

The Beachcomber And The Mermaid

‘One of us should go next door. But I’m afraid I’d find it much too upsetting.’

Mother’s knitting-needles clack and squeak. Light from the window streaks her khaki sock with yellow.

Rose admires her huge diamond ring, sparkling in the same shaft of light. ‘I don’t think Malcolm would quite like it. And of course I’m so *busy*, being engaged.’

I sigh and turn my own knitting over. ‘I’ll go,’ I say, as they have always known I would. Good old Prudence. Not too sensitive. Not too busy. Plenty of time for Good Works.

‘Well, you and the Sheldons were tremendous pals, weren’t you?’ Mother says.

‘Years ago.’ The boys on the beach. Bertie teasing, catching you out with a whip of wet seaweed, Peter serious, given to beachcombing. Rose still a toddler, waddling on the shingle, crying when we ran away from her.

‘And now poor Bertie... the Somme... and Mr and Mrs Sheldon too. I’ve always said motorcars were dangerous.’ Mother shakes her head and her sock dances.

‘Why didn’t Peter come before?’ I ask. ‘The funeral was weeks ago.’

‘He had to wait for leave.’

‘Horrid way to spend his leave. Sorting out the estate. Poor Peter.’

‘Sorting out the *debts*.’ Mother lowers her voice, though it’s only the three of us. ‘Rocklands is to be sold. Of course Mr Sheldon was never the same after Bertie...’ She mimics a drinking action.

‘Maybe I could help out a bit with the practical side of things. Packing and so forth.’ I unravel a row to pick up a dropped stitch.

‘Good old Prudence,’ Mother says. ‘That’s the spirit.’

‘It’s rather romantic, isn’t it?’ Rose says. ‘Dashing young officer, tragically orphaned. Heartbroken—’

My stomach shudders to think of Peter transformed by war and death into a tragic stranger. ‘It’s not remotely romantic,’ I say. ‘Just sad.’

Rose twists her ring. ‘Oh, you’ve no romance in your soul. Just wait until you fall in love. The whole world shifts.’ But she says it smugly, because we both know that I’m not the falling-in-love type. Still less the being-fallen-in-love-with type.

Rocklands breathes out dead air and dust-motes; and white-sheeted furniture hunches in dim rooms. Peter and I shift boxes and stack pictures against walls, and fill tea-chests. We don’t talk of dead people or the war. We remember the days of beachcombing and teasing. Nothing sad, except that everything’s sad now. He’s not exactly the boy on the beach, but he’s still Peter.

I find a jar of coloured glass, blues and greens and ambers, fleecy with dust.

‘Don’t,’ I say, as Peter sets it on the rubbish pile. ‘It must have taken you years to gather them. They look like jewels.’

‘I can’t be sentimental about some bits of old washed-up beer bottle.’

‘Then I can.’ I take the jar, and he smiles.

There are very few actual jewels – his mother was a hearty woman, devoted to King Charles spaniels. Everything – a worn gold wedding band and a ring with a small green-blue stone, very pretty and simple; a string of pearls, a couple of brooches

– fits into one small lacquered box. I set it on the mantelpiece and Peter says he will look at it later.

Every night I brush clouds of dust out of my hair and Mother says it can't be good for my chest though it's splendid that I'm doing my bit for an old neighbour.

On his last day in England, Peter changes out of the old jersey he's been wearing all week, and is unfamiliar in khaki. 'I'll walk you home,' he says. We cut through the Rocklands garden to the beach. I trail a skein of dried-up wrack and for a time its gentle scrape along the shingle is the only sound.

'Thank you,' Peter says.

'What for?'

'This week. I couldn't have done it alone.'

'It was only putting things in boxes.'

'You know it wasn't.'

'I was glad of a change. You can't *think* how dull it is at home.'

Peter makes a noise that's sort-of-a-laugh-but-not-really. 'Wouldn't mind a bit of dullness.'

'Sorry – tactless. I hope – when you go back...' *Don't get killed.*

'Look, Prudence. I'd like you to have this.' He fumbles in his pocket and takes out the ring with the blue-green stone.

