

BETTY NEELS



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SISTER PETERS
IN AMSTERDAM

Betty Neels
Sister Peters in Amsterdam
Серия «Mills & Boon M&B»
Серия «Betty Neels Collection», книга 1

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. Should she guard against love? Sister Adelaide Peters was surprised, but very proud and excited to be chosen to represent her hospital in a new exchange scheme, which meant spending a year in Holland. She was determined to do her best, and more than that succeeded! She adored Holland, liked her colleagues and even mastered some of the language. She also unexpectedly – and disastrously – fell in love with her new boss. Professor Coenraad Van Essen was clearly out of her league...

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Sister Adelaide Peters stood in front of Professor Coenraad van Essen, trying to be composed and cool, and to forget his kiss amidst the ruins of the bus; his fee, he had called it.

“I must thank you for getting me out last night. I was very frightened, you know. It was so dark. I believe you saved our lives, and I am indeed grateful. Just thanking you doesn’t seem enough,” she added worriedly.

“Thanking me is quite enough, Sister Peters. It just so happened that I was there. It could have been anyone else, you know.” She felt surprised at this.

“But I knew it would be you.” The professor was studying the papers before him, his pen busy once more, and she didn’t expect an answer. She gave a small, unconscious sigh.

“Did you and Dr. Beekman sleep last night? You both look very tired.”

“It was hardly worth it, Sister. We’ll go off early if we can.” He glanced up from his work, half smiling. “Thank you for your solicitude. Now, if you are ready, shall we have the next patient?”

About the Author

Romance readers around the world were sad to note the passing of BETTY NEELS in June 2001. Her career spanned thirty years, and she continued to write into her ninetieth year. To her millions of fans, Betty epitomized the romance writer, and yet she began writing almost by accident. She had retired from nursing, but her inquiring mind still sought stimulation. Her new career was born when she heard a lady in her local library bemoaning the lack of good romance novels. Betty's first book, *Sister Peters in Amsterdam*, was published in 1969, and she eventually completed 134 books. Her novels offer a reassuring warmth that was very much a part of her own personality. She was a wonderful writer, and she will be greatly missed. Her spirit and genuine talent will live on in all her stories.

Sister Peters in Amsterdam

Betty Neels



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CHAPTER ONE

IT was one o'clock, the corridor leading from the main hospital to the Children's Unit was very quiet. As Matron accompanied the professor to the ward, her thoughts were busy. She knew that the morning clinics were over; Sister Peters would be back from lunch and the children should be quiet enough for him to have a talk with her, before making his decision.

When the exchange plan had first been suggested by the Grotehof Hospital in Amsterdam, her own hospital committee had had no hesitation in recommending Sister Peters, who was in charge of Children's Casualty and Out-Patients as well as the ward. However, she had hardly expected matters to have gone forward as rapidly as they had. The professor had arrived within a few hours of his conversation with her, and she had had no time to speak to Sister Peters. She hoped that everything would go smoothly. As they reached the glass doors of the ward, she looked at the tall man beside her; he seemed very pleasant; rather quiet perhaps, but he had a charming voice and spoke excellent English. He did not open the doors but stood watching the girl sitting on a low chair with her back to them. She wore a shapeless white gown over her uniform, but the frilled cap—a dainty affair of spotted muslin—perched on top of a coil of vivid red hair, showed her rank. She had just put down a feeding bottle on the table before her, as she hoisted a fat baby on to her shoulder.

She patted his back while he glared at them through the door. Presently he gave a loud burp and was rewarded by a light kiss on the top of his head as he was neatly tucked under her arm while she stooped to lift a fallen toddler to its feet again. As she stood up, two small children ran over to her and caught hold of her apron and toddled beside her as she went over to the cots. The doors squeaked as the professor opened them, but she didn't look around.

'I'm all behind, Nurse.' She spoke in a clear, unworried voice. 'Johnny's been sick again. I popped him into a bath and put him back to bed. He'd better be seen as soon as I can get someone.' She tucked the baby expertly into his cot, picked up one of the toddlers and looked over her shoulder. She was surprised to see Matron, but remained unruffled. Still holding the child, she went across the ward to her. She was a pretty girl, with large brown eyes, extravagantly fringed with black lashes, a small straight nose and a wide mouth, nicely turned up at the corners. She was smiling as she spoke to Matron.

'Good afternoon, Matron. I'm sorry, I didn't hear you come in.' Matron returned her smile.

'Good afternoon, Sister. Have you no nurses on duty?'

'The clinics were late this morning, Matron. Nurses are all at second dinner; they'll be back any minute now.'

