

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

SUSIE-GIRL, she said into the mirror, if you don't step on it he'll be gone and you'll be on your own again.

She snapped shut the compact, dropped it into the white hand-bag, and snapped it shut, too.

Glad I decided on the red silk, she thought. I know he likes the feel of me in it, and she perched on the edge of the bed and wriggled into her white court shoes—the ones with the tall fine heels.

Out in the avenue there was a faint breeze, but the air was no cooler. She could feel the wet under her arms and was glad she had remembered the deodorant. She knew the landlady would be watching, but she didn't care. It was Saturday.

And from behind the first story window the landlady was saying to her friend: Just look at her all dressed up to beat the band like a girl in her teens.

Man-mad! said her friend.

But she keeps her room lovely, and she's always regular with the rent, I will say that, said the landlady, sipping her tea.

Still, you would think she'd show a little more breeding, said her friend. She's not a girl any more, but the way she dresses!

Susie's red dress and white shoes minced out of sight around a bend in the avenue and the two women began to talk of something else.

Susie loved walking down the avenue when it wasn't a work day. Her heels drummed a steady beat on the asphalt and she imagined herself someone else entirely, someone grand like girls she had read about or seen on the screen. Of course, she could have taken the tram and been down there early, but she preferred to walk.

Three teenage boys in short pants rode past on bicycles and whistled at her in unison, so that she just couldn't help smiling. Besides, it was nice to be

noticed—even by high-school boys.

The harbour water sparkled in the sun and away over on the other shore the hills looked hot and brown.

It has been a beautiful Summer, she thought. Not a drop of rain for three months, and she looked down at her brown fore-arms and thought of all the swims she and Tony had had, and wondered if he would want to go to the beach again tomorrow.

At the bottom of the avenue there was more traffic. Without knowing why, she began to walk faster. All the noise and the movement of the people gave her an excited flutter down inside her. She always felt like this coming into the city on a Saturday.

As she crossed the street, she glanced up at the clock on the front of the big hotel. Just in nice time and only two hundred yards to the corner where he would be waiting.

She glanced towards the shop windows, and felt, rather than saw, something on the footpath below her line of sight.

It was a man and he lay quite still with his face against the asphalt. His hat lay on its side a few inches in front of his head, and his left hand still held an empty shopping bag.

No more than five yards away, two boys were selling the afternoon papers: calling the name in high sing-song voices which had echoes further down the street. On either side, people hurried along the footpath, skirting the fallen man with careful feet.

Susie called across to one of the paper boys, "What happened?" and the boy nudged his mate and they grinned at her and shook their heads.



Friend of yours? asked the sailor

We dunno, said the one she had spoken to.

But didn't you see anything? she asked.

They giggled and shook their heads.

She knelt down and felt his upturned cheek. A trickle of blood came from a large bruise on his forehead. One of his arms was doubled under him.

A sailor who had been walking towards her stopped and offered to help. Together they turned him on to his back and the sailor picked up the hat and put it under his head for a cushion.

Friend of yours? asked the sailor. (He was nice-looking, with a space between his front teeth.)

I just found him like this, she explained. Nobody seemed to have noticed.

One too many, if you ask me, said the sailor. Seen it happen often. Soon as they get into the fresh air. One minute they're as right as rain—the next!

The man's eyes were tight-shut and the skin on his face looked grey. Without thinking, she picked up one of his hands and felt his heart-beat. She bent over his face but his breath did not smell. His pulse was slow and unsteady.

You a nurse? said the sailor, with a new interest in his face.

Did a bit of V.A.D. work during the war, she said. Funny how you never forget.

People began to gather round. They pressed about the injured man, making the air hotter and harder to breathe.

Now stand clear a bit there, said the sailor, getting up. And someone ring an ambulance quick!

People started to ask questions: How did it happen? What...? A car...? A stroke...? How is he? How did it happen?

The sailor crouched down again beside Susie, and they held the man's hands and waited for the ambulance.

A news-vendor came out of his shop nearby and pushed his way through the ring of people. He looked down at the man, who was beginning to groan like someone having a nightmare.

I don't like the look of that man, said the shopkeeper, fingering his chin. I don't like the look of him at all. And he went back into his shop.

In no time, it seemed, the ambulance was there and the attendants jumped out and ran over to the man and looked at his face and felt his pulse.

They asked Susie what had happened and when she couldn't tell them, they asked people in the crowd. But nobody seemed to know how the man had come to be hurt.

When they had put him on the stretcher and got him into the ambulance, the driver took Susie's name and address—in case there was anything the police or the relatives might want to know—and the ambulance swung out and away up the avenue with its siren wailing.

Have you got the time, please, Susie asked the sailor, suddenly beginning to feel anxious.

Sure have, said the sailor impudently. Then after a pause he said, It's a quarter past the hour.

She dusted the front of her dress. There was blood on the hem where it had trailed on the footpath. Just as well it hadn't been her white frock! There was also a bloodstain on her right shoe, but most of it came off on her handkerchief.

You're sure you're all right now? said the sailor.

Quite all right, thanks, she said. But I must go now, I've got to meet a friend.

Give him my love, the sailor called after her. But she kept on walking and pretended she hadn't heard.

* * *

TONY was not waiting outside the milk-bar. She waited anxiously, walking up and down several times in front of the big mirror to see if she were still tidy. But at half-past the hour, he was still not there.

She had just turned towards the waterfront with the idea of sitting down on one of the seats and having a good think, when coming towards her she saw the sailor.

Fancy meeting you! he said in a friendly way. Meet you friend all right?

O, yes, she lied quickly. She's gone to the pictures with her boy friend.

Doing anything yourself? he asked offhandedly.

Not particularly, but I ought to be going home, she said, vaguely.

How about coming out with me, then, he said. Some afternoon tea—or perhaps a drink and perhaps we could go to a picture show, too?

He was really very nice. The space between his teeth made him look more impudent than he really was. It would be nice to go out with him.

To tell the truth, I wouldn't mind a cup of tea, she said, smiling.

Let's go, then, he said, taking her elbow. I know just the place.

She let him steer her through the surge of people into the main street. Once she caught a glimpse of someone like Tony, talking to a fair girl outside a picture house, but they were past before she could be sure.

My name's Jack, said the sailor, when he had ordered the tea. What's yours? When she had told him, she remembered the man with the bruise, and began to wonder what his name had been.

I can't help thinking about that poor man this afternoon, she said. He probably had a wife waiting for him to bring home some shopping, and now she won't know what's happened.

But the sailor didn't want to talk about it. He said that when you lived in a city that was getting as big as this one it was best to mind your own business. He seemed to have forgotten the incident altogether.

And listening to him talk, and sipping the fresh hot tea, Susie began to forget, too.



YARNING away to some outsiders, people who'd been in Thames 15 or 20 years ago and never been back, Jim Henderson got the feeling that the town was on its last legs, so he went to find out. Thames, which is apparently still going strong, is the starting point for his programmes, "Coromandel Way," now being heard from 2YA and 3YA, and after a good look around they end at "Coromandel Town," glimpsed above in the middle distance.