

# The Leaving of Liverpool

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Extract

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Chapter I  
DUNEATHLY, IRELAND  
February 1925

Slowly, carefully, Mollie closed the door of the Doctor's house so that the catch made a scarcely audible click. She picked up the suitcase and whispered, 'Come along now, Annemarie, we're going to see Hazel.'

'See Hazel,' Annemarie said dully. It was neither a question nor a statement, merely an echo of her sister's words. Annemarie had been in a stupor since the 'thing' had happened just over three weeks ago.

Mollie put her finger to her lips, though there was no need: Annemarie was unlikely to speak again. The girls walked across the deserted square, frost skimming the buildings on all four sides like icing on a cake. There wasn't even a breath of wind on the still, February night. 'Be careful how you walk, darlin'; the ground's horribly slippy,' she warned through her already frozen lips. They were both warmly dressed in thick winter coats, boots and woolly hats. Mollie buried her chin in her knitted scarf and saw her sister had had the sense to do the same.

She'd waited until the clock struck twelve before leaving the house, knowing that almost everyone in Duneathly would be fast asleep in their beds. The shops had closed hours ago and the window of the butcher's was bare, though cakes remained on display in the baker's – Roddy Egan was forever trying to palm off stale cakes. A notice had been pasted on the window of Mrs

Gerraghty's dress shop – 'The Latest Paris Fashions in Stock', which was nothing but a big lie. Only the old and the partially blind bought anything from Ena Gerraghty, whose clothes were far too old-fashioned for anyone born within the last fifty years.

A cat ran in front of them, making Mollie jump and Annemarie squeak. It was the giant tabby that belonged to Mr O'Rourke, the solicitor, who'd called it Kitty after his long-dead wife, even though it was a tom who'd fathered enough kittens to fill a barrel during his long and dissolute life.

'It's all right, darlin'.' Mollie squeezed her sister's arm. 'Look at the sky: it's desperately pretty.' The sky was the colour of dark-blue ink and looked just as fluid. Stars twinkled plentifully, big ones and little ones, and some so close together they resembled scraps of spangled net. 'Those stars are millions and millions of miles away,' she told her sister, but Annemarie didn't answer.

The moon was a perfect circle, and clear enough for its craters and mountains to be visible. She wondered if people lived there. If so, what sort of clothes did they wear? Did they live in houses, the same as on earth? It worried her a little, the moon, the way it illuminated the whole square, making everywhere as clear as daylight. If someone saw them . . .

She comforted herself with the thought that, even if someone did see them, they were unlikely to knock up the Doctor and inform him his girls were out for a midnight stroll.

Wally McMahon came staggering out of the doorway of O'Reilly's pub where he'd probably been sleeping since the place closed. He didn't notice them. Wally consumed so much ale he wouldn't have noticed a crock

of gold had it stood in front of him on his way home from O'Reilly's.

The girls trudged on, a silent Annemarie following a few feet behind her sister, though a few weeks ago she would have been dancing ahead, her lovely face animated, talking ten to the dozen, wanting to know where they were going and wasn't it exciting to be walking through the moonlight and didn't the sky look too magical for words? You'd never guess she had something wrong with her heart, though the Doctor insisted it wasn't serious as long as she remembered to take her drops every day. Otherwise, there was a chance she'd have a heart attack or a stroke. There were two bottles of Digitalis in the washbag on the top of the suitcase, which was making Mollie's shoulder ache. It was stuffed with clothes, every single garment she and Annemarie possessed, all packed in the last sixty minutes so no one would see and wonder what they were up to. Clothes might cost the earth in America and it would be a shame to leave them behind.

There was a light on in Sinead Larkin's cottage. Sinead was a dressmaker and women came from as far away as Kildare to order their bridal gowns and bridesmaids' frocks, not to mention the occasional pageboy outfit. She made all Mollie and Annemarie's clothes, as well as Mammy's when she was alive. Mollie imagined the tiny dressmaker treadling away like a mad woman while she fed yards of glorious silk or satin under the flashing needle of her Singer sewing machine.

She breathed a sigh of relief and changed the suitcase to her other hand when they left the environs of the village. Ahead lay a narrow country lane with hedges on either side, the icy surface gleaming like a silver ribbon in the moonlight. About half a mile on, the land curved to

the left and Mollie knew that when they rounded the curve, they would come to her brother Finn's house. Finn was an accountant, away in Dublin on business at the moment, and it was his wife, Hazel, who was helping Mollie and Annemarie escape from the horror of Duneathly.

The suitcase was getting heavier and heavier: Mollie had to resist the urge to open it and fling half the clothes into the hedge. She breathed another sigh of relief when, at last, Finn's house came into view.

'Nearly there, Annemarie,' she said encouragingly.

The garden gate creaked when it was opened and, barely a second later, Hazel flung open the front door. 'You're here! I've been listening for the gate.' She ran down the path and kissed them warmly. 'Come on in, the pair o'ys. I've tea on the brew.'

Mollie put the suitcase down with a puff. 'I'll swear both me arms are at least six inches longer.'

