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The Doctor and Miss Darby
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THE DOCTOR AND MISS
DARBY



AVERY STERN



UNTITLED

The Doctor and Miss Darby

By

Avery Stern

CHAPTER 1



ENGLAND, 1944

The slope appeared out of nowhere, just as Ricky threw her step into the jaunt. She tumbled in silence, though, as she fell, she blamed Townsend for pushing her out of the house. She skidded at last to her knees, landing half submerged in the dark mud, damp and heavy smelling—a good spring mud. Her basket bounced away from her and landed near an explosion of mushrooms, and she smiled. She did not smile much, but it was amusing to have her gathering basket find them like that, to fall so accidentally into the thing she'd been looking for.

In moments like these, she did not think of Luke. He was with her when she sat in the window seat and watched the rain coalesce on the foggy glass. Not the good memories anymore, but just the end, the typed letter from his mother and the horror of a life cut so short. Her own dreams, of marrying for love, cut short too. And now, Townsend the butler telling her she ought to go outside, only because he did not want her to fade away again into the darkness.

The mushrooms seemed to smile back at her, in a splatter

of orange swinging up the side of the hill. She picked a good many of them and filled her basket. Should be enough to please old Townsend, perhaps convince him she'd done something out here to amuse herself. Then there would be dinner, and bed, and it would all start again tomorrow, the endless wheel of life. Not something to be considered right now.

It looked to rain; she squinted up at the latticework of hemlock, trying to determine the weather. A red squirrel raced over the branch, and she smiled again. Twice in one day. That was strange.

She clambered up the slope just as a car raced by on the long drive. *Her* drive, and who would be going up her drive? Wait. Was it Saturday already? Was this it, was this the day they came? She never could pay much attention to dates, and when each day was so like every other, how could the seven of them really differ? But it must be happening today.

The car had pulled over just ahead of her, and she dragged her feet toward it, dreading the encounter. Sure enough, the door opened, and someone stepped out. A tall man, brown-haired, in a dark woolen suit.

"Hello there!" he called, brashly cheerful. As she closed in, only walking in their direction because it was also the direction of her house, she saw that two women were also in the car, in nurse's uniforms. Yes, this could only be them, then. The people come to requisition the house.

"Hello," she said coolly.

"Are you heading back in?" he asked. "We can give you a lift. It looks to rain."

His tweed suit was out of style, older in fashion than matched him; he couldn't have been much over thirty. His dark brown hair curled thick around his temples, his brown eyes were friendly, if sharp, and his nose had a chiseled quality to its curve that gave her the impression he kept

excellent track of his accounts. Some people just had features like that, she found. Features that gave them away.

The nurse inside the car, in the backseat, began to roll down the window. She was older than the man and wore a bright punch of lipstick in Victory red, with horn-rimmed glasses to match. She smiled up at Ricky and said, "Hello, dear, I'm Nurse June." When Ricky made no response to this, the nurse went on, "It is going to rain. I'd wager within five minutes."

"Rain doesn't bother me," Ricky said crossly. "Why does everyone seem to hate it so much?"

Already, she had tired of these people. Why did they need so much to talk with her? She wanted to be alone with her thoughts, with the things which were not thoughts.

"What are those?" The man's voice cut through and she gazed up at him. He gestured to her basket.

"You know they're mushrooms," she said, aloof.

He looked at her pointedly, his eyes sharper than she'd surmised. "Those are fool's caps," he said. "They're deadly. You ought to toss them out."

"They're not," she said. "Besides, they're mine. We eat them all the time."

"Then you must be a ghost," he said drily. He stood much taller than she, a rare thing. His eyes pierced into her, and she disliked the feeling of it, disliked him.

"Are you heading up to the house?" he asked again, as though it were his business. She swung her basket low, behind herself.

"What if I am?" she said. It was rude, she knew that. She had not spoken to strangers in a long time. She didn't know anymore how one did it appropriately. "I guess you're part of the requisition people." She said it with deliberate distaste.

