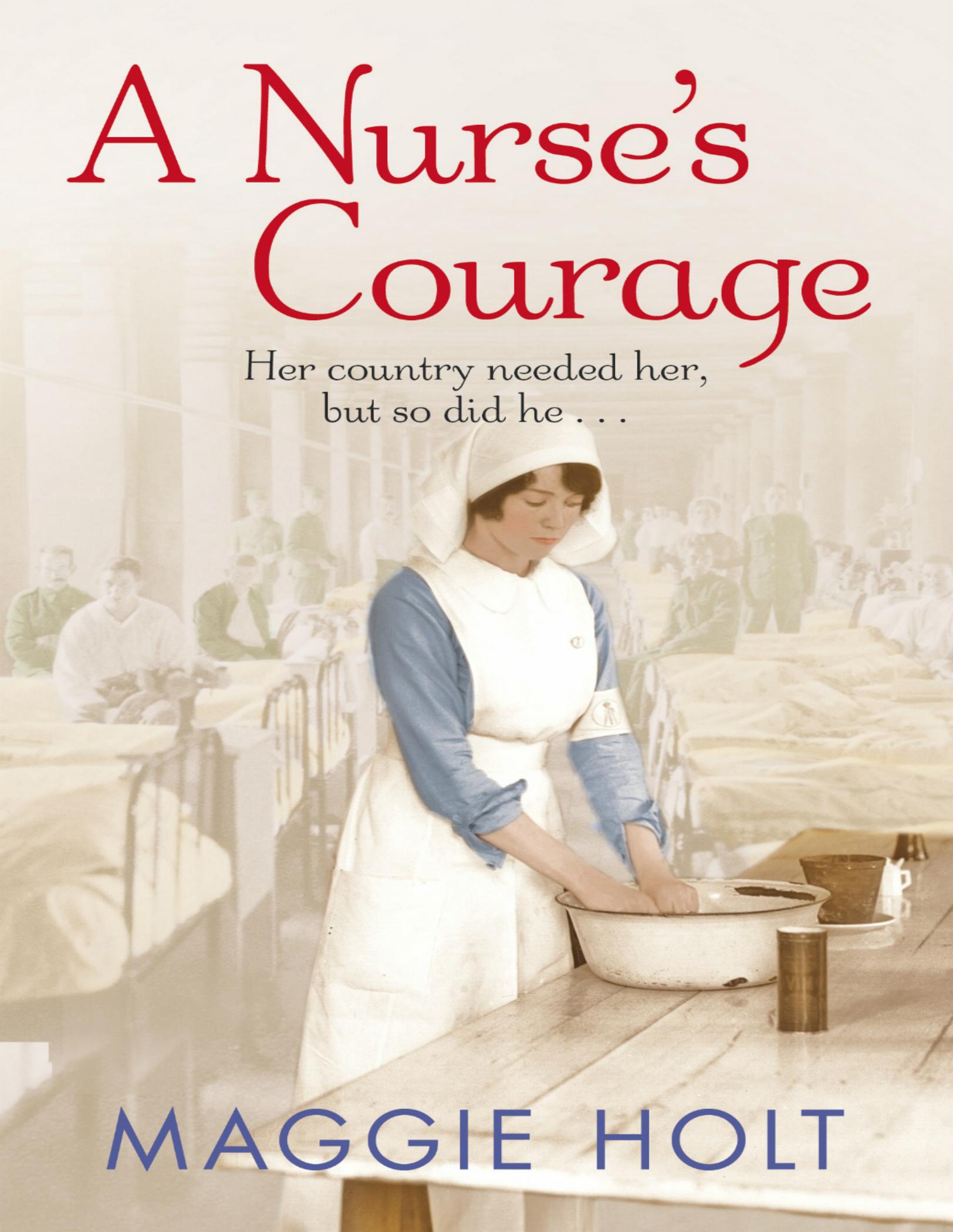


A Nurse's Courage

Her country needed her,
but so did he . . .

A sepia-toned photograph of a nurse in a white uniform and cap, focused on her work in a hospital ward. She is standing at a wooden table, leaning over a large white basin. The ward is filled with rows of hospital beds, some occupied by patients. The background is slightly blurred, emphasizing the nurse in the foreground.

MAGGIE HOLT

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Copyright

About the Author

Maggie Holt was born in Farnborough, Hampshire, in 1931. She worked as a nurse and midwife for many years before marrying and moving to Manchester where her two daughters were born. Having been an avid reader and scribbler all her life she took a correspondence course in creative writing after her husband's death in 1983, and won the Romantic Novelists' Association New Writers' Award in 1992. She is the author of *A Nurse at War* (previously published as *For Love of Lily* by Maggie Bennett). Writing as Maggie Bennett, she is also the author of *A Child's Voice Calling*, *A Carriage for the Midwife* and *A Child of Her Time*, all available from Arrow. *A Nurse's Courage* was previously published as *A Child at the Door* under the name of Maggie Bennett.

