RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Remember Me

Sheila Walsh

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About the Author

Sheila Walsh was born in Birmingham, but has lived in Southport for many years. She has been a writer for some sixteen years, during which time she has written eighteen historical novels of which the seventh, *A Highly Respectable Marriage*, won the 1983 RNA Romantic Novel of the Year Award.

She is a past chairman of the RNA, Life President of her local Writer's Circle and is happily married to a retired jeweller. She has two daughters, one married – and a Burmese cat. Her previous novel, *Until Tomorrow* is also published by Arrow.

REMEMBER ME

Sheila Walsh

arrow books

Dedication

To my husband, Des, for putting up with my absentmindedness and providing meals at regular intervals when necessary. Also to Tom and Marie Murray for their many kindnesses.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to all who have helped me in researching this book, especially Janet Smith at Liverpool Central Library and Carol Bidston at Birkenhead Central Library who went to so much trouble to find and send the relevant newspaper cutting relating to the ceremony honouring the Royal Iris and Royal Daffodil, which took place on St George’s Day in 1919.

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay . . .

(Christina Rossetti – 1830–1894)

PART ONE

1

THE FEBRUARY MORNING was pitch dark and ice frosted the windows as Matilda Shaw crept down the stairs, being careful to avoid the ones that creaked. Irene, Kevin and Moira would sleep through anything, but little Daisy was teething again, and the least sound might set her off whingeing, and with Mam not getting in till after midnight, and Dad spending half the night coughing his heart up, they both needed every bit of sleep they could get. Quiet as she was, however, as she reached the lobby, the thin thread of voice came from beyond the half-open door of the front parlour.

'Are you off out then, Matty, love?'

She pushed the door wider and put her head round. The fire had been built up with slack overnight, but now it burned low in the grate and the atmosphere was what Kevin, with the bluntness of a thirteen-year-old, always called 'pongy'. Her stomach had grown accustomed to stuffy sickroom smells, and anyway, when you loved someone it didn't matter. The oil lamp turned low cast deep shadows over the man slumped on the edge of the truckle bed behind the door, making his face seem full of hollows. His striped nightshirt hung in crumpled folds from protruding shoulder bones, but Patrick Shaw's eyes burned in their sockets with a special radiance at the sight of his favourite daughter, not far off eighteen and as pretty as her mammy at the same age, with the dark curls brushing her cheeks beneath her woolly hat and fierce accusation in her eyes. His voice was a breathless wheeze.

‘I was trimming the lamp before the smoke got on me chest.’

‘You should be asleep,’ she said severely.

‘And miss the sight of you? Not a bit of it. Sure, I’ll have all the time in the world to sleep, soon enough.’

‘Don’t say that!’ Fear sharpened her voice. ‘You’re doing just fine, if only you’d behave yourself. Hasn’t Dr Hutton said as much, time and again?’

‘Bossy, you are, just like your mam.’ His chuckle turned to a rasping, choking cough that shook his whole frame and brought Matty flying to his side to hold the hunched quivering shoulders as he pressed the towel, already stained from previous coughing bouts, to his mouth.

And as she hushed him, fighting down her own panic, she was filled with an unreasoning rage. How could a good and merciful God allow such things to happen? And to Dad, of all people, who was one of the grandest men in the whole world, an’ wouldn’t hurt a fly.

His breath still rasped, but the coughing bout was over.

‘There, you see?’ she reproached him, the thickness of tears in her voice as she laid him back on the pillows. ‘If you’d been doin’ as you should, that wouldn’t have happened.’ She whisked away swiftly to hide her distress. ‘I might as well mend the fire now I’m here.’

Matty lifted the fireguard to one side and, seizing the poker, vented all her pent-up fury on the sluggish embers until the sparks flew upwards. She was just shovelling on some precious coal when her mam came in.

‘What’s all this, then?’

Dad had always teased Mam, saying there wasn’t two penn’eth of her, and indeed the long thick plait of her chestnut hair hanging over the shoulder of the faded blue dressing-gown, did give her the look of a thin wiry child. Matty was already half a head taller. But what Mam lacked in inches, she more than made up for in force of personality.

Even so, she looked tired, and in the lamplight, Matty saw that the chestnut plait was becoming increasingly laced with silver, which was small wonder after the worry of the past few months.

