

BETTY NEELS



113

A KISS FOR
JULIE

Betty Neels
A Kiss for Julie
Серия «Mills & Boon М&В»
Серия «Betty Neels
Collection», книга 113

Аннотация

Mills & Boon presents the complete Betty Neels collection. Timeless tales of heart-warming romance by one of the world's best-loved romance authors. Simply SimonJulie Beckworth enjoyed her work as a medical secretary at St. Bravo's hospital so it came as a nasty surprise when her elderly boss announced he was retiring. Her new boss, Professor Simon van der Driesma, was younger, more energetic and worked Julie much harder but if only he would call her Julie, and not 'Miss Beckworth' in that cool voice! Both of them had the wrong impression of the other-what would it take for the truth to be revealed?

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He sat back in his chair, watching her.

Presently he said, coldly polite, “Miss Beckworth, shall we begin as we intend to go on? I am aware that I am a poor substitute for Professor Smythe; nevertheless we have inherited each other whether we wish it or not. I must confess that you are not quite what I would have wished for, and I believe that you hold the same opinion of me. If you find it difficult to work for me, then by all means ask for a transfer. On the other hand, if you are prepared to put up with my lack of social graces, I daresay we may rub along quite nicely.”

He smiled then, and she caught her breath, for he looked quite different—a man she would like to know.

About the Author

BETTY NEELS

spent her childhood and youth in Devonshire, England, before training as a nurse and midwife. She was an army nursing sister during the war, married a Dutchman, and subsequently lived in Holland for fourteen years. She now lives with her husband in Dorset, and has a daughter and grandson. Her hobbies are reading, animals, old buildings and writing. Betty started to write on retirement from nursing, incited by a lady in a library bemoaning the lack of romantic novels.

A Kiss for Julie

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CHAPTER ONE

PROFESSOR SMYTHE sat behind his cluttered desk, peering over his spectacles at the girl sitting on the other side of it. A very pretty girl, indeed he considered her beautiful, with bronze hair piled on top of her head, a charming nose, a gentle mouth and large green eyes fringed with bronze lashes.

She looked up from her notebook and smiled at him.

He took off his spectacles, polished them and put them back on again, ran his hand through the fringe of white hair encircling his bald patch and tugged his goatee beard. 'I've a surprise for you, Julie.' And at her sudden sharp glance he added, 'No, no, you're not being made redundant—I'm retiring at the end of the week. There, I meant to lead up to it gently—'

She said at once, 'You're ill—that must be the reason. No one

would ever let you retire, sir.’

‘Yes, I’m ill—not prostrate in bed, by any means, but I have to lead a quiet life, it seems, without delay.’ He sighed. ‘I shall miss this place and I shall miss you, Julie. How long is it since you started working for me?’

‘Three years. I shall miss you too, Professor.’

‘Do you want to know what is to happen to you?’ he asked.

‘Yes—yes, please, I do.’

‘I am handing over to a Professor van der Driesma—a Dutchman widely acclaimed in our particular field of medicine. He works mostly at Leiden but he’s been over here for some time, working at Birmingham and Edinburgh. What he doesn’t know about haematology would barely cover a pin’s head.’ He smiled. ‘I should know; he was my registrar at Edinburgh.’ He went on, ‘I’m handing you over to him, Julie; you’ll be able to help him find his feet and make sure that he knows where to go and keep his appointments and so on. You’ve no objection?’

‘No, sir. I’m truly sorry that you are retiring but I’ll do my best to please Professor whatever-his-name-is.’

Professor Smythe sighed. ‘Well, that’s that. Now, what about Mrs Collins? Did you manage to get her old notes for me?’

Julie pushed a folder a little nearer to him. ‘They go back a long way...’

‘Yes, a most interesting case. I’ll read them and then I shall want you to make a summary for me.’ He tossed the papers on his desk around in front of him. ‘Wasn’t there a report I had to

deal with?'

Julie got up, tall, splendidly built and unfussed. 'It's here, under your elbow, sir.' She fished the paper out for him and put it down under his nose.

He went away presently to see his patients and she settled down to her day's work. Secretary to someone as important as Professor Smythe was a job which didn't allow for slacking; her private worries about his leaving and the prospect of working for a stranger who might not approve of her had to be put aside until the evening.