Also by Maggie Holt

A Nurse at War (previously published as
For Love of Lily by Maggie Bennett)

Also available in Arrow by Maggie Bennett

A Child's Voice Calling
A Carriage for the Midwife
A Child of Her Time

A Nurse's Courage

Maggie Holt



For Audrey Yvonne Smith,
SRN, SCM, QN, HV Cert, RNT

and

Joan (Paddy) Robinson, RSCN

With love and grateful thanks for all they taught me.

*' . . . a stranger, and afraid,
In a world I never made.'*

*- A. E. Housman
Last Poems, XII, 1922*

Prologue

BENEATH A FRAMED lithograph of Their Majesties King George V and Queen Mary, little Dickie wakes from his afternoon nap and discovers that he's feeling much better. He shakes the high sides of his cot and calls to the wax-pale girl asleep in the bed beside him, her arms outstretched on the counterpane.

'Wake up, Queenie, soon be teatime!'

Some of the women smile and wave to the undersized, snuffly-nosed five-year-old, but Queenie does not stir; the soft rise and fall of her chest is almost imperceptible.

'Shut yer gob, monkey-face,' snaps the sharp-faced older girl sitting opposite them in Women's I. 'Ye're not to disturb 'er, Sister said so, cos she's got manaemia.'

Dickie turns and stares at her.

'What're them things on yer legs?'

'Them're leg-irons, nosey, cos I got resistant rickets, if it's any business o' yours.'

'Will yer die?'

'Course not, don't be daft. An' stop rattlin' yer cage, it gets on people's nerves.'

He sticks out his tongue at her, but before she can retaliate Nurse Court comes hurrying down the ward to check on Queenie. Dickie and the girl with the calipers are all attention.

'E keeps 'ollerin' at 'er, Nurse Court - can't yer tell 'im to shut up?'

'An' *she* made a stink, blowin' orf!' he retorts, grinning and wrinkling his snub nose. 'Pooh!'

'Now, now, Dickie, yer mustn't be rude,' murmurs the young nurse, relieved to see him so much improved; last

week he had been fighting for breath. She gently takes Queenie's hand and feels her pulse. The girl stirs and flutters her eyelids.

'Had a nice sleep, dear?' Nurse Court touches her forehead.

'Did yer dream anyfing?' asks Dickie.

Queenie smiles contentedly. The afternoon sunshine pours in through the opened window and bathes her in a pool of golden light. She has been halfway to heaven, carried upwards in warm and loving arms like a mother's, safe and happy. She clings to the last wispy vapour of her dream before it fades.

'She ain't got no blood, 'as she, Nurse Court? Can I feed 'er wiv 'er tea when it comes rahnd?' begs the older girl - but before the nurse can reply there is an urgent call from further up the ward and she has to leave the children.

'Be good, poppets, I'll be back soon's I can,' she promises.

'Can yer help me sit Mrs Graves up, Nurse Smith?'

'But I'm jus' fetchin' the pan for the ol' woman in the end bed - the one 'oo's 'ad the stroke.'

Nurse Court winces and rolls up her eyes. When will this girl learn to say old lady? *Young* woman is all right, but an *old* woman must always be a lady.

The two first-year probationers on Women's I are both aged twenty, though Nurse Court started her training six months earlier than Smith. They have been left in charge of thirty patients, including three children, with a ward maid to help with kitchen duties and act as messenger if an emergency requires a trained nurse, when they'd have to summon Sister on Women's II.

Women's I is a medical ward filled with mostly chronic, long-term conditions, the results of poverty and deprivation. The patients at Booth Street Poor Law Infirmary are of the older, poorer sort, who less than twenty years ago would have been workhouse inmates; but now the soot-blackened

stone building has been elevated to the status of a hospital licensed to train nurses and midwives. Girls who can't afford the fees of the prestigious voluntary hospitals can train at a Poor Law infirmary with free bed and board and a small uniform allowance, that's if they can survive the long hours and harsh working conditions for three years. About a third of them drop out, giving rise to situations like the one on Women's I this hot July afternoon.

Apart from the children who are constantly on her mind, Nurse Court's attention is centred upon two patients: young Mrs Graves in bed 7 and the woman sinking deeper into diabetic coma behind wooden-framed screens next to Sister's desk. Her two daughters sit one on each side of her bed and Nurse Court peeps in from time to time to smile in silent sympathy at the sad-eyed women keeping vigil. There's nothing more to be done for their mother.

But Mrs Graves has a chance. She was admitted yesterday, having fallen, or been pushed after some kind of altercation, into the Thames. Fished out by a passing bargeman, her lungs have become infected by the contaminated water, but with a young child to support, she ignored the symptoms until she collapsed and was brought into Women's I with a high fever, gasping for breath and ominously blue around the nose and mouth. She now clutches at her right side, her eyes silently imploring Nurse Court to ease the needle-sharp pain that stabs her with every breath she takes.

