

MONEY IN THE MORGUE

**NGAIO
MARSH** AND **STELLA
DUFFY**



AN INSPECTOR ALLEYN
ADVENTURE

CHAPTER ONE

AT ABOUT EIGHT o'clock on a disarmingly still midsummer evening, Mr Glossop telephoned from the Transport Office at Mount Seager Hospital to his headquarters twenty miles away across the plains. He made angry jabs with his blunt forefinger at the dial—and to its faint responsive tinkling an invisible curtain rose upon a series of events that were to be confined within the dark hours of that short midsummer night, bounded between dusk and dawn. So closely did these events follow the arbitrary design of a play that the temptation to represent Mr Glossop as an overture cannot be withstood.

The hospital, now almost settling down for the night, had assumed an air of enclosed and hushed activity. Lights appeared behind open windows and from the yard that ran between the hospital offices and the wards one could see the figures of nurses on night duty moving quietly about their business. Mingled with the click of the telephone dial was the sound of distant tranquil voices and, from the far end of the yard, the very occasional strains of music from a radio in the new army buildings.

The window of the Records Office stood open. Through it one looked across the yard to Wards 2 and 3, now renamed

Civilian 2 and Civilian 3 since the military had taken over Wards 4–6 and remade them as Military 1, 2, and 3. Those in Military 3 were still very ill, those in Military 1, their quarantine and spirits up, were well into the restlessly bored stage of their recuperation. Each ward had a covered porch and a short verandah at the rear linking it to the next ward. Before each verandah stood a rich barrier of climbing roses. The brief New Zealand twilight was not quite at an end but already the spendthrift fragrance of the roses approached its nightly zenith. The setting, in spite of itself, was romantic. Mr Glossop, however, was not conscious of romance. He was cross and anxious and when he spoke into the telephone his voice held overtones of resentment.

‘Glossop speaking,’ he said. ‘I’m still at Mount Seager Hospital. If I’ve said it once I’ve said it a hundred times, they ought to do something about that van.’ He paused. A Lilliputian voice reaching him from a small town twenty miles away quacked industriously in the receiver. ‘I know, I know,’ said Mr Glossop resentfully, ‘and it’s my digestion that’s had to take it. Here I am with the pay-box till Gawd knows when and I don’t like it. I said I don’t like it. It’s OK, go and tell him. Go and tell the whole bloody Board. I want to know what I’m meant to do now.’

A footfall, firm and crisp, sounded on the asphalt yard. In a moment the stream of light from the office door was intercepted. The old wooden steps gave the slightest creak and in the doorway stood a short compact woman dressed in white with a veil on her head and a scarlet cape about her shoulders. Mr Glossop made restless movements with his legs and changed the colour of his voice. He smiled in a deprecating manner at the newcomer and he addressed himself to the telephone. ‘That’s right,’ he said with false heartiness. ‘Still we mustn’t grumble. Er—Matron suggests I get a tow down with the morning bus...Transport Driver...No, it’s—it’s,’ Mr Glossop swallowed, ‘it’s a lady,’ he said. The Lilliputian voice spoke at some length. ‘Well, we hope so,’ said Mr Glossop with a nervous laugh.

'You will be quite safe, Mr Glossop,' the woman in the doorway said. 'Miss Warne is an experienced driver.'

Mr Glossop nodded and smirked. 'An experienced driver,' he echoed, 'Matron says, an experienced driver.'

The telephone uttered a metallic enquiry. 'How about the pay-box?' it asked sharply.

Mr Glossop lowered his voice. 'I've paid out, here,' he said cautiously. 'Nowhere else. I should have been at the end of the rounds by now. Tonight, I'll watch it,' he added fretfully.

'Tell him,' the Matron said tranquilly, 'that I shall lock it in my safe.' She came into the office and sat at one of the two desks. She was a stocky woman with watchful eyes and a compassionate mouth.

Mr Glossop finished his conversation in a hurry, hung up the receiver and got to his feet. His tremendous circumference rose above the edge of the table and was rotated to face the Matron. He passed his hand over his face, glanced at it and pulled out a handkerchief. 'Warm,' he said.

'Very,' said the Matron. 'Nurse!'