Their eyes met, and just for a moment the anguish of the older woman showed. But when she spoke, Agnes Shaw's voice was rock firm.

'I was wide awake, so I thought I'd come down and make a brew.' She glanced at the mantelpiece where the little oak clock with the twisted sugarstick legs ticked away merrily. 'Here, give me that shovel, our Matty. It's gone seven, an' it's little enough that skinflint pays you without havin' any of it docked for being late.'

'Better do as you're bid, me darlin' girl, before your mam belts you one, hard woman that she is.'

Dad's voice still held an echo of the good days – not so long ago – when he would tease Mam rotten, calling her the mighty midget and making a great show of fending her off with one big capable hand when she berated him for some chore left undone. Remembering brought the threat of tears close again, and Matty kissed the top of his head and, pausing only to wash her hands in the bowl by the door, ran out of the room.

As she turned the corner into Falkner Street, a veil of freezing fog swirled about her, driven by the piercing wind that came up from the Mersey and nearly took the feet from under her. Relieved that she didn't have to face into it, Matty gave her scarf an extra turn about her neck and stuffed her hands with their woolly mitts deep in the pockets of the grey flannel coat. It was quality cloth, and had needed only a stitch here and there to make it look almost as good as new. Even so, by the time she reached Lodge Lane, her fingers were numb.

It didn't seem right that Mam should have to do so much, taking in more and more washing for a niggardly return so that she didn't have to leave Dad alone of a daytime, and

then cleaning offices at night to earn the money for little extras. But Mam had a fierce streak of independence that made her refuse to accept anything that smacked of charity.

'You don't get nothin' for nothin' in this world,' was her motto, and no amount of argument would shift her.

Eager as Matty had been to learn all she could back in 1914, she had felt guilty about being apprenticed to Mrs Crawley, a much patronized dressmaker. War was declared soon after, and a part of her glowed with patriotism and a longing to do her bit like Phil and Irene. Mam insisted that it would be daft, wasting her talents when she was so obviously gifted with a needle, and that sometimes it paid to take the long view.

'Everyone knows the war won't last. And we aren't short,' she'd said proudly. 'Your dad's the best riveter this side of the river, an' everyone knows it. There aren't many as can pick and choose their jobs like he can. If our Phil hadn't been daft enough to volunteer for the Pals right off, he'd be well on the way to matching him by now. Still, Phil's a good lad – he'll send me something regular, and if our Holy and Blessed Mother watches over him and brings him home safe, your dad'll get him taken on in the yard soon enough.'

'But Irene's goin' on the munitions –'

'Irene's older than you. And she doesn't have your skills. Just think on – at the end of your apprenticeship, you'll be set up with a trade for life – one you'll be able to carry on from home, even after you're married.'

But at fourteen, marriage had been the last thing on Matty's mind, just as her sights had always been set far beyond being a tuppeny-ha'penny dressmaker working from home – beyond even the likes of Mrs Crawley. One day she was going to have her own elegant establishment in Bold Street, no matter how long it took.

But not a stitch had she been allowed to sew for the first twelve months. As a junior apprentice, it was all fetch and

carry.

'Bring me those pins and don't drop any or you'll be working an extra half-hour to make up for it.' Or: 'I need two dozen buttons the same as this one. And I do mean exactly the same.'

And buttons was about all she'd been paid, with never so much as a thank you. Even when she did finally get to use a needle, her situation had been little better, her wage a mere pittance.

Matty shrugged and quickened her step. Now, after four frustrating years with Mrs Crawley – who was well named, the way she sucked up to her clients – her dream still seemed as far away as ever.

But from the first day she had listened as Mrs Crawley talked to her posher clients about *haute couture*, which, so far as Matty could make out, was French for the elegant clothes sketched in the fashion magazines scattered about Mrs Crawley's reception room. And when she could sneak a minute, she would pore over some out-of-date ones piled up in a back room.

They were mostly from Paris, and written in French, which made them seem even more glamorous. As for the women whose pictures filled the glossy pages – graceful women they were, but so thin you'd think they'd never eaten a square meal in their lives, and striking exaggerated poses that must have given them terrible backache. They were wearing narrow skirts and flimsy blouses with V necks that she'd heard nicknamed 'pneumonia blouses' by Mam's friends, who thought them indecent. There were daring oriental tunics fashioned from beautiful flowing fabrics, with never a hint of a corset – hardly even room for a stitch underneath, except maybe a few wispy bits of silk and lace. These styles, so one rare English caption stated, had been inspired by the Russian Ballet's costumes for *Schéhérazade*, and made popular by a designer called Paul Poiret around the time the hobble skirt became popular in

England. They were beautiful, exciting and they set all kinds of ideas milling round in Matty's head.

