



## Uncertain Summer (Best of Betty Neels)

*By Betty Neels*

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### A marriage of friends

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She liked Gijs very much, and she knew he was fond of her. Companionship seemed as good a basis as any for a marriage—who needed romance anyway? But it turned out Gijs was in love, and Serena couldn't work out who the lucky woman was.

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## **Editorial Review**

### 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. 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. Her spirit and genuine talent live on in all her stories.

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The April sun was bright and warm even at the early hour of half past seven in the morning; it shone through the window of Serena Potts' bedroom in the Nurses' Home, on to her bright head of dark hair which she was crowning somewhat impatiently with her cap. The cap was a pretty trifle, spotted muslin and frilled and worn with strings, but she had tied these in a hurry, so that the bow beneath her pretty chin was a trifle rakish. She gave it an angry tweak, anchored the cap more firmly and raced from the room, along the long bare corridor and down two flights of stairs, into the covered way leading to the hospital, to arrive a minute or so later, out of breath, at the breakfast table.

Her arrival was greeted by cries of surprise by the young women already seated there, but she took no notice of these until she had poured her tea, shaken cornflakes into a bowl and sat herself down.

'No need to carry on so, just because I'm early,' she pointed out equably. 'Staff's away and there's only the first-year students and Harris on, and you know what Hippy's like if anything comes in a second after seven-thirty.' She raised her dark, thickly lashed eyes piously and intoned primly:

'You are aware, are you not, Sister Potts, that I will accept no responsibility for any cases brought into the Accident Room after half past seven precisely?'

She began to bolt down the cornflakes. 'I bet the floors will be strewn with diabetic comas and overdoses by the time I get there, and Harris will be arguing with everyone within sight.'

She buttered toast rapidly, weighed it down with marmalade and bit into it, and everyone at the table murmured sympathetically—at one time or another they had all had Nurse Harris to work for them—a scholarly girl, with no sense of humour and a tendency to stand and argue over a patient when what was really needed was urgent resuscitation. Serena found it difficult to bear with her, just as she found Sister Hipkins difficult. Hippy was getting on for fifty and one of the team of Night Sisters at Queen's, and while she was adequate enough on the medical side, she was hopeless in Casualty and the Accident Room; besides, accidents had a nasty habit of arriving just as she was about to go off duty, and she was a great one for going off punctually.

Serena wolfed the rest of her toast, swallowed tea in great unladylike gulps, said 'bye-bye' a little indistinctly and went off briskly to the Accident Room.

It, and Casualty, occupied the whole of the ground floor of one wing of the hospital. Each had its own Sister in charge, but as the two young ladies in question took their days off on alternate weekends, it meant that today being Monday, Serena would be in charge of both departments until Betsy Woods, who had Cas, returned at one o'clock. She swung into the waiting-room now, casting a practised but kindly eye over the few people already seated on the benches. She recognized several of them; workers from one of the nearby

factories, apparently accident-prone, with cuts and grazes clutching their tetanus cards in their hands as proof positive that they were up-to-date with their anti-tetanus injections and thus free from what they invariably referred to as the needle.

Serena wished them a cheerful good morning, stopped with no sign of impatience when she was begged to stop by an old woman who wished her to look at an injured eye, and having done this, offered sympathy and the mendacious information that the doctor would be along in a few minutes, and sped on her way again. Bill Travers, the Casualty Officer, had been up most of the night, Staff Nurse Watts had whispered to her as she met her at the door, and the chance of him appearing much before nine o'clock was so unlikely as to be laughable, but the old woman had needed comfort. She crossed the vast waiting-room to the Accident Room entrance and met Sister Hipkins coming out of it.

'And high time too, Sister Potts,' said Hippy nastily. 'No staff nurse and an RTA in! I'm sure I don't know what you young women are coming to—in my young days I wouldn't have dared to be late.'

'I'm not late,' said Serena with resigned calm. 'It's not quite ten to eight, I'm due on at eight o'clock, and you are off duty at the same time—I don't know where you get the idea that you're off duty at half past seven, Sister Hipkins.'

She didn't wait for an answer, but went on past Hippy, oblivious of her furious look, intent on getting to the case before Nurse Harris had a chance to do her worst.

