RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

A Sixpenny Christmas

Katie Flynn

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About the Book

As the worst storm of the century sweeps through the mountains of Snowdonia and across the Mersey, torrential rain, thunder and lightning make a dramatic backdrop for two women, Molly and Ellen, who are giving birth to girls in a Liverpool Maternity Hospital.

Molly and Rhys Roberts farm sheep in Snowdonia and Ellen is married to a docker, Sam O'Mara, but despite their different backgrounds the two young women become firm friends, though Molly has a secret she can share with no one.

But despite promises Ellen's husband continues to be violent, so she throws him out and years later, when Molly is taken to hospital after an accident, Ellen and her daughter Lana are free to help out.They approach this new life with enthusiasm, unaware that they are being watched, but on the very day of Molly's release from hospital there is another terrible thunderstorm and the hidden watcher makes his move at last…

About the Author

Katie Flynn has lived for many years in the north-west. A compulsive writer, she started with short stories and articles and many of her early stories were broadcast on Radio Merseyside. She decided to write her Liverpool series after hearing the reminiscences of family members about life in the city in the early years of the twentieth century. For many years she has had to cope with ME, but has continued to write. She also writes as Judith Saxton.

Also by Katie Flynn

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This Royal Breed
The Blue and Distant Hills
Someone Special

A Sixpenny Christmas

Katie Flynn

arrow books

For Jean and Sam Flavell, good friends whose holiday home enjoys a wonderful view of Snowdonia.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Wyn Williams of Penrhyn Farm on Anglesey for checking, and in some cases unscrambling, information about sheep farming both in mountain and lowland country. I've tried very hard to follow his advice and get it right but when I have failed to do so, it is my fault and not Wyn's.

For anyone who is interested in the joys and sorrows of life in the mountains of Snowdonia, Thomas Firbank's brilliant book, *I Bought a Mountain*, is a must and I am most grateful for the information I found in it.

Dear Reader,

How does one choose a title? I thought it might interest you to know how I arrived at *A Sixpenny Christmas*.

Many years ago I was the youngest typist in a large typing pool attached to a drawing office in the Highways Department. I loved the work and my colleagues, but became rather anxious as Christmas approached since I was paid a salary so tiny that it barely covered my bus fare, lunches and other small expenses; how was I to buy presents not only for my family but also for my many friends in the department?

Then I was told about the sixpenny Christmas tub, and in later years, as I went from job to job, I realised that most of the big companies for whom I worked had one thing in common (apart from me that is!); they all ran a Christmas tub, which enabled everyone to receive a present without breaking the bank.

The system was simple; all us girls bought one present which, in the old days, was not supposed to exceed sixpence, though by the time I started work the sum had risen to half a crown. These were then wrapped and popped into the Christmas tub, and on Christmas Eve each girl rummaged around in the sixpenny tub, as we still called it in the Highways Department, and fished out a gift.

Of course there were snags. Some gifts appeared year after year, only in different wrapping paper, but mostly we girls stuck to the rules. Scented soap, small manicure sets, a tiny bottle of nail polish, even a new paperback book were all put in the Christmas tub, so when I was searching for a title for this book, and realised that Molly, before her marriage, had worked in a big typing pool, I remembered the sixpenny Christmas, because such a title tells the reader a lot in three words. In those days salaries for young girls were barely above subsistence level; for most of us it was a constant battle to keep our heads above water. A dinner in the canteen cost one and six; we were paid monthly so we had one dinner at the end of each month, otherwise it was four pennorth of chips, or one of the huge Jaffa oranges, which a market trader would sell you for sixpence. So the Christmas presents which we fished out of the tub were needed as well as eagerly anticipated.

Even when Molly and Rhys are living on their farm in the heart of Snowdonia, Christmas presents, though gratefully received, tended to be small and inexpensive. The bicycle for which Molly’s son longs was just an impossible dream.

So that’s how I got the title for this book!

All best wishes.

Katie Flynn

Chapter One

RHYS ROBERTS, LYING in his lonely bed, heard the storm approaching, but thought little of it; storms in Snowdonia at this time of year were not uncommon, especially amidst the high peaks. They had enjoyed a mild but windy autumn at Cefn Farm, a cold but snow-free November, and now, with December well advanced and Christmas only a matter of days away, the muttering of distant thunder, and the snow – or hail – which he could hear tapping against the window pane, should have been expected.