The more time went on, the more she felt a great well of creativity inside her, bursting to find expression, but she did not as yet possess the skill or the opportunity to give it life. The war had cut down the demand for high fashion; utility clothes and plainer, fuller gowns had replaced the hobble skirt, and these, though more comfortable, were very uninspiring. Mrs C's customers, like most folk, seemed to feel that extravagant dresses were out of place in wartime, so a lot of the apprentices' present work involved alterations and making over. This still called for a certain amount of ingenuity, but sometimes Matty sketched her ideas in a notebook and dreamed of the day when she would be famous in Liverpool and beyond, as Matilda Shaw, the queen of *haute couture*.

And then, just before last Easter, Dad had been taken bad with what Dr Hutton said was a bad dose of bronchial pneumonia. 'Thirty years out in all weathers and never a day off work till now,' he'd fretted. But the cough didn't go away, even when Dad gave up his beloved pipe. The pneumonia had left a weak patch on the lung, the doctor said. Finally, he'd coughed up blood and the dread word 'Tuberculosis' had been mentioned.

After he'd had a spell in hospital, Mam had brought him home. The hospitals were full up with wounded soldiers, she said, and Pat might well pick up something worse than he already had. Anyway, he would get better sooner at home where he belonged. But he had to be kept away from the children, so the front parlour had become his room – almost his prison.

Even then Mam wouldn't hear of Matty giving up her training. There had been a big argument about it at the time. It had started, as most arguments did, with their Irene, who was two years older than Matty and liked to throw her weight about.

Irene was as fair as Matty was dark, with a flawless complexion and fluffy blonde hair, which, unlike most of the girls in the factory, she had refused to have cut short. ‘Mr Brighouse said it would be a pity to spoil such pretty hair, and that as long as I keep it well covered up with a cap, it’ll be okay.’

Irene had lost that earlier argument over Matty’s work, but it had come up again last night.

The curtains had been closed in the back room and the range glowed red as Mam put the iron to heat on the hob. Matty finished siding the pots and helped her mother to lay the thick folds of the ironing blanket across the table.

‘It’s all scrimp and scrape in this house,’ Irene was complaining, her pretty features twisted with discontent. ‘The shortages are bad enough without havin’ to make every penny stretch six ways. I’m just about sick of it.’

Mam took a shirt from a basket full of washing and wearily began to smooth it out. ‘There’s a lot of folk in the same boat, girl. We manage well enough with your dad’s panel money, and what the rest of us bring home between us . . .’

‘I earn the most, and little enough I see of it.’

Matty was incensed. ‘That’s not fair.’

‘Yes it is,’ Irene retorted. ‘I work bloomin’ long shifts for that money.’

‘We all work long hours. But I haven’t noticed you staying in much of an evening to help round the house.’

‘I do what I can. And I’m older than you. I’m entitled to a bit of fun occasionally, except I’m getting ashamed to go out looking such a frump. This frock’s the only one I’ve got that’s halfway decent, an’ it’s been washed that often, the pattern’s all but worn off.’

Matty saw the tight-lipped strain on Mam’s face and bit back her indignation. ‘If you get some material, I’ll make you one.’

‘Thanks, but I don’t want home-made,’ Irene said ungraciously. ‘I’ve seen the one I want, and if you got a proper job, I might stand some chance of buying it.’

‘There’s plenty worse off than you, my girl, and don’t you forget it,’ Mam snapped. ‘And keep your voices down, the both of you. I won’t have your dad upset.’ She drew a deep breath. ‘But you’ve got a point, for all that. I’ve been thinking that there’s no reason why our Kevin can’t leave school a few months early and find himself a job.’

‘Hey, Mam, can I really?’ Kevin’s head appeared over the top of his comic. ‘That’s be great. Just wait till I tell Albert. He’ll be furious, me gerrin’ one up on him.’

