

A HISTORICAL ROMANCE SERIES

# GARRISON

## *Hospital*

VIVIAN STUART

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman's silhouette standing on a beach, looking out at the ocean during a sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, with the sun low on the horizon. Palm trees are visible on the right side of the frame. The text is overlaid on this scene.

A HISTORICAL ROMANCE SERIES

# GARRISON

## *Hospital*

VIVIAN STUART



# Garrison Hospital

Garrison Hospital

© Vivian Stuart, 1957

© eBook in English: Jentas ehf. 2022

ISBN: 978-9979-64-412-5

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchase.

All contracts and agreements regarding the work, editing, and layout are owned by Jentas ehf.

## Chapter one

The gathering storm hung like a pall over the Garrison Hospital at Miljura Island. The heat was relentless, unabating. No faintest breath of wind came to dispute its possession of weary mind and wilting body; the electric fans, purring away uselessly, served only to agitate but not to cool the humid air. They added one more irritating sound to the other ceaselessly irritating sounds from which there was no escape.

Seated at her table in the middle of the ward, Sister Olivia Lessing passed a hand across her brow and sighed audibly. Her hand was damp when she took it away and it smudged the last line of the report she was writing.

“Oh bother it!” She spoke the words under her breath but they afforded relief to her feelings. Olivia Lessing came from Yorkshire, and eleven months’ experience of the heat hadn’t rendered her immune to it, as she had hoped it might. Rather it had taught her that there was nothing she could do to combat these periodic, airless, unbearable preludes to Miljura’s tropical storms. At least the heavy equatorial rain, when it came, brought a temporary drop in temperature and a breeze from the sea.

Once—it seemed to her a lifetime ago—she had thought of the Pacific islands as a sort of earthly paradise, and she had considered her posting to Miljura as a piece of unexpected good fortune. Now, in common with the rest of the small British and Australian garrison, she had suffered disillusion and wished that the Japanese, who had constructed the base during the war, had been allowed to remain in undisputed possession of it.

Olivia no longer found it possible to smile at the old jokes

about Miljura's being a bastion of the shrinking British Empire and a future naval base, or to feel a surge of patriotic pride when reminded that it was painted red, instead of green or orange, on the map. It was, in any case, too small a red dot to be noticed on most maps, even when it was shown. And only Commander Falconer of the Royal Australian Navy continued to believe the once prevalent rumors concerning the naval base. Hugh Falconer was a patriot and an optimist and he believed what he wanted to believe. Olivia wished, now, that she hadn't let him talk her into believing it too. In fact she wished that she hadn't let him talk to her at all. She might have been happier and found Miljura more bearable if she had never set eyes on him.

"Oh goodness . . ." the exclamation was out before she realized that she had spoken it aloud this time and she glanced about her apprehensively. Talking to oneself was a bad thing to do, even with the excuse of the brooding storm . . .

No one had heard her. The men in the ward were, with one exception, in that state of silent apathy which passed for sleep on days like this. It was too hot to move so they did not move. They lay with closed eyes and outflung limbs, untidily asprawl, waiting for the wind to rise and fling itself upon the island, waiting for the thunder to echo from one to another of the jagged, far-off mountain peaks which hemmed them in, waiting for the rain. Only then would it be cool, only then could they expect relief.

The single exception—the young American pilot whose jet had crashed into the harbor so dramatically that morning—wasn't asleep. He had been very badly burnt about the head and chest and little more of him could be seen, beneath the all-enveloping compass of his dressings, than his mouth and a pair of lashless blue eyes which held an angry, puzzled look as Olivia Lessing

rose and crossed the ward to his side.

He couldn't speak and it was doubtful if he could hear, so she smiled at him, nodding her head to the mute question in his eyes. He had been given his full quota of painkilling drugs on his return from the theatre: there was little she could do for him, save check the flow of plasma in the transfusion apparatus suspended above his bed and adjust his pillows, and the Bunyan bag in which his right leg was encased, so that he might change his position.

His lips moved, and, although no sound came from them, Olivia guessed that he was attempting to thank her for these small attentions and she smiled at him again, experiencing the familiar, almost maternal tenderness she always felt for those of her patients who were seriously ill.

"Sleep," she said, mouthing the word carefully in the hope that he might see and understand what she was trying to tell him. "You're . . . all . . . right. You're . . . going to . . . get well."

