24 HOURS LEAVE

CHAPTER VI

Continued from last week

She turned and walked blindly away. Tears fell down her cheeks. Quickly she fished her handkerchief out of her respirator—all the Waafs kept their handkerchiefs, powder puffs, lipsticks and other oddments there, though this hardly fitted in with service regulations—and wiped them away quickly. She mustn't cry in public, especially since she was in uniform!, But inwardly hot scalding tears were flowing.

She passed a telephone booth. She went in and got out two pennies, dialing the number Simon had given her to use in case of an emergency. But no sooner did she hear the ringing tone than she pressed button "B" and retrieved her coppers. What she wanted to say couldn't be said on an office telephone. She had to be careful. She mustn't make a false move now.

She walked on dully through the maze of people, thinking subconsciously that London was really astonishingly full for wartime. Funny how one side of her brain was concentrating on ordinary everyday things while the other was asking what she should do. It would be a fortnight before Simon and she would be together again at the cottage.

She could write and explain, of course. Passing the Piccadilly Hotel, she went in and found a quiet corner in the writing room. But to pour her heart out to him on paper was no easier to do than to get through to him onthe telephone—the right words simply wouldn't come. She thought, I'll have to wait. He's sure to write to me or perhaps he'll come down to the camp. He'll know he can see me just for a little while. Yes, this was what he would do.

But it wasn't. When she came off duty the next morning, she went straight to the cook-house, where letters for the Waafs were always put. Valerie, who was with her, found a letter waiting on the rack. As she grabbed it eagerly, she saw Cherry's face fall. "Nothing for you?"

"It doesn't seem so."

Valerie smiled. "You want jam on it. After all, you did have a week-end with your beloved Simon, and don't forget you saw him only yesterday!"

"I know. But I thought he'd write all the same."

"He'll write today and there'll be a letter tomorrow."

She prayed that Valerie would be right. They were on night duty again that night. It was difficult to concentrate on what she was doing, yet it was imperative that she should. The plotters couldn't walk through their jobs; they needed their wits about them.

During the early hours of the morning when they had a little time off in the rest room, Valerie said, "You all right, Cherry?"

"Yes, thank you. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. You look sort of tired."

"Oh, I'm tired certainly. I always am on night duty."

Blake lying in the deck chair beside her, leaned her arm behind her head and yawned. She was a skeptic on the subject of marriage and blamed it for every ill. "Oh, I know Cherry here thinks marriage is wonderful," she said bitterly, "but you wait, my girl. I must say these last two days you've not looked quite so perky."

Cherry picked up a book. If Blake was about to start pulling her to pieces, she'd begin to read.

Valerie jumped quickly in to her protection. "Cherry's all right, aren't you, Cherry? Just tired like the rest of us."

At long last they came off duty. Cherry said to Valerie, "I'm not going to bother about any breakfast. I'm going right to bed this very moment."

At the end of a week Cherry wrote to Simon. It was a short letter and didn't attempt to clear up anything. She only said that she was miserable at not hearing from him, that when she saw him again she would and could explain everything, and that once she did so he would understand that her reason for lunching with Jerry Miller had been thoroughly justified.

His answer to her was short and lacked the warmth and love which had always pervaded his letters. He was glad to hear there was some explanation. He would see her the following Saturday at the cottage.

It was on the Thursday that they heard the watch was to be changed. They all knew what it meant. Though they all talked wildly of revolt, there was just nothing they could do about it. Instead of their forty-eight hours' leave, they would get only a bare six off duty. Plans had to be cancelled, dates readjusted.

Valeria saw Cherry's face as she heard the news. She slid her arm through her friend's and murmured sympathetically, "Oh, Cherry, isn't that fiendish luck!"

Cherry said, "Oh, Valerie!" and then choked back her tears.

"You could get to the cottage for lunch, couldn't you?"

"Oh, yes. That's what I'll have to do. But it is terribly disappointing. You see . . . well, there is something I've got to put right with Simon."

Valerie shot her a swift glance. "I thought you were in some sort of a jam. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Cherry gave a wintry smile. "That's all right. It—it isn't anything really. At least, it's nothing that I can't explain away, so I'm very much hoping."

Simon cclled for her on Sunday morning. She'd written to him explaining what had happened. Almost fearfully she had suggested tha he should pick her up at the airdrome. "We'll only have six hours, darling. Please try and spend every moment of them with me."