'Yes, Matron?' A very small figure in a blue uniform and white cap rose from behind the second desk where she had been studiously avoiding overhearing Mr Glossop's telephone call.

'Hasn't Miss Farquharson got back yet?'

'No, Matron.'

'Then I'm afraid you must stay on duty until either she or Miss Warne returns. I wish to speak to Miss Farquharson when she comes in.'

'Yes, Matron,' said the small nurse in a very small voice.

'I'm extremely annoyed with her. And now I want you to telephone Mr Brown's grandson. Mr Sydney Brown. The number's on the desk there. Mr Brown has asked for him again. He could come out on the next bus but it would be quicker if he used his own car, and possibly safer as there's every chance we'll have a storm to break this weather before the evening's out. Tell him, as plainly as you can, that his grandfather is adamant he sees him, and time is not on his

side. I really do think young Mr Brown ought to have visited before now.'

'Yes, Matron.'

'Somebody very sick?' asked Mr Glossop, opening his eyes wide and drawing down the corners of his mouth.

'Possibly dying. It must be said, we have expected this for weeks and the gentleman seems to rally every time. It cannot go on though, and it's very important to the old man that he sees his grandson,' said the Matron crisply before turning back to the nurse and adding, 'Father O'Sullivan is cycling over from visiting a local parishioner to sit with old Mr Brown, make sure he finds me as soon as he arrives, will you? He arranged this visit a few days ago, but I'd like to update him on the old gentleman's condition first. Now come along with me, Mr Glossop, we'd better lock up that money of yours. Is there much?'

'It's all in the box,' he said, and lifted a great japanned case from the floor. 'Should have been empty by now, you know. Four hospital staffs are paid off after I leave here. As it is—'

'Mount Seager Hospital speaking,' said the little nurse into the telephone. 'I have another message for Mr Sydney Brown, please.'

'Just on a thousand,' said Mr Glossop behind his hand.

'God bless my soul, of course I understood you were carrying payrolls for several locations, but that is an enormous responsibility,' rejoined the Matron.

'Exactly what I'm always telling Central Office,' Mr Glossop replied, glad to have the Matron's understanding.

They went out to the steps. The little nurse's voice followed them: 'Yes, I'm afraid so. Not long, Matron says...Yes, he's asked for you again.'

'Just along here,' said the Matron.

Mr Glossop followed her down the yard that formed a wide lane, flanked on one side by offices, each with its distinguishing notice, and on the other by the wards set at intervals in sun-scorched plots, their utility gloriously interspersed by the roses which so recklessly floundered over the barb wire

fences in front of the connecting verandahs. From the covered porch of each ward came a glow of diffused light. The asphalt lane was striped with warmth. The usual tang of mountain air was missing in the sultry evening and the subdued reek of hospital disinfectants seemed particularly strong to Glossop's sensitive nose.

As they drew level with Military 1, the porch door slammed open and in a moment a heavy figure in nurses' uniform flounced into the yard. A chorus of raucous voices yelled in unison: 'And *don't* let it occur again.'

The nurse advanced upon Mr Glossop and the Matron. Her face was in shadow, but her glasses caught a gleam of reflected light. A badge of office which she wore on the bosom of her uniform was agitated and her veil quivered. She took two or three short steps and stopped, clasping her hands behind her back. In the ward the raucous voices continued in a falsetto chorus: 'Temperatures normal! Pulses normal! Bowels moved! *Aren't* we lucky?'

'Matron!' said the stout nurse in an agitated whisper. 'May I speak to you?'

'Yes, Sister Comfort, what is it?'

'Those men—in there—it's disgraceful. This entire notion of allowing them leeway now that they're recuperating—'

'Is a well-proven method for speeding up recovery. Rest and silence, Sister Comfort, is the old-fashioned way, the men benefit tremendously when we give them something to think about that is neither their illness nor their return to the war. Distraction is a nurse's best ally. However, I do agree there's far too much noise,' the Matron nodded. 'Will you excuse us, Mr Glossop?'

Mr Glossop moved away.

'Now, Sister,' said Matron.

'It's disgraceful,' Sister Comfort repeated in a grumbling voice. 'I've never been treated like it in my life before. The impertinence!'

'What are they up to?'

