, but Matron, that's only a P.T.S. girl—she's nervous because it's her first day on the wards! ' she burst out.

Sister closed her eyes, and Thelma rolled hers to heaven, from her position behind Matron.

Matron turned to Sarah and looked at her hard. ' Really, I see you are a champion of the P.T.S.,' she said pleasantly. Then that girl shall be saved from such a task. You shall do it instead, and polish the floor afterwards,' and she swept on, a dainty trim little figure, to harass the ward at the end of the corridor.

The men were livid when they heard about it. Even Thelma forgot her mood over Michael, and said, You are a clot, you know! Why didn't you shut up?'

Sarah muttered, Could you have let a P.T.S. girl have that to do?'

Thelma said, Oh, yes, I think so. Being cruel to be kind and all that sort of thing. Cure her of laughing out loud on Matron's round another day,' and she floated on to the ward, smiling around her, not a hair of her red-gold head out of place, not a crease in her pristine apron.

Olive had been sent back to the Nurses' Home to change her clothes and return to help, but she didn't

come back. There wouldn't have been much of her hour left, anyway.

Sarah had almost finished cleaning the corridor and was ready to polish, when the R.M.O. came striding along.

Too late, she saw the soap had been left out. She stared at it in horror and held her breath. He was such a big man to fall. He stopped dead in his tracks and looked down to see what she was staring at, and neatly avoided it. It was impossible to tell from his expression what he was thinking, but he said nothing and marched on. Sarah felt that this was her worst day yet and that it would steadily worsen.

She was right, and later she remembered it was the last day before the monthly social and she had needed to buy some things. Nylons didn't seem to last five minutes and she had to get her hair trimmed, and all those things to buy for the men. She tried to work it out in her mind how you could stretch three hours so far, when Sister came along and said crushingly, ' You'll have to stay on a bit, Nurse. Half of your jobs aren't finished. Don't think you can get out of them just because of that cleaning and polishing!'

Funny, Sarah reflected, how Sister just had to take it out of everyone else when she got jumped on. Sarah looped at Thelma going by, all her jobs finished, but Thelma wasn't the sort to help anyone out, even to a bit of shopping. She would promise the earth, but you couldn't rely on her.

But at last she was told she could go, and her ankles ached abominably, and it had started to rain. Bob Tracy signalled to her. ' Hey, Nurse, seeing as how you got into trouble and kept overtime, don't

bother about what I asked you to get for me,' he said urgently.

The others echoed that sentiment, but Sarah managed a smile, if a rueful one. ' Don't be dotty! I've got to go to the shops anyway, but for the love of Pete cough up your money now, because I'm broke ! '

That got a good laugh, and all round the ward the men told her what a rotten shame it was to pick on her when it wasn't her fault. Sister must have heard, but for once she discreetly kept in her office so she could at least pretend she didn't know what was going on.

Outside, Sarah looked round for Michael. It occurred to her he might be coming off duty about now and might drive her to the shops, but he was nowhere in sight. She set her teeth and faced going on foot. The rain was blowing in gusts and it was cold. As always, she was hungry. She was more hungry on a cold windy day. She couldn't think how it should be so, but she had noticed it before. In the High Street she stared

longingly in at a window where there were great pans of hot food displayed; small chickens slowly turning on a spit, hot pies, sausages in thick onion gravy with dobs of mashed potatoes. It was killing her to look and to smell the odours. She had neither the time nor the money.

Resolutely she turned away, and again ran straight into Dr Haynes. He steadied her. ' Bless my soul! ' he remarked. ' You'd think I'd be big enough to be seen, but you seem determined to wind me, young woman! ' which was hardly fair because each time Sarah, being considerably the smaller, got the worst of it. ' Sorry, sir ! ' she gasped.

He still retained her arm. Where were you off to in such a hurry? Are you alone?

Sarah admitted she was. With one last despairing half glance at the food shop window, she explained : I promised some of the patients I'd dosome shopping for them. I don't know what to get.' At his sudden black scowl, she recalled that shopping for the patients in the nurses' free time was frowned upon, -so she said quickly, ' I was going shopping anyway, for the dance tomorrow—the social, you know. I had nothing else to do and three hours to kill.'

If that's the case,' he said grimly, ' perhaps you'd help me, too. What can I buy a rich old lady who has everything and craves only novelty?'

Sarah looked blank. Rich,' she mused. Old,' and her smooth young face with its glowing colour struck him as the sort of indestructible thing that would never age. He wanted to take that face in his hands and ask her why she had been marring it with tears, before the fish tanks. Shocked at such a thought entering his staid head, he said briskly, ' Well, let's do your shopping first and have a think. How much did they give you—that is to say, I trust the patients remembered to give you their cash first, and not make inroads into yours! '

Oh, yes, they did,' she said quickly, as she made efforts to keep up with his huge strides. But the gifts must be flat, to be hidden in envelopes. It's for a surprise.'

Good grief!' he ejaculated. ' Who, might I ask, was the patient with that bright idea?' Tracy,' she said. For his sister, and also for Mr Murray's schoolboy son. Oh, and a soft toy for Fred Maddison to give one of the little ones (that's easy!) and a book for Mr Neal.'

The wind seemed to have a bigger bite in it somehow. He looked down at her. Now her little nose was pink and her eyes were watering. He said, I can't think in this wind—let's get a coffee first. No arguments,' and he took her arm and almost pushed her into the doorway of Latcham's, the most expensive place to buy coffee in the whole of Scopdale.

She blushed to the roots of her hair. She had no business to be in here with him. This was where Matron came for coffee sometimes, she knew, and the consultants dropped in here as well. But at this time of the day the place was almost empty and she was soon apologetically making inroads into fresh-made buttered scones.

When I was a medical student,' Dr Haynes said, reminiscently, I never could pass a food shop without getting such pangs of hunger that it was frightening.' His eyes twinkled at her and made her laugh. So he had seen her looking in that window! It's indecent to get so hungry,' she agreed.

' It is indeed,' he said, and did his share to lower the pile of scones. At home we had gingerbread once a week—the soft, sticky kind, you know? No one seems to make that kind anymore.'

Her eyes were dancing. Yes, they do! My mother does! And Maids of Honour, and Bakewell tart in a long tin, and masses of solid things like chunks of bread pudding, cold.'

'No!' He couldn't believe that anyone else enjoyed such bliss nowadays.

And old-fashioned syrup tart,' she added, only Thelma gets wild because she has to watch her figure and daren't eat any of those things, and I can eat loads and not put on an inch.'

Her face clouded suddenly. Watching her, he said, Oh, yes, I believe you are referring to Staff Nurse Cross. I keep forgetting that she's in your family.'

'We oughtn't to be doing this, sir,' she said uncomfortably. 'It won't do. I must be going, though it was very kind of you.'

Rot, sit still. We haven't discussed our business yet, and anyway, everyone knows I'm a law unto myself, and that being the case, you may be sure you won't get a rocket. I'll see to that!

But she was uneasy, he could see, so after having a purely business talk for a further five minutes, they decided to get the book first, because it was simple, then down to the market for a soft toy that wouldn't cost much, and then to Matthew Horrobin, who had what she called an Everything shop. Dr Haynes had never been so entertained in his life.

Sarah had an odd way of talking. Her voice was thick and low, so that all the others sounded high-pitched and squeaky in comparison. She explained things briskly, and wasn't afraid of laughing at herself and her own mistakes. He discovered that she usually left the assistants laughing when she left a shop with her purchases. His experience of women shopping hadn't been like this at all.

He astutely saw that she was rushing through the other things to get to Matthew Horrobin's and he looked forward to that. He couldn't remember having seen such a shop before, until he realized with a shock that she was leading him confidently to the poor part of Scopdale where the in-and-out shops were, the fishing tackle places, the marine store dealers, the shabby little jewellers' shops and inevitably one with three brass balls sported above it.

Shouldn't I express horror at the thought of Matron's first-years even knowing a place like this?' he said mildly.

Matthew Horrobin was a patient of ours,' she said, not answering his question or even meeting his eye.

I don't remember—' he began, but they were in the dark interior by then and the youngish man who came Toward with a slight limp had been known to Dr Haynes by another name, when he had taken a piece out of that leg.

'Oh, it's you, Matt,' Dr Haynes murmured, and the young man had the grace to blush. 'Well, you can be of use to Nurse here, who wants a gift for a lady of—how many years? About forty! And it must be of a size to be concealed in an envelope.'

Matt had been in the hands of the police. Dr Haynes wondered if his companion knew that, or if she did, whether she would have cared. She was expertly prowling round the shop searching, and presently came across a simple fine silver chain with a very thin enamelled pendant on it, well within the figure given to her. Matt artistically arranged it through slots in a postcard and put it in her envelope for her. After that it wasn't difficult to find a pocket chess set for the schoolboy, which also stowed in an envelope. Dr Haynes' problem wasn't quite so simple.

Sarah gave her attention to finding something for his rich old lady, and at last they found a small painted china box, perfect for keeping sweets or biscuits in, on a bedside table. If she's as rich as that,' Sarah said, she might just like to stay in bed

late in the morning, and I've discovered that when I do that, I don't sleep all through the night and I get hungry.' That made him laugh, but he was delighted with her find, though he took care not to let Matt know how pleased he was. Matt quite obviously didn't know the box was of any value, and it was as well he didn't hear Sarah's comments.

After they left the shop, he spoke severely to Sarah. I don't think you should come down to this part of the town,' he told her. Certainly not on your own! '

She regarded him quite seriously. You mean you're going to forbid it, sir?' she asked him, and there was a paralysing politeness about her tones that put the whole thing back on its formal footing, which was a pity.

I'm not sure,' he said, stung. I could, of course, especially after having a word with Matron, which I might. After all, would your parents like to know you were in such a place, shopping?'

That made her laugh, really amused soft laughter. ' My father sends me alone to worse places than this,' she said. Well, his patients live in places like this, and someone has to take a message if it's needed. He's got enough on his hands. He's shockingly overworked.'

What about the telephone?' he demanded, but she told him very seriously that few of her father's patients were on the telephone.

What about your mother? Wouldn't she be shocked?'

' Mother? Oh, no,' Sarah choked. ' When she was the district nurse, she often walked about such places in the small hours, when it was deep snow or her bike had given up the ghost, when she was

going to a baby case', you know.'

' Well, that's all very fine. You might at least have others with you,' he growled. And speaking of being with others, what made you leave them, that day I found you in such distress staring at oriental fishes ? '

He hadn't meant to ask her that outright. She had hedged when he had asked her at the time. But it suddenly burst out now because he was angry that she should be so familiar with streets like the one Matt's shop was in.

She was a long time in answering and when she did, she said, still with that politeness that made him want to shake her, ' Actually, sir, I had had a row with someone, but it's sort of all right now.'

' I see,' he said, and wondered whether it would make any difference to her if she realized he was only taking an interest in her from the health point of View, and if she knew about that other girl who had started wasting away through one of these ridiculous love affairs. And then he caught himself wondering if that was the only reason he was doing this.

He decided he would stop being benevolent to first-years stat before he made an ass of himself.

Well, that's fine,' he said, in a brisk tone to match her own. And I'd like to thank you for your help in choosing the gift for my old friend, and for a most entertaining afternoon, with the proviso, of course, that I meant what I said about wandering in this district alone.'

After he had left her, he thought about her and decided she was a very interesting young person indeed. Her eyes had kindled warningly when he had come back about her being in Matt's district, which rather suggested that she was aware of Matt's

background and thought the R.M.O. was being unwarrantably interfering. It rather took his breath away. No other first-year had ever treated him like that, and still managed to appear to be quite polite and obliging.

Sarah wasn't pleased either when she got back, because she discovered she hadn't done her special shopping for the dance. She rushed back to the town again, to Colley's, and did an indifferent bit of shopping with little time to spare. She hated that sort of thing.

'I don't know why I bother,' she said to Victoria in disgust when she got back. 'It's only the old monthly social. Who does bother with new things?'

Victoria, trying out a new hair-style, was abstracted in her reply. 'I wonder if this really suits me?' she murmured. Staring at Sarah in the glass beyond her, waiting for an answer, Victoria suddenly said, 'Why don't you get a hair-do? Well, I mean, you're back with your Michael, aren't you? I should do something to celebrate, if it were me.'

Such as what, for instance?' Sarah said belligerently.

I know! I'm fed-up with trying out new hairdos for me—let me try some things out on you! '

Sarah said no, a flat uncompromising no, but when she came back from distributing her shopping to the patients, she was so restless that Victoria insisted on giving her a shampoo and trying out a new style. There wasn't much one could do with Sarah's short crop, but she did back-comb the thick fringe, and she trimmed up the back a bit. How about false eyelashes?' she suggested, but Sarah protested so violently that she gave it up. Well, what about that mauve dress of mine? Go

on! You promised you'd take it off me and that would give me the excuse to buy a new one.'

Sarah wearily agreed. She never cared much about clothes so long as she was clean and neat.

She sat up suddenly and thought about that. Perhaps that was why Michael had got interested in Thelma, who thought a terrific lot about clothes? She said, thinking aloud, 'I suppose most men really care what a girl wears and looks like, and perfume and things like that.'

'Of course, ducky. Some men know as much about women's clothes as they do themselves,' Victoria said complacently, thinking about her soldier.

What sort of perfume would you say would suit me?' Sarah demanded.

Victoria blinked. All the men were saying that it was on ' again with Michael and Sarah, but she herself had seen a rather odd look pass between Michael and Staff Nurse Cross when they had passed not half an hour ago at the main gates. A sort of yearning look, as if they wanted each other and knew it wasn't possible. She said carefully, 'Well, I don't know. I was generalizing. Actually some girls don't react to perfume so well as others. I would say that you'd score best with an expensive scented soap, you know what I mean?'

Well, what kind?' Sarah asked impatiently. Name a scent!'

Victoria wished she hadn't started this. Well, there's a range called Sandalwood, which is not exactly sweet, certainly not sickly, but interesting, if you know what I mean.'

It sounds like something you store blankets in for the winter,' Sarah commented. All right, all

right, I'll try it, since you've been so good as to over-use your brains to think up something for me!' And she grinned.

Victoria was uneasy. She wondered whether she ought not to have suggested wood violets or something simple. Lilies of the Valley—anything except Sandalwood, which had some sort of connection with someone and she couldn't think who. Oh, well, it was done now, she thought. Perhaps no harm would come of it. Sarah might even forget to go out and buy the soap in time for the social tomorrow.

But Sarah didn't forget. She was a practical person and once she had made up her mind to a thing, she stuck to it. She went out and bought herself a tablet of the soap and some talc for good measure, and after her bath, she reeked of it. In an obliging mood, she even said she'd wear the mauve dress for Victoria's sake, so that Victoria wouldn't feel a twinge of conscience about her new cream wool dress with the dark red shiny belt to match her new shoes.

St Andrew's Hospital in Scopdale had a big social side for the staff. One of the housemen was the secretary of the social club and very energetic he was, too, so that each dance was very well attended. It was usually held in the big games room at the end of the Nurses' Home. Some energetic souls had dressed it up with streamers and lanterns for the occasion, and tonight they had got the services of the five-piece band, made up of two porters, one nurse, a fellow from the path. lab., and the pianist was the lame girl from the Appointments department. Sarah had forgotten that it was the first of the month, so the sports club would be in it, too, and some ward sisters,

tennis enthusiasts, would be here, some of the medical staff and like as not Matron would look in. What a blight! Sarah wished she hadn't come.

She couldn't see Michael or Thelma, and Victoria had come with a new boy from X-Ray. She always had a personable young man escorting her, because she said that her soldier being so far away, it made her feel lonely without an escort. Far away! Five miles as the crow flew, but of course, he couldn't get to these do's, both from distance and permission. Rose also had a new escort.

Sarah prowled around and saw Michael. Just a second too late he remembered to smile broadly and raise a hand and come over to her. What have you done to yourself?' he demanded. 'I didn't recognize you! Come on, we'd better dance.'

'Where were you? I thought you were going to phone me,' Sarah said, and felt, as always lately, vaguely disappointed at the way he greeted her.

I've only just got free,' he said carelessly. Have I seen this dress before?'

She glowed because he had noticed it, but the problem was how to answer. He wouldn't like to think she was wearing someone else's dress. Before she could think of an answer, he said rather severely, Shouldn't wear mauve, you know. Not your colour at all. Stick to blue, soft blue.'

Yes, Michael,' Sarah sighed. She had known it would be a mistake, but Victoria had been doing her best.

The five-piece band always started with decorum and a waltz, warming up through the evening until the ward sisters and any of the older medical staff who had inadvertently strayed in departed. Then they took the lid off. Tonight some strangers

appeared in the shape of the senior member of the path. lab. and the R.M.O.

Michael said in Sarah's ear, Good grief, it's Haynes! What's he doing here? '

'Why shouldn't the R.M.O. look in?' she said obstinately, but she wished he hadn't. I daresay Matron will turn up, too.'

She has. Have you got a clear conscience, my girl?' Michael chuckled.

No! No, I haven't,' Sarah said in alarm.

Well, go easy, don't trip me up, you lumpkin,' he said quickly. And then, all of a sudden, the sunshine of the evening quite folded up for her. As she moved, and a blast of her Sandalwood seemed to shoot out from her, Michael stiffened, and said, What are you using that scent for? Or did Thelma give it to you?'

Thelma—give me scent?' Sarah was indignant at first, for she hadn't quite got the drift of his remark Don't be silly. Of course she didn't!'

Well, don't use it. It doesn't suit you, and anyway, it's Thelma's scent,' Michael said crushingly.

Sarah recoiled, but Michael held her tightly, expertly, forcing her to keep moving without tripping him. He was a very good dancer indeed. It was scarcely possible to do anything really mad while dancing with him. But her head buzzed, and she felt hot and angry and ready to burst, as she remembered, stupidly, blindingly, that of course that was where she had smelt that smell before! Thelma's bedroom at home reeked of it. Stupid, stupid, to get that scent! Why bother at all, anyway? All he'd done so far was to be critical—of the scent, the dress, the colour.

Do you like my hair?' she asked tautly.

'What? Oh, I don't know, it looks the same as usual. No, by Jove, you silly little wretch, you've been trying to back-comb it. -Why don't you leave things as they are? You look all right!' And then he saw Thelma.

She knew he saw Thelma. There was a mirror on the wall and she saw Thelma in it. Thelma quietly, confidently, glowing, in a soft greenish-brown wool dress that was new, unobtrusive, shatteringly smart. Her hair was long and she had done it in a new style, like a smooth cone on the top of her head. She looked like Paris, on a shoe-string, a very successful shoe-string. She had probably run up that dress from a yard or two of woollen cloth from the stall in the market. She did it so cheaply that she could afford to throw it away when other people would think of dry-cleaning. She stood there smiling, and at once three men were round her. Michael stiffened, and then remembered who he was dancing with and relaxed.

A little later on, when the place was getting rather crowded, and all the male members were doing their duty dances, one by one, with Matron and the ward sisters sitting by her, Michael slipped out with Sarah into the dark grounds of the hospital, and found a clump of bushes that gave adequate shelter for kissing. He kissed her and kept kissing her with a kind of desperation. She put her heart into it, but couldn't get any satisfaction. She was filled with the desolate sensation of being there in the place of someone else—she didn't know why, but she got the odd feeling that Michael was kissing her and wishing it was Thelma. Sarah had never felt so frightened and desolate in her life. In the end she broke away, complained that she was chilly and went in, leaving him to follow her.

He wouldn't like that. He never did like her to break off the kissing first. He looked sullen and angry, all mixed up together, and carefully avoided looking down the end of the room where Thelma was.

As soon as she could, Sarah slipped out again, this time with her coat on. She didn't notice Dr Haynes follow her. He had gone with the odd desire of seeing how she enjoyed herself at play, and had realized she wasn't enjoying herself very much. Where are you off to ?' he asked her.

He was the last person she wanted to see, but if she had to have someone walking by her, she supposed it might as well be someone neutral. She might as well get some advice out of him while she was about it. She couldn't think who else to ask, anyway.

I wanted to come out here to think. I can't think where there's a lot of noise,' she said. I was wondering—are you an authority on people who are engaged to be married, sir?'

' Good grief ! ' he ejaculated. ' Well, I suppose I'm old enough to be, wouldn't you say? Or are you having the temerity to ask me if I've ever been engaged to be married?' He sounded rather frosty.

She was shocked. Oh, no, nothing so personal, sir. I just wondered if you'd known people who were engaged and could tell me something. I gathered you liked to advise us nurses, and all that, so I'd like some advice.'

He did rather wonder for a moment if she was being cheeky, but decided she wasn't. Well, try me with a question or two,' he suggested.

Well, if you think the person you're engaged to

is attracted to someone else, and they keep getting in tempers and being rather casual—oh, no, that wasn't what I wanted to say. I mean, if two people who work together are engaged, is it a sign they've been engaged too long if one gets in moods and tempers and doesn't look enthusiastic and all that?'

He gave it consideration. ' I would say it depends entirely on the temperament of the two people concerned. By and large I don't agree with being engaged to someone who works in the same place. It can be disastrous. It can get boring. It almost never retains the first freshness of the thing.'

I never thought of that!' Sarah exclaimed

Their feet clinked on the cement paths as they walked in silence. It seemed a long time before she said anything else. Dr Haynes was thinking about the gossip he had heard that day. If anyone said men didn't gossip among themselves, that person was a fool or very credulous. True, the men were devoted to Sarah, but they were mentioning her by name, and getting rather steamed up about the Casualty Officer, although Dr Haynes never did hear just what it was he was supposed to have done.

He turned over in his mind all sorts of questions he might put to her, to lead to a disclosure of the Casualty Officer's conduct, when suddenly Sarah said, ' I hope this question won't offend you, sir, but you did say you wanted me to ask your advice, and I would like an opinion on this. Is it possible for a man to want to marry a person and to be dazzled—harmlessly, of course—by someone who is quite exceptionally pretty, and still be in love with the first person?'

I would say it's quite possible, but you surely don't want my opinion of the sort of chap who would

go on in that disgraceful fashion?'

I see. No, thank you,' Sarah said.

She sounded so unemotional about it that he wondered again if she were pulling his leg. ' Is this a hypothetical question, or is there such a couple of people in this hospital?' he asked scathingly.

Oh, there are several, you know,' she said, lying as convincingly as she could, because quite frankly she couldn't think of anyone besides herself who would be so crazily credulous where Michael was concerned, and oddly she couldn't bear the thought of Dr Haynes guessing it was herself. Mind you,' she said vigorously, that sort of juggins of a girl really asks for all she gets, because really she ought to see that sort of man coming, if you see what I mean, sir.'

Indeed she should,' he said, and wished her goodnight. As they had come in a full circle back to the place where the dance was being held, there was nothing for it but for her to go in. Dr Haynes was the courteous sort of older man who didn't believe in walking off and leaving the young woman with him to find her own way indoors. But everything in Sarah cried out, fool, idiot, crazy fathead! What else did you expect? Thelma gave the game away herself, didn't she? But Michael wouldn't jilt anyone, not for anything! He'd even go through to the bitter end and marry a person rather than have it said he'd jilted a girl.

