

# BETTY NEELS



39

BRITANNIA  
ALL AT SEA

Mills & Boon M&B

Betty Neels

**Britannia All at Sea**

«HarperCollins»

## **Neels B.**

Britannia All at Sea / B. Neels — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon M&B)

Mills & Boon presents the complete Betty Neels collection. Timeless tales of heart-warming romance by one of the world's best-loved romance authors. Second thoughts. It was love at first sight for Britannia Smith when she met Professor Jake Luitingh van Thien and she shamelessly followed him to Holland, hoping to see more of him. She succeeded – and to her joy, he proposed! But just when all seemed perfect, she met Madeleine de Venz. In every way Madeleine was right for Jake, and Britannia became more convinced that to go ahead with the wedding might ruin Jake's life.

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**“I beg you to stop calling me Professor  
in that severe fashion. My name is Jake.”**

“Yes, I know. I like it—but if I call you Jake, that’s how I shall remember you...if I call you Professor you’ll always be just that.”

“My dear girl, let us get one thing clear. I have no wish to be just a professor dwindling away in your thoughts. I’m a man called Jake who has fallen more than a little in love with you.”

“But if you hadn’t met me, you would have married Madeleine.”

He took her by the shoulders. “I’ll give you an honest answer, Britannia, because I can’t be anything else with you—you have been honest with me. Probably I should, but not because I loved her. I’m almost forty and I must have a wife and children to live in my home after me, but having said that, I’ll repeat that now I have met you, I shall never marry her.”

## **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.

## **Britannia All at Sea Betty Neels**



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## CHAPTER ONE

THE SLUICE ROOM at the end of Men's Surgical at St Jude's Hospital was deplorably out of date; built in Victorian times, it was always damp and chilly, its white-tiled walls and heavy earthenware sinks doing nothing to alleviate its dismal appearance. The plumbing was complicated and noisy and the bedpan washer made a peculiar clanging noise, but because some time in the distant future the hospital was to be re-sited and become a modern showpiece with every conceivable mod con the architect and Hospital Committee could think of, the antediluvian conditions which at present existed were overlooked—not by the nursing staff, of course, who had to cope with them and voiced their complaints, singly and in groups, round the clock. And a lot of good it did them, for no one listened.

But the occupants of the sluice room weren't aware of its shortcomings; the younger, smaller girl was crying her eyes out by the sink and her companion, a tall, splendidly built girl, was deep in thought, her large brown eyes gazing unseeingly at the conglomeration of pipes on the wall before her. She waited patiently until the crying had eased a little before speaking.

'Don't cry any more, Dora...' She had a soft, unhurried voice. 'I'll see Sister the moment the round's over—I'll not have you take the blame for something Delia has done—and knows she's done, too. I know you don't like telling on anyone and if Sister hadn't been in such a fuss about the round, she might have listened. Of course, it would happen on this very morning just when everything had to be just so for this wretched professor, but you're not in the least to blame, so dry your eyes, go down the back stairs and have your coffee and tidy up that face. I'll think of something to tell Sister if she wants to know where you are. She won't though, not while Mr Hyde and this tiresome old gent are here.'

She leaned across and switched off the bedpan washer so that there was more or less silence save for the gurgling of the pipes. But not quite silence; a faint noise behind her caused her to turn her head and look behind her. There was someone standing in the doorway, watching her, a very large man with grizzled hair and pale blue eyes, his undoubtedly handsome features marred by a look of annoyance.

'Lost?' she asked him kindly. 'Everyone makes the mistake of coming up these stairs, but I'm afraid you're out of luck; you won't be able to go into the ward until the round's over and that will be at least an hour. Look, Nurse is going down to her coffee—if you go with her, she'll show you the front stairs. There's a waiting room on the landing—I'll let you know the minute they've gone. Have you come to see someone special?'

He regarded her frowningly. 'Yes. Er—Staff Nurse, I presume?'

'That's right. Sister will know about you, I expect. Now if you run along...'

Perhaps it wasn't the best way of putting it, she thought; one didn't tell giants of six feet something and broad with it to run along, but he had no need to look so unsmiling, she had done the best she could to help him. She nodded to the little nurse, who gave a final sniff and managed a very small smile. 'There's a good girl,' said her champion, and put a hand to her cap to make sure that it sat straight on her crown of dark hair as she made for the door. The man didn't move, so she was forced to stop.

'What is your name?' he asked.

'My name?' She was vaguely surprised at the question, but if telling him was going to make him go the quicker, then she might as well do so.

'Smith—Britannia Smith.' She smiled fleetingly and he stood aside. 'Goodbye. Nurse Watts, make sure that this gentleman gets the right stairs, won't you?'

She watched him shrug his shoulders and follow the little nurse down the stairs before she went back into the ward.

It was as old-fashioned as the sluice, with a row of beds on either side and because it was taken in week, three beds down the middle as well. Britannia sped up its length to where Sister Mack, the Surgical Registrar, the surgical houseman, a worried bunch of medical students attached to Mr Hyde's firm, the lady Social Worker, and the senior physiotherapist had grouped themselves, awaiting the great man. The group dissolved and then reformed with Mr Hyde as its hub as she reached them, in time to hear his measured tones voice the opinion that Professor Luitingh van Thien should be joining them at any moment. 'I take it that everything is in readiness, Sister?' he asked, with no idea of it being otherwise.

Sister Mack shot a lightning glance at Britannia, who shook her head. She had been on a swift foray to see if anything could be done to recover at least some of the specimens and while doing so had discovered poor Dora. Sister Mack looked thunderous, but as Britannia saw that look several times a day, she could ignore it and turned her intention instead to the third-year nurse, Delia Marsh, standing there like an innocent angel, she thought indignantly, letting a timid creature like Dora take the blame. She gave the girl a cool thoughtful look and was glad to see that she had her worried; her pretty mouth curved just a little downwards in sympathy for Dora and then rounded itself into a surprised O, while consternation and horror showed plain on her lovely face.

