

The Test Case

IT was twenty to nine. Nola buttoned her brown costume and pulled on the brown regulation beret. It wasn't a bad uniform, she decided, collecting a few extra bandages to put in the box in the back of the car. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. It was Joshua, small and dark and smiling, with black hair sticking out all over his head like a chimney sweeper's broom, and great soft brown eyes. His trousers, inherited from a long line of elder brothers, reached below his knees, and his horny feet were bare.

"Please, Nurse, hullo, Nurse, and what about a ride to school, please?" he said, wriggling with the intensity of his politeness. "Cold morning, eh?" he added conversationally.

"How many of you are there?" enquired Nola, familiar with this sort of situation.

"Well, there's me, and round by the front door there's Piki and Rewa and Tony and Janet and Wai. Oh, and Joe from next door, but, please, he got a very little bottom." He grinned at her. They had walked a mile and a half from the far end of Matai Road, which just missed the school bus limit.

"Hop in," said Nola, "but don't sit on my box."

Twittering and shuffling, they piled in.

"You gotta look out for her box of stuff," hissed Joshua as he shoved the others along. "She got Poison in it!"

A row of brown eyes grew enormous with awe, and as Nola edged into the small space left for the driver the silence of the deeply impressed fell on her passengers. "Gee," said several in a breathless undertone, while Joshua gazed nonchalantly out of the window, doubtless conjuring up colourful details he could add when they got out at the school gate.

"Bye, Nurse."

"Bye, Nurse."

"Coming to school Chcosdie, Nurse?"

"Silly, its Thursdie she comes. I got a big thing on my leg to show you. Nurse, nex' time."

"Bye, Nurse. Thanks for nice ride."

She watched them straggling through the school gate, nodding their black heads vigorously. They were shouting with pride, "We been in the Nurse's car! Dishrick Nurse brought us to school, see!"

It was a cold morning for even those leathery feet to have no shoes on, and they had no decent coats, either, most of them. Still, it didn't seem to quench their good spirits; they disappeared, laughing, mingling with the pakeha children as the bell sounded for them all.

Nola drove on, to begin her daily calls. Today was to be a test case. She had lately often been tempted to apply for a job in one of the big hospitals in town. You had a definite routine there; it was real nursing. People were sick, and you made them well—or at least comfortable. They came in weak and discouraged, and you brushed them up into the briskness of the hospital routine, kept them fresh and fed, and sooner or later wheeled them into sun-porches, and then saw them off home. Even the old dead-beats you could wash



"The sun was low and their faces glowed in its light"

and brighten up—keep their covers smooth and their charts in order. But this eternal visiting of homes where just about all you could do was try to persuade people to eat better food or spend their money differently—did it do any good? Mightn't she just as well spend her energy in the comforting certainty of work in a ward?

Well, the decision was to be made today. It was, by a private resolve, to depend on whatever the day might have in store for her. The pale winter sunlight gleamed on the car, and drew brilliance from the snow on the mountains away to the west of the town. It was perhaps point number one, she reflected, that she was, in a temporary sense, at least, owner of this comfortable old car; a bit heavy when it came to the mud, but one got used to that.

MRS. WAHEA was waiting at her door. The track in from the road was muddy, and becoming more so as the sun thawed the frost. It still lay in a crisp sheet over the ground in the shadows; it would be easy driving if I came about dawn, thought Nola. She left the car on the road and plodded through the crackling mud. There was no step up to the door, which was about two feet up from the ground.

"I'm so glad you've come, Nurse," said Mrs. Wahea. "Jimmy's awful this morning. He just grizzles all the time, and I don't know what to do with him." She managed, however, a smile as she offered a hand when the step should have come. "Like a lift, eh? Young one like you?" and she laughed good naturedly.

Jimmy was six months old, a limp little fellow with great round eyes and thin legs. He gave Nola a tentative and gummy smile. She felt his arms and legs gently.

"You're a good boy, aren't you?" she said. "But he's too soft and much too thin. I suppose you got that dried milk from the chemist? That is what Jimmy's been having?"

"Well," Mrs. Mahea hesitated. "Curly was going to go in, but he forgot, and I missed the bus last Friday."