'I don't need a keepsake. Anyway, I have the bits of glass.' Washed, shining like jewels on my bedroom windowsill.

Peter lets out a long breath. 'Call it a keepsake, if you'd rather. But – well, it was Mother's engagement ring, and we get on so well...' He half-turns away, looks down the beach. 'I'd love to feel there was someone – to sort of – belong to.'

No. I'm not the least in love with Peter, and he's not in love with me. I'm just good old Prudence, solid in a world where his family is dead, his possessions are in tea-chests, and he's going back to God-knows-what tomorrow. I open my mouth to say that, to wish him well, to say I'll always be fond of him—

But I've never been in love with *anyone*. Deep down, I know I never will be. *Just you wait*, Rose said. *The whole world shifts.*

He's going back to the front tomorrow.

And I'll be back to Mother reading out the casualty lists at breakfast and complaining about the butcher not sending his best cuts and telling me the vicar's wife wants me to knit bonnets for Belgian refugee children and can she put me on the flower rota? And Rose will marry Malcolm and then it will be just me and Mother, forever.

Someone – to sort of – belong to. He might not come back.

'Yes,' I say. Peter's shoulders slump and he slips the little aquamarine ring onto my finger.

'It's the colour of the sea,' I say.

'Yes, it's aquamarine. That's why I thought you'd like it.'

'I love it.'

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I carry on knitting and helping Mother and winding bandages for the Red Cross, but people admire my ring and say, *Fancy that!*

Peter writes: scrawled, impersonal letters, mostly anecdotes about his men, or memories of childhood. *That pony you had who wouldn't get his hooves wet... The time Nanny fell asleep and Bertie buried her in sand...*

When the telegram comes, and then the letters, Mother says I can go up to London alone. After all, I'm twenty-six, and engaged, and it's only a day trip.

Dread makes me dawdle along the Chelsea streets to the hospital. I imagine all the people living in the bright red-brick mansion flats, without mothers and knitting and the vicar's wife calling. I bend my head so far back to try to see in the high windows that my grey woollen tam falls off. As I dust it down and replace it on my head, I think, *You should have worn a more elegant hat. He'll think you haven't made an effort.* And then, *Well, he won't see what you're wearing. It doesn't matter.* And I force my feet to quicken.

A VAD nurse takes me to Peter's ward. 'You're the first visitor Lieutenant Sheldon's had,' she says. 'He's awfully excited.'

I can't see which of the men in the long bed-lined room is Peter – they are all young, all in blue pyjamas, mostly bandaged somewhere. Oh, please, let *that* not be him, plucking at the coverlet, writhing, moaning. No! There, in the bed by the window. His eyes are shut. I've never seen him asleep.

'Looks like the excitement's been too much,' I say, and the nurse smiles. Her blue-green eyes are shadowed with tiredness. She has freckles.

'Don't feel hurt. He's not awfully fit yet.' She tucks a lock of reddish hair into her cap. 'I'll just wake him.'

'If he needs to sleep...?'

'You've come all this way. He'd be fearfully cross to miss you.' She touches his arm, confident, intimate – no, that's silly; she's just doing her job. He starts awake, eyes snapping open and then shut as if the light hurts. Without being asked, she draws down the blind a little.

'I'll leave you alone together,' she says.

‘Don’t!’ I want to say, but I squash down my foolishness.

I always imagined nurses gliding, but she walks with an easy swing like a hockey player. She stops beside the bed of the writhing man and speaks to him in a soft voice.

‘Prudence?’ Peter reaches a hand towards me. I don’t know how much he can see or how permanent the damage is. I sit down. *This is me, Prudence Kane. This damaged soldier is my fiancé.* It’s not real. But Peter’s hand feels hot and dry, real enough to nip my skin when it catches against the aquamarine ring.

‘Thank you for coming.’ His voice is hoarse.

‘Of course I came! We’ve been *so* worried.’

‘I hoped they’d send me to Chichester. Easier for you. But – ours not to reason why. At least I’m in England.’ His eyelids flicker and he frowns.