Looking at the sky as he made his way up the stairs, Rhys had decided to put extra blankets on the bed, and now he reminded himself how much warmer he would have been had his dear Molly been beside him. She had been away for only three days but already the time seemed endless. He knew that as soon as the hospital had something to report they would notify him by telephoning the village post office; so far he had visited the post office three times every day, but without success. The maternity hospital was always busy but the staff were kind and realised that he was worried, and with good reason. Molly had had a bad time with their first child, little Chris, who lay in his bed in the slip of a room close by, slumbering peacefully, Rhys hoped. When Molly had felt her first pains she had been at Cefn Farm, assuring Rhys that he was not to worry, that she and the nurse would soon have the child born. However, on that first occasion she had been in labour for three days and nights, for Chris's had been what they called a cross-birth, and when it was discovered that she was expecting again Dr Llewellyn had advised that she should go to a proper

maternity unit, with staff who could call on all the most modern equipment should Molly need help with the birthing of her second child.

Rhys put out a strong brown hand and felt under Molly's pillow for the little wisp of nylon which had been her trousseau nightie. The touch of it comforted him, made him remember their first meeting. He had been a sergeant in the RAF, she a Waaf, secretary to a wing commander on a bomber station not far from Lincoln. They had met at a dance, fallen in love at first sight, and married a month later. Their wedding had been typical of the times; austerity and all that, Rhys thought now, cuddling the nightie. No wonderful white dress, no piles of presents, no honeymoon in Paris, or anywhere else; just two days in a bed and breakfast in the city and then back to work. They had managed to rent two rooms above a cycle shop near the Saracen's Head, the public house most popular with the air crew stationed nearby, where they were idyllically happy until the war ended.

When Rhys and Molly were demobbed, things had moved fast. Rhys's parents had both died a few years previously, leaving everything they possessed to their only son, and Molly had inherited her grandparents' small flat and all their worldly goods, which was not saying a lot. But when they combined their assets they found they had sufficient capital to take out a mortgage on a hill farm, which was the desire of Rhys's heart, and after very little searching they had chanced upon Cefn Farm. It was not large, but it was not expensive, either, and the land was in good heart, the sheep fat with the good mountain grass, and the owners, both in their eighties, eager to give the young couple all the help and advice possible.

It was summer when they took possession and very soon they realised that a baby was on the way, so that their cup of happiness seemed full to overflowing. Rhys once remarked that Molly never stopped smiling, and this, they

both knew, was because they were so happy. Hard work, small returns and the fear that they might make mistakes were all offset by the clean mountain air, the sweet silence after years of noise, and their very real affection for their livestock, their horses and their prick-eared, tongue-lolling Border collies, without whom they would, Rhys knew, have made many bad mistakes.

But it had been a hard labour, and this time Rhys had agreed with the doctor that his wife would be better in a proper maternity hospital, so a couple of days before the expected birth Molly had gone off to Liverpool, promising Rhys that she would ring the post office as soon as she had news to impart. She had taken with her a couple of sensible cotton nightgowns, some of Chris's old baby clothes and a couple of farming magazines, and when Rhys had found her flimsy honeymoon nightie when tidying their room he had taken it to bed with him, enjoying the faint flowery smell of the talcum and soap she used, finding it a comfort.

The storm was getting closer, and a good deal louder. Rhys half sat up, wondering whether he should go to Chris, tell him that the thunder posed no threat. But before he had done more than swing his legs out of bed there was a crack of thunder so intense that it sounded like a bomb exploding, and his little son appeared in the doorway, crying for his mummy.

Immediately, Rhys held out his arms and the little boy struggled into them, his own small arms curling round his father's neck, his curly head butting Rhys beneath the chin. 'I'm frighted; I shake,' he muttered. 'Where's Mummy? I want Mummy!'

You aren't the only one, Rhys thought, cuddling his son's small body and dropping a kiss on the child's damp curls. 'Don't you remember, old lad? Mummy's gone to Liverpool to bring you home a little brother . . . or sister,' he said, aware that Molly wanted a daughter though he would have preferred another son. Farmers need sons as fish need

water and Rhys was no exception. However, Chris was only a baby still, probably didn't know what a sister was, for the farm was remote and though Molly took him into the village a couple of times a month he was too young to play with other children or indeed to pay them any attention. He likes animals better than people, same as I did when I was a kid, Rhys told himself. The way he behaves when Molly is busy, staggering round after the sheepdogs as though he were a small pup himself, is enough to make a cat laugh. He reminds me of Mowgli, Rhys thought, remembering the boy who was brought up by wolves in Kipling's *Jungle Book*.

