

CHAPTER III

THE MATERNITY NURSE

Of course Alvina made everybody pay for her mood of submission and sweetness. In a month's time she was quite intolerable.

"I can't stay here all my life," she declared, stretching her eyes in a way that irritated the other inmates of Manchester House extremely. "I know I can't. I can't bear it. I simply can't bear it, and there's an end of it. I can't, I tell you. I can't bear it. I'm buried alive--simply buried alive. And it's more than I can stand. It is, really."

There was an odd clang, like a taunt, in her voice. She was trying them all.

"But what do you want, dear?" asked Miss Frost, knitting her dark brows in agitation.

"I want to go away," said Alvina bluntly.

Miss Frost gave a slight gesture with her right hand, of helpless impatience. It was so characteristic, that Alvina almost laughed.

"But where do you want to go?" asked Miss Frost.

"I don't know. I don't care," said Alvina. "Anywhere, if I can get out of Woodhouse."

"Do you wish you had gone to Australia?" put in Miss Pinnegar.

"No, I don't wish I had gone to Australia," retorted Alvina with a rude laugh. "Australia isn't the only other place besides Woodhouse."

Miss Pinnegar was naturally offended. But the curious insolence which sometimes came out in the girl was inherited direct from her father.

"You see, dear," said Miss Frost, agitated: "if you knew what you wanted, it would be easier to see the way."

"I want to be a nurse," rapped out Alvina.

Miss Frost stood still, with the stillness of a middle-aged disapproving woman, and looked at her charge. She believed that Alvina was just speaking at random. Yet she dared not check her, in her present mood.

Alvina was indeed speaking at random. She had never thought of being

a nurse--the idea had never entered her head. If it had she would certainly never have entertained it. But she had heard Alexander speak of Nurse This and Sister That. And so she had rapped out her declaration. And having rapped it out, she prepared herself to stick to it. Nothing like leaping before you look.

"A nurse!" repeated Miss Frost. "But do you feel yourself fitted to be a nurse? Do you think you could bear it?"

"Yes, I'm sure I could," retorted Alvina. "I want to be a maternity nurse--" She looked strangely, even outrageously, at her governess. "I want to be a maternity nurse. Then I shouldn't have to attend operations." And she laughed quickly.

Miss Frost's right hand beat like a wounded bird. It was reminiscent of the way she beat time, insistently, when she was giving music lessons, sitting close beside her pupils at the piano. Now it beat without time or reason. Alvina smiled brightly and cruelly.

"Whatever put such an idea into your head, Vina?" asked poor Miss Frost.

"I don't know," said Alvina, still more archly and brightly.

"Of course you don't mean it, dear," said Miss Frost, quailing.

"Yes, I do. Why should I say it if I don't."

Miss Frost would have done anything to escape the arch, bright, cruel eyes of her charge.

"Then we must think about it," she said, numbly. And she went away.

Alvina floated off to her room, and sat by the window looking down on the street. The bright, arch look was still on her face. But her heart was sore. She wanted to cry, and fling herself on the breast of her darling. But she couldn't. No, for her life she couldn't. Some little devil sat in her breast and kept her smiling archly.

Somewhat to her amazement, he sat steadily on for days and days. Every minute she expected him to go. Every minute she expected to break down, to burst into tears and tenderness and reconciliation. But no--she did not break down. She persisted. They all waited for the old loving Vina to be herself again. But the new and recalcitrant Vina still shone hard. She found a copy of The Lancet, and saw an advertisement of a home in Islington where maternity nurses would be fully trained and equipped in six months' time. The fee was sixty guineas. Alvina declared her intention of departing to this training home. She had two hundred pounds of her own, bequeathed by her grandfather.

In Manchester House they were all horrified--not moved with grief,

this time, but shocked. It seemed such a repulsive and indelicate step to take. Which it was. And which, in her curious perverseness, Alvina must have intended it to be. Mrs. Houghton assumed a remote air of silence, as if she did not hear any more, did not belong. She lapsed far away. She was really very weak. Miss Pinnegar said: "Well really, if she wants to do it, why, she might as well try." And, as often with Miss Pinnegar, this speech seemed to contain a veiled threat.