Professor Smythe didn't refer to his departure again that day. She took the letters he dictated and went to her slip of a room adjoining his office, dealt with mislaid notes, answered the telephone and kept at bay anyone threatening to waste his precious time. A usual day, she reflected, wishing him goodnight at last and going out into the busy streets.

It was late September and the evening dusk cast a kindly veil over the dinginess of the rows of small houses and shabby shops encircling the hospital. Julie took a breath of unfresh air and went to queue for her bus.

St Bravo's was in Shoreditch, a large, ugly building with a long history and a splendid reputation, and since her home was close to Victoria Park the bus ride was fairly short.

She walked along the little street bordered by redbrick terraced houses, rounded the corner at its end, turned into a short drive leading to a solid Victorian house and went in through the

back door. The kitchen was large and old-fashioned and there was an elderly man standing at the table, cutting bread and butter.

Julie took off her jacket. 'Hello, Luscombe. Lovely to be home; it seems to have been a long day.'

'Mondays always is, Miss Julie. Your ma's in the sitting room, I'll be along with the tea in two ticks.'

She took a slice of bread and butter as she went past him and crammed it into her pretty mouth. 'I'll come and help you with supper presently. Is it something nice? It was corned beef and those ready-made potatoes for lunch.'

'As nice a macaroni cheese as you'll find anywhere. I'll leave you to see to the pudding.'

She went out of the room, crossed the hall and opened the door of a room on the other side of the house. Mrs Beckworth was sitting at the table writing, but she pushed the papers away as Julie went in.

'Hello, love. You're early; how nice. I'm dying for a cup of tea...'

'Luscombe's bringing it.' Julie sat down near her mother. 'I can't imagine life without him, can you, Mother?'

'No, dear. I've been checking the bills. Do you suppose we could afford to get Esme that hockey stick she says she simply must have? Yours is a bit old, I suppose.'

Julie thought. 'I had it for my fifteenth birthday; that's almost twelve years ago. Let's afford it.'

Her mother said unexpectedly, 'You ought to be enjoying

yourself, Julie—finding a husband...’

‘I’ll wait until he finds me, Mother, dear. I’m very happy at St Bravo’s. Professor Smythe’s a dear.’ She hesitated. ‘He’s leaving at the end of the week—he’s not well. I’m to be handed over to his successor—a Dutchman with the kind of name you never remember!’

‘Do you mind?’

‘I shall miss Professor Smythe—he’s a dear old man—but no, I don’t mind.’ She would have minded, she reflected, if she had been told that her services were no longer required; her salary was something that they couldn’t do without.

Luscombe came in with the tea then, and they talked of other things—Michael, Julie’s elder brother, a houseman at a Birmingham hospital; David, still at Cambridge, reading ancient history and intent on becoming a schoolmaster, and Esme, the baby of the family, fourteen years old and a pupil at the local grammar school.

‘Where is she, by the way?’ asked Julie.

‘Having tea at the Thompsons’. She promised to be back here by half past six. The Thompson boy will walk her round.’

Julie peered into the empty teapot. ‘Well, I’ll go and make a bread-and-butter pudding, shall I?’

‘That would be nice, dear. Esme popped in on her way from school and took Blotto with her. The Thompsons don’t mind.’

‘Good. I’ll give him a run in the park later on.’

Her mother frowned. ‘I don’t like you going out after dark.’

‘I’ll not be alone, dear; Blotto will be with me.’ She smiled widely. ‘Besides, I’m hardly what you would describe as a delicate female, am I?’

She was in the kitchen when Esme came home, bringing with her the Thompson boy, Freddie, and Blotto, a dog of assorted ancestry with a long, sweeping tail and a rough coat. He was a large dog and he looked fierce, but his disposition was that of a lamb. However, as Julie pointed out, what did that matter when he looked fierce?

Freddie didn’t stay; he was a frequent visitor to the house and came and went casually. He bade Julie a polite goodbye, lifted a hand in farewell to Esme and took himself off, leaving the younger girl to feed Blotto and then, spurred on by Julie, to finish her homework. ‘And we’ll go on Saturday and get that hockey stick,’ said Julie.