'And so they are.' Hazel laughed. She was tall and boisterous, brown-haired and brown-eyed, and graceful, despite the huge, bulging stomach in which the Doctor's first grandchild lay. She clapped her hand to her mouth. 'I should be crying, not laughing. This is a tragedy, not a joke.'

The girls followed their sister-in-law into the cosy kitchen where the table was set with three cups and saucers, sugar and milk, and a teapot covered with the cosy Mollie had knitted as a present a year ago when Hazel and Finn married. She hadn't liked Hazel at first. She was too big, too bossy, too capable. She knew the best way of doing everything and didn't hesitate to tell people what it was. The Doctor loathed her. Perhaps it was this that had made Mollie look for Hazel's good side. It wasn't hard to find, for her brother's wife was also

generous to a fault, always ready to lend a hand when it was needed, and possessed of an incredibly kind heart.

It was to Hazel that Mollie had turned when the ‘thing’ happened three weeks ago. ‘I need to get our Annemarie away from the Doctor. I’d like us to go to America: New York,’ she’d told her. ‘We’ve an auntie there, Aunt Maggie, Mammy’s sister. She’s a school-teacher and we used to see a lot of her before she went away. She still writes to us every month. Aunt Maggie will take care of us, I know she will.’

‘But you’ll need passports,’ Hazel pointed out. ‘You won’t get into America without a passport.’

‘We’ve already got them. You won’t know, it happened before you met our Finn, but Mammy was planning to take me and Annemarie to see Aunt Maggie. Then she fell pregnant and didn’t feel well enough to travel.’ It had been disappointing at the time, but worse was to come: before the year was out, their beloved Mammy had died giving birth to her fifth child, Aidan.

‘But what’s this all about, Mollie, luv?’ Hazel had asked, looking puzzled, as if the import of Mollie’s words had only just sunk in. ‘What do you mean, you have to get Annemarie away from the Doctor?’

And so Mollie was left with no choice but to explain, the words coming out haltingly with many pauses and ending in floods of tears.

Hazel had gone deathly pale, too shocked to speak, until she said in a horrified voice, ‘You mean your father . . .’ She paused, unable to finish the sentence, then tried again. ‘You mean your father raped his thirteen-year-old daughter?’

Mollie nodded. Hearing it put so bluntly, yet so truthfully, only made her cry again. ‘Yes,’ she whispered.

‘Has he ever done it before?’

‘Not to Annemarie, no.’ She bit her lip. It was the wrong thing to say.

‘By that,’ Hazel said quietly, going even paler, ‘I take it he’s done it to you?’

‘Every month. He goes to Kildare to meet up with his old friends from university and comes home as drunk as a lord. It started right after Mammy passed away.’ Mollie shrugged. ‘I just close my eyes and pretend it’s not happening, but our Annemarie’s different, she’s not of this world.’ She began to cry again. ‘It’s all my fault. I stayed at Noreen, my friend’s house, to avoid him. I never dreamed he’d do it to Annemarie if I wasn’t there.’

At this, Hazel had leapt to her feet. ‘I’ll stop him,’ she screamed. ‘I’ll give the bastard what for, and I’ll tell Finn, I’ll tell the whole of Duneathly and report him to the medical board, wherever that may be. Not a soul will ever go near him again.’

‘No! There’s Thaddy and little Aidan to consider. What will happen to them if he loses his job?’ Once again her eyes had filled with tears at the idea of leaving her brothers behind, but she had to get Annemarie away. If the truth be known, she was anxious to escape her father herself.

‘It doesn’t seem right to let him get away with it,’ Hazel had muttered, but she’d given in, said she’d find out when the next boat sailed from Liverpool to New York and where to buy the tickets. Mollie had enough money, for hadn’t Mammy left her – left all her children apart from Aidan – a whole fifty pounds each when they reached the age of sixteen? Until last July, Finn had been the only one to see the money, but Mollie had received a letter from Mr O’Rourke, the solicitor, on her sixteenth birthday. Much against his advice, she had asked for her inheritance in cash. She didn’t want it putting in a bank

where she'd have a job getting her hands on it in an emergency. It had been a wise decision, for it had seemed no time since she'd laid the fifty pound-notes beneath her gloves in the drawer when an emergency *had* arisen.

Hazel said now, 'Jimmy Mullen should be along any minute. Drink your tea quickly. It'll be a long while before you have another.' She regarded the silent, dead-eyed Annemarie tenderly. 'Come along, darlin', finish your tea.' The girl obediently picked up her cup. 'Has she lost the power of speech?' Hazel asked.

'Almost. Sister Francis came round from the convent, wanting to know if she'd taken a vow of silence: Annemarie had always been one of her best pupils. Before . . . before *it* happened, she never shut up.'

'Ah, and don't I know it. A proper little chatterbox she was, and if she wasn't talking, then she was singing – or dancing,' Hazel sighed. She turned her gaze on Mollie. 'You'll write the minute you get there, won't you, Moll? A postcard'll do, so's I know you're all right, otherwise I'll worry meself to death over the pair o'yis.'

'You're not to worry, not in your condition,' Mollie said sternly. She pulled her woolly hat over her ears, re-wound her scarf around her neck, and reached for her gloves, while Hazel helped Annemarie do the same. 'We'll be fine.'

