

Love's Passion Alight

Sarah Samuels peered reflectively into her jewelry box. She was searching for earrings. —Where had she put them? It was hard to concentrate. She shook her head impatiently.

—I'll be late if I don't find them. —Why am I so nervous? These were not the first questions she had asked herself since coming to know Ransom Chutney, Chief of Surgery at General Hospital.

As a man of world-wide reputation, it was astonishing that Dr. Chutney and Sarah had ever met: he of an exalted professional background, coming from a long line of handsome doctors; she coming from a long line of mere plebian peasantry of the urban class—all covered in soot and despair.

However, Sarah had proved upwardly mobile and had excelled at every endeavor. The climbing up the social ladder of medical achievement had started slowly; yet now handsome doctors were arrayed before her, or at least one was. And it looked as though she was going to get to the bottom of her uncertain relationship with a man whose distinguished name sounded like a relish for fish.

Almost from the time they had met, Dr. Chutney had seemed as though he were under a dark, important cloud, as though he could see some threatening storm on the horizon – a storm that perhaps threatened their growing feelings for one another other. How had this all come about? As she sat looking into the opacity of her fingernails, Sarah went back in her mind over the last few years of her brief, turbulent life.

A scene became vivid to her. It was her first day at General Hospital. She remembered how she had stood before the green baize door of her first clinical

experience, considering in fear whether or not to run while there was still time or to stay. Yet even as she hesitated, RESOLVE had entered her soul. No, she would not throw away the sacrifice of her youth on the altar of cowardice! In her epiphany of self-abasement, she realized she had nothing to fear but the suffering she had always experienced; and, if that was to be her lot, she had been made ready. She knew the path to the top was not strewn with rose petals.

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Sarah began to drift further in reverie. She recalled how she had been born to simple, brilliant, devout parents who had sacrificed to send her through college and nursing school so that she might fulfill her life-long ambition to become a nurse, meet a rich, handsome, mysterious, frightening doctor – and marry him.

Sarah thought of how her mother had worked long hours as a dishwasher during the day, and how she had worked as a cleaning lady during the night to make Sarah's career possible. Nurse Samuels reflected on the fact that she hardly knew her mother and wished there had been time to become better acquainted.

—Oh, the curse of poverty! She thought bitterly (if it were possible for bitter thoughts to cross this woman's holistic mind).

Poverty had forced her father to supplement his meager income as a concert violinist by tuning pianos from early in the morning to late in the evening. At night he had worked at a loathsome job, stuffing sausages in a local packing plant. Sarah's cheeks

flushed with shame as she remembered the coarsening effect this job had had on her father's language.

Then, too, because of her father's work, there was the aroma of Stravinsky and the stockyard about him; it was an odor that pervaded the home. She remembered how it had embarrassed her to introduce Mom and Dad to her friends: very often her parents fell asleep during the introductions.

Perhaps understandingly, Sarah had been persecuted for coming from the wrong side of the tracks. High school had been a nightmare for her. So she had redoubled her scholastic efforts and decided on a career in nursing because it was a truly noble profession where one could serve others--and show creeps and snobs like her schoolmates what real, deserving virtue and humility were.

Of course, she never made less than an A in any of her courses in high school or college. She joined many organizations to show she was a joiner and did much church volunteer work to show that she was a volunteer. She made all of her own clothes and became an excellent gardener to supplement her meager diet with fresh vegetables. Sometimes she gave her folks left-over produce. She even learned how to raise chickens in the attic so they all could enjoy fresh meat and eggs.

And her privations had not been in vain. They had won her a full-paid scholarship to State University. All she had to do to keep her scholarship was work from eight to five in the dorm cafeteria; then she could knock-off for half-an-hour before doing light, miscellaneous research from 5:30 to 10:00; then she could knock-off until midnight, when she went to work as a guard in the computer center.

Yes, all the years of effort and starvation had paid off. She had won her coveted cap and degree, with honors, and now stood before the green baize doors of General Hospital, wondering, wondering what she would find waiting for her behind them.

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Sarah got up from the bed, stretched a bit, and paused before reviewing her reverie. —What had she been looking for? --What had she been looking for at General Hospital when she had first come to work those several months ago?

She sat back down on the bed and let her mind wander, which it readily did.

—Yes, there had been adjustments to make, but she had been ready and willing to make them. She knew what to expect from the real world of nursing--her high school and college reading had prepared her for that. Still, there had been surprises. For one thing, General Hospital had been so large. It was impossible to get acquainted with very many people. Everything was so efficient and functional, and cold.

