



A Little Moonlight (Best of Betty Neels)

By Betty Neels

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Her New Boss Meant One Thing -- Trouble!

Looking after her invalid mother, Serena had accepted long ago that the bright city lights were not for her. Not that she minded . . . Hardworking and quiet, she was perfectly happy with her life --until the Dutch consultant Marc ter Feulen turned it upside down. As her new boss, he was arrogant and demanding. As a man, he was altogether too attractive for Serena's peace of mind!

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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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It was mid-September and the day had been grey so that dusk had come early. Almost every window in the Royal Hospital was lighted, making a cheerful splash of colour amid the dingy streets of small houses and corner shops over which it towered. Only on the top floor of the hospital, where the windows were much smaller, were they in darkness—all save one, a corner room, furnished in a businesslike way with filing cabinets, shelves of reference books, a large desk on which was an electric typewriter, a computer and a word-processor, a small hard chair against one wall and another more comfortable one behind the desk. There was a girl sitting in it, a smallish person with a tidy head of mousy hair pinned severely into a bun, and an ordinary face whose small beaky nose and wide mouth were enlivened by large hazel eyes, fringed with a long set of curling lashes. She was typing with the ease of long practice, frowning over the sheet of handwriting beside her, but presently she stopped. The writing was by no means easy to read and she was used to that, but she had come to a halt. After a minute's frustrated study she spoke her mind to the empty room.

'Well, now what? Is it endometrioma or endometriosis? Why must he use such long words, and why wasn't he taught to write properly?' She sounded vexed, and for a good reason; it was long after five o'clock, the top floor, used by typists and clerks and administration staff, had become empty and quiet and she was lonely, hungry and getting rapidly more annoyed. 'It's all very well for him,' she went on, talking out loud to keep her spirits up, 'he'll be home, with his feet up, while his wife gets his supper...'

'Actually,' said a deep slow voice from behind her, 'he's here, although the picture you paint of domestic bliss is tempting.'

The girl shot round in her chair, but before she could speak the man standing in the doorway went on, 'I feel that I should apologise for my writing—it is, I'm afraid, too late to do much about that, and as for the long words, they are inevitable in our profession.' He advanced into the room and stood looking down at her. 'Why have I not seen you before now, and where is miss Payne?'

She looked up at him with a touch of impatience, untroubled by the awe he engendered in the regular hospital staff. 'Miss Payne is off sick—*influenza*.' She cast an eye over the small pile of work still to be done. 'And probably overwork, from the look of these.'

'Your name?' he asked with cold courtesy.

'Serena Proudfoot.' Her arched silky eyebrows asked the question she didn't utter.

'Dr ter Feulen.'

'Oh, I've heard about you, you're a Dutch baron as well...' She smiled at him with the air of one ready to

forgive him for that.

He was a handsome man, with grizzled hair and pale blue eyes as cold as a winter sea; moreover, he was a splendid height and broad-shouldered. Serena had only half believed the other girls who worked in administration and dealt with the medical correspondence when they had enthused about Dr ter Feulen, but she could see that they had been right. All the same, he appeared to be both arrogant and sarcastic. He ignored the remark and she stopped smiling.

'You are from an agency?' he queried.

'Yes, just as a temporary until Miss Payne is well again. And now, if you don't mind, I'll get on...'

He didn't move. 'Why are you working late?'

A silly question, but she answered it patiently. 'Because there was a backlog of your letters to be done and I was warned that you would expect them ready for your signature before you left the hospital.'

'And are they ready?'

'No, but if I can be left in peace to type them you can have them in half an hour.'

He laughed suddenly. 'Have you been working long as a typist?'

'Several years.'

'But never in a hospital, that is obvious.' He strolled back to the door. 'Be good enough to bring them to the consultants' room when you are ready, please. Perhaps no one told you that we don't watch the clock in hospital. It is to be hoped that Miss Payne is soon back at her desk.'

He had gone before Serena could utter her heartfelt agreement.

She put a fresh sheet of paper into her machine. 'And why did he have to come here in the first place?' she demanded of the empty room.

'Why, to see what had happened to my letters,' observed Dr ter Feulen. He had returned and was standing in the doorway again. 'I have come back to warn you that I have an outpatients' clinic in the morning and you will have a good deal of work to do in consequence. So let us have no more grumbling about late hours; Miss Payne never uttered a word.'