'Will your Aunt Maggie be there to meet you?'

'Only if she gets my letter in time. If not, I'll take a taxi to her house: I've plenty of money.' By some miracle, a ship, the *Queen Maia*, was due to sail from Liverpool the day after tomorrow, arriving in New York in ten days' time. Hazel had purchased two third-class tickets through a shipping agent in Kildare. They were tucked in Mollie's bag, along with their birth certificates



and the letters Aunt Maggie had sent over the years and Mollie had kept, to prove they had somewhere to stay and wouldn't be a burden on the State.

There was silence in the warm, comfortable kitchen. In the distance, Mollie could hear the sound of hooves on the icy road. Jimmy Mullen, whom she'd never met, was taking them to Dun Laoghaire on his vegetable cart. They would catch the midday ferry to Liverpool from there. In a few hours, all hell would break loose in Dr Kenny's house when it was discovered his girls were missing, but no one was likely to guess they were on their way to America. The reason they weren't travelling to Dun Laoghaire on the bus and the train like ordinary people was so there'd be no trace of their departure. The doctor's girls would simply have disappeared into thin air. Jimmy Mullen didn't know what day it was, so there was no chance of him cracking on.

Hazel's brown eyes misted with tears. 'Look after yourselves, won't you? I'll be thinking about the pair o'yis all the while.'

'Do I need to pay Jimmy?'

'It's already been seen to, Moll.'

The gate creaked, followed by a knock on the door. She threw her arms around the ample body of her sister-in-law. 'Bye, Hazel. Thank you for everything.'

'Bye, darlin'.' Tears were streaming down Hazel's rosy cheeks. 'Bye, Annemarie.'

They all trooped outside. Jimmy Mullen, not much older than Mollie and half a head shorter, was climbing back on to a cart laden with sacks of vegetables. He acknowledged the girls with a curt nod when they joined him on the wooden seat, cracked the whip, and they set off at a brisk pace, Hazel's cries of 'tara' and 'look after yourselves now' gradually fading, until they could hear

nothing except the clip-clop of the giant black horse and its occasional noisy sniff.

The moon continued to shine and the stars to twinkle. The ice became thicker and the air even colder, as Mollie and Annemarie Kenny began the first part of their journey to New York.

Mollie helped her sister on to the top bunk and tucked the bedding around her – she'd like to bet the first- and second-class cabins didn't have such coarse sheets and hard pillows. Despite this, Annemarie promptly fell asleep.

Mollie dragged off her own clothes, replacing them with a thick, winceyette nightie, and climbed on to the bunk opposite her sister. Clothes had been thrown on the lower bunks, indicating they'd been taken, but there was no sign of their occupants. Anyway the tops ones were best, as you wouldn't have someone's bottom right in front of your eyes when they used the lavatory between the bunks. Her heart had sunk to her boots when she first entered the cabin and saw it. She hadn't expected to use the lavatory in front of strangers. A dim light, barely enough to see by, illuminated the dismal scene.

She was so tired she expected, like Annemarie, to fall asleep immediately. After all, they hadn't slept a wink the night before, sitting on the cart, stamping their feet to stop them from turning into blocks of ice, cuddling up to each other in a vain effort to keep warm. They'd arrived in Dun Laoghaire, more dead than alive, and had spent the next two hours in a café drinking endless cups of hot tea until they began to feel almost human again.

They had emerged to find a piercing wind had arisen, and the waters of the Irish Sea were spuming and

frothing angrily when they boarded the ferry to Liverpool. Mollie had been looking forward to a restful journey, an opportunity to catch up on their sleep, but Annemarie had been sick the whole way and most of their time had been spent in the lavatory with her sister's head buried in a sink. She prayed the same thing wouldn't happen on the passage to New York.

When sleep refused to come now, she beat the pillow with her fist in an attempt to make it softer, but it had no effect. She did her best to think about nothing. When that didn't work, she tried counting sheep, but that was no good either.

She wondered what the time was. It had been just after 5 p.m. when they'd landed in Liverpool. By then it was dark and the piercing wind had become a howling gale. The *Queen Maia* was moored by the landing stage, Mollie was told: they could board whenever they pleased. They did not set sail until the next afternoon. The landing stage was a short walk along a busy road crammed with horses and carts and hundreds of people of all different colours speaking strange languages she'd never heard before. Annemarie lagged behind, as pale as a ghost, while the icy wind penetrated their thick coats, and blew up their skirts and down their necks, making their eyes water and their ears ache. Mollie allowed her imagination to stretch ahead to when they would be living with Aunt Maggie in her apartment in Greenwich Village, 'no distance from Washington Square', according to one of her letters.

The *Queen Maia*, a great white vessel with three funnels, had rows and rows of portholes like little, black eyes that stared at them balefully. Annemarie had uttered a little, fearful cry and Mollie put her arm around her thin shoulders.

‘It’s all right, sis. It’s only a ship.’ She produced their tickets and passports, surrendered the suitcase to be delivered to their cabin, and was directed towards a gangplank level with the dock.

