

# Babe and the Moon

By HENRY PHILIP BROAD

As soon as the emergency operation on Major Dexter was over, Colonel Gardner, chief surgeon of the military hospital, called aside Lieutenant Mary Howard, the gray-haired, pink-cheeked chief nurse who had stood at the door of the operating room, efficiency itself from white-winged cap down to rubber-heeled shoes.

"It will be urgent, Lieutenant, to detail a nurse, a special nurse on the case," he said. "A reliable nurse—I am very much concerned about Dexter. This fall from horseback!" He shook a lean, disapproving head. "And the hot season full upon us!" Swiftly he dashed the rubber gloves into a basin which the nurse held out to him.

"You have someone handy, Lieutenant?" "I think I have, Colonel," said the chief nurse, after a little pause. Then, puckering her attractively dark brows, "There is Miss Low, just back from the States and then there is Miss Hermann..."

"With roses in their cheeks, and the latest wrinkle in dance-steps, what?" the chief surgeon interrupted, crossly. "This is no ordinary case, Lieutenant. Very much depends on the person who takes care of him, especially at night. I'll be mighty glad if the wound sets up nothing worse than a violent fever." He sighed wearily, and then, turning to the nurse again, continued his arrangements. "What I have in mind, Lieutenant, is a nurse—well, a nurse—not too young... and... er... er... and above all things, not in the least good-looking!"

Lieutenant Howard bent her fine gray head to hide an amused smile.

Poor Colonel Gardner! Ever since his own son had fallen for a pretty face under a winged cap he had been of the obsession that nurses had nothing else on their minds but the capture of desirable husbands. Not that he was altogether wrong. Still there was a limit to everything, even to such a complex. Well, she'd find

the right person and allay his worried apprehensions. "There is Babe Martin, Colonel," she said.

He threw up his hands in horror: "Babe, Babe! Lieutenant, What I am looking for is a nurse—and not a debutante!"

Here she burst out laughing heartily. "Excuse me, Colonel, but the idea of Babe as a debutante..."

"But her name? Ever heard of a nurse with a name like that?"

"It's because she's small, Colonel. And something in her face—something about not caring for anything but her work.... You know the type, Colonel."

"How old? Been out here long?"

"Old? Why, thirty-five at least, but at that she manages to look older than it is well for any nurse to look. A very good nurse, though, very conscientious. The ideal nurse, I may say—the kind you read of and that you so rarely find in actual life.... Her term? I think it expires in September. She insists on going home. All the others have asked for an extension of their stay here in Manila. Strange, she does not like the islands."

With her gray, gold-flecked eyes she looked up at her superior officer and added:

"No fear with Babe, Colonel. Babe is no drawing-card with men."

"Well, she seems to qualify. I am rather sorry for poor Dexter, though." Then, with a chuckle, he said: "Still, it'll serve him right to be taken care of by an ideal nurse. The old madaep is always ready to fall for a pretty face. But let's not be too hard on him, Lieutenant! Put this Babe person on night duty."

"That'll be ideal, Colonel," was her final response, as she handed him his gold-corded Stetson.

Babe—or as the records had it—Miss Martha Martin, Second Lieutenant, Army Nurse Corps,

U.S.A., was in the room she shared with Sally getting ready for another night of duty. How oppressive the heat! Even the night brought no relief.

Just then Sally came in, wifed from afternoon-duty. Poor Sally, thought Babe. So little suited to be a nurse, especially in the Philippines! Pretty, vivacious and always in love!

Sally pulled off her dank white garments, throwing them in a heap on the floor; then, in her kimono, "Say, Babe, are you making yourself beautiful for your gentleman case tonight?"

Babe, pinning a cap on her pale-blond hair, did not reply. It was not the first time that Sally had teased her; nor was Sally the only one to indulge in the sport.

"Evelyn says his fever 's gone up something fierce." Sally went on.

"So you see, Babe my love, you needn't bother, he won't notice you."

"You must be tired as tired can be, Sally," Babe retorted. "When you are as mean as that I know you are worn out. You had better go to bed and sleep it off."

"Go to bed, your great-grandma!" Sally shouted from the door. "What do you think? Don't you know I am expecting a couple of callers?"

Babe crossed the small garden in front of the nurses' home and walked over to the hospital. She looked at the chart in the office. Fever had gone up, sure enough, but otherwise no change. How would it all end? Poor Major Dexter, lying there so helplessly, so hopelessly, she feared. Such a handsome man and so popular! Popular, yes, with his own set, of course, especially with the young married women of the regiment.... She sighed and cautiously stepped into the sick-room. It was a long and narrow room, off which there was a screened sitting porch facing the front. The nurse in charge withdrew and Babe was alone with her patient. Pathetically thin he lay on the white army bed; his eyes were closed, yet he did not seem to sleep, for on the cover-let his hands were fidgeting restlessly. Poor worn hands, Babe

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thought, in a man not yet forty. She sat down near the bed and slowly, rhythmically began to stroke those hands.