'More fool her,' said Serena with spirit. She answered his goodnight with cold asperity.

It was almost an hour later when she covered her machine and turned out the lights. The consultants' room was on the ground floor. She tapped on the door and, since no one answered, opened it and went in. There was only one small table light on and the large, gloomy room was dim. She laid the papers she had been typing on the ponderous centre table and turned to go again. A faint sound stopped her; Dr ter Feulen, his vast person stretched at ease in a leather armchair, his large feet, shod in the finest shoe leather, resting on a nearby coffee-table, was asleep and, without any loss of dignity, snoring gently. She stood and looked at him. He really was extremely good-looking, although now that she was able to study his face at her leisure, she could see that he was very tired.

She was tired too. She made her way from the room and out of the hospital and joined the queue at the nearest bus-stop.

She got off the bus at East Sheen and walked down a side street leading to a road lined with a terrace of red brick Edwardian villas, all very well kept. Halfway down she took out a key and let herself into the house through its pristine black-painted door, hung her coat in the narrow hall and went into the sitting-room. Her mother was there, sitting before a gas fire reading. She looked up as Serena went in.

'You're late.' She glanced reproachfully at the clock on the mantelpiece. 'I just didn't feel like getting the supper.' She smiled charmingly at her daughter. 'Aren't I a lazy old mother? It's cottage pie and you make such a good one, and if the oven's on I thought you might make one of your fruit tarts.'

Serena crossed the rather shabby room and kissed her mother. 'I'll go and start the pie,' was all she said. 'I'm sorry if you've had a bad day.'

'My nerves,' said Mrs Proudfoot, 'and all the worry of managing on the pension... If only your father had known.'

'We manage quite well,' replied Serena matter-of-factly. 'The pension isn't so bad, Mother, and there's my money.'

'Oh, I do know, darling, but you have no idea how unhappy I am when I think of all the things you're missing...dances and theatres and trips abroad. You might have been married by now—you're twentyfive.'

Mrs Proudfoot eyed her daughter with a look of resignation; how she had come to have this serious, rather plain girl who made no push to get herself a husband was something she couldn't understand. She had been considered quite pretty as a girl, and even now in her fifties she was still that, or so she told herself. That a good deal of the pension went on cosmetics and hairdressers and pretty clothes was something she never dwelt on. Serena had an allowance from her salary—not a big one, it was true, but then at her age she didn't need expensive creams and lotions, and since she worked in some dreary office for five days out of the seven, she didn't need many clothes. Mrs Proudfoot, a good-natured woman as long as she had her own way, said kindly, 'I saw such a pretty blouse today, just right for you, darling, it would cheer up your skirts.' She picked up her book. 'I won't keep you gossiping, or we'll never get supper.'

Serena went into the kitchen, peeled potatoes for the cottage pie, minced yesterday's joint and, while the potatoes cooked, made pastry for the tart. She was tired, too tired to summon the energy to point out to her mother that she had had a long and exhausting day and a slow bus ride home, standing all the way. Besides, she loved her mother and quite understood that after years of being spoilt by her husband, she was quite unable to alter her way of life.

She made her pastry and thought about Dr ter Feulen. A very ill-tempered man, she reflected, possibly overworked, but there had been no need for him to have been quite so rude. He had looked very tired, sleeping in his chair. She wondered what his home life was like. With no wife he probably lived in a service flat and cooked lonely meals for himself, and that was why he had been so terse. She put the tart in the oven with the pie and went across the hall to set the table for their supper. It made a lot of extra work, fetching the cloth and napkins and cutlery and the crystal glasses her mother insisted on using, but as she had pointed out many times, standards had to be kept up at all costs. Serena, who ate a hasty breakfast in the small kitchen before she left for work, would have been quite happy to have eaten her supper there too.

They ate their supper presently while Mrs Proudfoot reminisced gently about earlier days. 'We had old Sadie then,' she reminded Serena. 'Such a pity she decided to retire, she kept the house so well—if only my health were better!' She sighed, and Serena asked sympathetically,

'Have you had a bad day, Mother?'

'My dear child, I seldom have a good one. Just the effort to go shopping and get myself a morsel to eat during the day exhausts me.' Mrs Proudfoot contrived to look as though she were bravely combati...

Users Review

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