She went in to the dance, her chin up, looking so comically belligerent that Tony Weston from Casualty grabbed her arm and said, Hey, wait a bit, where's the fight, Sarah? Have this one with me and cool down!' and he swung her out on to the centre of the floor where they started gyrating with

the others, the crazy beat of the latest movements that went with the latest pop disc. The platform was empty, the older people had gone, and the younger ones were warming up. Sarah let herself go, and made her face laugh and her body be energetic while her heart cried so loudly that she was sure it could be heard above the music and the stamp of feet. I've got to tell Michael tomorrow that I don't want him, she told herself, and her face felt as if it had settled into the rigid lines of a careless smile for the rest of her life. Got to, got to, she told herself. It's the only way. Got to ! Come to think of it, he suits Thelma more than me.

She was telling herself this, trying to convince herself, sure in the knowledge that if she altered her mind no one would know. But a little later she saw Michael and Thelma come in, neither of them looking very happy, and with that special look about them that two people had when they had been talking privately and personally, sharing secrets, not very happy personal secrets.

She felt a little sick. She decided to tell Michael that night, only how would it help, she thought, remembering that as Thelma lived at home with them, then Michael would be going home too? The smile slipped. Her companion asked, What's wrong? Did I tread on your foot?' She shook her head. Her companion went on, Didn't I see you just now walking the R.M.O. in the moonlight? Rum bird, that! Better not let your Michael know you slip out for little talkings with the R.M.O.'

Very funny,' Sarah said, smiling hard again. You couldn't breathe in this place without everyone knowing! Well, let them know in the morning, let them all talk about it! She didn't care. She had

suddenly decided that to throw Michael over was the right and proper thing to do, like the clean amputation of a limb. Get it over with, before she had time to think about it and regret it.

She found Michael before the next dance began. He was moodily trying to get a coffee in the crush.

Hello, Sarah,' he said, and slipped an arm round her. You've been having a time, haven't you? Can't think how you can enjoy yourself so much in this noisy sort of do.'

He got her a coffee, too, and they found a quiet corner to drink it. Don't you like the dance, Michael?' she asked.

Not a lot. Got a splitting head, to be honest. I think I wouldn't mind sheering off early, if that's okay with you. Come to think of it, why don't you stay on, if you're enjoying it? No sense in spoiling your fun! Do that, will you?'

She nodded. Whipping herself up to it, she heard herself say, ' As a matter of fact, I think it might be better for both of us if we split up over everything, don't you? I mean,

there aren't many things we both enjoy doing together, and—well, if you don't mind, I'd like to—give you this back,' and she tugged off her ring. In the daytime it was worn on a string round her neck, and usually came off her finger quite easily to be threaded on the string. This time it stuck and spoilt the dramatic gesture. Michael watched her efforts with a sort of horrid fascination, and didn't try to stop her.

Recollecting himself, he suddenly said, 'Do you think you're doing the right thing, Sarah?'

'Sure I am,' she said firmly, as the ring suddenly slipped off her finger.

CHAPTER IV

Sarah's friends were shocked at the news. Karen found out about it first.

'How?' Sarah demanded wrathfully of Rose, who was looking puzzled and embarrassed and upset, all at once. 'How does that brat of yours get the news first?'

She was on a message to Matron's office, and overheard Michael's dresser telling Adams from Cranial,' Rose said bitterly. 'That kid's ears always have flapped, and now of course she's busy telling everyone. I'm sorry, Sarah, I did tell her to shut up, but you might as well talk to the moon!'

'It's all right,' Sarah said gruffly. 'I suppose it was bound to get out, anyway.'

'Any use asking what happened?' Victoria put it rather diffidently, not taking her eyes off her nails which she was busily buffing. 'I mean, I know you two have your ups and downs, but if it was that Thelma, well—!'

'It was me,' Sarah said briefly. 'I think, I

honestly think he'll suit Thelma better than me. No use in having no sense, when it's staring a person in the face.'

The men on her ward didn't agree with that.

'Lord love you, gal, if my old woman and me had thought like that, we'd never have got hitched and had ten kids ten of the best, if I say it as shouldn't!' Fred Maddison told her.

The others were inclined to agree with Fred. Sarah said, 'Never mind, not to worry! My problem! If I don't mind, why should you all care?'

Besides, I shall be in hot water more than ever, if you run up your B.P.s over me, you know I shall! I shall be blamed, sure as Fate!'

Thelma was drifting around looking a trifle dazed, but Sarah found no favour in her eyes. She had heard the man saying, once Sarah's back was turned, that it was a rotten shame, the way some people went around pinching other people's property and Sarah too nice to protest.

It was rather awkward being on Thelma's ward, but Sarah was confident that she would be separated from her cousin with General Post. Not that she wanted to leave the men. She liked nursing men more than women. They made less complaint. This ward was a riot sometimes, but you never got that sort of fun on a women's ward.

Thelma looked into the linen room for Sarah, the kitchen, and finally ran her to earth cleaning up the bathroom again, after the new girl had made a mess of it.

'What are you doing that for?' Thelma demanded

'Shan't be long, Staff,' Sarah said, not looking up, and praying that Thelma would have the sense to go.

Thelma shut the door behind her and stood with her back to it. Is it true that you gave Michael back his ring?' Sarah shrugged. Of course, if he said so.'

He did, and he doesn't know why. Did you both have a row?' Thelma persisted.

Sarah turned round, her eyes glittering dangerously. Now just a minute!' she said softly.

The bathroom door was pushed behind Thelma's back, jerking her a little. She opened it and found

Dr Haynes trying to open it. ' Oh, sorry, Staff,' he said mildly. I thought I heard Sister's voice in here. Do you happen to know where she is ? ' but all the while he was saying it, his eyes were slowly taking in the situation; Thelma's flashing eyes and the bright spots of colour in Sarah's cheeks. Sarah's cap was askew because she had been leaning over the bath to scour it. Her apron was rumpled. Dr Haynes' little rueful smile made her remember her appearance and she hastily got up to look in the glass, furious. How that man could convey a message simply by giving a look, she thought.

After Thelma came back from taking him to find Matron, Sarah said urgently, ' Don't tell Mother about it. Michael and I are finished. Absolutely. Clean cut. Final.'

Thelma said, That's all very well, but I know what people are like. Everyone's talking about it, and how sad it is for poor little Nurse Darley, and they're looking at me as if it was my fault. And you might just go back to him, I suppose ? '

' No. And I shall tell people it wasn't your fault, if you like,' Sarah said obligingly, finishing the bath.

For heaven's sake don't. You'll make it worse. Just leave my name out of it,' Thelma said irritably, and left her.

The three girls—Sarah, Victoria and Rose—went into Queenscliffe that afternoon, armed with their notebooks, intending to sit on the beach and swot, but it was such a lovely afternoon that they didn't get much work done. The first result of Sarah's breaking with Michael was that they had to make other arrangements for going into Queenscliffe, because of the erratic and broken bus journey. Michael had good-naturedly driven them over in

the past. That day they had arranged with Bill Hopkins, an ex-patient who ran the laundry van, to take them into Queenscliffe and pick them up in time to check into the Nurses' Home. Sarah, thinking of all the possible things that could go wrong with their trip, because she felt gloomy today, said suddenly, ' Where's Karen, Rose?'

' It's all right, she won't pop up and insist on joining us. They're off to a factory this afternoon to see how hygienically Stackers' Sticky Star-Dreams are made. I should think she'll never be able to look a boiled sweet in the face again after she comes back.'

Victoria said, You'd better watch her., I've seen her about with that little horror Olive Jermyn.'

She's not really a horror,' said Sarah, rushing to Olive's defence. She's just spoilt because she's so pretty.'

Pretty! It isn't right! She's got enough good looks for a dozen kids, but that doesn't make her any less than the most poisonous little brute I've come across! Even Sister is rattled, and that's saying something.'

Friend of yours?' Rose asked doubtfully, staring at Sarah, but Sarah only said evenly, Neighbour. I said I'd give an eye to her.'

She's . . . not quite the sort I'd choose for my young sister to be with,' Rose said reluctantly.

Why?' Sarah was still on the defensive. No girl can help being spoilt when she's the only one as Olive is, and especially when there are an awful lot of elderly aunts and grandparents all doting and giving presents and things like that. She hasn't had a chance. I'm glad she's come here.'

I don't know,' Rose worried. It's hard to

explain what I mean. I can't stop her going with Karen like today, when they have to go two by two, but I do hope they won't pair in their spare time.'

But why? You must have a better reason than that! Well,' Rose said, giving it a try, 'you how lazy she is and how sulky when we try to teach her anything. Goodness, she hasn't been here long, but I've found that much out! Well, if Sister or anyone comes along, she suddenly changes and smiles winningly and pretends she's trying her hardest but that the horrid senior to her is bullying. That sort of thing!'

Victoria nodded. 'I know what you mean. Makes me feel I'd like to kick her on the shins.'

Yes, and another thing,' Rose went on, getting worked up. She scowls at women, but when a personable man comes along, no matter what age he is, she looks up at him under her eyelids and - ugh!—the leer she gives is just plain repulsive.'

'I've not seen that,' Victoria said. But I can imagine.'

'I think you're both being thoroughly unfair!' said Sarah.

'You wait—you'll see!' Rose said wretchedly. She hated Sarah to be proved wrong, she was so decent to the young ones.

They walked along the beach, needing fresh air to blow hard in their faces after that. Olive Jermyn, pretty as she was, had that effect on them.

Sarah said, The point is, Matron evidently regarded her as fit to train, so she can't be that bad!'

'Matron,' Rose said heavily, is sometimes a law

unto herself, which is a polite way of saying she behaves in a singularly dotty fashion which only a Matron of a hospital like ours can get away with! If you want to know, I wouldn't trust that Olive Jermyn any further than I could throw her. In fact, I'm seriously thinking of writing home asking the parents to take Karen away, only she hasn't been bad enough to merit such big-sisterly behaviour yet.'

Victoria said, 'I'd feel like that too, if I had a sister,' which made them all laugh, because Victoria was the least likely person to accept any responsibility or to have a single thought in her head for anyone else but her soldier. He took over her mind from that moment. 'In fact, I told my Donald as much, when he was talking about young sisters.'

Why? has he got any?' Rose asked, with interest.

No, but he's quite sure how he would treat them if he had,' Victoria said seriously.

They walked to the end of the Bay and scrambled over the rocks left bare by the receding tide. Arguing pleasantly, they gave no thought to the time. Beyond that Bay was another and another. It was nice to be away from Scopdale for a little while, nice to be out together without Karen and her friends intruding. Nice not to have to explain to some patient how it was that she and Michael were no longer engaged, Sarah thought.

We've got her on the brain, haven't we?' Rose said suddenly, with a chuckle. Who?' the other two asked.

' That Jermyn brat. Look, isn't that girl like her, coming towards us? Just as pretty as that Olive Jermyn, too.'

The other two said at once, But it is her !'

After a startled silence, they ran towards her, but the girl turned and ran back the way she had come.

` It is her, but how did she get here?' they panted, running. Now there was no sign of her. Which way did she go?'

` Back towards the cliffs,' Victoria said. She was no use at all with speed, and stones were getting into their shoes. They all stopped, panting, and looked at each other.

How could she be here?' they asked each other. She should have been still at the sweet factory at this time,' and they made a concerted dive for their watches to check the time. Then they made an alarming discovery. It was very late indeed. ' She must have got a later bus,' they said. But she'll be as late back as we shall!'

` Help, no! What about Bill Hopkins? He'll have got to the roundabout and not found us there. What will he do?'

' He won't wait there. He can't!' Victoria said shortly. He might just drive round the town and come back again in case we got held up. Give it a trial? Quick sprint back to the roundabout?'

Rose agreed, but Sarah said no. At least, you two go—no sense in us all being late. I've got to find that girl and bring her. Well, we can't leave her here—the tide'll be up. I bet she doesn't know this bay gets cut off !'

Well, what are you going to do?' the other two asked.

I'll manage. You two go back and tell Bill where I am. You might just persuade him to drive along the cliff top. I think there's still the old broken steps. No, on second thoughts, persuade him to drive you back to the hospital and you can

tell Home Sister where I am.'

The back of the bay had once had small caves that had been pronounced dangerous, but the local council had shored them up by means of making cement store houses of them. Sarah decided that Olive must be hiding behind one of the buttresses to the openings , and that was why they couldn't find her. But when she reached the back of the bay, she could find no one. Puzzled, she turned and searched the shore. Her two friends were just vanishing round the point. There was no one—no one at all down here.

Still more puzzled than angry, Sarah made her way to the end of the bay, where round a tangled pile of rocks and old woodwork, a little dog was playing about. Another bay, more shallow, lay beyond this, but Sarah had to wade ankle deep in water.

By the time she reached the spot where the dog had been, it was no longer there. It was being called off, every inch of the way, and by that girl. Now dog and girl were going up wooden stairs set in the cliff. Sarah didn't know this bay. They never had time to come so far. She raced towards the stairs, but always Olive Jermyn was that much ahead of her and wouldn't take any notice Of her shouts. At least, Sarah said to herself, sitting down on a rock suddenly to gain her breath, is it Olive Jermyn? How come she's got a dog? But can she have a double, so near the hospital?

It was very late when Sarah climbed to the top of the wooden stairs. They were half hidden from below by scrub and bushes clinging to the face of the cliff. This was a long way out of Queenscliffe. On the top of the cliffs was nothing, only a motor road with a car rapidly retreating in the distance pre-

sumably the way that girl had departed with her dog. But had it been Olive Jermyn? And if not, how was Sarah going to explain her shocking lateness back?

She looked in dismay at her squelching shoes and wet stockings, and tried to suppress a shiver, as a tricky little wind flicked at the wet surface of them, here on the cliff-top. Well, nothing for it but to walk until she found some transport, she supposed. But she was seething inside her. That must have been Olive Jermyn, or why else would she have run away when they had called her, and where had the dog been? What was more to the point, who had been in that car, and how had she got out from P.T.S.?

A car flicked by. Sarah turned, ready to hail it for a lift, she was so desperate, but it didn't stop.

It was the only car going towards Queenscliffe after she had walked for twenty minutes, and she was still a long way outside the town. But a car coming from Queenscliffe did stop, and it was one she recognized. The R.M.O. leaned out.

'You do get around, nurse,' he remarked, and opened his other door for her.

This was ridiculous. By what coincidence could he have been here, of all places? Her thoughts must have shown in her face. He smiled faintly.

It's no coincidence, Nurse. I came to look for you. In fact, I came prepared to go down on the beach and rescue you from the tide.'

She reddened. You're making fun of me, sir,' she muttered. It isn't a scrape. I was trying to—'

'I know,' he said, backing and turning. I met your two friends looking rather frantic. What a

complicated existence you three lead! Is it really allowed, to use a trade van for transport on the strength of the driver having once been a patient? He fissured me it was quite normal, but I beg leave to doubt it.'

Oh, please don't tell Matron! 'she begged. There was a very good reason—not about the van, but about me being down there. May I ask you some advice?'

Again? I don't think the last bit of advice I gave you was much good, if the gossip is to be believed.'

She winced, and said, Yes, but that has nothing to do with this situation, sir. If you think you see someone you know and that person is doing wrong, and is your junior, even by only a little, wouldn't you feel it your duty to stop doing what you were doing (in this case getting back to the hospital on time) in order to—'

Wait! I've lost the thread,' he begged. First of all, what time do you have to be back?' She told him, with misgivings.

That makes you half an hour late as it is, for a start,' he worked out. How do you propose to explain that away to Home Sister?'

That was what I wanted your advice about, sir. You see, I'm not sure now if it was the person I thought it was, and if it wasn't, then I've got late chasing a complete stranger in order to give her help she didn't need.'

'Oh, dear Nurse Darley,' he said, in mock despair, again I have lost the thread!'

Now they were in Queenscliffe, and caught at the traffic lights in the main square. He turned to her. 'Let's start at the beginning. Is the person who

needs this advice I'm supposed to give you, by any chance?'

She nodded.

To get you out of being late?'

Again she nodded. No,' she amended. More than that. I mean, how can I find out what happened to her and if it really was her?'

' Who are we talking about now? What is her name?'

Sarah sighed. She had known it would be like this. A little more and he would want it all to be written down in triplicate for future reference. ' Olive Jermyn, sir.'

The lights changed, and still frowning, he drove forward, saying as he did so, The one who looks like a good-natured kitten?'

That would be Karen. What a very apt description, Sarah thought, giving him full marks. She told him so.

It is a P.T.S. girl I'm supposed to guess at,' he insisted, not looking really amused.

Yes.' On inspiration, she said, Did you by any chance go along to Men's Surgical three days ago, when the P.T.S. were on the wards for an hour? Because if so, she was the other one with the girl who looks like a kitten.'

He put some more thought on that, and finally said coldly, Then I presume she will be the exceedingly pretty young woman who was sitting in a large pool of water crying her eyes out I '

Yes, sir,' Sarah said, in a small voice. No doubt he had also heard that Sarah herself had been blamed for that fiasco, and made to mop the passage twice and finally polish it.

If he had heard about it, he didn't say so. Well,

so we have pinpointed the person who has made you anxious today. Why?'

' We thought we saw her on the beach and when we ran to her and called out, she turned and ran away and then we couldn't see how she could have got there in the time and it might have been someone else—her double, for instance—'

What was the advice you wanted from me?' he asked, ruthlessly interrupting.

How to deal with someone like her,' Sarah said simply.

Why bother?' he asked, with equal simplicity.

' You mean you think we should have left her there to get back on time if she could?' Sarah exploded. We wanted to grab her and take her back in our van—'

But you were late already,' he said gently. Tell me the whole story again, this time slowly and simply,' so she did. But when Sarah was slowed up and treated like a schoolgirl being lectured by an elderly uncle, she didn't improve. Her brows drew down in a straight dark line and she scowled at the road ahead, after the recital was finished.

' I see,' he said. It occurs to me that she might well have a friend who owns the dog and the fast car, in which case she might well have arrived back on time, whereas you three were on the late side, no?' -

Sarah reddened. We didn't know about the car when we tried to help her,' she pointed out. And we keep finding her on the brink of trouble, and sometimes she's smack in it, like the bowl of water incident, only she somehow manages to—' Sarah bit back what she had been going to angrily say.

He guessed, ' She manages to pin it on to you.

I agree, it isn't fair. I comprehend you are all worried as to whether she will contaminate little Kitten-Face, as well. Am I right?' and now he was looking less grim. Sarah agreed that that was so.

Tell me, do you like being a nurse?'

Now Sarah was on less treacherous ground. ' Oh, yes, yes, I do! ' she said, with no complications whatever.

' You are the one with the father who is a G.P.?'

Sarah agreed that that was so, but guardedly, because she couldn't see what he was getting at.

' Did your father give you any advice when you came here? Fathers usually do, in my experience.'

Everyone gave me advice,' Sarah said, without enthusiasm. My father's mother said " protect the weak " and my mother's mother said I was to avoid the pitfall of loathing other women because a nurse's life is caught up with them like the women's Services, so it's batting your head against a brick wall.'

How true,' he murmured.

And my mother said I wasn't to get the reputation of being dedicated because those are the ones who and always suspect, especially with a face like mine, and my father just told me to keep out!

That made Andrew Haynes laugh, a short appreciative burst of laughter. There's a lot in what your father said, even if he didn't give specific instructions how to go about it. I think I'd rather like your father. Still, this advice you want—I think I might offer some, though I don't usually, mind,' he said, as the hospital loomed up at the end of the road they were turning into. And it's this.

Don't lose those helpful instincts towards younger ones just reserve them for anyone else but this Olive Jermyn.'

Oh, why, sir?' Sarah asked blankly.

' I think you'll find she'll get herself out of trouble. If I were you, I'd join forces with your friend to protect her young sister. That's if you must do private crusading, of course! Now you'd better scuttle in, and tell Home Sister you're late because I held you up. I'll make it all right with her later.'

Sarah nodded, remembered her manners and thanked him, although he thought ruefully that it sounded like the thanks of some dutiful young niece to her elderly uncle.

He watched her go helter-skelter into the Home, and wondered why she looked so blank.

He hadn't really answered any of her questions, she told herself angrily. He had sounded a bit special about that Olive Jermyn, too. She wondered why, and decided rather angrily that she must have put her foot in it again, and that she would probably find that Olive Jermyn was related to him or friends of his family or something that the brat ought to have told her when she first came. This was endorsed the following day when, having found that Olive had got back on time from Queenscliffe, Sarah was scandalized to see her going off in the R.M.O.'s car somewhere with him.

CHAPTER V

Oddly enough, that piece of intelligence didn't get around. Sarah couldn't think why. People came up to her and said, ' What's the R.M.O.'s game? I heard you've been seen in his car with him! ' and the sort of smirks accompanied those questions which Sarah loathed. Yet no one remarked that they had seen him driving a small P.T.S. girl.

Sarah waited for Karen to have something to say about it, too, but she didn't. And then somehow the day of the examination was on them.

The last three days before an exam, Sarah had discovered, were mad sort of days. Everyone kept clamouring to hear everyone else's notes and to have her own heard, and no one took any notice of anyone else, and one humorist packed her case and put

it outside the door in readiness, because she was quite sure she would do so badly that she would be thrown out. Sarah's set dug themselves in and tried hard to mug things up, but nothing would stick.

It seemed strange to Sarah that eighteen months had fled by since she had come to the hospital. The very last thing that night, she went out for a walk all by herself, to shake off the feeling of hospital and intense mugging up of all that they were supposed to have learnt in those eighteen months, and she wasn't very pleased to be joined by the R.M.O. She kept thinking about Olive Jermyn sitting so smugly in his car beside him as if she were there by right.

It was a very cold night, but healthily cold. Sarah had been sniffing appreciatively at the atmosphere like a young and eager dog when it first leaps

out from the stuffiness of the house, to enjoy the first run of the day. The R.M.O.'s lips twitched, but he wouldn't let them smile, much as he wanted to. This had to be serious.

Sarah was serious. When he said to her, 'Well, how are you feeling about tomorrow?' she didn't grin or make a smart remark. She just said, 'Awful. But my patients all tell me I should get through all right. I wish I could believe them.'

'I think you can,' he said gravely. He didn't add that he'd watched her from under those beetling brows of his, while he had apparently been giving his attention to something else, and formed the opinion that she threw her heart and soul into the job, whatever it happened to be, not because she was flaying herself to do the job, but because she was one of those people who honestly liked working in a big hospital. Taking a temperature or running with a bedpan, rubbing a back with spirit or feeding the helpless, adjusting a drip stand or seriously helping Sister to do a dressing, it was all one to Sarah. She noticed nothing else at the time. Her attention never even wandered.

Not even when that glamorous young man of hers had been about, the R.M.O. thought grimly. He wanted to ask her about that, so that he could be assured that it was all over between them, but he wouldn't, not in any circumstances, least of all tonight, the night before the exam.

Yet he had heard such conflicting versions of Sarah's affair with the Casualty Officer. All the men, for instance, agreed that she had been engaged to Michael Armstrong right and tight 'as they called it, until the cousin—Staff Nurse Cross—had fancied him and drawn him away. But while some of the patients on Sarah's ward thought that Michael had jilted her, several of them were of the opinion that Sarah herself had broken it off, just because she was sure that he would suit her cousin more than herself. Andrew Haynes had heard them talking about it while he had been behind the screens one day with his pet ulcer case. He had fought to keep that man on the medical side until he couldn't fight any longer and he had had to relinquish him to the surgeons, but he had still been worried about him. Standing there looking down at the chalk-white face, he had found himself thinking of Sarah's skin, glowing with health, tanned with the winds off the sea, for she got out whenever she could, like a young animal tired of being penned in. And the men had all been talking about her, softly, with affection and loyalty, dying to do something for her, sure that she was eating her heart out, even though she had made that decision.

