

**Twenty-Four
Hour Leave**

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

Valerie wished her luck as she hurried from the billet. She said she would keep her fingers crossed and she was sure everything would be all right.

Simon swung open the door of the car as he saw her approaching. He didn't get out to come and meet her. He didn't attempt to say a word as she reached him. He only said "Hop in I thought we'd go back to the cottage for lunch. Mrs. Greene is cooking us a chicken. And once she was sitting down, 'Well, shall we talk when we get there. Shall we, Cherry?'"

Cherry drew a little girl's breath. Thank heaven the message wasn't far away. She wanted to get it over quickly. Only, even now, she wasn't quite certain what she was going to say or just how much she would tell him. She would have to see the way things went, what his reactions were. Just how hurt, how angry, he was feeling. If she must, she knew that she would tell him everything. But if she could avoid it, maybe it would be better.

She cast him a sidelong glance. Was this really Simon, this stern faced man sliding beside her, scarcely speaking to her, who looked so cold, and whose voice sounded so distant when he did speak?

CHAPTER XIV
At last they were at the cottage. Mrs. Greene greeted them at the doorway. She smiled warmly at Cherry. "Ah there you are, m'm I do think it's a shame you can't be here for the weekend."

"So do I, Mrs. Greene. I'm terribly disappointed." She stood on the threshold of the sitting room, looking around her at the furniture that had obviously recently been well polished, at the fresh flowers in the vases, at the general air of welcome.

"You've made it all look so nice for us, Mrs. Greene. 'She sniffed appreciatively. 'And, oh, my goodness, what an appetizing smell!'"

"Ah, that's the chicken. I mustn't stand here gossiping or I'll miss your dinner ready. In about twenty minutes or so it'll be all dished up."

"That'll be grand," said Simon. "We'll have some sherry first, in the garden if you like, Cherry."

"Yes, let's. I'll just run up stairs and get out of uniform. Even though I only have a short time here, I'd like to get into something different."

She went up to their room and slipped quickly out of her skirt and tunic. She found old navy-blue slacks and a simple blue and white striped blouse—homely clothes, but she knew Simon liked to see her in them. She whisked a comb through her hair and stood back from the mirror feeling vaguely dissatisfied with her appearance. She wasn't sure today that she looked what his reactions were. Just how were dark shadows beneath her eyes. Night duty and inability to sleep during the day were beginning to tell on her. She was thinner, surely, than she should be. It was all very well to be thin, but if she wasn't careful she'd soon be scrawny.

Her hair seemed lifeless and to look like usual willingness to look her cheeks were pale. Above all there was an anxious expression in her eyes. They were strained, uneasy. Simon was stretched in a deck chair beneath the apple tree. He'd put another one ready for her. He had the sherry decanter on a tray and two glasses. She could see him for a moment watching him a dreadful ache in her heart that things weren't as they should be between them, and a prayer, too, that soon all this would be over, soon she would be in his arms again. He'd be telling her that he understood.

With a little indrawn breath she turned and ran down stairs. He rose as she came toward him. "Where would you like to sit?"

"Here, Simon." She dropped into a chair opposite his. "Oh, dear, I was so thankful to get even this little time away from the station. At first I was afraid I might not be able to manage anything. Once they start switching around the times of the watches, you never know quite what's going to happen."

"Well, six hours is something. What time have you got to be back?"

"Six o'clock. You'll stay here, I suppose, till tomorrow morning?"

"I don't think so. I'll drive you to the airframe and then go back to London."

He poured out the sherry and handed a glass to her. "Thank you, Simon."

"Cigarettes?"

She shook her head. "Not before lunch."

He dropped into his chair again. Cherry wondered how to begin. She wanted to tell him right away, to get it over, because there could be no happiness while his shadow lay between them. She said despondently, "Simon, about the other day..."

"Well?" His voice was strangely cold. So were his eyes as they looked at her. Her heart shook.

"Darling, I've been so miserable, she said. 'I can't tell you what I've felt like this last fortnight!'"

He laughed shortly. "I don't think you need to. I haven't felt to good myself. It was a bit of a shock to me to see you come out of that restaurant with that fellow Miller."

"I knew, Simon, but..."

"Greene's voice interrupted them. 'It's all ready m'm. Shall I take it in?'"

Simon cursed beneath his breath. "Yes, certainly, Mrs. Greene," said Cherry. Then to Simon, "We'll have it, seems to talk about it later."

"I suppose there's nothing else for it. We must have this confounded meal!"

It seemed a lifetime before at last they were alone again. Mrs. Greene fussed about them. Were they sure they had all they wanted? She'd made bread sauce. She hoped they liked it. And there was stuffing, too. "I think it's a nice tender bird, sir," she breathed ecstatically as Simon carved it.

"It seems to be thank you, yes, really we have everything we want."

"Mrs. Greene took one last look around and then she hastily left them alone. Simon put Cherry's plate before her. "I hope you're hungry."

"I'm not in the least."

"Well, you'll have to eat all that up or you'll probably hurt Mrs. Greene's feelings." He sat down and their eyes met across the table.

"You were saying?" said Simon.

"To be continued."

"But" is a word that cools many a warm impulse, stifles many a kindly thought, puts a dead stop to many a brotherly deed. No one would ever love his neighbor as himself if he listened to all the "buts" that could be said. —Bulwer

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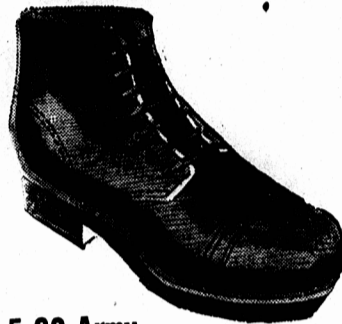
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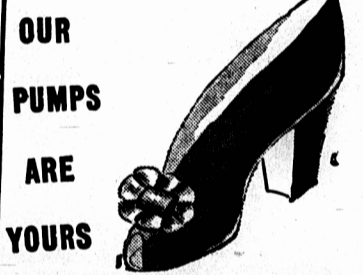
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