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Call the Ambulance!

Written by Les Pringle

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Call the Ambulance!

Les Pringle



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*For all those who ever have worked or ever will work at
Henrietta Street Ambulance Station*

Chapter One

‘You mustn’t push!’

‘Sorry, but I must.’

‘Can’t you hang on? We’re almost there.’

She let out a stifled moan. ‘Sorry. Oh God!’

When Mike and I collected the mother-to-be from her home I hadn’t suspected for a moment that the birth might be imminent. Her waters were intact and the contractions were nicely spaced at four-minute intervals. She was quite relaxed as we walked out to the ambulance and once on board chatted comfortably about this and that until a contraction pulled her up short. I glanced idly at my watch as Mike pulled on to the main road to begin the three-mile drive to hospital.

When a second contraction came along fast on the heels of the first, I looked down at my watch again and sat bolt upright. Only a minute since the previous one! How could that be? I moved to the edge of the seat and tried to

work out how much longer the journey would take. No more than six minutes, eight at the outside; we might just make it. And we almost did. The contractions continued fast and furious and then, with the hospital gates no more than a thousand yards away, her cheeks puffed up and that concentrated, faraway look I'd come to know so well settled on her features. She was starting to push. I knew nothing was going to stop the inevitable, but that didn't prevent me making my heartfelt, if futile, plea for her to hang on a little longer.

'Sorry . . . my waters have just gone.' She hoisted up her smock in time for me to watch the bed linen hungrily soak up the fluid and what it couldn't cope with slosh down the stretcher frame to the floor, where it found its way into every nook and cranny. I was on my feet now and didn't even have time to consider the unfairness of it all as another contraction brought the baby's wrinkled, hairy scalp into view. The next contraction would surely herald its entrance into the world.

I shouted through to Mike and asked him to pull over, while doing my best to guide the little body into the world as gently as I could. The cord was tight round its neck, but I managed to slip a finger underneath and hook it out of harm's way when the shoulders appeared a few moments later. Other than that it was a textbook birth. The baby girl sucked in air, screwed up her face and let out a cry that was music to my ears. I bundled her up in a sheet and was congratulating the mother when she pointed at the window with a shout of surprise.

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‘Look!’

I glanced up and found myself staring into a pair of eyes pressed up against the glass.

Then Mike’s voice boomed out.

‘Oi! You! Clear off unless you want my boot up your arse!’

The eyes vanished, only to be quickly replaced by another pair. Mike was outside the ambulance and still remonstrating loudly. The second set of eyes lingered a while longer, then they too disappeared. Mike opened the back doors and climbed in, looking flushed. He glanced down at the mother and baby.

‘Everything OK?’

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘What’s going on outside?’

‘Oh, it was just a couple of yobs. I parked near a bus stop and they wandered down to see what was going on. You can’t believe the cheek of youngsters these days.’

The new mother gazed down at her baby contentedly.

‘Oh well, it will be something to tell Becky when she grows up I suppose.’ She stroked a little cheek and smiled at the gurning face. ‘One day you’ll be thrilled to hear you were delivered by someone just out of school while everyone off the number twenty-six bus was watching, won’t you?’

A slight exaggeration perhaps, but you can’t let the facts get in the way of a good story, especially one that will last a lifetime.

I sat back in my seat and took a moment to bask in the self-satisfied glow that always comes after successfully

delivering a baby. Mike, however, saw to it that the glow was short-lived.

‘Have you seen the state of your shirt?’

I looked down. At some point my tie had dipped into fluids on the stretcher and then gone on to smear the unpleasant residue of amniotic fluid, mucus and blood across the front of my shirt. The woman followed my gaze.

‘Goodness, you are a mess.’

It was an understatement, but I made light of it.

‘Not to worry, I’ve got plenty of shirts back on station.’

‘What about your tie?’ She hesitated for a moment before continuing. ‘This might sound like a strange question, but will you be throwing it away?’

It was a strange question, which I answered without much thought. ‘Well, yes. I suppose so.’

‘In that case, do you mind if I have it?’

‘What?’

‘I know it sounds a bit weird, it’s just that I thought it might be a nice memento for Becky when she grows up. You know what I mean – the tie of the ambulance man who delivered her and all that.’

I unclipped it and handed it to her.

‘If you really want it, be my guest.’

She folded it up and tucked it carefully into her overnight bag.

‘Thanks. What’s your name, by the way?’

‘Les.’

‘Well, Les, thanks again. I’m sure Becky will treasure it.’

Mike and I wandered back outside after dropping

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mother and daughter off in the maternity department. I'd picked up a mop and bucket from the sluice room and got to work mopping the ambulance floor. Mike didn't seem inclined to help, preferring to draw contentedly on a cigarette and study the evening sky. He broke the silence after a minute or two of contemplation.

'You know, some people get the baby named after them . . . It's got to be a queer fish that gets a tie named after him.'

I squeezed out the mop. 'Very funny.'

'I tell you what though,' Mike continued. 'If you keep giving away ties there's going to be a national shortage. How many deliveries does that make it now?'

I carried on mopping. 'I don't know, I haven't been keeping count.' Of course, that was a lie. It was six, and six in just over a year and a half was at least four too many in most people's book. I picked up the sodden linen and dropped it into a plastic bag before starting the laborious task of cleaning the stretcher frame. I couldn't resist getting in a jibe when Mike flicked away his cigarette and yawned.