Now Andrew looked down into Sarah's face and wondered. 'The thing is,' he said conversationally, to regard it as just another day's work, not an exam at all. If you know it, then it doesn't fly out of your head that way. If you get all worked up into exam jitters because it's the fashion to do so, then you're asking to forget everything you ever learnt.'

Sarah looked up at him, and nodded. She was glad of him being there, and for the moment she forgot the shadow of Olive Jermyn. He wasn't like Michael. Michael could make her excited, skitty and walking-on-air sort of thing, but Andrew Haynes wasn't like that. He just filled the whole scene, like a great comfortable bear, and made everything seem very safe and sane and sensible, so that she

didn't want him to go and leave her.

She was glad when he asked, Where were you going? Just a walk? go with you. You shouldn't really come out alone on dark nights in this part of the town. I'm sure Home Sister is always telling you so. You young women think that because you're away from home you can do as you like, but it isn't very sensible really, is it?

She shook her head obligingly.

'I'm well aware that you probably want to be alone to repeat things learnt at the last minute,' he told her, but it won't do. You ought to relax. Think of something else. The best way I know of relaxing is to walk the dog. I wish I had my dog here. I miss him very much.'

What sort of dog is it, sir?' she asked politely, because he seemed to be waiting for her to say something.

He's a mongrel,' he said, laughing. Everything about him is wrong—one ear sticks up and the other flops and smacks him in the eye, he needs far more brushing than any other dog I know, and his tail is so long, it's absurd. He knocks half the tea things off the table as he goes by.'

What colour?' Sarah asked fiercely. She had suddenly remembered the dog that had been with the girl they had been sure was Olive Jermyn, the long-tailed mongrel who had been lingering among the rocks on the point. A dog not brown, not yellow, but something between.

She waited with bated breath, and when he said lazily, I suppose you'd call him fawn or biscuit colour,' her heart sank. So it had been his dog that Olive Jermyn had had out! She didn't understand any of it, but she was so sure that that must be

so, and didn't understand why she minded it so much. She hated Olive Jermyn and him, too.

'I think I'd better go back now, sir,' she said, hating the walk and the night and everything.

Well, I don't like leaving you in this deserted place. I've got an appointment, so I can't go back with you. Bless me, I think I'll have to chase Matron to resurrect her old rule about going out singly at night. I'm sure she doesn't know this happens. Good heavens, here's another one coining! Well, it's one of our nurses, so you'd better both go back together and that will put my mind at rest.'

Sarah's heart did a bound. Who was she going to be put in charge of? And then she saw it was a P.T.S. girl, which wasn't so bad. She could take charge. But then she recognized Olive Jermyn and that wasn't so good. She almost refused to wait.

Olive smiled prettily at the R.M.O. I'm not supposed to be out alone, Dr Haynes. Could you pretend you haven't seen me?' she murmured outrageously.

Sarah glared at her with real hostility. Andrew Haynes stared at Olive, and for a moment Sarah thought he was going to laugh. Then he said coldly,

No, I couldn't. You are to go back at once with Nurse Darley and I shall want to hear when I get back that you two have wasted no time. In fact, I shall contact Home Sister myself.'

Yes, sir,' Olive said meekly, but her look was seeming to ask outright what he had been doing with Sarah Darley and what he wanted to go to such trouble over them for.

Good night, nurses,' he said, dismissing them, so they had to go, down the long road, under his eyes.

Olive eventually got out her compact from her pocket, looked in the mirror and announced that he had gone. Sarah hadn't dared to look round.

' It's all right,' Olive said. We can go back now.'

' Who do you think you're talking to?' Sarah fumed. If there's to be going back, I say so. Anyway, we're not going back. It's time to go to the Nurses' Home and that's where you're going.'

Oh.' Olive stood her ground. Well, you can, if you want to so madly, but I think I'd better not. You see, they'll find it and then they'll know I've been there and it's out of bounds.'

What is?' Sarah asked, a little scared feeling taking possession of her. What was this new scrape Olive was in?

My handbag. I left it there. That's why I want to go back for it.'

You left it where?' Sarah asked, in an awful voice.

She could be very intimidating and this was one of the occasions. Above all, she didn't want to infuriate the R.M.O. and he had said very clearly that they were both to go back, and it was, after all, common sense. This, Sarah remembered, was a notorious road, quiet, just the place for assaults to take place, and there had been some, in the not so distant past.

Olive stared at her, and then her face broke up into a wholly winning smile, rueful, ashamed, everything that she ought to be showing she was feeling, mixed up in that smile. Sarah could have hit her.

At the house of a friend,' she said. She shrugged.

A man friend.'

Oh, my heavens!' Sarah exploded. ' Where is this house? Far? Then we'd better go back and ask for it and let's look sharp, in case Dr Haynes comes along.'

Now Olive was on firmer ground. Oh, he won't, you know. He's gone to Saxon Street, to a house of an old patient, to look at some puppies. He's like that—soppy over old patients. Funny, how some doctors are, and some are sensible and write them off once they leave the hospital! '

Sarah didn't like her any the more for that speech, not only for her comments about Dr Haynes but for her showing off how much she knew of his movements, which Sarah didn't.

I don't know why I'm doing this,' Sarah said crossly, ' but there it is—I feel sort of responsible for you and if you'll only stir yourself to tell me where this house is—'

' It isn't any use really,' said Olive. Come to

think of it.' She glanced slyly at Sarah, and Sarah wondered if she was up to some trick again. But a quick look at the girl satisfied Sarah that she certainly hadn't got her handbag with her. Olive's bag was too large to secrete in a raincoat pocket.

All right, tell me why!' Sarah said wearily.

You see, it was like this. My boy-friend said we could have a little while peacefully in his house, while his people were away—'

No!' Sarah thundered. ' You couldn't honestly have done that! Not while you're in P.T.S. Are you mad?'

' Done what?' Olive asked coolly. It was just sitting talking without a lot of old busybodies around, and a bit of kissing. Don't worry, it was nothing else—I'm not that sort of a fool! '

No, Sarah could believe that much, but she couldn't hope to make Olive see what it would sound like if it came out. ' Go on,' Sarah gritted. ' And let's get moving. Surely we can knock and ask for the handbag?'

' You really are bird-witted, aren't you? I don't particularly want anyone to know! was there. What I meant to do was to go back and get in the kitchen window and retrieve it. His old aunts came back unexpectedly, you see, and they're in the drawing-room, upstairs. Provided the dog doesn't start making a fuss—it's a daft little lap-dog—well, let's go back and try. I can climb in the window while you keep watch.'

Sarah's dictum had always been to do things for herself as far as she could, and only when she felt she could do no more did she ever ask for help. She said shortly, ' Right, let's go!' and they stepped it out, back the way they had come. Olive, in contrast to Sarah, looked relaxed and easy.

' Just a minute,' she said suddenly, as a thought occurred to her. ' Why were you coming back this way without the handbag when we saw you?' and Olive had the grace to blush.

' Well, to be honest, I'd only just discovered I'd lost it and I wasn't quite sure what to do, but when I saw you talking to the R.M.O. an idea occurred to me. I was pretty sure he'd soon be taking his leave, and I was also rather sure I could count on you to help me. It's a two-man job, you see, retrieving my property,' she finished with engaging cheek.

Sarah was sure that the part of that speech that stung most was that the R.M.O. would be sure to be taking his leave of Sarah about then. ' Why

didn't you ask him to help you?' she said bitterly, but Olive merely stared at her as if she had taken leave of her senses.

The house in question was just round the corner. Saxon Street, to which the R.M.O. had apparently gone, was uncomfortably near. Sarah saw the name up on the wall of a house almost facing their destination. ' Are you sure he's there?' she said, and Olive sadly agreed that that was where he was.

' Never mind, we shan't be long,' she said encouragingly, and led the way down the sift of one of the Victorian houses to the back. They were all more or less the same as each other, these houses. Solid villa type, with high slate roofs and a forest of chimneys; sash windows, heavily curtained. The best reception room in the front by the porch and front steps, the second-best leading from it through folding doors. A breakfast room and kitchen quarters in the semi-basement and a high-walled small garden at the back, where dustbins were decently hidden behind a trellis screen.

Olive pointed to the window they must get in. It was, at the back, at waist level, but the same window would have been considerably lower in the front of the house. Sarah couldn't see what the problem was.

Olive whispered, ' It sticks. Once you get it up, a person ought to hold it, if the other wants a quick getaway, otherwise it crashes down and you can't get it up again.'

' What's wrong with going out of the back door, once you're in?' the practical Sarah wanted to know.

Because you have to go through the place where the dog is sleeping, to get to it,' Olive explained, ' unless they've got it upstairs. Still, you never

know.'

Where did you leave the bag?' Sarah asked shortly.

I'm not sure. Somewhere in the kitchen. You hold the window up for me while I get in and search—I won't be long.'

Sarah agreed. It was probably better since Olive knew the layout of the place. But Olive wasn't in there long. She came out looking considerably upset. It's gone. It isn't there anymore. It isn't anywhere,' she whispered.

' Well, that's just too bad, isn't it? We'd better get moving, and you'd better go out and buy yourself another one tomorrow and serves you right,' Sarah said crossly.

You don't understand!' Olive cried. ' It's got the hospital as my address, and there's my name everywhere, and—and there are letters in it from my boyfriend.'

what happened to him? How come he didn't walk you back to the hospital?'

' He doesn't know I'm only a junior nurse,' Olive explained. That's why I didn't come out in uniform.'

It gets worse and worse. Where is he?' Sarah insisted.

He's gone home,' Olive said, and shrugged angrily. Well, the fact is, he isn't really related to these people. He knew they were going to be out and it seemed a good idea to use the place— well, we just wanted somewhere to sit and talk and there just isn't anywhere else! You can't talk in the Public Library—'

What about his home?' Sarah asked in a daze,

only just perceiving where all this was leading to, and the awful constructions that might be put on it.

' He's in digs. His landlady won't have young women in the gentlemen's rooms,' Olive said, outrageously mimicking the landlady, Sarah guessed.

' I ought to report you to Home Sister,' Sarah said angrily.

Oh, I don't know. Why should you? You're only a grade up from me,' said Olive. And anyway, who'd believe you?'

There is that about it!' Sarah said, her head spinning. I never heard such a stupid story in my life and I'm 'inclined to the view that none of it is true and you're just having me on for some reason of your own. Come on, let's get back!'

Olive stood her ground. I've got to get my handbag back!' and now she dropped her grand manner and was just a scared P.T.S. girl. If they read the letters they'll find the one where he wants me to run away with him, and there'll be a frightful row.'

If he doesn't know you're at the hospital, how come he could write to you?' Sarah demanded.

It got worse and worse. We used the shop at the end of the road as an accommodation address,' Olive said sullenly.

Sarah was really scared now. There would be an awful scandal if this came out. And this girl, she had reason to believe, was somehow connected with the R.M.O. I He would be dragged into it, too!

What's this bag look like?' she demanded. Is it that dark green one with a lot of purses caught together at the top with a strap going through rings?' She vaguely remembered it. You fathead, a more distinctive bag never was I ' go

' It matches my skirt,' Olive said defensively. And my shoes. What's wrong with that?'

Look, just get back to the hospital, or the next thing we'll know is you're late. Never mind me — I know a way in, only don't quote me on that. Just get yourself in, and do

not try to let the R.M.O. catch sight of you, or I'll be in the soup for letting you go back on your own after what he said! '

They had been talking in whispers, but since they had been talking, the lights on the middle floor had gone out, and the top floor lights had gone on.

' That's funny, going to bed without checking the windows?' Sarah murmured, but Olive said it was all right. She had unlocked that window to get out. They probably thought it was all locked up as they had left it.

Well, hold the window up for me to get in. I've got a torch. Then scoot, get me? I might even take a taxi back, if I'm very late,' Sarah said wrathfully, thinking how much that was going to set her back in her month's cash.

Inside the house it was deadly quiet. Almost as if the house were holding its breath, waiting to see what she would do. She heard Olive go crunching down the side path. Why couldn't the silly young idiot tiptoe?

She flicked her pencil torch on, and carefully trained it on everything in the kitchen, but it was such a neat and tidy room, nothing out of place. There were the two chairs where presumably Olive and her man-friend had sat; one cushion still smelt of the perfume she suddenly remembered that Olive had been using. There was also a trail of tobacco smoke in the air—pipe? Cigarette? But no handbag.

Sarah reluctantly left the kitchen and went into the breakfast room, but here again she drew a blank. She even remembered to get down on the floor and flick her torch about because she herself usually dumped her handbag on the floor.

She checked with her watch and decided she was going to be late, and in that moment she remembered the exam which was starting the next day. Feeling a little sick at her bad luck for having come out tonight alone anyway, she quickly did the rest of the ground floor, but it wasn't there. Now came the question: was she to go on through the house searching in an attempt to get Olive out of this scrape, or to escape while she could, and keep out of trouble herself?

She remembered all the advice she had been given at home, but it didn't make any difference. She must find that handbag. If she were late, that would be considerably less of an offence than Olive being in the middle of this thing if the handbag and its contents were found. Besides, surely if she found it, Sarah reasoned, Olive ought to show her gratitude by going steady and keeping clear of trouble afterwards? Duty was another thing Sarah had a high sense of, though she would have been the last to admit it, and it seemed to her that she must go ahead.

In Saxon Street, just round the corner, Andrew Haynes finished the game and put the board away and said goodnight to his patient.

Oh, I'll come to the door with you, sir. A breath of air will do me good.' He opened the door and they stood in the tiny front garden, looking up at the stars. The street was quiet at this hour, and

the tap-tap of a woman's heels made a sharp metallic click. Hello," said Will. Someone looking for you, I wonder, Dr Haynes?'

Surely not I No one knew where I—Oh, dear, yes, I think you may be right,' he said on an altered note, as he recognized Sarah. ' One of our young nurses.. Goodnight, Will,' he said, and stepped out into the street.

Sarah halted at the sight of him He took her appearance in, in one comprehensive glance. Her dark cap was askew, there was dirt on her face and mud on her raincoat, and over her shoulder was slung an alien object, that didn't suit Sarah at all: a rather frivolous, many-compartmented green handbag. And Sarah was in some distress.

What is it?' Andrew Haynes asked sharply. 'Where's Nurse Jermyn?'

He asked that, because it was the only thing he could think of to upset Sarah at this moment, since the last time he had seen her was when he had dispatched her with Nurse Jermyn, back to the hospital. Sarah constructed it to mean something quite different.

' Oh, she's all right. She's quite safely back at the hospital by this time, I should think, sir,' Sarah said quickly. It's you I want—I mean, a patient needs you. Well, a person in a house round the corner, who has collapsed. Well, I think it looks rather like the stroke my great-aunt had.'

He wasted no time, but went along with her, to the house where Olive had left her handbag. The front door was wide open, the lights all on. One elderly occupant of the house was still lying in a heap outside the parlour door, the other—her sister—was kneeling by her side, her head in her lap.

' We couldn't lift her,' Sarah said breathlessly. She's a big woman, and her sister's only a little scrap, and so worried, she's not much good at all. And I've never been taught what to do for a stroke, though I know a lot of other useful things.'

He noticed the wobble in Sarah's voice, said kindly, ' I'm sure you do. I'm sure you did your best,' and took the front steps two at a time.

The trouble about this house was that there was no telephone, no electricity, nothing that was much use for an emergency. Sarah went to get the patient's sister to fill hot water bottles while the R.M.O. carried the patient to her bed, and Sarah tore out to find a public telephone to call the hospital. Women's Medical, Sarah knew, was full right up at this moment, but he had said the woman couldn't remain there. When she got back, she murmured, left alone with him, Is it a stroke, sir?' but he shook his head.

Concussion—did she knock her head on the stair edge as she fell, do you know?' but Sarah didn't know. ' Heart's not too good, either,' he said, frowning at her.

While they waited for the ambulance, he questioned the patient's sister about what had happened.

Well,' she said, in her fluttery little voice, as she folded her hands and prepared to marshal her facts, she hadn't been feeling very grand—my sister, I mean. We had gone to a neighbour's house as usual for a game of cards. We always do on this night of the week.'

Olive and her friend had known that, Sarah thought.

So I said we'd better go home. Home is always best when one isn't well, don't you think? But when we got in, our little dog didn't greet us. My sister

was very much put out. She said, " We've got burglars " and she looked terrible. I thought she was going to faint on the spot. I said I was sure we had no such thing. We haven't got anything valuable enough to steal. But my sister, who feels draughts keenly, said, " There's a draught coming up from downstairs." Well, I'm afraid I'm not very brave. I did go to the stairhead and listen, but I couldn't hear anything, only I smelt cigarette smoke and I knew someone was in who shouldn't be there.'

' You should have gone to the front door and shouted for help,' Sarah said vigorously, but Dr Haynes frowned at her, so the little woman went on.

' I thought of that, but I didn't want my sister to be upset, so I shouted very loudly that I didn't think there was anyone down there, but anyway, that we had no need to worry as our friends were following us to finish the card party at our house. It was all I could think of. My sister looked at me as if I'd gone mad, and then I think she realized why I had done it. And then she stared at the hall table, horrified, and when I looked, I saw a

handbag. A strange woman's handbag. A green handbag, a rather fast sort of person's handbag.'

Sarah sat rigid, but the little woman was staring at Dr Haynes and he was looking intently at her, so she went on, 'We didn't know what to do, so I suggested that my sister go into the parlour and take off her things, and that I'd go down to the kitchen and make a nice cup of tea. Well, she did, but she looked so poorly. I had shut the door behind me. I hoped whoever it was would go, but when I opened the door I was so frightened because the handbag had gone. If only there had been lights to switch on. It's so tiresome to try to strike a match

and light the gas when your hands are shaking. My sister followed me out, and she saw the handbag had gone, and then she made a peculiar sound and . . . fell. Crash!'

'What happened then?' Andrew Haynes asked, and it seemed to Sarah that he was avoiding her eyes. He had seen the bag. She knew it, and she couldn't think what to do. She felt dreadful. It was all her fault that these people had been afraid. She should have knocked on the front door and just asked for it, straight out, except that then they would have known that someone was in the habit of coming into their house while they were away and that had been what Sarah had wanted to avoid.

'I don't know. I think I rushed to the front door and opened it, but then I thought of my sister lying on the ground (the hall floor is marble mosaic and so cold, you know) so I rushed back to my sister and then this lady—this young nurse—was at the front door, and I was so grateful because she was so brave and she went downstairs and shone her torch everywhere and said there was no one there—that was after we'd tried to lift my sister, of course—because you see she wanted to run out and fetch a doctor and I couldn't be left in the house alone, not knowing . . .

She burst into tears. Andrew let her cry, but jerked his head at Sarah to hide the bag, so Sarah stuffed the handbag under her coat, her face as red as a beetroot. And then the ambulance came.

The patient and her sister were despatched in the ambulance, but Andrew said he would walk the nurse back to the hospital. Sarah's heart sank. Now she would have to decide whether to tell him about Olive, or to spin some elaborate story in which

to take the blame herself. She saw that the latter course would probably be better, because if she mentioned Olive it would make her own efforts abortive. But he shattered that idea before it had got off the ground, by saying, 'Now, Nurse Darley, I want the truth, and let's begin by pointing out that that is not your handbag. I have seen it already in someone else's possession. Now please, why didn't you accompany Nurse Jermyn back to the hospital as I told you?'

CHAPTER VI

Sarah walked soberly beside him and thought with misery and dismay of the exam starting tomorrow, and what would be the outcome of all this? If that person died, it would be her fault—her fault and Olive's. They had started the shock, hadn't they?

Sarah said, 'I can't tell you, can I, because I shall have to mention Olive Jermyn, and you won't like that!'

What exactly is that supposed to mean?' he asked icily.

Well, I know that you're special friends with her—that is, she led me to think that—well, friends of her family, anyway.'

He said nothing and Sarah thought that was acquiescence. He couldn't have said anything; he was too much surprised.

Sarah rushed on, 'I know that to be true, because you mentioned your dog, which is rather a distinctive dog, and that was the dog she had had with her on the beach when she wouldn't stop for us, and I've just remembered that the car she must have been picked up in, with the dog, must have been yours, because it looks the same, so I know jolly well I shall be in the soup from the start. I wish you wouldn't ask me, sir. I can shorten the whole thing by saying it was my fault because in a queer sort of way it was, though I didn't mean any harm.'

After a pause, Andrew Haynes asked her coldly, When your father cautioned you to keep out of trouble, did he by any chance also caution you to

keep quiet?'

'Well, of course he did—he's always telling me I talk too much, but that won't help me now. It's done.'

All I'm asking is to know what was done and how.'

Well,' Sarah began, unable to resist the authoritative tone in his voice, Olive wouldn't go back to the hospital without her bag which she'd left somewhere because 'it had details in it that would give away that it was only a P.T.S. girl, and she was scared. She couldn't remember exactly where she'd left it, so I went back with her.'

I see.'

We had to get in the scullery window, but one of us had to hold it up or else it would crash down and stick, so I held it while she went in. She came out very scared and said she couldn't find it. Well, we had to, so I sent her back to the hospital—'

'Alone?' he broke in, in an awful voice.

'It was that, or her being caught for being late which she didn't want,' Sarah explained. 'There was no time to think all round that point. I had to make a snap judgment and it seemed best. She was glad to go.'

I bet she was,' he muttered, but Sarah didn't catch the words. She thought he was angry at his precious Olive being in trouble anyway.

I couldn't find the thing anyway, so I had to go upstairs and look, and I saw it on the hall table, but the sisters had come back before I could reach it. So I hid in the cupboard under the stairs, and I had got to the front door when one of them rushed out and left it open. I let her think I'd come in from the street. I didn't know they'd both seen

the bag. I thought they were carrying on because of the cigarette smoke. It was everywhere.'

'Whose smoke was it?' he asked, in a low voice.

don't know,' Sarah said crossly. Olive had told me you'd gone to see a patient in Saxon Street, so I thought it would be quicker to run round and try to find you than to hunt for a telephone to call the hospital, only I saw the callbox just as I saw you come out of that house.'

After a silence, he said, You know, of course, that a shock like that might have dire consequences on an elderly person with a heart condition?' and she nodded.

They had reached the hospital by then. I shall

want you to hold yourself ready to see Matron,' he said coldly, before he left her.

Matron! There was Home Sister to be faced first, Sarah thought dismally, as she rang the bell. It was no use trying to creep in the back way now.

One of the maids let her in. Home Sister was nowhere to be seen. Later Sarah found that Home Sister had taken one of the second-years to the sick bay with a suspected throat. But still Sarah wasn't sent for, so she went to bed.

Victoria turned over sleepily and said, 'Hello, what happened to you?' and fell asleep again before Sarah could tell her. Apparently, Sarah thought, completely mystified, there had been no row about it. Hadn't Olive mentioned what had happened? It was all very odd. Apparently no one knew that Sarah had been out late.

The R.M.O. who had been called over to the sick Bay was in point of fact discussing the matter with Home Sister in her office at that moment. This girl, Olive Jermyn, what sort of young woman is

she?' he asked, frowning. 'I confess I've only seen her sitting in a puddle of water in the corridor making a loud fuss.'