Another tremendous crash of thunder brought with it a gust of wind so strong that the curtains were dashed to one side. As the vivid lightning flashes lit up the room Rhys clutched the baby involuntarily, expecting that Chris would begin to cry once more, but this time Chris seemed rather more interested than afraid. He wriggled out of his father's arms and ran over to the window. 'Where doggies?' he asked anxiously. 'What made the big bang? Train? Car? Tractor?'

Rhys hurried across to draw back the curtains so that he could see what was happening in the yard outside, and saw with real dismay that the corrugated iron roof on the pigsty was flapping up and down in a manner that boded ill for the occupants. Rhys hesitated. He dared not leave the baby whilst he ran into the yard and tried to secure the roof, but he could not take the child out with him, for the storm, far from easing, seemed to get wilder with every moment and the sleet and the cold were intense. He was fond of the pigs but they would simply have to take their chance, along with the rest of the stock, most of which was out on the hillside. He and Chris had better simply sit in the kitchen and wait for the storm to pass over.

He scooped up his son and went down to the kitchen, sat in one of the well-cushioned and comfortable basket chairs and watched quite enviously as Chris's thumb slid into his

mouth and his eyelids drooped. Wish I could sleep, he thought, but the noise of the storm alone would have kept him awake even had he not been worrying over Molly.

The roof of the pigsty, which had been crashing at regular intervals, was suddenly silent. Rhys heard what he thought was a frightened grunt, but then the thunder roared again and through the closed window he could see the lightning, bright as day as it stabbed to earth. In the lull which followed the last crash, Rhys heard Feather, the mother of his two other sheepdogs, barking outside. He got carefully to his feet, still holding Chris in the crook of his arm, and opened the back door. The dogs tumbled in, wide-eyed, ears a-prick, seeming to say that it was about time someone remembered them. They crowded round Rhys as though anxious for an explanation, but he could only ruffle their heads and soothe them with promises that it would soon be over and everyone would be able to sleep.

But the storm raged on and Rhys began to fear for the trees which protected the cottage and for the hay in its ancient Dutch barn. Then there were the horses in the stable, for though a good deal of his work on the farm involved the ancient tractor, on the steep hillsides horses were essential. They had two, Guinness and Porter, as well as Cherry the pony, and all three were as liable as any other of their kind to take fright at loud unexpected noises or movements. Rhys thanked his stars that he had decided to bring them in tonight, for the stable building was old and solid, built of stone and roofed with shingles.

Thinking of the work he would have to do to repair the storm damage brought Rhys’s mind full circle, back to Molly, who would normally have helped him but now was fighting her own battle – one in which he could no more help her than she could help him in his.

Rhys sighed and looked longingly at the kettle. The fire in the range had been out for days and rather than relighting it he had been heating water, Chris’s food and anything else

which needed cooking on their small Primus stove. Molly, good little wife that she was, had cooked soups, pies and loaves of bread before she had left for the city; Rhys just hoped these would last until she came home again, for his own abilities as a cook were small: he could boil an egg and heat some milk and that was about it. Now he was old enough Molly fed Chris on what they ate themselves. When he was a baby she had pressed his food through a fine wire sieve; Rhys had once eaten a crafty teaspoonful of the mixture and had nearly thrown up. How could good food, when you ate it from your plate, become disgusting pap when pressed through a wire sieve? But Chris had appeared to notice nothing amiss. He was a bright little boy who had walked before he was a year old and now, at two and a half, chattered away to anyone who would listen. Rhys looked fondly down on his sleeping son and wondered whether he should try to put him back in his own small bed, but the warm little body was a comfort and anyway should the child wake again he might feel himself abandoned and begin to wail once more.

Rhys got stealthily to his feet, but did not return to the bedroom. He would lie down on the comfy old-fashioned sofa in the parlour and try to snatch an hour or so of sleep before it was time to get up and begin his daily tasks. Most parlours were rarely used but Molly had furnished theirs with care, saying that she wanted comfort more than a lot of fancy furniture. She liked them to use the parlour on weekday evenings as well as Sundays, and when she was pregnant she had her midday rest on the comfortable sofa. Settling himself with the sleeping child still in his arms, Rhys jumped and swore softly beneath his breath when lightning lit up the room again and a gust of wind blew into the room, presumably from under the kitchen door, wrenching the parlour curtains apart. But by now Rhys was truly sleepy and settled down with his head on one of the beautiful

cushions which Molly had made and stuffed with their own goose feathers.