Agnes Shaw eyed her tow-haired thirteen-year-old. ‘Never you mind about Albert Finch. And don’t get yourself excited,’ she said dryly. ‘I haven’t cleared it with the school yet, though I doubt there’ll be any problem. You’re not so bright as they’ll miss you. It’s possible your dad might be able to get you taken on down the docks as an apprentice. That’s how Phil started, and look how he got on. It won’t pay much to begin with, but if you shape, you might end up as good as your dad one day. Meanwhile every little helps and together we’ll get by . . .’

‘Will we, though? If you keep on the way you’re going, Mam, you’ll wear yourself out.’ Exasperation made Matty sharp. ‘Here, sit down, before you fall down. I’ll do that.’

She snatched up the iron holder she’d knitted last Christmas and reached for the iron, spat on it to test the heat and set about the waiting shirt with a speed and deftness born of practice.

For once, her mother didn’t argue. She sat in the creaking armchair, rubbing her legs to ease her throbbing veins.

‘Moira’s a big help when she gets home from school of an afternoon, aren’t you, chuck? Got a lot of sense for her ten years.’

Moira was stretched full length on the rag rug in front of the fire with her colouring book and chalks, tongue caught between her teeth in fierce concentration. She lifted her head and flipped back a neat fair pigtail.

‘Little Daisy minds me more than she does you, our Irene,’ she said virtuously.

‘There’s no call to be smug,’ Irene retorted. ‘Anyhow, I still think Matty should leave that Mrs Crawley and come on the munitions with me while they’re still takin’ folk.’

But she’d pushed her luck too far. Mam went mad.

‘Indeed, our Matty’ll do no such thing. She’s worked like a Trojan for years, for very little reward, and I’ll not have her throwin’ away all that training now for the sake of a few bob extra, especially not to go in that factory. To tell the truth, I’ll be glad when you’re out of it, Irene, for all that you bring good money home. Mrs Bennett’s friend’s daughter nearly got blown up last week, an’ what’s more, she says the girls skin’s already turnin’ as yellow as a canary.’

‘People say a lot of daft things,’ Irene said dismissively. ‘It depends how you go about things. You won’t catch me turnin’ yellow, an’ there’s no risk of gettin’ blown up unless you’re put on filling shells.’

Matty remembered how Irene, in a rare moment of frankness, had confided to her in bed one night that the factory foreman had put her on special jobs where she wouldn’t encounter any of the usual hazards. She had sworn Matty to secrecy in case Eddie got into trouble.

But it worried Matty. You didn’t have to be worldly wise to suspect that men who did favours usually wanted something in return. ‘I just hope you know what you’re doing, that’s all. He’s miles older than you.’

But Irene had just thumped her pillow into shape and turned over. ‘Don’t you fret. I can handle Eddie Brighouse any day.’

She probably could, too, Matty thought with a twinge of envy, setting about the pile of ironing with renewed vigour. Her sister took the curling tongs from the fire, tested them on a sheet of newspaper, and with an air of injured innocence set about curling her hair. Mam would be hopping mad if she knew that the friend Irene was meeting later that evening wasn't Ellie Briggs, but Eddie Brighouse. She folded a shirt with deft hands and reached for another. 'I could maybe get an evening job somewhere.'

'And fall asleep over your work in the day? Where's the sense in that, Matty? You're doing ever so well. And Mrs Crawley's bound to increase your money now she's made you a bodice hand. Mind, I had wondered if we might get hold of a second-hand sewing machine cheap, then you could do a bit of dressmaking for folk round here in your spare time. Marge Flynn was askin' only the other day if you could make her a frock for her sister's wedding. It's be good practice.'

Matty thought of their neighbour, big-hearted and with a figure to match. She'd want something cheap and garish. Her fingers curled convulsively round the handle of the iron. 'Mrs Crawley'd go mad if she found out I was doing work on the side,' she said evasively. 'I could get dismissed.'

'There'd be no reason for her to know.'

'She'd find out. She's got ears everywhere, that one.'

'Don't be disrespectful about your betters, my girl.'

'I'm not . . . but,' she sighed, 'it's just . . . well, Mrs Flynn . . .'

'So what's wrong with Marge Flynn? Heart as big as a bucket, she has. I'd be hard pressed many a time without Marge to call on. A knock on the wall is all it takes an' she's here, so don't you go upsetting her.'