"I'll get you some and send it out with young Lenny from next door," said Nola briefly. She wrote down directions for the milk mixture, her pen scraping quietly in the little, overfull room. Mrs. Wahea stood silently watching, her plump arms in the ancient purple cardigan folded over her great bosom, a smile still creasing her pleasant face.

"Maybe next week when you come we have new step," she said. "Curly say so." Nola laughed heartily.

"He often says so, doesn't he?" "Oh, yes," smiled Mrs. Wahea imperturbably. "But you never know. You like a cup of tea?"

"There isn't really time this morning." It was impossible to maintain one's exasperation with Mrs. Wahea. She looked disappointed. It was not unlikely that she had prepared everything just in case.

"I'll be sure to come early enough next week," said Nola. Mrs. Wahea stood at the door and watched till the car was out of sight; then she went inside. It seemed a long time till next week.

The Williamsons were next. Their house was a tiny thing of three rooms, its furnishings threadbare but spotlessly clean.

"Hullo, my friend," said the mother of four visible Williamsons and several absentees. "Come in. What do you think of this boy now, eh?" This boy detached himself from the crowd and stood obediently before Nola. He had on a shabby but neat navy blue shirt and trousers, and worn sandals. He gazed at Nola with solemn eyes. She had the

impression that his face was gently inflating before her gaze.

"I think he's got mumps," she said after a long silence, "and ought to go to bed." Mrs. Williamson's face fell.

"I wouldn't have to keep the other kids home, eh?" she said disconsolately. "They fight like mad, the little devils, when they're all here together." It was not difficult to believe, in that amount of space. How they fitted in at all was a miracle, not to mention how Mrs. Williamson managed to keep it so neat and tidy.

Just then a little girl poked her head through from the tiny pantry, which was a corner of the kitchen, separated from the rest by a piece of ancient tasselled green velvet strung up on a wire.

"Them pies is hot now, Mum," she said in a husky voice, with a shy smile at the visitor. Nola and Mrs. Williamson exchanged glances; vegetables, vitamins, and human frailty hung heavily in the air, but what was there to say? What, indeed, that had not been said many times before? Nola contented herself with a reference to the silver beet growing in front of the cottage. Mrs. Williamson smiled with pleasure.

"Not bad, eh?" she said without a trace of irony. "See you next week, Nurse."

NOLA waved as she climbed into the car. Two more calls, and then lunch with Mrs. Parakura. She was a well-educated woman, used to acting as interpreter at any functions where there were many pakehas. Her husband was active on the tribal committee; they both spoke, Nola thought, like pakehas, except for the beautiful correctness, still unfamiliar to her, of their pronunciation of Maori names. Over onion soup, deliciously made, Mrs. Parakura was chatty and entertaining.

"You'd laugh at us," she said, "if you could see us playing cards. We have an evening every week, you know, to raise money for the new pa, and we all get so excited about who's going to win that we shout and dance and hop all over the place." Her thin brown face crinkled with laughter. "Last night Janie Wahea grabbed my whole handful of cards, and somebody tore the joker in half!"

"How much do you make?" Mrs. Parakura laughed again.

"Oh, hardly anything. They all come, and pay their money all right, but they spend nearly all of it on the supper and getting taxis from town to take them home afterwards." She stopped and frowned. "It's no good, though, really. We enjoy ourselves, but that's not the only point. I think we'll have to try something else as well." She looked out the window, to where the neat rows of her winter cabbages glistened as the sun struck them for the first time. "I think we'd better have a sale, a sort of bring and buy thing. What do you think?"

"Well," said Nola cautiously, "who would bring, and who would buy?"

"We all would—all of us round here. It could be a huge success, or it could be a flop. It depends entirely on how keen everyone feels. Listen, Nurse, what about helping us? You could make all the difference. You are the only good influence that everyone likes!" Nola laughed.

"Yes, you are," insisted Mrs. Parakura. "Apart from families and relations, you're far more important to us than anyone else."

NOLA went away looking thoughtful. A mile down the road she collected her patients for the chest clinic, thirty miles away. They were two shy young

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