The blue eyes stared back at her blankly and she tried once more, miming her meaning and letting her head sink on to her outstretched hands, closing her own eyes and willing him to understand. He seemed to grasp her meaning at last, for a flicker of comprehension lit his eyes and he managed to emit a small sound which might or might not have been "okay."

Olivia waited, and after a while saw his eyelids droop. Poor boy, she thought, looking down at him pityingly. They didn't yet know his name. He had been taken out of the water, his uniform and the heavy flying suit he had worn over it reduced to a few scraps of charred cloth which had offered no clue to his identity. He had been put into her ward, which was an other ranks' ward, to facilitate nursing because they were understaffed, but he was probably an officer, most American pilots were. She supposed that Major Carter had been in touch with

the American Air Force base by this time: no doubt they would be able to tell him which of their pilots had failed to return and thus give a name to this newest of her patients.

They would need a name for him. He was too badly injured to be moved, even though the American base on neighboring Stewart Island was less than a hundred miles away. A hundred miles across the Pacific was nothing in these days of jet aircraft and rocket missiles. The young pilot himself had covered the intervening distance at a speed approaching that of sound, to appear out of the blue, screaming down to what had seemed certain destruction, his aircraft a flaming torch which had lit the dawn sky in brief and terrible splendor.

Olivia shuddered. She had witnessed the crash from the windows of her sleeping quarters and knew that a miracle had saved the blue-eyed young American—a miracle brought about by the swift action of Commander Falconer, who had been out in his launch on some providential naval manoeuvre which had enabled him to reach the pilot in time.

There was a stir at the end of the ward, heralded by the rattle of teacups, and Olivia turned thankfully in the direction of the sound. Two of the orderlies, their faces shining with perspiration, pushed a trolley into the ward and began to serve tea. The British and Australian patients, as if this were a signal for which they had all been waiting, roused themselves instantly and sat up, yawning and holding out eager hands for the steaming mugs, all trace of apathy gone. It was a phenomenon which, even after eleven months, Olivia still found surprising, this sudden return to life of the whole ward the moment the tea trolley appeared.

And yet, she realized, smiling as she returned to her table and the tray which had been placed there for her, she herself was no exception to the general rule. The mere thought of a cup of tea



was enough to banish her depression, give her fresh heart.

She was even prepared, when the wire-mesh doors of the ward opened again to disclose the tall form and unmistakable fair hair of Commander Hugh Falconer, to greet him with her accustomed friendly warmth. But his face fell at the sight of her and she knew that he had come, not to see her but in the hope that Jane Grant would be on duty. She stiffened.

There had been a time, not so far distant, when his visits had been on her account, but—Olivia bit her lip, feeling it tremble—there had been nothing serious between them. They had simply been good friends, until Jane Grant's arrival. After that everything had changed. Hugh Falconer had had no eyes for anyone but Jane, and Jane, young and lovely and fresh out from England, with all the men at her feet, scarcely knew that he existed. She hadn't intentionally taken Olivia's beau, she wasn't aware of having done so, but it had happened just the same.

Hugh still came as frequently to the hospital but now he made no secret of the fact that he came to see Jane, and this, as much as the climate of Miljura, was responsible, Olivia knew, for her disillusionment and for her bitter, nostalgic longing to return to her native Yorkshire. She had another seven months of her tour of duty to serve and they hung like seven millstones about her neck. Because she was twenty-eight and Jane, who had so many other advantages, was four years younger: because, try as she would, she couldn't hate Jane and . . . because she had been deeply in love with Hugh Falconer.

But at least he hadn't known it. She had never given herself away, either to him or to Jane. . . .

Olivia rose, motioning to her tray. "Hello, Hugh," she said, and even to her own ears her voice sounded edgy and unnatural. "Jane hasn't come on yet. Would you like a cup of tea? There's plenty."

“Thanks.” Hugh smiled back at her mechanically and a faint flush crept up under the deep tan of his cheeks. “I wasn’t looking for Jane, as it happens—I came to inquire for my Yank. I gather from the major that he’s likely to survive. Frankly he didn’t look in any shape to go anywhere but heaven this morning when we fished him out of the water. Is that him over there with all the bandages?”

Olivia inclined her head. “Yes, that’s him. He’s not what I should call in good shape now, but he’s not going to die. It was lucky for him that you were so close to where he came down.”