'All right, Mrs Graves, we'll make yer comfortable, don't worry,' soothes the young nurse when Smith at last comes to the other side of the bed. 'Put yer arm across her shoulder, Nurse Smith, and take hold o' mine at the elbow, so - and put yer other arm under her knees like I'm doin' - ready? One, two, three - and *up!* That's right - and again, a bit higher still - is that better, Mrs Graves? I'll make a nice warm poultice to put over yer bad side.'

The young woman moans faintly. The pleuritic pain in her right side is obviously worse, but she's not yet due for another dose of the opium tincture the house doctor has ordered. Nurse Court wonders if she could be given aspirin in the meanwhile.

While she prepares a kaolin poultice in the ward kitchen she ponders over the plight of Susan Graves who isn't a *Mrs* at all, but a disgraced maidservant reduced to soliciting to support herself and the baby girl for which she has lost her place and who's now in the dubious care of another young prostitute. The house doctor suspects a lung abscess, which could be fatal, and Nurse Court wonders what will then happen to her child - an overcrowded babies' home, most likely, and quite possibly death from lack of care.

A cumbersome metal trolley is trundled in by the ward maid, carrying a large teapot, milk jug, cups, plates and sliced bread and margarine. Nurse Court looks round the ward: some need help with feeding, like the strokes and the confused old lady in bed 13 who keeps shouting, 'Help! Help me, somebody, help, help!' in her cracked old voice that most of the women have learned to ignore, though one or two are driven to yell back, 'Shut up, Gran, for Gawd's sake,' not that she takes any notice.

Nurse Court asks the ward maid to see to the children's tea, saying she will come to them as soon as she can. 'And Nurse Smith, will yer feed number 13? Use a feeding cup and put a towel under her chin.'

At that moment a cheerfully wheezy woman with grey, begrimed skin gets out of bed 14 and offers her services.

'Ere, Nurse Court, I'll feed ol' Mrs Oo-jah for yer, an' Nurse Smiff can go an' see to them poor little kids. Give us the feedin' cup, dearie.'

'That's really good o' yer, Mrs Tollett, ye're a brick,' says Nurse Court, and the woman grins broadly and toothlessly.

'Got a nice young man, 'ave yer, nurse? Goin' aht wiv 'im tonight, are yer?' she asks with a knowing wink, and

chuckles at seeing a blushing response. Approaching bed 13, she expertly tucks a towel round the old lady's scraggy neck.

"Ere, come on, Gran, stop 'ollerin' for 'alf a minute an' get this dahn yer - keep yer marf open, 'ere we go - whoops! Nice cuppa Rosie Lee, eh?"

Nurse Court pours out milky tea for Mrs Graves, and gently places the spout of the feeder on the gasping girl's lower lip.

'Come on, Susan, yer need to drink all yer can, so's to get better an' see yer little girl again.'

The faint gleam in Susan's sunken eyes shows that she's still fighting and Nurse Court longs for her to recover for the sake of her child. As the liquid slowly disappears she feels a tap on her shoulder and hears a sepulchral mutter in her ear.

'Don't want to interfere or nuffin', Nurse Court, but ye'd better go an' 'ave a look at 'er be'ind them screens. If yer was to ask me, I reckon she's jus' *gorn*.'

Mrs Tollett is right as usual. There is a sound of subdued weeping as Nurse Court hurries up the ward, and as soon as she sees the still, parchment-yellow face on the pillow, she nods to the daughters and beckons them to follow her. The ward maid is despatched to fetch Sister on Women's II, and Nurse Court puts the kettle on in the kitchen to make tea for the bereaved. She's had scarcely a minute to spare for the children this afternoon.

And as always when she looks upon death, she experiences that lurch of the heart, seeing again her mother's drowned face on the mortuary slab.

And her father, felled like a tree in his own home.

For Nurse Court had encountered death long before she entered the Infirmary.

Part One

Girls in Love

Chapter One

THE NOTICEBOARD OUTSIDE the red-brick hall advertised times of meetings and offered an invitation to all. On this particular Sunday evening the meeting had been held outside in the Cut, now empty of the street traders that made it one of London's oldest and largest open markets. The strains of the last hymn carried all the way down to the Lower Marsh, the well-rehearsed brass band accompanying the hearty upraised voices:

'What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear -'

Mabel stood a little way apart from the crowd, fanning herself with a hymn sheet, for the air was stifling and dust-laden. Her fair, wavy hair was once again escaping from its pins, and she put up a gloved hand to push back a stray lock under the wide-brimmed buckram hat that she had covered in navy-blue silk to match her skirt and jacket, beneath which her long-sleeved white blouse buttoned up to the neck. Harry must be sweltering, she thought, under his navy serge uniform jacket.

She nodded and smiled to familiar faces in the dispersing crowd, her widely spaced grey-blue eyes alight with easy friendliness. The Salvation Army attracted a very different mix of humanity from the congregations of the established church in which she had been brought up.