The group had increased by one; the man who had been in the sluice—standing behind everyone else, just inside the ward doors, surveying her down his arrogant nose with the hint of a sardonic smile. Sister Mack looked round then, and if Britannia hadn't been so taken up with her own feelings, she might have been amused at that lady's reaction, for her somewhat hatchet features broke into the ingratiating smile which Sister Mack reserved for those of importance, and there was no getting away from the fact that the man looked important, although not consciously so, Britannia had to concede him that. The party regrouped itself once more, this time with Mr Hyde and his companion wandering off in the direction of the first bed with Sister Mack hard on their heels. Britannia gave a soundless chuckle at the imperious wave she gave to the rest of them to keep at a respectable distance. After all, they rarely saw anyone quite as exquisite on the ward, and Sister Mack considered that she should have the lion's share of him. And that suited Britannia; with any luck she would be able to avoid having to speak to either Mr Hyde or the visitor; she was merely there as Sister's right hand, to pass forms, offer notes and whisper in Sister's ear any titbit of information she might have overlooked.

She wished she wasn't such a tall girl, for she stood out in the group, and she sighed with relief when the Registrar, edging his way along to join his chief by the bedside, paused beside her. 'And what hit you?' he wanted to know. 'Our professor looks the type to turn any girl's head and here's our gorgeous Britannia all goggle-eyed at the sight of him—anyone would think he had a squint and big ears!'

Britannia spoke earnestly in a thread of a whisper. 'Fred, he was in the sluice just now—he'd come up the staircase and I sent him all the way back and told him to come up the front stairs and wait until the round was over...'

Fred gave a snort of laughter which he turned into a fit of coughing as the two consultants turned round with an impatient: 'Come along, Fred—' from Mr Hyde. The visiting professor said nothing, only raked Britannia with a leisurely look from half-closed eyes. She wondered uneasily if he had heard what she had said and then, obedient to an urgent signal from Sister Mack, slipped behind her and bent her head to receive whatever it was her superior wished to say. 'Nurse Watts—where is she, Staff Nurse? I have not yet told Mr Hyde about the specimens.' She shuddered strongly. 'When I do so, I wish Nurse to be here so that she may admit her carelessness.'

Britannia bit back all the things she would have liked to have said; Sister Mack had been nursing for a good many years now, but apparently she still hadn't learnt that junior nurses could be admonished for their errors in the privacy of Sister's office, but in public they were to be protected, covered up for, backed up...

'I sent her for coffee,' she said with calm.

‘You what...? Staff Nurse Smith, sometimes you take too much upon yourself! Why?’

‘She didn’t do it.’

Sister Mack went a pale puce. ‘Of course she did it—anyway, she didn’t say a word when I accused her.’

‘That’s why, Sister—she was too frightened to.’

Sister Mack eyed Britannia with dislike. ‘We will discuss this later.’ Her expression changed to one of smiling efficiency as she became aware that the two consultants had finished their low-voiced conversation and were looking at them both.

The patient in the first bed was a double inguinal hernia and nicely on the mend—a few minutes’ chat sufficed to allay his dark suspicions that Mr Hyde had removed most of his insides without telling him, and they moved to the second bed; a young man who had been in a motor crash and had ruptured his liver; Mr Hyde had removed most of the offending organ, since it was no longer of any use, and his patient was making a slow recovery—too slow, explained Mr Hyde to his colleague. The two of them muttered and mumbled together and finally Mr Hyde enquired: ‘The specimen from this lad, Sister? Both I and Professor Luitingh van Thien wish to examine it—the blood-clotting time is of great importance...’ He meandered on for a few moments while Sister Mack’s complexion took a turn for the worse and Britannia prayed that Dora wouldn’t come tearing back too soon. The nasty silence was broken by the visiting professor. A nice voice, Britannia considered, even though it had a pronounced drawl: ‘I understand that the specimens are not available.’

She shot him a look of dislike; if he was going to sneak on poor Dora in front of everyone, she for her part would never forgive him—an absurd resolve; consultant surgeons were unlikely to be affected by the feelings of a mere staff nurse. But he wasn’t going to sneak. Sister Mack, interrupting him willy-nilly, declared furiously: ‘The nurse responsible isn’t here; my staff nurse has seen fit to send her to coffee...’

His cold eyes held Britannia’s warm brown ones for a moment and then settled on a point a little above Sister Mack’s shoulder. ‘I have it on good authority that Nurse Watts wasn’t responsible for the error,’ he pointed out in a silky voice. ‘I suggest that the matter be looked into and dealt with after the round.’ He turned to Mr Hyde. ‘I’m sure you will forgive me for saying this, but I happen to have been personally involved...’

Mr Hyde, not very quick to catch on, observed gamely: ‘Oh, certainly, my dear chap. We can make do with the notes.’ His eyes suddenly lighted on Britannia. ‘You know who did it?’ he asked. And when she said ‘Yes, sir,’ he went on, ‘And of course, you don’t intend to tell me.’

She smiled at him. ‘That’s right, sir.’

He nodded. ‘I like loyalty. I daresay you can get fresh specimens, Sister?’

Sister Mack, quite subdued, muttered something or other and Britannia took the opportunity of putting the next case papers into her hands. The quicker the round got back into its old routine, the better. She looked up and found the professor’s eye on her once more and this time, because she was so relieved that he had held his tongue, and at the same time stood up for little Dora, she essayed a smile. His eyes became, if anything, even colder, his fine mouth remained in an unrelenting straight line; he didn’t like her. She removed her own smile rapidly and frowned instead.

The next patient, fortunately, was an irascible old gentleman who had a great deal to say for himself, and as the professor’s face was a new one and he looked important, he was able to air his opinion of hospitals, doctors, the nursing staff and the Health Service in general, at some length. Mr Hyde, who had heard it all before, listened with veiled impatience and said ‘Yes, yes,’ at intervals, not wishing to offend the old man who had, after all, been something important in the War Office in his heyday, but the professor heard him out with great courtesy, even giving the right answers and making suitable comments from time to time so that when at last the diatribe came to an end, the speaker added a corollary to the effect that the professor was a man of sense and might do worse than join the hospital staff. Whereupon Mr Hyde pointed out that his colleague was only paying them a brief

visit on his way to Edinburgh and had work enough in his own country. ‘A distinguished member of our profession,’ he added generously.

‘A foreigner,’ remarked his patient with a touch of asperity, and then added kindly: ‘But his English is excellent.’