Home Sister's lips didn't twitch as he had expected. She seemed rather uncomfortable. She and the R.M.O. had known each other for many years and understood each other very well. Indeed, Home Sister had known Andrew Haynes' father before him. He was very like his father, she recalled, and both were men a person could talk straight with.

She said now, 'Well, at risk of sounding catty about a girl who is more than ordinarily pretty, I would say that I am continually surprised at the choice of entrants to the Nursing School nowadays.'

'Because her looks might prove to be too distracting?'

No, Dr Haynes, not at all,' Home Sister said, with tightened lips, 'but because this girl's looks hide a disposition I don't care for. What has she done this time?'

'I'm not quite sure,' he said, raising his eyebrows in a wry smile against himself. 'I'm sure I could tell you word for word the story about it that I got from Nurse Darley.'

Oh, yes, Nurse Darley—I don't think she's in yet.'

Yes, she is—I brought her back myself,' and he told Home Sister the story as he had it.

There are a lot of gaps in the story,' Home Sister objected. 'Why was the handbag left in that house anyway, and why was it necessary to go to such unconventional and roundabout ways to retrieve it?' To which he replied, 'Exactly V What are you going to do about it?' Home Ica

Sister asked softly. 'Or is it that you want me to do something, sir?'

Masterly inactivity for the time being, I think,' he decided. 'You see, it's fascinating and horrifying when one considers the answers one might get if one pressed too much. If it was a common break-in, that will argue that the police will have to be brought in, which we don't want, and I don't think it would really be true, anyway. On the other hand we might find ourselves with a first-class scandal if I let my mind suggest other answers.'

As to who the owner of the green handbag was there with, and why?' Home Sister said shrewdly. 'I know the girl!'

'There is this, too. It seems she has given Nurse Darley to believe that she has a claim on my protection, because of her family being friends with mine. It does just occur to me that I might exercise that protection for a while, at least to keep Nurse Darley from getting into this situation again!'

Home Sister murmured, 'Would that be a wise course, sir?' but what she would really have liked to ask was why on earth the R.M.O. should have so much interest in Nurse Darley, who was, after all, only a first-year and not a very spectacular one at that!

Sarah Darley would have been horrified to hear that conversation. She had been brought up to expect retribution for getting into a scrape, and if retribution didn't come, it worried her. It worried her as to the position if that elder sister died, or the younger one talked enough to persuade neighbours to go to the police or the hospital, since she had recognized Sarah's uniform! and Sarah couldn't sleep. Sarah, like most energetic and virile people,

had to have her full night's sleep to be on form the next day. She hardly slept at all that night, and awoke with black circles under her eyes and a splitting headache. Her first thought was the condition of that older woman, but of course, she wasn't over at the hospital today. It was the exam.

Exams normally held no terrors for Sarah. She liked her work, and while not achieving the brilliance that Thelma achieved, Sarah did a very good average in almost everything. Today it wasn't like that.

To begin with, Michael crossed her path, for the first time since she had told him she didn't want to go on being engaged to him. He looked so dejectedly at her that she regarded it very much as she might have if a black cat had crossed her path. Nurses have pet superstitions of their own, and they were legion and varied. Sarah tried to pretend she didn't know him, which didn't help, and she couldn't get his face out of her mind. A girl who had twice failed this exam knocked accidentally against Sarah and they both collapsed on the floor of the exam room, which was taken by both to be a very bad omen. And sitting down to two hours' of written work, Sarah for the first time in her life had her mind go blank. It was the most hideous sensation. She went hot and cold by turns, and the questions danced before her eyes. She only answered half the amount she was required to, and was quite sure when she tottered out to her lunch that what she had written was complete rubbish.

She had no appetite for her food, either, which wasn't like her. As they filed back into the room where questions had to be answered on what was for her a relatively easy subject—first aid—her eyes

alighted on a trail of P.T.S. girls going past in the distance, among them Olive Jermyn, laughing and talking quite happily with her neighbour. That finished Sarah. Rage filled her. She couldn't think, she was so angry. Whatever the truth had been of that affair last night, Olive had been the cause of that woman collapsing, of those two inoffensive elderly ladies being frightened so that they might not well have the nerve to live alone again—and Olive didn't care! She had dragged in Sarah to help her and Sarah was failing her exam before her own eyes, and Olive couldn't even give a thought to it!

No, that wasn't fair, Sarah told herself. She hadn't been forced to go back with Olive for her handbag. If she'd had any sense, she would have left her to stew with anxiety about what would happen when it was found and sent back to the hospital. But still, even in that event, the old ladies would have known that someone had been in their house in their absence and been very frightened, and after all, that had been in Sarah's mind to prevent, hadn't it? If she could have found the bag and got out before they returned, they would have known nothing about it, would they?

Having thrashed that out in her mind to her own satisfaction, Sarah returned to her work, but found to her horror that there was little time left to do anything, even if she

could have remembered half the answers. She did her best in a very short time, working to fever pitch, but she knew, without being told, that she had failed this exam.

The rest of the day was their own. Victoria and Rose Were happy. It wasn't so bad after all, was it?' Victoria said jubilantly. ' I shall ring Donald tonight, I think—no, I'll write to him a specially

long letter, telling him all about it.'

Rose said briskly, Sarah, what's wrong? Are you sickening for the bug that Allen's in Sick Bay with?'

Sarah had forgotten Nurse Allen and her illness. That was funny, she thought. The R.M.O. would have been over there last night to see her I Then how was it he hadn't told Home Sister and all the furies let loose because she had got into a scrape? Were they waiting for the exam to be over first? Sarah put it to the others. I got in late, but no one said anything.' But her friends were equ ally mystified.

Well, the grapevine would get busy, Sarah told herself wretchedly. But it didn't. By the time the exam was over and behind them and they all settled back to wait the excruciatingly long time before they got the results, nothing had been said about the affair. It had been squashed, smothered. Why, for heaven's sake?

Sarah thought she knew very well why. It was because of Olive Jermyn's connection with him. He wasn't going to let that girl get into trouble.

Sarah racked her brains to remember anything about the Jermyns which would suggest that Dr Haynes had been their friend, but she couldn't. The only thing was that they had been so particular about Olive being a nurse at St Mary's in Scopdale, but Sarah had thought that was because she herself was already there and could give an eye to (Ave. Apparently it hadn't been the reason I

Anyway no one appeared to have heard a whisper about that night. The elderly sisters, whose name was Oldham, had evidently decided not to talk about it, which was strange, considering how garrulous

little Miss Charlotte had been. Sarah went over to see Miss Josephine, who was still lying down but much better.

Miss Josephine said, ' I understand you were very kind to us that night, my dear,' which didn't really give any leeway for confessions, nor any indication that such a thing as an ultra-modern handbag was going to be mentioned.

Which was as well, because Sarah was sent to that ward in the next General Post.

She went to say goodbye to her men. They were almost ready to go home now, those who had known her so well. It was strange to see Eric Neal walking about the ward in a dressing-gown. He was much taller than she had anticipated and looked every inch a teacher, while Alf Murray was much shorter than she had expected, and a typical grocer. He was sitting at the table with his account books, and little piles of coupons which he said his customers brought in for discount, and all had to be counted and his wife couldn't do the job very well. Already he was wearing his 'worried ' look, as his visitors put it, and was one foot outside the hospital, anticipating his return.

Still, they all tore their minds from their own problems to consider losing their favourite nurse, and Sarah couldn't help noticing that there was no air of conspiracy, nothing at all to indicate that they knew anything at all about her scrape that night she went to the Oldham house.

General Post this time had split up everyone. As a rule girls who had been friends or worked as a team in P.T.S. were allowed to keep together. At St Mary's this was considered to make for smooth working and general content among ,the staff. Now

Rose was sent to the Children's Wing and was fretting because she couldn't keep an eye on her sister, and Victoria was sent to the Cranial Ward, which worried her because it was all very quiet, with a lot of very sick people there. After the jollity on Men's Accident, it was a complete change, one that Victoria said she wasn't going to stand for.

Sarah was well pleased with her change. Her new ward was interesting, and even though she was plunged into despair about the outcome of her exam which she was sure she knew the result of already, there was one bright spot on the horizon: her holiday. She had saved for it for ages, this very special holiday in Cornwall, at one of those smart hotels that kept a gay programme all through the year. Sarah had picked a time at the start of the season, and it was all booked up; she had bought new luggage pieces, new clothes packed in them and ready, and out of each pay packet she squeezed a little more for extras such as colour films and new walking shoes, because of the moors, and strappy silver dancing sandals and a surfboard and flippers—it was to be the holiday of a lifetime, the first she had paid for herself. Her parents had smiled on the plan because in the past Sarah had just bundled into the back of the car with the rest of the family, and taken her oldest clothes for a happy-go-lucky holiday that her parents liked, with meals outdoors. She dreamed of the hotel, overlooking the bay, as she marched briskly over to the Women's Section to take, up her new job. She had a double room, to accommodate either her youngest aunt or one of the cousins—whoever happened to be free at the time—for company. Someone would go with her from

home. It had to be like that because neither Victoria nor Rose could take their holidays at the same time. Sarah counted up the weeks in her mind as she went on to Flora Sykes Endowed, which was a medical ward.

The only person she thought she knew here was Miss Josephine Oldham, but in one of the side wards was an elderly woman called Burrridge, and when Sarah went in to say good morning to her for the first time, introducing herself as Nurse Darley, Mrs Burrridge's fat creased face broke into a nice smile as she said, in the loveliest voice Sarah had heard for a long time, 'You must be Sarah!'

She chuckled at Sarah's blank look but held out her hand. Sarah went closer to her and took it. She said, 'How did you know my name?'

'Never mind. But you do look like a Sarah, I must say!' Mrs Burrridge said. And you're just as I expected you to be. Slightly belligerent, determined to do the job well, ready to be friendly if that's what the other person wants, but quite ready to fight, if a fight's the thing that's needed. You'll do, my dear,' she broke off, patting Sarah's arm. 'I'm glad I've got you!'

Mrs Burrridge had a great sheaf of flowers delivered daily from the florist's, Sarah discovered. She had a secretary, too, middle-aged and absorbed in her work. There was a thin person in a white coat who came to put on her make-up, attend to her quite beautiful hands, and to set her hair after a shampoo. And on the very first time that Sarah dusted her room, she realized who Mrs Burrridge was, when she saw the box that she had helped the R.M.O choose that day. She stood startled, looking at it, trying to think.

She laughed again at Sarah's bewilderment. But oh, Andrew was so cross about you going there! That dreadful man in the shop! He told me about him!'

Sarah went pink. Oh, Matthew's all right,' she said defensively. He's quite an interesting person, really. I adore poking round his shop for unusual things.' Do you indeed!' Mrs Burridge thought. 'I'd like to get something unusual for Andrew. It's his birthday soon. Last year I gave him flies, but I didn't know then that he doesn't fish any more. I suppose you would be well aware of that, my dear?'

'No! No, I didn't know he liked fishing! How should I?' Sarah said quickly. 'You must be confusing him with someone else. Nurse Jermyn, I mean. She knows all about him—her family and his are friends.'

Oh, is that so? I have made a mistake, then. Still, if you did happen to go to this Matthew's shop and you saw something that you felt might be acceptable to poor An—I should say, of course, to your R.M.O.—I wish you'd get it for me! I don't suppose you girls have got any too much cash around you, so let me give you some money to have by you for the purpose, before I forget,' and she reached out for a very expensive handbag indeed, and found a fiver.

Sarah reddened to the roots of her hair. I wish you wouldn't! If I ever do go there, I can always

ask Matthew to put such an item by till I come and tell you how much it is, but I'd much rather not take any money of anyone else's—I'm rather careless and I might lose it! '

'Oh. Very well, my dear, if that's how you feel, but I'd appreciate it if you could go soon. His birthday is next Saturday.'

A week and a bit—I'll try,' Sarah promised.

She came off the women's ward much more tired than she had been on the men's. The men weren't so demanding, and didn't want so much fussing over as the women. Somehow it had been so different on Patrick Ward. She had been happy then. She hadn't kept running into the R.M.O. She had been going around with Michael. She hadn't known that Thelma wanted him. She had had her friends near her all day.

Thinking of all these things, Sarah demanded that they all go with her the following afternoon to Matthew's shop.

Rose said, I'm afraid of leaving Karen to her own devices. I used to be afraid she'd go around with that Jermyn girl, but now I don't have to worry about her on that score, I wish I did, because I think she would have been less of a hazard than the crazy crowd Karen's in with at the moment! '

Why doesn't Olive Jermyn go around with Karen?'

Sarah love, you're way behind the times,' Victoria put in. Haven't you heard? The R.M.O. squires her these days! Right down disgusting, I call it, a little wretch out of P.T.S. Everyone's talking about it.'

That was a shock to Sarah. She didn't understand why it should be a shock. After all, she had come to terms with the idea that Olive Jermyn was pretty smug about knowing the R.M.O. and it had been borne in on her that for Olive's sake he had smothered that incident of the handbag in the Oldham house, as if it had never really happened. Any other P.T.S. girl would have been thrown out, but not Olive.

And yet, now it had been actually said, that he was being seen around with Olive, it had somehow hurt Sarah. Being Sarah, she had to take the idea to pieces and examine it. She was honest enough to admit that she didn't want Olive around with him, nor did she want other people to talk about them both being seen together. If she had been asked why, it was mainly because he was such a big man; big in the sense of importance. Whenever he was spoken of, it was with reference to his skill. His life was dedicated to research in his spare time. He would go far, everyone said. Well, he

wouldn't go far with Olive hanging like a millstone round his neck. Everything in Sarah revolted against the idea. Somehow she must wean Olive away from him.

But she said nothing of this to her friends. Not that there was much chance. They had so much to say to each other now that they had been separated; they just talked all the time. Victoria talked nonstop about her soldier and Rose was employed with a monologue about her sister Karen, who had developed the habit of slipping out alone, which worried Rose, whose times were very often different from Karen's. It isn't as if I knew where she

went,' Rose fretted. She won't tell me! '

' She isn't likely to, if she realizes you are interested, is it?' Sarah said, but all the time she could

see the face of Andrew Haynes, and that gleam of amusement in his eyes when he was talking to her, only now he would reserve it for that odious little Olive Jermyn.

' I don't know,' Rose fretted. Look, Sarah, if

you're out and you see Karen, I wish you'd tag along and find out where she goes! All right, if you don't like following her, then go with her, will you? Take her with you on some of those errands of mercy or whatever you call them. Don't look so indignant—you know what I mean! All the patients talk about you. The lads miss you terribly. Well, the ones that left passed the word on to those who stayed, and they got a shock when you got moved off Patrick Ward. They thought there was a ready-made angel to do their shopping and sort out their home troubles for them—'

What have we got an Almoner for?' Sarah said fiercely.

Her white coat crackles and frightens the boys,' Victoria put in, with her husky laugh. ' If her face doesn't ! '

Well, for your sins we're going to buy a present now,' Sarah said firmly. I think personally it's rather nice of a patient to want to buy her doctor something, don't you? How many of them do? I'm all for it. Now what would he like?'

' Search me! ' they both said. You're the one who knows him best,' and they met each other's eyes.

' What's that supposed to mean?' Sarah asked fiercely.

Neither of them would say what they had discussed together. You didn't tell Sarah you'd talked about things like hat. It would be embar-

rassing and she wouldn't like it. All the same, they were inclined to the view that he was just taking Olive in his car somewhere, as a kind of Quixotic move to please Home Sister, keep her out of mischief till she did something bad enough in her work to get kicked out. But with Sarah it was different. They had seen the way he looked at Sarah. A man didn't look like that at a young woman for nothing. Not that they could have explained what they meant, except that it was the sort of look they had never seen in his eyes before, for anyone. Odd, too, when you came to think what his background had been, and that story in his life which everyone seemed to know about except Sarah.

They said pacifically, You're good at deciding what people want. It's a gift with you. Stupid people like us don't know about presents.'

Matt's shop seemed to smell more dirty and peculiar than on that last occasion. They walked slowly round the place, Matthew watching them jealously, in case they broke something or forgot to put something back. Victoria remarked in a hoarse whisper that she couldn't think while he was looking at them. Rose said she thought it was a lot of awful junk, but Sarah, with her unerring instinct for something that was a little different,

found a bit of home carving. Someone had whittled it lovingly, and stained and polished the finished article, so that it was—if not valuable—at least different.

'What is it?' Rose asked disparagingly. 'A model of a castle? What's it for?'

Sarah didn't want to explain it. She felt as if she would like to give this to the R.M.O., only he wouldn't want a gift from her. What a stupid idea! Besides, this was for Mrs Burridge to give him.

'You keep pens or spills in the hollow part of the central tower,' she said shortly. There was also a thermometer to register room temperature, and the moat 'was a shallow trough to hold pencils or a pipe. The whole thing measured no more than eight inches wide, and she even discovered the knobs at the ends which turned up a perpetual calendar in the windows.

'It's hideous,' said Victoria, but Sarah wanted it. She came out with it wrapped in newspaper, and the others went into gales of giggles when they found the newspaper was Chinese. He'll hit his patient over the head with that thing!

But they had found laughter again. The tension eased between them. They bought some fruit and a carrier bag, and put the castle in it too, and took a bus down to the sea and forgot all their problems. Even the exam.

The problems were still there, though, under the surface. Rose and Victoria were uneasily aware that they had seen Thelma looking wretchedly out of the window at the unsuspecting Michael passing underneath, not once but many times. All was not well in that quarter, no matter what Sarah thought about it, and although their three-fold friendship hadn't yet been strained by Sarah's silence, yet they were both miserably conscious of the fact that Sarah hadn't offered to tell them why—she had come in late that night and why Home Sister hadn't pitched into her for it. One or two comments had been made by two nurses they didn't like, about people who came in late as bold as brass ringing at the front door and got away with it. It was all covered up, but it was there, under the surface. Sarah was so universally liked that perhaps that was why, but it wasn't like

her not to have taken them into her confidence.

She hadn't told them why she had seemed so ill with anxiety on the morning of the exam either, and they were both well aware that she had spent most of the time with her thoughts elsewhere, so that it was no surprise to them when she said she was sure she had failed. It was nothing to do with Michael, they were sure. And yet Michael didn't seem to be hitting it off too well with the lovely Thelma.

Victoria's loathing of her new job didn't help, either, and it was because of this that it brought matters to a head. One day Victoria got a letter from her soldier, which she didn't devour and go off in a dream about. She promptly burst into tears, and it was as well that she was reading it in their bedroom, since only Rose was in there with them. 'He's going away! He's being sent abroad and he wants me to marry him on the dot! Men haven't got any sense!' she sobbed. 'How can I?'

Rose and Sarah exchanged glances. Sarah said, 'It depends on you, doesn't it? Don't you want to finish your training here, Victoria?'

Victoria said roundly that she loathed it, especially since she had gone on to the cranial ward.

Well, how long has he got before he goes?' Sarah asked.

It seemed that there was time enough for that, if they could manage to arrange for the wedding. But how can I?' Victoria wailed.

Rose met it as a challenge. ' Sarah could fix everything, couldn't you? You're good at that sort of thing,' she said.

Victoria gave herself the pleasure of crying her eyes out while Rose and Sarah discussed the procuring and the cost of a wedding outfit for Victoria, and

a new case and hatbox as presents from them, provided she didn't mind a substitute material, because neither of them could afford leather. And you've just got three weeks to put up the banns,' Sarah finished. ' I'll go with you to buy everything if Rose isn't free.'

Victoria wasn't happy. She said that if her soldier wouldn't take her with him, and she wasn't sure he could, it would mean that they would go to the altar, eat their cake and say goodbye. She wanted a honeymoon. So Sarah rashly undertook to telephone hotels in the vicinity for them to stay.

But she can't—there won't be time for a honeymoon,' Rose objected. She can only get that if there's a special licence and you need a bishop for that. Do you know a bishop, Sarah?'

Sarah didn't, but she knew someone who did. She couldn't think how she had heard it, but she was quite sure that Dr Haynes knew, or was related to, a bishop. With resignation she said she would see about it, and braced herself to ask him yet again for advice and help.

You've been avoiding me,' he accused. Ever since that night. What did you think, that I'd go straight to Matron and tell her what you did?'

I've wondered why I wasn't thrown out, and why no one had me up before Matron,' Sarah confessed. I didn't get the smallest rocket for being late. I can't think why.'

Well, I'm very glad you didn't get an attack of conscience and go and confess to someone, because that would have undone all my skilful work in sweeping it under the carpet.'

I don't understand—oh, I see,' she said. To keep Olive's name out of it. Yes, well, I'm glad

I did benefit through it, sir, but I wish I'd been free to go and make a clean breast of it.'

She wasn't looking at him, so she didn't see him frowning at the mention of Olive's name. She rushed on, ' You said I could come to you to ask any advice, anything at all—'

' Oh, dear, not shopping for another patient?' he asked, his lips twitching. I refuse to escort you to Matt's! '

No, it's not that, sir. I want a bishop and I wondered if you knew one. I thought you might.'

She was looking at him then, and she saw how white he looked. It was as if she had suggested something quite horrific. Have I said something awful?' Sarah gasped.

No, no, child,' he said, passing a hand over his forehead. It might help, however, if you told me what you wanted a bishop for! '

' Not for me. It's for a friend of mine. She wants to get married. If she does it in the ordinary way,/ it will take three weeks and there won't be time for a honeymoon before her soldier goes abroad, but if we can find a bishop to give a special licence—'

Oh, yes, I see. Well, why does it have to be you, always doing things for people? Can't they do things for themselves?'

She isn't good at things,' Sarah said simply. That was reason enough for her to put herself out and do things for people—she could manage to achieve results and they couldn't.

All right. I'll do the needful,' he said. You'd better give me all the details necessary.'

So Victoria got the services of a bishop, but then Sarah couldn't find a hotel booking for them, not

anywhere. Not even in Queenscliffe. It appeared that the holiday bookings had swamped everything, and anyway, Victoria needed it in such a short time. Such short notice was not possible.

Sarah was at her wits' end. She was looking up the last of the hotel names, one eye on the clock, when Thelma came into her room. It was so unusual that Sarah sat and gaped at her. Thelma wasted no words.

You've been pestering the R.M.O. for a bishop!' she said.

Not pestering,' Sarah corrected gently. ' I just asked if he knew one.'

' Any use asking what he said in answer to your blighted cheek?' Thelma snapped. And just who was the action for?'

Sarah considered the matter. She couldn't see how it concerned Thelma. It was for Victoria Lister. For a special licence. It's all right—Matron says she can leave to get married—her soldier's being posted overseas. And the R.M.O. wasn't wild—he did look a bit bothered, I admit, but I suppose it isn't easy, rustling up a bishop's services.'

You little clot! Don't you know about the tragedy in his life? Is it possible you don't know the bishop was her uncle?' Thelma stormed.

Sarah sat stunned. She kept thinking of Andrew Haynes' face when she had asked him, confidingly, if he could help her. And how he had said he supposed he could, but the way he had said it. She felt like crying her heart out, to think she could have wounded him so. And he had been so kind.

It swept every other consideration from her mind. She wanted to rush out and find him and apologize, but at the same time she felt she couldn't even face

him again.