'Good meetin' tonight, wasn't it?' - 'Yes, praise the Lord' - 'Peace be with yer, sister.'

Mabel was prepared for a long wait, knowing that Captain Harry Drover might be required for some time. He had stayed behind in the hall to offer up prayers for those in

special need, and Mabel could picture him kneeling down now with some troubled soul, placing his hands on a possibly verminous head and asking the Lord to send down his Spirit and the gift of grace to overcome a particular trial or temptation. All sorts of men and women who would never enter a church came to the mercy seat of the Salvation Army; the drunkards, the prostitutes, the victims of all kinds of social evils came to be consoled and perhaps transformed: all were welcomed. Mabel waited until Captain Drover's last penitent had been sent on his or her way with the Lord's blessing.

For Harry Drover was Mabel Court's young man. They were walking out together, an engaged couple, though marriage was still a long way off. Like thousands of others they had not the means to set up house for a year or two or three: he had just finished his training to become a fully-fledged Salvation Army officer, and she had nearly completed her first year at Booth Street Poor Law Infirmary. They both worked long hours, so their time together was all the more precious. She attended the Sunday meetings when she could and sometimes went back to his parents' home in Battersea; this evening there would only be time for him to walk her back to Booth Street. A church clock struck nine and she sighed: she had to be in by ten.

The crowd had broken up and Mabel's face relaxed into thoughtfulness. No longer obliged to smile, her mouth drooped a little and her eyes were shadowed. She had come on duty that morning to find Queenie's bed empty and the other two children sadly subdued. Her heart still ached for them, for she could never leave her work entirely behind her.

This was the picture that Captain Drover saw when he came out of the hall, locking the door behind him. He placed his crested cap squarely over his light-brown, rather floppy hair and held his trombone in its case under his right arm. For a long moment he stood unobserved by her, longing to

hold her, cherish her and guard her from all the misfortunes of the world; but this he knew he could not do, for it was not in his power: he believed their lives to be in the Lord's hands.

She caught sight of him and made a quick movement.

'Harry! I didn't see yer come out.'

The smile that lit up her face made him catch his breath: the same smile that had won his heart four years ago when he'd worked on the railway depot with her brother Albert who'd taken him home one Friday evening. He had never forgotten his first sight of the pretty sixteen-year-old laying the table for a fish-and-chips supper and issuing orders to her younger brothers and sisters. Watching her push back a strand of silky hair from her forehead, he'd thought she was the sweetest thing he had ever seen; and when she shyly asked him to say grace for them as the packets were unwrapped and served on hot plates, his heart was hers from that moment on. He had never once looked at another girl.

He now linked arms with her and they walked down the Lower Marsh to Westminster Bridge Road and the river, where they lingered on the Albert Embankment.

Harry wanted to tell her how lovely she looked and how much he adored her, but straight after a Salvation Army gathering the language of love did not come easily to him.

'Good meetin' tonight, Mabel. People are turnin' to the Lord, what with all this talk o' the ol' Kaiser stirrin' up trouble.'

'Yer don't really think he'd go to war with us, do yer, Harry? I'm shut up in that Infirmary, I only hear bits o' news. Is it that serious, d'ye reckon?'

She looked up at him anxiously. For her Harry Drover was the sort of young man that any girl would trust, with his open face and honest brown eyes that looked so earnestly into hers. Her brother Albert teased him unmercifully for his lack of humour, yet they were true friends, always pleased

to see each other when Albert turned up on leave from the merchant service.

'I can't see the Kaiser darin' to take on the might o' the British Empire,' Harry replied slowly.

'But isn't he goin' to war against France and Russia?' asked Mabel.

'Yes, and we signed a treaty with France some years back to defend each other if need be - and we're both bound to defend the Belgians if he decided to march through their country. But no, Mabel, I reckon there's too much against him. From what I've heard there's more danger o' civil war breakin' out in Ireland 'cause o' this Home Rule, and we're more likely to have to send troops over there. I'd let 'em rule 'emselves if they want to, it's their country.'

Mabel did not know enough about the Irish question to agree or disagree, but she trusted his judgement and was willing to be reassured. Kaiser Wilhelm was after all King George's cousin, both being grandsons of Queen Victoria.

'And in any case, Mabel, I don't believe the Lord would allow such a war to break out in Europe, not in this day an' age,' Harry added seriously, and Mabel was content to believe her wise young man.

They strolled along Bishop's Walk and stopped by Lambeth Pier.

'What about that day off ye're supposed to get at the end o' the month?' he asked as they looked down at the flowing water.

'We-ell, as a matter o' fact it's next Saturday,' she answered after a slight hesitation. 'And I've said I'll go down to Belhampton to see Daisy - oh, yer *must* understand,' she added quickly, seeing the disappointment in his eyes. 'I haven't seen my sisters for three months and I worry about my little Daisy, yer know I do.'