The professor thanked him gravely, expressed the wish that he would soon be on his feet again, and with Mr Hyde beside him, wandered on to the next bed. The round was uneventful for the next half a dozen beds; it was when they reached the young man in the corner bed as they started on the second side that interest quickened. He was a very ill young man, admitted only a few days previously, and it became apparent that this was the patient in whom the professor was interested—indeed, intended to operate upon that very afternoon. ‘Hydatid cysts,’ explained Mr Hyde to his audience, ‘diagnosed by means of Casoni’s intradermal test—the local and general reaction are very marked.’ He signed to Britannia to turn back the bed-clothes and began to examine the patient while he murmured learnedly about rupture, peritonitis and severe anaphylaxis. The professor agreed, nodding his handsome head and adding a few telling words of his own, then said at length: ‘We are unable to establish eosinophilia, but the X-rays confirm the cysts, I take it?’

Britannia, on the alert, produced the films with all the aplomb of a first-class conjuror getting a rabbit from a hat and obligingly held them up for viewing while the surgeons, this time with the registrar in attendance, peered and commented. ‘Yes, well,’ observed the professor at length, ‘should you feel that I could help in any way...’

Mr Hyde took him up smartly: ‘This afternoon?’ He turned to include Sister Mack. ‘Could that be arranged, Sister? Shall we say half past two in main theatre? He will go to ICU from theatre and I shall want a responsible nurse to look after him here.’ His eye lighted upon Britannia. ‘Staff Nurse Smith, perhaps.’

Which would mean that Britannia would have to forgo her evening off duty and, worse, Sister Mack would have to stay on and do her Staff Nurse’s work. ‘Certainly, sir,’ said Britannia, not looking at her superior. She had been going out with Doctor Ross, the Medical Registrar, and now she would have to explain. David was impatient of interference with his wishes; he had booked two seats for the latest musical and the forgoing of a pleasant evening was going to put him out—perhaps a good thing, she decided; he had become a little possessive just lately...

The round rambled on, with frequent pauses while Mr Hyde and his companion murmured, occasionally drawing Sister Mack into their discussion and asking Fred for his opinion, invariably pausing too to say a few appropriate words to the occupants of the beds. At the last bed, Britannia nodded to the ward orderly, peering at them through the glass window of the door; it would never do for the coffee tray in Sister’s office not to be there and ready. Not everyone had coffee, of course, only Sister Mack and the consultants and Fred; no one else was considered eligible. Britannia, used to Sister Mack’s little ways, despatched the houseman and the students to the kitchen for refreshment and retired to the linen cupboard where Bridget, the ward maid, would have put a tray for her. But before she went she beckoned Delia Marsh to her.

‘Before you go to coffee,’ she said without heat, ‘you will find Dora and apologise, and when you have had your coffee you will report to Sister and tell her that the error was yours, not hers. And I advise you not to do anything like that again. You’re in your third year and you should know better.’ She nodded dismissal. ‘Dora will be back from her coffee, tidying beds.’

The linen cupboard was cosily warm and the frosted glass of its narrow window shut out the grey November morning. Britannia made herself comfortable on a laundry basket and poured her coffee. Bridget was one of the many people in the hospital who liked her; the coffee was hot and milky and two biscuits had been sneaked out of Sister’s tin. Britannia munched and swallowed and thought in a vague way about Professor Luitingh van Thien; an ill-tempered man, and arrogant, she considered, then looked up in astonishment as he opened the door and walked in. And over and above that, she discovered with an almighty shock, the man she wished to marry; she had been in and out

of love quite a few times, as any healthy-minded girl of twenty-four or so would, but never had she felt like this. Nevertheless, all she said in a mild voice was: 'You should have knocked, Professor.'

The cold eyes studied hers. 'Why?'

She said with some asperity: 'Manners.'

His thick dark brows rose, and then: 'But I have none,' and he went on deliberately, 'I am getting on for forty, unmarried, rich and something of a hermit; I need please no one.'

'How very sad,' observed Britannia with sincerity. 'Did you want something?'

The lids drooped over his eyes. 'Yes. I also wish to ask you a question. Why Britannia?'

She took a sip of her cooling coffee and stared at him over the mug's rim. 'My parents decided that with a name like Smith they should—should compensate me.'

He broke into such a roar of laughter that she exclaimed: 'Oh, hush, do—if Sister hears you she'll be in to see...'

His brows rose again. 'Chance acquaintances over a cup of coffee?'

'Put like that it sounds very respectable, but it wouldn't do, you know. Visiting professors and staff nurses don't meet in linen cupboards.'

'You flatter yourself, Miss Smith. I cannot recall inviting you to meet me.'

She took another sip of coffee. 'Very prickly,' she observed, 'but I quite see why. There's no need for you to stay,' she added kindly, 'I've answered your question.' He looked so surprised that she went on: 'I'm sure that no one speaks to you like that, but it won't harm you, you know.'

He smiled, and she wasn't sure if she liked the smile. 'I stand corrected, don't I?' He put a large square hand on the door. 'And talking of manners, you didn't offer me coffee, Miss Smith.'

'You've just had it,' she pointed out, and added: 'sir.'

'Yes. A cup of vilely brewed liquid, curdled by Sister Mack's conversation. What an unkind woman!' He eyed the almost empty coffee pot as he spoke and Britannia said with real sympathy:

'The kitchen maid makes super coffee—I always have it alone on round days. I enjoyed mine.'

He opened the door. 'Heartless girl,' he remarked coldly, and went out.

Britannia poured herself the last of the coffee. She had forgotten to apologise for sending him out of the sluice, but her whole mind had been absorbed by her sudden uprush of feeling when he had come in so unexpectedly. She frowned, worrying that she would never have the chance to do so now—she wasn't likely to see him again, at least not to speak to. 'And that's negative thinking, my girl,' she admonished herself out loud. 'If you want to see him again, you must work at it.'

A heartening piece of advice, which she knew quite well was quite hollow. The professor wasn't the kind of man to be chased, even if the girl chasing him had made up her mind to marry him. She sighed; probably she would have to rely on Fate, and that lady was notoriously unpredictable. She picked up her tray and bore it back to the kitchen, then crossed the landing to Sister's office. The door stood half open; everyone had gone, Mr Hyde, his firm and his handsome colleague. She might as well get Dora's unfortunate little episode dealt with at once. Undeterred by Sister's cross voice bidding her to go in, she opened the door wider and entered.