“We were a bit too darned close! At one stage, I can tell you, we were flat out trying to avoid him. I thought he was going to do a Jap Kamikaze on us.” Hugh Falconer shrugged ruefully. Olivia noticed that his right hand and wrist were bandaged and guessed that he must have sustained some injury—a burn, probably—when he had gone to the rescue of the drowning pilot. She knew better than to question him about it: Hugh prided himself on his physical stamina and always became annoyed if she attempted to show him any solicitude. He never admitted to feeling off color and it was seldom that he even complained of the heat. Although perhaps to Jane . . . she caught herself up. She mustn’t be jealous of Jane, mustn’t think of her.

She reached for the pot and poured tea into Jane’s cup, passed it to him, careful to avoid touching his hand as she did so. Hugh took the cup from her with equal care and seated himself in a chair which he drew up to the opposite side of the table. He placed it so that he was facing the ward doors and would see Jane when she came in. He looked, Olivia thought, watching him covertly over the rim of her own cup, very big and virile and attractive, sitting there in his immaculately starched uniform, his long, muscular legs stretched out in front of him, his eyes bright with expectancy and a smile playing about his

lips.

How was it possible, she wondered sadly, that Jane could be indifferent to the fact that he was in love with her? Certainly she seemed to be, although Hugh made it so painfully obvious. But then there were so many men for Jane to choose from: all of them, even the married ones, sought Jane's company and vied with each other for her smiles. She was, of course, a girl who would have stood out in any company, but here she had no rivals. The garrison of Miljura was entirely male, apart from two senior officers' wives and the nursing staff of the hospital, which consisted of herself and Jane, Matron and old Sister Archer who . . .

"I hear," Hugh said, breaking into her thoughts and turning to look at her, "that there's something of a mystery as to where our Yank came from. I suppose he hasn't talked to you?"

Olivia shook her head. "No, he can't, he's only semiconscious. But I took it for granted that he came from Stewart Island. Hasn't Major Carter contacted them yet?"

"Yes, he did, and they say he's not one of theirs. They've accounted for all their aircraft, no one's gone missing, but they're making a check. They asked for particulars of the aircraft, which I tried to supply. But I didn't really get much of a look at him as he came down this morning, I was too busy trying to keep out of his way, and he was a mass of flames, in any case, when I first caught sight of him. But—it was only a sort of instinctive impression, you understand—I didn't think it was a shore-based aircraft——" He listed the types normally in use in the shore-based American squadrons, ticking off each on the fingers of one hand. "We see those coming over from Stewart every day."

"Yes." Olivia cast her mind back, remembering, her brows coming together in a little frown.

She had just started to dress when she heard the high-pitched whine of a jet engine overhead. As Hugh had said, the jets from Stewart Island came over every day, but this one had sounded very close and unusually low and there had been something odd about the engine note which had sent her rushing fearfully to the window. She had half-expected it to crash, long before she had glimpsed it, hadn't been surprised, when it flashed into her line of vision, to see that it was already on fire.

She sighed, reliving the moment in all its horror, seeing again in memory the spinning plane with its trail of vivid, leaping flames. It had disintegrated as it fell, parts of it hitting the water, whilst other parts, one of them a wing, had floated down a second or so afterwards to fall some distance away. And, although she had seen the launch go out, she hadn't believed that it would find a living man amongst the pitiful wreckage. Yet it had and the man lay, encased in bandages, in her own ward, a man who was still without a name.

She glanced at Hugh uncertainly. "But if the aircraft wasn't shore-based and didn't come from Stewart, where could it have come from? A carrier?"

"We're checking that possibility. And we've been ferreting about for wreckage in the harbor too. I think . . ." He broke off, rising to his feet, suddenly awkward as a schoolboy, and it didn't need this or his swiftly indrawn breath to tell Olivia that Jane Grant had come, belatedly, to relieve her.

Jane was smiling as she crossed the ward to join them. In spite of the sultry oppressiveness of the evening, she looked as always, cool and lovely, her dark hair neatly braided beneath her beautifully laundered cap, her uniform band-box fresh. Her manner was as brisk and alert as her step, her smile serene, her voice eager and friendly, with an underlying note of laughter in it which elicited an immediate response.

She paused once or twice to speak to the patients as she passed their beds, and smiles followed her down the long ward. It was always like this when Jane came on to the ward: her happiness, her gaiety were infectious, the men, however ill they were, roused themselves and were the better for her coming.