'Yeah, 'course I understand, Mabel. I was just hopin' that - oh, never mind, I couldn't get away Saturday anyway. Will yer stay down there overnight?'

'No, I'll get an early train and make it a day trip. Be back at Waterloo about eight, 'cause I'm on again Sunday mornin'.'

He considered for a moment. 'Tell yer what, Mabel, I'll meet yer off the train an' walk yer back to Booth Street.'

'Ah, would yer? Ye're so good to me!' She smiled up at him and as always his heart melted.

'I'd do anythin' for yer, Mabel.'

'I know.'

It was true and not for the first time Mabel was aware of a sense of unease. For him there was no conflict between his dedication to the Salvation Army and his love for her. Men were not pulled in opposing directions as women were, she thought. She needed to complete her training, knowing that he did not really like her working at the Infirmary. He worried about the long hours and the infections she might catch from the dregs of humanity admitted to the former workhouse. His dearest wish was they would be a Salvation Army couple like his parents, like his sister Ruby and her husband, fellow soldiers together in the war against sin and social degradation. Mabel's dearest wish was to look after children in need of love and care, and she dreamed of a day when their aims would coincide, running a children's refuge on behalf of the Army. Harry always said that their future was in the Lord's hands, and that if it was His will that they should work with children, He would bring it about in His own good time.

And Harry did not want to wait another two years to be married. She knew that his parents thought her stubborn, and she suspected that they wished their son could find a more suitable young woman, more obedient to the Lord's will and ready to devote her life to the Army as Ruby had done.

But he had chosen Mabel Court and had stood by her like a rock through the tragedy of her parents' deaths and the break-up of her family. Dear Harry! Just as soon as she had

her certificate from Booth Street Poor Law Infirmary, they would be married at a Salvation Army ceremony where she would vow to serve the Lord and her husband. And as she had already reminded him several times, she'd be so much more use to both as a trained nurse.

'Heard from Albert lately?' he asked as they turned away from the river and skirted the gardens of the Archbishop's Palace.

'Oh, yer know my brother, he's no writer! He sent me a birthday card in March, otherwise not a word. He'll turn up out o' the blue one day with his pockets full o' back pay - though he'll have to stay at that Sailors' Home down by the docks, poor boy.' Mabel sighed. 'I miss him, Harry, an' George too, just as I miss my Daisy - and Alice o' course - but as long as they're happy where they are - yer know what I mean.'

He smiled and gave her arm a squeeze. Albert, a year younger than Mabel, was away at sea and fourteen-year-old George was working as a hand on a huge prairie farm in Alberta; he had been sent to Canada on a child emigration scheme following their father's death - and Harry knew better than to cause Mabel distress by bringing up that subject. Her sisters Alice and Daisy had been adopted by an aunt and her husband, and lived in the country.

It was time to return along Lambeth Road to Booth Street. The sun had gone down and the summer dusk had descended around them: it was the moment they had both been waiting for without saying so, the brief closeness when they said goodnight in a dingy brick recess near to the back entrance of the nurses' hostel.

'Dearest Mabel, I see so little o' yer - we're never alone, not for so much as a kiss,' he whispered, drawing her close to him. He had put down the trombone and she felt his arms around her body, the roughness of his uniform jacket against her cheek, his lips upon her forehead, his hand on

her shoulder, her waist – and lightly on the soft curving beneath the layers of jacket, blouse, liberty bodice . . .

‘Oh, Mabel, Mabel –’

A sudden sharp intake of breath, a quickening pulse: Mabel was conscious of her own physical reaction, the indescribable tingling of that secret place where a man becomes part of a woman’s body. She and Harry had known each other for four years, they were closest friends, they would one day be married – but *that* was not allowed, was not even to be thought of.

‘So give us a kiss instead, Harry.’ Did she whisper the words to him, or were they uttered silently within her head? She put her arms up round his neck, letting her hands clasp together, her fingers in his hair.

‘Whoops, there’s yer cap gone – oh, Harry!’ She giggled nervously. ‘Sorry!’

She would have stooped to pick up his cap with its red band and gold lettering, but he held her tightly and mumbled that it didn’t matter. Her giggle was stifled by his lips pressed on hers and she felt the tremor that ran through his whole frame. Then he released her just enough to put his lips to her ear and speak in short, jerky breaths.

‘Mabel, could yer – could yer think about – maybe we could be married sooner – then I – I’d be able to hold yer and love yer as yer lawful husband –’ The words were almost incoherent, but she understood. And had to give him the answer she had given before.

‘But we can’t, Harry, not yet. We’ve got no money, and –’

‘Yer could come an’ live at Falcon Terrace, Mabel. Lots o’ couples start that way, livin’ with parents – and we’d get accommodation from the Army if we were both officers.’

He was practically pleading with her: she saw his eyes glittering in the faint light of the street lamp as he heard her refusing him what he wanted most in the world. But –

But she could not live with his parents in a Salvationist household run by his mother.