"A maternity nurse!" said James Houghton. "A maternity nurse! What exactly do you mean by a maternity nurse?"

"A trained mid-wife," said Miss Pinnegar curtly. "That's it, isn't it? It is as far as I can see. A trained mid-wife."

"Yes, of course," said Alvina brightly.

"But--!" stammered James Houghton, pushing his spectacles up on to his forehead, and making his long fleece of painfully thin hair uncover his baldness. "I can't understand that any young girl of any--any upbringing, any upbringing whatever, should want to choose such a--such an--occupation. I can't understand it."

"Can't you?" said Alvina brightly.

"Oh well, if she does--" said Miss Pinnegar cryptically.

Miss Frost said very little. But she had serious confidential talks with Dr. Fordham. Dr. Fordham didn't approve, certainly he didn't--but neither did he see any great harm in it. At that time it was rather the thing for young ladies to enter the nursing profession, if their hopes had been blighted or checked in another direction! And so, enquiries were made. Enquiries were made.

The upshot was, that Alvina was to go to Islington for her six months' training. There was a great bustle, preparing her nursing outfit. Instead of a trousseau, nurse's uniforms in fine blue-and-white stripe, with great white aprons. Instead of a wreath of orange blossom, a rather chic nurse's bonnet of blue silk, and for a trailing veil, a blue silk fall.

Well and good! Alvina expected to become frightened, as the time drew near. But no, she wasn't a bit frightened. Miss Frost watched her narrowly. Would there not be a return of the old, tender, sensitive, shrinking Vina--the exquisitely sensitive and nervous, loving girl? No, astounding as it may seem, there was no return of such a creature. Alvina remained bright and ready, the half-hilarious clang remained in her voice, taunting. She kissed them all good-bye, brightly and sprightlily, and off she set. She wasn't nervous.

She came to St. Pancras, she got her cab, she drove off to her destination--and as she drove, she looked out of the window. Horrid,

vast, stony, dilapidated, crumbly-stuccoed streets and squares of Islington, grey, grey, greyer by far than Woodhouse, and interminable. How exceedingly sordid and disgusting! But instead of being repelled and heartbroken, Alvina enjoyed it. She felt her trunk rumble on the top of the cab, and still she looked out on the ghastly dilapidated flat facades of Islington, and still she smiled brightly, as if there were some charm in it all. Perhaps for her there was a charm in it all. Perhaps it acted like a tonic on the little devil in her breast. Perhaps if she had seen tufts of snowdrops--it was February--and yew-hedges and cottage windows, she would have broken down. As it was, she just enjoyed it. She enjoyed glimpsing in through uncurtained windows, into sordid rooms where human beings moved as if sordidly unaware. She enjoyed the smell of a toasted bloater, rather burnt. So common! so indescribably common! And she detested bloaters, because of the hairy feel of the spines in her mouth. But to smell them like this, to know that she was in the region of "penny beef-steaks," gave her a perverse pleasure.

The cab stopped at a yellow house at the corner of a square where some shabby bare trees were flecked with bits of blown paper, bits of paper and refuse cluttered inside the round railings of each tree. She went up some dirty-yellowish steps, and rang the "Patients" bell, because she knew she ought not to ring the "Tradesmen's." A servant, not exactly dirty, but unattractive, let her into a hall painted a dull drab, and floored with cocoa-matting, otherwise bare. Then up bare stairs to a room where a stout, pale,

common woman with two warts on her face, was drinking tea. It was three o'clock. This was the matron. The matron soon deposited her in a bedroom, not very small, but bare and hard and dusty-seeming, and there left her. Alvina sat down on her chair, looked at her box opposite her, looked round the uninviting room, and smiled to herself. Then she rose and went to the window: a very dirty window, looking down into a sort of well of an area, with other wells ranging along, and straight opposite like a reflection another solid range of back-premises, with iron stair-ways and horrid little doors and washing and little W. C.'s and people creeping up and down like vermin. Alvina shivered a little, but still smiled. Then slowly she began to take off her hat. She put it down on the drab-painted chest of drawers.