Valerie wished her luck as she hurried from the billet. She said she would keep her fingers crossed and she was sure everything would be all right.

Simon swung open the door of the car as he saw her approaching. He didn't get out to come and meet her. He didn't attempt to kiss her as she reached him. He merely said, "Hop in. I thought we'd go back to the cottage for lunch. Mrs. Greene is cooking us a chicken." And once she was sitting beside him, "We'll talk when we get there, shall we, Cherry?"

She cast him a sidelong glance. Was this really Simon, this stern-faced man sitting beside her, scarcely speaking to her, who looked so cold, and whose voice sounded so distant when he did speak?

Mrs. Greene greeted them in the doorway of the cottage. "Ah, there you are m'm! I do think it's a shame you can't be here for the week-end."

"So do I, Mrs. Greene. I'm terribly disappointed."

"In about twenty minutes or so I'll have your dinner all dished up."

"That'll be grand," said Simon. "We'll have some sherry first in the garden if you like, Cherry."

"Yes. Let's. I'll just run upstairs and get out of the uniform. Even though I only have a short time here, I'd like to get into something different."

She went up to their room and slipped quickly out of her skirt and tunic. She found old navy-blue slacks and a simple blue and white striped blouse -- homely clothes, but she knew Simon liked to see her in them. She whisked a comb through her hair and stood back from the mirror feeling vaguely dissatisfied with her appearance. She wasn't sure today that she looked so "ridiculously youthful." Night duty and inability to sleep during the day were beginning to tell on her. She was thinner, surely, than she should be. It was all very well to be thin, but if she wasn't careful she'd soon be downright scrawny. Her hair seemed lifeless. Her cheeks were pale. Above all there was an anxious expression in her eyes. They were strained, uneasy.

She could see Simon through the window stretched out in a deck chair beneath the apple tree. She stood for a moment watching him, a dreadful ache in her heart that things weren't as they should be between them, and a prayer, too, that soon all this would be over, soon she would be in his arms again. He'd be telling her that he understood.

She turned and ran downstairs. He rose as she came toward him. "Where would you like to sit?"

"Here, Simon." She dropped into the chair opposite his. "Oh, dear, I was so thankful to get even this little time away from the station. At first I was afraid I might not be able to manage anything. Once they start switching around the times of the watches, you never know quite what's going to happen."

"Well, six hours is something. What time have you got to be back?"

"Six o'clock."

He dropped down in his chair again. Cherry wondered how to begin. She wanted to tell him right away, to get it over, because there could be no happiness while this shadow lay between them. She said desperately, "Simon. About the other day . . ."

"Well?" His voice was strangely cold. So were his eyes as they looked at her. Her heart shook.

"Darling, I've been so miserable," she said. "I can't tell you what I've felt like this last fortnight."

He laughed shortly. "I don't think you need to. I haven't felt too good myself. It was a bit of a shock to me to see you come out of that restaurant with that fellow Miller."

"I know, Simon, but . . ."

Mrs. Greene's voice interrupted them. "It's all ready, m'm. Shall I take it in?"

Simon cursed beneath his breath.

"Yes, certainly, Mrs. Greene," said Cherry. Then to Simon, "We'll have, it seems, to talk about it later."

"I suppose there's nothing else for it. We must have this confounded meal."

It seemed a lifetime before they were alone again. Mrs. Greene fussed around them. Were they sure they had all they wanted? She'd made bread sauce. She hoped they liked it. And there was stuffing, too . . . "I think it's a nice tender bird, sir," she breathed ecstatically, as Simon carved it.

"It seems to be. Thank you, yes, really we have everything we want." Mrs. Greene took one last look around and then almost reluctantly left them alone. Simon put Cherry's plate before her. "I hope you're hungry."

"I'm not in the least."

"Well, you'll have to eat all that up or you'll probably hurt Mrs. Greene's feelings." He sat down and their eyes met across the table. "You were saying?" said Simon.

"I was trying to tell you, darling—that I had a very good reason for meeting Jerry Miller."

He looked at her disbelievingly. She thought bitterly. He might at least wait until he's heard my explanation.

Suddenly realizing that complete frankness was the only way to win back his trust and love, she said desperately, "It's rather a long story, Simon."

"Well, we've got all afternoon."

"It goes back over two years."