The floodlit quayside was frantically busy. Food was being taken on to another part of the ship: bags of flour and crates of wine, sides of beef and trays of leafy vegetables. Trolleys were pushed at a demonic speed, a giant crane transferred cargo to the hold, and people rushed to and fro – aimlessly, as far as she could see. An extremely elegant lady clad in white fur was negotiating a gangplank leading to the upper part of the ship, followed by a uniformed man carrying an assortment of parcels. There seemed to be an awful lot of unnecessary screaming and shouting.

A steward showed them to their cabin along a maze of narrow corridors, the motion of the boat gentle, almost soothing, considering the fierceness of the weather. Their suitcase was waiting for them.

The first, possibly worst, part of the journey was over, thought Mollie now as she lay in the bunk, tired out of her wits, but unable to sleep, having counted so many sheep she never wanted to see another for the rest of her life. Music came from some distant part of the ship. ‘I’m just wild about Harry,’ a woman was singing.

She pulled the clothes over her head when one of their fellow travellers came in, undressed, and used the lavatory with a great deal of grunting followed by a horrible smell. The bunk below creaked when she got in.

The other passenger arrived in what could have been hours later or might only have been minutes: Mollie’s head was swirling with clouds of tiredness and she couldn’t tell. A guttural voice from down below said, ‘I

see you on deck with man. Is it what you do for living, get paid to go with man? Is why you go to America?’

‘Mind your own business, you nosy German cow. You’re only jealous ’cos no man’d go with you for a hundred quid.’

Mollie opened one eye. The light would appear to be permanently on and she saw a young woman with a pretty, heart-shaped face and bright yellow hair wearing a little cocked hat with a bent feather and a partially bald fur cape. With a series of dramatic gestures, she removed the hat and cape, kicked off her shoes, undid the buttons of her satin blouse and slipped out of a black silky skirt that was much too thin for the wintry weather, then slid into bed in her petticoat, leaving the clothes on the floor.

‘Tomorrow, I report you to steward. Why you got no luggage? You not should be in cabin, you belong in steerage with immigrants.’

‘Oh, shurrup, Gertie. You’re keeping me awake.’

‘My name is Gertrude Strauss, *Miss Gertrude Strauss.*’

‘Nighty-night, *Gertie.*’

From then on, there was silence in the cabin, until Gertie began to snore, by which time Mollie had, at last, fallen asleep.

When she woke, a murky light was visible through the porthole, which was too high to see out of. Annemarie was dead to the world and the yellow-haired girl, already dressed, was sitting on the opposite lower bunk filing her stubby red nails. She smiled when she saw Mollie looking down on her. ‘Oh, hello,’ she said cheerily. ‘You’re awake. I’m Olive Raines from Deptford in London. Who are you and where are you from?’

‘Mollie Kenny. I’m from County Kildare in Ireland. That’s my sister, Annemarie, in the bed over yours.’

‘Annemarie’s a pretty name – and she looks pretty, too. Such lovely-coloured hair, sort of blue-black. What colour eyes has she got?’

‘Violet, and her hair almost reaches her waist. Everyone admires it.’

‘Really! Mind you,’ she added, almost as an after-thought, ‘you’re quite pretty, too.’

‘Not as much as Annemarie.’ Mollie, with her ordinary brown hair, ordinary brown eyes, and a face that was often described as ‘interesting’, had always known that she didn’t hold a candle to her beautiful sister. She lowered her head over the side of her bunk to introduce herself to Gertie, but the bed underneath was empty.

‘Miss Strauss has gone for a walk before breakfast.’ Olive rolled her eyes in an exaggerated fashion. ‘Have you met her yet?’

‘No, but I heard her come in last night. I heard you, too.’

‘Did you hear what she said?’

‘Yes.’ Mollie had known what Gertie had meant when she accused Olive of being paid to go with men. There was a woman who lived in a cottage just outside Duneathly who made her living the same way. Her name was Eileen. None of the women would speak to her and she never went to Mass – perhaps she didn’t dare. She’d often wondered why the Doctor hadn’t gone to Eileen, but perhaps he was worried his reputation would suffer and he’d sooner inflict himself on his daughters.

‘Oh, well.’ Olive gave her an arch look. ‘A girl has to earn a few bob the best way she can. What way do you earn a few bob, Mollie?’

‘I’ve never worked, not properly. My mammy wanted me to stay at school till I was sixteen and train for a career

like my brother, Finn, but she died almost two years ago and I left to look after the Doctor and Annemarie and my two little brothers.’ It wasn’t as arduous as it sounded. Fran Kincaid came in daily to do the heavy work and Nanny, who’d looked after all the children from Finn downwards, took care of Thaddy and Aidan. Mollie’s main tasks had been to see to the meals, act as receptionist for the Doctor, and keep his records up to date.

‘The Doctor?’ Olive raised her arched black eyebrows, which were about an inch higher than eyebrows normally were. The roots of her blonde hair were dark brown.

‘My father,’ Mollie said abruptly.

‘That’s a strange way to refer to your pa – the Doctor. Anyway, Mollie,’ she put the nail file in a worn leather handbag, ‘would you mind looking the other way for a mo while I use the lavvy?’