Fate at least allowed her to see him again, although the circumstances might have been more propitious; it was quite late in the afternoon when the patient returned to the ward and by then Sister Mack, never the sunniest of persons, was in a quite nasty mood. She had an evening's work before her and instead of being refreshed by a free afternoon, she had been hard at it doing dressings, medicine rounds and writing the beginnings of the day report, while Britannia, as she put it, had been idling in theatre. Britannia hadn't been idling at all, but she knew better than to protest. She had rushed back to the ward while the patient was in the Recovery Room and broken the news to her superior that ICU was up to its neck with a bad car crash and the patient would be coming straight back to his own bed. So she was engrossed in a variety of urgent tasks to do with the well-being of the patient when Mr Hyde and the professor arrived at the bedside. They were still in their theatre gear; shapeless white smocks and trousers; the professor, being the size he was, looking as though he might burst

every seam although his dignity remained unimpaired. He barely nodded at Britannia before bending over the young man. She handed Mr Hyde the observation sheets she had been keeping, answered his questions with brief clarity, and stood silently until the two men had made their examination. Everything was just as it should be, they told her, she was to continue the treatment which had been ordered—and what, she was asked, were the arrangements for the night?

‘There will be a special on at nine o’clock, sir,’ said Britannia, and thought longingly of that hour, still some time ahead—tea, and her shoes off and her feet up...

It was disconcerting to her when the professor asked: ‘You have been off duty?’ because unless he was blind and deaf, which he wasn’t, he would have seen her and heard her during the course of the afternoon; indeed, he had stared at her in theatre so intently that she had felt twelve feet tall and outsize to boot.

She handed Mr Hyde her pen so that he could add something to his notes and said composedly: ‘No. I can make it up later in the week.’

‘No tea?’ And when she shook her head: ‘A paragon among nurses, Miss Britannia Smith. Let us hope that you will get your just reward.’ His voice was bland and the smile she didn’t like was back again. She wondered what his real smile was like and wished lovingly that he wasn’t quite so difficult. She said a little severely: ‘You have no need to turn me into a martyr, Professor. I shall do very well.’

The two surgeons went presently; the professor’s casual nod seemed positively churlish compared with Mr Hyde’s courteous thanks and genial good evening. Britannia, fiddling expertly with tubes, mused sadly on her day. Surely when one met the man of one’s dreams, it should be the happiest day of one’s life? If that were so, then hers had fallen sadly short of that.

Sister went to supper at seven o’clock, leaving a student nurse in charge of the ward with the remark that Staff Nurse Smith was there and able to cope with anything which might turn up; she was still bad-tempered at the loss of her off-duty, and the fact that Britannia couldn’t leave her patient didn’t seem to have struck her, nor did it strike her that Britannia might like her supper too, for when she returned from her meal she finished the report, gave it to the night staff when they came on, and pausing only long enough to tell Britannia that she was worn out with her day’s work, hurried off duty. The special wasn’t coming on duty for another hour; Britannia, dealing with the dozens of necessary chores for her patient, hardly noticed where that hour went. Fred had been down earlier, he came again now, expressed his satisfaction as to the patient’s condition, told Britannia with the casual concern of an old friend that her hair was coming down, and went away.

She still had no time to have done anything to her hair when she at last got off duty. Men’s Surgical was on the first floor and she wandered down the staircase to the front hall, listening vaguely to the subdued sounds around her; the faint tinkle of china as the junior night nurses collected up bedtime drinks, the sudden distant wail of some small creature up on the children’s unit above her, the creak of trolleys and the muffled to-ing and fro-ing of the night staff. She yawned hugely, gained the last stair and turned, her eyes on the ground, to go down the narrow passage which would take her to the Nurses’ Home. She was brought up short by something large and solid—Professor Luitingh van Thien.

‘Put on that cloak,’ he advised her in a no-nonsense voice. ‘We are going out.’

Britannia, aware of the intense pleasure of seeing him again, opened her mouth, closed it and then opened it again to say: ‘I can’t—my hair!’

He gave her a considered look. ‘A mess. Why do women always worry about their hair? No one is going to look at you.’

She was forced to agree silently and with regret; not that she minded about that but because he didn’t consider her worth looking at.

He had taken her hospital cape from her arm and flung it around her shoulders.

‘And you have no need to look like that; you are a handsome creature who can manage very well without elaborate hairstyles or other such nonsense.’

She was torn between pleasure at being called a handsome creature—even though it put her strongly in mind of some outsized horse—and annoyance at his casual dismissal of her appearance. ‘I don’t think I want to go out,’ she told him calmly.

‘Tea? Hot buttered toast? Sandwiches? Are you not famished?’

Her mouth watered, but: ‘I can make myself a pot of tea...’

She could have saved her breath; she was swept across the hall and out into the cold November night and walked briskly down a back lane or two and into Ned’s Café, a small, brightly lit place much frequented by the hospital staff in need of a hasty snack or cup of coffee.

Britannia, seated willy-nilly at a small plastic table in the middle of the crowded place, put up a hand to tuck in her hair. ‘How did you know about this place?’ she enquired, and thought how like a man to choose to sit where everyone could see them, and her with her hair streaming around her head like a witch.

‘The Surgical Registrar was kind enough to tell me.’

‘Oh—haven’t you had your supper either?’

His fine mouth twitched at its corners. ‘Er—no.’ He lifted a finger and Ned came over, his cheerful, round face beaming.

‘Ullo, Staff—’ad a bad day? and I bet they didn’t give yer time to eat. What’s it ter be? A nice bacon sandwich or a nice bit o’ cheese on toast? And a pot of tea?’

Britannia’s nose twitched with anticipation. ‘Oh, Ned, I’d love a bacon sandwich—and tea, please.’

They both glanced at the professor, who said at once: ‘A generous supply of bacon sandwiches, please, and the cheese on toast sounds nice—we’ll have that too—and the tea, of course.’