It was while she was in this dreadful state that Victoria and Rose rushed in. Sarah, we've had a thought! What about your holiday reservation! Would you be a sweetie and let us have it? It would be so nice—and you could get your holiday later! It would be the most marvellous honeymoon of all time!'

What?' Sarah said trying to focus. My holiday? What about it?' So both Victoria and Rose repeated it. For my honeymoon!' Victoria insisted.

CHAPTER VII

Mrs Burridge had known Andrew Haynes for many years, and she knew all about his secret. As he sat by her bed that day she said gently, Andrew, isn't time healing anything?'

He winced. He still couldn't bear to be reminded of it. Oh, yes! ' he denied. ' I've forgotten it all, you know! ' but because she looked so unbelieving, he laughed. No, I haven't. Not really. I don't think it's a thing one can forget, not absolutely. So many little things remind one of what happened, and there's always the big question: could it have been prevented?'

Then why stay here?' she asked, in a low voice. Oh, what am I saying? Heaven knows, I don't want to lose you or your excellent services.'

There are other doctors,' he said quietly, amused.

She patted his hand again. There's only one Andrew Haynes. And between ourselves, I think your little nurse thinks that, too ! '

His head shot up, then his face cleared. Oh, no, she doesn't! No, I'm under no such illusions. There's only one chap around here for her, my dear, and that's our Casualty Officer!'

He is, as I remember him, an excessively handsome young man,' Mrs Burridge said rather wistfully. ' When I was a girl, he would automatically have been the one for the young ladies to set their caps at, but you, my dear, would be the one they would want to marry. And your Sara is a very sensible girl. I think she already sees you in a rather

special light!'

' Oh, does she!' he retorted. Let's not delude ourselves. In any case, I avoid her where possible.'

No, Andrew! But why, my dear? Does the thought hurt so much? Or do you blame yourself, so that marriage is out of court for you for ever?'

Hardly that. No, Sarah being Sarah, she is curiously enough the one who turns the knife in the wound, all the time, and heaven knows, she doesn't mean to. For all I know, she isn't even aware of what happened in my past.'

How, Andrew? What could Sarah have done to hurt you?'

' Well, she came to me to demand to know if I knew a bishop, for a start ! '

Oh, no!' Mrs Burridge lay back on her pillows with a jerk, for once forgetting the careful set of her waved grey hair. Oh, my dear! What did you say? And why, why?'

I said, because I could think of nothing else to say, that I would do what I could. As to why, she wanted to procure a special licence for her best friend to marry in a hurry.'

She is so helpful to people,' Mrs Burridge approved.

Yes, but a little too helpful at times.' He looked angry now. I did get in touch with her bishop for her, which reopened everything, of course. There was a lot of indignation for a start, and unspoken comments about bad form. However, Sarah's friend has got her special licence, but Sarah has lost her holiday through it,' and he told Mrs Burridge what had happened. She's wanted that holiday so badly. I remember the first time I was ever in any sort of conversation with her, she

mentioned it, and her eyes danced with anticipation. She'd even bought a new case to pack her new things in.'

' And Sarah told you how she had to give up her reservation for her friend's honeymoon?'

' Good heavens, no! Sarah wouldn't do that! No, I got it bit by bit from various sources; the friend, for a start, who was feeling rather conscience-stricken about it, and told me when she came to -thank me for my offices regarding the special licence. (Giddy girl, that Victoria Lister, but Sarah thinks a lot of her!) And of course, Thelma—that is, Staff Nurse Cross, Sarah's cousin—had something to say about it, too. Sarah is merely going home for her holiday now, and Thelma, who has formed an attachment for Sarah's Michael, is probably worried about possible awkward situations when she brings him home for the week-end and Sarah is there. Oh, the situation is fraught with difficulty—it always will be, I suppose, with Sarah around.'

That Sarah! ' Mrs Burridge said, with a tender smile So generous, never thinks of herself ! '

' She needs someone to look after her,' Andrew Haynes said fiercely, getting to his feet. And you are the one to help her now, my dear, if you will! '

' Bless me, Andrew, she doesn't need an old woman, she needs a man ! ' Mrs Burridge said vigorously.

' For what I have in mind, my dear, she needs you, and only you. I want you to arrange it to look natural, a nice holiday for her, away from that family, where I believe she'll just continue making herself useful for everyone. As to a man, I don't believe that any other chap will be anything but second best to her, after young Armstrong.'

Then why did she break it off with him?' Mrs Burridge asked reasonably. No girl in her right mind relinquishes her man to her cousin.'

Sarah would. She thought it the right thing to do, because she knew they were both so keen on each other,' he said.

Well, well, what is it you want me to do, Andrew?'

Think up a very good reason why someone like Sarah should be needed at Amblesforth House.'

She looked startled. ' Your house? That you bought for . . . ?' She couldn't bring herself to say that name. ' You mean you're going to open it up again? What sort of holiday would that be for her?'

He rubbed the back of his head. It's the only place where I have any right to go for a week-end, to see how she's getting on,' he said ruefully. No, I suppose it's a mad idea.'

She thought a moment. It wouldn't do, my dear,' she said, ' but it does occur to me that you might send her to your sister's place. If she rides, she might enjoy the background of a riding school near the sea.'

Good heavens, I couldn't do that!' he said, shocked. That's where I've been shipping, the Jermyn girl to keep her out of Sarah's way, and to have someone responsible to keep an eye on her!'

Mrs Burridge's face was a study. So that's it! I wondered what was behind the disappearance of that girl every day. I suppose it doesn't matter to you, but gossip is circulating that you are cradle-snatching, and Sarah believes you are in love with the Jermyn girl.'

' Don't be absurd, my dear! You never have been, so don't start now! ' he protested. ' Sarah would never have such an idiotic notion about me—' He broke off, frowning, remembering what Sarah had said to him about Olive in his company. He hadn't taken much notice at the time, but now perhaps seen in this light, Sarah really did believe the gossip. No, she couldn't! What does she take me for?' he muttered.

' She takes you for a virile man who might easily be swayed by an exceptionally pretty face and a very sly disposition. Sarah also is conscious that she has no beauty whatever. Don't forget that, my dear, in your future dealings with Sarah. It's because of living in the shadow of that lovely cousin of hers, I expect.'

He was shocked. Sarah having no beauty?

What a ridiculous thing to say! Why, Sarah is—!' and again he broke off, and turned sharply away from her.

' Yes, well, if you're not going to examine me, don't go tearing off on the instant because I've something to give you. Get it, my dear—that parcel on the dressing-table. The dear knows I hesitate to make you a gift for your birthday after all this distressing conversation, but I wanted to. I adore birthdays personally, and I'd be upset if yours went by again and I did no more than send you my kind regards. Here, open it in front of me, so that I can tell by your face whether you really like it or are mentally consigning it to the deepest darkest cupboard you've got.'

He sat down by her and undid the newspaper, glancing at the print in some amusement.

' Sorry, I forgot to stipulate birthday wrappings,' she remarked, her lips twitching.

Sarah had told Mrs Burridge that Victoria had said it was a hideous thing and that Rose had struggled manfully to find something polite to say about it. Now, watching Andrew, Mrs Burridge could see how much alike in their tastes both he and Sarah were. Sarah had said confidently that the R.M.O. would be very keen on it, and that, apparently, was just what he was. He examined it from every angle, discovered all its special features and expressed himself delighted with it.

But he looked puzzled. ' Well, Andrew,' Mrs Burridge said vigorously, you know I can't get out and you must know that the only place that could have come from is someone called Matt of whom you don't approve. Sarah said you'd be livid if you ever found out she'd gone there again, but she did take her two friends, to lessen your wrath. You don't handle her very well, do you?'

Matt's dangerous,' he said tautly. ' He's a fence. He only keeps out of prison himself by shopping his friends. I wish Sarah had never found his place,' but he remembered wistfully that first day they had gone there together, for the box for Mrs Burridge. He wished he could live that day over again.

' Well, may this birthday be more peaceful for you, my dear,' Mrs Burridge said, watching him, and may future ones hold more than peace.' She patted his hand, bringing him back from his thoughts. She watched him re-wrap the gift to take with him; a big man awkwardly carrying a treasure under one arm, and already tearing his heart out over someone else, someone who would, by the look of it, become more deeply entrenched than the first one, and just as unsatisfactory to him. ' I'll try to

think of something for her holiday,' Mrs Burridge called out, as an afterthought, as he was shutting the door behind him

She racked her brains, but couldn't think of anything. All she could think of was to send both of them to the same place on an errand so that they could converge as it were, and find something for themselves. But where could she send them? The weather was wonderful and they ought to both be driving to somewhere such as Amblesforth, which was a very lovely place, but full of sad memories for Andrew. That was where his house was. No, that wouldn't do.

All she could think of was to urgently desire a book from the Public Library, but Andrew knew she never borrowed books. If she asked him to buy a book for her in King's, the rather expensive bookshop in Blidbourne that she patronized, that might get him there, but how could she send Sarah, who had no car and probably not enough Money for the train fare to Blidbourne, nor the time, either?

Very soon after that, an extremely pretty young girl came in, in the bright blue nylon overall and cap of the P.T.S. It was their day today, and the girl brought a fresh jug of water and set it down with exaggerated care.

' Why, you pretty little thing,' Mrs Burridge said with pleasure. ' How do you like training to be a nurse?'

' Oh, very much,' the girl said, and she had a really pleasant voice. ' It's the only thing I've ever wanted.'

How nice! Tell me, you look intelligent. If you wanted to arrange a meeting between two shy people, a man and a woman, what would you sug-

gest to them, so that neither of them guessed until they got there, converging on the same spot as it were?'

The girl veiled her eyes, so Mrs Burridge couldn't see how she really received that question. She looked as if she were prettily considering the matter.

I think the thing would be to send them to the Shrubbery in Queenscliffe, you know, because when they did meet, there are lots of nice little nooks where two shy people could talk,' she offered.

Ah, yes, but how to get them there, singly, with a good reason, and how to make sure they would meet?'

'Is the girl a nurse?' And when Mrs Burridge nodded, the P.T.S. girl continued, Then you could send her there with a message to deliver to an old friend of yours who sits every day in the Shrubbery because it's as far as he can walk.'

But that's brilliant!' Mrs Burridge approved. But how to get the young man there?'

The same thing, in reverse. A letter for a young person who works near there and slips into the Shrubbery to eat her sandwiches. Only they must both wear something distinctive such as a yellow rose in the buttonhole.'

Mrs Burridge didn't care for that idea much. She couldn't see Andrew wearing anything in his buttonhole. His tailoring was superb and expensive and he would be shocked at such a suggestion. Still, the basic idea was good and she thanked the girl. You'd better go now, my dear, or else you'll get into trouble for gossiping.'

'Oh, yes,' the girl sighed, I'm always getting into trouble! Never mind, I don't care! I love my nursing!'

A little later on another, and older, nurse came in and took a blood sample from Mrs Burridge. After the casually expert performance was over, Mrs Burridge said, Who was the pretty child from P.T.S. who brought in my jug of water? Such a dear little thing!'

The nurse snorted, Mrs Burridge, don't you be misled by that one! We shiver in our shoes when she comes over. Someone's bound to get a rocket through her! That's Olive Jermyn.'

Mrs Burridge started. It is?'

It is! 'the nurse said grimly. 'Poor old Darley would have the bad luck to get that little fiend on today, of all days! '

Nurse Darley, ah, yes, I would like to speak to her if she has a minute to spare,' said Mrs Burridge.

'Well, she's been in trouble already this morning,' the nurse warned. Through our friend! Yes, and I must warn you—it isn't safe to trust that Jermyn with anything, not even let her hear you if you're on the telephone! I heard her just now sending another P.T.S. girl into fits about something one of the old patients said about trying to bring two people together. Matchmaking's all very fine, if it can be kept quiet about, but it's a fine thing for a laugh in hands like that Jermyn's '

Mrs Burridge reddened with anger, but the nurse was busy and noticed nothing, and bustled out. Sarah came in almost at once.

You wanted me, Mrs Burridge?' Sarah's smile was all that Mrs Burridge wanted just then, but she beckoned her.

I know your life is not easy at this particular moment,' she smiled, taking Sarah's hand, but I also know you do things for patients, and if you go

near a bookshop, I wish you'd do a commission for me.'

Sarah nodded. Could you write it all down

clearly, because at the present I seem to have a head stuffed with wool—well, according to Sister!'

'I will. Can it be today?'

Sarah said it could, and fled. Later she scuttled back to ask if it could be a bookshop in Queenscliffe because she had suddenly remembered that she had promised to visit an old patient, one from her last ward who had gone home two days ago, and wouldn't really feel fit enough to stand up to the onslaught of his ten children, so she had promised to take them out.

What, all ten of them? Really, my dear, is that wise? I mean, it's a stupendous task!'

Don't worry! They're not all under five, you know. The twins help—they're ten, and the youngest is pretty nifty on his pins, and I use leading strings. It's all right.'

Mrs BurrIDGE sat back and thought. This might be a better case for Andrew meeting Sarah. She tried to think of him helping with ten children, but sighed with regret. No, he would never forgive her for landing him with Sarah and ten children. That was too much even for someone as besotted with a girl as poor Andrew seemed to be over Sarah.

She lay there thinking of them. They would make a very nice pair, really, she thought, as sleep claimed her. Sarah with her most distinctive young face so full of emotions, that wholly enchanting bright spreading eager smile, and that full flooding life through her; goodness, she made half the other nurses look as though they were wilting, she was so vigorous. And Andrew, with his latent strength

and energy was very much the same. Not good-looking, but big, well-made, and such style.

She dreamed gently of them, but she couldn't make them come together, no matter how much she tried. There was that pretty little wretch from the P.T.S. hanging on to Andrew's arm, and he seemed to believe it was Sarah and Mrs BurrIDGE couldn't make herself cry out to him that it wasn't. And some other man with his back to her had got Sarah, and Sarah was being so foolish and thinking he was a man to be trusted, and then he turned round and Mrs BurrIDGE saw his face and cried out: Not him! Not him! And then the dream faded and people were round her bed, and someone was saying to Andrew that there had been an attack. A cardiac attack. But that, surely, wasn't her? Mrs BurrIDGE, fighting for her breath, tried to tell herself that that wasn't herself they were talking about. It wasn't herself that needed the oxygen mask. They were all so foolish, so wrong, and they wouldn't listen . . . Sarah! 'she called, but Sarah had gone.

Off duty, hating every minute off the wards, because there was time to think. Thelma joined her. 'You really are a clot to give up your holiday to that woolly-headed friend of yours! What did you do it for?'

'Oh, you wouldn't understand,' Sarah said cheerfully. Don't worry, I shan't get in your hair, even if I am at home!' Silly, wasn't it, apologizing for being at home, her own home, when Thelma was really only a sort of permanent guest? Sarah hated herself for that, and determined to be extra nice to Thelma. She said, Are you going out with Michael or just going walking?'

Thelma went pink. 'Michael is on duty. I never saw a Casualty Officer so hard pressed or with so little free time.'

Yes, he's like that,' Sarah agreed. 'I used to wonder, but I think he just loves his work. Nothing one can do about it!'

There is, you know,' Thelma said sweetly, but she was talking mainly to herself.

One of the porters, called after them. There was a man standing talking to him. Sarah stared at the man, fascinated. He was so handsome, yet somehow he struck her as

being bad. She gave herself a little shake, for using such an old-fashioned term, but there it was. Even Thelma, who was sophisticated, and lenient, muttered something about, Now there's a naughty boy if ever I saw one! '

The man was no boy, Sarah thought. In his early thirties, he looked as if he'd stop at nothing, and there was a rakish style about him that she found hard to resist.

The porter said, This gentleman is looking for the R.M.O.—any idea where he is, nurses?'

My name's Sadler, Luke Sadler,' the man said, with the sort of smile that meant a secret joke was going on. This chap must be very new or he would know I used to be here, too, when the R.M.O. was something rather less grand.'

Thelma went a little pink. 'I remember Dr Sadler,' she said rather stiffly. The R.M.O. has a cardiac failure on his hands at this moment, I believe, but if you could leave a note . .

How obliging of you,' he said mockingly, and he didn't take his eyes off Thelma. I suppose you would have been a tiddler in P.T.S. in those days, Staff Nurse,' he said mockingly, his eyes on her belt. Well, I suppose no one will turn the dogs

on me if I go around to look up some of the chaps, or have they all emigrated by now?'

The porter was all at sea and didn't approve of this sort of thing at all. He liked his doctors to be formal like the R.M.O. Even the Casualty Officer, who was a honey boy, knew how to behave to the porters. They were all glad when Luke Sadler took himself off to find his own way around.

'Where are you going?' Thelma asked suddenly. 'I'll come with you, I think.'

No can do,' Sarah said. She didn't want any more of her cousin's company than she could help. She kept seeing Thelma and Michael looking at each other with that special look that shut everyone else out. Got something personal and private on hand.' She looked at Thelma. Well, no, I can tell you— you can come if you like,' she said, on second thoughts, sure suddenly that Thelma wouldn't want to. I'm going to get some fish and chips and take Fred Maddison's ten kids out for the afternoon.'

'Good grief!' gasped Thelma, and swung off towards the shops, horrified at the thought of such an expedition.

Michael passed in his car as Sarah stood at the bus-stop. With the utmost amiability he stopped in the wrong place and invited her to take a lift. Only the incidence of a traffic warden approaching made her decide to hop in.

Michael, what did you want to do that for?' Sarah exploded. 'I want to go all the way to Queenscliffe I'

Well, I can take you there, can't I?' he said.

With Fred Maddison's brood, all ten of them,' she enlarged. Michael visibly quailed, but he wanted to talk to Sarah, so he said he didn't mind.

'I suppose they're fairly small and can pack in the back.' It wasn't a small car, but Sarah didn't see how it could be managed. 'Well, let's have a coffee first,' he said.

They finished by having a steak and chips in one of the back street cafés they had loved when they were going around together, and Michael talked all the time.

'I still don't see why you chucked me, Sarah. People are saying it's Thelma and me, but it isn't! They must be mad I'

Sarah said, pensively nibbling at the tip of a chip, 'I saw the way you both looked at each other. Why fight it? We weren't getting on. You have to be practical, you know I' she said severely, but inside her a new war had started. She had just discovered that

Michael's nearness didn't shake her up any more, but when she was near the R.M.O. she always went to pieces. What on earth was the matter with her?

Sarah, let's not be dotty. Let me give you my ring back,' Michael pleaded, but she shook her head.

Don't let's talk about it. I've got lots more on my plate to worry over. There's the exam.'

What's the matter with it? It's all over, and it must have been a walk-over for someone like you! '

Well, it wasn't. I did very badly. I'm dead certain I've failed, but I'm going to take it again. I don't care, I'll stay on and take it again.'

Sarah, don't be potty, darling. Never mind the beastly exam. Listen to me. I'm not the sort of chap to make pretty speeches. I just know I want to marry you. Won't you?' No, I won't,' Sarah said firmly. You want

Thelma as well, and I wouldn't be the sort of wife to like to see my husband kissing my cousin in odd corners and saying she's in the family anyway.'

I wouldn't do that! Well, not often! Well, she's so gorgeous, Sarah. A chap just naturally wants to kiss her.'

Not the man I'm married to,' Sarah said. Now, what about this lift into Queenscliffe with the kids?'

Nothing he could say would shake Sarah, so he said he'd go with her. You can't manage ten kids all on your own. What are you thinking of, Sarah?'

I'm thinking of Fred. He's not doing so well now he's home, because of the row they make. I thought I might keep them off his hands for one afternoon.'

I'll help you. Anyway, we haven't been to Queenscliffe for an age. Well, I can take the bigger boys of the party, can't I, and walk 'em or take 'em in a boat or something! Fred told me he'd got three or four boys who were keen on boats.'

Sarah was rather relieved at this suggestion. It had been a generous thought, but one that had scared her a little.

In the end they took eight, for a neighbour had decided to have the two younger ones for the afternoon. Even so, it was a squash, Sarah sitting with two small ones in the front, and the other six in the back. Michael said sharply, ' Sit still, if you don't want to overturn us,' and they sat. Sarah gave him full marks for the way he handled that journey. But he couldn't stop them talking, nor did he try. Under cover of their shrill conversation, he tried again to persuade Sarah to renew her engagement with him. You know I'm not hard up, Sarah,' he urged.

I'm not lousy with money like the R.M.O.,' he added.

That was unwise. It intrigued Sarah. She hadn't known that the R.M.O. was wealthy, outside of his salary as the hospital's most important resident physician.

' And I haven't got three different properties like he has, but I could buy you a decent house near wherever place we decided I'd work. That'd be up to you, too!'

' Why,' she asked carefully, ' have you suddenly dragged Dr Haynes in for comparison?'

Because you've been seen around with him! I thought he was your new bloke. A bit old in the tooth for you, but still, girls do funny things on the rebound!'

One of the boys missed fire, hitting his brother, and clonked Michael on his back. ' Cut it out ! ' he said, and peace reigned in the back for a while. The children started chasing a spider about the floor of the car. Sarah said indignantly, I am not on the

rebound, and I am not going around with the R. M. Anyway, what about Olive Jermyn?

' That little fiend? What about her?'

She's been seen in the R.M.O.'s car with him!

' Sarah, dear Sarah, she has to be in a car of sorts to be got out to the riding school because no bus goes near there.'

' Riding school?' Sarah said blankly.

' Lord, didn't you know about that? I suppose I've let the cat out of the bag. Well, forget it. Still, any fool must know he's not likely to go for that little horror in a big way.'

' But she's so pretty!'

' So is poison ivy, according to some people, but

you don't have to pick it! '

The sea, the sea! ' the children suddenly shrilled, so Michael amiably invited them to shut up while he found a place to park, then he took the boys off to find a boat, and turned the little ones over to Sarah to take to the baby's paddling pool.

Andrew Haynes found her licking an ice-cream cornet, the children all round her burying their faces blissfully into candy-floss.

She suspended her cornet. Dr Haynes! I

thought you had an emergency and couldn't come out,' she faltered, feeling oddly guilty without knowing why.

' I did. Mrs Burrige. She's all right now. She was rather poorly, worrying about you. No, I don't say it was because you did anything to worry her— what I'm saying is she got the idea that you were with—Who are you with, by the way?'

' Oh, it's because I told her that I was taking ten children of a patient to Queenscliffe. I shouldn't have!' Sarah said, contrite. Anyway, in the end only eight came, and Michael Armstrong drove us here.'

Oh, Armstrong! ' Yet it wasn't with dislike so much as relief that the R.M.O. said it. ' Where is he now?'

He took the bigger boys out in a boat. He's awfully good with them. I feel awful that he's being so kind because he wants to be engaged to me again, and I've told him and told him that I don't want to, and why.' She sighed. I'm so sorry about Mrs Burrige. She's so nice. Are you sure she'll be all right?'

Quite sure,' he said, and for no good reason patted her shoulder. Good girl, I'm glad Armstrong's keeping an eye on you. Is he going to take you all back?'

' I expect so,' Sarah said.

He stood there with his hand on her shoulder, half leaning over her talking to one of the small ones, who was trying to persuade him to take a lick at her candy-floss. They looked pleasantly intimate, Karen thought, as she watched them from the pier. It was stupid of her sister Rose to keep saying that the R.M.O. wasn't batty about that Sarah Darley. Anyone could see with half an eye that he was.