‘Harry, I need to finish me trainin’, yer know I must. We’re young, we can wait, other couples have to –’

As if at the mention of other couples, they became aware of the whisperings of another young man and a girl near to them, also having a surreptitious cuddle in the grey shadow of the Infirmary – another nurse saying goodnight to her young man and canoodling like themselves.

Canoodling. In public, under cover of semi-darkness, after a Salvation Army meeting. The thought seemed to strike Harry at the same time, for he gave her a last despairing kiss on the cheek, replaced his cap, picked up his trombone and with a whispered ‘God bless yer, me own dearest girl’, he walked swiftly away.

So abruptly did he leave her that she almost called out to him, but checked herself because of the other couple. And also because she felt strangely ashamed, not of her feelings for him, but because their love was somehow tarnished by this furtive snatching of kisses and embraces: it did not seem right that his faithful love for her should be dragged down to the level of vulgar *canoodling*.

Suddenly sad at heart she hurried inside, ran up the stone stairway for two flights and opened the door of the room she shared with three other first-years. They were in and sitting on their beds, folding their caps for the next day. They looked up in surprise at her flushed face.

‘Whoa! Steady on, Court!’ said Nurse Tasker. ‘Somebody after yer?’

‘Thought yer was goin’ to a Sally Army do,’ said Nurse Davies with a wink at the others.

‘Ah, now, don’t be botherin’ her, yer can see she’s upset.’ Nurse McLoughlin’s soft accent reproved them. ‘I’ll get yer a nice cup o’ tea, Mabel, so I will.’

She rose and went out to the little alcove along the corridor where there was a gas ring for boiling a kettle. Mabel followed her gratefully.

'Norah, ye're an angel. It's me young man, y'see, we're that fond of each other, but I can't marry him until we can get a place of our own,' she explained, blinking back tears.

'And aren't ye the lucky one, Mabel Court, for to be havin' a young man o' yer own? If I had a nice fella like your Harry, I'd wait for ever an' a day to be married.'

Mabel's only answer was to kiss her. Poor Norah was from a Cork orphanage and had not a relative in the world. The two girls had been drawn to each other from the very first day they had met, both being orphans, though Norah was never tired of hearing about Mabel's two brothers and two sisters, all younger than herself and now dispersed in different directions.

'Come on, Mabel, let's take the pot an' go back to the others.'

'Done yer cap for yer, Mabel,' said Nurse Tasker on their return.

'Thanks, Betty.' The probationers wore caps folded from lengths of finely woven cotton tied round the head and secured at the back with a double button like a collar-stud, so that the ends hung down in a 'tail'. Depending on how skilfully they were folded, they could look charming or unflattering, or even downright comical.

'Er - it's your turn for the bath tonight, Mabel,' said Nurse Davies, knowing that it was her own but wanting to show sympathy for her friend's trouble, whatever it was.

'No, it's all right, Ethel, thanks all the same. You have it.'

Mabel knew that she would have to tell them something about the evening, if only to stop them jumping to a wrong conclusion, like thinking that she and Harry had had a row.

'It was a good meetin', more people than ever turned up at the Cut,' she said lightly. 'Harry had to stay on for ages afterwards at the mercy seat.'

'Oh, ah.' The others murmured and nodded, eagerly waiting for her to go on. They knew that Mabel's young man was a good chap and not bad-looking, but they couldn't

believe that he'd be much fun to walk out with. No drinking, no smoking and you could bet your life not too much of the other . . .

'He just doesn't want to wait for another two years, that's all,' said Mabel in a sudden rush. 'And I couldn't give up me trainin' now that we've got this far, no more'n I could live with his parents at Battersea.'

'Ah!' The girls now understood and were in complete agreement with her.

'Oh, no, Mabel, 'course yer can't - an' we couldn't carry on here without yer,' said Ethel Davies. 'Told me mother only last week that I'd never've stuck it if it hadn't been for you, Court. Ye've kept me goin' when I was ready to give up.'

'Me, too - and yer couldn't live jam-packed in a little terraced house with his parents hearin' everythin',' added Betty Tasker with a significant look. 'Oh, Mabel, don't do it!'

'If ye love each other enough, ye'll wait an' be glad ye waited,' said Norah softly.

Mabel's eyes filled with gratefulness. How lucky she was to have such friends! They had started their training together in the previous September and had got on well from the start. Betty Tasker's father ran a fish-and-chip shop in Kennington and Ethel Davies's widowed mother made ends meet by dressmaking for the better-off families of Clapham, so neither girl was suitable material for the big voluntary hospitals where 'lady probationers' paid for their training. And Norah McLoughlin had been in service to an Englishwoman who had brought her over from Ireland and then decided that she no longer needed her, but had helped her to apply to a Poor Law infirmary for free training. Sharing the day-to-day triumphs and disasters on the wards, and the added intimacy of a cramped bedroom, the four girls had learned the basic facts about each other's histories and knew that both Mabel's parents were dead and her family dispersed - something they accepted as unfortunate

but no worse than some of the horrific backgrounds of their patients.