Sarah's thoughts flew to the one who had become her best friend. What a support she had been! From the very first day she had been taken under wing and shown the ropes by Darla Dunn. She couldn't imagine how she could have survived otherwise. The two nurses had had an impressive *mélange* of experiences, mostly together.

There had been that confrontation with head nurse Borden who had ordered Sarah to give enemas to everyone in intensive care. That had been the first time that she had stood up for what she thought was a preferable course of treatment: laxatives.

Then there had been the hospital itself to learn, with its multiple floors, dead ends, and corridors leading to who knows where. --Where were the restrooms? It had all been so confusing.

Especially upsetting had been the strain of meeting all of those people! There was the peculiar fellow in Room 405 who kept proposing to her, and the funny old woman in 406 who kept tearing her bed sheets up and setting them on fire.

Then there were the doctors. They were the most perplexing group of all. Some were curt and dismissed you with a slap on the head, while others were just as nice as could be. Many of them seemed preoccupied with their specialties and somehow out of touch with reality. Doctor Adams in particular seemed a zombie until someone would mention yachting.

Most troubling of all had been her intense but confusing relationship with Dr. Ransom Chutney, Chief of Surgery. She remembered well (or was about to remember well) her first meeting with him. It had been, in fact, during her first day . . .

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Darla Dunn had set off at a break-neck pace, and they had covered floor after floor and mile after mile, stopping to greet a myriad of faces. There had been nurse Pursely and nurse Hanon, Drs. Wheatley, Morris, and Joeblonowski. She had been told that she would work in each section of the hospital for a week to familiarize herself with procedures before being turned loose on her own. She would work a week in the surgery, a week in pediatrics, a week in dietetics, and a week in dianetics; she would also work a week in the kitchen and the laundry. No stone would be left unturned in her education.

For instance, there was this Borden woman.

When Darla first took Sarah to meet the head nurse, they found her sandpapering a hypodermic. She seemed perturbed at being interrupted. Darla had put on her cheeriest smile and made the introductions. “Nurse Pig – I mean nurse Borden. I would like you to meet our new nurse, Sarah Samuels. Sarah, this is Elsie Borden. She is the head of nursing here. We couldn’t – uh – get along without her.”

Sarah looked at nurse Borden uncomfortably. In fact, she noticed the head nurse had taken out a magnifying glass and was looking at her through it.

“I think I see a bit of dust on your uniform, Miss Samuels. What have you been doing? Playing in the mud? We must do better than that around here. Ours is a life-and-death struggle against disease and death. A person who brings dust into the hospital will, the next thing you know, be spreading infection to the patients. See that you are always clean, neatly attired, and wearing your cap. Now, where is it you’re supposed to be stationed after we teach you something? Speak child! Cat got your tongue?”

“I’ll be in p-pediatrics, sir. I just—I love children and—”

“Come, come, nurse Samuels. Surely you can use a better word than that. *Love*. I hope we will not continue to hear such sentimental simpering from one of our own. We are professionals here. Our highest duty is to give every patient the kick in the rear he or she needs to get him/her out of here. Don’t talk to me of love. The little brats grow up, don’t they? No doubt we’ll whip you into shape in no time. They all come out of school muttering like you at first, but we set them straight. Now wipe those tears off your face and stop trembling; you’ll get used to me after a while and find me gruff, but kindly, with a heart of gold. Now beat it, the both of you.”

But before Sarah could leave General for the day, go home, and throw herself on her bed in anguish, they still had to visit the surgery. Darla and Sarah soon arrived at a green baize door marked “Surgery – Off Limits” and went in.

“This is surgery, Sarah, Darla began. Over there, sharpening a scalpel, is Dr. Lance Buboos, and there are Drs. Smithe and Wayne, (pointing) and nurse Murphy and nurse Simpson. Am I going too fast for you?”

As Sarah dried her eyes and tried to clear her head, she began to pay attention to what Darla was saying, and she noticed one of the surgeons had his back to them. “Who is that standing over in the corner with his back to us?”

“Oh, I’m glad you noticed him. That’s Dr. Chutney. Maybe you’ve heard of him – Dr. Ransom Chutney. He’s the strong, silent type. He often uses his eyebrows to browbeat the nurses. A real terror. Some of us think he is suffering from a secret sorrow. Let me introduce you to him. You’ll find him fascinating – if I can get him to open up.”

“Dr. Chutney, could you speak with us for a minute? I would like to introduce you to our new nurse.”

