

## Author's Introduction



There was a time when the only welfare officer was the school attendance officer, when the needs of children at risk were catered for by the NSPCC and the health visitors, when disabled children were provided for by the appropriate voluntary societies, and the British Red Cross spread its benevolent wings over all. At that time the health visitor had an undisputed responsibility for the health and welfare of everyone within her area.

It is of those days that this book is written, days when lice and fleas and scabies were so common that cleansing stations were operating all over the country, when TB was rampant, sanatoria were filled, and children died from diphtheria and whooping-cough. On new council estates, baths were frequently used to store coal. In those days health visitors were important in the community. We were consulted by doctors and magistrates, police and charities; we co-operated closely with all voluntary societies, with paediatricians and probation officers; the council employed and paid us, but we worked for the families under our care, and their needs took priority over statistics and economics in the council offices.

*An Armful of Babies and a Cup of Tea*

I have seen sanatoria close for lack of patients, diphtheria and whooping-cough eradicated by wholesale immunisation, cleansing stations disappear, and generations of clean, healthy children result from our years of intensive health education in homes and clinics. Today a proliferation of social workers and welfare officers have taken over much of the work which was once the province of the health visitors. Other fields are opening to them; they have new challenges to meet. As long as there are people, there will be challenges; there will be hope and despair, success and failure, laughter and tears. It is of such things that this book is about, because it is a book about *people*.

# 1

## A Small Henhouse



**I**t all began on Southport Pier. Eileen Newton and I had returned from overseas service with the QAs and had been posted to a makeshift hospital in Southport's Floral Hall, to look after POWs repatriated from Japan who were under psychiatric care. We had enormous fun together, playing with slot machines on the pier, drooling over Rex Harrison (who was almost continually on the screen in three different films) and laughing together over the vicissitudes of our temporary accommodation. After years of camp hospitals, even a narrow wooden bed in the dormitory of a children's home was comparative luxury.

Playing on the pier, walking by the sea, sitting by the bandstand in the Floral Gardens, we discovered each other, liked what we found, and decided to set up home together somewhere in Warwickshire, near my ageing mother and Eileen's married sister. After years of hospital living-in and of army messes, we longed for a little place of our own, for the home comforts we had so missed during the war, for our own front door which we could shut against the world, and lead our own lives in privacy and independence.

*An Armful of Babies and a Cup of Tea*

We were both demobilised in 1945. Eileen got a job in Birmingham as a Nursing Officer with the Ministry of Labour, while I went to London to do my health visitor's training. With the arrival of penicillin we felt the end was coming to the challenge of nursing as we had known it, and we had grown far away, in the easy comradeship of army life, from the narrow disciplines and etiquette of a civilian hospital. In our Territorial Army unit there were all sorts and degrees of nurses, and I had found the health visitors more outgoing, more companionable, more fun to be with than the average ward sister, whose outlook was apt to be limited by the four walls of her ward – and I liked what they told me about their work.

The training at the Royal Sanitary Institute lasted six months, followed by a period of close supervision in Solihull, with experienced staff always at hand to help and advise. In the busy clinics I observed and listened, and soon realised how little I had learnt on the training course. You can't learn about people from books and lectures, certainly not about baby people, who, not having read the books, invariably break all the rules.

It was frightening knocking on those first doors. Up till then my patients had come to me, not I to them, and these weren't even patients. They weren't ill and in need of my professional skill. What had I to offer, in my brand-new navy-blue suit and hat, with the Warwickshire badge on the hatband? They didn't need me, not like a district nurse is needed, or a midwife. Would they even want me? Strangely enough, they did, and the kindness of their reception, and the courtesy with which they

*A Small Henhouse*

listened to what few suggestions I dared to offer them were a tribute to the service which the health visitors had been giving to the people of Warwickshire before I was even aware that such people existed.