She glanced at the man standing so quietly at Matron's side. She supposed he was a visiting doctor looking around the hospital, and wondered why he chose to come at such an

awkward time. Matron's next words cut across her thoughts.

'Sister, this is Professor van Essen, senior consultant pediatrician at the Grotehof Hospital in Amsterdam.' She paused. 'He is just taking a look round.' She tuned to him. 'Professor, this is Sister Peters.'

The girl put out her hand. 'How do you do, sir?' She smiled at him in a friendly way, and thought how handsome he was in a dark, beaky-nosed fashion.

The professor shook hands and returned her smile, saying only, 'How do you do' in a rather formal way. He caught Matron's eye.

'May I go round with Sister, Matron? That is, if she can spare the time.'

He waited patiently while Sister Peters took off her gown, handed the toddlers over to a nurse who had just come in, and put on her cuffs. Having adjusted these to a nicety, she indicated her readiness to conduct him around the ward. His tour was a thorough one, his questions searching and numerous. Sister Peters began to think that he would never go, and blushed guiltily when he said at length:

'Forgive me for taking up so much of your time, Sister. I do have an excellent reason for doing so, and that must be my excuse.' He hesitated, and she thought he was going to say more; instead he smiled at her so charmingly that she felt a distinct stab of regret when he left the ward.

She wondered about him once or twice during the rest of

the day and so far forgot herself as to day-dream about him—something quite alien to her nature, for she was a sensible young woman who accepted her life cheerfully and made the most of it. Only persistent cries of ‘Adelaide, it’s your turn to make the tea’ from the other occupants of the Sisters’ sitting room brought her back to reality, and as she jumped to her feet to put the kettle on, she told herself not to waste her time on such senseless mooning. This sensible attitude of mind, however, did not last very long, and her last thoughts before she slept that night were of the professor from Holland.

Coenraad van Essen, walking back with Matron to her office, assured her that he considered Sister Peters would be most suitable for the post in his hospital. Matron nodded her agreement.

‘Sister is a first-class nurse,’ she said. ‘She’s young, I know, barely twenty-five, but she has had several years’ experience and is especially good with children in Out-Patients and Casualty, and I understand that she will be working for you in those departments at your clinic.’

‘Will she object to living in Holland for a year? Has she family ties or—er—is she engaged to be married?’

Matron reassured him. ‘Sister is the daughter of a country parson, she has twin brothers younger than herself—still at school, I believe. They are a devoted family, but I see no reason why she should not go to Holland, for to the best of my knowledge she is not engaged. She’s a very popular girl, but shy,

and makes no effort to attract attention.'

'There could hardly be any need to do so,' murmured the professor, 'with that hair.'

Matron looked rather taken aback. 'It is rather striking,' she conceded, 'but I can assure you that whatever the colour of her hair, Sister Peters is ideally suited for the post.'

They parted on the friendliest of terms, arranging to meet in Matron's office in the morning, as the professor had expressed a wish to be present when Sister Peters was offered the job. It was almost nine o'clock the next morning when the phone rang, and Adelaide, who had been half expecting a summons, answered it. It was Matron. 'Sister Peters, would you come to my office at once, please?' She answered with a meek 'Yes, Matron,' and thought uneasily of the noisy toddlers and untidy ward yesterday afternoon, which Matron would not have failed to observe. Perhaps the professor had remarked on it, although he had appeared oblivious of the chaos and noise around him. 'And so he should,' thought Adelaide. 'If he runs a children's clinic he must know that they shout and yell and vomit and wet their nappies, irrespective of Matron or doctors' rounds.' She smoothed her apron, put on her cuffs and patted the cap on her astonishing hair, told the staff nurse where she was going, and set off for the office.

When she knocked and went in, the professor rose from the arm of the chair where he had been sitting, and she returned his greeting with a rather startled good morning as she went

across the room to Matron's desk. She eyed that lady warily. She appeared to be in a good humour, but with Matron that didn't always signify; she could deliver a telling set-down in the friendliest possible way. Adelaide stole a look at the professor, lounging against the mantelpiece, with his hands in his pockets. He was looking at her and smiling almost as though he read her thoughts. She bit her lip and went a little pink as she dutifully gave Matron her full attention.

'You have doubtless heard of the exchange scheme between this hospital and the Grotehof Hospital in Amsterdam, Sister.' Matron looked at Adelaide, but gave her no time to reply. 'As you know, an arrangement has been made for our two hospitals to exchange a member of our staff for a period of one year. The hospital committee has decided to nominate you, and I must say that much as we shall miss you, I must endorse their choice. Professor Van Essen feels that you will be most satisfactory for the post of Out-Patients and Casualty sister in his clinic—it only remains for you to decide if you will accept the offer.'

