AIR FORCE GIRL

"Down to your airdrome. Or at least to a cottage quite near-by. Isn't that grand? Guy's been transferred there."

Tips was turning to Jane now and introducing them to each other. "Jane, this is Mrs. Stanton. Iris, Miss Lambolt."

"How do you do?"

"How do you do?" Iris Stanton smiled brilliantly.

"Miss Lambolt is at the station also," said Tips.

"Really! You must bring her along to see us, Tips."

"Thank you," murmured Jane politely.

Mrs. Stanton turned back again to Tips. "I mustn't stop any longer now. But I'll be seeing you soon. Sunnilands is the name of the house we've taken. Come in tomorrow evening for a cocktail."

"I'll see, Iris. I'm not certain. I'll give you a ring."

She made a little face at him and swept away with a short good-bye to Jane and a much warmer one to Tips. Jane rested her elbows on the table, cupped her chin in her hands and looked thoughtfully at Tips. "You know her pretty well, don't you, Tips?"

"I know her fairly well, yes. Her husband was stationed at the same airdrome I was at up north. I met them both up there. The husband's a very decent sort."

"If I married you," said Jane slowly, "I'd fully expect you eventually to be talking to some other woman just as you're talking to me. But don't let's argue about it. I'm due back at ten and we don't want to spend the time drangling."

But they did and were still doing so when Tips brought the car to a standstill some little distance from the airdrome shortly before ten o'clock. "Well, here we are," he said lightly.

"Yes. Here we are."

"I've never kissed a girl who din't want to kiss me."

"You wouldn't be doing so now."

He said at last, still holding her closely, "You let me kiss you and yet you won't agree to marry me."

"That was just a moment of madness."

"I don't believe you. You let me kiss you because you're in love with me."

This was true, of course, but all the time she denied it. Before he could argue with her further, she said, "Thre'll be a row if I don't get out of this car right here and now and hurry. Fraternizing with the officers is forbidden and if I'm caught . . ." she was out of the car as she spoke.

There were twenty-four Waafs at the airdrome. They had come in batches of twelve she and Sparks having arrived with the second contingent. The first, they'd soon discovered, had been sent to do their special training immediately on joining the service, thus missing their fortnight of life at the camp near London, which had been devoted solely to disciplinary training, and assuredly this had been a pity. Jane, in the first few days on the station, had realized quite dispassionately the difference between the girls who had arrived with her and those who had been sent on earlier.

Sparks murmured to Jane, "Blue bell-darling is off again." Blue-bell darling was eighteen. She was the loveliest thing Jane had ever seen. Her hair was almost silver it was so fair and her eyes, fringed with thick dark curling lashes, were as blue as her nickname.

Jane paused in the important business of cleaning her buttons, deciding with satisfaction that they positively shone like gold. The door burst open and two more girls appeared, Hunter and Brett, who were bosom friends.

"It's the hours that'll kill us off," said Hunter wearily. "I'm so dead tired I could lie down and die." She fished her make-up out of her bag and began to re-do her face. It was a very pretty face and she knew how to make it even prettier. Her father was an M. P. She claimed to know everything that was going on and had never been taught the meaning of the word discretion.

She was chatting now nineteen to the dozen, not bothering terribly whether anyone wanted to listen. "I've got a school friend who's just moved down here. Have any of you noticed that new officer —the tall dark one round about forty? He and his wife have taken a cottage over at Stretton, that pretty little village some five miles away"

Brett said she'd noticed the officer and added that he'd left her cold.

"I know. Guy's deadly. But his wife's fun. She'll liven things up. I've known her for ages."

The next moment she knew about whom Hunter was speaking. "I'll bet Iris has pulled some wires to get Guy transferred down here. She's absolutely crazy about Tips Poel-Sanders. She was up north when he was stationed there and most of the time Guy was away on some job or other. And did those two get around together!"

"I wouldn't mind getting around with Tips Poel-Sanders," murmured Brett.

Jane looked at her watch. "Well, I don't care what the rest of you do, but I'm off. We're due in the Ops. room in just five minutes."

Sparks strolled across to the square concrete building with her The two of them were ahead of the others. "Don't you know Tips Poel Sanders?" she asked.

"I've met him. Yes."

"I thought I saw you talking to him the other night."

Jane aid Sparks was right. "But don't tell the others."

She'd seen Tips with Iris Stanton once or twice herself. In the days that followed she saw him often, but only rarely to speak to. But this wasn't his fault. He tried to persuade her to meet him she wouldn't. She was afraid to see much of him. Despite the resentment in her heart against him she knew if they were to meet often it would be disastrous. So she made excuses. She was working when he was off duty. If she wasn't she was too tired.

"I could get you transferred if you married me," he said one morning when she met him as she had met him on the first morning in the narrow passage leading to the Ops. room.

"So you said before. But I don't want to be transferred."

"You want some sleep. There are dark shadows under your eyes Jane."

"I know. I don't care. I'm doing a useful job of work."

"Jane, darling, please . . ."

She fled. His voice did things to her. It made her want to give in, made her almost forget Stella and all she'd suffered because of him. Then that afternoon she saw Iris Stanton drive up to the airdrome and the two of them go off together. This hardened her, this and all the gossip that was rife now, according to Hunter who knew so much.

Hunter insisted on joining Jane and Sparks one day when they went off for a bicycle ride and took them round by Stretton and pointed out the Stanton's house to hem. "Let's call in and see if Iris is at home," suggested Hunter brightly. "I know she'd love to meet you both."

But Jane took one quick look at the pretty little red brick house and said she didn't feel like meeting anybody. "Let Mrs. Stanton alone. I'm too tired to make polite conversation."