Presently the servant came in with a tray, set it down, lit a naked gas-jet, which roared faintly, and drew down a crackly dark-green blind, which showed a tendency to fly back again alertly to the ceiling.

"Thank you," said Alvina, and the girl departed.

Then Miss Houghton drank her black tea and ate her bread and margarine.

Surely enough books have been written about heroines in similar circumstances. There is no need to go into the details of Alvina's

six months in Islington.

The food was objectionable--yet Alvina got fat on it. The air was filthy--and yet never had her colour been so warm and fresh, her skin so soft. Her companions were almost without exception vulgar and coarse--yet never had she got on so well with women of her own age--or older than herself. She was ready with a laugh and a word, and though she was unable to venture on indecencies herself, yet she had an amazing faculty for looking knowing and indecent beyond words, rolling her eyes and pitching her eyebrows in a certain way--oh, it was quite sufficient for her companions! And yet, if they had ever actually demanded a dirty story or a really open indecency from her, she would have been floored.

But she enjoyed it. Amazing how she enjoyed it. She did not care how revolting and indecent these nurses were--she put on a look as if she were in with it all, and it all passed off as easy as winking. She swung her haunches and arched her eyes with the best of them. And they behaved as if she were exactly one of themselves. And yet, with the curious cold tact of women, they left her alone, one and all, in private: just ignored her.

It is truly incredible how Alvina became blooming and bouncing at this time. Nothing shocked her, nothing upset her. She was always ready with her hard, nurse's laugh and her nurse's quips. No one was better than she at double-entendres. No one could better give the

nurse's leer. She had it all in a fortnight. And never once did she feel anything but exhilarated and in full swing. It seemed to her she had not a moment's time to brood or reflect about things--she was too much in the swing. Every moment, in the swing, living, or active in full swing. When she got into bed she went to sleep. When she awoke, it was morning, and she got up. As soon as she was up and dressed she had somebody to answer, something to say, something to do. Time passed like an express train--and she seemed to have known no other life than this.

Not far away was a lying-in hospital. A dreadful place it was. There she had to go, right off, and help with cases. There she had to attend lectures and demonstrations. There she met the doctors and students. Well, a pretty lot they were, one way and another. When she had put on flesh and become pink and bouncing she was just their sort: just their very ticket. Her voice had the right twang, her eyes the right roll, her haunches the right swing. She seemed altogether just the ticket. And yet she wasn't.

It would be useless to say she was not shocked. She was profoundly and awfully shocked. Her whole state was perhaps largely the result of shock: a sort of play-acting based on hysteria. But the dreadful things she saw in the lying-in hospital, and afterwards, went deep, and finished her youth and her tutelage for ever. How many infernos deeper than Miss Frost could ever know, did she not travel? the inferno of the human animal, the human organism in its convulsions,

the human social beast in its abjection and its degradation.

For in her latter half she had to visit the slum cases. And such cases! A woman lying on a bare, filthy floor, a few old coats thrown over her, and vermin crawling everywhere, in spite of sanitary inspectors. But what did the woman, the sufferer, herself care! She ground her teeth and screamed and yelled with pains. In her calm periods she lay stupid and indifferent--or she cursed a little. But abject, stupid indifference was the bottom of it all: abject, brutal indifference to everything--yes, everything. Just a piece of female functioning, no more.