‘Sure and isn’t it grand to have friends like us!’ Norah would exclaim from time to time and the others could only agree that it was a life saver.

‘And now ye’re goin’ to see yer sisters and aunts in the country,’ said Norah wistfully on the evening before Mabel’s monthly day off. ‘Little Daisy’ll be longin’ for a sight o’ ye after so long.’

For Mabel had told her about Daisy, born when Mabel was ten, and now ten herself, the last of Annie Court’s children.

‘We were always extra close to each other, right from when she was born,’ Mabel recalled fondly. ‘I used to come home from school, and there she’d be, runnin’ up to me with her arms open wide and callin’ out, “Maby, Maby!” And then when she started school, I was workin’ close by at the Babies’ Mission, a sort o’ nursery where the younger children could be left and looked after, ‘cause – well, a lot o’ the older girls used to miss school, kept at home to mind the babies and help out – washdays in the winter were a nightmare for my poor mum.’ Mabel shook her head at the memory of wet sheets and clothes hung up indoors, and the number of schooldays she herself had missed.

‘Mother o’ God, what I’d give to have brothers an’ sisters like yerself,’ sighed Norah with innocent envy. She had never known any other home but St Joseph’s Orphanage in County Cork, run by the Sisters of Mercy. ‘I haven’t a single relative in all the world.’

Which was a timely reminder to Mabel to be thankful for having had a family life, for all its ups and downs and the double tragedy that had ended it.

‘Mabel, Mabel!’ Daisy came running to her with outstretched arms, just as she had done as a toddler, to be gathered in a loving embrace on the station platform. Alice, now an

attractive girl of seventeen, stood back a little and rather awkwardly offered a cool cheek for Mabel to kiss. Both girls had the dark eyes and black hair inherited through their father from an unknown grandfather, while Mabel's fair colouring was her mother's, shared with George and little Walter who had died.

Aunts Kate and Nell greeted their eldest niece with smiles and kisses, and Uncle Thomas had his motor car outside to take them all to Pear Tree Cottage where the Somertons lived with their two nieces. Miss Chalcott, Aunt Kate, still lived at Pinehurst, the handsome house where the three Chalcott girls had grown up. Anna-Maria had been the youngest and prettiest, the darling of her widowed father – until the scandal of her elopement with Jack Court. Chalcott had suffered a stroke and died, it was said, from the shock; and only after their unfortunate sister's death had Kate and Nell emerged from the past and their long, bitter silence, to offer a home to the two younger girls.

All over now, but Mabel had mixed feelings about the Belhampton connection, the well-ordered lives of her aunts and sisters. She could never reconcile the two pictures of her mother, the lovely, wilful Anna-Maria Chalcott and the worn-out drudge Annie Court, dead at thirty-seven. Mabel had dearly loved her, defending her against the malice of her mother-in-law, comforting her when little Walter died and covering up for her on the occasions when she had given way to the oblivion of the gin bottle. Grateful as she was to her aunts and Thomas Somerton for their belated kindness, she had turned down Aunt Kate's invitation for her to live at Pinehurst as niece and companion; her heart was firmly fixed in London with Harry and her life at Booth Street.

Dinner at the Somertons' was at midday on that Saturday, with Aunt Kate over from Pinehurst to share it.

'Are you still happy at that Infirmary, Mabel?' she asked. 'It sounds a very hard sort of life.'

'Yes, but it's wonderful when yer patients thank yer for what ye've done,' answered Mabel eagerly. 'I know the big teachin' hospitals look down on the infirmaries, but Matron says we get just as good a trainin' - sick people need nursin' wherever they are, and besides, not havin' medical students means that the nurses get a chance to do more. We've got this poor young woman in at present, very ill with pneumonia and a lung abscess - the doctor thinks she got infected when she -'

'For goodness' sake, Mabel, do we have to listen to all this at the dinner table?' asked Alice with a pained expression.

'I'm sorry, but I can't stop thinkin' about her and her little girl,' muttered Mabel and said no more, though Daisy was loud in her indignant defence.

'I like listenin' to *everything* Mabel says - it's better than your rubbishy old dances and stuff!'

'Hush, Daisy,' reprovved Aunt Nell, though Mabel smiled at her young sister. It was just as well that Alice had interrupted, for she had been about to say that Susan Graves had nearly drowned in the Thames - a painful subject in the present company.

'Do you have a room to yourself, Mabel?' asked Aunt Kate.

'And are your meals adequate?' asked Aunt Nell.

She assured them that she had as good a bed as any of the patients, and that the food was of the same standard as theirs. She did not add that the room she shared with three other girls was cramped and ill-ventilated, nor that all the food came from the same kitchen and had to be carried across an open courtyard in all weathers to the nurses' hostel.