Dr. Chutney, who had not seen them approach, started as though shot, but regained his composure quickly and turned around.

“Dr. Chutney, this is Sarah Samuels, who will be in pediatrics. Sarah, this is Dr. Chutney, our Chief of Surgery.”

As Sarah gazed upon Dr. Chutney’s full visage, bells went off. She was utterly stunned by his dark, handsome masculinity. He was the spitting image of Chris Evans, Idris Elba, and Mick Jagger, depending on which mood he chose to be in. His mood

changed several times while he stood there with them. It was as though he were Mt. Rushmore being swept by the seasons.

“How do you do, Nurse Samuels? I hope you will like it here at General.”

Sarah regained her voice. “Yippee! I think I’ll like this place just – that is, I hope – I’m sure I will have a satisfactory adjustment here, Dr. Chutney. Nurse Dunn has been showing me around. I’m so excited that I shall at last be able to put the noble ideals I learned at school to work for the betterment of humankind.”

She noticed a sudden change sweep over the noble young doctor (for so she sensed him to be). He darkened visibly. “Yes. Noble ideals, noble ideals . . .” He murmured for several minutes.

Suddenly he came to himself. “Yes, nurse Samuels, noble ideals. Never forget them. Always live by them. I’m sure they will serve you in good stead.” He spoke with an odd intensity, as if his own ideals not only guided but also hounded him in some way. It was all such a mystery.

They bid each other goodbye, but as Sarah left, words could not express the strange, almost wonderful, emotions that coursed through her veins. Who was this man who had suddenly made her heart to pitty-pat in a drum solo? What did she know about him? What had he murmured about ideals? Why did he give the impression of being a driven, almost desperate, man? She could not say.

And so the mystery had become ever more of a preoccupation as the months had gone by. She simply could not fathom Dr. Chutney’s behavior. At times he seemed almost suicidal. Once she caught him actually holding a scalpel to his throat, but he had gotten out of the situation by saying he was shaving. Another time she found him

floating face down in the whirlpool. When she had revived him, he had said that he had “slipped.” And so it went, until the day she found a note in her mailbox. It read: “Dear Sarah, I can’t stand it anymore. If you will come to a little informal gathering I’m having this evening, I will tell you all. I need your help. Desperately yours, Ransom Chutney, MD.”

Her eyes bulged. So at last she was to know. She felt like flying, or at least like leaping a tall building with a single bound. He was going to take her into his confidence! She literally floated through the rest of that day. And now she lay on her bed, reflecting over the recent past. What would she find tonight? Would it be love? Or only More Mystery?

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With the song “Tonight, Tonight” from West Side Story running through her head, Sarah rang Dr. Chutney’s doorbell. She had never seen his place before. —Not a bad looking pad, she thought, as she stepped back to admire the Greco-roman terra cotta frieze that bordered the driveway.

A butler opened the door. “Please come in, Miss Samuels. Dr. Chutney is expecting you. You will find the party on the patio, drinking. My name is Mackintosh. Could I get you something?”

Sarah hesitated. —How could she let him know she didn’t drink? “Why no, thank you, I don’t drink while I’m off-duty.”

She found the guests all cozily ensconced on the patio. There was an air of festivity about the gathering, but there was also a note of uneasiness. She wondered if the others knew of Dr. Chutney's troubles. Was he going to confide in them, also, in a sort of mass therapy? She decided to mingle with the gaily-strewn, Chinese lanterns and see if she could find out more of what was going on.

She had not mingled more than a moment when she realized there was something strange, all right. Where was Dr. Chutney? He was not on the patio. She sidled over to the patio doors and looked into the house itself.

At first, she couldn't see anything. Then as her eyes become adjusted to the light, she noticed the solitary figure of the Chief of Surgery standing by the fireplace. She went in and stood beside him in a moment of silent vitality. Their eyes met, and for several sacred seconds they stared at one another – until their eyes watered. Finally, they averted their gaze and stared at the fireplace, which was unlit but interesting.

Sarah agonized in Dr. Chutney's presence. He seemed so near, yet so far away. What she could do to break the spell she didn't know. Then the phone rang.

Mackintosh answered it, and as he did so, his countenance changed. He hurried to his master's side, and as he whispered in the doctor's ear, she saw Ransom's face go white. As she glanced down to be sure she wasn't standing on his foot, she heard him croak in a whisper, "Yes, tell him to come over. It can't be avoided any longer. His condition has reached a crisis. Tell him – midnight!"