I've always felt sympathy for salesmen knocking on doors trying to sell their wares to busy women with no time to listen to their patter, and no desire for their products. What had I to sell to these young mothers? Health for their precious babies. You can't carry health in a suitcase, nor display it on the kitchen table. In those early days I wasn't even convinced of the value of what I was doing, and after a morning of visiting polite but experienced and confident mothers, I would long to be back in a hospital ward, to be healing and comforting, to be needed and wanted and appreciated.

An early awakening to the value of my work came as a direct result of my diffidence. A first visit to a big house was not well received. The mother was a private patient and told me she would call in her doctor if she needed help. She did not actually ask me not to call again, and I left her my telephone number, but it was her first baby, and I should have made a follow-up visit. It was three months later, on hearing from a neighbour that the baby was in hospital, that I plucked up courage and rang the bell again. I was warmly welcomed and told, shamefacedly, that the baby had had severe digestive problems caused by incorrect feeding. The doctor had visited frequently but was unable to find the cause of the trouble and had called in a paediatrician from Birmingham. The feeding formula was wrong; the milk

*An Armful of Babies and a Cup of Tea*

was too concentrated. It had all cost her a great deal of money, and the poor baby a great deal of pain.

'Why didn't you ring me?' I asked. 'I could have told you that over the telephone.'

She smiled ruefully.

'I know. "For twopence" – as the paediatrician pointed out. I'll know better another time.'

Too many people make the mistake of thinking that the more they pay for advice and treatment, the better it must be.

After a year's apprenticeship I was considered safe to be let loose on the public and was allocated my own field of work in Kenilworth and its surrounding villages and hamlets, responsible for my own clinics and schools. While I moved into digs in Leamington, Eileen and I got down to house hunting. As it happened, her sister and brother-in-law lived in Kenilworth and were keeping their eyes and ears open on our behalf. Leonard Smalley was a dedicated and much-loved doctor and my rather vague connection with him – sharing a home with his wife's sister – was to be of immense help in my professional life and opened all sorts of doors to me. Claire, Eileen's sister, was one of Kenilworth's leading citizens, a councillor, chairwoman of innumerable committees, governor of most local schools, a JP and twice a mayoress when Leonard wore the mayoral chain. They thought we were most unwise and held out no hope of our partnership being successful or lasting. Who can blame them? They knew Eileen, and they quickly assessed me, and we were both women of pretty average independence and obstinacy. On the face of it,

*A Small Henhouse*

it seemed a rash decision, but nursing, especially in wartime, is a great smoother of rough edges and teaches the give and take required in any partnership.

In spite of her misgivings, Claire was helpful, and it was she who found us the little house in Birmingham Road. I wonder what there is about a house that makes it somehow different from other identical houses in the same street? Before we had seen the number, we were both hoping that the honeysuckle-covered porch belonged to 149. Often, when we were living there, strangers would call to ask the way, to use the telephone or the loo, to borrow a safety pin. When we asked, 'Why pick this house?' The reply was always, 'There's something so friendly about it.' Yet, apart from the honeysuckle, 149 was exactly like 147 and 151, with its sloping roof and dormer windows, like surprised eyebrows, the formal little front garden and short drive to the garage. It was a little way out of the town, the road running through a ford, past the castle ruins and the green opposite – the scene of the annual Boxing Day meet, when it was bright with the gay new Christmas scarves and woollen caps proudly displayed by children of all ages. When the ford was full it was a great gathering place for children, who would watch with glee as rash motorists splashed through it – often, to the spectators' delight, getting trapped in the deceptively deep water. A sharp corner and steep hill beyond the ford, a hazard for cars with wet brakes, brought us to the clock and the main shopping street.

Alternatively, a hill opposite the house led to the High Street shops, old and picturesque. At the top of

the hill, this road passed St Austin's Roman Catholic church, a little Pugin gem, with its attached school and presbytery in which reigned a gentle and holy old man. Canon Swift was well into his eighties and unable to do much active work in the parish, but he was ably supported by his curate, Father Pat O'Leary, a big, black-haired, curly-headed, boisterous and endearing young man with the physique of a prize-fighter and the heart of an angel. It was a treat to see him on Good Friday afternoon after the service, armed with great sticks, waylaying reluctant men who were trying to slink past him and pretending not to see the church carpets spread out on the grass.