The tea was hot and strong, the bacon sandwiches delicious. Britannia sank her splendid teeth into one of them before asking: ‘Why are you buying me my supper, Professor? It’s very kind of you, of course, you have no idea how hungry I am—but I’m surprised. You see, I sent you all the way back to the ward this morning, didn’t I, and I haven’t apologised for it yet. I’m sorry, really I am—if you had said who you were...’ She eyed him thoughtfully. ‘I expect people mostly know who you are...’

Her companion smiled faintly. ‘Mostly.’ He watched her with interest as she daintily wolfed her sandwich. ‘When did you last eat, Miss Smith?’

She licked a finger. ‘Well, I should have gone to second dinner, but Sister was a little late and we had this emergency in... I had coffee on the ward, though, and some rice pudding left over from the patients’ dinner.’

The professor looked revolted. ‘No wonder you are hungry!’ He pushed the plate towards her. ‘It is nice to see a girl with such a splendid appetite.’

Britannia flushed faintly; she wasn’t plump, but she was a tall girl and magnificently built. Despite the flush, she gave him a clear, unselfconscious look. ‘There’s a lot of me,’ she pointed out.

Her companion drank his tea with the air of a man who was doing his duty and helped himself to one of the fast disappearing sandwiches. ‘You are engaged to be married?’ he asked coolly.

‘Me? Whatever gave you that idea? No, I’m not.’

‘You surprise me. In love, perhaps?’

She flicked a crumb away with the tip of her tongue. For someone who had known her for a very short time, his question struck her as inquisitive to say the least. All the same, it didn’t enter her head to tell him anything but the truth. ‘Yes,’ she said briefly, and wondered just what he would say if she told him it was himself.

The toasted cheese had arrived. She poured more tea for them both and sampled the cheese, then paused with her fork half way to her mouth because the professor was looking so very severe. ‘It is, of course, only to be expected,’ he observed in a nasty smooth voice. ‘I suppose I am expected to say what a lucky man he is.’

Britannia munched her cheese; love him she might, but he really was quite disagreeable. ‘You aren’t expected to say anything,’ she pointed out kindly, ‘why should you? We hardly know each other and shan’t see each other again, so I can’t see that it could possibly matter to you. Have another piece of toast before I eat it all.’

The professor curled his lip. ‘Thank you, no.’ He sat back with his arms folded against his great chest. ‘And as to seeing each other again, the unlikelihood of that is something for which I am deeply thankful. I find you far too ready with that sharp tongue of yours.’

Britannia choked on a piece of toast. It was mortifying that the professor should have to get out of his chair and pat her on the back while she spluttered and whooped, but on the other hand it concealed her feelings very satisfactorily. As soon as she could speak she said in a reasonable voice: ‘But it is entirely your own fault that you brought me here, you know, unless it was that you wanted to convince yourself of my—my sharp voice.’

She got up suddenly, pulled her cloak around her, thanked him for her supper and made for the door. She was quick on her feet and through it before the professor had a chance to do anything about it—besides, he had to pay the bill. There were several short cuts to the hospital, down small dark alleys which normally she wouldn’t have chosen to walk down after dark, but she didn’t think about that. She gained the hospital and her room in record time, got ready for bed and then sat down to think. She very much doubted if she would see the professor again, and if she did it would be on the ward where their conversation, if any, would be of the patients. And he had presumably only come for that one case. The thing to do would be to erase him from her mind, something she was loath to do. One didn’t meet a man one wanted to marry every day of the week and when one did, the last thing one wanted to do was to forget him. He could have been tired of course, but more probably just a bad-tempered man, given to odd whims. She couldn’t for the life of her recall any consultants who had taken staff nurses out for tea and sandwiches at nine o’clock at night, but he looked the kind of man who was accustomed to do as he pleased without anyone attempting to stop him. She got into bed, punched up her pillows and continued to muse, this time on the probability of him being engaged; he wasn’t a young man, and surely he would have an attachment of some sort. But if he hadn’t... She lay down and closed her eyes; somehow or other she intended to meet him again and some time in the future, marry him. She slept soundly on her resolution.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE PROFESSOR came to the ward twice the next day; during the morning when Britannia was scrubbed and doing a lengthy dressing behind screens, so that all she could hear was his deep voice at the other end of the ward. And in the afternoon when he came again, she was at tea.

Sister Mack, giving her the report before she went off duty in the evening, mentioned that he would be leaving for Edinburgh the following day and then returning to Holland. ‘A charming man,’ she observed, ‘although he never quite explained how it was he knew about those tests...’ She shot a look at Britannia as she spoke, and Britannia looked placidly back and said nothing at all.

She went about her evening duties rather morosely. She had had no plans concerning the professor, except that she had hoped that if and when they met again something would happen; she had no idea what, but she was a romantic girl as well as a determined one, and without being vain she was aware that she was worth looking at. Of course, it would have been easier if she had been small and blonde and helpless; men, so her brothers frequently told her, liked their women fragile. She looked down at her own splendid person and wished she could be something like Alice and become miraculously fairylike. And David Ross hadn’t helped; he had grumbled about his spoilt evening without once showing any sympathy for her own disappointment. They had met as she was on her way to dinner and he had spoken quite sharply, just as though she had done it deliberately, and when she had pointed out reasonably enough that if he wanted to grumble at someone it should have been Mr Hyde, he had shrugged his shoulders and bade her a cool goodbye.

She had had no deep feelings about David, but before the professor had loomed so largely over her world, she had begun to think that given time she might have got around to the idea of marrying him later on. But she was sure that she would never want to do that—indeed, she didn’t want to marry anyone else but Professor Luitingh van Thien. She stopped writing the Kardex for a moment and wrote Britannia Luitingh van Thien on the blotting paper; it looked, to say the least, very imposing.