Simon wondered if it were fair to force a confession from her. Suppose he just said, "It's all right. Denise told me that the fellow was in love with you. Maybe we'd better just say no more about it." But somehow he didn't feel like saying this. He longed above all else for some explanation, as she had promised in her letter, that would put things right between them. Only for the life of him he couldn't think of one.

"You see, Simon . . .oh, darling, don't look at me like that. You're making it all so much harder. Simon, Jerry Miller used to be terribly fond of Denise."

Simon stared at her. "Of Denise?"

(To be continued)

POULTRYMEN CONCERNED OVER MARKET SITUATION

Shortage of storage space, egg production continuing at a high level, an unfavorable feed-egg ration for the producer, and the anticipated decline in poultry prices this month are factors that are causing great concern to poultrymen, according to Dr. Robert E. Phillips of the University of Maryland poultry department. It appears to be anybody's guess as to the outcome of the situation, he states.

Purchases by the War Food Administration have been largely responsible for maintaining egg prices at the present level, Dr. Phillips says. For some time, the market egg supply has been burdensome and much lower prices to poultrymen would have resulted had not this government agency supported prices. Every producer can assist in correcting this situation by encouraging greater consumption of eggs, he asserted.

There has been little change in feed prices lately, Dr. Phillips said, because the usual ingredients that make up the poultry ration are at ceiling levels. The egg-feed ratio is less favorable because of the decline in egg prices. At present, approximately two dozen more eggs are needed to buy 100 pounds of feed, as compared with the corresponding period last year.

It would appear, Dr. Phillips said, that little improvement can be expected for this situation until egg production begins to decline in mid-summer. From all indications, he said, the market egg situation appears very favorable for poultrymen next winter.

It is always a good practice for poultrymen to cull their laying flock periodically, Dr. Phillips said. Hens that molt and stop laying in June and July are usually the poorest producers, and it is his advice to market them immediately.

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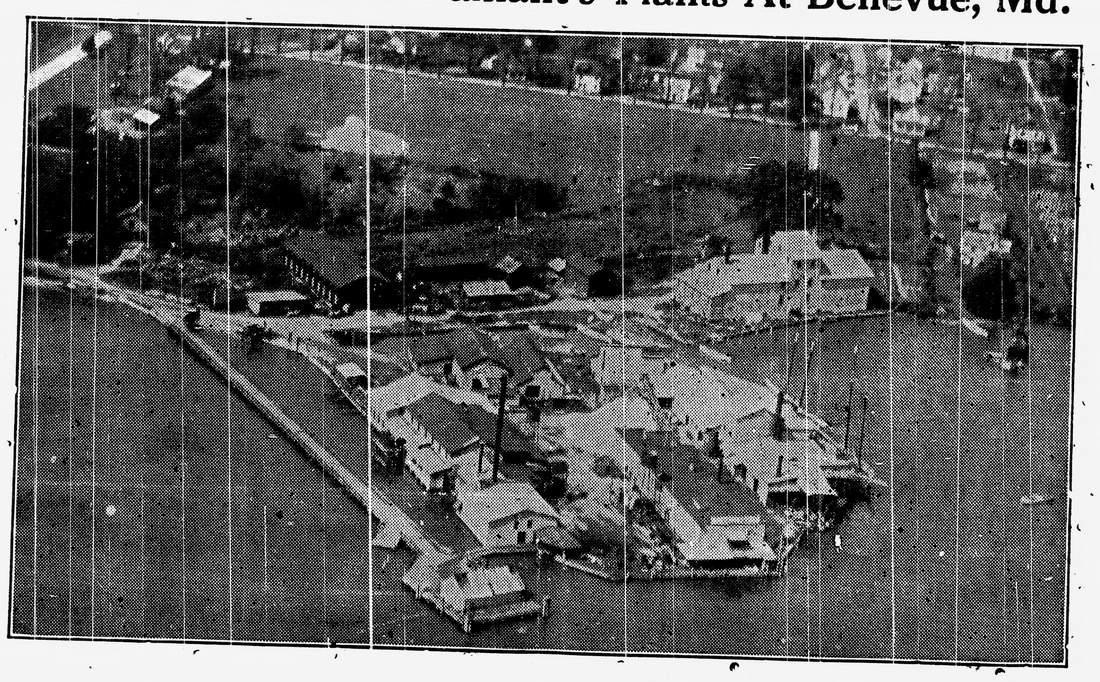

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