CHAPTER VIII—Continued
—12—

He turned submissively away; and then Ruth appeared, her arms full of linen.

Nancy with the help of Mary Ann stripped off Dan's garments, and while Mary Ann and Ruth lifted first his head and then his feet. Nancy slipped under his body blankets and sheets to cushion the hard shutter on which he still lay. A pillow under his head; then sheets over him, expertly slit and folded to expose the field in which Doctor Greeding must work.

Once Dan whispered something, weakly, and Mary Ann said: "Hush, dear. Rest!"

"Where's—Nancy?" he asked.

"Here," said Nancy, and touched his lips with her finger; so that he was content.

When they were ready, Mary Ann said crisply:

"Go tell your father to hurry." Nancy obediently departed. Mary Ann went to the sink, and under the running faucet scrubbed her hands and her arms above the elbow. She ripped a sheet in half and folded it like an apron around her shoulders, slit holes for her arms, made Ruth pin the sheet like an apron behind.

She then thoroughly washed her hands with alcohol; then bade Margaret empty the water out of the boiling kettle and set it, with the things it contained still steaming as they dried, on a chair by the table. Doctor Greeding and Nancy returned.

Mary Ann said briskly: "Doctor, you can scrub up at the faucet there. Here's alcohol."

He urged: "Mary Ann, don't count too much on this."

She retorted: "I'm not counting, I'm not even thinking. I'm just doing all I can. You must—do the rest of it!"

Nancy stood by uncertainly, and Mary Ann said to her:

"Nancy, you scrub up too. Scrub your hands, hard, with the brush and soap. Then wash them in alcohol. Don't touch anything afterward. Stand near us here, in case we need you. Your father will tell you what to do."

She bound a strip of linen across Doctor Greeding's mouth and nose, made Ruth do a like service for herself. And she showed Doctor Greeding the kettle and its contents. "I've boiled everything I found that you might use," she said. Her voice caught. "It isn't much of a kit, but I beat those big spoons for retractors; and here are scissors, and razor-blades. They're double-edged. You'll have to be careful not to cut yourself! We've no snaps, so you'll have to catch the small vessels with thread as you go along. Here are needles, and thread."

She saw him waver, and she cried in a swift storm of determination: "What's the matter with you? You act like a scared interne!" Her tones rang with scorn. "If you bungle this, I'll see that the world knows it. You can do this; and you've got to, Doctor. You've got to! Now come!"

He said with a helpless gesture: "The ether, Mary Ann. Who will give that?"

They were ready, scrubbed, standing by the table. Mary Ann for a moment hesitated helplessly. Then: "Nancy will," she decided. "I'll tell her how." To Nancy: "Take that towel and fold it twice, and pour ether on it and then lay it across his mouth and nose. Then a few drops afterward, whenever I tell you."

Doctor Greeding stood with his hands lifted, protecting them against any least contamination. He said: "You know it's hopeless, Mary Ann. We're not properly sterile. Infection—"

Mary Ann's voice broke for a minute in something like a sob. "For that matter, there's infection enough already inside him. Begin!"

"He's not ready yet."

Mary Ann was white with desperation, white with haste. "Dan," she cried. His lips moved. "Dan, if it hurts, lie still," she commanded. "Nancy's going to give you ether now. Just breathe deeply. You won't feel it long."

Nancy came with the can, the pungent smell of ether preceding her. "Pour it on the towel, Nancy," Mary Ann commanded. "Now lay the towel over his face!" And then, curtly, over her shoulder: "Ruth, scrub your hands with soap and water and then alcohol. Don't touch anything afterward. We may need you." To Doctor Greeding: "I'll assist, do everything I can."

CHAPTER IX

Doctor Greeding steeled himself; he picked up a razor blade from the kettle. He looked at his hands.

These hands of his were, miraculously, steady. He studied them as though they belonged to some one else, astonished at their rocklike firmness. Himself in turmoil, his body and his soul shaken as by a tempest, it seemed to him incredible that these trained hands of his should be so still and sure.

They stood in a silent group, waiting; Doctor Greeding by Dan's side, Mary Ann facing him across the table, Nancy at Dan's head. Ruth, holding her scrubbed hands out in front of her, white and motionless, stood near, awaiting any command.

There was no sound save Dan's long, rattling inhalations; and the clock ticked on the wall.

"He's ready," said Mary Ann.

Doctor Greeding's thoughts began to race. It was a moment before he realized that, at her word, and without command from his will, his hands had begun their business here.

Doctor Greeding, during that interminable time while he waited beside Dan, with Mary Ann facing him, and Nancy at his left dripping ether on the towel, felt himself helpless as even the stoutest swimmer must be helpless in the full sweep of a mighty current. And when at last he began, he watched like a spectator this conflict between his will—which desired Dan to die—and his deed. He wished to bungle, to be inept and clumsy; but despite himself, those long-trained fingers went about their accustomed tasks, seeking out the hurts that must be mended, discovering them infallibly by touch alone.