Matron rounded off this speech with an encouraging smile and nod. Adelaide, who had been listening with growing surprise and excitement, was still trying to find her voice when the professor spoke.

'Before you say anything, Sister Peters, I should like you to know that I and my staff will be very happy to welcome you at the clinic, and will do our best to make you happy as well as keep you busy while you are with us,' he smiled down at her. 'Please

say that you will come.'

Adelaide looked up at him. She liked his quiet, unhurried voice, she liked his face. He was very good-looking, she decided, but good looks didn't count with her. His nose was certainly very beaky; she wondered why he wore glasses. His eyes were twinkling now, and she saw his lips twitch, and realised that she had been staring. She bit her lip. 'I'm sorry,' she stammered. 'Quite understandable, Sister,' he smiled. Adelaide made up her mind. She liked the professor, and rather to her own surprise, for she was not a hasty girl, found herself accepting his offer without further preamble.

'Good, Sister Peters. I will leave Matron to make all the necessary arrangements, and shall hope to see you in due course.'

'Well, that's settled.' Matron sounded pleased. 'You will want to go back to your ward now, Sister. Perhaps you will come and see me this afternoon, and I will tell you all the details then.'

Adelaide thanked her, and repeated her thanks rather shyly to the professor as he held the door open for her. He said nothing further, however, only smiled briefly.

Her mind was in a whirl as she walked back to the Children's Unit. Perhaps she should have taken more time to decide, but the professor had seemed so sure of her acceptance that it had seemed quite natural to say yes immediately. She felt a thrill of excitement. She hoped that Dutch wasn't too difficult a language, for she supposed that she would have to learn it if she was to make a success of her new job. It suddenly seemed most important that

she should do well and please the professor.

CHAPTER TWO

AS Adelaide walked towards the Children's Clinic at eight o'clock on the morning of her first day in Amsterdam, the professor was coming down the staircase of his lovely old house on the Heerengracht. Below him he could see Castor and Pollux, his two labrador dogs, sitting side by side, waiting for him to take them for their morning walk. As he crossed the black and white tiled hall he gave a cheerful good morning to his butler, Tweedle, who looked up from the coat he was brushing.

'Good morning, Mr Coenraad.' He looked at his master over his old-fashioned spectacles. 'You'll need to wear a coat.' He spoke in English, with the respectful familiarity of the old family servant and friend. The professor, born the Baron Coenraad Blankenaar van Essen, and possessed of a considerable fortune, would always be 'Mr Coenraad' to Tweedle and his wife, who acted as the professor's housekeeper. The butler's earliest recollections of Coenraad had been the conversations they had held with each other as he opened the great front door to allow the small boy and his even smaller sisters to go through on their way to the park or to school. The professor stood waiting patiently for his coat. He was polishing his glasses and looked quite different without them, and considerably younger. His eyes, bright and searching, were blue-grey.

'Any news?' he asked, as he put on his coat. Tweedle eased it

over the broad shoulders.

‘Freule Keizer telephoned and asked me to remind you that she expects you to take her to the Concertgebouw this evening.’

The professor frowned. ‘I suppose I must have said I would take her. Oh, well, I can’t disappoint an old friend.’

He had known Margriet Keizer since childhood. She was now a handsome young woman, and there had been some speculation among their friends as to whether they intended to marry. She was suitable in every way and would make an admirable wife for the professor, as she had been at some pains to let him realise, but so far he had remained a good friend and nothing more. All the same, Tweedle, who disliked her, was very much afraid that he would marry her sooner or later, even if only for the sake of an heir.

Coenraad, threading the Volvo through the early morning traffic, was not thinking of Margriet, however. Today, the English Sister would be at the clinic for the first time. He hoped that he had made a wise choice—she had seemed exactly the type of girl they had been hoping for, but there was always the language difficulty. Even with lessons it would be a few weeks before she could make herself understood. It would be interesting to see how she would make out.

He parked the car and strode rapidly through the Vondelpark, the two dogs careering ahead, making the most of their half hour’s run. Back home, the professor read his post and glanced at the papers as he ate his breakfast. At precisely ten minutes to nine

he left his home for the hospital. There he left his coat and gloves in the changing room, and walked down the familiar corridor. His registrar, Piet Beekman, came out of Casualty as he passed. They were friends of long standing. Piet was the professor's junior by five years and married to a nurse. They had a baby son, and Coenraad was the little boy's godfather, and a frequent visitor to their flat. They said 'Dag' briefly and Piet fell into step beside his chief.

