

CHAPTER I

MISS HOLT'S nursing home was in a dignified street in the West End of London. Till the day when she took it over, it had been a private residence. In the time of the Regency it had been the scene of many entertainments, extravagances and absurdities, but it had become more and more decorous till, at last, its end was this. It was rather a dingy but an expensive nursing home, to which some of the best-known doctors and surgeons sent their patients.

Miss Holt did not much like obstetrical cases, but an occasional baby was brought into the world beneath her roof and, on this November morning, there were two in the nursery. Both were two days old. Both had been born on Armistice Day, 1925. Nurse Jennings was busy washing and dressing them when Miss Nairn, the elderly but vigorous and upright Sister-in-charge, came in. She liked to have a peep at the babies when there were any in the house.

They were so new and fresh, a happy contrast to the sufferers under her care. One naked baby was across Nurse Jennings's knee, his pinkish bald head looking too large for his body, his buttocks white from a dusting of talcum powder. Miss Nairn bent over and kissed the back of his neck, the snowy streamers on her starched cap falling over her shoulders.

"Dear little mite," she murmured. "Which is he— the Englishman or the American?"

"The American," Miss Jennings murmured absently, for her mind was busy with her own affairs. She deftly turned the baby over and began powdering his front. His eyes were tight shut and he wore an expression of ancient endurance.

"Odd, isn't it, the way he happened to be born over here?"

"Yes, Sister. I mean, I hadn't heard."

"Well, his parents were to have sailed for home two months ago, but they were in a motor accident and the father — Mr. Wylde his name is — was badly hurt. By the time he was well enough for the journey it was too late for Mrs. Wylde and they had to stay in London for the birth."

"That was a bit of bad luck," said Nurse Jennings, still in a haze.

“Do you think,” asked the Sister, “that maybe he has wind? He’s making a face and drawing up his legs.”

Nurse Jennings was thinking, — “Get along, you old busybody,” but she answered :

“Oh, no, Sister. He has no wind. He couldn’t be better. Nor the other one either.”

“Bless their hearts !” said Miss Nairn. She went to the cot where the other infant lay wrapped in a warm little blanket and bent over him. “Mm,” she murmured. “Whose wee precious is he? Have you finished with him, Nurse?”

“Yes, Sister.” She added to herself, — “And I’d get along better if you’d stay out of the way.”

“They’re named already,” said Miss Nairn.

“Are they really, Sister?”

“Yes. This one is Mark and that one is Palmer. Palmer Wylde. I quite like it.”

“So do I, Sister.” She kept thinking : “Why don’t you go, you old busybody !” Her mind revolved around her quarrel with her fiancé.

Miss Nairn had taken the baby up from his cot. She exclaimed :

“I don’t like the way you have these cot coverings. How often have I explained how I want them ! I’ve

no patience with such stupidity.”

She laid the baby on a pillow on the table and attacked the two cots, deftly rearranging the coverings as she liked them to be. Nurse Jennings watched her meekly but she felt as though her nerves would crack. This was her half-day off and if she got no word from Edgar . . .

“ Now, do you see ? ” said Miss Nairn. “ Come and take a good look.”

Nurse Jennings bundled the baby in his blanket and came to her side.

“ Yes, Sister,” she answered, in a daze.

A complaining cry came from the bundle in her arms.

“ Is he hungry ? ” asked the Sister. “ Is it time to take him to his mother ? ”

“ Almost time, Sister.”

A young nurse appeared in the doorway.

“ The new patient has arrived, Sister,” she said. “ And would you please come ? ”

Miss Nairn bustled off, her cap-strings flying in a way that suggested wings.

Nurse Jennings gave a gasp of relief.

“ My God,” she said aloud. “ What an old nuisance ! ”

She laid the baby she was holding on the table beside the other. She heard the hum of the lift, then the opening of its door, a murmur of voices. She must speak to Jimmy, the lift-man. She glided to the door and peeped out. Figures were disappearing down the passage. The lift was about to descend. She flew out to it and caught Jimmy's arm.

"I say," she gasped, "has the postman been?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Is there a letter for me?"

It was strictly against the rules to rush out to the lift-man about one's letters but she couldn't help that. If she didn't hear from Edgar it meant that all was over between them. The immaculate bosom of her uniform vibrated with the beating of her heart.

