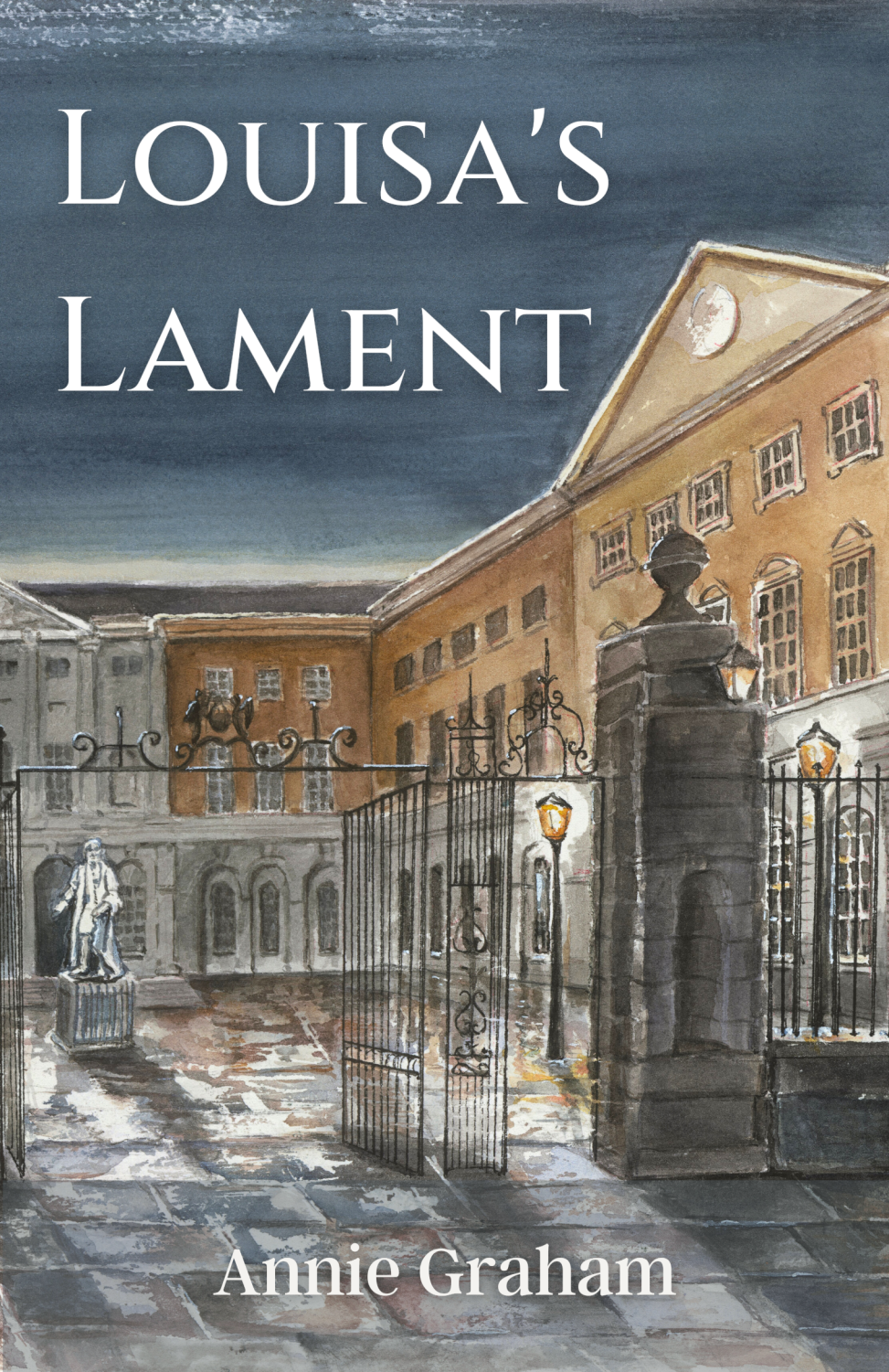
Louisa's Lament



Annie Graham

Louisa's Lament

Annie Graham

POP

Copyright © 2023 by Annie Graham

Illustration by June Schneider

Published by Pat Oakley Publishing

www.patoakleypublishing.london

All rights reserved.