'As if I would. I really like Mrs Flynn, but –'

'But you'd rather be making fancy clothes for them as has more money than sense,' Irene murmured, goading her to

fresh fury. ‘Pigs might fly, our Matty, but they’re unlikely birds.’

‘Just because you’ve got no ambition –’

‘That’s enough from the both of you.’ Agnes watched the light blaze and then fade in Matty’s eyes, and her voice softened. ‘Ah, listen now, if we could all do what we wanted to, I wouldn’t be taking in other folks’ washing. Like I’ve told the lot of you many a time – strawberries and cream are very tasty, but they don’t fill an empty belly half as well as bread.’

‘I know that,’ Matty said grudgingly. ‘And I don’t mind making a frock for Mrs Flynn, truly I don’t. It’s just . . .’ The smell of scorching brought her up short. ‘Oh glory!’ she snatched up the iron, and stared in dismay at the neat brown stain slap in the middle of the shirt front. ‘Oh, Mam, I’m sorry!’

‘Heaven help us, that’s all we need.’ Agnes’s veins screamed in silent protest as she eased herself out of the chair. ‘Move over, girl, an’ let’s have a look. Maybe we can do something with it.’

‘No, we can’t. It’s ruined! I’ll have to buy a new one, an’ it’ll take every penny I’ve saved. And it’s all Irene’s fault!’

‘How dare you blame me for your own clumsiness!’

‘Be quiet, the both of you.’

‘What’s going on in there?’ Dad’s voice rose above the din.

‘Now see what you’ve done!’ Mam shouted. ‘I told you not to upset your dad!’ And Matty was horrified to see the tears rolling down her face.

‘I’m sorry, Dad,’ she confided later, kneeling beside his bed, her own tears spent. She ought not to bother him with their troubles, and Mam’d kill her if she knew. ‘It was awful. The room was awash with tears. An’ it was all my fault. Well, nearly all,’ she amended. ‘Irene seems to take a delight in riling me.’

Pat ruffled her hair, his voice gentle. ‘Do you not think that might be because she’s a wee bit jealous? You have a rare talent, Matty, and talented folk are often inclined to be single-minded. That’s not always easy for others to live with.’

‘But there’s so much I want to do!’

‘I know, child. And your mother knows too, deep down. But real success – success worth having – seldom happens overnight. You have to work at it for years. Just be thankful you have a trade at your fingertips. That’s no bad thing, believe me. It was the saving of me and your mother many a time when you lot were babbies.’ His eyes had clouded over, remembering, and Matty wanted to cry for reminding him and making him sad.

But now, as Matty ran down Wandsworth Street and mounted the steps to the dressmaker’s house, she wondered how much longer things could go on as they were.

‘Matilda.’ The sharp voice banished all thoughts of home. ‘It is twenty minutes to eight, and that trousseau for Miss Fortesqueue must be finished today.’ The rigidly corseted black figure bristled. ‘You will have to make up the time during your dinner break, and if necessary, stay late this evening.’

It was no use telling her about Dad. In fact, Matty had been at great pains not to mention his illness, knowing that the mere mention of tuberculosis would earn her instant dismissal for fear that she might contaminate the clientele.

2

VICTORIA STATION WAS noisy, full of steam and bustle, and packed with people: weary-looking soldiers coming home on leave, some with uniforms still caked with mud, being welcomed into loving arms, some standing apart looking dazed and rather lost. And there were others with clean uniforms and strained faces, being wept over by loving relations as they departed for the Front. Aimée Buchanan was determined not to be one of the latter.

Passers-by occasionally gave the young couple more than a brief glance, for they were very much alike; the girl in her smart brown coat with its fur collar, a neat little hat perched on her abundant hair, linking arms with the handsome young officer in the distinctive uniform of the King's Own Royal Rifles, the famous Green Jackets. Close, yet not lovers. Both were tall and slim, both possessed of velvety brown eyes and the pale translucent skin that so often goes with auburn hair.

Aimée and Gerald were indeed close as only twins can be. He had always supported the suffragist cause, for which Aimée had campaigned with enthusiasm during her days at medical school, and it seemed particularly apt that the last night of his leave had coincided with the day that the woman suffrage bill giving votes to married women over thirty, was passed in the House of Lords, having received the Royal Assent. After all the agony and spectacle of the fight that had gone before, this triumphant first step had crept in without pomp, overshadowed as it was by greater exigences that had led Mrs Pankhurst to throw her support

behind the government for the duration of the war. The irony of the moment did not escape the twins.