'Come on now, you can help beat the carpets. Isn't that the great penance you can be doing for Good Friday?'

He was bigger than most men of the parish, and the carpets got beaten. But those strong hands could be so gentle in cradling a child or tending the sick and house-bound whom he visited and cared for with such love.

In those days, Kenilworth had not become the dormitory town for Coventry that it is today; it was an intimate little place where everyone knew each other and many people were related, in varying degrees of kinship. There were family businesses, like the firm of brothers who had built (and lived in) our own house, and another family of brothers running three businesses: plumbing, ironmongery and greengrocery. I discovered the intricacies of Kenilworth's relationships after a party Eileen and I gave for the builders, plumber, decorator, plasterer and carpenter who had helped to enlarge



*A Small Henhouse*

149, much to the amusement of the Aitken brothers who had fitted in, five of them with their parents, without feeling cramped. We fed our guests on beer and sandwiches and entertained them with one of the early television sets, and everyone in Kenilworth knew about it. Every family I called on was full of it, being related in some obscure way to one or other of our guests. From my point of view that party was extremely good for business. But that came a lot later. In 1947 we were busy getting settled in. The idea of the extension resulted from the many friends we made and the need of a room large enough for party-giving and a guest room large enough for two.

There are problems and compensations in a 'henhouse', and one of the problems we met at the very beginning. People don't get wedding presents unless they are getting married! In 1946 furniture, china and household linen was all 'utility' – basic, drab, but adequate. Eileen's careful search for export rejects produced a complete service of rose-patterned china, of which we were very proud. A canteen of silver and some good pieces of furniture came from her old home. Clothing coupons were hoarded and exchanged for sheets and curtain material. For the rest we hunted round markets, bazaars and second-hand shops – and what fun it was! One of the joys of two women sharing a home is the shared shopping. In a henhouse there is no dividing line between the man's province and the woman's province. We were both women and every domain was shared – decorating, gardening, furnishing, sewing, catering. It is really much more fun

*An Armful of Babies and a Cup of Tea*

playing with your partner among rolls of wallpaper and shelves of furnishing fabrics, even on limited means, than being alone among such excitements with only a husband's cheque for company, however generous.

In those days L-plates were not displayed on cars. Not only should outsize Ls, in bright red, have been in evidence on my Austin, and on my new navy-blue uniform, but also in the kitchen!

Even if brides have not taken a pre-marriage cookery course, their early mistakes are probably cushioned by the rapture of young love, and starry-eyed bridegrooms may fail to notice the culinary howlers which, should they occur a few years later, might be sent hurtling through the window. There were no stars in our eyes, but, as we were both learning and experimenting, no stars were needed. For our own self-protection we withheld criticism, remembering, nose curling over the burnt potatoes, how last night's over-salted soup had been swallowed without even a raised eyebrow. There were not too many casualties. We had a good cookery book and followed each recipe meticulously. We were used to following instructions to the last minim. Carelessness in the dosage of drugs and medicines can be disastrous. Not for us the unhelpful advice from experienced and blasé cooks: 'Chuck in a bit of this, and a handful of that, and bung it in the oven.' Eileen's hands and mine were different sizes anyway.

The garden provided us with fresh vegetables, apples and small fruit, and we planted a herb bed, which contained nearly every herb known to man – at least to English-dwelling man – even a root of incense given by

a friend. I've never been good at remembering names, so, when I decided to flavour the stockpot for a good nourishing soup, I gathered leaves from all the herbs. It never occurred to me to plant the culinary herbs separate from the others, so in they all went: thyme, sage, mint, parsley, lavender, peppermint, rosemary, verbena, even a sprig of incense. It smelt wonderful and it tasted delicious, and we suffered no ill effects. The mints were a recurring problem. I could never remember which was which, and, in early summer when new potatoes and young peas were cooking, the kitchen would sometimes be filled with a strange and not unpleasant smell of peppermint.