No part of this extract may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Foreword

Louisa Ingle has been a presence in my life for over thirty years, since I came across her while researching my thesis into medical power and conflict. Although life moved on, I have always felt a sense of injustice at how she was treated; and a desire to tell her story, and that of her fellow nurses Margaret Burt, Victoria Jones and Margaret Lonsdale.

Ignored by history, these women were early pioneers who broke out of the social shackles of the 19th century to assert their independence as educated nurses at London's Guy's Hospital. As they stepped out of the shadow of Florence Nightingale to professionalise nursing in 1880, they became embroiled in a bitter dispute with the hospital's traditionalists. Their lives were crushed, and their story was buried in a footnote of the history of Guy's.

But, in large measure because of their efforts, Guy's Hospital now has one of the finest Nursing Training Institutes in the world. This is their legacy.

Part I: An Ending

One

The old man shut his eyes and sobbed as he gritted his teeth and gasped for air. His arm, raised in pleading, fell limp at his side as he slumped on his chaise longue trying to find a position of comfort.

"Ahh… ahh… the pain. I can't… breathe… What's happening? Help…help me…" he moaned.

"Who's the duty surgeon this evening? Oh never mind, get Mr Howse at once. Run boy, run," shouted Mr Lushington at the junior house surgeon.

Puddles of rain reflected the spill of dull yellow light from the gas lamps to relieve the gloom of a typical drizzly November night in the front quadrangle of London's Guy's Hospital. The fog, known as 'a right peculiar', had swirled up from the river a few days before. It hung motionless in the air as it held the drizzle and soot from the local factories and tenements in a fine suspension, chilling the bones and making the skin clammy to the touch. It was as if death

itself lurked in that fog, looking for someone to cloak in its shroud.

"Something up, I reckon," spoke Mr Payne, the hospital's nightwatchman, to Mr Bryers as they stood at Guy's north gate on St Thomas's Street watching people, important ones at that, scurrying across the front quad pulling their hastily donned overcoats and cloaks tightly around them.

"They've been runnin' to and fro' for the last hour; backwards and forwards to the Super's 'ouse; might be old Dr Steele's ill," observed Mr Payne, holding his oil lamp to the gate and squinting as he turned the key to lock up for the night. He had seen much of the goings on in this hospital for over thirty years, ever since he had joined the institution from his army days in India in the late 1850s, after the Uprising. Guy's was quite a repository for men, both high and low born, who had returned from serving the East India Company, and latterly, the Queen, in that far-flung reach of the Empire.

Dr Steele's study had been turned into a makeshift sickroom, with his discarded clothes and shoes lying on the floor alongside the used towels and bowls of camphor water. Pillows and blankets cluttered what little space there was around the chaise longue, where Dr Steele had been resting while trying to shake off his pain.

"How long has he been like this?" inquired Mr Howse, one of Guy's senior surgeons. His patient writhed in pain as the surgeon prodded his exposed throbbing belly and flank.

"Several hours, Sir, ever since evening prayers I think," came the reply from Mr Howse's nervous junior houseman.

"Shall I bring some morphia, Sir, and more fresh water to bathe his face?"

"No; we will need to open him as soon as possible," came the reply. "Get the theatre ready and make sure there's enough chloroform and ether for a big gut operation. And get any of the other senior surgeons out of bed to assist me. Try Mr Davies-Colley first, or if he's not about, Mr Golding-Bird. I fear infection. Get the antiseptic equipment ready and make sure my scalpels are sharp and soaked. We must work quickly.

"Steele! Steele! John, can you hear me?" yelled Mr Howse as he tried to call his patient's attention away from the excruciating pain of a twisted or blocked bowel. It could already be perforated and gangrenous, Mr Howse thought, as he sized up the risks of the operation.

"We need to operate now, it can't wait… John, do you understand? You know how serious it is, but it'll be alright, we'll cover the pain; time is short, we must operate now," pleaded the surgeon, as Dr Steele drifted in and out of consciousness.

Dr John Steele was Guy's Resident Medical Superintendent. He had lived in the Superintendent's House in the northeast corner of Guy's front quad since his appointment nearly forty years ago. Now, at seventy-one, he was slower than his younger medical colleagues, but still fulfilled his duties with a deft touch. He loved Guy's and he had dedicated his life to the hospital and south London's poor, and he had done much to develop its fine Medical School. Some said he represented the very best of Guy's.