‘Temperatures normal! Pulses normal! Bowels moved! Aren’t we lucky?’

‘Just because I happened to pass the remark when I’d been round the ward,’ Sister Comfort said breathlessly. ‘They turn everything I say into ribaldry. There’s no other word. I can’t speak without them calling after me like parrots. And another thing, three of them are still out.’

‘Which three, Sister?’

‘Sanders, Pawcett and Brayling, of course. They had leave to go as far as the bench at the main gate.’ Sister Comfort’s voice trailed away on a note of nervousness. There was a brief silence broken only by the Matron.

‘I thought I had made it quite clear,’ Matron said, ‘that they were all to be in bed by seven. Distraction by day, rest by night, you know the rules.’

‘But, I can’t help it. They *won’t* obey orders,’ complained Sister Comfort.

‘They’re getting better,’ Matron said, ‘and they’re bored.’

‘But how can I keep order? Almost ninety soldiers and hardly any trained nurses. The VADs are not to be trusted. I know, Matron. I’ve seen what goes on. It’s disgusting.’

‘Nurse! Come over here and hold my hand,’ sang the patients.

‘There!’ cried Sister Comfort. ‘And the girls go and do it. I’ve seen them. And not only that—that Farquharson girl in the Records Office—’

‘Nursey, Nursey, going to get worsey.’

‘Come and hold my hand.’

‘Where is Sergeant Bix?’ asked the Matron.

‘Several of the men are due to be discharged this weekend coming and he has a huge amount of paperwork to get through before he can let them go. He’s not much use anyway, Matron, in my opinion, far too warm with the men. They’re the worst lot of patients we’ve ever had. Never in my life have I been spoken to—’

‘I’ll report you to Matron,’ said an isolated falsetto. *‘Call yourselves gentlemen? Well!’*

‘Did you hear that?’ Sister Comfort demanded. ‘*Did you hear it?*’

‘I heard,’ said Matron grimly. The chorus was renewed. She folded her hands lightly at her waist and with an air of composure walked through the porch doors into the ward. The chorus faded away in three seconds. The isolated voice bawled a final line and died out in a note of exquisite embarrassment. Mr Glossop, who had hung off and on in the doorway to Matron’s office, approached Sister Comfort.

‘She’s knocked them,’ he said. ‘She’s a corker, isn’t she?’ He waited for a reply and getting none added with an air of roguishness: ‘It’s a wonder she hasn’t made some lucky chap very happy, isn’t it?’

With a brusque movement Sister Comfort twisted her head so that the light from Matron’s office fell across her face. Mr Glossop took a step backwards and then checked as if in surprise at himself.

‘What is the matter?’ asked Sister Comfort harshly.

‘Nothing, I’m sure,’ Mr Glossop stammered. ‘Nothing at all. You looked a little pale, that’s all.’

‘I’m tired out. The work in that ward’s enough to kill you. It’s the lack of discipline. They want military police.’

‘Matron’s fixed them for you,’ said Mr Glossop, and recovering from whatever effect he had experienced he added in his fat and unctuous voice: ‘Yes, she’s a beautiful woman, you know. Not appreciated.’

‘I appreciate her,’ said Sister Comfort loudly. ‘We’re very friendly, you know. Of course, in public we have to be formal—Matron and Sister and all that—but away from here she’s quite different. Quite different.’

‘You’re privileged,’ Mr Glossop murmured and cleared his throat.

‘Well, I think I am,’ Sister Comfort agreed, more amiably.

The Matron returned and with a brisk nod to Mr Glossop led the way into her office. After they had left her, Sister Comfort stood stock-still in the yard, her head bent down as

if she listened attentively to some distant, almost inaudible sound. Presently, however, she turned into Military 1 but went no further than the porch; standing there in a dark corner and looking out obliquely across the yard at the Records Office. A few moments later a VAD scurried out of the ward. She experienced what she afterwards described as one hell of a jolt when she saw Sister Comfort's long heavy-jowled face staring at her out of the shadow.

'Doing the odd spot of snooping, that's what she was up to, the old stinker,' said the VAD 'She's got a mind like a sink. And anyway,' the VAD added complacently, 'my fiancé's in the air force.'



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