The Accident Room was semi-circular, with screened-off bays and a vast central area to allow for the rapid manoeuvrings of trolleys and stretchers and the easy passage of the doctors and nurses. The curtains had been drawn across the furthest bay and she started towards it, her eyes searching the department as she went, to make sure that everything was in its proper place.

Nurse Harris was standing by the patient, looking important, and while doing nothing herself, issuing orders to the other two more junior nurses with her. Serena promised herself ten minutes with Nurse Harris later on, said calmly, 'Good morning, everybody,' and went to look at the patient—a man, young, and unconscious, presumably from the head wound visible through his blond hair. Serena took his pulse and pupil reaction and told the more senior of the two nurses to start cleaning the wound.

'His leg,' breathed Harris importantly, 'it's broken.'

Serena drew back the blanket covering the young man and saw the splints the ambulance men had put on. As she did so she asked:

'Did Sister Hipkins tell you to ring anyone?'

'No, Sister.'

'Then ring Mr Thompson—he was the RSO—ask him to come down here, please, and tell him it's an RTA. Head wound, probable fracture of left leg—badly shocked, unconscious.' And when Harris didn't move, she added with a patience she didn't feel, 'Will you hurry, Nurse, and then come back to me here.'

She was cutting the outside seam of the torn trousers covering the injured leg by the time Harris got back. She was doing it very carefully because if it was properly done, the trousers could be repaired. Experience had taught her that not everyone had the money to buy new trousers, although this man looked prosperous enough; she had noted the gold wrist watch and cuff links, the silk shirt and the fine tweed of his suit, and his shoes were expensive.

'Make out an X-ray form, Nurse,' she told Harris, 'and one for the Path Lab too—I daresay they'll want to do a crossmatch. What about relatives?'

Harris looked blank, and Serena, holding back impatience, asked:

'His address—you've got that? Was he conscious when they got to him?'

'Yes, Sister. But Sister Hipkins said we weren't to disturb him when he was brought in, and the ambulance men didn't know, because he was only conscious for a few minutes when they reached him.'

Serena counted silently to ten, because when she was a little girl, her father had taught her to do that, so that her temper, which was, and still was, hot at times, could cool. It was a silly childish trick, but it worked. She said with no trace of ill-

humour: 'Go and make sure the trolleys are ready, Nurse, will you? Then bring in the stitch trolley.'

Later, she promised herself, she would go and see the Number Seven, Miss Stokes, and see if something could be done to get Harris off the department. Her eyes flickered to the clock. Two part-time staff nurses would be on at nine o'clock, and thank heaven for them, she thought fervently. She had the splint off now with the most junior of the nurses helping her, and turned to wish Mr Thompson a friendly good morning as he came in.

He was a thin young man with a permanently worried expression on his pleasant face, but he was good at his job. 'I thought you might want to take a look at this head before the orthopaedic man gets here,' explained Serena. 'Sorry to get you down so early, Tom.'

He smiled nicely at her and set to work to examine the patient. 'Nice-looking bloke,' he commented as he explored the scalp wound. 'Do we know who he is?'

'Not yet...'

'Unconscious when they found him?'

'No—not all the time, and he was conscious for a very short time when he got here.'

He gave her an understanding look. 'Hippy on last night?'

Serena nodded. 'I'll go through his pockets as soon as you've been over him.'

'Um,' agreed Mr Thompson. 'Where's this leg?'

She whisked back the blanket and pointed with a deceptively useless-looking little hand. There was a discoloured bump just above the ankle and a sizeable bruise. 'Pott's,' she said succinctly. 'Now you're here I'll get this shoe off.'

Mr Thompson obligingly held the leg steady while she eased it off and after he had taken a closer look said: 'You're right— X-ray, and we'd better see to that head too. I'll do it now, shall I? It only needs a couple of stitches, so if everything's ready

I'll get down to it, then Orthopaedics can take over when he's been X-rayed.'

Serena waved a hand at the small trolley Harris had wheeled in. 'Help yourself. Do you want a local? He

might come to.'

She looked down at the man on the examination table and encountered bright blue eyes staring at her. He smiled as he spoke, but she was unable to understand a word. She smiled back at him and said to no one in particular: 'Foreign—I wonder what

he said?'

Her query was answered by the patient. 'I will translate. I said: What a beautiful little gipsy girl.' His English was almost without accent. He smiled again and watched admiringly while Serena's dark beauty became even more striking by reason of the col...

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