"Miss Jones, get Miss Jones, I must speak to her,"

begged a breathless and tearful Dr Steele, struck with the terror of a man who knows his life is slipping away. He had felt unwell since his recent return from a long-wished-for holiday to his native Scotland, where he had met up with some of his old colleagues from Glasgow Royal Infirmary. It was as if he knew that his time was coming. Now, in his agony, his thoughts turned to the woman who had been so wronged by Guy's over a dozen years before. A memory so painful, it displaced his present agony momentarily.

"I'm here, Dr Steele," whispered Miss Jones, the matron, willing him on to survive.

With an almighty effort, he raised his head, his anguished face covered in sweat and creased in pain, as he fixed his tearful gaze upon her.

"Tell her… tell her…" he blurted out between the jabbing spasms of colicky pain, "she must know everything… the account, in my bureau, send it… you must send it to her… do this for me."

Exhausted, he receded back into his own world of half-consciousness, breathing hard from the exertion. Miss Jones held his hand and stared at him intently. She who had admired him from afar, knew immediately what he meant her to do. She squeezed his hand as the surgeons and the dressers lifted him onto a gurney and wheeled him to the nearby theatre block.

"I beg you, Mr Howse, do everything to save him; he is precious to all of us," spoke the grim-faced Mr Lushington, Guy's treasurer and administrator. He and Dr Steele had been colleagues and friends since Mr Lushington's appointment in 1876. Together, they had seen Guy's through

many crises and changes, including the terrible events of the summer of 1880, when Dr Steele's wise counsel had come to the aid of the beleaguered treasurer and his reforming matron, Miss Margaret Burt. Dr Steele had done more than anyone to attempt to prevent the catastrophe that had unfolded.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Holy Mary…" whispered Miss Jones repeatedly as she fingered the rosary beads hidden in her pocket, pleading for divine intervention to save the life of this good man. Like many High Church women in nursing, even in this modern age, she kept her Anglo-Catholic devoutness hidden.

"All the lights on at this hour," observed the nightwatchman to his mate as they proceeded in the drizzle and cold to the east gate.

"If it is 'im, better say some prayers," suggested Mr Payne to his companion.

Dr Steele bore the operation and the antiseptic procedure well enough to live a few more hours. With his breathing shallowed by the morphia for his pain, he was conscious enough to hold Miss Jones's hand, softly squeezing it as she sat next to him reciting prayers from her beloved Sisterhood's book of meditation. She gazed on his pale waxy face, wiping away the cold sweat on his forehead with the light caring touch of one who loved. All the while, she whispered her prayers for this good man.

He died in peace that night, November 6, 1892, from infection, blood loss, shock – who knows, speculated Mr Howse to himself. In the quiet of Dr Steele's room, Mr

Howse sat with his head in his hands, next to Miss Jones, as they stared at their lifeless friend in disbelief, weeping for the man they could not save; a good, kind, doctor who had served Guy's and its patients well. They were joined by the other surgeons who stood by in silent respect.

"He is gone," murmured Miss Jones to Mr Lushington as he entered the room with Reverend Flood, Guy's old chaplain of many years, now long retired. The priest and Dr Steele had been great friends and colleagues in attending to the needs of the poor and destitute in the local dives and slums around Borough and Bermondsey.

There, in the soft light of the gas lamps turned down low, and the quiet of the death room, Mr Lushington gently held Dr Steele's still warm hands as the chaplain recited prayers for the departed's soul. "Our Father who art in heaven…"

The sight of grown men weeping and Miss Jones comforting them was forlorn on this miserable November night.

"Rest in peace, dear friend." Feeling useless and lifeless, Mr Lushington withdrew to his private quarters. There is much bureaucracy that surrounds death, he reflected, but in the case of Dr Steele, there was the added burden of announcing his death to the medical world. He heaved a sigh of despair as he contemplated having to talk to the editors of the medical press. Although a dozen years had since passed since their unpardonable intrusions, he felt a fresh wave of disgust.

He sat at his desk and, in the privacy of his study, wept for his friend as he sketched out some notes for the obituary.

He made a list of those to be invited to the funeral – which would be held, he decided, at Guy's in the chapel where Dr Steele had attended prayers each day. And then there was the death certificate and the letters, and of course, he would have to value and dispose of his friend's estate in the months to come.