‘Do your eyes hurt?’ I don’t think they look different, but then I’ve never gone round gazing into them.

‘Not much now. They’re just rather useless – as eyes. I can see that you’re *there*, but not really that you’re *you*.’ He yawns. ‘Oh, Prudence, I’m so sorry.’

I squeeze his hand. ‘Go back to sleep.’ At least we won’t have to think of conversation.

‘You won’t go away?’

‘Of course not.’

Rose would think it romantic. The faithful young fiancée holding the blinded officer’s hand. Peter twitches and starts in sleep. His skin is blotchy, dry in patches round his mouth. His breath wheezes. I imagine the gas still inside him, poisoning him slowly, seeping out on every breath, creeping through every pore.

Someone is snoring. Someone is muttering. Something rattles – some kind of trolley. Too hot but I can't take my jacket off without disengaging my hand. I nod and start.

'Miss Kane?' It's the VAD nurse again. 'I've brought you some tea.'

White china. Warm in my hands. 'Thank you.'

She bends over Peter. Cool, strong-looking hand on his forehead. No ring. She wouldn't be allowed one on duty, I don't suppose.

'Will he – be all right? He seems so...'

'He won't die. His sight won't improve any more, and there'll always be a weakness in his lungs. You'll have to take very good care of him.'

'Yes.'

Perhaps she hears the uncertainty in my voice because she says, 'You'll be all right.' She smiles. 'He's been lucky.'

'I suppose it's all relative.'

'Yes. Of course we don't see any very acute cases here.'

'Do you like nursing?'

Her lips twitch. 'There's a lot of scrubbing. It's not as romantic as people seem to think.'

Nothing ever is. I think of saying it aloud, but Peter's eyes flicker and he clutches my hand tighter and instead I say, 'I'm here, Peter. I haven't gone away.'

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Her name is Felicity. It's easier when she's there. Peter mostly sleeps. I learn his breathing noises, the weight of his hand, the texture of his skin. I get used to this new Peter, who isn't the boy on the beach anymore.

One Sunday I find him hunched over, racked by coughs. Felicity holds an enamel dish in front of him. I step backwards. My hands fly up to cover my eyes but nothing can muffle the spluttering, heaving rattle. My stomach squirms. Felicity pats his back and says, 'That's right, best get rid of it.'

When he's done Felicity slips a white cloth over the bowl, and Peter sags against the pillows, sweaty, purple-faced, gasping, strings of phlegm pasted to his white lips.

'Better now.' An order rather than a question. 'Let's get you cleaned up for Miss Kane.' She bathes his face and hands. 'Don't try to talk,' she warns him.

Before she goes she touches my arm. 'Please don't worry.'

Both of us ignore her instructions. Peter frowns. 'I suppose you saw that.'

'Yes. Poor old you.'

'I wish you hadn't.'

I wish I hadn't. 'It doesn't matter.' I reach for his hand. It's still damp.

'It happens a lot. You've been lucky until now. I'm much less disgusting when I'm asleep.'

'Don't be silly.'

He shakes off my hand. 'Prudence – this is how it's going to be. I don't know if I'll ever be able to work. What I got for Rocklands will buy us a cottage if we're lucky. No help. No comforts.'

'I don't need *comforts*.'

'You think it will be romantic? Love in a cottage?'

'You should know me better than that.'

But we don't know each other very well, do we?

‘I ...’ He takes a rough breath. ‘I don’t *expect* you to marry me now. You didn’t sign up for this.’ He waves a hand. ‘Blind, useless—’

‘Stop it.’ I lean over and kiss his forehead. It is damp and tastes of salt.

‘Don’t marry me out of *pity*.’

‘Don’t be a chump.’ I close my eyes. Tea-chests in the dusty hall. His mother’s ring. The jar of beachcombed glass. *Someone – to sort of – belong to*. ‘I won’t hear of breaking it off. So unless you can’t bear the thought of marrying *me*, you’ll just have to put up with me.’

Good old Prudence. That’s the spirit.

Tears slide out of his eyes. ‘Gladly,’ he says.

I stroke the damp hair off his forehead. ‘It will be all right,’ I promise.

