

THERE IS TODAY

By JOSEPHINE LAWRENCE

CHAPTER XIII

Big-hearted Sarah Daffodil acts in every capacity for the four-family house in Gerset after her husband's death. The frugal, elderly Mr. and Mrs. Peppercorn and the newly-wed Andrew and Candace Thane occupy the two top floor apartments and below them middle-aged Bert Fitts and his wife—who is too engrossed in war activities to care for her home—and King Waters, veteran of World War I and his wife, Emma, a devotee of fine crocheting. The Peppercorns wish to help a destitute family found by Hen, the junkman, sheltered under his scrap metal. Mrs. Peppercorn calls on Mrs. Fitts to ask her aid but Mrs. Fitts is not interested. Tom Fitts, however, Candace for refusing to devote evening hours to volunteer war service and Mr. Waters sneers at Andrew for marrying when he may be called for selective training. King Waters, who is expecting to sign up for making speeches before young men's organizations to raise the morale, discusses Andy Thane's draft status with Mrs. Waters. Mrs. Waters, who has already developed quite a reputation for leading, goes on a shopping trip and does some more hoarding. She drives to her cabin and as she enters finds evidence that someone is in the place ahead of her.

The screen around the other bed afforded at least the semblance of privacy. Behind it two girls were chattering to Stacy, their every other sentence beginning with "So I said to him." Sarah put her square, capable hand over the thin white one lying on the coverlet. "I've thought it all out," Sarah said. What she would like to do, she asserted, was to take charge of the baby throughout the day. There was no reason, she insisted, why she shouldn't manage a plain, practical day nursery for one. For the first few weeks the baby would require little of her, except to be fed and changed. When warmer weather set in, there would be the garden. He could sleep in his coach while she worked in the flower beds. Tenant repairs and services could wait until she was free—Candace would be at home Saturdays and Sundays. "You see, there's nothing left to argue about."

"Oh, but Sarah, you have so much to do. What about your marketing? Suppose you had to go downtown?" She would telephone, Sarah replied, or take the boy in his coach. "We'll probably cover miles on his wheels and my feet."

Candace protested. She couldn't accept such a sacrifice. "It's wonderful, I do appreciate it, Sarah, but I couldn't begin to pay you—"

"It's to be my patriotic gesture," Sarah informed her gravely. "I've decided that individual service is my niche and that caring for a baby is important work in wartime, or in peace."

It would be wonderful, Candace admitted again, she couldn't imagine anything more perfect from her point of view and that of her son's. She had been so discouraged, trying to devise a plan which she could afford to carry out. Andy had been worried, too—

"Then let's call it settled now and you tell Andy tomorrow," Sarah urged. "Mind you, it's not upsetting my life in any way. I'm alone so much it will be good for me to have something human and alive dependent upon me."

Finally they left it that Candace should talk it over with Andy and after Sarah had gone, in the hour before the supper trays were brought up, she thought intently, trying to consider the plan from all angles. Suppose Sarah found the daily care of a tiny baby too heavy a burden? If that proved to be the case, she could make other arrangements. Candace reminded herself,

and later she would be stronger and better able to make decisions. It would be marvelous to feel that she could leave Michael in such strong capable, tender hands—no mother would worry one minute about a child in Sarah's care. Hers was the kind of common sense that saw each new situation whole, instinctively separated essentials from non-essentials, and made the best of whatever was available. Sarah would never be maudlin about baby. Candace reflected, stretching luxuriously—it was lovely to see the peaks that were her feet again—Sarah wouldn't gurgle and coo, but neither would she be so rigidly detached that she would freeze her affection. Michael would know, as soon as he developed instincts, that someone who loved him was keeping him safe.

Zither would come twice a week to wash and iron and to clean the apartment. Leila had sounded her out and had discovered that factory jobs did not tempt the colored girl. Someone yelled at employees who made mistakes, Zither quavered, she had no intention of putting herself at the mercy of production managers. "I'll work for Miss Thane and Mr. Michael till his papa come back," Zither had said.

They had so much to talk about! When Andy, his lean, brown face cold against her smooth cheek, his gnarled hands holding hers, sat hunched on the side of her bed late the next day, Candace unfolded Sarah Daffodil's generous plan to him. "She is so good, Andy, she will be so cheerful and strong. And Michael will be in the garden all day, as soon as it is warm. I shall not have to worry about him, or wonder if he is unhappy or neglected. Shall we accept, Andy? Or shall we be taking too much?"

It was taking too much, Andy assented soberly, "But let's say yes."

He stopped with that and Candace glanced at him curiously. She had expected him to argue, perhaps, certainly to weigh his decision carefully, to be surprised, or pleased, or touched. He must be tired, not to express greater appreciation for Sarah's kindness, it wasn't like Andy to be so brusque.

"You know," Candace said, "it will mean a lot to us. As soon as I get out of here, I mean to hunt for a job. I wrote to Hacker and Hacker, but they are not even going to open the repair shop they half planned to open. It's just as well—they couldn't pay me my old salary."

Andy put the palm of her soft hand to his lips. "Don't worry. You'll be all right."

"Oh, I've made up my mind not to worry," Candace assured him. She looked at him and knew and even in the shock of knowing realized that a certain measure of relief came with the acceptance that one had reached the end of the bridge. "It's all right—I'm all right," she whispered, her hand straying blindly in search of her handkerchief.