Now, apparently, he was sleeping quietly and she withdrew her hand; but almost immediately he grew restless again. Her hand seemed to infuse him with quiet. And thus she sat for ten nights, stroking him into blissful oblivion, with strained watchfulness on her part, lest the slow unceasing rhythm might lull her to sleep.

As the days and nights passed still there was no change in Major Dexter's condition. The chief surgeon was at his wits' ends as he confided to the smiling head nurse: "The patient should be dead or alive, according to all known precedents." And just now, he was neither. The reports on the chart repeated themselves in endless monotony, restless at times—asleep; restless at times—asleep. This was the night nurse's report. One night Colonel Gardner had gone to visit his patient at an inordinate hour and had found the head nurse's judgment entirely substantiated. That pale blonde, that forgotten old maid would never make an impression on Dexter if he ever took an interest again in women.

The night that Babe was never to forget settled upon Manila in an ineffable halo of moonlight. As Babe unobtrusively enough passed the sala on her way to the hospital, Sally, comfortably ensconced in a deep, becoming Bilbid chair, called out: "Don't get excited, Babe my love, if anything happens tonight. They say he is at his lowest."

"Miss Martin," said the day-nurse, "orders from Colonel Gardner to call him in case . . . of any change. He will be at Mr. Lowe's until midnight, and later at his quarters."

"Yes, it's in the chart," Babe answered, very much perturbed. Fever had gone to such height that it seemed impossible to have it and still be alive. The crisis, surely. She looked at her patient as he lay there so spent, so still. Even the hands twitched no longer. Like poor wind-blown leaves they rested on the sheet. All strength gone already? She bent down to him. His pulse was slow, very slow . . . but it had been

slower before. A last flicker of vitality? A final summing up of forces, perhaps? It might be a matter of hours, perhaps of minutes. She would have to call the Colonel soon. So she rearranged bottles and glasses on the small table near the bed, set things to rights again on the tiny dresser, and smoothed over the light blanket. Babe was a conscientious nurse.

Outside the world lay under the silver effusion of the moon. The flame-trees in the hospital courtyard wore wraps of shimmering gold through which the fire-flies wove an endless thread of glittering splendor. The acacias had folded their green-and-silver leaves as if in prayer. A hush had fallen like a heavy mantle upon all things. Only the gecko-lizards from their leafy fastnesses pierced with their weird staccato call the night that had not quite become day.

The awful, awful stillness, Babe thought. The terrible quiet! As though the heart of the universe had ceased to beat. The eeriness of it. She felt painfully and utterly alone in an unfriendly world. She would have given anything to have heard a human voice, to have had someone to talk to.

It was just as Babe had reproved herself for an unbecoming case of nerves that the patient slowly opened his eyes.

She watched him intently. This was a change. Hadn't she better call the chief surgeon?

Very slowly he turned his eyes upon her, looked long and intently, then closed them once more. A smile crept into his face, a smile of regret, she thought. The smile lingered, sadly illuminating the ravaged features. To her own amazement Babe's eyes filled with tears. It was so sad to see a man die who knew he was dying, she explained the tears to herself, dashing them away excitedly.

Before midnight the chief surgeon dropped in. The nurse reported the change. He waited a while, then left, shrugging sympathetic shoulders: "It might take him until morning or even longer. . . . I am to be called, nurse, in case. . . ." "Yes, Colonel."

The door had scarcely closed on the physician than the patient opened his eyes once more and

directed their full glance upon the nurse standing by the bedside. His lips were moving and she bent down to him. High up in the star-strewn firmament stood the moon.

Very distinctly, in the perfect stillness of the night, she heard him whisper and bent closer to him. "Margaret", he breathed. "Margaret!"

Babe drew back. Delirium was setting in. Too bad, too bad. With brimming eyes she reached for a small bottle, poured some of its contents into a spoon and approaching him said gently, "This will do you good."

He took it meekly, looking at her steadily, and then lay back. But the drug did not have the desired effect. A quarter of an hour passed in silence. Once more he directed his glance upon her. His eyes looked out pleadingly from the pale face, and moved by their mute insistence he sat down on the edge of the bed. He stretched out his hands to her: "Margaret!" He whispered again, "oh, my Margaret!"

Now he took her hands and stroked them and she let him do it. Suddenly, with a weak, yet determined gesture, he raised her hand to his lips. She hastily withdrew it, brushing the bandaged forehead as she did so. Then with infinite reproach in entreating eyes and in a voice barely audible he pleaded: "You said you loved me, Margaret."

From high above the moon poured bewitching radiance into the room; and once more into the velvety stillness of the night his words cut a plaintive refrain: "But you said you loved me, Margaret!"

Then something altogether unheard-of happened. Babe bent down to the sick men, she who had never bent to a man before! With a gesture infinitely tender she put her arms around him and into his ears, softly and sweetly, she whispered: "I do love you, dear." Then he drew her to him and kissed her lips and she returned the caress, her first and—as she shiveringly told herself—his last! Twice more during the night he asked her if she loved him and each time she said she did, sealing her pledge with a kiss.

(To be continued)

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