'She's here, the English girl—I've not seen her, but Staff Nurse Wilsma says she's nice, but has the most frightful red hair.'

The professor nodded, only half listening, his thoughts already busy with the day's work. They went through the door Piet had opened, into his office. Adelaide and the staff nurse had their backs to him as he entered. She looked very small and slight beside the sturdy Dutch girl. The two girls turned round as Piet closed the door, and came towards the doctors. Adelaide gave an inward sigh of relief; the professor was exactly as she had remembered him—no, that wasn't true; he was even better. They smiled at each other and shook hands, and Piet Beekman was introduced.

'You'll find the routine here very similar to your hospital in London, Sister Peters. Dr Beekman and I will speak English with you until your Dutch is adequate. I understand lessons are already arranged?'

As he himself had sought out an old friend of his father and persuaded him to give Adelaide lessons, the question was

an unnecessary one, but Adelaide, who was feeling shy in her strange surroundings, was glad to be able to talk about the arrangements which had been made for her.

She had enjoyed the hour before the professor had arrived. Staff Nurse had taken her over the clinic and she had opened and shut drawers and peered into cupboards and examined trolleys, and drawn the conclusion that Casualty at least was almost identical with its English counterpart. She thought that, even with the language barrier, she would be able to manage quite well. She liked the nurses. Zuster Wilsma was a little younger than herself, a big jolly girl, blonde and blue-eyed. She had been at the clinic for a year now, and although her English was fragmental, Adelaide guessed that she was going to be a great help to her. Nurse Eisink was the senior student nurse, as dark as Zuster Wilsma was fair, and only half her size. She had enormous pale blue eyes and a very attractive smile. The third nurse, Zuster Steensma, was the junior, a thick-set, stolid girl with black boot-button eyes and blonde hair that she obviously didn't bother about a great deal. She beamed at Adelaide, who beamed back. She was quite undeterred by their inability to communicate excepting on the most basic terms. It seemed to her that she was very lucky; they all seemed so anxious to be friendly and helpful.

The desk in the professor's office was, however, a different matter. The forms upon it were not in the least like those to which she had been used, and the printing on them was quite incomprehensible to her. She determined to stay on that evening

and study them. They were of various colours; if she was very careful to watch during the clinics, she should be able to identify them later, and learn their various uses. The Dutch she had heard so far had been quite beyond her; indeed, by nine o'clock, a dozen small worries and doubts had assailed her, but somehow the sight of the professor's placid face and his firm handshake had done much to put her fears at rest. She liked Dr Beekman too, he looked good-natured and cheerful. He was nearly as tall as the professor, but of a burlier build, with very fair hair and blue eyes. He spoke English with fluency, but with a terrible accent.

The professor asked her gravely if she could say 'Ja' and 'Neen', and everyone laughed, and she felt quite at ease. He noted this as he was putting on his white coat; it seemed the right moment to start work; he signed to Zuster Wilsma to bring in the first little patient, and work started.

The clinics finished for the day at five o'clock, and the doctors left together. The professor was very well satisfied with the day's work; Adelaide, despite her difficulties with the language, had managed well. She had not been easily flustered or put out. As he took off his coat he congratulated her on getting through the day so competently, and told her to go and enjoy her evening, for she had earned it. Adelaide wished them both a cheerful goodbye, and they went on their way; Piet Beekman to his home, the professor to do a round of his private patients in the town.

Adelaide stood where they had left her, thinking about the professor. She liked him, very much. The thought that she

would be working with him every day for a whole year was an extremely pleasant one. She finished clearing up and went along to Casualty. Staff Nurse had just come on duty, and would be there until the night staff arrived. Adelaide said goodnight and went back along the corridor to the office, went inside, and shut the door. She was off duty, no one need know that she was there. She was determined to study the forms and papers lying on the desk; she had had to be told a dozen times during the day which was needed. She wondered how the doctors had managed to keep their patience with her. It wasn't going to happen again. She sat down on the professor's chair, got out her dictionary and notebook, and set to work. It was far worse than she had anticipated—it meant looking up every word, one at a time, and she hadn't known that the Dutch liked their verbs at the end of their sentences, and not in the middle. By the end of an hour she had sorted out the forms and had learnt what they were for, but she had no idea how to pronounce the words she had so carefully learned to write. Some one had told her—in England before she left—that if she pronounced every letter in a Dutch word, she would be understood, but had omitted to tell her that the Dutch alphabet didn't sound the same as the English one anyway; so she sat, happily and painstakingly mispronouncing every word.