Alvina was supposed to receive a certain fee for these cases she attended in their homes. A small proportion of her fee she kept for herself, the rest she handed over to the Home. That was the agreement. She received her grudging fee callously, threatened and exacted it when it was not forthcoming. Ha!--if they didn't have to pay you at all, these slum-people, they would treat you with more contempt than if you were one of themselves. It was one of the hardest lessons Alvina had to learn--to bully these people, in their own hovels, into some sort of obedience to her commands, and some sort of respect for her presence. She had to fight tooth and nail for this end. And in a week she was as hard and callous to them as they to her. And so her work was well done. She did not hate them. There they were. They had a certain life, and you had to take them at their own worth in their own way. What else! If one should be

gentle, one was gentle. The difficulty did not lie there. The difficulty lay in being sufficiently rough and hard: that was the trouble. It cost a great struggle to be hard and callous enough. Glad she would have been to be allowed to treat them quietly and gently, with consideration. But pah--it was not their line. They wanted to be callous, and if you were not callous to match, they made a fool of you and prevented your doing your work.

Was Alvina her own real self all this time? The mighty question arises upon us, what is one's own real self? It certainly is not what we think we are and ought to be. Alvina had been bred to think of herself as a delicate, tender, chaste creature with unselfish inclinations and a pure, "high" mind. Well, so she was, in the more-or-less exhausted part of herself. But high-mindedness had really come to an end with James Houghton, had really reached the point, not only of pathetic, but of dry and anti-human, repulsive quixotry. In Alvina high-mindedness was already stretched beyond the breaking point. Being a woman of some flexibility of temper, wrought through generations to a fine, pliant hardness, she flew back. She went right back on high-mindedness. Did she thereby betray it?

We think not. If we turn over the head of the penny and look at the tail, we don't thereby deny or betray the head. We do but adjust it to its own complement. And so with high-mindedness. It is but one side of the medal--the crowned reverse. On the obverse the three

legs still go kicking the soft-footed spin of the universe, the dolphin flirts and the crab leers.

So Alvina spun her medal, and her medal came down tails. Heads or tails? Heads for generations. Then tails. See the poetic justice.

Now Alvina decided to accept the decision of her fate. Or rather, being sufficiently a woman, she didn't decide anything. She was her own fate. She went through her training experiences like another being. She was not herself, said Everybody. When she came home to Woodhouse at Easter, in her bonnet and cloak, everybody was simply knocked out. Imagine that this frail, pallid, diffident girl, so ladylike, was now a rather fat, warm-coloured young woman, strapping and strong-looking, and with a certain bounce. Imagine her mother's startled, almost expiring:

"Why, Vina dear!"

Vina laughed. She knew how they were all feeling.

"At least it agrees with your health," said her father, sarcastically, to which Miss Pinnegar answered:

"Well, that's a good deal."

But Miss Frost said nothing the first day. Only the second day, at

breakfast, as Alvina ate rather rapidly and rather well, the white-haired woman said quietly, with a tinge of cold contempt:

"How changed you are, dear!"

"Am I?" laughed Alvina. "Oh, not really." And she gave the arch look with her eyes, which made Miss Frost shudder.

Inwardly, Miss Frost shuddered, and abstained from questioning. Alvina was always speaking of the doctors: Doctor Young and Doctor Headley and Doctor James. She spoke of theatres and music-halls with these young men, and the jolly good time she had with them. And her blue-grey eyes seemed to have become harder and greyer, lighter somehow. In her wistfulness and her tender pathos, Alvina's eyes would deepen their blue, so beautiful. And now, in her floridity, they were bright and arch and light-grey. The deep, tender, flowery blue was gone for ever. They were luminous and crystalline, like the eyes of a changeling.

Miss Frost shuddered, and abstained from question. She wanted, she needed to ask of her charge: "Alvina, have you betrayed yourself with any of these young men?" But coldly her heart abstained from asking--or even from seriously thinking. She left the matter untouched for the moment. She was already too much shocked.

Certainly Alvina represented the young doctors as very nice, but

rather fast young fellows. "My word, you have to have your wits about you with them!" Imagine such a speech from a girl tenderly nurtured: a speech uttered in her own home, and accompanied by a florid laugh, which would lead a chaste, generous woman like Miss Frost to imagine--well, she merely abstained from imagining anything. She had that strength of mind. She never for one moment attempted to answer the question to herself, as to whether Alvina had betrayed herself with any of these young doctors, or not. The question remained stated, but completely unanswered--coldly awaiting its answer. Only when Miss Frost kissed Alvina good-bye at the station, tears came to her eyes, and she said hurriedly, in a low voice:

"Remember we are all praying for you, dear!"