She went home for her days off at the end of the week; she managed to travel down to Dorset at least once a month and although the month wasn’t quite up, she felt the urge to talk to her parents. Accordingly she telephoned her mother, packed an overnight bag and caught the evening train, sleeping peacefully until the train came to a brief halt at Moreton station, a small, isolated place, some way from the village of that name and several miles from Dorchester and Wareham. It was cold and dark and Britannia was the only passenger to alight on to the ill-lit platform, but her father was there, passing the time of day with Mr Tims, porter, stationmaster and ticket collector rolled into one. They both greeted her with pleasure and after an animated discussion about Mrs Tims’ nasty back and Mr Tims’ bunions, they parted, Mr Tims to return to his stuffy little cubbyhole and await the next train and Britannia and Mr Smith to the car outside; an elderly Morris Oxford decidedly vintage and Mr Smith’s pride and joy. They accomplished the short journey home without haste, because the country road was winding and very dark and the Oxford couldn’t be expected to hurry anyway, and their conversation was casual and undemanding. But once through the front door of the small Georgian cottage which was Britannia’s home, they were pounced upon by her mother, a tall older replica of herself who rattled off a succession of questions without waiting for any of them to be answered. Britannia, quite used to this, kissed her parent with deep affection, told her that she looked smashing and remarked on the delicious aroma coming from the kitchen.

‘You’re famished,’ said Mrs Smith immediately. ‘I was only saying to your father this evening that you never get proper meals in that hospital.’ She started kitchenwards. ‘Take off your coat, darling, supper’s ready.’ She added to no one in particular: ‘It will be a blessing when you marry, Britannia.’

Which could mean anything or nothing, thought her daughter as she went upstairs to the small room which had been hers since she was a very small girl. When her brothers had left home her mother had suggested that she might like to move into either of the two bigger rooms they had occupied,

but she had chosen to remain in the little room over the porch. She flung her coat down on to the bed now, then went downstairs again without bothering to look in the looking glass; supper for the moment was far more important than her appearance. It was after that satisfying meal, eaten in the cheerful rather shabby dining room opposite the sitting room, when her parents were seated on each side of the fire and she was kneeling before it giving it a good poke, that she paused to look over her shoulder and say: 'I've met the man I want to marry, my dears.'

Her father lifted his eyes from the seed catalogue he was studying and gave her a searching look and her mother cast down her knitting and said encouragingly: 'Yes, dear? Do we know him?'

'No.'

'He's asked you to marry him?'

'No.' Britannia sounded matter-of-fact. 'Nor is he likely to. He's a professor of surgery, one of the best—very good-looking, ill-tempered, arrogant and rich. He didn't like me overmuch. We—we don't come from the same background.'

Her father, longing to get back to his seeds, said vaguely: 'Not at all suitable, I gather.'

It was her mother who asked: 'How old is he, darling? And is he short or tall, fat or thin?'

'It doesn't matter what he looks like if he's unsuitable,' her father pointed out sensibly.

'Quite unsuitable,' agreed Britannia. 'He's in his late thirties, I understand, and he's very large indeed. He's Dutch and he went back to Holland a few days ago.'

'Do we know anyone in Holland?' queried her mother.

Britannia threw her parent a grateful look for taking her seriously. 'No—at least, one of the staff nurses—Joan Stevens, remember her, you met her at the prize-giving—she has a Dutch godmother and she's going over there to stay with her for a couple of weeks very soon. It's a small country,' she added thoughtfully.

'Very. Joan's a good friend of yours?' Her father had left his catalogue to join in the conversation again.

'Oh, yes, Father. We were in the same set, you know, we've known each other for years. She did suggest that I might like to go with her this time.'

'And of course you said yes.'

Britannia nodded and laid the poker down. 'Am I being silly? You see, it was like a sign, if you see what I mean...'

Her parents nodded in complete understanding. 'You've always known what you have wanted,' observed her father, and, 'Have you plenty of pretty clothes?' asked her mother.

She said that yes, she had, and added earnestly: 'I had to do something about it. I'm not sure what, but Joan asking me to go with her seemed like a sign...'

'He'll be a lucky man,' remarked her father, 'if he gets you—though I should have put that the other way round, shouldn't I?' He added: 'It's a pity he's rich—it tends to spoil people.'

His daughter considered this. 'Not him, I think—I fancy he takes it for granted.'

'How did you meet?' her mother wanted to know.

'I sent him packing out of the sluice on Men's Surgical. I didn't know who he was, but he shouldn't have been there, anyway.'

'Hardly a romantic background.' Mr Smith's voice was dry.

'No—well...' Britannia sounded uncertain, for only a moment. 'Don't say a word to Ted or Nick, will you?'

'Of course not, dear,' promised her mother comfortably. 'Anyway, they're neither of them coming home for weeks. Such dear boys,' she continued, 'and good brothers to you, too, even though they tease.' She picked up her knitting again. 'What's his name?'

'Professor Luitingh van Thien. He's not married, but I daresay he's engaged or got a girlfriend.'

'Quite suitable,' commented her mother, and shot her husband a smug look. 'And one doesn't know, probably he's a misogynist.'

Her husband and daughter surveyed her with deep affection. 'In that case,' declared Mr Smith, 'he won't be suitable at all.'

The first thing Britannia did when she got back to St Jude's was to go in search of her friend. She found her in the pantry, making tea after her day's work, and said without preamble: 'Joan, you asked me if I'd like to go to Holland with you—well, I would, very much.'

Joan warmed the pot carefully. 'Super! The Veskes are dears but a trifle elderly, if you know what I mean. I'm a bit active for them, that's why they suggested that I should bring someone with me. Could you manage two weeks?'

Britannia nodded. 'Mack will be furious, but I haven't had leave for ages—she asked me to change with her, so she owes me a favour. When do you plan to go?'

'Ten days.' They had gone back to Joan's room and were sipping their tea. 'Can you manage that?' And when Britannia nodded again: 'Can you ride?'

'Yes—nothing too mettlesome, though.'

'And cycle? Good. I daresay the weather will be foul, but who cares? We can borrow the car if we want, too. Hoenderloo is fairly central and we could travel round a bit.'

Holland was small, thought Britannia, they would be able to visit a great many places, there was always the chance that she might meet the professor... 'Won't your godmother mind? I mean if we go off all day?'

'Not a bit of it, as long as we're home for dinner in the evening—they like to play cards in the evening—besides, we can always take her with us. She's pretty hot on a bike too.'

'Thick clothes?' asked Britannia.

'And a mac. Not much chance of dressing up, ducky, though I always pop in something pretty just in case Prince Charming should rear his handsome head.' Joan poured more tea. 'And talking of him, what happened to that splendid type who came to operate on that liver case of yours? I saw him in theatre for a minute or two and he quite turned me on.'