Fortunately, we had a kind butcher who, like so many tradesmen and neighbours, was a grateful and admiring patient of Leonard's and took the doctor's wife's sister and her friend under his wing. Hitherto, meat, for me, had been something which just appeared on a plate in hospital dining rooms and hotels. It came as a joint in other people's houses. I knew, of course, that 'roasts' came as beef, lamb or pork, but sirloin, buttock, silverside, brisket, ribs, legs, shoulders and hands were not in my vocabulary, catering-wise. To me, a shoulder was a clavicle and a hand was something with five fingers that grew on the end of an arm. Listening to experienced shoppers in the queue giving their order, and seeing them receive goods that seemed totally unrelated to what they had asked for, I eventually found myself standing at the counter, wanting something simple like a 'Sunday joint'. Jake the butcher was a large man, his ample form covered with a striped

apron, eyes twinkling behind his glasses. I had met him before, in my childhood, in our pack of 'Happy Families'. But his eyes didn't always twinkle. I had seen them blazing with anger. No awkward customer lasted long in his shop, but he recognised a tyro when he saw one. There are tradesmen who make a nice profit from the ignorance of customers, but not Jake. Week by week he helped me through the intricacies of his trade, identifying joints and cuts, discussing quality and value, suggesting recipes, ensuring that his 'Favourite Girls' ate the very best that our money and our ration books allowed.

It was always fun when Eileen and I were able to visit the shops together, and tradesmen must have smiled in pleasurable anticipation when they saw us arrive. Together we always seemed to see things which, on my own, I would not have noticed. If we found a recipe we liked the sound of, we would go out and buy the ingredients, regardless. Such expeditions might have been disastrous for the housekeeping purse, but they did result in exciting meals. Eileen, on her own, was not safe in a shop. Asked to pop into the electricians one morning to buy an adaptor, she came home having bought a refrigerator. Admittedly, we needed a fridge, and it was going at a bargain price; nevertheless when I needed a spare bulb for my car I went to the garage myself. There just might have been a bargain in the showroom!

We were fortunate in our neighbours. At 151 lived a master-carpenter with his wife and small son; at 147 three bachelor brothers – the eldest, Charlie, being a

*A Small Henhouse*

decorator. Charlie adopted us from the very first, watching over us like a broody hen over her chicks. When we camped in the house one weekend before moving in, it was Charlie who hurried round before it got dark, concerned and embarrassed, to tell us that the uncurtained windows rendered us visible from the road. Charlie was the 'man about the house', ready to do any odd job that might be beyond the capabilities of two helpless little women. I hope he was not disappointed that there were so few. Helplessness is not a characteristic of a nurse, and wartime nursing in jungles and deserts requires a certain ingenuity in coping with minor practical difficulties. We graduated, quite undeservedly, from being Charlie's 'ladies' to being his 'angels'. After the episode of the uncurtained windows he never called at the house uninvited, but would materialise at the fence when we were in the garden to check on our well-being, and on that of our dog, our budgie, our guests of all ages. If there were any angels in the relationship, I think it was Charlie who wore the wings in his capacity as guardian angel of 149.

## 2

### Early Days



Finding my way round Kenilworth was easy. Streets had names and most houses had numbers, but it was different in the villages, scattered over the wooded Warwickshire countryside. I had babies in council houses and flats, cottages and prefabs, Nissen huts, caravans and houseboats, manor houses and farmhouses. I had a particular love for the farmhouses, where I was always welcomed by mothers whose knowledge of babies and all young life was vastly greater than mine. After coping with the inanity that I sometimes encountered on my rounds, it would be refreshing to call at one of my farms and drink deep, not only of the tea or coffee that was always produced for me while I dried out or warmed up by a huge log fire, but also of the common sense and sanity and sheer naturalness of these homes. No feeding problems here.