Esme flung herself at her. ‘Julie, you darling. Really? The one I want? Not one of those horrid cheap ones.’

‘The one you want, love.’

Getting ready for bed in her room later that evening, Julie allowed her thoughts to dwell on the future. She did this seldom, for as far as she could see there wasn’t much point in doing so. She must learn to be content with her life.

No one had expected her father to die of a heart attack and they were lucky to have this house to live in. It was too large and needed a lot done to it, but it was cheaper to continue to live in it than to find something more modern and smaller. Besides, when

she had made tentative enquiries of a house agent, he had told her that if they sold the place they would get a very poor price—barely enough to buy anything worth living in. It was a pity that there had been very little money, and what there had been had gone to get the boys started.

Julie sighed and picked up her hairbrush. It would be nice to get married—to meet a man who wouldn't mind shouldering the burden of a widowed mother, two brothers and a schoolgirl sister. Her sensible mind told her that she might as well wish for the moon.

She brushed her mane of hair and jumped into bed. She hoped that the professor who was taking her over would be as nice an old man as Professor Smythe. Perhaps, she thought sleepily, as he was Dutch, he would go back to Holland from time to time, leaving her to deal with things or be loaned out to other consultants as and when required. It would make a change.

There was a good deal of extra work to be done during the rest of the week; Professor Smythe tended to be forgetful and occasionally peevish when he mislaid something. Julie dealt with him patiently, used to his sudden little spurts of temper. Besides, she reasoned after a particularly trying morning, he wasn't well.

It was on the last morning—Friday—as she patiently waded through the filing cabinet for notes which Professor Smythe simply had to have when the door opened behind her and she turned to see who it was.

Any girl's dream, she thought, and, since he had ignored her

and crossed to Professor Smythe's office, turned back to her files. But she had even in those few seconds taken a good look. Tall—six and a half feet, perhaps—and enormous with it, and pale hair—so pale that there might be grey hair too. His eyes, she felt sure, would be blue.

‘Come here, Julie, and meet your new boss,’ called Professor Smythe.

She entered his office, closed the door carefully and crossed the room, glad for once that she was a tall girl and wouldn't have to stretch her neck to look at him.

‘Professor van der Driesma,’ said Professor Smythe. ‘Simon, this is Julie Beckworth; I'm sure you'll get on famously.’

She held out a polite hand and had it crushed briefly. She wasn't as sure as Professor Smythe about getting on famously, though. His eyes were blue; they were cold too, and indifferent. He wasn't going to like her. She sought frantically for the right thing to say and murmured, ‘How do you do?’ which didn't sound right somehow.

He didn't waste words but nodded at her and turned to Professor Smythe. ‘I wonder if we might go over these notes—that patient in the women's ward—Mrs Collins—there are several problems...’

‘Ah, yes, you are quite right, Simon. Now, as I see it...’

Julie went back to her filing cabinet, and when told to take her coffee-break went away thankfully. When she got back her new boss had gone.

He came again that afternoon when she was at her desk, dealing with the last of the paperwork before Professor Smythe handed over. The door separating her office from Professor Smythe's was open but when he came in he paused to close it—an action which caused her to sit up very straight and let out an explosive word. Did he imagine that she would eavesdrop? Professor Smythe had conducted countless interviews with the door wide open. A bad start, reflected Julie, thumping the computer with unnecessary force.

She would have been even more indignant if she could have heard what the two men were talking about.

'I should like to know more about Miss Beckworth,' observed Professor van der Driesma. 'I am indeed fortunate to have her, but if I were to know rather more of her background it might make for a speedier rapport between us.'

'Of course, Simon. I should have thought of that sooner. She has been with me for three years; I believe I told you that. Her father had a practice near Victoria Park, died suddenly of a massive heart attack—he was barely fifty-six years old. A splendid man, had a big practice, never expected to die young, of course, and left almost no money.

'Luckily the house was his; they still live in it—Julie, her mother and her young sister. There are two boys—the eldest's at the Birmingham General, his first post after qualifying, and the other boy's at Cambridge. I imagine they are poor, but Julie is hardly a young woman to talk about herself and I wouldn't

presume to ask. She's a clever girl, very patient and hard-working, well liked too; you will find her a splendid right hand when you need one.' He chuckled. 'All this and beautiful besides.'