She was a good nurse, Olivia was the first to concede. In a hospital of this size, isolated and thrown very much on its own resources, formality was cut to a minimum and military red tape scarcely existed but, for all Jane's easy *good* nature, there was no lack of discipline when the ward was in her charge. The men admired and respected her and took no liberties: they might joke with her but they called her "Sister" punctiliously and the orderlies rushed to serve her, anxious to spare her work. She looked fragile, but it was a deceptive impression created by the natural pallor of her skin and by the fact that she was slim and small. Olivia, who had seen frequent examples of her incredible reserves of strength, frankly envied Jane's stamina and her resistance to the heat. Her own could not compare with them.

Jane said, when she reached the table: "I'm sorry I'm late, Olive. The mail's in and I was so busy reading mine I completely forgot about the time, but I'll make it up, I promise. Incidentally there's quite a bundle for you, I put them in your room." She smiled briefly at Hugh. "Hello, Commander! Are you visiting the sick or"—her glance took in his bandaged hand and she asked, with a casualness which Olivia found faintly shocking—"are you in need of our services yourself? What have you done to your hand?"

"That? Oh, nothing, it's all right. Actually I came up to inquire for the pilot who crashed this morning."

"Did you?" Jane's eyes left his face and returned to Olivia's. "How is he?" She had been off duty in the morning and hadn't

yet seen their new patient. Olivia gave her a low-voiced account of the extent and nature of the American's injuries and passed her his chart.

"Major Carter saw him an hour ago. He wants the plasma continued and . . ." she went into details and Jane nodded her understanding. The instructions were routine: he would be seen again when the orderly officer made his evening round. There were no other special instructions to be passed on which weren't covered by the report book, so Olivia prepared to go off duty.

Normally she would have stayed to exchange news of home with Jane, who always enjoyed talking about her mail when she received it, but now, with Hugh there, Olivia didn't want to stay. It hurt her like a physical pain to see Hugh and Jane together. She hated to witness Hugh's discomfiture, his humiliation, the bewildered, doglike misery in his eyes when Jane treated him casually. It was agonizing enough, heaven knew, to have lost him herself, but it was a thousand times worse to have to stand helplessly by whilst he suffered, on Jane's account, a torment similar to her own.

Olivia picked up her discarded fountain pen, clipped it in place in her pocket, aware that her hand wasn't steady. Jane's attitude to Hugh both puzzled and angered her and there were times when it strained friendship to its limit, times when she thought that she would have minded less had Jane fallen frankly and openly in love with him. At least if she had, Olivia would have understood and forgiven her: she would have been able to feel that Hugh was happy and have seen her own loss in the light of a noble sacrifice. As things were, neither she nor Hugh was happy and they had abandoned all but the superficial pretence of their old intimacy, which—in the days before Jane had come to Miljura—they had both enjoyed.

And as for Jane . . . Olivia felt the familiar ache in her throat as she glanced at her colleague's lovely, untroubled face. She liked Jane, she couldn't help it, but she hadn't yet come near to understanding her. Jane was all things to all men, she was popular with everyone but she had no real intimates, there was no one to whom she really talked and—in spite of all her chances—she had shown no preference for any of the men who offered themselves so eagerly to her notice. She was friendly and pleasant but indifferent to them all, apparently heart-whole and anxious to remain so. Which made her completely unnatural and deeply, infuriatingly puzzling . . . which made her . . . Jane.

Jane said, touching her arm in the gentle, affectionate way she had: “Olive dear, you look awfully tired. I suppose it's the storm?”

Olivia didn't withdraw her arm. “I suppose it is,” she agreed tonelessly, “this beastly oppressive weather always gives me a shocking headache, I'm afraid. But once it breaks, it'll be cooler and I'll be all right. I'll have a sleep before dinner, I think.”

“Do—if you have time after wading through all your letters! I'll look in before I go to dinner and if you're asleep I'll get Corporal Wace to put yours on a tray for you and bring it to you in bed.” She spoke soothingly, almost as if to a child, Olivia thought, but strangely, didn't resent it. The offer was kindly meant, Jane's concern genuine and unselfish.

Jane looked at her watch. Tea was over, the orderlies collecting the cups, and soon it would be time for the evening ritual of sponging and bed-making. She said, still addressing Olivia and apparently unaware of Hugh's presence: “Well, I have to get on, I suppose. But I think I'll hold up the sponges until after the mail's been delivered. It shouldn't be long now, they were sorting it out when I came in. Aren't you interested in mail,

Commander Falconer?”