Lying curled round the baby, he remembered suddenly how Molly hated storms, reminding her as they did of the May blitz which had destroyed half her home town of Liverpool. He told himself that the storm was a local one, caused by the great mountains of Snowdonia, and would not affect his wife in her comfortable bed at the maternity hospital. Smiling, he thought it fortunate that she was not here to be cast into misery and fear by the cracks of thunder and the lightning which either lit up the whole sky or stabbed to earth, causing damage to both buildings and animals. He must remember to tell her about the dreadful storm she had missed, the fearful wind which was even now blowing snow under the kitchen door, and Chris's bravery in the face of all the noise and confusion.

He lay quietly for a little while, telling himself that he should get up off the sofa and pull the curtains closed again, but sleep was too urgent now and soon the storm raged unheard as Rhys and his little son slumbered.

Molly lay on the delivery couch, feeling the beautiful peace that comes after the struggle to give birth. The nurse who had held her hand and encouraged her throughout the whole business came over to her, a green-wrapped bundle in the crook of her arm. 'There you are, Mrs Roberts, your beautiful little girl; want to hold her?'

'Oh, yes please,' Molly said eagerly, holding out her arms, but though the nurse smiled she shook her head.

'She's a fine healthy girl, my dear; she weighed in at eight pounds four ounces, so just you lie back and I'll put her against your shoulder . . .'

Molly was preparing to curl an arm round the baby when there was a tremendous crash, which made both the new mother and the nurse jump convulsively and caused the baby to give an indignant hiccup. The nurse laughed and

began to speak but she had scarcely got more than a couple of words out when the thunder roared again and the night, which had seemed calm, was suddenly calm no longer. Outside, the wind howled and shrieked, the thunder rumbled and cracked and lightning lit up the long windows of the delivery room. Molly was about to say that she would take the baby now when, abruptly, the room was plunged into inky blackness. Molly and the nurse shrieked again and through the long window Molly saw only Stygian blackness: the lightning had caused a massive power cut.

Someone came hurrying across the delivery room, a dark figure which could have been a man or a woman, until more lightning shivered across the sky – sheet lightning this time – and lit the scene with an unearthly violet glow long enough for Molly to see it was a woman; a sister. The newcomer tapped the nurse on the shoulder. 'Mrs Roberts and Baby had best get back to the ward now. A porter is outside with a wheelchair for the mother, who is to go to room eight. You take the baby straight to nursery eight and make sure she's labelled.' She patted Molly's shoulder and probably smiled, though Molly could not see her face. 'The nursery is adjacent to your ward, and for the first couple of days the baby will be brought to you at feeding times.' She addressed the nurse once more. 'See if you can rustle up a cup of . . . oh my God!' The nurse gave a nervous laugh but Molly, who was terrified of lightning, found nothing amusing in Sister's squeak of fright. She could not remember a worse storm, and as another nurse helped her off the delivery couch and into the waiting wheelchair she had hard work to suppress her own fear. She had only caught one glimpse of her baby's small crumpled face, still red with the strain of birth and wet from its recent cleansing, but she thought that the infant was bound to be pretty, for was she not Chris's sister? He had been a delightful baby, despite her protracted labour, and this little one had popped into the world after only half a dozen hours. It had taken baby Chris

a whole week to recover from his experience; this child should be pink and white and beautiful in no time.

Whatever the lightning had done to the electricity supply, it seemed it could not easily be undone. The porter produced a torch, and as he pushed her wheelchair along the corridors he told her that she was fortunate indeed to have given birth before what he guessed was half the city had lost all their electric power. ‘It’ll be chaos tomorrer; perishin’ chaos,’ he said with a sort of ghoulish cheerfulness. ‘As bad as the bleedin’ blitz in ’41, blinkin’ near. Someone’s in the operating theatre right now havin’ what they calls a caesar-een and all the instruments and stuff is down. The lifts is out too, but you’re one of the lucky ones, ’cos rooms seven and eight are on this floor so I shan’t have to try and carry you up the stairs in me strong and manly arms.’

‘Oh, good,’ Molly said faintly. If it isn’t just my luck to get a porter who fancies himself as a comedian, she thought. I know for a fact that this is a single-storey hospital and the upstairs is just administrative offices. But it would not do to say so, of course; the man was only trying to amuse her, and to take her mind off the uncanny darkness through which he was wheeling her and the occasional stabs of brilliant lightning, to say nothing of the thunder which, though it occasionally seemed more distant, only redoubled its force on its return.

The porter swung her through a pair of doors and into a ward, shining his torch ahead of him, and in its light Molly saw another mum, probably just as tired – and as pleased – as she was herself. Then the wheelchair stopped and the porter shouted to the nurse to come over and give a hand, and very soon Molly found herself between the sheets. She realised as she turned her head into the pillow how very tired she was, and would have slept instantly had a voice not addressed her from the adjacent bed.