His companion smiled. 'How old is she? There is no question of her leaving to marry?'

'Twenty-six. Never heard of a boyfriend let alone a prospective husband. Even if she didn't tell me, the hospital grapevine would have got hold of it. Her home is nearby and she doesn't watch the clock and I've never known her to be late.'

'A paragon,' observed his companion drily.

'Indeed, yes. You are a lucky man, Simon.'

To which Professor van der Driesma made no reply. He glanced at his watch. 'I'm due on the wards; I'd better go. I shall hope to see something of you when you have retired, sir.'

'Of course, Mary and I will be delighted to see you at any time. I shall be interested to know how you get on. I'm sure you'll like the post.'

'I'm looking forward to it. I'll see you tomorrow before you leave.'

He went away, adding insult to injury by leaving the door open on his way out.

Professor Smythe had refused an official leave-taking but his friends and colleagues poured into his office on Saturday morning. Julie, who didn't work on a Saturday, was there, keeping in the background as well as her splendid shape allowed, making coffee, finding chairs and answering the phone, which

rang incessantly. Presently the last of the visitors went away and Professor Smythe was left with just his successor and Julie.

‘I’m off,’ he told them. ‘Thank you, Julie, for coming in to give a hand.’ He trotted over to her and kissed her cheek. ‘My right hand; I shall miss you. You must come and see us.’

She shook his hand and saw how tired he looked. ‘Oh, I will, please.’ She proffered a small book. ‘I hope you’ll like this—a kind of memento...’

It was a small book on birds and probably he had it already, for he was a keen bird-watcher, but he received it with delight, kissed her again and said, ‘Be off with you, Julie.’

He would want to talk to Professor van der Driesma she thought, and went silently, closing the door behind her. She was crossing the forecourt when a dark grey Bentley crept up beside her and stopped. Professor van der Driesma got out.

He said without preamble, ‘I’ll drive you home.’

‘My bus goes from across the street. Thank you for the offer, though.’ She was coolly polite, remembering the closed door. Rude man...

‘Get in.’ Nicely said, but he wasn’t prepared to argue. After all, she was working for him from now on. She got in.

He got in beside her. ‘Somewhere on the other side of Victoria Park, isn’t it? Professor Smythe told me that your father was a GP.’

‘Yes.’ She added baldly, ‘He died.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, and strangely enough she knew that he

meant it.

‘I think that I should warn you that I may work at a slightly faster pace than Professor Smythe.’

‘That’s to be expected,’ said Julie crisply. ‘He’s very elderly and ill too, and you’re...’ she paused. ‘You’re not quite middle-aged, are you?’

‘Not quite. If I work you too hard you must tell me, Miss Beckworth.’

Put neatly in her place, she said, ‘You can turn left here and then right. It’s a short cut.’

If he was surprised to see the roomy house with its rather untidy garden, surrounded by narrow streets of small dwellings, he said nothing. He drew up in the road and got out to open her door—an action which impressed her, even if against her will. He might have a nasty tongue but his manners were perfect and effortless.

‘Thank you, Professor,’ she said politely, not to be outdone. ‘I’ll be at the office at eight forty-five on Monday morning.’

He closed the gate behind her, aware of faces peering from several windows in the house, waited until she had reached the door and opened it and then got into his car and drove away. He smiled as he drove.

Julie was met in the hall by her mother, Esme and Luscombe.

‘Whoever was that?’ her mother wanted to know.

‘That’s a smashing car,’ observed Luscombe.

‘He’s a giant,’ said Esme.

‘That’s my new boss. He gave me a lift home. His name is Simon van der Driesma; I don’t think he likes me...’

‘Why ever not?’ Her mother was simply astonished; everyone liked Julie. ‘Why did he give you a lift, then?’

‘I think he may have wanted to see where I lived.’

Mrs Beckworth, who had hoped that there might be other reasons—after all, Julie was a beautiful girl and excellent company—said in a disappointed voice, ‘Oh, well, perhaps. We waited lunch for you, love. One of Luscombe’s splendid casseroles.’