"Yes. I'm Doctor Hart. Those," he pointed at her basket,

"those are not to be brought back to the house. If anyone were to ingest them—"

"You're being ridiculous. I go out in these woods all the time, I *know* mushrooms. These..." She'd started to hold up the basket, but in the next instant he'd relieved her of it, and she could only stand in place, shocked.

"I'm confiscating them," he said. "Until I can show you that they very much *are* poisonous fool's caps, and they'll only go back to the house under lock and key."

She glowered at him. She thought to reach for the basket but knew by how easily he'd snatched it away that getting it back would be a struggle. A struggle she'd not stoop to having, not over some silly mushrooms.

"If you're going back to the estate, you ought to ride in with us," he said, opening the back door. The nurse in the backseat gave a friendly smile which Ricky did not respond to.

"It's going to be pouring in a minute," Dr. Hart concluded.

"No," said Ricky, then added, "thank you. I like to walk. Good day."

His mouth tightened, and there was a moment in which she thought he might snatch her as he had the basket and put her into the car. She jumped when he moved, but it was only to swing himself back into the seat, folding his long legs and slamming the door shut behind himself. "Very well, miss. Good day."

One of the nurses said something as they sped off, but she could not hear it.

Already, the awful people coming to requisition the house were interfering with her. What a brazen thing to seize people's homes to make hospitals. Of course, it had to be done, just as all the things that had to be done for the war effort. But she was angry, angry enough that the cause sometimes felt to her to be a great, dreaded god who could never

be appeased, despite all sacrifice. She huffed her breaths as she made her way up the road, determined to get home not far behind them. Within a few minutes, a growl of thunder announced a torrent of the prophesied rain, which, though not terribly cold, left her soaking wet by the time she made it back to the estate.



AFTER PULLING the car to a stop on the gravel drive, the first thing Matthew Hart did was go up to the room they'd given him as an office and put the basket of mushrooms onto the desk, shutting the door on his way out. Then he came back down as the rest of them arrived, in cars and larger vans, with all the beds and supplies which would turn the place into a convalescence hospital.

Limewood House was not as big as he'd expected, nor so fine; just three, square stories of scuffed red brick overgrown with vines. Monstrous blue hydrangeas sprawled across the gravel and onto a lawn ribbed in rows of a poorly plowed victory garden. It all looked rather in need of a landscaper and maintenance. His first impression of the estate interior was of overall shabbiness as well; the gentility had gone when the money had, it seemed, leaving threadbare rugs, creaking stairs, and water stains in blotches on the wallpaper. He could feel no regret at taking over such a house; it functioned better as a hospital than an excess of property for a careless aristocracy. Who knew where they'd gone off to, even? Likely out of the country.

The drenching rain continued to fall, but he stood a moment surveying everyone as they scurried about. Then he approached the men in the vans. "Bring the supplies in only," he said. "Hold off on moving the mattresses until the weather lets up."

Nurse June moved to him, hunched under a black umbrella. "Where are we setting up?"

"There's a sort of a sunroom just east of the second-floor stairwell. That's where we'll go. It's just next to my office. Wait on those cots, Nurse," he said, as she approached the metal frames. "Let me do that. Go on inside, please."

As he spoke, he spied the girl from the woods, walking swiftly now across the lawn towards the house. He watched her tall, lanky form moving with the haste of being soaked through by rain, her long blonde hair plastered over her shoulders with it. She hugged her arms around her navy sweater and disappeared into the servant's entrance. He smiled to himself, shaking his head. How many of the servants had stayed on, and what on earth were they doing here? If they'd somehow eluded being called up, he certainly intended to make them useful.

"Good afternoon! Are you Dr. Hart?" An older gentleman with a sonorous voice stepped toward him from the house.

"Yes, good afternoon... sir?"

"My name is Townsend. I'm the caretaker here." He was heavyset, with circular spectacles that had become almost completely fogged and dark hair split to precision in a side part.

"A pleasure to meet you," said Hart. "Tell me, how many of the servants are still on here?"

"The cook, and two housemaids."