'Do you have to nurse people with infectious diseases?' asked Aunt Kate with a look of distaste. 'Consumptives and - er - other horrible diseases?'

'Not very often, Aunt Kate. They get sent to isolation hospitals as soon as possible,' replied Mabel, not adding that the Infirmary held separate clinics for the Lock cases,

the syphilitics who came up for their painful injections and applications; only those in the late second or third stage of the disease were kept in wards. Her mouth briefly tightened: her aunts had never known the real reason why their sister had drowned herself.

‘And is there a children’s ward?’

‘No, we don’t get that many children, only the very poorest, and they’re put in the women’s wards, poor little souls,’ she explained, remembering Queenie. ‘Miss Nightingale thought that sick children do better nursed at home if possible, otherwise they should go in women’s wards, and older boys in men’s.’

‘And do you think that’s a good idea, Mabel?’

‘I’m really not sure, Aunt Kate. Quite a lot of ours are sent in from children’s homes and they often die because they’re so bad by the time they come in – but it’s wonderful when they get better and they’re the patients I most love lookin’ after.’

It was time for a change of subject. Uncle Thomas asked if there was any news of George and Mabel had his last letter from the Alberta prairie farm where he worked with his good friend Davy. The farmer’s wife had bought them new clothes from a catalogue.

‘They’re two hundred miles from any shops, but these catalogues come round an’ people send away for what they want, an’ pay the money when it arrives,’ she explained.

There was a rather strained silence. The Somertons and Aunt Kate had never understood why George had been sent out to Canada at twelve, all by himself, so soon after the death of his father. However, they all agreed that Davy Hoek had been heaven-sent, and proved himself a true friend to George who looked upon him like another brother.

‘Did they meet on the ship going over?’ asked Somerton.

‘No, it was at Waterloo Station. I just marched up to him and begged him to look after me brother. And so he has –

even said he wouldn't go to McBane's farm unless George went too.'

'When will George come back?' asked Daisy and again there was a silence which Mabel felt obliged to fill.

'I don't know, dear. Perhaps he'll come and visit us again one day, and bring Davy,' she said gently, though she knew it was most unlikely that they would ever see George again; she only wished she could thank Davy for what he had done for her brother.

She had no news of Albert, and Thomas Somerton looked grave at the mention of the navy. Mabel realised that his views on the situation in Europe were far more alarming than Harry's.

'Do you mean to tell me, Mabel, that living in London as you do, you know nothing of the danger this country's facing? Good heavens, girl, are you shut up in an ivory tower?'

'No, Uncle, I'm shut up in the Booth Street Infirmary,' she retorted. 'I only hear what I pick up from what people say and I wish ye'd tell me about it!'

'It's been brewing for a very long time and ever since the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was shot dead last month, Germany's been mobilising men and artillery, ships -'

'Excuse me, Uncle Thomas, but *who* did yer say was killed? I never heard anything about it. Was it in London?'

'No, my dear, the Archduke was assassinated at a place called Sarajevo in the Balkans and it's caused repercussions all over Europe. It's a warning that no government should ignore.'

Mabel had to admit that she had never heard of the unfortunate nobleman who had been killed in a place she knew nothing about, nor could she see how this distant event might affect the destiny of Europe, especially of the British Isles, with or without Ireland. But it was not for her to question her uncle's superior knowledge on such matters.

There were tears, kisses and promises to write when Mabel boarded the London train on its way up from Southampton that evening. She found it unexpectedly crowded with men, mostly young though a few were older, some in the uniform of the Territorials or the Officers' Training Corps, others in plain clothes. The air was full of a strange excitement and Mabel heard enthusiastic talk of 'seeing some sport before it's all over'.

A bewhiskered old gentleman in military uniform ordered the young ones to make room for Mabel in a corner seat and she politely enquired of him where all these men were going.

'My dear young lady, we're reservists goin' to join our regiments and one or two fellahs are goin' to enlist with the Army Service Corps,' he told her importantly. 'We're gettin' ready to show the Kaiser that if he wants a fight, he's got Great Britain and her Empire to give him a run for his money. Huh! We'll show the bounder!'

Mabel was beginning to realise that something momentous was about to happen and when the train drew in at Waterloo her eyes darted among the crowds, looking for the familiar Salvation Army uniform.

But it was a man in a different uniform who hailed her.

'Miss Court! It *is* Miss Mabel Court, isn't it?'

Two smiling blue eyes met hers and a firm arm helped her to step down on to the crowded platform. She recognised Dr Stephen Knowles, the son of their old family doctor who had been such a friend to the Court family during that terrible summer of 1912 when Annie and Jack Court had met their deaths within six weeks of each other. And Stephen had treated Albert's injuries when he'd been involved in the railway strike the year before.

'Dr Stephen! Don't say *you're* going to join yer regiment!'

'Not exactly. I've joined the RAMC in case they need extra medics. But how are *you*, Miss Court? My father heard you'd gone to train as a nurse and said you'd be ideal.'