Luscombe, besides having been with them for as long as Julie could remember, first as a general factotum in her father’s surgery and then somehow taking over the housekeeping, was a splendid cook. ‘I’m ravenous,’ said Julie.

They went to the sports shop after lunch and bought Esme’s hockey stick, and Esme went round to the Thompsons’ later to show it off to Freddie while Julie took Blotto for his evening walk.

Sunday, as all Sundays, went too quickly—church, home to an economical pot-roast, and then a few lazy hours reading the Sunday papers until it was time to get the tea.

Luscombe went to see his married sister on Sunday afternoons, so Julie got their supper, loaded the washing machine ready to switch it on in the morning, did some ironing, made sure that Esme had everything ready for school, had a cosy chat with her mother and took herself off to bed. She went to sleep quickly,

but only after a few anxious thoughts about the next morning. Even if Professor van der Driesma didn't like her overmuch, as long as she did as he wished and remembered to hold her tongue it might not be so bad.

It was a bad start on Monday morning. She was punctual as always, but he was already there, sitting at his desk, his reading glasses perched on his patrician nose, perusing some papers lying before him then laying them tidily aside.

'Good morning, sir,' said Julie, and waited.

He glanced up. His 'good morning' was grave; she hoped that he would soon get out of the habit of calling her Miss Beckworth; it made her feel old.

'I believe I am to do a ward round at ten o'clock. Perhaps you will get the patients' notes and bring them to me here' When she hesitated, he said, 'Yes, I am aware that the ward sister should have them, but I simply wish to glance through them before I do my round.'

Julie went up to the women's medical ward and found Sister in her office. Sister was small and dainty, never lacking dates with the more senior housemen. She was drinking strong tea from a battered mug and waved Julie to the only chair. 'Have some tea—I'll get one of the nurses—'

'I'd love a cup, but I don't dare,' said Julie. 'Professor van der Driesma wants the notes of his patients on the ward so's he can study them before his round.'

'A bit different to Professor Smythe?' asked Sister, hunting up

folders on her desk. 'I must say he's remarkably good-looking; my nurses are drooling over him but I don't think he's even noticed them. A bit reserved?'

'I don't know, but I think you may be right.' She took the bundle of notes. 'I'll get these back to you as soon as I can, Sister.'

'I'll have your head if you don't,' said Sister. 'It's his first round and it has to be perfect.'

Julie skimmed back through the hospital, laid the folders on the professor's desk and waited.

He said thank you without looking up and she slid away to her own desk to type up notes and reports and answer the telephone. Just before ten o'clock, however, she went back to his desk.

'Shall I take the patients' notes back now, sir?' she asked the bowed head; his glasses were on the end of his nose and he was making pencil notes in the margin of the report that he was reading.

He glanced up and spoke mildly. 'Is there any need? I can take them with me.' When she hesitated he said, 'Well?'

'Sister Griffiths wanted them back before you went on the ward.'

He gave her a brief look and said, 'Indeed? Then we mustn't disappoint her, must we? Oh, and you may as well stay on the ward and take notes.'

She gathered up the folders. 'Very well, sir. Do you want me to come back here for you? It is almost ten o'clock.'

'No, no, save your feet!'

It was a remark which made her feel as if she had bunions or painful corns. It rankled, for she had excellent feet, narrow and high-arched, and while she spent little money on her clothes she bought good shoes. Plain court shoes with not too high heels, kept beautifully polished.

From his desk the professor watched her go, aware that he had annoyed her and irritated by it. He hoped that her prickly manner would soften, totally unaware that it was he who was making it prickly. He didn't waste time thinking about her; he put the notes he had been making in his pocket and took himself off to Women's Medical.

He had a number of patients there; a rare case of aplastic anaemia—the only treatment of which was frequent blood transfusions, two young women with leukaemia, an older woman with Hodgkin's disease and two cases of polycythaemia. To each he gave his full attention, taking twice as long as Sister had expected, dictating to Julie as he went in a quiet, unhurried voice.

She, wrestling with long words like agranulocytosis and lymphosarcoma, could see that the patients liked him. So did Sister, her annoyance at the length of the round giving way to her obvious pleasure in his company. It was a pity that he didn't appear to show any pleasure in hers; his attention was focused on his patients; he had few words to say to her and those he had were of a purely professional kind.