‘I check that the calves are suckling, and the piglets, put the bitch in with her pups, then come in and feed my baby . . .’ was the way one farmer’s wife described her morning routine. In those early post-war days of rationing, how valuable were the gifts without which I

## *Early Days*

could never leave a farm – eggs, freshly made butter, a chicken. I received so much from these women and felt I had so little to offer them, but they always seemed glad of my visits, being too busy to get to the clinics.

However, the farmhouses weren't in streets, but down nameless lanes, and so were cottages; caravans were in fields, and houseboats tied up somewhere along the stretch of canal which bypassed Lapfold on its way between Warwick and Stratford. My best chance of finding the babies was to go straight to the Post Office as soon as I reached the village. A village post office is a world on its own, and, like the village pub, contains the whole atmosphere of the village life. Is the gossip exchanged with the postmistress concerned or malicious? Do the villagers drifting in and out greet each other? Lapfold was a happy community. I felt it that first day as I waited my turn at the counter. There were notices in the window announcing a jumble sale, a parish meeting, a Red Cross outing for the elderly, job vacancies for a part-time gardener and a babysitter, articles for sale. A table by the door displayed a selection of village crafts, pottery and exquisite bookmarkers made with pressed flowers from the surrounding countryside. Everyone greeted everyone else, their children and their dogs. A new coat was admired, invitations issued to a party, help enlisted for the jumble sale, the outing, the car pool which transported people, parcels and prescriptions to and from Leamington. I waited only because I chose to wait, happy to talk to people in the queue, to listen and observe and feel the pulse of this village, which was to be a part of my life for so many years. I was pressed to jump the queue,

and when I reached the counter everyone crowded round giving different directions as to the quickest way to reach the houses I had come to visit.

‘Past the pond, second on the left, a green gate . . .’

‘Not now . . . I saw him painting it white while she was in hospital.’

‘But they’re nearly all white in that lane. How will Miss Corbally recognise the cottage?’

‘The pink cherry tree by the gate.’

‘That won’t help in winter.’ (That was the green gate lady.)

‘It would be quicker to leave your car this side of the pond and take the path on your left across the field. It comes out opposite the cottage.’

There was a chuckle behind me. The postmistress smiled across my shoulder.

‘Good afternoon, Vicar.’

‘Afternoon, Mrs Down.’ He turned to me, his hand outstretched. ‘Our new health visitor, I presume? Miss Smart told us to expect you.’

‘That’s our nurse. You know where she lives?’

The voices started up again with conflicting directions to the nurse’s cottage. The vicar laughed aloud.

‘Lucky you’re not in Ireland. When we lost our way in Donegal last summer and asked for directions, the young fellow, after offering the same sort of advice you’ve been getting, ended up saying: “Well, I wouldn’t start from here . . .”’

While everyone laughed, Mrs Down handed me a small map she had been sketching while the conversation was going on, the houses and cottages I wanted



## *Early Days*

marked with the initials of the owner. I was immensely grateful for this help which was available, accompanied by the equally willing advice from whoever was in the post office, until I came to know my district so well that people could change the colour of their gates and front doors, and plant or cut down trees without confusing me.

My first call was to the midwife. Miss Helen Smart welcomed me into her cosy sitting room. She had had a busy morning, and a late lunch, so there was a freshly brewed cup of tea for us to share. Approaching middle age, her black hair already streaked with grey, Miss Smart was a tubby, bespectacled little person, solid, dependable, wise and tough, with a voice gentle to soothe away fear, sharp to check hysteria, melodious to lull a baby to sleep.

'I'm glad you called,' she said. 'Your predecessor rather kept herself to herself, she was sort of eaten up with professional jealousy. I think she resented the babies being mine before they were hers.'

Her eyes met mine, straight, challenging.

'They're always mine, you know – when you've delivered a baby.'

I smiled.

'I know. I've been a midwife, but it was in London, before the war. I've lost touch.'

'I never lose touch. They're all round me, nearly a generation of my babies.'

I felt a twinge of envy. I was so new, so untried. Every house I called on was strange, every family I met were strangers. She seemed to read my thoughts.