'Would you like me to see if I can find you a chair so you can watch me clean this mess up in comfort?'

He looked at me over the top of his glasses.

'Now, now, no need to be sarky; it doesn't become you. Anyway, it's your mess, not mine.'

'My mess? How do you figure that?'

'You must be encouraging these women, or you're a jinx. Either way, it's down to you.'

Mike was the shift patriarch while I still languished depressingly close to the bottom of the pecking order. I'd been in awe of him since arriving at Henrietta Street Ambulance Station as a new recruit just over eighteen months earlier. In his mid-fifties and built like a bull, he was a tough, charismatic individual who, in common with a lot of people working at the Street, had spent many years in the forces before joining the ambulance service. His army days had taken him to the D-Day beaches and then on to see active service in Malaya and Korea. Heaven knows what he must have thought when I and others of my generation started walking through the door with our long hair and less-than-focused view of discipline. He mostly kept his thoughts to himself, only occasionally going off on a rant about the shortcomings of the younger generation. It was all a front though; behind the scary exterior was a man of compassion, wit and fierce loyalty. You needed friends like Mike at the Street. Despite having qualified six months or so earlier, I was still finding my feet in an ambulance depot every bit as tough as the inner city it did its best to care for.

When everything had dried out we loaded the stretcher and set off back to the Street. We couldn't think about taking on another job before I got cleaned up and sorted out a fresh shirt. Twenty minutes later I wandered into the messroom buttoning a crisp new shirt taken straight from the packaging and hoping I hadn't missed any pins. Mike was sitting at the communal table sharing a pot of tea with Jack and Larry, two of our shift mates. Jack was the

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newest member of the shift, despite being in his mid-thirties, and still had three months to go before being fully qualified. Larry, an irreverent character, was a couple of years younger but had ten years' experience under his belt. He looked up when he noticed me.

'I hear you've been at it again.'

I feigned puzzlement. 'At it?'

'Yes, at it. That's got to be at least eight. I'm going to start painting storks on the side of your ambulance.'

'Ties might be a better idea,' Mike suggested.

I sat down and squeezed half a cup from the all but empty teapot.

'Very amusing. Anyway, it's six, not eight.'

'I thought you weren't counting,' Mike said.

'I'm not. It's just that it happens to be six.'

I'd already delivered more babies than some might in an entire career. It's strange how these things pan out, but at the time it was given as read that if a baby was to be born during our time on duty, then it would be me and whoever I was working with who would end up delivering it. In a similar way, others found themselves attending every nasty road accident that came along, while for the next crew it might be cardiac arrests. The whole business, irrational as it might sound, was a fact none the less, and I was beginning to think that all I had to do to send a pregnant woman into labour was to wish her the time of day. Larry had the dubious reputation of attracting every hopeless drunk in Birmingham like a moth to the flame. As we sat around drinking tea and chewing the fat, it

didn't take long for him to come up with a story that combined alcohol and childbirth.

'I think I was working with Ian Williams from "D" shift when we were called to a drunken woman in labour at a social club. It was just about closing time and when we got there she was lying outside on the grass verge, flat on her back with her knees in the air.' He looked round at the rest of us. 'You know that bloody horrible sinking feeling you get sometimes even before you get out of the cab?' We all nodded. 'Well, I had it big time. She was a hefty piece, eighteen stone at least, and howling with each contraction like someone was jabbing her with a cattle prod. When I suggested that it might be an idea to get in the ambulance, she refused point blank. She said she was comfortable where she was and wasn't moving. Even when I pointed out to her that it was dark, starting to rain and that she had an audience of at least twelve drunks, she still wouldn't budge.'

'You never did have much of a way with women,' Mike observed.

Larry gave him a sanctimonious smile and took a sip of tea.

'So what was it all about?' Mike asked. 'Was she a bit simple or something?'

'Heaven knows. I suppose she couldn't have been that bright if she thought spending the evening boozing in a social club was a good idea when she was full term. But even so, drunk or not, what was going on in her head?' Larry put down his cup. 'That's not all. There was a chip

shop on the corner and most of the people coming out of the club got themselves a fish supper and then wandered over to watch the show. Some even brought their pints out as well – quite a little party. So there we were, crouching in the rain trying to help her, with the smell of chips, vinegar and beer wafting over us. Not that she gave a monkey’s. She just parted her legs even wider and after about three pushes out comes the baby – just like shelling peas. I’ve never been able to drive past that club since without a picture of her coming into my head. And that poor baby, I hope it never finds out that it was born on a grass verge in the rain surrounded by ogling drunks stuffing chips down their throats, especially when it could all have been done neat and tidy in the back of the ambulance.’ Larry rested his case and surveyed his audience while we battled to shake off the images he’d planted in our heads.

His story only served to underline what I’d been learning for the past eighteen months: no amount of training can prepare you for the realities of life on the road. The idiosyncrasies of the public are legion, if not limitless. I mean, what training officer would dream up a practice scenario the like of which Larry had just described? And if it had been dreamt up, would any new recruit have taken it seriously? I doubt it; I know I wouldn’t have. Even putting the eccentrics to one side, the truth is that real patients tend to be less compliant than the plastic mannequins we practise on and, unlike training school, their symptoms never seem to be laid out on a sheet of

paper to be ticked off one by one. Some may argue that it all adds spice to a job that by its very nature is unpredictable anyway. And, if I'm honest, part of me agrees with them – which is just as well, because I was to see plenty of it.