She was heard by the professor, on his way back from seeing an urgent case in the children's ward. As he passed his office he saw the light beneath the door and wondered idly who was there. He decided to have a look, and it was his rather startled

gaze which met Adelaide's eye as she looked up from his desk. She was trying to say Geneeskundige Dienst, and getting in an appalling muddle.

The professor shut the door. 'That's rather a difficult word for you to cut your teeth on, you know.'

Adelaide jumped up. She looked surprised, but not in the least disconcerted. In reply to the professor's enquiry as to whether she wasn't off duty, she said:

'Yes, I am, sir, but I want to learn these forms before tomorrow. I was a great hindrance to you today.'

She watched the professor take off his topcoat and draw up a chair, waving her back into his at the same time.

'I don't think you have the pronunciation quite right,' he remarked mildly. 'Do you know what all these are?' He waved at the mass of papers on the desk.

'Oh, yes, sir. I've got them all written down, and when I have a lesson with Mijnheer de Wit, tomorrow, I shall ask him to teach me how to say them correctly.'

The professor took out his pipe. 'Do you mind if I smoke?'

She looked surprised and shook her head.

'It occurs to me that it would be to the advantage of all of us if you learn the pronunciation now, Sister Peters.'

Adelaide gathered her books together and started to get up. In this she was thwarted by the professor's hand, and was forced to sit down again, protesting, 'I really cannot let you waste your time like this, sir.' She sounded rather prim. She had never met

a member of the consultant staff who behaved quite as he was, and she wasn't quite sure what to do. He did not appear to have heard her, but reached for the phone and told the operator to get his home. When Tweedle answered, he looked at the clock. He had almost forgotten Margriet.

'Tweedle? Will you ring Freule Keizer and tell her that I'm unavoidably detained. I'll pick her up at the end of the concert and take her home.'

He grinned at Tweedle's sigh of satisfaction; he was well aware of the old man's feelings about Margriet. Adelaide, watching him, wondered why he smiled, and started to protest at his spoilt evening.

'I didn't want to go anyway,' he said. 'It was a Bach concert, I should have gone to sleep.'

Adelaide laughed, and he asked briskly:

'When do you have supper? Eight o'clock? Good, we have three-quarters of an hour. We will take one form at a time.'

He worked her hard, with a merciless criticism which made her blush and stammer, but at the end of the allotted time she had mastered the medical terms well enough to be understood. As she collected her books together, she thanked him, and added:

'I hope you will have a very pleasant evening, sir,' to which he made no reply, merely holding the door politely for her to pass through. When she reached her room she got out her dictionary once more and looked up 'Freule'. It said 'an unmarried female member of the nobility.' She would be tall and blonde, Adelaide

decided, and very beautiful. Her clothes would be exquisite. Adelaide hated her. Doubtless the professor admired blondes. She tugged at her own red mane as she tidied herself for supper, and jabbed the pins in with a complete disregard for the pain she was giving herself.

She longed to ask some questions at supper, but conversation, although friendly, was of necessity limited. She sat, listened to the unintelligible chatter around her, and wondered what the professor was doing. He was still in his office, having been delayed by a phone call from Tweedle reminding him that he still hadn't had his dinner. He lighted his pipe and reached for his coat, and went in search of his car. It had been a long day; he yawned, and hoped that Margriet wasn't going to be too maddeningly boring about Bach.

Adelaide loved Amsterdam. On her second evening at the hospital, Zuster Zijlstra had walked with her to the Spui, where Mijnheer de Wit lived. They went through the Kalverstraat, and had found time to take a quick look at the shops, gay with pretty clothes and jewellery and silverware. Zuster Zijlstra rang the bell of the small gabled house and, when the door opened, waved Adelaide a cheerful goodbye. Adelaide, left to herself, pushed the door wider and heard a voice telling her to come upstairs. She climbed several steep flights before she saw who had spoken to her. An elderly white-haired man was standing on the tiny landing. He introduced himself and led her into his flat. Here, he wasted no time, but took her hat and coat, sat her down at

the table, and plunged into her first lesson. Rather to her dismay, he spoke Dutch, only using English when he saw that she was completely befogged. At the end of an hour he wished her a polite good night, and sent her back with a great deal of homework. He seemed pleased with her, but Adelaide thought that she would have to work very hard indeed to keep him so.