He shed tears at the thought of closing his friend's life, and at the thought that he would never see him again, nor have earnest discussions and arguments about the hospital's medical politics, nor stroll across the Downs together on a fine weekend.

Miss Jones returned to her rooms in Matron's House on the west side of the front quad, facing Dr Steele's and Mr Lushington's quarters. Oblivious to the now heavy rain, she got soaked and her stockinged feet swished around inside her sodden boots.

The housekeeper took her things and settled Miss Jones in her sitting room by the fire with a cup of tea. There, she fell into a deep sorrow, broken only by her fretting about the time it would take her letter to get halfway around the world to the great port of Calcutta, even by the modern steamboat packets cutting through the newly opened Suez Canal. It would then have to be taken up to Ranchi by train and on to the hill station on its outskirts by donkey cart. She could not risk the news of Dr Steele's death, which would be reported in the *Times* within the week, having reached Miss Ingle without prior notice.

A telegram would be better – followed by a fuller note

and Dr Steele's account. It had been a long day with the saddest of endings and it was not over yet. The telegraph office would be open at eight o'clock, and she wanted her telegram to be on the early morning's dispatch to India.

She forced herself to her desk. Meanwhile, her housekeeper went in search of Mr Payne to take the message to the post office ready for when it opened. After several false starts, and conscious of the costs for anything of length, she settled on the briefest of words to convey the terrible news.

Sad to inform that Dr Steele died after short illness, November 6.
Funeral hospital chapel November 10. Last thoughts of you.
Fuller note follows.
VJ, Matron, GH.

"Take this to the telegraph office at once, Mr Payne," requested Miss Jones, "and make sure it gets on the first dispatch."

Mr Payne looked at her askance.

"I know it's raining hard, and I regret that you will get soaked, but it is of the upmost importance."

Consumed with the restlessness that grief brings, Miss Jones started to compose the letter Dr Steele had requested her to write. She toyed with her pen and jotted down her first thoughts, but it was all a jumble, an incoherent cluster of words.

Staring at the dying fire, her thoughts drifted to the

disastrous events of that summer in 1880 and Dr Steele's request to send his account of what had happened to Miss Ingle. Might it stir up old feelings that by now had been buried deep inside Miss Ingle's memory?

She found she could not bear the confines of her room any longer so, to her housekeeper's astonishment, Miss Jones made her way back across the courtyard to Dr Steele's quarters.

She sat in his armchair in the dark and thought about the man who had been a towering presence in her life. When Miss Burt had returned to the Midlands after three years at Guy's, Miss Jones was appointed to replace her as matron. She had been daunted by the prospect of dealing with the medical staff who had been so brutal to her predecessor. It was the kindly Dr Steele who had guided her through those early days, and she had remained in his debt ever since.

Miss Jones turned up the gas lamps to search Dr Steele's bureau for the account. Mr Lushington, alarmed by the noise, entered Dr Steele's quarters to investigate the disturbance.

"Miss Jones," he exclaimed, as he found her sifting through Dr Steele's papers, "what are you looking for that cannot wait until morning?"

"Sir, I beg your pardon. I feel I might go mad with grief. Dr Steele asked me to send his account of the dispute to Miss Ingle. He was desperate for her to know the details of his findings in the hope, I think, that she might forgive him, and us, for failing her all those years ago." It was as if Dr Steele were driving her on from the next room. In her

distress, she could not rest until she had his account in her hands.

"How did such a bitter dispute arise? I was present at many of the events that summer," she recalled, "but I did not understand all the forces that were at play – potent forces, evil forces, that created such hatred between our professional colleagues."

Mr Lushington gave a heavy sigh. "I too have asked myself that question over the years. Things that were of great importance in 1880 seem less so now. It was an unsettling time. Reform was in the air – political, social, and religious. Was it the new lady-nurses that Miss Burt had introduced with their superior education and training that caused such offence to the doctors? They were a great improvement on the old drunken and uneducated nurses, so I am mystified as to why the reforms proved to be so controversial.

"Or was it the lady-nurses' over-zealous devotion as High Church women to their Sisterhood that offended them? Remember, Miss Jones, many of our doctors were devout Nonconformists who would have found your Anglo-Catholic practices far too popish."

Miss Jones blushed. "Perhaps," she conceeded, "we were too enthusiastic to take over some of the doctors' traditional duties; that would have caused offence. I do readily recall one of those ladies, Miss Lonsdale. She was so confident and assertive about her position, and she caused much anger with her article and letters about the reforms. I still think of how she rowed with the doctors on

their own terms in her vigorous support of Miss Burt. She was formidable."