Mollie disappeared under the clothes until Olive had finished, then requested she do the same for her. Afterwards, she got washed in the little corner sink, put on her clothes, twisted her hair into a thick plait, yanked it over her shoulder, and tied the end with a blue ribbon. ‘What time’s breakfast?’ she asked as she laced up her boots.

‘Between eight and ten.’ Olive was in the process of painting her lips vivid scarlet with the aid of a hand mirror. ‘Don’t ask me what time it is now, because I’ve no idea, though there’s plenty of people about so I reckon it must have gone eight.’ As she spoke, there were footsteps in the corridor outside accompanied by a child’s excited laughter. ‘How long are you staying in New York, Mollie?’

‘We’re going to live there with our Aunt Maggie in Greenwich Village,’ Mollie said shortly.

‘What about the Doctor – your pa? Don’t he mind? I mean, who’ll look after him now you’ve gone?’

‘The Doctor doesn’t mind, no, and he’ll soon find someone else to look after him.’

Olive’s eyes narrowed. ‘You’re running away, aren’t you? That’s real spunky of you, Mollie. I’ve known people who’ve run away before, but never as far as America.’

There seemed no point in denying it, so Mollie didn’t bother. ‘What about you? Are you running away, too?’ Last night Gertie – Miss Strauss – had said Olive should be travelling steerage with the immigrants.

‘Me? No, I’m eighteen years old and off to start a new career on the stage. I can sing and dance, but haven’t had much luck so far.’ She stood and kicked her leg so high it was almost level with her shoulder. ‘I bet you can’t do that.’

‘Indeed I can’t,’ Mollie admitted.

Olive smirked. ‘I’m going to change me name to Rosalind Raines. It sounds better than Olive. Eh, what about your sister? I take it she’s getting up today?’

‘I’ll leave her to wake up of her own accord. We had no sleep the night before last and she was sick on the ferry from Ireland. She’s probably worn out.’

‘And you’re not, I suppose! Well, I’ll love you and leave you, Mollie. It’s so stuffy in here, I can hardly breathe. Tata.’ She left with a cheerful wave, slamming the cabin door and waking Annemarie, who groaned, sat up, and began to retch so hard that Mollie was worried she’d crack a rib. She grabbed a towel and held it over her sister’s face, but it was so long since either of them had eaten that there was no food left to bring up.



‘There, there, darlin’,’ she said softly, and began to wonder if going to New York was turning out to be a great big mistake. In her present state, Annemarie wasn’t up to the long voyage cross the Atlantic. They might be better off in Liverpool until she felt better, but the Doctor might suspect they’d come this far when he could find no trace of them in Ireland. He knew people in the city, other doctors, with whom he corresponded.

She bit her lip. Perhaps the best thing was to stay on the boat. Annemarie might improve once she got used to it and the sooner they got to New York – and dear Aunt Maggie – the better.

Her sister was asleep again, her head falling forward until it almost touched her knees. Mollie gently laid her down. It was hard to imagine this was the same, vivacious girl with whom she’d shared her life since she was born. Even Mammy’s death hadn’t dampened Annemarie’s high spirits for long. She’d used to pretend their mother was still there; had brought her home wild flowers from the fields to put on the kitchen window-sill; had drawn pictures, sung for her, convinced that, wherever she was, Mammy could see and hear. Her sister had lit up the Doctor’s house with her bright eyes and infectious laughter. But now she lay on the bed like a corpse.

All of a sudden, Mollie felt quite overwhelmed by their situation. She was sixteen, used to coping, particularly since Mammy died, but now everything was getting beyond her. The last few weeks, since the ‘thing’ had happened, had been nightmarish. But she wouldn’t cry. She rubbed her cheeks with her knuckles, willing away the tears that threatened to fall.

‘I’ll have some breakfast, a hot drink,’ she said aloud. ‘It’ll do me the world of good.’ She felt guilty for leaving

her sister on her own, but if she didn't have something to eat soon, she'd become ill herself and that would never do.

It was cold on deck, but the wind had died down, the sun was out, and it was a tonic to breathe in the fresh, salty air. She swallowed great gulps of it as she took in the still busy quayside and the majestic buildings opposite. There was a clock on one: half past nine, she noted, later than she'd thought. Liverpool appeared to be a splendid city. If it hadn't been for Annemarie, she wouldn't have minded having a look around. The ship didn't sail until some time this afternoon.

There were quite a few people out for a stroll around the deck, most of the women smartly, if not richly dressed, their skirts shockingly short, ending just below their knees. It was a style that hadn't yet reached Duneathly where ankle-length skirts were still in vogue.

She made her way to the third-class dining room. It was much grander than she'd expected: wood-panelled with glass-shaded wall lights and a striped carpet on the floor. A steward took her name and cabin number and led her to a round table big enough for eight. The other six must have already eaten, as only two places were set.

'I have a Miss Annemarie Kenny on my list,' the steward remarked. 'If she doesn't come soon, we'll stop serving.'

'My sister isn't well: she won't be having breakfast this morning.'

'I hope she's better soon,' the man said sympathetically. He would have been remarkably handsome had he not had such a fearful squint. 'If it's the seasickness, you can get something for it from the ship's doctor.'