Zuster Zijlstra and Zuster Boot, from Men's Surgical, both spoke a little English. They took Adelaide shopping as often as possible during the next few days; the feast of St Nicolaas was only a few weeks away. They explained that she should give small gifts to the doctors and nurses she was working with, and also explained the enormous numbers of chocolate letters displayed in the confectioners' and banketbakker. It seemed that it was customary to exchange them with friends and relations. Zuster Boot, a practical young woman, volunteered to supply the christian names of the clinic nurses so that Adelaide could buy the appropriate letters for them; she already knew that she must get a C for the professor, and a P for Piet Beekman. They roamed from shop to shop in their off-duty, choosing scarves and stockings and fancy soap, and admiring the lovely things on display. When they were off duty in the afternoons they went to Formosa in the Kalverstraat, where Adelaide sampled thé complet; she was enchanted with the tray of savoury tit-bits and cream cakes and chocolates, with its accompanying pot of tea.

Just before St Nicolaas, she and Staff Nurse Wilsma spent an hour choosing presents for the two doctors. Dr Beekman was

easy; he never had a pen of his own. They chose a vivid green one he couldn't possibly mislay. The professor was rather more difficult; he seemed to have everything. In the end they settled for a leather wallet. Wilsma was sure that he had several already, but observed that he could always put it away and use it later.

There was no clinic on the morning of St Nicolaas. Instead the nurses and porters set about transforming the Out-Patients' waiting hall. Paper chains and flags hung around the walls, and tables were set up, covered with gay cloths and loaded with glasses and plates and great baskets of oranges. The annual party for the hospital's small patients was to be held that afternoon. St Nicolaas and Black Pete would be coming to distribute the presents. Adelaide, opening tins of biscuits, asked, 'Who gives this party, Zuster Wilsma?'

Her staff nurse, scooping sweets into countless little bags, stopped her work to reply. 'Professor Van Essen. He pays for it all too. He'll be coming, and his aunt and sisters—he's got two, and his nephews and nieces—and his close friends'—she looked at Adelaide, and added, 'and Dr Beekman and his wife and baby.'

Adelaide hadn't understood half of what Zuster Wilsma had said, but there wasn't time for explanations, anyway. They still had to fill several sacks with presents.

At two o'clock the first guests arrived; most of them had mothers or big sisters with them. Adelaide sat the children in rows on the floor; the grown-ups lined the walls. Presently Zuster Zijlstra arrived, opened the piano, and started to play the first of

the traditional tunes, and everyone began to sing. Adelaide didn't understand a word, but when St Nicolaas appeared with his black slave, she laughed and clapped with everyone else, and carried the smallest toddlers up to receive their presents. She was enjoying herself enormously. At length the Saint made his stately exit, sent on his way by enthusiastic and rather shrill singing. Adelaide dumped the baby she was holding into the nearest nurse's lap and went over to the tables to pour lemonade and hand out biscuits.

There was no lack of helpers; she piled the oranges in baskets ready for the nurses to take round, talking all the while to Zuster Zijlstra in her mixture of Dutch and English. It was at this moment that the professor, with his aunt and sisters, chose to join them. They all seemed to know Zuster Zijlstra, and greeted her like an old friend. Adelaide, started to move quietly away, but the professor, who had been expecting her to do just that, put out a detaining hand and turned her smartly round, and performed his introductions in English.

She found herself the centre of an animated group. His two sisters were very like him, with dark hair and blue eyes; they wore their elegant clothes with a careless grace. His aunt was small and slim and just as elegant as her nieces. She eyed Adelaide with bright black eyes and talked to her in a gentle voice. They were all charming to her and chattered and laughed until they were presently joined by several children, who addressed the professor as Uncle, and smiled shyly at Adelaide as he introduced them. When, after a little while, they all bade her goodbye. Adelaide

watched them go with regret; it seemed unlikely that she would meet them again.

The professor made no attempt to go with them. Adelaide hesitated.

‘I must go and help the others; I’m not doing my share. It was delightful meeting your family, Professor.’

She was about to turn away when an attractive young woman put her hand on the professor’s arm. Adelaide looked at her. This must be Margriet. At once, and irrationally, she disliked her. Freule Keizer was extremely good-looking, with blonde hair and blue eyes and a magnificent figure; she was dressed with the simplicity of wealth with a sparkling bandbox finish that caused Adelaide to put an involuntary hand up to tidy away the curly wisps escaping from her cap. She was suddenly aware of the lemonade stains on her apron and its deplorably creased condition.

Margriet spoke. ‘There you are, Coenraad. I wondered where you had got to.’ She gave Adelaide a cursory glance. ‘Are you coming?’

The professor had apparently not heard her.

‘Sister Peters, I should like you to meet Freule Keizer.’ He turned to the girl beside him. ‘Margriet, Sister works with me in the clinic.’