‘Hey, missus! Did you have a gal or a boy?’ The woman giggled. ‘Wharra Christmas present, eh? Bet your ole feller’s over the perishin’ moon!’

Molly smiled at all she could see of the other woman, which was the pale disc of her face. ‘You’re right there! A sixpenny Christmas we told each other this one ’ud be, ’cos money’s scarce. But my little girl is worth a lot more than that to me!’

Her companion looked puzzled. ‘A sixpenny Christmas? I ain’t never heard of that before,’ she remarked. ‘What does it mean, eh?’

Molly laughed. ‘It’s plain you never served in the forces,’ she said. ‘I was in the WAAF and there were more than a dozen girls in my hut. If we’d had to exchange gifts with all our friends we’d have been broke for a twelvemonth. Instead, each girl bought something worth no more than sixpence, wrapped it, and put it in a big box, and on Christmas morning everyone took a parcel from the box. They were only little things, but somehow just getting a present started the day off well, even if it was only sixpennyworth of chewing gum, or a length of hair ribbon. See?’

The other woman nodded vigorously. ‘Wharra grand idea. Well, it looks like you won’t be the only one havin’ a sixpenny Christmas this year. But what does that matter? We’ve both got daughters. I allus wanted a daughter; eh, come to that I allus wanted a baby so I s’pose it didn’t much matter if it were a boy or a girl. I’m gonna call mine suffin’ real fancy – what’s you gonna call yours? Who’s you, by the way? I’m Ellen O’Mara.’

‘I’m Molly Roberts,’ Molly said wearily. Trust me to get landed with someone who wants to talk when I’m so dreadfully tired, she thought. But she could hear the excitement in the other woman’s voice and answered patiently. ‘I’ll – I’ll think about a name tomorrow.’ And with

that, despite the dark, and the noise of the storm, she fell at last into a deep sleep.

Ellen had been prepared for a long and arduous labour, for it is no small thing to have your first child when you are past the age of forty. Her mother had warned her that she would likely have a hard time, and so had various aunts and cousins, but Ellen had just smiled happily and told them that to have a baby of her own would be worth a bit of pain.

And then what had happened? She had been wheeled into one of the delivery rooms at just about the moment when the storm had come roaring down from the mountains of Wales, charged across the Mersey, and descended upon Liverpool. Ellen was not afraid of much, but she had never come to terms with thunderstorms. Her grandmother had once scared the life out of her with a story about her own father, who had been a farm labourer and had been struck by lightning as he ran for shelter from the heavy rain. ‘It did suffin’ to his poor brain,’ her grandmother had said impressively. ‘He were never the same again, weren’t my poor old dad.’

So naturally enough as soon as the thunder began to rumble Ellen’s thoughts, which had been upon the task in hand – delivery of her first child – wandered out of the hospital and into the outside world. She saw in her mind’s eye lightning zigzagging across the river and down on to the docks where her husband worked, though obviously he wouldn’t be there at this time of night. He ought to be longing for news, striding up and down the waiting room like any other expectant father, but knowing him as she did Ellen suspected that he would be in a pub somewhere, never giving her a thought.

Sam was not a good husband. He was a docker and quicker with a punch than a kiss; in fact Ellen could not remember him showing her a single mark of affection in all their married life. Of course it was her own fault in a way;

she should have left him years ago, when he first took a liking to using his fists on her, but he earned a good wage and handed over the housekeeping each week, and though he would occasionally take her small earnings to fund his insatiable thirst she could not accuse him of meanness. The fact was, Ellen was lazy, and though she knew Sam had no affection for her she also knew that if she left him he would pay her back for her desertion. Her mother thought her a fool to put up with such treatment, but Ellen and Sam had stayed together – so far.

And now, as the thunder rolled overhead, and lightning lit up the delivery room as brightly as though it were day, Ellen obeyed the nurse's instructions to 'Bear down!' by giving a tremendous push, and to her delighted astonishment the next words she heard were: 'Well done, Mrs O'Mara; you've got a dear little baby girl. My goodness, and you've barely been in here ten minutes! When I've settled you back on the ward I'll go straight to the waiting room and tell your husband that he may visit you for five minutes.'

Ellen reared up on one elbow to gaze at the tiny crumpled red face and dark wet hair of her very own baby. She could feel an enormous smile spreading across her face, but when she spoke her tone was rueful.