Andy gathered her into his arms and her brief storm spent itself against his breast. We have had so much, she kept saying to herself, we have had so much . . .

Drying her eyes on Andy's capacious handkerchief, Candace said in her normal, soft, clear voice, "When, Andy?"

"They notified me this morning. To report tomorrow. They send you direct to the Army, then to camp. I've had my first physicals, so there's no chance of a delay."

He could stay with her till nine o'clock, he went on, they would have supper together and he'd jolly the nurse into bringing the baby in. "Unless—that is, I don't want to make things harder for you, Dace."

"Stay till the last minute, darling. It's only what we've been expecting and preparing for." Candace added that he would have to tell Sarah, but she hoped he would tell no one else. "I don't want to hear the other tenants talk—I don't want to hear anyone talk about you."

Candace had a job waiting for her, Andy disclosed at supper, if she wanted to take it when the doctor gave his O.K.

"My bosses have been stewing around, since I told them I'm leaving," Andy said, quite unable to keep his eyes from his wife's face. "When I told them I was coming up to the hospital, Bacon asked some questions about you and when he heard you'd been a private secretary, he suggested that you take my place. Only till I come back—that's understood." He didn't like the idea of women holding on to men's jobs after the war, Andy explained. "Not when the woman is the wife of the man and the job was his in the first place."

Toni Fitts sighed that she had begun to think she would have to wait to see the baby until Candace brought him home. "My dear, I never have a minute to myself any more—we packed fifty layettes yesterday to go abroad."

On the other side of the bed, Mrs. Waters asked about tea. "Do they still have it for the patients? They say it's going to be rationed. All food, they say, is going to be rationed."

She looked about the room a little distractedly, as if seeking something. "You've probably heard that tramps get into our cottage and ruined my summer supplies? Simply wrecked everything—I can't begin to tell you what the money loss is, to say nothing of foodstuffs we can't replace." Her husband, she continued in a listless monotone, had suggested renting a fire-and-theft-proof room in a furniture storage building. "But I don't know," Mrs. Waters said forlornly. "All my ambitions is gone. And my confidence. I tell King that I don't trust life any more."

Mrs. Fitts lowered her voice discreetly. "I was saying to Mrs. Waters this morning that I did hope Mr. Thane wasn't ill. We haven't seen him since—when was it, Emma? Thursday morning, I believe. I sent Bert up to ring your bell, but no one answered."

"Andy's inducted." "You mean he's gone? With you here in bed? Why, how dreadful!" Mrs. Fitts appeared to be genuinely disturbed. She had no idea, she flattered, that it would be so sudden.

Mrs. Waters agreed that it was terrible. Unnecessary, too, she declared. "My husband read last week of a case where the man appealed his rating as soon as his child was born. Decision is still pending, but the man is home meanwhile with his wife and baby. You could probably have got a delay."

"Andy never planned to ask deferment," Constance wondered how much longer this must go on. In the wards the nurses hustled visitors out after a decent length of time, but in the rooms only the nine o'clock curfew was enforced.

Mrs. Fitts regretted that no one had gone to the train to see Andy off. "I've always understood that the military officials and the railroad men, too, preferred that people kept away from the stations. But we had a speaker at a dinner last week who berated the indifference and complacency of the public. He told us it was our duty to give the boys a cheerful farewell."

"I don't suppose your husband had a soul to say good-by to him?" Mrs. Waters suggested. "King would have been delighted to stage a little celebration for him, if he had only known in time."

"For the love of Lulu!" muttered Stacy from her bed.

The visitors turned slightly to stare. "Is she refined? In your class?" Mrs. Waters whispered uneasily. "Well—I only asked. I had a friend who shared a room with a perfectly awful woman, the regular gutter-snipe type. You never know what you'll get."

Toni Fitts glanced satisfiedly toward the dresser where her daffodils filled a green jar. "It's a privilege to be young at a time like this." She spoke solemnly, patting the coverlet softly. "Many of us, my dear, will envy your opportunity to give your husband to your country."

"How dare you!" Candace jerked upright; her wonderful, clear voice cut through the room like a blade of steel.

"Wha-at?"

"I said how dare you. How dare you say such a stupid, cruel, dishonest thing! My husband's life isn't mine to give—his life is his alone. Do you believe that when a woman marries a man she owns him, like a table or a chair? What Andy decides to do with his precious, beautiful life—his own dear life—is for him to say. It's the men who offer their lives and who lose them—not the women at home who talk as you do of 'giving' a husband or a son."

They were startled at her as if frozen into silence. In her bed Stacy O'Neill rocked back and forth, clapping her hands soundlessly.

Against the background of her pillows, Candace's flushed face and enormous blazing eyes were startlingly alive. Her tumbled hair, her trembling scarlet lips had in them something furious and beautiful and pathetically young.

"I have a son." The exquisite voice faltered, but the little head remained proudly erect. "There may be another war when Michael is old enough to fight. Perhaps there will always be wars—who knows? But if my son, if Michael goes to war, I'll never say I gave him to his country. His life is his to give as he chooses. No one except himself shall claim the right to offer it for any cause, dedicate it to any plan. Not ever."

"That's telling them!" Stacy O'Neill said.

(THE END)

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