As the butler returned to the phone, Sarah saw Dr. Chutney pass both hands over his face. He was dripping wet and trembling. She could stand it no longer. Deciding that the direct approach was best, she took both of his hands in her own and in her

tenderest voice said, “Dr. Chutney, dear, sweet, Dr. Chutney, won’t you tell me what is the matter? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

Dr. Chutney allowed himself to be drawn away from the view of the patio doors, and they sat down together on a loveseat. After a moment’s struggle, during which Dr. Chutney seemed to throw caution to the wind, he said, “I have seen a ghost, Sarah. My own! It is the ghost of a dreadful mistake I’ve made that has haunted me relentlessly for some time now. I have committed a blunder, a surgical blunder, Miss Samuels. Yes-- and now it has come back to haunt me! But before I go further with my confession, dear little one--for it is a confession I’m making--you must promise to help me.”

His voice rose. “You must promise to redeem me and my career from utter ruin!”

“But how can I do that, Rance? I don’t see--”

“It’s this way, Sarah – such a lovely name – such a dear, adorable name – that was Everett Buncombe on the phone. He was a former patient of mine and is soon to be again, although he doesn’t know it yet. Because the fact is, the truth is, he has never been quite well since I operated on him three months ago. Indeed, he’s been quite ill since that time, and it’s been puzzling him very much. He comes to me regularly with complaints, but I’ve been putting him off. You see, the truth is, Sarah, I know perfectly well what his problem is, but I can’t do anything about it. It’s been maddening. Now something simply must be done!”

Sarah’s head swirled with confusion. What could he be talking about?

But without giving her a chance to gather her thoughts, Dr. Chutney rushed on. His next words came almost as a convulsion: “Buncombe is not getting well because--

because I--I left his stomach stapled shut when I operated on his ulcer. He's got a backlog of food debris that is awful. Sarah – don't look at me that way. Sarah--!"

Sarah was visibly shaken. She had always thought she could stand up to anything, but to find out that surgeons ever made such humdingers was almost too much. She looked into Dr. Chutney's pleading eyes. As she did she did so, she nearly panicked, for she saw both love and torment there. Her heart went out to the young malpractice candidate.

Dr. Chutney was down on his knees as he burst forth again, "You've got to help me. I must operate again, before it is too late. Tonight! Will you help me? Say you will!"

Sarah thought feverishly. --Could she return the love of this man? Wasn't he incompetent? She wondered. And then she wondered that she wondered; for after all, he was so compelling, so helpless, so handsome, so solemn, and so vulnerable. "Oh, Dr. Chutney – Rance. Don't look at me that way! You'll break my heart!"

"Sarah, don't turn your face away!" he said commandingly, a new note of resolve in his voice. "Look at me. You can see that I love you, that I need you. Can you forgive a poor, but modestly wealthy, fool? I ask you again. Will you help me *tonight*?"

Sarah got up off of the loveseat and stood for a moment in silent agony. Finally, she responded to his pleading. Her reserve collapsed like the melting of a great iceberg.

"God help me!" she breathed. "I will!"

After the guests had all departed – ushered out by the butler well before midnight – all was in preparation. Then midnight came. As Mackintosh took old Buncombe's coat and hat, the butler slugged the old man with a lead paperweight, rendering him

senseless. Then the conspirators all gathered around and carried Buncombe to the kitchen where the operation began immediately.

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Sometime toward morning it was all over. Sarah asked breathlessly, “Will he be all right? Will he live? He’s lost so much blood, Rance.”

“Yes, he’ll be all right. His hematoma count is rising; that’s a good sign. And now with this new wonder drug I’m going to give him, he’ll never remember this happened at all – in fact, he might lose his memory altogether!” Dr. Chutney’s eyes brightened at the thought.

“But won’t he notice he’s been re-operated on? I don’t understand. How can we get away with this? The paring knives--ugh! It’s madness!”

“No, it isn’t. Listen! While he is under the influence of P2snafoo, I will give him a postoperative suggestion – and he won’t remember anything that’s happened. Sarah, oh Sarah, you’ve been such a brick through all of this! Let’s get married and have three kids; two boys and a girl, and settle down.”

“Yes, Rance, I accept. Two girls and a boy would be fine, if we could have maybe a small dog and a canary.”

They clung to each other in a shy but vigorous embrace while Dr. Chutney, with his free arm, continued to pump the supine, insensible Everett Buncombe ever more full of P2snafoo. Imagine the scene--dear reader!--and join with me in an earnest prayer for their happiness. May all their dreams come true!