'It's only the beginning, of course,' Gerald said, adding provocatively, 'I imagine women will have to register in order to qualify, and I doubt many will wish to admit to being over thirty.'

'Chauvinist,' she retorted. 'How dare you think so poorly of women.'

But they had celebrated nevertheless with a grand dinner, sharing the satisfaction of this vital first step towards the wider freedom as they had shared so many triumphs and disasters. For Gerald was more than Aimée's twin – he was also her dearest friend and confidant.

'We both hate goodbyes,' she said now, reaching up to cup his face with a gloved hand, 'so I shan't stay. But do take care of yourself, dearest boy.'

He covered her hand with his own, and a tide of colour, the curse of people with their delicate complexion, flooded his face.

'Take care yourself, Aimée, and for heaven's sake give up that mad scheme of yours. It is madness, I promise you.' His voice was suddenly harsh. 'You can have no idea how dreadful conditions are in France. It's a certainty they won't take you as a doctor, and anything less would be such a waste. I love you for wanting to be in the thick of it, but I had far rather you were here, safe and sound.'

But he knew from the light in her eyes that he was wasting his breath.

'And I had far rather be in France where the action is, and where I can be as much a part of it as you are. One way or another, I mean to find a proper use for my skills.'

'You can do that here. And we have to think of Mother,' he said. 'She tries to be brave, poor dear, but she was terribly cut up when I said goodbye this time. If you put yourself in danger, too –'

But Aimée would not be moved from her resolution. ‘I’m not a child. And Mother’s tougher than you think. She’ll get used to the idea.’

When Gerald’s train had left, she turned her back on Victoria Station, intending to go straight to the British Red Cross Society’s enrolment centre. But on the way to Grosvenor Crescent she passed a smart little hairdressing salon she had not noticed before and, to give herself Dutch courage, she succumbed to the luxury of a shampoo and set. Two hours later she emerged into the weak February sunshine, light-headed in more ways than one, and impetuously, gloriously reborn. Her long auburn hair was no more; in its place, a stylish bob curved sleek and shining into the nape of her neck and framed her face. Mother would die when she saw it, but Aimée had no regrets. It was a sign.

She came down to earth, however, when faced with officialdom. Her services as a doctor would be received with open arms almost anywhere but in France, said the prim lady with the steely grey eyes who interviewed her, and who clearly thought she was mad even to contemplate such a brush with danger.

‘You will have considered the Women’s Service Hospital, I suppose? They have quite a strong contingent working with the refugees in Serbia. I can give you their address in Edinburgh . . .’

Aimée said that, much as she admired the excellent work the Scottish women’s medical units were doing, she wished to aid British troops wounded in battle. The woman lifted a faintly uncredulous eyebrow.

‘I can perhaps arrange for you to go to Malta, where some of the less seriously wounded and convalescent patients are sent to recuperate. The War Office have begun to employ women doctors there in order to relieve pressures elsewhere.’

‘Thank you,’ Aimée said politely, ‘but convalescent work is not what I had in mind. I can find more fulfilling duties here. What alternatives do you have? I can drive, if that is any help.’

And, as easily as that, her immediate future was decided.

Her mother, when told, turned pale and groped for her smelling salts.

‘But, darling, you can’t! An ambulance driver indeed. Your father won’t hear of you exposing yourself to so much danger.’

‘I’m twenty-four, Mother,’ Aimée said dryly. ‘I don’t really see how he can stop me.’

‘But you’re a doctor. Heavens knows, even *that* isn’t what I had hoped for, but . . .’ Minna Buchanan’s lip trembled. ‘Oh dear, everything is so horrid. Do you know, Mrs Evans had to queue for two hours yesterday for a pound of sugar – and we haven’t had a decent piece of cheese in weeks. But I don’t expect you to care for that.’

‘Mother –’

‘You young people can be so thoughtless. It is almost more than I can bear, knowing that poor Gerald has gone back to face terrible danger, and the army is so bad at delivering letters, for I’m sure he doesn’t get half the ones I send.’