'I don't think he'll be in the waiting room, chuck; he's workin', and since he don't know I were took to the delivery room he won't be expectin' the news yet for a while,' she said. 'Oh, nurse, ain't she just perfect?'

The nurse agreed, then called a porter to wheel Ellen back to the ward and carried the baby off to the nursery.

Ellen was back on the ward, far too excited to sleep as the nurse had advised, when the lights went out. But she, who had been terrified of thunderstorms, was too happy to worry about this one. She just wished that someone else on the ward was awake, so that she could tell them all about her beautiful baby girl. But she knew there had been another mother in the delivery suite; perhaps she would be along

presently, having had her baby, and they could compare notes. Ellen lay back on her pillows and snoozed.

Sam emerged from the dockside pub he favoured in a murderous rage and almost indifferent to the storm, although he pulled his coat around him against the driving rain. He had been made a fool of, and if there was one thing he hated it was being made to look a fool. And of all people the one who had turned against him had been Billy Bates, a feller he had thought of as a friend. Sam considered going on to another of the many pubs down by the docks, but his money was running low and his belly felt full to bursting. Besides, after a bout of drinking the previous week he'd been pretty ill and seen strange things, and he had no desire to repeat the experience. Billy Bates had warned him that it might well be the start of something called the DTs and he didn't want none of that. On the other hand he wanted to smash Billy until the grin disappeared from his one-time friend's face. He had been so happy until Billy had opened his big mouth. He had been boasting that he'd got a kid of his own now, someone to look after him in his old age, someone to listen to his tall stories. He had even bought a round of drinks, which had cost a good deal, but he knew that the men would buy him drinks in return; it was the done thing, after all, when the man became a father, to treat him to a glass of whisky or rum. He was preening himself, enjoying the unusual popularity – for his temper and his willingness to use his fists had made most other men wary of him – when bloody Billy Bates had burst the bubble. Billy was a big man, bigger than Sam and a great deal stronger, which was probably why they got on. But now Billy raised gingery eyebrows. 'You've not said, me ol' pal, so before I wet this baby's head, wharrisit?'

Sam had not understood at first. 'Wharrisit? It's a perishin' baby, din't you hear wharr I said?' he demanded truculently. 'Me and the missus, old Ellen O'Mara, have done the trick at

last and we gorra baby.' He looked defiantly around the bar and saw that a great many people were grinning, though when their eyes met his the grins were wiped off their faces and they turned away.

If only bloody Billy Bates had kept his big mouth shut all might yet have been well, especially as Billy was now the only one still grinning, but Billy was three parts drunk and clearly could not resist. He slung a heavy arm around Sam's shoulders and shook him. 'Is it a boy or a girl, you great fool?' he said. 'Is it a Sammy or a Sally? I don't go wettin' no baby's head till I know what's what.'

Irritated, Sam shook himself free of his pal's grip. 'How the devil do I know?' he enquired irritably. 'It'll be one or t'other; what's it matter?'

Billy started it, the swine. A slow grin spread across his ugly face and then a chuckle escaped from his lips, and in half a minute or less the whole pub was convulsed with mirth. Billy turned to the barman, who was chortling even though he probably had no idea what was funny. 'Sam's wife is in 'ospital, havin' a baby, and he wants us to wet the kid's head before he even knows if it's a boy or a girl,' he said. 'Come to that, with a dad like Sam it might turn out to be a perishin' donkey!'

Sam looked around the pub and there wasn't a single man without a grin on his face. Men who usually agreed with everything Sam said, laughed at his jokes, never contradicted him, were laughing like hyenas, and Billy Bates who was supposed to be his pal, his bezzie in fact, was laughing loudest of all. He balled his left hand into a fist and smacked it into the palm of his right. If Billy Bates hadn't been so bloody enormous he would have lain in wait for him, and used his docker's hook or a cudgel or some other weapon to teach him not to have such a smart mouth, but Billy was quite capable of holding his own against Sam. There were other men in the pub, of course, smaller men, but they would make their way home in groups, knowing

how Sam always took his anger out on someone smaller than himself, and bloody Ellen was tucked away in the maternity hospital with nurses and doctors on every side. Now that he came to think of it, it was all Ellen's fault really. He hadn't wanted a baby – more expense, more irritation – but Ellen had simply told him that the kid was on the way, so what choice did he have? He played with the idea of going up to the hospital; if she'd not had the kid by now he'd teach the perishin' lot of them a thing or two. But then he remembered that Ellen had bought a bottle of rum, his favourite tipple, so that they could drink the child's health; she had dared him to so much as touch it until the baby was born.