And Doctor Greeding thought, with a deep wonder, that his hands had never better performed their task than now. He had not even to direct them with his eyes.

While he worked, a change by slow degrees took place in him. He began to be able to look with a clear eye upon himself and upon the world.

He saw Nancy clearly, and perhaps for the first time. He comprehended her love for Dan, and he comprehended in all its implications her love for himself too. So many times he had hurt her, wounded her, frightened her; and yet always there dwelt in her a love for him that, no matter how often he spurned it, was still ready to offer him tenderness and comforting.

And Doctor Greeding thought of Mary Ann, so bravely steady now, rigorously controlling all the sorrow and terror she must feel, on the slim chance that she might, by summoning all her wit and strength, save Dan. Of Mary Ann, who loved Jerrell enough so that even after his shot struck down her brother, she could offer him forgiveness and comfort with an unasked kiss.

She loved Jerrell, would be happy with him. But—could she ever be happy with him if Dan, whom Jerrell had shot, should die?

And Doctor Greeding thought of Dan, so near death now, whose crime had been no more than that Nancy loved him. And as Doctor Greeding's thoughts thus spun and swirled, he began to feel himself utterly alone. By the interwoven loves which bound these others together—Nancy and Dan, Dan and Mary Ann, Mary Ann and Jerrell—he felt himself hopelessly excluded. Their lives were full without him. There was no one to whom he, his life, was indispensable. No one now in the living world.

He was lonely for Myra, for his wife. Through all the years of his manhood she had been welded to his side. He realized, suddenly, that where she who had been flesh of his flesh had been torn away, there remained an open wound that would never close.

Flesh of his flesh; and—torn away by his own hand! He accepted this fact with all that it implied; and he remembered with a wry smile something Professor Carlisle had said, long ago. Something about the unwisdom of supping with the devil, unless one had a long spoon!

He had paid no heed to that caution, at the time; but it was too late for wisdom now. His fingers were already burned . . .

With a rising pride he watched these fingers of his, working here so skillfully. Burned or not, they could still work miracles when he chose.

And suddenly Doctor Greeding realized that he did so choose; that he wished, deeply and profoundly and with a certain desperation, to work now a miracle for Dan. He wished it just as a man swept by a strong current toward the crest of a cataract wishes to cling to the stout rope which chance has thrown within his reach and grasp.

As he had wished death for others, and even a while ago for Dan himself, so now he wished life for Dan. For the sake of Mary Ann, that she might be happy with Jerrell; for the sake of Nancy and her love; for Dan's own sake, he wished Dan to live! This wish was like a humble prayer.

He began to work with a new intentness. Mary Ann, facing him across Dan's body, sensed this, and looked at him quickly. But she said nothing, asked no question, continued like a machine to supplement in every way his efforts with her own.

And presently, as his senses cleared, Doctor Greeding began to feel, with that fine instinct of the surgeon which is so often right without any tangible reason for its conclusions, that Dan might be saved. All went so smoothly. The bullet had been driven by a light powder-charge—by a target, rather than a service-load. Also, the ball had struck Dan's belt and thus lost somewhat of its force, so that its destructive effect was less than might otherwise have been the case.

Thus the wound itself was as mild as possible—though deadly serious enough. But also there seemed to Doctor Greeding ground for hope in the fact that this absurd, irregular surgical procedure insisted on performing itself without the least hitch. Razor-blades instead of the knife, blunt scissors for dissection, thread and needle in place of snaps, clumsily bent spoons for retractors, each in his hands so incredibly shrewd and skillful served their purpose well; and at the moment the supply of gauze for sponges neared exhaustion, Jerrell and Thomas came racing up the path, bringing all that might be required.

When Doctor Greeding saw the end of the task in sight, he spoke to Nancy. "Enough ether—take the towel away now." She obeyed, and he finished, sure that what he had done was well done; with a nod to Mary Ann, he withdrew from the table where Dan lay. He went to the sink to wash his hands. Nancy was there, leaning back against the drain-board, white and still. Doctor Greeding looked at his daughter, and he asked gently:

"Head ache? It's the fumes. Get out of doors. We must keep Dan warm, can't open any windows here."

Nancy went obediently toward the kitchen door, and Mary Ann said:

"We'll move him into the dining-room, arrange some sort of screen around him there to keep off drafts."

Doctor Greeding nodded. He said wearily: "It's been a strain. My head's whirling. A surgeon should never operate on his friends!"

"You did all that could be done, did it perfectly," Mary Ann assured him; and she asked, with a sudden weakening in her tones, her first confession of fear: "Tell me what you think?"

Doctor Greeding hesitated. "Everything was as fortunate as possible," he said. "There are many perforations, as you saw. That was inevitable. But not much poisonous matter free. Of course, all we could do was repair the damage, and drain the wound, and—wait. You know that as well as I." He added: "Yet—I believe he will get better!"

With Thomas and Jerrell helping, they carried Dan into the dining-room, and laid a mattress on the table for his bed, and set a fire on the hearth.