"I suppose all the men have been conscripted?"

"A groundskeeper was. But Lady Darby was forced to let most of them go many years back."

Well, it confirmed his own assessment of the home. Aristocracy in decay. He sighed, brushing rain off his coat sleeves. "I may utilize some of the staff to assist me, in the hospital."

"Certainly, sir." Townsend nodded, sincere. "I put them at

your disposal entirely. And if there is anything *I* might do to help, I'm most eager. I went up to join the Home Guard at the start, but they turned me away."

"Thank you, sir. I'm sure to take you up on it. I'll be setting up the hospital in that large sunroom on the east side."

Townsend's face flinched, but he said graciously, "Very good, sir."

"Is something the matter with that?"

"Not at all. Forgive me. Only, it's Lady Darby's favored spot, when she's able to leave her bed."

"Lady Darby? But surely, she's not here? The family's gone, aren't they?"

"It's only Lady Darby and her child. It was deemed by her doctor that Lady Darby was too ill to withstand a move."

Hart managed to conceal a grumble. He could only wonder if such illness was genuine, rather than the malin-gering that so many genteel women were prone to, in his experience. All he needed was an interfering hypochondriac at his hospital. And a child too? Why couldn't it have been sent off to relatives? A hospital of wounded soldiers was no place for a child.

"Very well, then," he said curtly. "My apologies if she is... inconvenienced by my use of her sunroom. It will, however, do the injured a world of good to have light and fresh air. And she may still use it, of course."

Townsend agreed hastily.

"We've brought our own cook," said Hart. "But I'd not turn away the one you have. We shall find use for everyone. There will be more than enough to do."

"Of course, Doctor. Can I help you carry some of these things up?"

"Yes, maybe we can get a few of these cots, together. The mattresses can wait until it stops raining."

They spent the next forty minutes or so moving cots inside, up the flight of stairs and around to the sunroom. Afterward, Townsend stared at the soaked, muddy rugs, and mumbled something Hart didn't quite catch. "They weren't exactly in the best condition before," Hart remarked.

"No. But better than this."

"They ought to have all been taken out in preparation for us. Didn't you get the instructions?"

Townsend blushed, an even deeper red than he already was from the exertion. He took out his handkerchief as they stood in the foyer and dabbed at his face, glossy now with a mixture of sweat and rain.

"It's possible they didn't make their way down to me," he admitted. "What with Lady Darby being so ill. I'll see to it everything's moved by morning."

Hart sighed. He could see the man was earnest in desiring to accommodate them; the fault did not lie with him. But the man would not speak an ill word towards his lady, and so Hart was left to fill in the blanks for himself. Clearly, Lady Darby was resisting the takeover in any way she could.

"It's all right, Mr. Townsend. Whenever it can be managed is fine."

Townsend nodded and requested a few minutes' rest before more work. Hart had already decided against using him for any more such labor; the man's constitution did not seem suited to it. Heaven forbid he were to give one of the staff a heart attack in their first week here.

He headed back up the stairs. When he saw the door to his office moving, he quickened his pace.



RICKY SLIPPED IN QUIETLY. The basket sat in the middle of the dark walnut desk like a trophy, and she smiled. She glanced

about; new white cabinets with frosted glass had appeared, unfamiliar and institutional, and decidedly hideous. She picked up the basket.

The door, which she'd left ajar behind herself, clicked shut and she whirled around. Dr. Hart stood in front of it.

"Bloody hell," she said through clenched teeth; his sudden appearance had set her heart pounding, and she nearly dropped the basket. He narrowed his eyes, possibly at the expletive.

"Put that back," he said crisply.

"It's mine," she said, clasping her hands about it, tight.

"You may have it once I've had the chance to show you what those are," he said. "But my books haven't arrived yet. I've a good pamphlet, with sketches, that you'd do well to look over before you go out and take mushrooms."

When he said, *with sketches*, her skin prickled in deep annoyance. With him having closed the door, however, she felt an animal anxiety at being trapped and wanted more to leave than to argue further. "I'd like to be going now," she said, raising her head and pulling back her shoulders.