"No," he answered, "there weren't a letter for you — not that I saw. But Thomas 'e sorted the mail. Perhaps your letter went to your own quarters. That's where it ought to go, isn't it?" There was a slight rebuke in his tone. He closed the door of the lift and moved the lever. It began to descend.

She hurried back to the nursery. Everything there looked unreal to her. Everything would look unreal till she had heard from Edgar. God, she hadn't known she loved him so! If he didn't write to her

she'd just have to put her pride in her pocket and send him a beseeching letter. She couldn't go on like this. She'd soon make a mess of her work and get into trouble. She looked at the babies' charts. It was time for the American baby to go to his mother to be nursed. The two babies lay side by side on the table, one red-faced and disinterested and the other red-faced and preparing to squall. She'd pop them in their cots to be ready when wanted.

The young nurse who before had been at the door, reappeared. She said :

"Mr. Wylde has sent the loveliest flowers for her. Pink roses and carnations. You ought to see them."

"Look here, Carter," said Nurse Jennings, "I want you to do me a favour. I want you to go to our hall and see if there's a letter there for me. Do go, like a dear, and I'll do you a good turn when the chance comes."

She knew that Nurse Carter was just going off duty and that there was no infringement of rules in what she asked.

"All right," answered Carter good-naturedly, "I'll go. Really you ought to see those roses. They're beauties. Mr. Wylde is awfully nice. He's so

friendly. She's nice too, but a handful to wait on."

"Carter, do go! If I don't get this letter my time off will be spoilt."

She was alone again. Her mind was chaotic. She picked up the American baby to put him in his cot. But *was* it the American baby? She gave him a puzzled look. On which end of the table had she laid him? On which end of the table had Sister laid the English baby? For a moment her mind stopped working and she just stared in blank bewilderment at the two. Then she pulled herself together.

She bent over the two babies and examined them carefully. She could find nothing to distinguish them. The one that had been about to cry was now tranquil. The other had puckered up his face into despairing pink creases. Their wrappings were identical. She broke out in a cold sweat. She looked at the two cots as though that might help her. She looked at the two charts but found nothing there. She walked distractedly to the window and stared out, thinking she might thus clear her mind. The thin fog was separating, pierced by shafts of hazy sunlight. The street was quiet. She turned back to the room. She was trembling all over. She could

hear Carter's footsteps. Carter was coming in at the door.

"Well," she exclaimed cheerfully, "here's your old letter. I hope you're satisfied."

It was easy to see Edgar's handwriting on the envelope, even before she had it in her own hand. The relief made her forget everything for a moment. She tore open the letter and read :

"DEAR OLD GIRL,

Let's forget our little dust-up. I'll be waiting at the usual place this afternoon. I think and always shall think there's no one like you. Love and kisses

EDGAR."

She put the note in the pocket of her uniform.

"Everything all right?" asked Nurse Carter.

"Just perfect. Thanks, Carter. Are you off now?"

She was alone once more with the two babies. She went to them with a false determination in her bearing.

"Now, you," she muttered, "let's have no more nonsense about this."

But they lay before her inscrutable, sinister in their

weakness and similarity. God, why hadn't she examined them more carefully when she knew which was which! Certainly one showed more distinct eyebrows than the other. One's nostrils were a shade wider. But which? The right thing to do would be to call in Sister Nairn and the parents. But would they know one from the other? She was positive that they wouldn't. Not one of them knew the babies as well as she herself did, and she'd never have got them mixed up if her mind hadn't been in such a state because of her quarrel with Edgar. For days, since before these two were born, she'd been completely upset. If she confessed what she'd done she'd be in for a hell of a time. She'd be up before Miss Holt. She'd have to leave the nursing home. She'd be done for. It wasn't as though Edgar was able to support her. It would be two years at the least before they could marry.

Suddenly she felt so weak that her legs almost gave way beneath her. She supported herself against the table, staring down at the babies. She'd got to decide which was the Englishman and which the American, and right away. Two pairs of opaque blue eyes opened and looked up at her, as though accusingly. She whispered: "You little devils! You don't

care a damn which you are. You don't care if I'm ruined and lose my job !”

Still they gazed at her with animal detachment in their opaque eyes. One sucked in his lips, making his mouth no more than a buttonhole. The other showed his pink gums as though in a mocking smile.

If only she could have them to herself, strip them and force herself back to the moment before she mixed them up, she thought she might be able to identify them. But there was no chance of that and her mind reached the state when it refused to work. She could hear someone coming. Swiftly she returned the babies to the cots.