'You'll soon get to know them. They're nice people, warm and friendly.'

I felt she had been trying to tell me something. I had to know where we stood. My job was clearly defined. After the tenth day I had sole responsibility for the babies.

'Do you continue to visit your babies after the tenth day, Miss Smart?'

'Officially, no. That's when you take over. But . . .'

I smiled.

'Of course, they're your friends, your neighbours. You live here.'

She nodded. 'That's about it. I live here, as you say, and you come over . . . what, once a week or less?'

She refilled my cup.

'Do you mind?'

Did I mind? I'd been asking myself that since the conversation started, and I thought I knew the answer.

'No. No, Miss Smart, I don't mind. I think I'm going to like it, knowing you're around and still caring about the babies, our babies.'

She smiled suddenly, held out her hand.

'Our babies. Shake on it, Miss Corbally.'

We shook on it, but I too had my professional pride. After all, I was to be responsible from the tenth day onwards. We discussed feeding and general care, and I made quite sure that my ideas and principles and prejudices were clearly understood. We agreed on most points. The midwife assured me that nearly all her babies would be on the breast when I took over, or, failing that, she would start them off on my preferred brands of dried milk.

## *Early Days*

Professional possessiveness towards 'our' babies was no longer divisive, but a mutual bond, an exclusive bond which waived the statutory ten days ruling if one or other was on holiday, and I would take over at a week, or she would visit for two weeks, to exclude the need of a 'relief' trespassing on our domain. A brief rundown on the family and any snags that had arisen during or after the birth would precede my first visit, and she could always check on her babies' progress at the Lapfold clinic at which she was always a welcome visitor.

But there was a third person who might be involved professionally with our babies.

'What's Dr Stevens like?' I asked.

Miss Smart paused, and those few seconds of silence told me much that professional loyalty forbade her to utter.

'He's not all that strong. He had a bad time during the war, lost his home and his family in the Coventry blitz. It took the stuffing out of him, poor man. Now he's . . .'  
she hesitated. 'He's just not interested. He does what he has to do, and does it well. You could say he's a good doctor, but not a caring one, if you understand.'

I nodded. I'd got the picture.

'Is he pro- or anti-health visitors?'

She laughed.

'Health visitors? He doesn't know they exist. He'll not bother you . . . and he won't thank you for bothering him.'

I was glad to be forewarned. Miss Smart helped me into my coat.

*An Armful of Babies and a Cup of Tea*

'Let me know if there's any way I can help.'

I was glad of those words. One day, in the distant future, I would be saying the same words to the new tenant of the nurse's cottage. We walked down the flower-bordered path to my car. Miss Smart saw the little brown face watching for me at the window.

'A dachshund! My favourite breed.'

She knew the breed well enough not to open the car door, but waited to make Solow's acquaintance until I had released the very pregnant bitch and she stood inside the gate, receiving with dignity the homage of the knowing midwife, whose professional hands were busy while her voice caressed. Her verdict was unerring.

'She's got a bellyful! I'd guess there's six or seven in there.'

I'd not brought Solow to the midwife's cottage because she was pregnant, but because I brought her everywhere, as Eileen was now working all day in the surgery of a big factory in Coventry. A dog had not figured in the early plans we had made.

How could we have been so stupid? Having seized our independence in both hands, we sat down and rationally and logically discussed the advisability of buying a dog and irrevocably exchanging our treasured independence for total slavery!

The local paper was advertising a four-month-old dachshund puppy at a giveaway price, so, having acquired a basket and other dog belongings, we drove up to the farm to investigate. We were greeted by a pack of excited, wriggling, licking, rotund puppies, but

## *Early Days*

they were another litter. The giveaway puppy stood apart, shy and shivering and painfully thin. The farmer's wife explained that the little bitch was very nervous. She had been ill-treated by one of the kennel lads and, although very well bred, was now valueless for showing or breeding. There was no hesitation. We signed a cheque and gathered the pathetic trembling little creature into our arms, and into our lives.