Karen was feeling disgruntled. She had no one to go out with, this nice afternoon, and that Olive Jermyn had spoilt it all by demonstrating how easy it was to pick up a smart boy. Karen was fuming as she remembered the demonstration Olive had given her the last time they were out together. Karen couldn't think how she did it. Of course Olive was madly pretty, but it was the way she did it. She just picked her group of young men, and walked past them. To Karen's eyes it was no different from Olive walking down the male ward at the hospital, but sure as fate, one of the young men would detach himself from the group, and as if mesmerized, follow her.

Karen hated to be bested, but she had tried it, time and again. She knew she wasn't bad to look at, but nothing happened when she did it. She was too proud to ask Olive to demonstrate again. Her fury took it out in another form. She had to mix things for someone else, and if ever a group asked for it, it was that Sarah, looking messy with an ice cream cornet, the kids all fighting to cuddle her, candy-floss and all, and the R.M.O. drooling over her, as if he wanted to bite a lump out of her.

It was sickening, Karen thought. He wouldn't look like that if that old story of his could be turned up, she was sure. She wished passionately that she knew what it was.

Little threads, murmurs, whispers, bits of gossip, like gossamer blown in the wind, floated on the air at the hospital, from people who had been there when it had happened, but Karen could never find out what it was. Even that Victoria and her own sister Rose knew what it was, but they wouldn't tell her, wouldn't let her get near enough to hear when they had been discussing it, that day in the Store. All Karen had been able to hear with any certainty was that it had been in the newspapers. It must have been pretty bad, or spicy, or something, to be worth putting in print.

Newspapers. Surely it might be in the local one here in Queenscliffe? The story took root in her mind. She saw the R.M.O. leave Sarah, with a good show of reluctance. Sarah didn't appear to mind, but the children did. They ran after him calling him back, but he didn't return. He waved to Sarah. Michael Armstrong came a bit later, with some more children, and sat with his arm round Sarah until she moved it by getting up to take the little ones paddling. Really, some creatures had all the luck! Two men soppy over her, and she didn't even bother to make up. Today Sarah's hair was windblown, and her turtle-necked sweater so casual that Karen was shocked. There would probably be candy-floss on it now. But there was the Casualty Officer, by her side again, and she was supposed to have broken her engagement and been bawling over it, in the fish tank room.

Karen, sickened, went to the newspaper office archives and feverishly work for the rest of her time off, till she found it. Not so many years ago, she thought, and . . . there was that man in the story, the devilish man who had turned up today and been called by the older doctors Dr Sadler. Dr Luke Sadler.

CHAPTER VIII

Mrs BurrIDGE was much better by the time Sarah went back on the ward again. Mrs BurrIDGE was so pleased to see her.

'Where did you spend your free time, my child?' Sarah told her.

'With eight children, all so young? Did you have no one to help you with them?'

Sarah went pink, but busied herself around the room while she talked. Too many helpers. The young man I used to be engaged to, and then the R.M.O. turned up.'

'What happened?' Mrs BurrIDGE wanted to know.

'Nothing. Dr 'Haynes seemed quite relieved to hear it was Michael who had taken the boys in the boat and was coming back to take us home in his car. I don't know who else he thought might have helped me, but he certainly seemed to approve of Michael being there.'

What did Michael say to Dr Haynes being there?' Mrs Burrridge wanted to know.

Sarah had been told to stay there a while and talk to this patient if she needed it. Mrs Burrridge was really interested in the outcome of that outing, so Sarah told her in a hearty voice as devoid of romance as anything could be, Nothing! Dr Haynes had gone by the time Michael came back.'

Didn't the children give the game away?'

Give the game away? Oh, I don't think it mattered, you know. Dr Haynes is like one's favourite uncle, and the children like both of them. Michael has the edge on them, I think, because he's young

and vital and terribly handsome and such fun to be with. You know, he really goes with them.'

' I know,' Mrs Burrridge agreed. ' Have you ever thought—if all your men-friends were in equal danger and you could save one—which one it would be?'

Sarah laughed, ' That hoary old one! Fancy you, Mrs Burrridge! I can't see any of the men-friends I've ever had letting a girl rescue them. Michael wouldn't like it a bit ! '

But it's an interesting argument, don't you think? Take, for instance, the Casualty Officer and Dr Haynes. Say that something heavy was going to fall on them as they stood talking, and you had lost your voice with a cold and couldn't call out. You could just reach one to give him a helpful shove. Which would it be? (It's just an argument, but the answer might be interesting!) Which one would you want it to be?'

Sarah's jaw dropped. ' Mrs Burrridge, what a gruesome person you are! I don't know! I can't think! I'd want to save them both!'

' But suppose you could only have the life of one, like the old legend. " Name one," said the wicked Caliph. " Only one life." Which?'

Sarah thought Mrs Burrridge was every bit as wicked as the old Caliph. I don't know,' she said crossly. I'm not going to think about it, and you're not going to make me. Oh, what about the present I chose for you? I do hope it was all right?'

Mrs Burrridge thoughtfully considered the sudden brilliant smile Sarah had turned on, and said, Oh, yes, the R.M.O. liked it very well. You'd want to save him, wouldn't you? Sarah's face flamed. I might, at that, because

man for man, he's the most use to so many people. If you want to know, I heard the other day that he's got a brilliant future ahead of him in research, and he needn't work hard at all really, not to make a living, that is, because he isn't hard up. The thing is, he likes research, so he would have to be the one to be saved. Does that answer your question? This is taking advantage of a poor little nurse, and you should be ashamed!'

' I shouldn't have teased you, my dear. It was naughty of me, but I've never enjoyed myself so much in my life as in these last ten minutes. Sarah! Be careful, my dear!'

Why did you say that?' Sarah, half way to the door, paused to ask.

There's a man, about here perhaps—well he used to be, and I have a feeling he's about here again—he's a quite wicked man, but you'd never know. Sarah, I wish you would be careful who you go out with.'

Sarah came back. Dear Mrs Burrridge, you're thinking of Matt, at the junk shop—the one I told you about. And he wouldn't be wicked to me. He likes me and I like him,' and she hustled out, conscious of Sister's ' war-path ' sound up the corridor.

For Sarah the days were tearing by. Victoria's wedding was the one thing they talked about. Her soldier came over to the hospital, and he was just what the others had guessed he would be; rather fine to look at, but not particularly brilliant Victoria worshipped him and kept saying things like Donald says ' and Donald thinks ' and to

him Oh, Donald!' in delight and pretended shock at everything he said to her. Sarah, still thinking of

what-might-have-been with Michael, felt a little sick. Yet when she was with Michael, which happened nowadays too often for comfort, she found that she hadn't been wrong that last time and that the old exhilarating mood with him had gone.

' Why don't you keep out of my hair?' she demanded of him angrily one day. You're Thelma's man now, and she'll be livid if she hears we've been to Blidbourne together! '

Don't be silly, love, I only offered you a lift. Sarah, are you sure you won't come back to me?' he asked comically.

This was happening with increasing frequency, so that when Dr Sadler drove by one day and asked her if she needed a lift into Queenscliffe, she accepted with alacrity and just beat Michael with a counter offer. His car was held up by an ambulance, and before he could get to where she had been standing, Dr Sadler had put his foot down hard on the accelerator and they had shot forward and away.

This is a marvellous car,' Sarah said rather breathlessly. ' I've never been in a low-slung sports model before.'

She's not bad,' Luke Sadler agreed. Where do you want to be dropped in Queenscliffe?'

Oh, anywhere. I just want to kill time. I can't bear it at the hospital. My friend keeps talking about her wedding—it's tomorrow—and I'm being pretty mean, but honestly it gets a bit much.'

Seeing you lost your man to the handsome redhead you were with the other day,' he nodded. Oh, the old grapevine is just as busy as when I was here. Tell me, what have you heard about me?'

Well, nothing, Dr Sadler,' Sarah said blankly. What could I have heard ?'

' That cousin of yours could have told you, but I suppose you're both at each other's throats over the Casualty Officer. Pretty lad, isn't he?'

Sarah giggled, wondering what Michael would say if he heard another man call him a pretty lad. He would be livid. She stirred uneasily. She wasn't sure that she liked this Dr Sadler, but he certainly stimulated her.

' I broke it off with Michael myself. I'm not sorry. I just wonder why he and Thelma haven't done something about it as they seemed to be so wretched when they were kept apart by me.'

Well, that's often the way, you know. The person is always more divine when unattainable. Have you no one else on your hook, young lady? (I really think I must call you Sarah, although it's such a short acquaintance, because I've never met a girl who looked more like a Sarah than you do!) May I?'

Well, I don't mind, but what did you mean by that, Dr Sadler?'

Oh, for heaven's sake, my name's Luke! I was never one to stand on ceremony. And you look like a Sarah because you haven't got any beauty but a dickens of a lot of the , other ingredients which fetch the boys less blatantly. I think you're the sort of girl who could brighten my sad life quite a bit while I'm here, and I could do quite a bit for you, too! Good gracious, having got rid of the current man, you mustn't run around with no one! Fatal, that! Loses prestige quicker than anything! Better go around with me, my dear, till you find a more permanent substitute for the first lad. What do you say?'

He seemed so reasonable about it, yet she couldn't

forget what Thelma had said, and how stiff she had been, which was odd, because Thelma liked all men. There wasn't a man breathing, not even old Granfer Smith who had been in James Ward for so long he was permanent, hadn't something to offer Thelma. Men, Thelma seemed to say, made living possible, when you came to think of all the women who surrounded one. Still, there was a lot of what Dr Sadler said, even though Thelma didn't seem to care for him

So Sarah agreed, and that day he took her to a rather sophisticated film show and roared her back to the hospital in good time to sign in. The next day he took her to Blidbourne for coffee and to examine the cathedral, a thing she hadn't expected from him, and which somehow made him seem respectable. And inevitably Luke was there to comfort her in his own racy manner after Victoria's wedding.

She met him accidentally, and didn't guess that he had been unobtrusively hanging about for that purpose.

Well, was it pretty ghastly?' he asked her with a

' Pretty ghastly. Well, not from my best friend's point of view! It was a smallish party and they went off in a hurry. Not many of us could get off for it, being an awkward time.' And she thought of Victoria, her fair hair looking glorious, done in a fantastic style by one of the second-years who had been a hairdresser before she came to the hospital; Victoria in a soft grey-blue, with pink rosebuds and a froth of blue veiling instead of a hat. Her eyes had been misty with happiness, and her soldier had looked handsome and wooden. Sarah did ask herself what he would be like in a domestic emergency,

such as a tree falling on a roof, or Victoria having to be delivered of twins if the ambulance couldn't get through the floods. Things like that happened more often than not, but she supposed that a soldier had some sort of training which would cover for his lack of brilliance.

And then they had gone, amid the good wishes and vociferous goodbyes of their friends, off to the hotel Sarah had booked for her own holiday, and she was left to think of going home and helping her father with the practice, and falling foul of Thelma when she brought Michael home for the week-end. She had revolted, and wired home that she wouldn't be coming after all, and then Luke Sadler had been there.

' How did you know I'd be in the Post Office?' she asked blankly.

' Because I was parked outside the church and saw you come out and go in the Post Office,' he said reasonably. Was not our dear R.M.O. at the wedding?'

No, he was asked —because he was the one who got the special licence, you know, as he was the only one who knew a bishop—'

Wha-a-at?' Luke gasped, and looked thunderous.

Goodness, what is this thing about The bishop?' Sarah gasped. ' That's a little how Dr Haynes looked when I asked him if he knew one I '

' I should jolly well think so! ' he said, between his teeth. Don't you know the story of his life, really, Sarah?'

No. Does it concern the bishop?'

Get in,' ordered Luke, and while we're driving, I'll tell you a thing or two about your dear R.M.O.

He was responsible for a girl's death, and he has the gall to approach her uncle about some little nurse's wedding! Well, well, if that doesn't beat everything!'

Oh,, no!' Sarah gasped. It was all my fault for bothering him. I shouldn't have asked him, but he did say that I could ask him anything and go to him for any help I wanted at

any time I He's been very good to me. Poor man, fancy losing a patient, and then me asking him—'

She wasn't a patient ! ' Luke said bitterly. Far from it.' But that, unfortunately, was as far , as he would go.

Sarah was surprised that she should feel so heated about any aspersion cast on the R.M.O. But she did, and she told Luke Sadler so in no uncertain terms.

He's a marvellous man and I'm quite certain that he wouldn't do any of these things you suggest. There must have been some mistake. You got the story wrong!'

She was so fierce about it, Luke was amused in spite of himself. ' Oh, no, I didn't,' he assured her. But if you want to carry a torch for dear Andrew Haynes, it's all right with me !'

She sat silent, thinking over all the vague things Luke Sadler had said about the R.M.O. Very few facts, but enough aspersions to make her feel that Andrew Haynes was not all that she had felt him to be, by any manner of means.

Why can't you tell me exactly what happened?' she demanded, after a while.

Oh, I could,' Luke said easily, but I perceive that in your present mood you wouldn't believe any of them. No, much better to ask him yourself.'

' I can't do that ! Besides, my father always says that you never get a straight answer by demanding it!'

No, but you can form a thumping good conclusion by watching the person's face and considering how they wriggle out of answering,' Luke said shrewdly. It's old history, I know, but it made quite a stir at the time, believe me ! '

' Then,' said Sarah belligerently, if that's true, how came it that he stayed on all these years in the same place, if he was guilty?'

' Ah, well, now you're asking!' Luke shrugged. ' There are people who can brazen things out!'

Yes, and there are people who are wrongfully accused when they're innocent all the time. I don't believe Andrew Haynes is guilty of any such thing! ' Sarah shot at him.

' My, my, what a champion he has in you,' Luke said with lazy amusement, and adroitly turned the conversation before she had a chance to strengthen her faith in her hero by any more information she might think she had dug out.

Luke was good at taking a person's mind off something. He had an easy way of going on, which got him the best service in restaurants and car parks. People liked him, while recognizing, as Thelma had, that he was what the head porter of the hospital might have termed a wrong 'un, but a lovable wrong 'un '. He turned Sarah's mind from the wedding and all the things she had lost in these last few weeks, and he kept her from thinking about Andrew Haynes, too.

But if he doubted that he could swerve Sarah from worshipping the R.M.O., he was wrong. There was also Karen to contend with. When Sarah returned

to the hospital, Rose, lonely without Victoria, who had been closer to her than to Sarah, wandered in and slumped down on Victoria's bed.

I wonder who you'll get in here,' she said. Why didn't you go off for your holiday? Take your mind off it all.'

Work's the only thing that will do that!' Sarah said stormily. And the next time Dr Sadler calls for me, I'm not available, remember?'

Dr Sadler? I thought you liked him,' Rose frowned. It isn't the first time you've been around with him, is it?'

Sarah hunched her shoulders angrily. Well, I had to have someone with me, so that Michael wouldn't keep on—well, you know how it is! That's why I didn't want to go home, in a way. There's enough trouble with Thelma, on and off, and she really thinks I'm trying to get Michael back! How mad can you get?'

` So? What's Dr Sadler done to annoy you?'

You'll never believe this, but he's been telling me the most awful things about Dr Haynes!' Sarah burst out.

Rose looked guarded. What sort of things?'

Oh, some old scandal. He actually said—he actually said Dr Haynes was responsible for some girl's death.'

Well,' Rose said, studying her fingernails, ` so he was.'

Sarah sat down suddenly on her bed. What did you say?'

You tell me just what Dr Sadler said, and why, because for the life of me I can't think why one doctor should want to return and stir up old trouble for another, except that I suppose Dr Sadler is like

that. Yes, I suppose he really is like that.'

' I don't know what you're talking about! I only happened to mention that Dr Haynes had been kind enough to help to get the special licence from some bishop he knew, for Victoria—what's wrong with that? Well, I didn't see anything in it, but it seems the bishop was the uncle of this girl.'

Rose looked appalled. Oh, I forgot! Of course, he would be. Well, I didn't know. It's only what I've heard, of course. Everyone seems to know about it, but it's thought to be best forgotten. There was a doubt, you see.'

That bucked Sarah up. I thought there would be! I was sure there would be! He couldn't do anything bad! I told Dr Sadler so. I hate him.'

Karen wanted to know all about it,' Rose said unwillingly. We were talking about it that day when you went off on your own to get a fluffy toy, remember? We saw the R.M.O. wandering about trying to find some department and we had to keep pushing Karen away so she couldn't hear what we were saying. But she got very fed up about it.'

Go on,' Sarah said. You'd better tell me.'

Well, actually, she was determined to find out, and somehow she got hold of an old newspaper.'

Sarah was furious. And she's spreading it around, I suppose? Why didn't you stop her? What was the story?'

First, how can I stop Karen doing anything? Second, it would have come out anyway, because that Dr Sadler coming back has reminded everyone about it. They were old enemies, apparently, he and the R.M.O. '

You can say that again! ' Sarah said angrily. Is it asking too much to see this old newspaper?'

Rose went back to her room and got it. It was just a cutting out of a newspaper. She cut it out herself. It's my unenviable job to take it back and try to stick it in when no one's looking, I suppose. I told her she shouldn't have robbed a file copy!'

Sarah didn't answer. She was intent on reading. But it didn't give her many of the answers she wanted to know. There was a picture of Andrew Haynes, looking harassed, very much as he looked nowadays sometimes when something had gone wrong and he was hard pressed. And there was another doctor, a woman doctor; in her thirties, and to Sarah's mind rather like someone's aunt. She's not the one he's

supposed to have been responsible for her death ! ' she said disgustedly. ' What a fuss to make—a couple of doctors out on accident duty and one accidentally gets killed! What about it?'

I don't know. The findings were a doubt, you see. I think the idea was that he could have rescued her, but he didn't. People are saying there was feeling about something.'

But that's ridiculous!' Sarah stormed. ' Anyway, he did bring her out of this place they were trapped in, only he couldn't get her out alive! I reckon he was jolly brave ! '

Still, something's wrong there,' Rose insisted. I mean, there's no smoke without fire, and people keep talking about it. Some people are even saying that she was the one who was secretly engaged to him and whom he jilted,' Rose added worriedly. ' But I wish you'd forget about it, Sarah. If only that Dr Sadler would go away, it would all die down again and he'd be left in peace.'

' Who are you anxious about? The R.M.O.'s reputation or Karen for tearing this out of a file

copy and probably showing it to one or two of her friends?'

Rose looked so wretched that Sarah pounced on her. ' I know what it is I Karen was responsible for it getting all over the place! That's it, isn't it?'

Rose burst into tears. The wedding and the change of duty hadn't helped her, either. She hadn't told Sarah, but at that time on Children's Ward there had been a couple of very bad cases. An accident victim of six years who had looked so much like Karen at that age that Rose had been almost broken up when they lost the child after a struggle; and a child who had to be drained of abdominal fluid every so often and was still hanging on to life by a thread. Every day Rose promised herself that she would ask to be transferred, and every day she put it off, telling herself not to be a ninny It was all very fine for Victoria to escape by marriage, but Rose wasn't engaged to anyone, and her steady boy-friend was a doctor, anyway.

Sarah stalked out and left her. It might have been better as things turned out, if she hadn't happened to run into Karen almost at once. But she did, and she gave Karen such a dressing-down for what she had done that Karen was almost on the point of rushing to Matron's Office to ask to be released from a job she was now beginning to hate.

Sarah marched off, and was conscious that she was still holding the cutting. She stood still, indeterminate, wondering what to do about it. She had by then left the Nurses' Home, to go over to the wards. Dr Haynes found her there, in the middle of the grass square outside the Male Wing, staring at the paper.

He took it from her. Wretchedly she looked up at him. Remembering what Dr Sadler had said,

she watched his face. It was like a mask of stone.

' Yours, I think?' he said coldly, giving it back to her. ' Or did Luke Sadler give it to you?'

She gaped at him. Surely he hadn't seen her with Luke Sadler? Never fear, dear Nurse Darley,' the R.M.O. said sarcastically, if I don't happen to see what you're up to, there are plenty of people who do, and are only too ready to tell me that you're out a lot with him and getting very thick with him '

He thrust the cutting into his pocket as he turned away, saying, With your record and the hash you made of your exam. I don't imagine you want me to speak to Matron about you, so make sure I don't hear you're fraternizing with Luke Sadler again!'

Her face flamed. Why? What's wrong with him?' she demanded. ' And may I have that cutting back, please?'

' There's plenty wrong with him, and you're not to go out with him because I say so! No, you can't have this cutting back, since it refers to me only. I shall destroy it.'

But you can't! It was cut out of a file—it never ought to have been! It has to go back to the newspaper archives—at once before they discover its loss!'

A little belated,' he said coldly, rendering up the cutting with the tip of thumb and forefinger in a fastidious gesture that reduced her to thorough shame. ' I would hardly have thought you'd make such a thing your recreation, even though it sounds pretty much in keeping with Sadler!' And he marched off, "leaving her holding the cutting, conscious of the inquisitive stares of a bunch of P.T.S. girls passing, and a staff nurse who had surely been close enough to hear a lot of that conversation.

CHAPTER IX

Sarah's troubles were by no means over. Her family telephoned, wanting to know what she was about: first she had said she would be going away on the holiday of a lifetime, all booked up, then she had said it had fallen through and she was coming home, and finally she had said she would be a day or two late. What was she about?

Sarah said she wasn't coming home at all now. Her mother was never an easy person to talk to about such things, and it was a rather incoherent explanation that finally found its way to Sarah's father's ears. If only 'Sarah could have spoken to the doctor, it would have been all right, or even one of her grandmothers. As it was, they had a much better explanation given to them by Thelma, who told them succinctly that Sarah had thrown over the Casualty Officer, who was now more interested in Thelma herself, and that Sarah now discovered that she could hardly come home for her holiday without embarrassment as Thelma meant to bring him home for next week-end.

Matron sent for Sarah, to ask why she was still at the hospital when she should have gone either for her holiday or home for that fortnight, so Sarah had some sort of excuse to invent there. Matron said slowly, I have heard a rather different account from the R.M.O. who seems to be doubtful about your health at the present moment. Do you think you could elucidate, nurse?'

So Sarah had to admit that she had let her best friend have her reservation for her honeymoon.

Matron didn't care for such shilly-shallyings, as she termed it. She was a great believer in making a plan and holding to it. She was not a believer in allowing one's best friend to coax one out of a set course of action. Sarah did her best, but floundered before Matron's penetrating glance and finally agreed to go somewhere if somewhere could be found. Matron said coldly, The chances are that as you have nowhere to go, you will be asked to accompany a patient home and stay for light duties. As we are very short-staffed,' she added.

Sarah escaped. She didn't care what happened to her now. It was all messed up. She was almost in tears when she went into Mrs Burridge's room, and as the R.M.O.

had only just departed, and Mrs Burridge was now up to date with everything, she wanted to hear what had happened with Matron.

Sarah gave a very vague account and said that Matron had been kind to her. As Mrs Burridge didn't like Matron at all, it was hardly surprising that she didn't believe that story.

Now listen to me, my dear. If I can arrange for you to stay somewhere, will you go, and not ask questions or raise difficulties or doubts?

Sarah shot her a glance of suspicion. She suddenly remembered that Mrs Burridge was a great friend of the R.M.O.

You'd better not,' she said fiercely. ' Make arrangements for me, I mean. Because you won't like to do such a thing when I tell you that Dr Haynes hates me.'

' What's that got to do with my little act of kindness, my dear?' Mrs Burridge said tranquilly. Why do you think he hates you?'