Mrs. Wylde's nurse came in to fetch her baby. It was time for him to be fed. She went straight to his cot and peeped in.

“My word,” she said, “he looks nice and bright this morning !”

Nurse Jennings all but screamed, — “Don't take that one ! It's not him !” But she stood in miserable silence while the nurse lifted him in her arms and cuddled him there.

“I believe he's the best of the two,” said the nurse.

“I don't see much difference in them,” said Nurse Jennings.

“ Well, it was wonderful, wasn't it, having two lovely boys born here the very same day when we hadn't had a lying-in case for months ? ”

“ I don't like them,” said Nurse Jennings.

“ The cases or the babies ? ”

“ Neither. They get on my nerves.”

“ Why, Jennings, I thought you loved babies.”

“ Not two at a time. We haven't the facilities here.”

“ Well, you are getting fussy. Are you going out with Edgar this afternoon ? ”

“ Yes.” She drew a deep breath, as one who has been submerged under water. She grasped at her own happiness and thrust indecision and worry behind her. Anyhow, one baby was as good as another, if they both were normal and healthy. Each of the mothers would have a perfectly good baby and an equal chance that it was her own. Mrs. Wylde's nurse carried the baby in to her.

“ Here he comes,” she said; “ fresh as a daisy and hungry as a hunter.”

Mrs. Wylde held out her slender white arms, in a gesture a little consciously exquisite. She held him to her breast a moment, before uncovering it. The nurse looked down at her admiringly. A tremor of greed

passed through the baby. He opened his mouth. As he grasped her breast she had a moment's hesitation, a strangeness, almost a fear. Then it passed. She laughed and looked up at the nurse.

"He's a wonder, isn't he?"

"Yes, indeed. He's a lovely baby — and how hungry he is!"

"It's a queer thing, nurse, how well I am with this baby. I mean, I had so much worry with my husband's accident. Then, having everything strange about me. After my little girl was born I was a wreck. But now the doctor says I can sail for home at the end of this month."

"That's lovely. *And* what a prize to take home with you!"

"Do you know, I can feel a difference in him since the last time I nursed him. He's quicker and stronger somehow."

"Yes, it's surprising how they change."

The baby had nursed for the second time that day when his father came softly into the room. He stood looking down at the pair in the bed with a tender, somewhat tired, smile.

"Well, Camilla," he said, "you look more like yourself this morning."

"I am. I had a pretty good night."

"That's fine. How's the youngster?"

"You can see for yourself." She drew the covers back from his head. The baby opened his eyes. He spread his fingers till his hand looked like a pink starfish.

Robert Wylde touched him gingerly. "He's pretty red. Is that all right? Janet wasn't quite so blistered-looking."

"Janet's like me. He's going to be fair. He's like you."

"Gosh." He gave a sigh, for it still tired him to stand. He limped to a chair and sat down. His stick made a clatter as he put it on the floor. His wife started and her grey eyes widened in annoyance. "Goodness, you're noisy."

"I'm sorry, Camilla."

"Baby jumped from head to foot."

"Too bad. I can't get used to this cane."

Suddenly she remembered his roses. She exclaimed:

"Oh, darling, thanks so much for the lovely roses! Just look at them! They make even this room cheerful. Come and kiss me again."

He smiled, got up and limped to the bed. He

bent over her and planted a kiss on her cheek. "Gosh," he said, "I'm glad you've come through this so well, Camilla." He examined the roses. "They are nice, aren't they? I got the best they had."

"They're lovely." She looked toward the window. "What is it doing out? If the windows were cleaner I might see. Considering what this is costing, I think it's pretty badly run."

"Well, you'll soon be out of it. I got our reservations yesterday. Good position amidships. Near the dining-room elevator. To be convenient for you."

Her fine eyes darkened with disappointment.

"Why, darling, you know I hate being near the elevators. The noise of them keeps up till all hours. After what I've been through I must have my proper rest. You'll just have to go back to the steamship office and make an exchange."

He shifted in his chair and passed his hand over his face. He said, — "Now, look here, Camilla, we were quite near the elevators coming over and you didn't seem to mind."

"Because I was up late myself then. And I did complain of them. I complained of them several times. Only of course you wouldn't remember."

"Well, I'll go back to the office and see what I

can do," he answered resignedly. He pressed his hand to the injured part of his leg, which was aching.

