

**Twenty-Four
Hour Leave**

BY KENEE SHANN
Author of "Student Nurse",
"War Wife", "Air Force
Girl".

I was trying to tell you darling and I had a very good reason for missing Jerry Miller.

He looked at her disbelievingly. She thought bitterly. He might at least wait until he's heard my explanation. Then she told herself perhaps she was imagining the mistrust she saw in his eyes. Maybe it was just that he had been so badly hurt. If he'd been thinking for these last two weeks that she'd been with Jerry Miller because she enjoyed his company.

Suddenly realizing that from now on she would have to be honest with him, that complete frankness was now the only way to win back his trust and his love, she said desperately, "It's rather a long story, Simon."

"Well, we've got all the afternoon." "It goes back over two years."

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

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

Simon stared at her. "Of Denise?"

She heard the surprise in his voice, the doubt almost. She thought in sudden panic. Suppose I tell him the truth about everything, and he doesn't believe me? Suppose he thinks I'm just trying to trump up some story? But he couldn't possibly do that. He must know she was being completely honest with him.

"Yes, darling. Oh, Simon, I don't know how to tell you this. I think perhaps I'd better make it as brief as possible. I'm afraid what I'm going to say may hurt you a great deal. But I'd rather risk even that, than have you imagine for a moment that Jerry and I... her voice broke. With a tremendous effort she went on. "That Jerry means anything to me, Simon, it was because I had to find out something about Denise and I agreed to have lunch with him. Simon asked himself if she'd taken leave of her senses. He couldn't make head or tail of what she was trying to get at. What was all this business of that fellow Jerry Miller and Denise? He ran a hand back over his hair. He said angrily, "I wish you'd be a little more explicit."

Cherry forced herself to go on. She'd not know it would be so difficult. Still she had to get it over. That day you came back from America, Simon, you remember? I was waiting for you at the flat. The day Denise—the day Denise was killed in the accident, I told you she was on her way to meet you.

"Well, what of it?"

"I wasn't speaking the truth that day, Simon. Denise wasn't on her way to meet you. She was running away with someone else, walking out on you. I—I thought the man was Jerry Miller."

CHAPTER XV

For a moment there was no sound in the room save the ticking of the grandfather clock in the far corner. Cherry saw Simon's face harden, his jaw set. There was a look in his eyes that almost frightened her. "I see," he said coldly. "And why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to hurt you."

"Didn't it occur to you that that was something I had every right to know?"

She made a little gesture. "Yes and no. I couldn't be certain, when there was that accident and we believed her dead, it seemed there was no reason why I should ever know. I didn't want to ruin your faith in her. I didn't want to spoil the memory you had of her."

Simon made a gesture. "All right. Your motives are very laudable. I'm sure. I'm afraid I can't at the moment quite appreciate them. And I'm still at a loss to know what all this has to do with your lurching with Jerry Miller. I should have imagined under the circumstances that you wouldn't have wanted to have anything to do with him, especially since I told you I disliked and distrusted him."

Cherry wondered how she could go on. There seemed so much still to tell him and yet it was impossible now to draw back. But the way he was looking at her hurt her so terribly, made her want to cry out as if she were in sheer physical pain. "I know, Simon. But there was a reason. I thought that Jerry could give me news of Denise. You see, there is still something more I've got to tell you. The day before we married I found this in one of the little drawers in the dressing table."

She opened her handbag as she spoke and took from it Denise's engagement ring. She handed it across the table to him. "You remember, Simon, that ring?"

There was no need to go on, no need to remind him. He realized as quickly as she had what the finding of this ring might mean to them. He stared at it without speaking. Then he looked across the table at her and the expression in his eyes turned her heart to water.

As he still said nothing she went on desperately. "You see, darling, I thought Jerry might be able to tell me if she was really dead. It's been so dreadful not knowing for certain, I did it because I loved you so terribly, because I couldn't bear to tell you about Denise. And because... well, I didn't know that she wasn't dead. I don't know that now. I feel sure she must be. It's only that there is some doubt, Simon dearest, don't look at me like that! Simon..." she broke off. Simon's eyes were hard. His face was drawn. "My God, Cherry," he said slowly. "I don't believe I'm ever going to be able to forgive you."

Cherry asked herself whether it would have been better after all to have said nothing. Hadn't she always intended to keep the possibility of Denise's being still alive a secret? Looked away in her heart? Hadn't it been with the idea in mind that she decided to risk their marriage? And now, because of this seeing her with Jerry Miller, she'd allowed herself to be stampeded into telling him. She wrung her hands. "Simon darling, I can't bear you to take it like this."

(To be continued)



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