'He went back to Holland.' Britannia made her voice nicely vague. 'He made a good job of that liver, too.'

Her friend gave her a considered look. 'Britannia, are you up to something?'

'Me? What could I be up to?'

'Well, you haven't been out with Ross lately, and you were seen wining and dining in Ned's Café.'

'Cheese on toast and a pot of tea,' said Britannia in a very ordinary voice. 'Neither of us had had any food for ages and we happened to meet—he was very rude,' she added.

'So much for Prince Charming,' declared Joan comfortably. 'Oh, well, let's hope he turns up for both of us before we're too long in the tooth.'

It wasn't easy to persuade Sister Mack that she could manage very nicely without her staff nurse for a fortnight, but Britannia's mind had been made up; she was going to Holland, childishly certain that she would meet the professor again. What she would say to him when she did, she had no idea—that could be thought about later. Once having wrung her superior's reluctant consent, she clinched the matter at the office, telephoned her parents and began on the important task of overhauling her wardrobe.

Joan had said something warm and sensible; she had a Scottish tweed suit she had providentially bought only a few weeks previously, a rich brown, the colour of peat, into which had been woven all the autumn colours of the Scottish Highlands. She bought a handful of sweaters to go with it, decided that her last year's brown tweed coat would have to do, added a small stitched velvet hat which could be pulled on at any angle and still look smart, and then a modicum of slacks and thick pullovers before concentrating on the important question of something pretty. For of course when she and the professor did meet, she would be wearing something eye-catching and chic... To be on the safe side, she bought two new dresses, one long, with a sweeping skirt and a plainly cut bodice.

It had long sleeves demurely cuffed and its soft pink, she felt sure, would enchant even the cold eye of the professor. The other dress was short; a dark green wool, elegant and simple and in its way, equally eye-catching.

The two girls left for their holiday on a cold grey day which threatened drizzle, and indeed when they arrived at Schiphol it was raining, a cold, freezing rain which made them glad that they had worn raincoats and tied scarves over their heads. Mijnheer Veske was waiting for them, a tall, quiet man whose English was excellent and whose welcome was sincere. He stowed them into his Citroën and throughout the sixty-mile journey kept up a running commentary on the country they were passing through, but as he travelled fast and the greater part of the journey was a motorway, Britannia at least got a little muddled, but just before Apeldoorn he left the motorway, to take a quiet country road winding through the Veluwe to Hoenderloo, a small town composed largely of charming little villas surrounded by gardens, which even in the winter were a pleasure to the eye. But they didn't stop here, but took a narrow country road lined with tall trees and well wooded on either side, their density broken here and there by gated lanes or imposing pillars guarding well-kept drives.

Presently Mijnheer Veske turned the car into one of the lanes, its gate invitingly opened on to a short gravelled drive leading to a fair-sized house. It was elaborately built, with a great many little turrets and tiled eyebrows over its upstairs windows, and small iron balconies dotted here and there. But it looked welcoming, and indeed when the front door was flung open, their welcome was everything they could have wished for; Mevrouw Veske was waiting for them in the hall, a short, stout lady with carefully coiffured hair, a massive bosom and a round cheerful face. She embraced them in turn, declared herself to be enchanted to entertain her goddaughter's friend, outlined a few of the activities arranged for their entertainment and swept them into a large and cosily furnished sitting room, barely giving them time to shed their outdoor things. The room was warm and a tea tray stood ready; very soon they were all sitting round talking away on the very best of terms.

Presently the two girls were taken upstairs to their rooms, pleasant apartments overlooking the now bare garden at the back and the woods beyond, and left to unpack. Britannia, happily arranging her clothes in a vast, old-fashioned wardrobe, decided that she was going to enjoy herself. It would of course be marvellous if she were to meet the professor, but during their drive from Schiphol she had come to the conclusion that she had been a little mad to imagine that she might find him again. Holland might be small, but not as small as all that. She changed into the new green dress, piled her hair into a great bun above her neck, did her face and went along to see if Joan was ready to go down.

The evening had been very pleasant, she decided, lying in her warm bed some hours later. Dinner had been a substantial meal, taken in a rather sombre dining room and served by a hefty young girl who looked at them rather as though they had arrived from outer space and giggled a good deal. Berthe, explained Mevrouw Veske, was learning to be a general help in the house and doing her best. There was an older woman, it seemed, with the astonishing name of Juffrouw Naakdgeboren, who was away at a family wedding. 'Very important they are, too,' explained their kindly hostess, 'in the country at least it's a very gay affair.' She smiled at them both. 'That's something you have to look forward to, isn't it?'

Britannia had smiled back, agreeing fervently if silently, though whether the professor would fit into a gay affair was something she very much doubted. And really, she reminded herself crossly, she must stop behaving as though she were going to marry him; it was one thing to make plans and hope, quite another to take it for granted. She had the feeling that the professor wouldn't take kindly to being taken for granted.

It was raining when they got up the next morning, but since they were on holiday they had no intention of letting the weather spoil their days. They put on raincoats again, muffled themselves in scarves, thick gloves and high boots and accompanied Mijnheer Veske to the garage, where there was quite a selection of bicycles. Britannia, mounting her rather elderly machine dubiously, almost fell off again because she hadn't realised that its brakes were operated by putting the pedals into reverse, but

after a rather hilarious start they pedalled off, down the drive and out into the lane, to take the cycle path running beside the road. Hoenderloo was their destination, and once there they intended to have coffee, buy stamps and have a look round its shops before going back for lunch. Their surroundings, even on a bleak November morning, were pleasant; the bare trees lining the lane formed an arch over their heads, and the woods behind them held every sort of tree.

‘Estates,’ explained Joan. ‘Some of them are quite small, some of them are vast. There are some lovely places tucked away behind these trees, I can tell you, but we shan’t get much chance to see many of them—Mevrouw Veske visits here and there, but only the smaller villas. There’s a gateway along here, look—something or other rampant on brick pillars and the drive curving away so that we can’t see anything at all. It’s a castle or moated house or some such thing, I asked Mevrouw Veske last time I was here.’

Britannia was balancing precariously with an eye to the brakes. ‘Does anyone live there?’ she asked.