Oh, it's horrible, horrible. I was feeling low

after my best friend got married, and Dr Sadler was around to give me a lift—he does sometimes—'

Luke Sadler!' Mrs Burridge exclaimed. The had not mentioned him. Is he around again?'

Didn't you know? Oh, yes, he came back and he told me the most awful things about Dr Haynes, and I wouldn't believe him, only one of the young ones found a cutting in a newspaper office and brought it back (you're not supposed to remove anything from the files, but she did !) and she's the sister of my best friend and they showed me, so I had to believe it. Then like a ninny I was looking at the cutting and wondering how to get it back when Dr Haynes saw me, and he tore me off a strip because of the cutting and he wasn't going to give it back. He also tore me off a strip because he'd heard gossip about me and Dr Sadler and he ordered me, ordered me, not to be seen with Dr Sadler again! '

What an outburst, Sarah! ' Mrs Burridge smiled. No wonder you're out of breath. And I must say, my dear, that even though Andrew handled it very badly, he was right. Dr Sadler is, I regret, not a good man. Not medically—he's a very fine doctor, so they tell me. But I wouldn't want a young relative of mine to be about with him. Oh, dear, what have I said, and do I really mean it like that? No, I do not. What I mean is, he's a very ruthless man. He uses people to his own ends and he doesn't scruple to tell all of the truth, when a half truth will get him what he wants. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

Not really, because what's so unusual about that? I know other men like that, and no one says they're bad!' Sarah said. Besides, I keep remembering

what my friend Rose said, that Dr Haynes jilted that girl and then didn't save her life.'

Oh, now, Sarah, I do know that for a fact to be quite untrue, and I must really tell you about it. Look, my dear—'

She gasped, and tried to sit up, and her face went a terrible colour. Mrs Burridge ' Sarah gasped. What's the matter? Wait, let me get someone - Sister-! ' -

Sarah scuttled to the door, forgetting to ring the bell, but was fortunate enough to catch Sister coming along at that moment with Dr Fenn. They hastened into Mrs Burridge's ward and the R.M.O. was sent for, and in the confusion Sarah never did hear what Mrs Burridge had said roundly was the truth about Andrew Haynes and that old affair.

Sarah stood with her back to the door of the linen cupboard, the traditional hide ' for every nurse while she does what Home Sister called in her old-fashioned way ' recovering her countenance ' which, although as P.T.S. babes, they had all laughed their heads off in secret about Home Sister's expressions, was really very near the mark. Sarah was crying silently and couldn't stop and she didn't really know what she was crying for. Mrs Burridge, who she had just realized must have been the cardiac failure case that had been on the R.M.O.'s hands that first day they had met Dr Sadler? Or because Mrs Burridge hadn't managed to tell her the things she had meant to about the R.M.O. and that Mrs Burridge might very well die and not tell her?, Mrs Burridge seemed to be the only one who knew Andrew Haynes at all well, but was Mrs Burridge not a trifle prejudiced in his favour? Or was Sarah crying for the R.M.O. whom she had just said

terrible things about? After all, if someone meant something to you, you had to believe the best of them, surely, and not listen to things about them?

Even newspaper reports, common sense asked her, in one of those spiking questions that must have an answer. No, she couldn't get round that newspaper report of a case which as good as laid the blame for that other doctor's death at the hands of Dr Haynes, even if it hadn't actually been said in so many words. All wrapped up very nicely, so that the case could be wound up, but a little doubt left like a maggot, in everyone's mind.

She came out, in her usual vigorous fashion, like a shot out of a gun, leaving the linen room door thump-thumping behind her, and almost knocked the ward sister down.

Ah, nurse, yes, I want you,' she said. Come into my office, if you please.'

Sarah followed her. She looked keenly at Sarah, and said briskly, Wipe your eyes, girl, and pull yourself together. The patient is all right now. But you must have known that she is subject to these attacks. What upset her? You were the only one with her, weren't you?'

Sarah wondered dully why she got herself into such positions that gave people in authority the right to ask all these awkward questions of her. She said carefully, Mrs Burridge was asking me a few things, and when I told her, she disagreed and just sat up to tell me what she believed was the truth, then she started gasping and went a queer colour and I hurried out for help.'

Yes, quite, but it hasn't answered my question really, has it? What was she getting so excited about?'

Dr Haynes, if you please, Sister, and it was rather personal, and I'd rather not say anything else because I'm afraid it would upset Mrs Burridge again if she heard. I'd mentioned it even to you. Please, Sister!'

Sister sighed, her lips twitching ' I see. Very well, I don't propose to question you further on that. One more thing, however. What about this nonsense over your holiday? Are you going home or aren't you?'

Please, Sister, Mrs Burridge wants me to go somewhere of her choosing,' Sarah said, as if only the fact that Mrs Burridge had asked would cause her to consider the matter,,

All right. Let me know the minute you've decided,' Sister said, and after Sarah had gone out, she sat with her hands clasped together in front of her, thinking. Was this the girl the R.M.O. was so het up about? Or was it that tiresome, dangerously pretty P.T.S. girl, Olive Jermyn, who was, after all, being taken by the R.M.O. to his own sister's riding school in every bit of free time the girl had? All very fine for people to say that it

was because the Jermyn girl was making herself a nuisance to the person the R.M.O. was really interested in, but frankly, Sister Wills considered, it was all a very odd business.

There was still the cutting to be returned. As soon as Sarah was off the wards, she marched out and wondered if there was anyone she could cadge a lift from, to get to Queenscliffe in good time. If Dr Sadler had happened along just then, in spite of all the R.M.O. had said about him, she would have gone with him. This was important. But it was the R.M.O.'s car finally that nosed its way out, so

she turned away and walked quickly along.

She had still to learn that the R.M.O. wasn't a person who could be handled as easily as the other men of her acquaintance. He slowed at the kerb by her, pulled down his window without really stopping, and shouted, Get in and look sharp! I can't wait here all day!' So she wrenched open the door and scrambled in, furious that she hadn't had the nerve to ignore him and run to catch the bus just ahead of her. 'I want to go to Queenscliffe!' she said indignantly, doubting very much that that would be his destination.

And you were looking for someone to cadge a lift from someone I might know!' she flashed.

'All right, all right, I'll take you,' he growled. Now—what was going on when Mrs Burridge had that attack?'

Sarah had forgotten that he would inevitably ask her. She had thought that she had got out of it nicely when Sister Wills had abandoned the questioning. She was asking me about something private and personal,' Sarah said with dignity.

So she told me herself. She also told me not to ask any more about it, but I am not a person who is in the habit of taking orders from either a patient or a first-year nurse, so no more nonsense—what was she talking about? What was going on at the time of her attack?'

Sarah, goaded, said through her teeth, We were discussing you, Dr Haynes!'

It was so unexpected that he swerved the wheel a little and that made him angry. He was a good driver, and he hated the mere thought of having his paintwork scratched or a man in a lesser car

tooting at him, as was happening now.

He looked thunderous and got out of the town as quickly as possible without speaking to Sarah. Once out of Scopdale, of course, and high on the cliff road overlooking the town's gasworks and abandoned port, he pulled up and turned to Sarah.

He didn't get very far, however, because Sarah's face was working and tears were like beads on her thick black eyelashes, and she muttered, 'Is she going to die?'

Oh, for heaven's sake, girl!' he said crossly. You know I can't bear to see you cry. Give over, now!' and he put a careless arm round her shoulders and she pressed her face into his coat and cried unrestrainedly for a few minutes.

Presently, however, she got up, pushing away from him, and said crossly, I seem to be getting as bad as my friend Victoria for bawling,' but that wasn't a happy comment to make, because it reminded him of the bishop and the special licence, and Dr Sadler and all the disagreeable things he hadn't wanted to remember.

never mind that! what about what you were talking about to Mrs Burridge when she had her attack,' he insisted.

All right, he can have it, Sarah told herself angrily. She wanted to know what they were saying about you, and that newspaper cutting, and when I told her she didn't like it and said she'd tell me the truth, and that's when she—'

' I see. It's a pity you can't just entertain her, keep her happy, which is what is required of you at present, because that's what she asked for, and she likes you.' Then tell me how I can avoid answering one of

her direct questions, sir, because that's when every- thing comes unstuck! You know what she's like!'

He had to concede a point there. Mrs BurrIDGE was as obstinate as himself when she wanted a question answered.

All right,' he sighed. What do you want to go to Queenscliffe for?'

You won't like it if I refuse to tell you and you won't like it if I do tell you!'

Oh, Sarah,' he said helplessly, grinning at her. It was the first time he had ever used her christian name. He didn't seem to notice it, but Sarah did. She supposed it had slipped out because Mrs BurrIDGE used it so much, but when he said, You can't even mop your face up properly. You look terrible !here let me! and with a clean handkerchief mopped her face quite efficiently, Sarah felt so shaky and upset she couldn't think what was happening.

' Can we go to Queenscliffe, please, if you're sure you don't mind,' she said brusquely.

Yes,' he said, the smile fading, ' if you tell me what for !'

' To stick back that cutting about you,' she said.

He was so angry, she wondered he didn't burst a blood vessel. I told you you wouldn't like it,' she reasoned.

' Will you tell me just one thing, Sarah? What's your crusading for? The. brat who cut it out or her sister who seems to be your friend, or the whole of the miserable P.T.S. section? Who?'

' Someone you haven't mentioned,' she said, looking in front of her without blinking. And she wasn't going to say it was for his sake, either.

He studied her profile and, feeling him staring at her, she grew redder and redder in the face. But

he didn't notice. He felt he knew every feature of that profile so that he could have drawn her when she wasn't there. The wild thick dark fringe and the straight uncompromising brows, the sweet curve of her cheek and the glowing colour in it under the light tan; the cussed little chin and the saucy turned-up nose and that mouth which could sometimes be so sweet you wanted to kiss it and not stop, and sometimes so obstinate that he wanted to shake her.

He said suddenly, ' Sarah, what difference would it have made to you if Mrs BurrIDGE had told you what she considers to be the truth? Would you have believed it?'

Sarah, glad he had stopped the silent scrutiny, shook her head. ' She only sees you the way an old friend does.'

' So you prefer to believe the newspaper story?' He sounded bitter, hurt, but Sarah didn't care. She'd formed her own conclusion and she wasn't going to pull her punches.

' Not necessarily. For two pins I wouldn't take this piece back, only people, if they find the gap and know what was there, might think worse than the cutting says.'

' But you don't believe the cutting?'

' I think the only person who knows what happened truly is you. No one else has got all the full facts. No one will believe the truth about me and the Casualty Officer, which is silly, because it's no one else's business. But if I were to tell them everything they wouldn't believe it.'

Sarah, I've altered my mind. I'll tell you the whole thing, here and now. No holds barred. I've not told anyone else in the world.'

' Then why will you tell me?' she demanded,

turning round to look at him.

She didn't understand the way he was looking at her. She dropped her eyes. ' I don't want to know. It's nothing to do with me,' she said fiercely. And are we going to Queenscliffe or not, because if you're not going to take me, I can soon get a lift on a lorry,' and she started to undo the door.

No, you don't! And don't let me hear that sort of talk anymore,' he said, starting up the car. I'll take you! '

She sat back, considerably shaken. He had put his hand on her arm to stop her opening the door. As when he had put an arm round her shoulders, she had shaken with a queer excitement. She didn't like it. She was indignant and ashamed and worried all in one, and she vowed to herself that she'd keep her distance from him in future and certainly never accept another lift in his car. Talk about Dr Sadler being dangerous ! The R.M.O. was dynamite!

However, he dropped her at the newspaper offices without a word more on the subject, contenting himself with saying, ' I shall give you ten minutes. That ought to be enough. Then I'll be back, and don't keep me waiting. The traffic wardens are pretty hot in this street.'

Sarah ignored that and raced inside the building. She was lucky that day. The place she wanted to be in for her nefarious task of replacing the stolen cutting was empty. Because it was empty, she browsed through the near newspapers after she had hastily stuck in the piece Karen had purloined, and in doing so she had found what Karen had read, about Dr Sadler and his part in it.

Sarah flopped on to the chair in dismay, gasping a little with shock. Poor Dr Haynes, no wonder

he had been furious with her for going out with that snake-in-the-grass! No wonder Mrs Burridge, who liked Andrew Haynes so much, had been so worked up about Sarah's account of the affair. Sarah thought she would never be able to look anyone in the face again, let alone Andrew Haynes.

She was so furious and indignant that she marched out of the offices two minutes before Dr Haynes, held up in thick traffic, could get there. She dived down a side turning towards the bus station, thinking black thoughts about young Karen and Dr Sadler, Rose for being so weak with her young sister, and even blacker thoughts about Olive Jermyn for existing at all!

Down this street a house was being demolished. Traffic was sifigle file, and an improvised pathway for pedestrians had been arranged, some way out from where the bricks were falling, but part of the wall gave way as Sarah came along. She saw it fanning out, just as a man walked unthinkingly below.

Sarah's reflexes were working properly that afternoon. She shot forward, threw herself against the man and together they rolled outwards, through the barrier into the road. Cars pulled up on the instant and missed them by inches. A brick had caught the man's ankle a glancing blow and blood was pouring from it, but Sarah was unhurt.

A man tumbled out from one of the cars that had pulled up. It was Michael. Like Andrew Haynes, he was furious to find that Sarah had got herself into something else. He pulled Sarah carefully to her feet, but she beat him off. Don't, Michael! Look—this poor man! Do something for him!

Andrew Haynes passed along the end of the street and automatically stopped when he saw the crowd. He was in time to see Michael with his arm round Sarah. At that distance he couldn't see that Sarah was making determined efforts to discourage him. Someone was running to fetch an ambulance, but someone else said that it didn't matter, there was a doctor there who said he'd run the man to Scopdale in his car. It would be quicker. So Andrew, reading the wrong things into what Sarah had said about the Casualty Officer and the fact that she was with him now and not waiting on the kerb outside the newspaper offices for Andrew himself to pick her up as arranged, decided he was being a prize fool, and drove off without another glance.

Thelma was waiting for Michael to pick her up. He hadn't been able to get away when she did, for their week-end at home. Thelma stood outside the hospital wall, her cases beside her, and she wasn't pleased when Luke Sadler paused by her in his rakish-looking car, taking in the picture.

Stood you up?' he asked sympathetically.

'No, not necessarily, Dr Sadler,' she said frigidly.

Go on! I just saw him drive round to Casualty with a victim, and your belligerent little cousin with him.'

Thelma was betrayed into surprise. She almost moved to go round to Casualty to look for herself, but Luke Sadler's mocking smile stopped her.

Well, she is a nurse,' she said. I expect she was roped in to help with the victim if she was near.'

Coincidence,' said Luke, shaking his head. 'I did hear that she went off with the Thelma went on, so I'm sure it wasn't anything

but an accident.'

But at that moment the R.M.O. drove past, and swung his big car into the opening to the Residents' car park as if he had a grudge against the very hospital and everyone in it.

Not with him now,' Luke said, still in that mocking tone. He doesn't look very pleased, either.'

Well, are you going to sit there until a traffic warden catches you, Dr Sadler, or can you bring yourself to take me and my cases to the station?'

Only waiting to be asked,' he grinned. He got out and lifted her cases aboard for her. Tell me, what do you see in our boyish Casualty Officer?'

He is not boyish!' she snapped.

He is, you know! I had a chat with him. Didn't want Sarah when he had the chance. Taken up with a beautiful redhead. Then he lost Sarah to the R.M.O. and Sarah's stock went up. Not that Sarah realized it, and she hates the R.M.O.'s guts now I've had a few words with her. But the Casualty Officer is dead certain that he's mistaken and lost a prize among ladies.'

Thelma whitened. She usually did when she was angry.

Not that you care!' he murmured. I daresay you've only been stringing him along for fun, while there was nothing else doing! A bit on the young side for someone sophisticated like you, I would have said!'

'I need someone more like . . . yourself, no doubt, Dr Sadler?' she said bitingly.

' Oh, bad show! Being like that doesn't suit you,' Luke remonstrated with her. No, no, you should be smooth, carefree, liking everyone—that's the ticket with those looks of yours. Think what you

like inside that pretty head, your thoughts are your own. But newer spit—gives credence to the old tag, Redhead, sorehead, gingerbread. Never did like that old tag. Damned silly when you come to think of it. Can't all be alike You, I would say, have hidden depths.'

' Never mind that! We've just gone past the station!' Thelma exploded.

Yes, well, I thought to myself, I'm not doing anything. Why don't I take you right home? Eh?'

Thelma eased out, and murmured, ' Why not, if you've nothing better to do? You might be more amusing than Michael, who does tend to get into a huddle with my uncle, who is also a doctor. Talking shop over the week-end is not my idea of a rest.' ' I'm a doctor too,' he reminded her.

Urn, but I somehow can't see you spending a week-end in a country surgery when there are other things to do, Dr Sadler,' she said demurely, and Thelma with her sophisticated good looks, appearing demure, was tantamount to an open invitation.

Michael suddenly remembered her after relinquishing his patient to the plasterers in the form of a dresser and a staff nurse, and gave his attention to Sarah.

Look, love, I've just remembered I was to pick Thelma up and take her home for the week-end. Wish it was to have been you, Sarah. I don't suppose—'

No, Michael, no!' Sarah said firmly. ' I feel lots better now I've had some tea, and you're to hurry or Thelma will pitch into me when she comes back.' But couldn't you, Sarah—? Michael pleaded.

If you want to know,' she said, losing patience, ' I couldn't because I've been batty enough to fall for someone else. Now, will you go and find Thelma?'

She put her cup down and fled, before he started questioning her. Everyone knew she had been around alternatively with the R.M.O. and Dr Sadler. She could only hope that the grapevine would pick on Dr Sadler as the likely one.

She thought of the moment in the car when she had cried on Andrew Haynes' shoulder and for a minute or two she enjoyed a shattering ecstasy that scared her a little, before she put the thought away and told herself firmly that she hated him.

But Karen and Olive between them had done their work well, and the grapevine was humming with gossip about Sarah and about both the R.M.O. and Dr sadler.

It was because of this that Matron decided to force Sarah into going away from the hospital; not just for a fortnight but for a much longer time.

Sarah listened to the edict with gloom. You remember Mr Felstead in your own ward, Nurse Darley?'

Sarah did. Thin, white and miserable, Colin Felstead in his side ward, with secretaries and other people from the thriving firm left to him by his father; a little wisp of a man who not only didn't seem to realize he was big business in a town like Scopdale, but didn't enjoy the mantle of importance. He looked like a tired sick boy, but had none of the attributes of such a boy so that Sarah could even feel sorry for him. She didn't like him and she never had, and now she heard with dismay that she was to go with him to his family's estate beyond

Blidbourne, with its own private beach, its tennis courts and croquet lawns, its fine stabling, and many other delights which she had been invited to use while being with their son as companion, private secretary, nurse, general factotum, it seemed to her. Please, Matron, must I?' she asked despairingly.

'Many young women would regard it as a splendid opportunity,' Matron said crushingly. You are needing a holiday and the air is very fine there!'

If anyone needed fresh air, it wasn't Sarah but the patient, Matron reflected, taking in Sarah's clear eyes and glowing cheeks. Yes, well, have you any better ideas for spending your holiday and keeping yourself out of the sphere of the gossip that has unfortunately grown up around you, to the detriment of the hospital?'

Sarah bit her lip, and wondered why she wasn't just being thrown out.

Matron said, I take it that you will hardly be surprised to hear that the results of the exam—'

Sarah held her breath. If they were in, they wouldn't be posted up until the next day. Was she being told now?

—will hardly give you cause for gratification,' Matron said dryly. But it seems a pity, in view of the fact that your father is a G.P., that your mother was an S.R.N., and both your grandmothers were Matrons of two smaller but quite fine hospitals—'

So that was it. They wouldn't kick her out just yet because of her relations and their record in medicine. But if she failed this chance she was being offered?

What else had you in mind?' Matron forced herself to ask.

What? Sarah asked herself. She couldn't go home because owing to her sense of what was right and wrong, she had broken with Michael, and Michael and Thelma would be there part of the time, anyway, and she couldn't face the questions of home just yet. Owing to her being so helpful to Victoria, Victoria had felt she could safely and confidently demand Sarah's holiday booking so that had gone west. She couldn't even avail herself of any cosy suggestions from Mrs Burridge because, in helping Rose's sister Karen to keep out of trouble, she had botched everything up in the direction of the R.M.O. and he was Mrs Burridge's close friend. There wasn't anywhere she could turn, no one to whom she could turn, Sarah thought drearily, and shook her head.

So Matron fastened on Colin Felstead's convalescence and that was settled.

Sarah went to say her goodbyes to those old patients who still remembered her.

There was only one of the old lot in the men's ward, and that was Will Kennaway. He had slipped on the day he had been discharged and had to have his leg put back, in a sling again. His face lit when he saw her.

So there you are, Nurse Dailey, love! Cor, I don't 'arf hear some rum things about you, and now they're sending you away! Tell us about it, love ! '

Sarah made it brief, so brief that all he could make of it was that she'd given up her much dreamed of holiday to her best friend and all they could find for her in its place was to send her home with young Felstead.

'Never mind, love,' said Will. 'Keep your pecker up. Know what we called you? Nurse in a Million, that's what! '

'Oh, no ! ' Sarah choked. No, that isn't right, and I don't deserve it. I mean well, but I botch things. It's time I learnt to leave people alone instead of being so beastly helpful.'

I don't reckon on that,' he said. It's not just

you trying to put the world to rights, though you do, of course ! —well, you try, and that's something, seeing as most people don't care, like that cousin of yours what just smiles and agrees with us and beats it as soon as she can. No, it's the way you make

a chap comfortable in bed. Hands, see what I mean? Some nurses have got 'em, and some have got lumps of wood or iron, seemingly, the way they clump you about. Rare tender hands you've got, nurse, especially when you do backs and things. A chap can tell. And—oh, it's everything. The way you just come marching on the ward does a chap good!

Sarah thanked him and said goodbye and made her other goodbyes, then somehow she had to force herself to go and see Mrs Burridge, which she didn't want to do, because of Dr Haynes. She gave herself a pep talk and felt ready for almost anything, but it was all to no good, because at Mrs Burridge's door Dr Haynes was coming out, and he looked at Sarah, one of those looks which tore her defences apart, before he walked off without a word.

CHAPTER X

Sarah went into Mrs Burridge's room and shut the door behind her. She felt so shaken that she stood against it for a moment, recovering herself.

Mrs Burridge said sharply, 'What is it, Sarah? You look quite ill! Are you all right?'

Sarah went over to the bed, trying to pretend that she was her old vigorous self, but somehow she felt rather tired.

Yes, yes, I'm all right. Don't worry. It's been a bit hectic lately, but I'm going away for a time and I came to say goodbye.'

But I don't understand,' said Mrs Burridge. Andrew went out just a moment before you came in—didn't you see him?'

'Oh, yes, but I think he was in a hurry. I'll see him later,' Sarah said, but before Mrs Burridge's searching gaze, she said, Oh, no, well, that isn't true. He gave me a look of loathing and walked right by me. It's a long story, I'm afraid—'

Then you just sit down and tell it to me, and you just listen to what I've got to say. What I started the other day, when I so foolishly had an attack, and it never got said. How cross I was about that! But first of all, how have you fallen out with Andrew?'