'Thank you, I'll remember that.'

A few minutes later, she was tucking into bacon, eggs, and sausages, accompanied by an entire pot of tea to herself as well as a basket of crusty rolls, jam, and butter. The jam was raspberry, her favourite.

The world seemed a much-improved place after she'd finished eating and her stomach was full – she'd almost drowned herself in tea. She returned to the cabin. Annemarie was the only one there, still asleep, breathing evenly, looking quite peaceful. Mollie decided to go back on deck for a while. It smelled nicer and she'd like to have a last look at Liverpool: she'd almost certainly never see the place again.

She was leaning on the rail, admiring the clear blue sky and a sun that was more cream than yellow, when a girl of about her own age leaned beside her. Her fair hair was a mass of ringlets and she wore a bright-red coat with a fur-lined hood. Mollie's sensible navy-blue one looked desperately old-fashioned beside it.

It turned out the girl was American. Her name was Rowena and she'd boarded the *Queen Maia* in Hamburg where dozens – it might have been hundreds – of immigrants had been herded into the steerage compartment below where it was absolutely horrid. The stench was indescribable, she'd heard, and it was apparently so crowded that there was hardly room to move.

'You should have seen them, poor things,' Rowena said in a voice thick with emotion. 'Their clothes were little more than rags and they looked so wretched. A lot of the women had babies in their arms, and the older children and the men carried all their worldly possessions in bundles on their backs. It was so sad I wanted to cry.'

'*They* probably don't feel sad and wretched,' Mollie said. 'They're setting off for a new life in a new world. They might be a bit scared, that's all.'

Rowena conceded this could well be the case. ‘My grandparents were immigrants,’ she said proudly. ‘That’s why I know so much about it. They came to America forty years ago without a cent: Papa was only two. But they started their own bakery and did really well for themselves. Papa has just taken us, my brother and me, to Hamburg, to see the place where he was born and look up some of his cousins.’

It was all extremely interesting but, after a while, Mollie felt bound to excuse herself. The big clock across the way showed half past eleven: Annemarie had been on her own for ages. ‘My sister’s sick, I’d better go and see if she’s all right.’

‘If she’s OK,’ Rowena said eagerly, ‘perhaps we could all have a game of cards in the lounge this afternoon? That’d be neat, wouldn’t it?’

Mollie agreed that it would indeed be ‘neat’, and they exchanged cabin numbers in case they missed each other at lunchtime.

She knew something was badly wrong when she reached the cabin and heard the screams coming from inside. She almost fell through the door and found an hysterical Annemarie sitting up in the bunk yelling, ‘Mollie, Mollie, Mollie,’ over and over again. A small, tubby woman with iron-grey hair was holding her by the arms, saying soothingly, ‘All right, little girl, Mollie come soon.’

‘I’m here, darlin’,’ Mollie cried. ‘I’m here.’ She tried to reach her sister, but before she could get near, the woman slapped Annemarie’s petrified face. Annemarie stopped screaming and began to cry instead.

‘You shouldn’t have done that!’ Mollie gasped, appalled.

‘It all right, I am nurse. Your sister having nervous fit, now she better. Now she just cry, much better to just cry.’ The woman, who looked in her sixties, proceeded to gently stroke the back of the sobbing girl. ‘What wrong, child?’ She turned to Mollie and asked in her guttural voice, ‘What wrong with your sister?’

Mollie sank, trembling, on to one of the lower bunks. On reflection, a sharp slap was the best way to treat a person with hysterics. This must be Gertrude Strauss; she was being very kind. Last night, she’d got a completely different impression of the woman. ‘Annemarie had a very bad shock a few weeks ago and she hasn’t recovered since. Normally, she’s full of the joys of spring.’ At this, Miss Strauss looked bemused. ‘What I meant,’ Mollie explained, ‘is that normally she’s an exceptionally happy person, if rather highly strung.’ She’d never leave her sister alone again. Until Annemarie was back on her feet, she’d eat all her meals in the cabin.

‘Her heart beat very fast, like engine. It not . . . what word I want?’ Miss Strauss’s round face screwed up in a frown. ‘*Regular!* Her heart not beat regular.’

‘Oh, my God!’ Mollie could feel the colour drain from her face. ‘Last night, I forgot her digitalis, she has five drops on her tongue.’ Until recently, Annemarie had administered the drops herself and Mollie hadn’t got into the habit of remembering.

‘You better get it now. Is important.’

‘It’s in the washbag.’ Mollie leapt to her feet, her head meeting the frame of the bunk above with such force that, for a few seconds, the world went black.

‘*Mein Gott!*’ gasped Miss Strauss.

‘I’m all right.’ She reeled across the cabin to the locker where she’d put the things they’d need on the voyage. The washbag was right in front: she’d used it only that

morning. She rooted through the toothbrushes, the tooth powder, soap and face flannels, but couldn't find the little brown bottles with rubber droppers that she distinctly remembered putting there before they'd left the doctor's house.