"Of course. But first, you'll set that back where you found it. I'll not have anyone endangering the hospital. And I'll thank you not to come sneaking around in here again. This is my office now, and it's private."

She dropped the basket back on the desk with an angry *thud*, glaring at him. "This is hardly your house to go making rules in."

"No, it's not, but I'm in charge here while it's under War Office use. If I catch you sneaking in here again, I'll spank you."

She laughed, even as a shock pulsed through her at the threat. "Do you know who I am?"

"I don't, actually. You work for the house, I guess? It

seems things are poorly managed. Honestly, I don't care who you are; you aren't to be in here again."

"Let me by." But she did not take a step closer to him.

"So long as we're understood."

"Yes. Fine. Now open the door."

He swung it open and moved aside. She tensed as she passed him; his gaze made her feel hot under scrutiny, as though she were guilty of something. Something about his physical presence felt too active somehow, along with his absurd threat, and she did not like to pass so close to him. She doubted he'd lay a finger on her, but she could not be completely sure. At the doorway, she sped up and skipped out, cringing when he laughed softly. She did not look back even once as she stormed along the banister and up the smaller staircase to her room on the third floor.

So, what, did he think she was a maid or something? Someone he could push around that way? He seemed to think her a child, too. Talked to her like she was a teenager. It wasn't a thing she faced often, with her height and coolness of poise. It galled her. She spent a long time at her closet, when dressing for dinner; at last, she chose a seafoam green gown, a relic of her mother's, long and old-fashioned. She put her hair into pins, as it had gone into curls and cowlicks from the rain, and pinned a pair of ruby earrings in her earlobes. She looked out of style perhaps, but the change was enough. It would shock him, put him in his place.

She twirled a lace shawl over her shoulders, if only to have something to cling to, and headed down. None of the lights had been lit. She paused in the dark of the foyer, peeking into the dining hall, overcome with a sudden shyness. What was she doing? She ought to go back upstairs, stay away from it all, all the new people, like her mother was doing. They would ask her things, talk to her. It wouldn't be tolerable.

But that Dr. Hart was there, and she wouldn't have him thinking she was someone he could treat like that. She'd have his respect. She held her breath and pushed herself into the hall.

Several people sat in the dining hall whom she'd not seen yet—a few more nurses, along with the two she had glimpsed earlier in the car. The chandelier was lit only dimly, and the dark curtains were drawn tightly closed, for the blackout regulations. Before she could leave the entryway, Dr. Hart came in with a load of folded bedding in his arms. After glancing at her in surprise, he frowned, then gave her a cool nod. Her face heated uncomfortably, but she returned it.

"Doctor, we're serving dinner," called the nurse, the one with the cat's eye frames. Ricky couldn't quite remember her name. Oh, yes. It was Nurse June.

"I'll be there in a moment," he said. He sounded weary. He eyed Ricky with a touch of suspicion as he hauled the bedding up. She turned from him and stepped into the dining room. Townsend sat at the table, looking so befuddled that she immediately pitied him. What, they were making him dine alongside them all? Yes, and there were Katie and Opal, the housemaids; they both stared at her when she came in, their eyes wide with either shock at her dressing up for once, or simply pleading with her silently to make the situation less confusing. If that was what they wanted, she could hardly help them.

Dr. Hart returned, and after looking over everyone, said, "Yes. Good. This is a hospital now, and everyone who stays on, works here, and we all eat together. I realize it's an adjustment. Thank you for making it." With that, he took a seat at the head of the table, unsurprisingly.

"Forgive me, sir, it's only strange for me," said Townsend in a low voice.

"I don't know why I've never had dinner with you before,

Townsend," said Ricky flippantly, when no one replied to him. She plucked anxiously at her skirt under the table, feeling impossibly foolish to have dressed up as she had. The nurses wore wool suits, and Dr. Hart was in his shirtsleeves, having been working for the whole of the afternoon. She tensed, sure that most of them looked on her with disapproval.