I hope, she thought, he isn't going to fuss over that leg every time he is annoyed at me. She closed her eyes and caressed the downy head on her shoulder with her lips. A sensuous peace stole over her.

He took the brightly-coloured plan of the ship from his pocket, put on his glasses and examined it earnestly.

After a moment she said, — "The man across the way is visiting his wife, too. His name is Captain Rendel."

"He came up in the elevator with me."

"Oh. What's he like?"

"Like all other Englishmen. Afraid I'd speak to him."

"Did you?"

"Of course not. He had some flowers in a paper. It looked like about three daisies."

"Goodness!" She laughed. "Is he good-looking?"

"Tall and thin with a kind of bend in the middle. I liked his clothes."

"Well, I must say, Robert, you look nice enough for anyone this morning."

He was gratified. "Thanks, Camilla."

The nurse came in for the baby.

"Let's have a look at him," said Wylde, "in the daylight — such as it is."

"He's a beauty, sir," said the nurse.

She put the baby into his arms.

He limped to the window and scrutinized it with a tender half-humorous look.

"My wife thinks he's like me," he remarked to the nurse.

She thought him very good-looking and said :

"I hope so, sir."

"Is that a sort of compliment?" he asked with a boyish grin:

"You really shouldn't be holding him," interrupted his wife's voice. "Dear knows how germey your clothes are."

"That's true," he agreed, and handed over the baby.

The nurse carried him off.

"Robert," said his wife solemnly, "we must give him every advantage we possibly can."

"You bet," he agreed.

In the room across the way the Rendels were talking about their baby.

Phyllis Rendel chuckled. "It's ridiculous," she said, "how fast the tiny things develop. At any rate I hadn't realized till this minute that he has eyebrows. Look at them."

"I'm dashed if I can see any."

"Look from this angle. They're almost white but they're there."

"What amuses me is his nose. He's a funny-looking little codger altogether."

"Certainly he's not so pretty as Clive was at his age. He takes after his poor mother, I'm afraid."

"I hope he does. One like me is enough."

"Dick, don't pretend you don't know you're handsome."

"Then don't you go calling yourself his poor mother."

They laughed together. They were relieved that the ordeal was over. The child was healthy. Now they could return to their home in the country. Soon Phyllis would be able to ride again. Their life would go on in its accustomed pleasant groove. The baby had been born in the London nursing home because Mrs. Stuart-Grattan, Phyllis Rendel's mother, had a deep-seated distrust of the general practitioner in the country. He had attended her daughter when

the first child was born and she had had a very bad time. Mrs. Stuart-Grattan had plenty of means and a strong will. If Phyllis would have her baby in the nursing home, she would pay all expenses. She had, and the expenses were heavy.

The two fathers stood waiting for the lift. The passage was dim. The wan electric light made the men's faces sallow, gave them a careworn look of false age. Robert Wylde leaned heavily on his stick and stared through the iron grille behind which the lift would appear. He would come again in the evening to see Camilla. Between then and now the day stretched purposeless, except for the visit to the steamship office. He wished Camilla had been satisfied with the stateroom. Still, he supposed she was right. It might be noisy.

The lift was coming. It stopped. Neither man moved forward to enter first. Then, seeing he was expected to because of his stick, Wylde stepped hastily through the door. The floor of the lift was not quite level with the floor of the passage. He stumbled and would have fallen but for Dick Rendel, who caught him by the arm and held him. Reddening with annoyance at what he looked on as his own stupidity, Wylde thanked him. The lift slid down-

ward. In silence they descended, passed through the hall and into the street. The pale sunlight had deepened to a dusky gold. A flower-seller's barrow appeared around the corner. The Englishman turned suddenly to the American.

"I hope you weren't hurt," he said.

"Oh, no. I've been in an accident and it's made me clumsy, that's all."

"You're from America, eh?"

"Yes, my accident kept us here. That's why our baby was born in London." He had a sudden desire to talk to another man. "I suppose you live here," he said.

"No," answered Rendel vaguely. "In the country." And he added with unexpected familiarity, "How is your family doing?"

"Fine, thanks. How's yours?"

"Couldn't be better. It's my second son. The other is three years old."

Nurse Jennings, in her outdoor things, passed them on her way to meet Edgar. She gave them a swift, appraising look. She had a queer light-headed feeling as she passed them. Then she giggled and giggled.