But they *must* be there. Desperate now, she emptied everything on to the bed, but there was no sign. Perhaps she'd put them somewhere else. But where? She wouldn't have left them loose in the suitcase or her handbag where the tops might become loose. Just in case, she searched both: no digitalis. Knowing it was hopeless, Mollie reached for the fat, brown envelope in which she kept the money, their passports and other papers. The bottles weren't there either.

She sat back on her heels, closed her eyes, and relived the last hour spent in the Doctor's house, packing their clothes, trying not to make a noise, Annemarie lying fully dressed on Mollie's bed, watching with her big, violet eyes. Mollie had already taken an extra bottle of digitalis from the medicine cabinet in the surgery to add to the one that was almost full. She'd put both bottles on the bedside cabinet, crept into the bathroom to collect the other items for the washbag, returned to the bedroom, picked up the digitalis . . .

*No, she hadn't.* When she'd looked, Annemarie had fallen asleep and she'd had to wake her, tell her they were leaving any minute, that they had a long walk ahead of them. Then she'd put the washbag in the suitcase and snapped it shut . . . leaving the digitalis on the bedside cabinet.

'I'll have to buy some,' she muttered. She rooted through the mess on the floor for a ticket to see when the boat sailed. 'Thirteen hundred hours.' Three o'clock. It was a strange way to put it. 'I've plenty of time.'

‘Where you go?’ Miss Strauss asked.

‘To find a chemist’s and buy some digitalis.’ She shoved her purse into her pocket. ‘Do you mind looking after Annemarie while I’m gone? I won’t be long.’

‘Of course I look after your sister, but—’

Mollie didn’t wait for the woman to finish. She was already outside, racing along the corridor, and Miss Strauss’s final words – ‘Ship doctor will have digitalis’ – were addressed to the empty air.

She’d forgotten her hat, and the spot where she’d banged her head felt as if someone were banging it with a hammer. There wasn’t a shop of any description in the area outside the dock, let alone a chemist’s, just the majestic building she’d seen from the boat and streams of traffic, including dozens of tramcars whizzing by, sparks exploding from the lines overhead. It was a sight that, normally, would have made Mollie stop and stare, entranced, had she not had more important things on her mind. She grabbed the arm of the first man she saw and asked if he knew the whereabouts of the nearest chemist.

‘Let’s see now.’ He chewed his lips with maddening slowness. ‘The nearest chemist’s. Well, you won’t find one around here, luv. You’ll have to go into town to find a chemist’s. If you cross the road and go up Chapel Street . . . no, no, Water Street, it’s more direct, and turn right at Crosshall Street, you’re bound to find one there. A tram would take you quicker. They start from over there, but I’m afraid I don’t know what number.’

‘Is it far to walk?’

‘Not too far for a healthy young lady like you,’ he said with a wink and a smile.

‘Then I’ll walk.’ That way she was in control of the situation. Her legs wouldn’t let her down.

Except today they did. She was half walking, half running along Water Street, when her head began to swim, the pavement began to rock, and the tall buildings looked about to topple down on her. Her legs positively refused to move in the right direction. This must be what it was like to be drunk, unable to put one foot in front of the other. People were giving her some very odd looks: a woman stopped and asked if she was all right. 'I'm fine,' Mollie insisted, although her breath was coming in little hoarse gasps. She held on to a wall and gritted her teeth so hard that her jaw hurt: the Doctor had said Annemarie's heart condition was nothing to worry about, '*As long as she uses the drops every night before she goes to bed.*' She *had* to get the digitalis for her sister or die in the attempt.

Her breathing was easier now, so she resumed her search, hanging on to railings, supporting herself along walls, more people stopped to ask if she was all right, until she arrived at Crosshall Street and saw a chemist's directly across the road. Without thinking, she stepped off the pavement and was nearly mown down by a van. It stopped, just in time, with a screech of brakes. 'D'you want to get yerself killed, you stupid bitch,' the driver yelled.

Mollie hardly heard. A bell sounded loudly when she entered the shop, hurting her ears. 'Digitalis,' she gasped. 'Two bottles, please.'

'Digitalis is a poison,' the young woman behind the counter informed her. She wore wire-rimmed spectacles and a white overall, and her brown, frizzy hair was coiled over her ears. She had a pleasant face, very friendly. 'I'm afraid I can only sell you one.'

'One will do. It's for my sister: she has a heart



condition. Oh, do you mind if I sit down.’ There were two chairs at the front of the shop.

‘Sit down for as long as you like, luv. You look dead puffed. Would you like a glass of water?’

‘Please.’ Her throat was as dry as a bone and she felt desperately hot.

‘Here you are, luv.’ The girl came round the counter with the water. ‘Crikey! There’s a bump on your head as big as a football and it’s bleeding. Hang on a mo, I’ll get some disinfectant and bathe it. You’ve been in the wars, haven’t you?’

‘I banged it.’

‘Well, you must have banged it awful hard.’

It was rather nice to just sit there, sipping the water, while the girl gently dabbed the bump with cotton wool and disinfectant.

‘It’s not bleeding much, but you’ll need to be really careful next time you wash your hair. Don’t use a scented shampoo or anything.’

‘I won’t,’ Mollie promised.