In spite of recurrent eczema and cankerous ears, we managed to keep our pet healthy until her odd behaviour forced us to get advice. She was listless and unhappy, refusing food, and making beds all over the house. The vet diagnosed a false pregnancy and advised an early mating. Remembering that we had not got her pedigree, I took our beautiful bitch to the farm from which we had bought her. The farmer's wife met us at the door.

'What a superb bitch. Where did you get her?'

'From you,' I replied.

She shook her head. 'I don't remember her. I wouldn't have forgotten if we'd bred that one.'

'You did breed her, and sold her to us for eight guineas.'

She remembered, and shook her head in disbelief. However, when I told her the purpose of our visit she still insisted that we would never have puppies from Solow. She said she had been breeding long enough to recognise a barren bitch.

So we mated Solow.

'Keep her quiet after the mating to make sure she takes,' we were told. Keep Solow quiet? She was far too

elated and full of herself. She careered round and round the garden, into the house, up the stairs for a scramble under the beds, but in spite of her activity she 'took' in no uncertain way. She had indeed, to use the midwife's words, 'a bellyful'.

'Talking of a bellyful,' said Miss Smart, 'have you seen the twins?'

'Mrs Roche-Anderson? I'm on my way now.' I consulted my map. 'First right past the pond, the big house opposite the church. Right?'

'Yes. It's the old Glebe House. The gate will be open, you can drive straight in.'

'Girls, aren't they? Is everything OK?'

'Yes . . .' She didn't sound too sure. I waited, the car door open. 'They're identical, an enchanting pair, and she's an intelligent woman. You'll have a lot to do with her, since she is in on everything – president of the WI, secretary of the Welfare Centre committee, Red Cross, you name it, Mrs R-A is in it, up to the eyebrows.'

I quailed.

'Oh dear! She sounds rather formidable.'

Miss Smart chuckled.

'Formidable? Not her. She's not even terribly efficient, just adores people and finds fulfilment in doing things for them and with them.'

'Perhaps she'll find fulfilment in her babies now. Is she happy to have twins?'

The midwife hesitated.

'I think so . . . we had some trouble with the second. She was a breech. And the birth was difficult. She was

*Early Days*

the bigger, the five-pounder, but has dropped behind in weight.'

'Why's that? Are they breastfed?'

'Yes. Mrs R-A's managing them both very well, but I've a feeling . . . I don't know . . . I suppose she concentrates more on the smaller one, and she's certainly a better feeder.'

She closed the car door and I settled behind the wheel.

'I'll be interested to watch those two develop. First twins we've had in the village for years. Good luck. They're all yours now.'

I smiled. '*Ours, Miss Smart.*'

'Ours.'

She was right about Mrs Roche-Anderson, who was anything but formidable. A warm, outgoing woman in her mid-twenties, she welcomed me into her lovely Georgian house, sat me down, and plied me with questions about myself and my work. Did I like the village? Where was I living? I was beginning to wonder who was visiting whom when the door was pushed open and we were joined by a beautiful black cocker spaniel who greeted me ecstatically, and, after two abortive efforts, jumped onto the sofa and settled happily with her nose on my knee.

'Smudge is losing a bit of her spring,' explained her mistress. 'We're expecting puppies in about three weeks. She must have caught the infection from me.'

I raised an eyebrow.

'She could have. I'm told it is catching. A doctor friend told me how a patient, being told his wife was

*An Armful of Babies and a Cup of Tea*

pregnant, could only think of one possible explanation. His wife had been seeing a lot of the woman next door, and she was six-months gone.'

In that gracious drawing room, with its chintzes and old china and bowls of roses, I didn't feel like a health visitor visiting a new mother, but like a guest in whose affairs my hostess was so interested that I had to remind her of the purpose of my visit. Patricia and Phillida were, as Miss Smart had said, an enchanting pair. They were asleep, so I accepted the assurance, and the midwife's report, that all was well, but I noticed, before we left the nursery, how the mother bent over the cot and gently caressed one baby's cheek . . . Patricia's.