The young women shook hands and smiled politely. Margriet’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

‘How awful for you, having to work.’ She made it sound like

an insult.

‘But I enjoy it, you know,’ Adelaide protested. She was struggling to overcome her dislike of Margriet, who looked astonished and turned to the professor.

‘You don’t know how lucky you are. You’ve at last got a nurse who is wedded to her work.’ Her tone made it clear that work was all that Adelaide could hope to wed. Her glance rested on Adelaide’s hair and she allowed her beautiful eyebrows to arch slightly. She smiled. ‘Such unusual hair! You must find it a great drawback.’ The professor, listening idly, heard Margriet’s last remark.

‘How bad your English has become, Margriet. I don’t think that drawback is the word you mean.’ He sounded reproving.

Margriet laughed—she had a charming laugh.

‘Do forgive me, Sister—there, I have forgotten your name already. It’s quite true, my English is shocking; that’s because I dislike speaking it, I suppose.’ She turned to the professor. ‘I must go and say goodbye to Lisette and Paula. Shall I wait for you in the car?’ She didn’t wait for him to reply, but said goodbye to Adelaide with cold charm, and slipped away.

‘I must go too, Professor.’ Adelaide looked pink and was breathing rather quickly, struggling to regain her temper.

The professor said, ‘Of course, Sister, but don’t forget that we shall all be meeting in my office in an hour’s time to open our presents.’

When Adelaide got to the office it was just striking six o’clock.

She was the last one to arrive and found Zuster Wilsma and the other nurses grouped around the desk, laughing and talking with the doctors.

The professor looked up as she came in. 'Good, now we can begin,' he cried, and pushed a pile of gaily coloured parcels in front of the youngest nurse. 'You first, Nurse Eisink.'

They all watched as she undid each parcel and admired the contents in turn. Zuster Steensma followed, her homely face alight with pleasure, and then Zuster Wilsma, and lastly Adelaide. As she unwrapped the first package she asked:

'But how can I thank the givers if I don't know who they are?'

Dr Beekman laughed. 'That's the whole idea, Sister. You mustn't know. Remember St Nicolaas gave them to you, and thank him.'

She did this, piling up the pretty trifles in front of her. The last two parcels were elegantly wrapped and tied with ribbons. She opened the flat box first, and gazed with delight at the fur-lined suede gloves inside.

'They're beautiful!' she exclaimed, and tried them on. They fitted perfectly. She looked around at the faces of the others watching her; it was impossible to tell from their expressions which of them had given her the gloves. 'Thank you, St Nicolaas,' she said, and added, 'I can't think who they are from.'

She opened the last parcel. It was quite small, and she almost dropped it when she saw what it was, wondering who could possibly afford to give her Madame Rochas perfume. Perhaps all

the staff had put together. She took a blissful sniff, and thanked the Saint with a fervour which left her audience in no doubt as to her delight.

The two men opened their parcels together amidst a good deal of laughing and joking from the nurses, and by the time they had finished it was almost seven o'clock. The doctors got ready to leave, Dr Beekman reminding Zuster Wilsma, who was on duty until the night staff came on, that he was on call. No sooner had they gone than Adelaide sent the two junior nurses off duty. They lived in Amsterdam, and were looking forward to an evening at home with their families, and more presents. Zuster Wilsma rammed the last of the paper and string into the wastepaper basket; she looked forlorn. Adelaide remembered that she lived in Amsterdam too.

'You live in Amsterdam, don't you, Staff Nurse? You go home too. I've nothing to do for the rest of the evening.' Her Dutch was clumsy, but Zuster Wilsma understood her and grinned with delight. She shook hands with Adelaide and tore off as fast as she could go. It seemed very quiet when she had gone. Adelaide sat down and looked at her presents again, wondering who had given them.

It was almost eight o'clock when she heard the ambulance bell. She went quickly to Casualty, switching on the powerful light over the couch and opening the door for the ambulance men. The blue flasher shone on the man hurrying towards her with a blanketed bundle in his arms. He laid his burden gently on the

couch and took the blanket away. The little girl looked about two years old; she was unconscious, her little face the colour of skimmed milk. Even as Adelaide reached for the oxygen mask the blue tinge deepened, and the harsh breathing became more agonisingly difficult. Adelaide pushed an airway gently between the tiny teeth and slipped the catheter attached to the sucker down it. She switched on the motor, which made a reassuring purr. While she had been working, she had been aware of the mother standing close by. Now, with the essentials done, she turned to her. 'Bronchitis?' she asked. The woman nodded.