‘I’ll give you a couple of Aspros. I don’t know whether your head’s hurting much, but it’ll ache like billy-o before the day’s out.’ She seemed extremely knowledgeable. ‘In fact, it mightn’t be a bad idea if you bought a box of Aspros while you’re here. Two tablets won’t be of much use.’

‘It’s throbbing more than aching at the moment. You’re being very kind,’ she said gratefully.

‘Oh, think nothing of it. I wanted to be a nurse, so I like treating people, and it makes a nice change from just selling things over the counter.’

‘Why didn’t you take up nursing? You’d make a great nurse.’

‘Ta.’ The girl blushed slightly, pleased by the compliment. ‘The thing is, the training takes for ever and you only get paid a pittance. When our dad was killed in the war, me, being the eldest like, had to find a job that paid a decent wage.’

‘That’s a pity, about your dad, and you not being able to become a nurse. Is that a clock on the wall over there?’

‘Yes.’ The girl regarded her worriedly. ‘It’s just gone half twelve. Can’t you see it proper?’

‘It’s a bit blurred.’ Everything was a bit blurred.

‘You really should go to the hospital with that bump. You might have suffered brain damage.’

Mollie laughed. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘You should at least be lying down, resting, not running like mad all over Liverpool,’ the girl said sternly. ‘I could tell you’d been running when you came in. Have you got far to go home?’

‘I’m not going home. The truth is, my sister and I are on our way to America – New York. We were already on the ship when I found out I’d forgotten to bring her drops.’

‘New York!’ She looked hugely impressed. ‘Flippin’ heck, I’m green with envy. Shouldn’t you be getting back, then? The ship might sail without you.’

‘It doesn’t sail for another couple of hours.’ She should get back to Annemarie, but her legs still felt wobbly and her vision still wasn’t right. ‘You don’t get many customers in this shop, do you?’ Not a soul had entered since she’d come in.

‘I locked the door and turned the sign over when you arrived so people’d think we were closed for dinner. I didn’t want them gawping at that bump on your head.’

‘Won’t that get you into trouble? I’d best get out your

way, I'm being a nuisance.' Mollie leapt to her feet and immediately sat down again when the floor rose up to greet her.

'I won't get into trouble, there's no need to get out me way, and you're not being a nuisance.' The girl smiled and announced she'd make them both a cup of tea. 'I'll just go and put the kettle on.' She disappeared into the back of the shop. 'Would you like a butty?' she shouted. 'It's mushy peas.'

'No, thank you,' Mollie shouted back. Even the thought of eating a mushy pea butty made her feel sick. 'I'd love a cup of tea, though. You *are* being kind. What's your name? Mine's Mollie Kenny.'

'Agatha Brophy. Most people call me Aggie, but I hate it. I'd far rather be Agatha. Have you heard of that writer, Agatha Christie? I've read all her books. I get them from the library.'

'No. Me, I like Ruby Ayres and Ethel M. Dell. They're desperately romantic.'

Agatha reappeared. 'Did you see that picture, Mollie, *The Sheik*, with Rudolph Valentino? Now *that's* romantic. He's got these dark, hypnotic eyes that make you go all funny.'

'There wasn't a picture house where I lived in Ireland,' Mollie said regretfully, 'so I've never been.'

'Well, there'll be plenty in New York.'

They smiled at each other and Mollie asked if she would remind her when it was one o'clock. 'I still can't see all that well, but it's getting better. I'll feel better all round once I've had a cup of tea, then I can make me way slowly back to the landing stage.'

At one o'clock, Mollie left the chemist's and went back the way she'd come, her legs her own again. She was

sorry to leave Agatha, who'd become a good friend in the space of half an hour. 'I'll send you a card from New York as soon as I've settled in,' she promised. 'I'll address it to the shop.'

Agatha wished her all the luck in the world and said she wished she were going, too. 'Don't forget to take some more of the Aspros if your head starts to ache.'

'I won't.' They waved to each other until Mollie reached the corner of Crosshall Street and couldn't see Agatha any more. She sighed and walked steadily in the direction of the River Mersey where Annemarie and the *Queen Maia* were waiting for her return.

It was just a dream, the sort in which something so hideous and horrible is about to happen that you wake up before it does, heart throbbing, bathed in perspiration, terrified you'll fall back asleep and return to the dream, to be butchered in your bed or slip off the roof you'd been hanging on to with your fingertips.

But this wasn't a dream: this was real. The *Queen Maia* really was sailing away, about fifty feet from the dock on its way towards the Atlantic and New York.

Without *her*.

Mollie began to scream, to scream and scream, to continue to scream until someone grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her: a man in uniform wearing a white peaked cap. 'Calm down, miss. What on earth's the matter?'

'The ship's left early and my sister's on board,' she gabbled. 'It wasn't supposed to sail until three o'clock.'

He shook his head. 'No, miss, one o'clock.'

'But it said three o'clock on the ticket, it said thirteen hundred hours. I distinctly remember.'

'Oh, Jaysus!' He groaned. 'I'm sorry, miss, but thirteen

hundred hours means one o'clock. Look, what's your sister's name? I'll get someone to telegraph the captain to say you've missed the boat.'

'Annemarie Kenny,' Mollie managed to say before she fainted dead away.