Mr Lushington cringed at the mention of the lady's name, for she had caused him many difficulties. He had tried to dampen the raging dispute while Miss Lonsdale had sought to aggravate it with her insensitive writings and inflammatory utterances.

"The dispute had started well before Miss Burt's arrival in November 1879," Mr Lushington confided. "I travelled to Leicester's Infirmary to seek her out on behalf of Lord Cardwell, who was President of the Board of Governors, to come to London to modernise our hospital's nursing practices and introduce formal training for the nurses.

"She had achieved a great deal in this regard and her references were excellent, so we asked her to oversee our nurses' work more directly on her arrival. This caused great offence to the medical staff, who felt it a direct challenge to their authority. You see, Miss Jones, we had, and maybe still have, very traditional doctors here at Guy's."

"Sir, I was one of Miss Burt's acolytes," spoke Miss Jones in defence of her predecessor, "and I know from the outset that she had a poor opinion of the nurses she had taken charge of on her arrival. To make the case for her reforms, she complained openly that they were untrained and exhibited unbecoming behaviour. Some even wore jewellery on the wards."

Miss Jones paused at the awful memory. "Miss Burt and our company of lady-nurses," she whispered, "were appalled."

"Indeed," concurred Mr Lushington, "it was Dr Steele

who had revealed to the Board many years earlier that some untrained nurses took money from our patients. He was also disgusted to find that they did not keep their patients clean. It was quite unacceptable."

"Oh, Dr Steele," lamented Miss Jones, looking at his desk and around his room, "he did so much for our nurses and their education." After a pause to reflect on the loss of such a good man, she mulled, "Did you know that he took the trouble to give us lectures? He was a fine teacher."

"Dr Steele," replied Mr Lushington, lost for a moment in his own reflections, "knew this area like the back of his hand. He had lived and worked here since he had arrived at Guy's forty years ago, from Glasgow.

"Like Miss Burt," he added, "he had suffered the rejection of the medical staff who had objected to his appointment even though he had held the Medical Superintendent's post at Glasgow Royal Infirmary previously. And did you know that by the time he left for London, he had suffered the personal tragedy of the death of his sister and two of his brothers?"

"I did not. I wish I had." She felt consumed with sadness at the thought of Dr Steele's loneliness.

"So you see, Miss Jones, London represented a new beginning for him," he explained, "but with his thick Scottish accent, and passion for data collection and accurate record keeping, the medical staff regarded him as a cold fish and an outsider."

"Sir, are you saying he was not regarded as a Guy's man?" she asked. Perhaps, she thought, that might explain why he was not involved in the plot.

"I am," came the reply. "Dr Steele was a worthy innovator. He had seen the benefits of Lister's antisepsis regime in Glasgow. He adopted such practices before they became fashionable. Despite the objections of some of our surgeons, he introduced Lister's ideas here at Guy's. Even if his suggestions were to the benefit of our patients, his changes were not popular."

Mr Lushington added to his homage, "But for Miss Burt, Dr Steele was a true blessing. We had far too many nurses, if you can even call them by that name, who were drunk and dirty on duty. More likely to kill our patients with their lack of hygiene than to cure them. And they could not be trusted not to rob them as they lay in their beds. Dr Steele helped to rid us of those harpies."

"What about Miss Burt's predecessor, Miss Loag? Surely she would not have tolerated such dishonesty?"

"She had tried her best to reform nursing, but age and ill health had taken their toll," came the reply, "and she disliked upsetting the medical staff, so progress was slow."

"Blessed be his soul in heaven," cried Miss Jones in heartfelt tribute, "our loss is truly great… Sir, I am in great confusion… I shall not be able to carry on without him."

Two

November's glorious in Ranchi. The seasonal rains have finished for the year, and up on the Chota Nagpur Plateau, south of the great Indo-Gangetic Plain, the days are warm and dry.

"Louisa, your camellias are lovely my dear. What are you feeding them? Do come over and work in my garden," chuckled Lydia as she turned to the group of ladies sipping their afternoon tea and nibbling pieces of shortbread and ginger cake, trying not to get their fine white cotton dresses and muslin shawls stained with annoying greasy patches from the crumbs.

