

SUE BARTON

SENIOR NURSE

by

HELEN DORE BOYLSTON

THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON · SYDNEY · TORONTO

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*The complete SUE BARTON series (uniform volumes)
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*The reader will understand that the institution,
the staff, and the patients mentioned in this story
are wholly imaginary.*



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I

SENIOR YEAR BEGINS

BREWSTER, the dormitory for probationers and junior nurses, stands on the outer fringe of the acres of hospital buildings, and that afternoon in September it was still with the stillness of an oven. The day nurses who were off duty were on the roof, stretched out in the shade of a great awning, where a wind from the river brought a suggestion of coolness. On the upper floors the night nurses slept in flushed restlessness, with doors and windows wide open to catch the least stirring of air. Downstairs, in the little tea-room at the end of the first-floor hallway, the sun crept under partly drawn shades and lay in blinding bars on the white tablecloth.

Norah, the little Irish maid, glanced wearily at the half-empty pitcher of iced tea, put down the nurse's cap she was making, and rose from behind the table. The sleeves of her black silk uniform clung damply around her arms, but her tiny white apron and ruffled collar were starched to a smoothness that no humidity could impress. She picked up the pitcher, stepped out into the hall, and disappeared down a flight of stairs beside an elevator shaft.

The deserted tea-room was so silent that the timid approach of two very new probationers had almost the effect of a flurry. They carried pens and large black notebooks which they placed gingerly on a chair, and then stood eyeing a plate of sandwiches on the table. The taller of the two was almost abnormally thin, with sharp nose and pale, uncertain eyes. Her blue uniform hung lankly upon her. The other was short and pudgy and there was a dew of perspiration on her round face. The thin probationer spoke first.

'Maybe we'd better not, Mary,' she said. 'They might not like it.'

'Well, they won't miss one sandwich—and I'm starved.' She was extending a plump hand toward the plate when there was a step behind her. She jerked her hand back with guilty haste and turned, to encounter the amused eyes of a slender girl in the grey and white uniform of the student nurses.

The probationers looked at her with some apprehension. You never knew, in the hospital, *what* the nurses were going to say next. Still, this one seemed nice—not the teasing kind—and she was, as the probationers agreed later, 'the prettiest thing' they had ever seen. She stood easily, smiling at them, one hand buried deep in the pocket of her skirt. Her crinoline cap—so like an inverted teacup—rested on copper-red, soft curls. Her skin, except for a warm flush along the cheekbones, was transparently white, her features clean-cut and delicate.

SENIOR YEAR BEGINS

'Aren't you having any tea?' she asked, in a clear, pleasant voice. 'Where *is* the tea, anyway? Goodness! People must have been gulping it down like boa constrictors!' She went to the stairs and called, 'Norah! Help! Tea!'

Norah's voice floated up the well of the stairway.

'Shure an' I'm comin'! Give a body time!'

The nurse laughed and returned to the probationers, who had been watching her, envying her the grey uniform with its fitted bodice and full skirt, the starched white bib and apron that looked so businesslike. But most of all, at that moment, they envied her her short sleeves and turn-over collar, open at the throat—for their uniforms had high collars, and long sleeves with five-inch, stiff cuffs.

'Have a sandwich,' the nurse said, offering them the plate.

The plump probationer's fingers closed on, not one, but three sandwiches, and the nurse grinned. 'I know just how you feel,' she said. 'But you'll get over being so ravenous after a while.'

'Is—is it all right,' the tall probationer asked, 'for *us* to have tea here?'

'Of course! It's for everybody. Didn't you know? And *do* sit down! It makes me hot just to look at you standing there in all those cuffs.' She added, explaining, 'You don't have to rise for older nurses when you're off duty, you know. I mean except for Sisters

or Staff nurses.' She sat down herself, in a wicker chair by the table, and after an instant of shy hesitation the two probationers seated themselves side by side, prim in their blue and white. They were immensely flattered by her friendliness.

'Do you like it here?' she inquired politely.

'Oh, yes!' they chorused, and the lanky probationer added surprisingly, 'It's so—so free here, isn't it?'

The nurse looked startled.

'What on earth do you mean?'

The probationer's heels twisted on the rung of her chair. 'Well, you see,' she began uncomfortably, 'at—at home—my stepfather was so strict. I couldn't ever do anything—or—have a minute to myself. He always wanted to know why I wasn't doing something different. But here—why, when I'm off duty I can do whatever I like—go out—or stay in—or read—or anything. And everybody is so—nice. I—guess you'll think I'm silly—but it seems like heaven to me!'

'Why, you poor lamb!' the nurse said gently, and the probationer flushed. 'I—this is a grand old place—though I must say I'd never thought of it as the last word in freedom. It——' she broke off at the sound of clinking ice behind her. 'Oh! Norah! Bless you!'

The little maid trudged across to the table, her movements heavy with the heat. But her face above the iced-tea pitcher was beaming,