Hugh reddened. “Not particularly, but I’ll have to be on my way too, I suppose.” He hated Jane’s insistence on the formal mode of address, Olivia knew, but she never varied it, never appeared to notice his diffident attempts to put himself on Christian name terms with her. He, too, glanced at his watch, but it was a reflex action; she didn’t think his mind consciously registered what he saw, it was wholly concentrated on Jane. “I—er—I’m afraid I drank your tea?”

Jane’s lips twitched. She almost laughed at him but made an effort to control her levity and, after a slight hesitation, managed gravely: “I expect Olivia encouraged you.”

“She did.” Hugh didn’t smile, Olivia noticed, and that hurt too. There was no need to make a thing about the tea, it was so easy to get more and Jane would probably prefer to have hers freshly-made, in any case.

Jane said, without rancour: “Olivia’s very free with my tea—aren’t you, Olive dear? But not to worry, I see the invaluable Private Garrett is bringing me a tray all to myself, so I’ll be able to wallow in it while the men are reading their mail.” She sat down, unclipped her pen and pulled the report book towards her. It was the signal for dismissal, but Hugh Falconer, still with the air of a gauche schoolboy, resumed his own seat.

“I wonder,” he began, “if you’d have a look at my hand. It’s nothing really but . . .” Olivia left them together, her brief “See you later” acknowledged only by Jane. Hugh was busy unwinding his bandage and did not notice her going.

The storm still hadn’t broken as she crossed the courtyard to her own quarters, but thunder rumbled threateningly in the distant hills, and above the squat, singlestoried hospital buildings, the clouds hung, black and ominous, pregnant with the violence that was to come. Olivia shivered and wished,



wearily, that it would rain. . . .

James Raeburn saw her crossing the compound and raised an imperious hand. She halted obediently and waited for him to join her.

James—or to give him his full military title, Captain James Macallister Raeburn, R.A.M.C.—was a tall, gaunt, quiet-voiced Scotsman and second in command of the hospital. A clever and highly qualified surgeon, he was in official charge of the surgical wards, but his deep and abiding passion, which exceeded even his love of surgery, was for bacteriology and pathology. He had equipped a laboratory for himself and spent all his spare time and the greater part of his nights engaged in an ambitious and entirely self-imposed research project, covering an investigation into various tropical diseases and infections of the blood.

He had a trained laboratory assistant, a middle-aged Scot like himself, Sergeant Farquhar, but neither of them could type, and he had co-opted Olivia's services as secretary a long time ago, and now regarded her as his property whenever she was off duty. Olivia didn't mind, she liked James Raeburn and had become as interested in his research as he was himself—or almost so—and, since Hugh's defection had left her with time on her hands, she welcomed the distraction of working on the long and complex reports he was writing for posterity.

This evening, she was tired and drained of energy by the airless heat and had been thinking longingly of her bed and the mail that was awaiting her in her room, but when James Raeburn said eagerly: "Olivia my dear, can you spare me half an hour?" she hadn't the heart to refuse. James' half-hours were apt to mean a great deal longer than that, for he was an enthusiast and drove his assistants hard, but his gratitude was sincere and, Olivia found oddly touching, his work—if he ever

published it—likely to be of considerable value to medical science.

He could have gone a long way in his profession as a civilian but he preferred the Army, and, lacking in ambition and the administrative qualities called for in higher ranks, he remained a captain and was content. He was, Olivia reflected, glancing at him affectionately as he fell into step beside her, one of the few really happy people she knew and the only man of any rank who had ever asked for and been granted an extension of his tour in Miljura. He had now spent close on three years on the island and actively resented any suggestions that he might wish to go home, except for retirement. He spent his leaves in Australia, working in the laboratory of a Sydney bacteriologist who was a friend of his, and returned to his own, a giant refreshed, as soon as he decently could.

The typewriter was out, on his desk, when they entered the laboratory, a sheaf of scrawled reports beside it, and Olivia sat down without further ado and started to sort them out.

James Raeburn's writing was spidery and almost illegible, but practice had taught her to decipher it: Sergeant Farquhar, on the other hand, wrote a beautiful copperplate script and kept his reports with meticulous neatness, but he didn't do many and this evening was no exception. Olivia sighed, dealt with his first and then attacked the others. Her head was throbbing and the scrawled letters danced in crazy circles in front of her eyes, but at least it kept her from thinking about Hugh and Jane, so perhaps, after all, it was an ill wind . . . she didn't want to think about Hugh Falconer this evening.

James, as he always did, poured her a drink from his private store of iced barley water, placed a battered tin of cigarettes at her elbow with the injunction to help herself and then, his duties as host completed, he returned to his microscope, from