‘Oh, yes, but I haven’t a clue who it is.’

They spent a happy hour or so in Hoenderloo, pottering in and out of its small shops, managing, on the whole, to make themselves understood very well, before having coffee and apple cake and cycling back again. They went with Mevrouw Veske to Apeldoorn in the afternoon, their hostess driving a small Fiat with a good deal of dash and verve and a splendid disregard of speed limits. She took them on a tour of the city’s streets, wide and tree-lined and, she assured them, in the summer a mass of colour, and then hustled them back to the town’s centre to give them tea and rich cream cakes and drive them home again. They played cards after dinner and went quite late to bed, and on the following day the same pleasant pattern was followed, only this time the girls cycled to the Kroller-Mullermuseum to stare at the van Gogh paintings there, and after lunch Mevrouw Veske took them by car again to Loenen so that they might see the Castle ter Horst, and in the evening they played lighthearted bridge. Britannia, who didn’t much care for cards, was glad that neither her host nor her hostess took the game seriously.

It was raining the next morning and Mevrouw Veske was regretfully forced to postpone her plan to take them to Arnhem for the day, so they settled down to writing postcards and then tossed to see who should go to Hoenderloo and post them. Britannia lost and ten minutes later, rather glad of the little outing, she wheeled her bike out of the garage and set off in the wind and the pouring rain. She had reached the gate and was about to turn on to the cycle path when she saw something in the road, small and black and fluttering. A bird, and hurt. She cast the bike down and ran across to pick it up, the wind tearing the scarf from her head so that her hair, tied back loosely, was instantly wet, flapping round her face and getting in her eyes. It was because of that that she didn’t hear or see the approaching car, a magnificent Rolls-Royce Camargue, its sober grey coachwork gleaming in the downpour. It stopped within a foot of Britannia and she looked over her shoulder to see Professor Luitingh van Thien get out. She had the bird in her hand and said without preamble: ‘I think its wing is broken—what shall I do?’

‘Fool,’ said the professor with icy forcefulness, ‘darting into the road in that thoughtless fashion. I might have squashed you flat, or worse, gone into a skid and damaged the car.’ He held out a hand. ‘Give me that bird.’

She handed it over, for once unable to think of anything to say. So dreams did come true, after all, but he hardly seemed in the mood to share her pleasure in the fact. She stood, the rain washing over her in a relentless curtain, while he examined the small creature with gentle hands. ‘I’ll take it with me,’ he said finally, and nodded briefly before getting back into his car. Britannia, made of stuff worthy of her name, followed him.

‘Do you live near here?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’ He gave her a cold look which froze the words hovering on her tongue, and drove away.

She stood in the road and watched him go. 'I must be mad,' she cried to the sodden landscape around her. 'He's the nastiest man I've ever set eyes on!' She went back to collect her bike and got on to it and rode off towards Hoenderloo. 'But he took the bird,' she reminded herself, 'and he could have wrung its neck.'

She was almost there and the rain had miraculously ceased when he passed her again, going the other way, and a few moments later had turned and slid to a halt beside her so that she felt bound to get off her bicycle.

'The bird's wing has been set; it will be cared for until it is fit to fly again.' He spoke unsmilingly, but she didn't notice that, she looked at him with delight.

'Isn't it incredible?' she declared. 'I mean, meeting like this after the sluice at St Jude's and now you here, almost next door, as it were.'

He looked down his splendid nose. 'I can see nothing incredible about it,' he said repressively. 'It is a coincidence, Britannia, they occur from time to time.'

He could call it that if he liked. She thought secretly of good fairies and kindly Fate and smiled widely. 'Well, you don't need to be so cross about it. I've never met such a prickly man. Have you been crossed in love or something?'

The ferocious expression which passed over the professor's handsome features might have daunted anyone of lesser spirit than hers. 'You abominable girl!' he ground out savagely. 'I have never met anyone like you...'

Britannia lifted a hand to tuck back a wet strand of hair. 'What you need,' she told him kindly, 'is a wife and a family.'

His mouth quivered momentarily. 'Why?'

She answered him seriously. 'Well, you would have them to look after and care for and love, and they'd love you and bring you your slippers in the evening, and...'

His voice was a well-controlled explosion. 'For God's sake, girl,' he roared, 'be quiet! Of all the sickly sentimental ideas...!'

Two tears welled up in Britannia's fine eyes and rolled slowly down her cheeks. The professor muttered strongly in his own language, and with the air of a man goaded beyond endurance, got out of his car.

'Why are you crying? I suppose that you will tell me that it's my fault.'

Britannia gave a sniff, wiped her eyes on a delicate scrap of white lawn and then blew her nose. 'No, of course it's not your fault, because you can't help it, can you? It's just very sad that you should think of a wife and children as being nothing more than s-sickly s-sentiment.' Two more tears spilled over and she wiped them away impatiently as a child would, with the back of her hand.

The professor was standing very close to her. When he spoke it was with surprising gentleness. 'I didn't mean that. I was angry.'

She said in a woeful voice, 'But you're always losing your temper—every time we meet you rage and roar at me.'

'I neither rage nor roar, Britannia. Possibly I am a little ill-tempered at times.' The gentleness had a decidedly chilly edge to it now.

'Oh, yes, you do,' she answered him with spirit. 'You terrify me.' She peeped at him, to see him frowning.

'I cannot believe that you are terrified of anyone or anything, certainly not of me. Try that on some other man, my dear girl, I'm not a fool.'

She sighed. 'Well, no—I was afraid you wouldn't believe me.'

He looked at her with cold interest. 'And were the tears a try-out too?'

She shook her head slowly; she might have met him again, just as she had dreamed that she might, but it hadn't done much good. She said quietly: 'Thank you very much for taking care of the bird,' and got on to her bike and wobbled off at a great rate, leaving him standing there.

She tried very hard not to think of him during the rest of the day, but lying in bed was a different matter; she went over their meetings, not forgetting a word or a look, and came to the conclusion that he still didn't like her. She was on the point of sleep when she remembered with real regret that she had hardly looked her best; surely, if she had been wearing the new pink dress, he would have behaved differently? Men, her mother had always said, were susceptible to pink. Britannia sighed and slept.

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