As if the postman popped across to France especially to deliver her weekly missives. This example of her mother’s simplistic, almost childlike attitude to life filled Aimée with a sudden rush of love. And guilt.

‘Now, here you are, talking of leaving me and going off to this dreadful war.’ Minna’s voice faltered on a sob. ‘And as for your beautiful hair . . .’ She averted her tear-filled blue eyes from the hated bob, instinctively lifting a hand to her own pretty fair hair, untouched by even a hint of grey, as if to reassure herself that the whole world hadn’t gone mad.

‘Darling, I’m sorry.’ Aimée felt close to tears herself as she came to perch on the arm of her mother’s chair,

hugging her close. ‘I’m a terrible disappointment to you, aren’t I?’

‘Oh, no, never that!’

‘But, you see, this is something I just have to do.’

Aimée looked round her mother’s pretty pink and green drawing room with its apple-green velvet sofas and elegant bow-fronted mahogany chiffoniers. The long windows embraced the garden where herbaceous borders, riotous with bloom in summer, were now undressed for winter, the huge beech tree in the centre of the lawn bare of leaf.

Beyond the garden bounded by a stout yew hedge, lay the sheltered little Lancashire valley that she loved. Through it, guarded by a belt of elms, ran a stream, deep and clear between steep banks, which in summer overflowed with wild garlic and meadowsweet. In the nearby little town of Coram, her father’s mills worked overtime to meet the needs of a country at war. As children, she and Gerald had ridden their ponies through fragrant meadows towards the outcrop of rock that gave the vale its name, and dared each other to jump the chuckling water. Now the elms were bare-branched above meadows dug over by an army of sturdy young women, ready for the production of vegetables, and smoke from the mill chimneys two miles away drifted above a lone clump of Scots pines, their tops etched against the sky like a cluster of umbrellas tilted drunkenly against the biting wind.

Aimée’s father had invested heavily in new machinery to cope with ever-growing demands for miles of cotton sheeting and ticking for hospitals at home and abroad. Crisp white aprons and uniforms were needed for the nurses, and khaki drill and webbing, poplin shirts, even canvas for tents, and unlimited supplies of bandages.

Many folk in Crag Vale had assumed that hard-headed Seth Buchanan had married pretty little butterfly Minna Howard, from nearby Liverpool, to further his ambitions. For wasn’t her father Sir Amos Howard of the Howard and

Mellish shipping line, and didn't his ships carry Seth's cotton goods halfway round the world, bringing back from America and India the raw cotton on which his prosperity depended?

But no such inducement was necessary, for Minna had captured big Seth's heart from the first. He had denied her nothing, and she adored him. He had built for her Fernlea, this charming manor house nestling in the lee of the valley.

Poor Mother, Aimée thought, with her arm about the trembling silk-clad shoulders. She must have entertained such dreams for her only daughter – a genteel education, followed by a London Season and marriage to someone who would keep her in style. Instead, Aimée had insisted on following a very decided path of her own, eschewing every eligible young man presented for her approval – and, at twenty-four going on twenty-five, was still single and talking about going to war – as an ambulance driver.

'I suppose you do know what you're doing?' her father, a man of few words, had said in his blunt way when she told him. 'I'd hate to think I'd wasted good money putting you through medical school, only to have to throw it away for a whim.'

'Not a whim, Dad. A compulsion, if you like. Oh, I can't explain properly. Of course I'd rather go out there as a doctor, but the petty bureaucrats haven't taken their heads out of the sand yet, so I must go any way I can. It's as if something is drawing me –'

'Oh, spare me all y'r airy-fairy notions of equality. Just remember, I won't have y'r mother upset.'

Aimée was about to tell him that her mother's air of gentle helplessness concealed a resilience that would see her through most eventualities. But even as she framed the words, the look in his eyes brought a lump to her throat, and she held her tongue. There was a greyish tinge to his skin these days. The cause was easy enough to pinpoint. Like so many people he was working too hard, and keeping

his troubles to himself. But it was no secret that supplies of raw cotton were dwindling. Thanks to Grandpa Howard's long-standing Indian connections, he had not so far suffered the shortages that were afflicting many of his competitors, but the worry must always be there.

Now Aimée was adding a new worry. Yet she could not forsake her principles, even for him. Nor, in his heart, would he wish her to do so, for all that he disapproved.