"No, don't do that!" cried Alvina involuntarily, without knowing what she said.

And then the train moved out, and she saw her darling standing there on the station, the pale, well-modelled face looking out from behind the gold-rimmed spectacles, wistfully, the strong, rather stout figure standing very still and unchangeable, under its coat and skirt of dark purple, the white hair glistening under the folded dark hat. Alvina threw herself down on the seat of her carriage. She loved her darling. She would love her through eternity. She knew she was right--amply and beautifully right, her darling, her beloved

Miss Frost. Eternally and gloriously right.

And yet--and yet--it was a right which was fulfilled. There were other rights. There was another side to the medal. Purity and high-mindedness--the beautiful, but unbearable tyranny. The beautiful, unbearable tyranny of Miss Frost! It was time now for Miss Frost to die. It was time for that perfected flower to be gathered to immortality. A lovely immortal. But an obstruction to other, purple and carmine blossoms which were in bud on the stem. A lovely edelweiss--but time it was gathered into eternity.

Black-purple and red anemones were due, real Adonis blood, and strange individual orchids, spotted and fantastic. Time for Miss Frost to die. She, Alvina, who loved her as no one else would ever love her, with that love which goes to the core of the universe, knew that it was time for her darling to be folded, oh, so gently and softly, into immortality. Mortality was busy with the day after her day. It was time for Miss Frost to die. As Alvina sat motionless in the train, running from Woodhouse to Tibshelf, it decided itself in her.

She was glad to be back in Islington, among all the horrors of her confinement cases. The doctors she knew hailed her. On the whole, these young men had not any too deep respect for the nurses as a whole. Why drag in respect? Human functions were too obviously established to make any great fuss about. And so the doctors put their arms round Alvina's waist, because she was plump, and they

kissed her face, because the skin was soft. And she laughed and squirmed a little, so that they felt all the more her warmth and softness under their arm's pressure.

"It's no use, you know," she said, laughing rather breathless, but looking into their eyes with a curious definite look of unchangeable resistance. This only piqued them.

"What's no use?" they asked.

She shook her head slightly.

"It isn't any use your behaving like that with me," she said, with the same challenging definiteness, finality: a flat negative.

"Who're you telling?" they said.

For she did not at all forbid them to "behave like that." Not in the least. She almost encouraged them. She laughed and arched her eyes and flirted. But her backbone became only the stronger and firmer. Soft and supple as she was, her backbone never yielded for an instant. It could not. She had to confess that she liked the young doctors. They were alert, their faces were clean and bright-looking. She liked the sort of intimacy with them, when they kissed her and wrestled with her in the empty laboratories or corridors--often in the intervals of most critical and appalling cases. She liked their

arm round her waist, the kisses as she reached back her face, straining away, the sometimes desperate struggles. They took unpardonable liberties. They pinched her haunches and attacked her in unheard-of ways. Sometimes her blood really came up in the fight, and she felt as if, with her hands, she could tear any man, any male creature, limb from limb. A super-human, voltaic force filled her. For a moment she surged in massive, inhuman, female strength. The men always wilted. And invariably, when they wilted, she touched them with a sudden gentle touch, pitying. So that she always remained friends with them. When her curious Amazonic power left her again, and she was just a mere woman, she made shy eyes at them once more, and treated them with the inevitable female-to-male homage.

The men liked her. They cocked their eyes at her, when she was not looking, and wondered at her. They wondered over her. They had been beaten by her, every one of them. But they did not openly know it. They looked at her, as if she were Woman itself, some creature not quite personal. What they noticed, all of them, was the way her brown hair looped over her ears. There was something chaste, and noble, and war-like about it. The remote quality which hung about her in the midst of her intimacies and her frequencies, nothing high or lofty, but something given to the struggle and as yet invincible in the struggle, made them seek her out.