Adelaide beckoned to the ambulance man, glad he was one she had met several times before.

'You'll stay?' She pointed to the sucker and oxygen mask. He nodded and she went quickly to the phone on the desk and asked for Dr Beekman urgently. When she heard the voice on the other end of the line, she said in her quiet efficient voice:

'Dr Beekman? There's a small girl just in—bronchitis and laryngeal stridor. She's unconscious and her respirations are very difficult. Will you come, please?' The voice said 'Yes' as she put down the phone and went back to the child, who looked worse. She cleared the sucker, put it carefully down the little throat again and gave it to the man to hold again, then sat about laying up a trolley. The tracheotomy instruments were always kept ready; there wasn't much for her to do. She drew up a local anaesthetic into a syringe and was putting a sandbag under the small shoulders when she heard a car draw up outside. The

ambulance man glanced at her—he wanted to be on his way; she thanked him as he hurried away, and said over her shoulder:

‘The doctor is here. Everything’s all right,’ and smiled reassuringly at the mother, sitting quietly in a corner. She turned back to the child, who gave a strangled breath as the professor came in.

He dropped his coat on the floor and stood for a moment looking at the small convulsed face, his fingers on the flaccid wrist.

Adelaide went to the head of the couch and steadied the child’s head between her hands.

‘Everything’s ready,’ she said quietly. ‘The local is on the lower shelf.’

The child hadn’t drawn another breath. The professor didn’t stop to scrub, but quickly injected the local anaesthetic, picked up a scalpel, and made a cut—quite a small one—in the little throat, securing it with a small hook. He spoke softly to the mother—Adelaide thought it sounded comforting, although she couldn’t understand what he had said—and the woman murmured a reply. He slit the trachea neatly, holding it open with the knife handle while he inserted the dilators. He mopped unhurriedly, and slipped in the tube with an unerring hand. He waited a moment, pushed the inner tube in and tied it securely. The operation had only taken a minute or two. They stood watching while a faint pink colour slowly started to blot out the blueness. The little girl’s breath rasped in and out of the tube, but it was regular again. The

professor dabbed at a tiny spot of blood on his cuff.

‘Close call,’ he observed. Adelaide’s brown eyes smiled at him over her mask, and he smiled back. ‘Nice work, Sister.’

He went to the phone and asked Zuster Zijlstra to come to Casualty as soon as she could. A moment later she came in quietly. She was a tall girl, with merry blue eyes; she and Adelaide got on well together. She winked at her now, and asked ‘Busy?’

Adelaide, doing neat things with gauze and strapping, smiled.

‘No, but you will be!’

The professor, who had been talking to the mother, turned round.

‘Ah, my good Zuster Zijlstra, I want a cot, and oxygen tent, and a nurse to special this child. Will you fix them up for me, please?’

Zuster Zijlstra tossed her head. ‘You always want something,’ she complained. ‘I’ll do it at once, sir,’ and disappeared again.

The professor walked over to the couch.

‘I expect you’ve got some writing to do. I’ll stay here.’

He stood by the patient, listening to Adelaide asking the mother the routine questions which had to be asked before the child could be admitted. She managed rather well, using a minimum of words and being very wary of the grammar. Her pronunciation was peculiar at times, but on the whole he thought that she must have worked quite hard during the month she had been in Holland.

Zuster Zijlstra came back. She scooped up the small figure

on the couch very carefully and went to the door, which the professor held open for her.

‘I’ll come with you. I’d better write up some sedation and antibiotics for her.’

Adelaide finished what she was doing and showed the mother how to get to the ward, then began to clear up; there wasn’t a great deal for her to do. She made up a fresh tracheotomy pack and put it in the autoclave, then stripped the linen off the couch and made it up anew. She was washing her hands at the sink when the professor returned.

‘The child’s fine. Zuster Zijlstra’s a wonderful nurse.’ He looked round. ‘Where’s Staff Nurse?’

Adelaide dried her hands carefully. ‘At home. She lives in Amsterdam.’

‘You took over her duty.’ It was more of a statement than a question.

‘Yes, sir. I don’t mind in the least. I wasn’t going anywhere.’ She sounded quite cheerful about it.

‘You should have taken your off-duty,’ he said evenly.

She threw the paper towel in the bin, and went to turn off the autoclave.

‘I rang Dr Beekman.’ Her voice held a question, politely put. The professor was getting into his coat.

‘Touché, Sister Peters. I have taken Beekman’s duty over until midnight; his people have come down from Drente for St Nicolaas.’ He grinned at her, called good-night, and was gone.

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