"I recognise that. It's from Fortnum's, isn't it?" exclaimed Sarah as she held a distinctive tin up for all to see. "Whoever is sending you such fresh supplies from London? Have you a secret admirer you are hiding from us?"

The ladies lolled about in the generous veranda chairs, taking in the beauty of the garden in full flower.

Louisa waved for her housekeeper to bring a fresh pot of hot water. "Mary," she said, "I believe it is your turn to organise the flower committee ready for this year's Christmas festivities?"

The inquiry caused the ladies to turn expectantly to their friend, who fished out a list from her bag and put on her gold-rimmed reading glasses.

"It is," replied Mary heartily, "and I am going to be a tough sergeant major this year to get you all to do your bit. Louisa, I want camellias, roses and gardenias from you, and I'll give a list to each of you ladies shortly of my requirements, so don't pick everything before the big day."

"We await your instructions," replied Lydia. "We want our church to look beautiful, and if there are spare blooms, we can decorate the hospital and the Officers' Mess. How about that?"

The ladies sipped their refreshed teacups and adjusted their wide-brimmed hats to keep the sun off their faces. Louisa and Sarah strolled around the garden in the late afternoon sun while Mary and Lydia discussed the latest edition of *Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion* sent from London on Louisa's subscription.

When not working, the ladies liked nothing better than to visit each other to read magazines, play cribbage, and admire their gardens' flamboyant blooms with their bright colours and delightful perfumes. It was so English, you would think you were in Surrey.

Mary readied a deck of cards for their crib game, folded the linen napkins into neat squares, and tidied the table ready for the next round of refreshments. Louisa was very

particular about her linen. She loved its feel and smell when freshly pressed and kept a store of such squares not only for dining but also for her pillow to lay her head on each night. It gave her a real sense of comfort.

The ladies' pleasant afternoon was interrupted by a commotion from the house. Looking to the wide-open veranda doors, they saw Louisa's housekeeper running towards them waving an envelope.

"What is it, Ahya?" inquired Mary.

"A telegram from London for Miss Ingle," she replied. "The post boy said it was very urgent."

"Louisa, come quickly," cried Mary, calling her friend over to the house. "A telegram, there's a telegram for you from London." The ladies gathered in a huddle of concern as Louisa opened the envelope. As she read its contents, her expression changed to one of great alarm.

"No… Please no… Not true... Oh… Oh… Please… Please not Dr Steele… " Louisa crumpled to the ground, as she screwed the paper in her hand into a ball and dropped it. Her pain was palpable. Her sobbing was heartbreaking. Her world had fallen into tumult in an instant.

"Ahya, fetch Dr Macpherson at once," commanded Mary as the ladies pulled a chair around for their stricken friend. Lydia poured water onto one of the linen napkins to cool Louisa's reddened face while the others offered their comforting hands.

The servants gathered on the terrace and stared in silence, not knowing what to do. They had never seen their mistress in such a state of disarray.

"Louisa my dear, settle yourself," instructed Mary. "You

are among friends, and we will take care of you. Now, sip some lemon water."

Lydia proffered the glass of sharp liquid on Mary's matronly nod.

"Let's move her into the house and out of the sun," suggested Sarah, to which they all agreed as it was something useful to do.

As Lydia and Sarah helped Louisa into the shade, Mary picked up the screwed-up telegram and straightened it out on the tea table, pushing the cups and plates to one side. She read the message several times, trying to work out the meaning of Miss Jones's words. 'Last thoughts of you. Fuller note follows.'

Who is Miss Jones, she wondered, and who on earth was Dr Steele of Guy's Hospital?

About the Author

Annie Graham has consulted and taught on inter-professional conflict for over thirty years, with a PhD in Organisational Psychology, and a special interest in medical power structures and behaviours.

She has a Diploma in the Social History of Medicine and an MA in Nineteenth Century Studies which she uses to write fact-based novels to illuminate the ways in which organisations succeed and fail.

If you've enjoyed this extract, the full book is available for purchase and the proceeds from every sale will be given to Birkbeck College to support the students' hardship fund in celebration of the College's 200th anniversary since its founding in 1823. Long may it continue.

Visit www.patoakleypublishing.london for more about the author, to sign up for news of future publications, or to purchase prints or postcards of the illustrations from the book.

 twitter.com/agbythesea