Hart spoke up quickly, looking her way. "Now then. I know you can't be Lady Darby, who I'm told is bedridden. Just who are you?"

Townsend chuckled. "No, sir, this is Miss Frederica Darby, her daughter."

"The *child*?" Hart's brows raised in time with his sour tone.

"She's Lady Darby's child, yes." Townsend did not seem to understand Hart's confusion. Ricky had an impulse to push aside her chair and run upstairs to her room, which would hardly make her seem any less a child at the moment. So instead, she kept her head high, the way Mother would have done, and made her expression cool. In her head, she went somewhere else entirely, somewhere deep within herself that none could follow. The place she kept Luke.

The serving platters had been brought to the table by a woman who was not Cooky; she did not see Cooky anywhere. This person sat and took the lead in serving herself food quite like they were at a buffet. It would have scandalized Mother so much that Ricky could only be grateful she was not here.

"So, Miss Darby," said Dr. Hart, his eyes fixed on her even as he served himself from one of the dishes. "You've not been called up, then?"

"I haven't."

"And how old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

He made a sound, deep in his throat, a scratchy sort of grumble not unlike a scoff. "Old enough. A wonder they've not called you up. There's plenty of work to be done. How odd that they missed you."

Her nose suffused with heat, but she smiled graciously. All the same, it was hard to stay in the distant place in her mind where she remained unaffected; Hart's words quite drew her out like she were a mole being unearthed by a gardener's shovel.

Townsend set down his fork, with a carrot still speared on it. "Miss Darby's fiancé is a Royal Air Force pilot, doubly decorated."

He'd said it as though to defend her patriotism, and Ricky blushed hot at his obviousness. She gave him a thin smile; he was only trying to help, but she wished to God he'd not brought up Charlie. Charlie was on that list of things she wished to pretend weren't real.

"Oh, I was in love with a RAF pilot once!" cried one of the younger nurses.

"How exciting, to be getting married," said Nurse June. "Have the two of you set a date?"

"Christmas, but likely it will have to be sooner, because of my mother's health."

"I'm sure you're just *thrilled*," Nurse June gushed.

"Not terribly," said Ricky; it simply fell out of her mouth, perhaps in response to June's ridiculous enthusiasm, which felt to her to be somewhat forced. Townsend made a deep, grumbling sound, probably only perceptible to herself.

"No?" asked Dr. Hart, a dark eyebrow raised, as though he had something to contribute.

She lifted her head. "No," she replied coolly, as if she had been dared. "I'm marrying Charles because his family made so much money at the start of the war, and without it, we're going to lose the house. And he's marrying me because his

family gets called profiteers and aren't invited into a decent home in the district. So, it's not exactly *thrilling*, is it?"

There. That would shock him. She'd laid it out plainly, and indeed they all looked quite shocked at her breach of decorum. All except Dr. Hart, who watched her wryly, his expression unreadable.

"I thought young people married for love these days," said Nurse June coldly as she poured herself a cup of tea. She would not meet Ricky's eye.

"*Love*," said Ricky, her mouth stiff with bitterness. An awkward silence followed, in which everyone seemed terribly intent on chewing their food. Ricky alone did not eat; she kept her hands under the table, tearing away at her skirt with all the disquiet she would not show on her face. Peeking from the periphery of her vision, she noticed that Dr. Hart watched her still, his hands set in a triangle under his sharp chin.

Finally, he said, "Well, since you're here, and *you're* not bedridden, you'll be expected to help out in the hospital, Miss Darby."

"With what? I'm hardly a nurse."

"No, but there's plenty you can do to help the nurses here. This is a medical facility now and everyone pulls their weight."

Ricky pressed her lips together, the breath heaving out of her in a sigh she was barely able to control. "I'm glad to have the chance to do my part," she said, trying to mask the sourness in her words but which crept into them about halfway through.

"England thanks you, madame," said Dr. Hart, lowering his head in dry, dramatic sarcasm, and she decided in that instant that she would hate him from this day onward, until he got the hell out of her home.