As for Julie, he dictated to her at length, over one shoulder, never once looking to see if she knew what he was talking about.

Luckily, she did; Professor Smythe had been a good deal slower but the words he had used had been just as long. She had taken care over the years to have a medical directory handy when she was typing up notes, although from time to time she had asked him to explain a word or a medical term to her and he had done so readily.

She thought that it would be unlikely for Professor van der Driesma to do that. Nor would he invite her to share his coffee-break while he told her about his grandchildren... He was too young for grandchildren, of course, but probably he had children. Pretty little girls, handsome little boys, a beautiful wife.

She became aware that he had stopped speaking and looked up. He was staring at her so coldly that she had a moment's fright that she had missed something he had said. If she had, she would get it from Sister later. She shut her notebook with a snap and he said, 'I'd like those notes as soon as you can get them typed, Miss Beckworth.'

'Very well, sir,' said Julie, and promised herself silently that she would have her coffee first.

Which she did, prudently not spending too much time doing so; somehow the professor struck her as a man not given to wasting time in Sister's office chatting over coffee and a tin of biscuits. She was right; she was halfway through the first batch of notes when he returned.

'I shall be in the path lab if I'm wanted,' he told her, and went away again.

Julie applied herself to her work. It was all going to be quite different, she thought regretfully; life would never be the same again.

The professor stayed away for a long time; she finished her notes, placed them on his desk and took herself off to the canteen for her midday meal. She shared her table with two other secretaries and one of the receptionists, all of them agog to know about the new professor.

‘What’s he like?’ asked the receptionist, young and pretty and aware of it.

‘Well, I don’t really know, do I?’ said Julie reasonably. ‘I mean, I’ve only seen him for a few minutes this morning and on the ward round.’ She added cautiously, ‘He seems very nice.’

‘You’ll miss Professor Smythe,’ said one of the secretaries, middle-aged and placid. ‘He was an old dear...’

The receptionist laughed, ‘Well, this one certainly isn’t that. He’s got more than his fair share of good looks too. Hope he comes to my desk one day!’

Julie thought that unlikely, but she didn’t say so. She ate her cold meat, potatoes, lettuce leaf and half a tomato, followed this wholesome but dull fare with prunes and custard and went back to her little office. She would make herself tea; Professor Smythe had installed an electric kettle and she kept a teapot and mugs in the bottom drawer of one of the filing cabinets—sugar too, and tiny plastic pots of milk.

Professor van der Driesma was sitting at his desk. He looked

up as she went in. 'You have been to your lunch?' he asked smoothly. 'Perhaps you would let me know when you will be absent from the office.'

Julie glowered; never mind if he was a highly important member of the medical profession, there was such a thing as pleasant manners between colleagues. 'If you had been here to tell, I would have told you,' she pointed out in a chilly voice. 'And it's not lunch, it's midday dinner.'

He sat back in his chair, watching her. Presently he said, coldly polite, 'Miss Beckworth, shall we begin as we intend to go on? I am aware that I am a poor substitute for Professor Smythe; nevertheless, we have inherited each other whether we wish it or not. Shall we endeavour to make the best of things?'

'I must confess that you are not quite what I would have wished for and I believe that you hold the same opinion of me. If you find it difficult to work for me, then by all means ask for a transfer. Your work is highly regarded; there should be no difficulty in that. On the other hand, if you are prepared to put up with my lack of the social graces, I dare say we may rub along quite nicely.'

He smiled then, and she caught her breath, for he looked quite different—a man she would like to know, to be friends with. She said steadily, 'I would prefer to stay if you will allow that. You see, you're not a bit like Professor Smythe, but I'm sure once I've got used to you you'll find me satisfactory.' She added, 'What don't you like about me?'

‘Did I say that I disliked you? Indeed I did not; I meant that you were not quite the secretary I would have employed had I been given the choice.’

‘Why?’

‘You’re too young—and several other...’ He paused. ‘Shall we let it rest?’ He stood up and held out a hand. ‘Shall we shake on it?’