The bell rings at last. I know I should kiss him, but I can’t forget the phlegm. I touch my fingers to his lips instead.

In the hallway I pass Felicity pulling on her coat.

‘All right?’ she asks, buttoning with deft fingers. ‘Try not to worry. You’ll get used to it.’

Tears push up my throat. ‘It’s so – horrible.’ I scrub at my face. *If I let the tears slide out, would she comfort me?* ‘Sorry – that sounds... I didn’t mean...’ I blink, find my handkerchief, have a good blow.

Under her navy outdoor cap Felicity’s eyes are the colour of the sea on a bright day. Aquamarine. Like my ring. ‘Come back for tea. My rooms are in the next street. You can pull yourself together before your train. Do you have time?’

‘I don’t want to be a bore.’ *My rooms* – she mustn’t live at home.

‘I never do anything that bores me.’ She laughs. ‘Actually, that’s a lie. Emptying bedpans, washing out sputum jars... But having tea with you won’t be anything like that.’

‘I hope not.’

Her rooms – airy, untidy, modern, all open doors and discarded cups and trailing stockings – are high up in one of the mansion blocks I’ve woven fancies around. While Felicity makes tea I look out the window at rooves and brick and sky, and the street far below. There are photos on the mantelpiece of a second lieutenant with a dark moustache. Sweetheart? Brother? Husband?

‘Do you live here alone?’ I ask.

‘Lord, no,’ Felicity calls from the kitchenette. ‘I share with a pal. She’s a tram conductor.’ She makes it sound great fun. ‘We both work shifts and our char has abandoned us. Hence the mess.’

‘It’s not a mess; it’s heaven.’ I move some stockings aside and sink into an armchair. I no longer feel like crying.

Felicity sets an orange teapot on the little table in front of the fire. ‘I’ll light the gas,’ she says. ‘It’s fearfully cold for July.’

The gas pops and the fire glows. I’d like to stay here forever.

Felicity pulls at the waist of her VAD dress. ‘Phoo,’ she says. ‘I feel all piggy. Would you excuse me – I must change into something fresher.’

She goes into what must be a bedroom. She doesn’t close the door: I can’t help seeing a slice of blue dress, white corset and slip, creamy skin. She bends to rummage in a chest of drawers, a question-mark of suppleness. There are red rubbed marks above her corset. She leans back and pulls the pins from her hair and it falls, russet and silky, to her waist.

She reappears in a loose greenish frock, her hair still loose. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’ she says. ‘It’s *such* a relief to get the pins out.’

‘Of course not.’ *You look like a mermaid.*

She pours the tea, her hair falling forward over her face. My fingers long to reach out towards it, to push it back, to feel its weight.

I set my teacup on the arm of the armchair. I won’t be able to drink it. My throat has closed over.

The whole world has shifted.

Felicity tucks her feet under her and sips her tea. ‘I’m sorry there aren’t any buns,’ she says. ‘I’m a shocking housekeeper. Now, are you feeling better about Lieutenant Sheldon? You will get used to it, you know. The trick is – try not let him *know* you find it so distressing. And then, after a while, you won’t. Honestly. I was fearfully squeamish when I started. Fainted the first time I had to do a dressing.’ She laughs.

I imagine her fainting, scooping her up, feeling the fall of her hair, her weight in my arms. But we aren’t in a hospital ward; there is no wounded soldier with his suppurating wound, no VAD uniform. We are on the beach, the waves frothing to the shore, and we are alone, and her hair sweeps across her breasts. She opens her aquamarine eyes and murmurs something.

‘And I can see you’re the sensible type, aren’t you?’ Felicity says. ‘Not one of these silly romantic girls. That’s bound to help too.’

‘Yes,’ I agree. ‘I’m sure it will.’ I can’t believe that my voice comes out so ordinary.

THE BEACHCOMBER AND THE MERMAID

I pick up my cup and set it down again. 'I ought to go, really. Mother will worry if I'm not on the 5.35. Thanks for the tea. And tell Peter I'll be back on Tuesday, at the usual time.'

(2995 words)