And thus began the vigil that must endure for days. Doctor Greeding assumed command. "Another procedure may be necessary later," he explained. "I'll get whatever we are likely to need, have it ready." He telephoned to Boston and arranged that a full kit should be dispatched by messenger. He suggested a nurse; but Mary Ann negatived that.

"I shall be within call always," she said. "And Nancy will want to help. Any unnecessary people could only add to the confusion. He needs quiet, needs to sleep."

He assented. "Yes, that's true," he agreed.

"But I must let Father know," she remembered.

Doctor Greeding said quickly: "Of course." And he urged: "Have him come up here, Mary Ann." He was suddenly and for no tangible reason eager to see Professor Carlisle again.

Jerrell took this matter in hand, he volunteered to drive to Boston and fetch Dan's father. "It's better than having him make the trip alone," he said. "And—I must confess my fault to him, Mary Ann."

She reassured him. "It wasn't your fault. It was an accident," she urged. Yet she let him go.

Thomas took him in the boat to the landing where he had left his car. He would, they decided, return next day.

Dusk began to creep across the lake and cloak the island. Dan was drowsily conscious, murmuring absurdities and realizing their absurdity and chuckling at himself; and Nancy, close by him, holding his hand, laughed with him ever so tenderly. Mary Ann had made a couch in the billiard-room, close by where he lay. After dinner—they ate in the kitchen, in relays, one of them always by his side—Mary Ann insisted that Doctor Greeding go to bed for a while.

"I'll call you later," she promised. "Nancy will stay with him, and I'll sleep here, and we'll call you!"

So Doctor Greeding went to his room; but at first he did not sleep. He turned on all the lights, unwilling that there should be anywhere a shadowed corner in which anything or nothing might be hidden. The man's nerves began to twitch raggedly. He had a sense of dark forces gathering like a smothering cloud. He slept at last uneasily; and when at last some one came tapping at his door, he woke with a bound and a cry.

"It's Nancy, Father," the girl said reassuringly, through the panels. "It's all right. Nothing's happened. Only Mary Ann thought you might come down for a while now."

"At once," he promised, steadily enough; yet it was in fact some time before he was sufficiently composed to face them. When he came downstairs, he found Mary Ann by Dan's side, Nancy half asleep in a great chair near. Doctor Greeding touched Dan's wrist, his brow, and nodded reassuringly; and Mary Ann smiled. She went to spread a blanket gently over Nancy.

"You lie down too," Doctor Greeding directed.

She obeyed him, white and weary; and Doctor Greeding was left with the hurt man. He stood beside Dan for a moment; then he too sat down—sat without moving, while long thoughts absorbed him.

Sometime later he looked toward Nancy. Her eyes were open. He saw the glint of them.

"Awake, dear?" he murmured.

She smiled. "I had a bad dream," she whispered. "But it's all right if you're here." And she sighed, and slept again. Her faith was like a draft of warming wine.

Hours later Nancy roused, and came and stood with her hand touching Dan's. His fingers closed faintly over hers.

"He knows me," Nancy whispered; and Dan muttered:

"Nancy. There?"

"Here always, Dan. Hush now, darling. Sleep."

She held him in her love as a mother holds a babe in arms. Doctor Greeding drew back into the shadows while she took his place at her lover's side. And so at last the long night ended, darkness yielding to the warm gray of dawn.

CHAPTER X

There followed days of waiting, of that inaction which is so much more difficult than action, when they could only tend the hurt man, and seek to cheer him with their smiles, feeding with the fuel of their untainted strength the flickering fire of life that burned in him. Sometimes he was in torment, but he managed to grin despite the pain, hiding his anguish behind a brave mask of mirth from these folk who loved him.

He did thus deceive Nancy; but at such hours his brow was wet, and Mary Ann knew he suffered, and eased him as she could.

Doctor Greeding himself seldom went far from where the hurt man lay. He clung to Dan's proximity, as a mariner in stormy weather clings to safe anchorage, with a jealous diligence. Here was his task and his desire; to make sure, first of all, that Dan came back to health again. He would not by even a brief absence take the least risk of failure.

The vigil left its mark upon him, so that even Mary Ann urged him to rest, to walk around the island, or take a boat-ride, or find some other means of distraction.

"You need it," she insisted. "You're deadly tired."

"I'm all right," he protested. "I'll stand by."

Jerrell and Professor Carlisle had arrived early on the first morning, having left Cambridge at dawn. Doctor Greeding welcomed them. There was rising in him a deep affection for these folk, a new perception of the kindliness and understanding in them all. Jerrell, for instance, had not offered to throw the resources of his wealth at their disposal; his silence seemed to assume that whatever could be done for Dan, they would do. Some men, Doctor Greeding reflected, would have displayed the arrogance natural to financial power; would have insisted on summoning other physicians, nurses, on importing hospital facilities of every kind. He liked Jerrell for his reticence in this direction.

(TO BE CONTINUED)