Making his way back towards Dryden Street, Sam decided that by now he must be a father. He would go home, take a glass of rum mixed with hot water, get out of his soaking clothes and go to bed. Time enough to visit the hospital the following day. He quickened his pace.

Florence Lana Manners heard the storm coming as she was finishing an eight-hour shift as ward maid at the maternity hospital. Despite her rather imposing name, Flossy was skinny and underfed, the youngest of three children and the only girl. Though it seemed strange to Flossy, both her parents favoured the boys and regarded her as someone else to wait upon their strong, healthy and exceedingly selfish sons.

Flossy, just fifteen, was in her first job and absolutely adored it. Miss Raines, whose job it was to supervise all the cleaning staff, porters and ambulance attendants – in fact everyone bar the actual medical staff – was delighted with Flossy's work, although she probably never noticed that Flossy came in early and left late in order to ensure that ward eight and the adjacent nursery, which were her special preserves, were almost unnaturally clean and tidy. The girl was popular with the mothers because she was always

ready to run an errand or fetch a baby for a woman too tired – or too lazy – to get out of bed, and executed many small commissions for both patients and staff. When a mother was ready to leave the ward Flossy would trot down the road to the nearest shop and buy a little box of chocolates, if the mother in question still had any sweet coupons, or a box of biscuits or some other little luxury such as scented soap if coupons were not forthcoming. The gift would then be handed graciously to a favourite nurse, or ‘to Sister, for the staff’.

But Flossy didn’t mind. She adored the babies and, even though she knew she should not do so, hurried to the nursery as soon as she heard a baby wail, whipping it out of its cot, cradling it in her arms and kissing the petal-soft cheek until, soothed, it slept once more.

If it had been possible, Flossy would have remained at the hospital for twenty-four hours at a stretch, for here she knew she was appreciated, regarded as a worthwhile member of the nursing team, though of course she had no qualifications. Her brothers, Hubert and Horace, sneered at her, called her a skivvy, but objected when she was not there to dance attendance upon them. Both boys followed the example set by their parents. They were always quicker with a cuff than a word of encouragement, so Flossy could not love either of them, and the more she was appreciated at the hospital the more she resented the treatment which was meted out to her at home. Tonight she had signed off and gone to the cloakroom to get her coat when she heard the first rumblings of thunder. She paused, a hand reaching up to the peg. Her coat was thin and much patched, and she doubted it would afford much protection in such rough weather. Nevertheless, she took the garment off its peg and went reluctantly towards the exit, where she stepped through the revolving doors and was decanted on to the pavement just as a terrible crack of thunder and a stab of lightning pinned her to the spot, too shocked and terrified to

move. A passer-by told her to get back into the hospital unless she wanted to risk being lightning-struck, and Flossy grinned at the man, only too glad to obey, and bolted back into the hospital almost happily. The nurse on the big reception desk smiled at her.

'You go back into the staffroom, Flossy, and wait for the storm to ease,' she advised kindly. 'Did you count the seconds between the thunder and the lightning? I reckon the storm's pretty well overhead now and will move off any minute.'

Flossy muttered something and fled to the staffroom, but it was just her luck that the probationer nurse who most disliked her was ensconced in the only comfortable chair. She stared accusingly at Flossy and dropped a hand negligently over the arm of the chair. Flossy knew the older girl had been smoking, knew that it was forbidden to do so in any part of the hospital, but would not have dreamed of telling tales, not even on someone whom she knew to be her enemy. Instead, she backed out, closing the door softly, just as another tremendous crash was closely followed by a sort of sizzling sound and every light went out.

Flossy found herself running towards ward eight and its adjacent nursery, without any real intention of going there. She had always hated storms, feared both thunder and lightning, for when she had been quite a little girl, no more than four or five, her brother Horace had brought a young lady into their house, announcing that he was giving her shelter from the storm which was raging outside, and had thrust his little sister out into the yard, telling her to take shelter in the privy if it came on to rain. Ever since then Flossy had been terrified of storms, and now in the pitch blackness she fairly flew along to ward eight. Other people were also hurrying along the corridors. Some had torches, while those who had not relied on what little light came through the windows between the flashes of lightning that lit up everything. Flossy reached ward eight without

difficulty and stopped outside the swing doors, then went through the ones which led to the nursery. Her poor heart was fluttering in her breast like a terrified butterfly, but as soon as she entered the nursery with its dozen small cots and its long windows she began to feel calmer. It seemed strange that no one was in here with the babies, but then she realised that they were not crying, did not seem at all ruffled by the noise, the darkness, or the sudden stabs of brilliance which lit up the room as though it were midday.