They felt safe with her. They knew she would not let them down. She would not intrigue into marriage, or try and make use of them in any

way. She didn't care about them. And so, because of her isolate self-sufficiency in the fray, her wild, overweening backbone, they were ready to attend on her and serve her. Headley in particular hoped he might overcome her. He was a well-built fellow with sandy hair and a pugnacious face. The battle-spirit was really roused in him, and he heartily liked the woman. If he could have overcome her he would have been mad to marry her.

With him, she summoned up all her mettle. She had never to be off her guard for a single minute. The treacherous suddenness of his attack--for he was treachery itself--had to be met by the voltaic suddenness of her resistance and counter-attack. It was nothing less than magical the way the soft, slumbering body of the woman could leap in one jet into terrible, overwhelming voltaic force, something strange and massive, at the first treacherous touch of the man's determined hand. His strength was so different from hers--quick, muscular, lambent. But hers was deep and heaving, like the strange heaving of an earthquake, or the heave of a bull as it rises from earth. And by sheer non-human power, electric and paralysing, she could overcome the brawny red-headed fellow.

He was nearly a match for her. But she did not like him. The two were enemies--and good acquaintances. They were more or less matched. But as he found himself continually foiled, he became sulky, like a bear with a sore head. And then she avoided him.

She really liked Young and James much better. James was a quick, slender, dark-haired fellow, a gentleman, who was always trying to catch her out with his quickness. She liked his fine, slim limbs, and his exaggerated generosity. He would ask her out to ridiculously expensive suppers, and send her sweets and flowers, fabulously recherché. He was always immaculately well-dressed.

"Of course, as a lady and a nurse," he said to her, "you are two sorts of women in one."

But she was not impressed by his wisdom.

She was most strongly inclined to Young. He was a plump young man of middle height, with those blue eyes of a little boy which are so knowing: particularly of a woman's secrets. It is a strange thing that these childish men have such a deep, half-perverse knowledge of the other sex. Young was certainly innocent as far as acts went. Yet his hair was going thin at the crown already.

He also played with her--being a doctor, and she a nurse who encouraged it. He too touched her and kissed her: and did not rouse her to contest. For his touch and his kiss had that nearness of a little boy's, which nearly melted her. She could almost have succumbed to him. If it had not been that with him there was no question of succumbing. She would have had to take him between her hands and caress and cajole him like a cherub, into a fall. And

though she would have like to do so, yet that inflexible stiffness of her backbone prevented her. She could not do as she liked. There was an inflexible fate within her, which shaped her ends.

Sometimes she wondered to herself, over her own virginity. Was it worth much, after all, behaving as she did? Did she care about it, anyhow? Didn't she rather despise it? To sin in thought was as bad as to sin in act. If the thought was the same as the act, how much more was her behaviour equivalent to a whole committal? She wished she were wholly committed. She wished she had gone the whole length.

But sophistry and wishing did her no good. There she was, still isolate. And still there was that in her which would preserve her intact, sophistry and deliberate intention notwithstanding. Her time was up. She was returning to Woodhouse virgin as she had left it. In a measure she felt herself beaten. Why? Who knows. But so it was, she felt herself beaten, condemned to go back to what she was before. Fate had been too strong for her and her desires: fate which was not an external association of forces, but which was integral in her own nature. Her own inscrutable nature was her fate: sore against her will.

It was August when she came home, in her nurse's uniform. She was beaten by fate, as far as chastity and virginity went. But she came home with high material hopes. Here was James Houghton's own daughter. She had an affluent future ahead of her. A fully-qualified

maternity nurse, she was going to bring all the babies of the district easily and triumphantly into the world. She was going to charge the regulation fee of two guineas a case: and even on a modest estimate of ten babies a month, she would have twenty guineas. For well-to-do mothers she would charge from three to five guineas. At this calculation she would make an easy three hundred a year, without slaving either. She would be independent, she could laugh every one in the face.

She bounced back into Woodhouse to make her fortune.