Aimée's mentor, Dr Lomax, was equally disapproving, though not surprised. He knew Aimée's stubborn streak better than most; without it, she would not have fulfilled her burning ambition this far. Frank Lomax had been her unfailing champion when her father had at first dismissed any mention of her becoming a doctor. And when she had worn down all resistance, he had continued as her ally throughout the years of her training. Now, he recognized that stubborn set of her mouth and jaw.

'And I've no doubt you'll be expecting my blessing?'

She looked into the grizzled, weatherbeaten face and there was a hint of pleading in her wry smile. 'Your understanding at least, Doctor dear.'

'Oh, I gave over expecting you to take the easy path years ago, though as for understanding – I don't know what you hope to achieve driving ambulances. Waste of a damned good doctor, if you ask me. There are several excellent hospitals in this country run by women, and enough wounded coming home to enable you to put your surgical skills to good use and study for your fellowship at the same time.'

'I know. And I *have* given it a lot of thought. But, crazy as it sounds, I must know for myself what it's really like out there – the kind of things Gerald won't talk about even to me. Back here one only sees the end result: the poor blind soldiers shuffling in lines, each man clinging to the one in front like lost souls; men without limbs; with shattered

minds like poor Cousin Toby. And I feel inadequate to deal with them.'

'My dear girl,' he said heavily, 'we all feel inadequate. We simply do what we can.'

'Yes, I know, but for me that's not enough. I keep thinking that one day it might happen to Gerald.' There was passion in her voice as she reiterated. 'If I can be a part of it, for a while at least, in whatever capacity, I may better understand and be better able to help. Don't you see?'

He saw, right enough. And he knew there'd be no stopping her.

Of all her relations, the one who best understood was the one whom most of the family held in awe, and the whole of Liverpool revered and respected. Grandpa Howard was a big man in every sense of the word, though at seventy-eight, he suffered increasingly with rheumatism.

'Damned nuisance,' he'd barked at her when, before leaving, she visited Hightowers, the large house in Aigburth, where he lived alone except for the servants. The rest of the family found the house too gloomy, though it still held a powerful attraction for Aimée. It had not always been so: when her grandmother was alive, there had been grand parties and balls. The house was set on rising ground, with gardens running down almost to the river, and from the twin towers that gave it its name, you could see right the way downriver to the estuary.

Aimée found her grandfather with his chair drawn up close to the fire in the oak-lined library, a blanket across his knees. 'Can't move anywhere these days without this wretched stick.'

She pushed back the shock of white hair and dropped a kiss lightly on his forehead. 'Which doesn't stop you going to the office every day.'

'Someone has to keep a hand on the tiller. We lost another ship to those damned U-boats last week, cargo and crew all gone. It has to be dealt with, and that brother of

mine’s no use – never takes his nose out of the accounts book, except to go home to that soulless house in Woolton to play with his butterfly collection. He’s a good accountant, I’ll give him that, but he’s got no imagination – no flair for the cut and thrust of business – and y’r Uncle George has his heart set on change.’

A fit of coughing doubled Sir Amos up, but he waved away the glass of water Aimée offered him, and when he resumed, there was an added tetchiness in his voice.

‘He’s too busy hobnobbing in government circles at present to give me chapter and verse, but I do know that when this damned war ends he wants to build a fleet of new passenger liners – reckons cruising’s going to take off in a big way. He could be right, but I told him, commerce has always been the backbone of Howard and Mellish, and has made us respected throughout the world.’

Aimée shook her head at him. ‘No use telling you that you should rest more, I suppose?’

‘Rest? Bah! I’ve watched folk die, resting.’

Amos Howard’s keen eyes, so like her own, dared her to contradict him, but she only laughed. His autocratic ways had never held any terrors for her, and perhaps because everyone said she was the image of her late grandmother whom she could hardly remember, she was his favourite, the only one of the family who could persuade him to see reason when all else failed.

‘Perhaps if you took the medicine Andrew Graham prescribed instead of pouring it away, you might see some improvement. Poor Judd is in despair.’

‘The old fool should know better after fifty years. Coloured water isn’t the answer to what ails me, as you of all people must know. The machinery’s wearing out.’

Her heart lurched, knowing it to be true. ‘Even so,’ she coaxed, ‘the medicine can help. Take it to please me. I’m going away, you see, and I’m counting on you to be here