Hunter left it at that. They rode on through the village. "I never thought I'd live to ride a bicycle again," said Sparks, puffing and blowing from sheer exhaustion.

"It's good exercise," murmured Jane.

Hunter skimmed in between them. "If I tell wou two something, will you keep it to yourselves?"

The two smiled.

"There's something big pending. It's all terribly hush-hush, but it might happen any night now."

"Do you mean Adolf is going to pay us a visit?" asked Sparks with interest.

"No. We're paying him one. Jimmie Stafford told me. He's not going. He says he wishes he were. But Tips Poel-Sanders is and Guy Stanton too and . . ."

Sparks, pedaling hard, broke in on her indignantly: "You know you ought to get a prize for careless talk!"

Hunter looked at her reproachfully. "I like that! I'm only telling you two under the strictest secrecy. Why shouldn't I tell you two? You've promised not to say anything to anyone else."

"That's not the point. The point is—" Sparks looked at Hunter and wondered if it would be sheer waste of breathe to try and make her see what she was doing. She said to Jane later that afternoon when they were preparing to take a few hours of sleep prior to going on duty at midnight: "You know, if we did our duty we'd report Hunter."

"I know. But it would mean an awful row."

"Of course it would. And so it should. Remember how we were all sworn to say nothing? That girl's a public danger. She knows too much and she talks too much. And how that silly young fool Jimmie Stafford can have been such a nitwit as to tell her what he did I simply can't imagine."

Jane couldn't either. But she wasn't caring about Jimmie Stafford. She was worrying terribly about Tips and wondering when the "something big" was coming off. She wished suddenly from the very bottom of her heart that she had not been quite so strong-imnded about him. After all, that night they'd dined together at kettner's —the night after she'd seen Stella —she'd made up her mind to quite a different course of action. Then she'd decided to see him just as often as she could but to make sure that she never took him seriously or allowed him to hurt her. Instead he had been the one who was going to be hurt one day. She would throw caution to the winds.

But she hadn't seen him often. Nothing but little fleeting moments with him had come her way for the last two or three weeks and now tonight it made her feel no happier to realize that they had been only by her own choosing. She glanced across at Sparks who was sleeping peacefully.

Very quietly she swung her legs over the side of the bed and, stooping, found her shoes and put them on. She slid into her skirt, shirt and tunic and found her big coat and cap. Very quietly she opened the door. She slipped out and sped swiftly across toward the officers' quarters, uncertain how she would set about finding Tips, but determined that in some way she would let him know she was there and wanting to see him.

There were cars outside the officers' mess. She could see men moving about in the comfortably furnished room. She walked up and down wondering what to do next, scared that at any moment one of the Waaf officers might see her and ask her what she was doing.

Then the door of the officers' mess opened. In the light shed from within she saw Iris Stanton and Tips come down the steps and walk toward her car which was very near where Jane was standing. Instinctively she drew back into the shadows, sharp tears stinging her eyes and a dreadful feeling of desolation filling her heart. They passed quite close to her. She heard Tips say, "What about Guy? Shouldn't we wait for him?"

Iris gave a light rejoiner to this. "He can't come yet. He's working this evening. Come on, Tips. Get in." And a little reproachfully, "Darling, you didn't used to take It seemed he didn't take a great deal now. He got into the car and a moment later Jane heard the purr of the engine. She watched them drive with increasing speed down the long asphalt road leading from the main buildings. Then she turned nad would have moved swiftly away, but she stopped short. A man was standing a few paces from her. His eyes were on the retreating car, his brows were drawn together. In a flash she recognized Guy Stanton, the husband who, Hunter suggested, was so absorbed in his work that he was oblivious to what his wife was up to.

To be continued

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Watch this paper for details of the big scrap drive and what you must do to help

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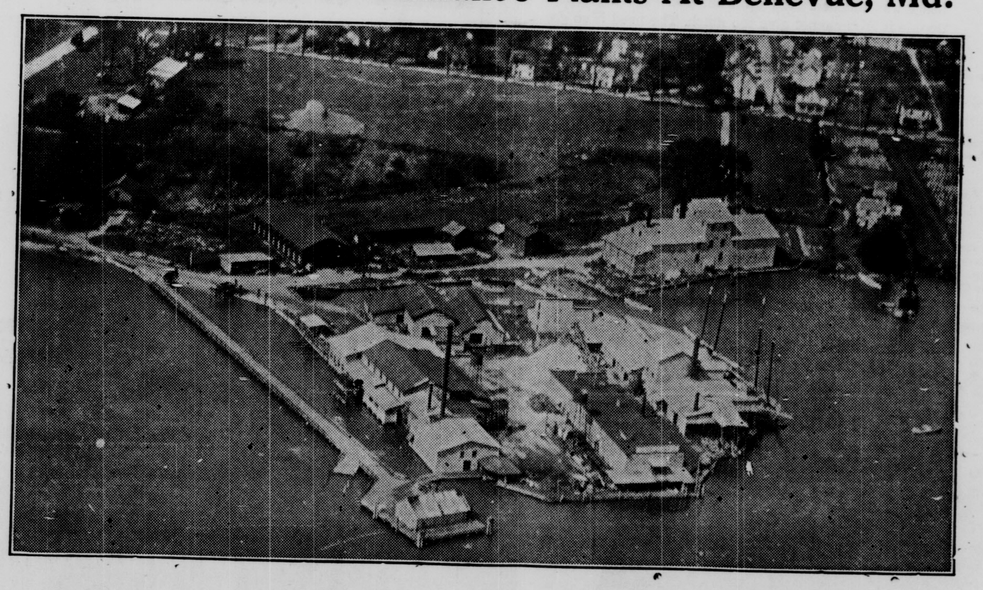


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