She shook hands and thought what a strange conversation they were having.

He was back behind his desk, turning over the papers before him.

‘This case of agranulocytosis—Mrs Briggs has had typhoid and has been treated with chloramphenicol, the cause of her condition. I should like to see any old notes if she has been a patient previously. From her present notes you have seen that she remembers being here on two occasions but she can’t remember when. Is that a hopeless task?’

‘Probably. I’ll let you have them as soon as possible. The path lab from the Royal Central phoned; they would like to speak to you when you are free.’

‘Ah, yes. There’s a patient there. Get hold of them and put them through to me, will you, Miss Beckworth?’

‘I’m going to hunt for those notes,’ she told him. ‘I shall be in the records office until I find them.’

‘Very well.’ He didn’t look up from his writing and she went to her own office, dialled the Royal Central and presently put the call through to his office. There was nothing on her desk that

needed urgent attention, so she went through the hospital and down into the basement and, after a few words with the fussy woman in charge of the patients' records, set to work.

It was a difficult task but not entirely hopeless. Mrs Briggs was forty years old; her recollections of her previous visits were vague but positive. Say, anything between five and ten years ago... It was tiresome work and dusty and the fussy woman or her assistant should have given her a hand, although in all fairness she had to admit that they were being kept busy enough.

She longed for a cup of tea, and a glance at her watch told her that her teabreak was long past. Was she supposed to stay until the notes were found or could she go home at half-past five? she wondered.

It was almost five o'clock when her luck turned and, looking rather less than her pristine self, she went back to the professor's office.

He was on the telephone as she went in; she laid the folders down on his desk and, since he nodded without looking up, she went to her office and sat down at her own desk. While she had been away someone had tossed a variety of paperwork onto it. 'No tea,' muttered Julie, 'and this lot to polish off before I go home, and much thanks shall I get for it—'

'Ah, no, Miss Beckworth,' said the professor from somewhere behind her. 'Do not be so hard on me. You have found the notes, for which I thank you, and a dusty job it was too from the look of you.'

She turned round indignantly at that and he went on smoothly, ‘A pot of tea would help, wouldn’t it? And most of the stuff on your desk can wait until the morning.’

He leaned across her and picked up the phone. ‘The canteen number?’ he asked her, and when she gave it ordered with pleasant courtesy, and with a certainty that no one would object, a tray of tea for two and a plate of buttered toast.

She was very conscious of the vast size of him. She wondered, idiotically, if he had played rugby in his youth. Well, she conceded, he wasn’t all that old—thirty-five, at the most forty... He had straightened up, towering over her, his gaze intent, almost as though he had read her thoughts and was amused by them. She looked at the clock and said in a brisk voice, ‘I can get a good deal of this done this afternoon, sir. I’m quite willing to stay on for a while.’

‘I said that tomorrow morning would do.’ His voice was mild but dared her to argue. ‘We will have our tea and you will leave at your usual time.’

She said ‘Very well, sir’ in a meek voice, although she didn’t feel meek. Who did he think he was? Professor or no professor, she had no wish to be ordered about.

‘You’ll get used to me in time,’ he observed, just as though she had voiced the thought out loud. ‘Here is the tea.’

The canteen server put the tray down on his desk; none of the canteen staff was particularly friendly with those who took their meals there; indeed, at times one wondered if they grudged

handing over the plates of food, and the girl who had come in was not one of Julie's favourites—handing out, as she did, ill nature with meat and two veg. Now, miraculously, she was actually smiling. Not at Julie, of course, and when he thanked her politely she muttered, 'No trouble, sir; any time. I can always pop along with something.'

The professor sat down behind his desk. 'Come and pour out,' he suggested, 'and let us mull over tomorrow's schedule.' He handed her the toast and bit hugely into his. 'What an obliging girl.'

'Huh,' said Julie. 'She practically throws our dinners at us. But then, of course, you're a man.'

'Er—yes; presumably you think that makes a difference?'

'Of course it does.' Perhaps she wasn't being quite polite; she added 'sir'.

They had little to say to each other; indeed, he made a couple of phone calls while he polished off the toast, and when they had had second cups he said, 'Off you go, Miss Beckworth; I'll see you in the morning.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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