Flossy was bending over the nearest cot when she heard footsteps approaching down the corridor and the swish as the swing doors began to open. Her heart, which had started to beat at its normal rate, speeded up again. If it were that wretched probationer she would be in trouble, because once her shift was over she should not really have been in here in the pitch dark. Hastily she dropped to all fours and squiggled beneath the nearest cot. Odd how safe she felt, not only from the storm but also from the spite of the cigarette-smoking probationer. God, she thought, would take special care of twelve brand new babies, would not let lightning enter a room containing so many tiny new souls. And with the thought she heard the doors swish again. Whoever had come in had gone out, having reassured themselves that everything was all right.

With a satisfied sigh, Flossy made herself comfortable. Because of the cold, extra blankets had been hung on the foot of each cot, and she reached up, pulled a couple down, rolled them into a ball and laid her head on the resultant cushion. She realised suddenly that she was very tired indeed. She had had a long and exhausting morning at the beck and call of both her mother and her brother Horace. Then she had come in to the hospital for what they called the afternoon shift, two till ten, and now that fright had eased exhaustion took over. Curling up, she began to enjoy one of her favourite daydreams. One day, when she was old enough, she meant to apply to the hospital to be taken on

as a probationer. Then she would work very hard, pass examinations and become a proper nurse. She would have a room in the nurses' home and a real salary, for even though she knew the nurses were miserably underpaid they got more than a ward maid did. She dreamed of wearing the lovely blue and white striped dress of a qualified nurse, dreamed of never having to go home again to the ramshackle little house in Dryden Street. She dreamed . . . she dreamed . . .

She was almost asleep when she realised two things. The first was that the thunder was rumbling off into the distance, to be replaced by rainfall so heavy that it streamed down the windows like a river, and the second was that someone was entering the nursery; a mother no doubt, come to check on her baby. Or perhaps one of the nursing staff. Flossy's heart began to beat uneasily once more; she knew very well she should not be here at all, let alone curled up under the babies' cots with the babies' blankets as a pillow. She thanked God that the lights had not yet come back on and shrank even further against the wall as the woman – it was definitely one of the mothers, for though there was very little light coming in through the rain-drenched panes Flossy could see a regulation dressing gown as well as a pair of slippers, far too large for the wearer – passed very quietly along the row of cots.

Flossy thought hard. Before she had gone off duty there had been two mothers in the delivery room; doubtless it was one of them, anxious about her new baby. Well I just hope she doesn't go picking it up and setting it wailing, Flossy thought apprehensively. If she does, she'll set the whole lot off and one of the nurses will come in and find me, and if that happens Matron will sack me . . . oh please, please God, don't let the stupid woman wake the dear little babies!

Anxious to see what was happening, she craned her neck and looked sideways. The woman was lifting a baby out of its cot and cradling it in one arm; she was actually singing a

calming tune beneath her breath. Then she bent over another cot, murmuring words Flossy could not quite make out, and plucked up another child, cradling it in her other arm, and with a sudden stab of real fear Flossy remembered the gypsy woman who had come into the ward the previous day and given birth to a puny little thing, all straggly black hair and sticky, half shut eyes. Was the visitor the gypsy? Had she come to look at her odd little baby, to make sure that it was still alive? Flossy remembered that the doctors had had real worries over the state of its health. The mother was old; she had had a great many children before this one and had not taken care of herself . . . the woman turned unexpectedly and Flossy banged her head against the bottom of the cot in her anxiety to get back out of sight. There was not sufficient light to identify the woman, but it might be the gypsy; the thick grey clouds from which the rain was pelting obscured so much light that it was impossible to tell for sure. And even as Flossy withdrew once more, like a snail into its shell, the intruder replaced the babies in their cots and hurried out of the nursery, pushing the swing door so cautiously that it made scarcely a sound.

Flossy waited for what seemed like an age but was probably only a few minutes, then crawled out of her hiding place, put the blankets back where they belonged and stole over to the babies the woman had picked up. Had she put them back in the right cots? Not that it should matter, because as a rule all the babies were labelled. But on this occasion the newborns who had arrived during the power cut had been placed in their cots without ceremony. Suppose, just suppose, that it was the gypsy who had lifted the babies from their cots, meaning to change her sickly baby for a healthy one? Flossy was telling herself that she should go to someone in authority and explain what she had seen when she realised that if she did so she would be in deep trouble. She had no right to enter the nursery when