I don't know—you seem to think we're friends, but we're not, you know. He's never been more than my R.M.O.'

'That's stuff and nonsense! However, what made him go right past you just now? What has happened?'

'Well, when we meet, it's always a bit awkward somehow, I'm not sure how, and after my friend's wedding, I wanted someone to turn to, and Dr Haynes wasn't there, but Dr Sadler was, and he offered to take my mind off weddings. Well, they're always rather sad, aren't they?'

Dr Sadler? Oh, my heavens! 'Mrs Burridge moaned.

'What is it? I'm not supposed to upset you!' 'It's all right, child. Oh, so that's why Andrew was so very angry!'

No I No, not really, only now I see why he didn't seem to mind me being out with Michael when I took the children—I see now that he was afraid that the person helping me with the bigger boys might have been Dr Sadler. He doesn't want Dr Sadler with me, only he didn't tell me why.'

Well, he wouldn't, my dear,' Mrs Burridge moaned. She was really quite upset about it, and Sarah couldn't see why.

I know there was an awful quarrel between them both, but that doesn't mean to say that he's got to cut me dead just because Dr Sadler takes me around sometimes. It's just a lift, because the R.M.O. said I wasn't to get one in a van.'
I should think not indeed!

The bus services are rather difficult to connect up,' Sarah pointed out patiently. Anyway, it wasn't just that. I had taken a cutting away from my friend's young sister and I was going to put it back in the files of the newspaper where it belonged, only the R.M.O. came along and saw me with it and he took it away and he was furious. I made him give it back to me when I told him what I was going

to do with it.'

'And then?' Mrs Burridge asked anxiously. She had had this story from Andrew, but it hadn't been quite the same. He had been so angry, so biased, and so certain that Sarah had just been having fun at his expense. She couldn't think why he was so hurt at Sarah, who wouldn't do any such thing, she was sure.

'He drove me to Queenscliffe, only it's not possible to wait outside the newspaper offices, so he said he'd drive round and come back for me in ten minutes and be sure to be there.'

'Why weren't you, my dear?'

'Well, something happened! You see, I found something else in the newspaper that hadn't been included in my cutting, and it explained a lot about Dr Sadler. I didn't know that he had been the chief one to say bad things about Dr Haynes, and not helping that girl to safety, you know! It seems she was a doctor as well, and I didn't think much of her picture. They say he jilted her.'

'Andrew? Oh, my dear, the shoe was on the other foot. She jilted Andrew for someone else. Dr Sadler thought she cared for him, but it was no such thing. It was someone neither of them knew. I know, because I was involved, too. It was a guest in my house, so you see I'm in a position to know. What I wouldn't give to turn back the clock, so that I could tell them all; at the same time, what a lot of noodles they were being.'

'You mean that neither Dr Haynes nor Dr Sadler knew about this other man?'

Dr Sadler was vain enough to think he could take her away from Andrew, but everyone wanted her. She might not look very handsome in a blurred

black and white newspaper picture, but in real life she was very fetching. Her colouring was so striking and she had such a vivid personality and a fine voice. She was so talented in the arts as well as medicine. But she wanted a rich husband and the guest in my house had more than enough money to offer her. I was the cause of them meeting and I shall always blame myself.'

'Doesn't Dr Haynes know?' Sarah whispered.

She sighed. 'I told him, just now. I don't know how he took it, but I got the feeling that his old love for her had gone with the years. Well, there's nothing like a trying courtroom scene for destroying the delicate fabric of a love affair, and who knows what went on between them when he was down that shaft trying to get her up? She went down to help free a workman, and a further rock fall caught her legs. It was all very sad. Dr Haynes hadn't got there in time to forestall her going down. He blamed himself for that, but there, a doctor, no matter which sex, stands to get injuries in rescue work. Oh, dear, where is it going to end?'

Sarah was lost in thoughts of her own. What had made her mad enough to be so shaky and excitable about Dr Haynes when his thoughts had been down that shaft with

a woman he couldn't save? Why did Dr Sadler blame him for not being able to save her? He did try!' she whispered.

Because he's that kind of man. I don't like him,' Mrs Burridge said. ' And you'd do well not to go around with him, young woman. There are better men for you!'

You wouldn't think so. There's only one man I want, and I go and get Michael back again! I didn't even try! I was so bowled over with the

other cutting I read that I rushed out and automatically went towards the bus station, only there was a house being demolished in this street I was going down, and I could see a lump of wall was going to fall on a man walking by, so I shouted and sort of launched myself at him. Well, I know it was daft, but it was all I could think of to do, and we both fell into the road and nearly got run over with cars going by, only the first car had Michael in it. He would come by just then! He went all soppy and put his arms round me, so I shouted at him to do something about the man, because although he'd fallen clear of the main lot of bricks, there must have been one that caught his ankle because it was all bleeding, so I made Michael take us both back to the hospital, and honestly, I forgot about Dr Haynes going back for me. He must have been livid to find me not there! He hates someone not to do what he says. Oh, it's all a mess!'

So that's what happened! But wouldn't he know that?' ' Who?'

Andrew, my dear. We're talking about him, aren't we? Surely the man would have had to be admitted—'

' I don't know. Not necessarily, if they were full up. He might just have been strapped up and sent home. It looked like the artery caught, but we stopped the bleeding before we took him back and anyway, the R.M.O. was out at the time.'

Well, my dear, he caught sight of you in that street, with the Casualty Officer's arms round you, I can tell you that! And he didn't like it. He felt a great fool. I don't know what he said to you in the car, but he seems to think he's made a

fool of himself over a girl young enough to be— well, if not his daughter, at least a great deal his junior.'

Sarah wasn't going to tell her about how she had cried on the R.M.O.'s shoulder, or of how scared she had been, the way he had looked at her and the way she had felt so upset. She said, Yes, well, I don't suppose he'll ever look at anyone else, after that, whatever the truth of it was,' and she wished she had let him tell her in the car, when he had wanted to, but it was too late now. Goodbye, Mrs Burridge. I hope—well, I wish you all the things you wish yourself,' she compromised, and fled because she could feel the stupid tears rising again.

Mrs Burridge rang her bell with a great deal of energy when Sarah had gone. I want the R.M.O. It's urgent,' she said. No, nothing to do with my health, but something else.' She just must find him, she told herself. He must know about this—and Sarah was going away for some time and she couldn't remember if Sarah had said where or with whom. She must not let Andrew make a further mess of his life!

But he, too, had left the hospital, and she didn't know what to do. She insisted on his being given her message the minute he came back.

As for Sarah, surely she should have had the wits to keep that girl there until she had found the R.M.O. and brought them both together. Mrs Burridge rang for Sarah, but she too had gone.

Where has she gone?' Mrs Burridge asked fretfully.

' With another patient who is being sent home. She will be doing private work for some time,' she was told.

Another patient. Well, Sarah shouldn't be difficult to trace. The hospital would know. Mrs Burridge pictured Sarah, sitting upright in the ambulance, making her new patient happy and amused while she talked with that energetic manner of hers.

But Sarah wasn't feeling energetic. She wondered if she had got delayed shock from that fracas of the falling wall. Her hands were shaking a little, and it occurred to her that Colin Felstead didn't look too good, either. He would need lifting, and although the ambulance men would do that, she would have to lift him once she got him to his home.

She hadn't the heart to make conversation with him. She suddenly didn't want to go home with him at all.

He said suddenly, in that fretful voice of his, ' Why don't you say something?'

' I didn't think you'd want to talk while you're getting such a shaking,' she apologized.

Expected it. This road's never good, and after all the rain we've had this last week, I expect there have been some landslips, and they never clear them up completely.'

Surely not I Couldn't we have gone another road?' she asked, in alarm. Any one of those other men on her old ward would have been preferable to this man, in such an emergency. They were a sporting lot, never grumbling, taking the rough with the smooth. This young man grumbled incessantly.

He said, ' Yes, but I never get anything really, well planned. I don't think anyone cares.'

Come now!' she said, trying to rally him.

' I heard you were quite something. Nurse in a Million, the men on the ward called you. That's why I asked for you to be my private nurse.' He

broke off there and looked at her with no great favour, as if he would have liked to say that he couldn't see why she had earned such a title.

' It's the last title I really deserve,' she said ruefully. ' I just seem to make a lot of trouble for everyone.'

He looked at her, but he didn't ask to hear about it. So she didn't tell him. Instead, he started to tell her about himself. He had been very ill, she knew, but she had never heard a male patient, least of all a young one, list his aches and pains as completely as this one. He had remembered every one, and he was much more interested in telling her about them than in finding out how she had had a lot of ups and downs. Sarah was glad. She didn't want to have to tell him, but most men had a lively curiosity about the troubles of the young nurses, and most men got a lot of fun out of hearing about it.

She sighed, and let him talk, while she looked ahead out of the small window behind the driver. She couldn't see much, except that it was raining again. Scopdale had long been left behind, and now they were going through Queenscliffe, up the hill and along the road by the edge of the cliffs. They were evidently meaning to by-pass Blidbourne, which was as well at this time of day. The traffic would be pretty thick.

I expect you'll be wanting to escape all the time and get to the tennis courts and the beach,' Colin Felstead was complaining, but it was in the same weary flat voice as all the other grumbling and she hadn't noticed the change of subject. But my mother will see you don't slip off too soon, so I warn you, because she's always said I'm delicate. She's the only one who understands. I can't think why I

didn't ask for an older nurse, because at least they don't want to go swimming all the time. You don't talk much, do you?'

Sarah smiled and told him about the social club at the hospital, since he had mentioned tennis and swimming, but he really didn't want to hear, so she gave up and let him talk.

The driver looked round. Nurse, better hang on to the patient—I shall be swinging off in a minute to let that big black car pass us. He's been on our tail for long enough.'

She nodded, but she couldn't see anything out of the darkened glass of the back window.

She just watched the driver, but the road was narrow and there was traffic coming down. She got ready to take the jolt for the patient when the ambulance swung to the left. She wondered idly why some big cars seemed to hang on to the tail of a slower moving vehicle. Was it so imperative to rush?

Andrew, in the car behind, was fuming. He didn't want to sound his horn, since that was a practice which made the driver in front do something stupid, but why their own ambulance should have come on this road, knowing what it would be like, he couldn't think. But then a lot of other cars were using this road, too.

He had gone back to the hospital unexpectedly, having left his packet behind that he had been taking into the town to post, and had received Mrs Burridge's message. She had been in rather a state.

Andrew, I've only just heard the truth about—' she began, then had to stop and gasp for breath.

He sat down quietly beside her, holding her wrist, and she suddenly went quiet. ' I know you'll stop

and listen to me this time,' she said, and he nodded.

But once he had heard about the rescue that had detained Sarah when he had not found her outside the newspaper office, he was hard put to it to sit quietly by Mrs Burridge and behave as if he was quite calm so as not to upset her. And when Mrs Burridge remarked that Sarah had already left the hospital, that almost finished him.

Andrew, tell me, my dear—have you forgotten Norah? Is it Sarah now?' she asked sleepily. She fancied he nodded. Half to herself, she said, ' I confess I was never happy at the thought of Norah Quinlan for you. Every time you showed me some exploit of hers, in those medical journals of yours, I had an entirely feminine wish to kick her good and hard. She was so clever, she knew all the answers. Not for you, Andrew. You want someone loving . .

When she had closed her eyes, he released her hand and slipped out of the room. Now he must bend his energies to finding out where they had sent Sarah in such a hurry and how it was that he hadn't been told.

When he had spoken to Matron, he realized why; Matron had her own ideas of what was best for the hospital and the R.M.O. and quite clearly she didn't want to see him entangled with a little first-year nurse like Sarah Darley, especially now that tiresome Dr Sadler was about the place again doing his best to stir up the old scandal. Well, someone was doing their best to stir up old things best left forgotten, she said, with some asperity.

And down at the porter's lodge Dr Haynes heard something that almost finished him. An ambulance coming in had brought the news that the Queenscliffe

Upper Road had landslides again. In this weather it usually had its share of rubble and stones falling, but there was the bypass to take the overflow of the traffic. People usually avoided the cliff road.

The porter watched Dr Haynes racing across for his car. He commented to his relief, 'What got him? Did you see his face? Anyone'd think it was someone he knew in that ambulance !'

Looked kind of green, didn't he?' the other porter remarked, and because he had been there long enough to remember the old affair of Dr Norah Quinlan and Dr Haynes, he recalled it and they stood quietly talking, until Dr Haynes' car shot out again. The rain was so heavy at that time that they couldn't even see it clearly as it turned out into the main stream of traffic.

'I heard that Dr Sadler has been around again,' the porter commented. I wonder he had the gall to turn up again.'

Yes. Perhaps it's as well our little Nurse Darley got sent off, come to think of it, because he's had her in his car. Can't say I'd like a daughter of mine to be around with Dr Sadler. Now Dr Haynes is a different matter. Think there's anything in it?'

They discussed Sarah and Dr Haynes pleasantly. Two nice people who somehow didn't seem to hit it off all the time.

Rose discussed them with the girl who had taken Victoria's place, because she was worried about young Karen, now going around with Olive Jermyn. Everything Sarah did was to help other people, and that was the one thing she didn't want—Karen and that Olive Jermyn getting together, and now all her efforts have been in vain! I don't know what she's going to say when she hears about it. I wish she

hadn't been sent home with that Colin Felstead. I wish it wasn't raining You know, I've got the most miserable feeling altogether !'

'Word is going around from your sister Karen that the R.M.O. was practically cuddling Sarah Darley in public the other day. You ought to stop her saying things like that !'

Rose was staggered. She went and fetched Karen and made her repeat the story, and so heard for the first time about the Maddison family Sarah took out, and of how Michael Armstrong was with her, looking after the older boys.

Well! Which one is it she wants, then?' the other nurse asked, in some amusement.

Isn't it funny,' Rose said wrathfully, and if you want to know, I'm worried about her. Did anyone hear what time she left with Colin Felstead? If you must know, I'm going to ring her up. I don't know why—I just want to hear her voice, see if she's all right. I know she was pretty wretched when she came out of Matron's office.'

Karen, after her sister's dressing down, turned overpoweringly helpful and brought back the news of the time the ambulance had gone out. She also said it had taken the road that the landslips were on, because Colin Felstead had objected to being driven through the heavy traffic in the rain in Blidbourne. Rose switched on the radio and heard the local warning about that road on the news. Her fears increased so much that Karen, miserably wanting to worm her way back into her sister's good books all of a sudden, ambled off to get any other bits of gossip she could. She came back in a hurry to say that Mrs Burrige had had another attack, this time worse than the last.

'Oh.' Rose and her friend looked glum. I

suppose the R.M.O.'s with her. He likes her rather a lot. Old friends, aren't they?'

No, the R.M.O.'s not here,' Karen was delighted to offer by way of snippets of news. I heard someone say he'd gone belting off in his car when he heard about the landslip on the road beyond Queenscliffe.'

' He did what?' Rose asked.

Karen repeated it. The porter said he'd just mentioned the ambulance had taken Colin Felstead home, had gone that way, and the R.M.O. had looked all peculiar and just rushed out to his car.'

Rose said, through dry lips, 'Because Sarah was in that ambulance.'

They kept the radio on. Sarah's home rang up. Her mother asked for Victoria and apparently had forgotten that Victoria was the one who had married, and used Sarah's holiday booking for her honeymoon. Well, when is Sarah coming home? She's still got her leave at the same time, hasn't she?' she asked blankly.

Rose gently explained to her. Mrs Darley said, 'Well, really, I don't know what's going on at all! Where is Michael? I thought he was going to drive Thelma home, but a strange doctor brought her and they've gone out together with no explanation, and Sarah's letters have been so peculiar lately.'

Rose said soothing things, and longed to get off the telephone and find out what was on the radio, that was making her friends beckon her so urgently. At last she managed to persuade Mrs Darley to take in the fact that Sarah had somehow got herself sent home with a patient who needed private nursing, and was to be away some time, and as it was on the

coast, she would have a lot of spare time and almost a holiday. Finally Rose got away, but by then the news flash had gone.

The others were mystified. It seems there were landslips on the coast road outside of Queenscliffe, and one caught our ambulance napping, only it just about got through.'

Karen said in a frightened voice, ' There was a big black car following, and it went round the bend and wasn't ready for our ambulance swerving out, to avoid the rocks and stuff falling and it went over the edge.'

' So Sarah's all right,' Rose said, feeling as if the whole room were spinning. She didn't really care about the black car that had been on the tail of the ambulance. Sarah was all right, only it was rotten for her because it was so soon after that business where the wall was being demolished. No one had thought much about Sarah's part in that, because she hadn't made a fuss, and the Casualty Officer had been with her.

Rose said, 'I wonder if the R.M.O. knows she's all right? I think he . . . well, he likes her, don't you think?'

Karen said, still in that frightened voice, 'But he's not here. He went out after the ambulance when they told him about the landslips. And his car is a big black one.'

That was a nightmare time for everyone. The rumours stopped and they couldn't get any real news, because an influx of other accidents came in. It was always the same in weather like this. Rose, and all the others who were off duty, went down to Casualty to help. Accidents weren't run of the mill in Scopdale. They had a choice of road accidents

and factory disasters, holiday accidents on the beach beyond the town and ordinary disasters around the cranes and commercial craft in the wharves. That night a pleasure boat was dashed against the sea wall, and Casualty went mad for a while. But no one was brought in off the coast road.

Mrs BurrIDGE, recovering a little, asked for Andrew Haynes, but no one knew what to say to her. By then they had heard that he had been thrown out of his car on to a shelf of rock, but that he had been hurt by falling fragments. She asked for Sarah, but Sarah had gone to the hospital in Blidbourne with Colin Felstead, who had been jolted

against the side, in spite of all Sarah's efforts to take the shock from him and his recovery had been put back quite a bit. She wasn't in too good shape herself.

But she didn't know who was in the black car, and it wasn't until the small hours when Dr Haynes came to and asked for her that Sarah was told he had been in the same accident.

She knew he was very ill, for herself to have been roused in the middle of the night. She had plaster on her forehead and cuts and bruises. There had been a lot of flying glass. 'I can't see him like this, can I?'

He won't notice,' the nurse assured her.

Sarah felt the ward swim. He was going to die, she told herself. He's going to die, and it's all my fault for making a mess of everything. But how she could have prevented him from being in his car behind the ambulance, she didn't know.

He was very feverish, and it seemed to her in the half light that he was covered in bandages. Later, in the daylight, she saw that this wasn't so, but

sitting by his bed, taking his groping hand gently in hers and seeing him wince through the bandages, she didn't see how she could bear it.

He seemed to sense she was there. 'Sarah?'

His voice was thick, unlike his own. The nurse in the shadows moved forward a little, keeping an eye on him.

'Yes, I'm here,' she said in a shaky voice.

'Doesn't sound like you,' he grumbled. 'Sarah! Why did you go? After that other business? Why didn't . . . you tell me?'

'Didn't think you wanted to know,' she choked, and then his eyes closed, and she was chased back to bed.

But he was tough, and long before she was about again, after being isolated with a severe cold, he was sitting up in bed, cursing everyone for the grossly bad management of that whole journey, and complaining of everything. He still had a bandage round his head when Sarah next came to visit him, and one arm in a sling, but she saw, examining him with sense, that he wasn't all that bad, and that he had been very lucky, as Sister had said.

'Sarah!' Now he had a hand free with which to grab hers and hold on to it. 'Sarah, why do you get into these scrapes?' and his voice wasn't too steady.

'I didn't know it was you behind us,' she tried to explain. 'We were going to pull over and let you pass, only we didn't know the layby was filled up with that stuff falling . .

'So you all had to swing out and knock me over the edge!' he growled. 'Come round here where I can see you.'

She came round his side where the good arm was, and he pulled her to him. 'You're going to cry

again, aren't you? I wish you wouldn't! I don't like it. I can't think straight. Oh, don't, my love! Wha-at did you say?' Sarah choked.

He brushed her hair awkwardly away from the last of her cuts to heal. Her fringe would cover them until they vanished, but he looked angrily at them and roundly blamed everyone, from the drivers of the ambulance, to her cousin Thelma and the Casualty Officer, and the P.T.S. in general, for everything that had happened to Sarah.

No, no,' she choked, trying to wipe her tears away with the back of her hand. It was all my fault. I didn't find out till I saw that other news paper cutting . .

You really believed I let Dr Quinlan die? You can't have, Sarah!'

' No, no, I just wanted to find out the truth and stop the gossip because it was so wrong and they all said you were so brilliant and I wanted some peace for you because you always looked so angry, as if you were doing battle all the time..

But I'm always like that,' he told her. Sarah, is it true what our good friend Amelia Burrridge keeps telling me? Do you care for me?'

She nodded. I expect I do, because I'm always thinking about you and worrying about you and I thought you were going to die and . .

' And you don't think that of Armstrong?'

Oh, no, of course not! It would have been an awful mistake if I'd gone on with him. I told him so.'

And Sadler?' he snapped.

No, of course not,' she said.

Then, Sarah, if you really mean me to have peace of mind, will you marry me? Because I can't

stand the worry I've had lately about you!'

His one good arm was round her and he was kissing her very thoroughly when his-nurse came in. She backed out again, and opened the door noisily, because the door shouldn't have been shut at all: Sarah pushed hastily away from him, and didn't know where to look. It had been a satisfying kiss but she felt so heady that it was like Christmas parties and exam. fever and holidays all rolled into one, and she couldn't look at him.

He still hung on to her hand as if afraid to let her go. Well, nurse, why isn't an Engaged notice on my door when I have a visitor?' he demanded, and his voice, Sarah noticed, was now almost normal.

I'm sorry, Dr Haynes, but an old patient of yours wants to speak to you on the telephone. She's been ill again. A Mrs Burrridge.'

That was different, so he abandoned his battle' look, and took the call. Mrs Burrridge's voice was so clear and strong again that Sarah could hear what she was saying.

' Andrew! Are you really on the mend?' she demanded.

' Apart from a thumping headache, an arm in a sling and Sarah on my mind, I'm fine,' he told her.

Sarah! Oh, that dear girl, yes, how is she?' and Mrs Burrridge sounded really anxious.

She's here beside me, rather tearful after a shaking up in the ambulance and a howling cold, but she'll do.'

Andrew! Are you and Sarah—?' and Mrs Burrridge left it delicately in the air, but very anxiously waiting.

He looked across at Sarah. ' Are we?' he murmured. Sarah, who had heard it all, nodded, her eyes like stars.

' Yes! Sarah says we are! ' he told Mrs Burrridge, who said she could now get well with no more anxieties.

After he had put the telephone down, he took Sarah into his arms again. ' Why didn't you let me tell you about Norah, that day in the car?' he wanted to know.

Sarah felt young and inexperienced again, as she had when he had towered over her in the room full of fish tanks that day, when she had known she had lost Michael to her cousin Thelma, and that she must in all pride give him up. I don't know. I think I was a little afraid of you,' she offered.

Are you now?' And when she shook her head, he said, ' I like to have things all definite and neat and tied up. Prove it, Sarah.'

How?' she whispered.

That day in Saxon Street, when you hurtled round the corner, do you know what you said? You said, " It's you I want." The way you said it, it changed everything for me. I was your slave from then on. Did you know that?'

She shook her head again, so he commanded, Say it again.'

Oh, Andrew, it's you I want,' Sarah said obligingly, and then, more vigorously, as she cuddled close to him, For always ! '