

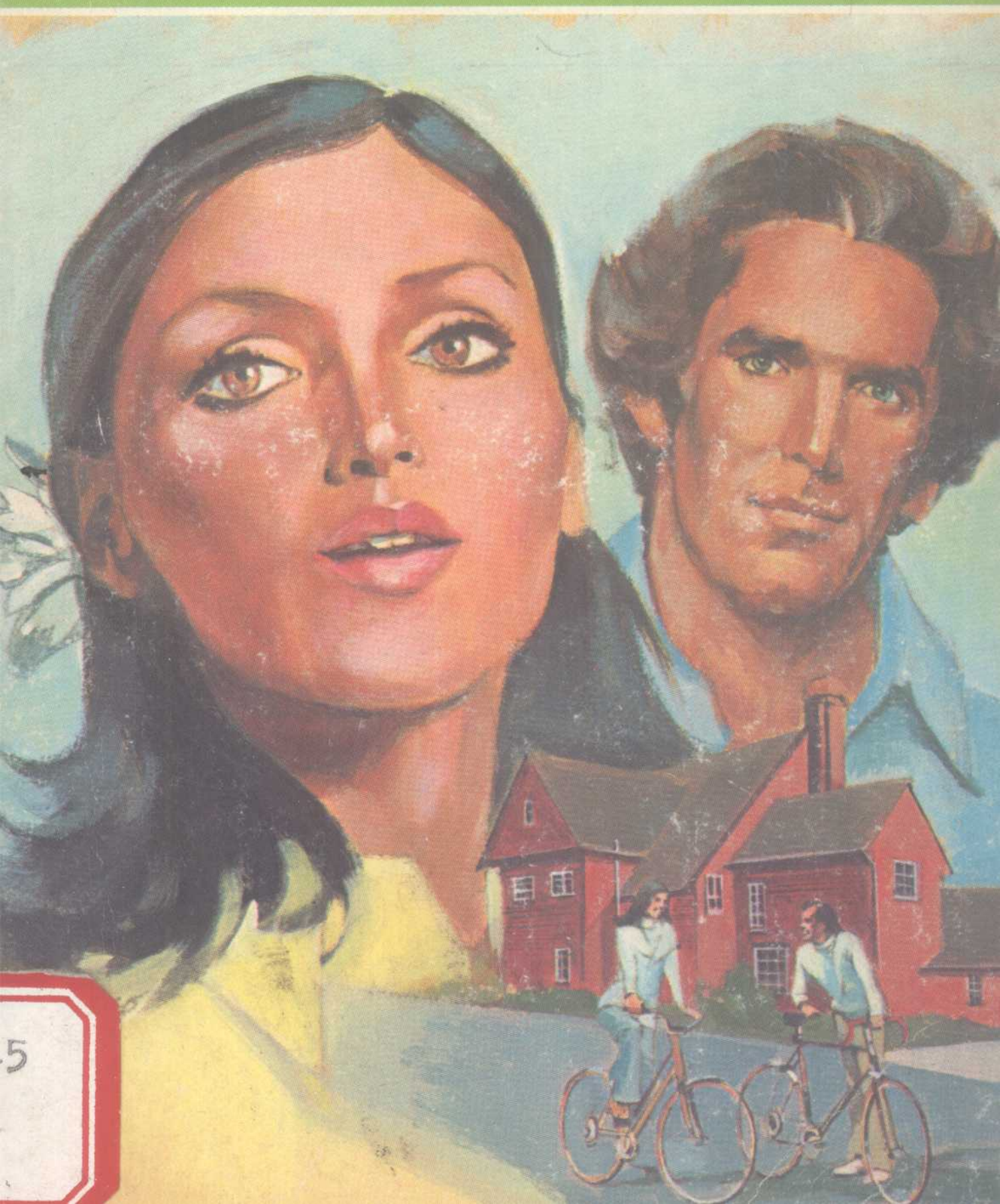


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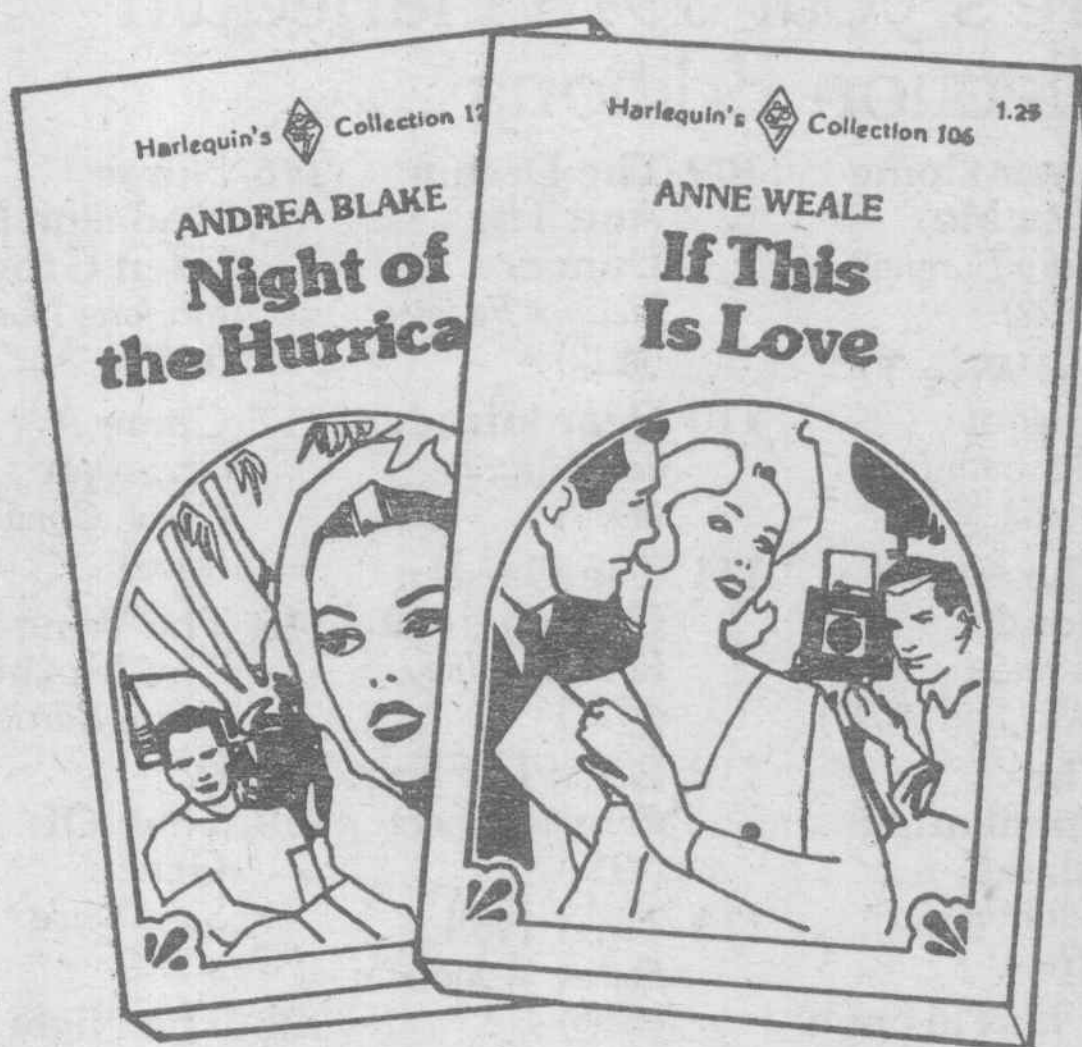
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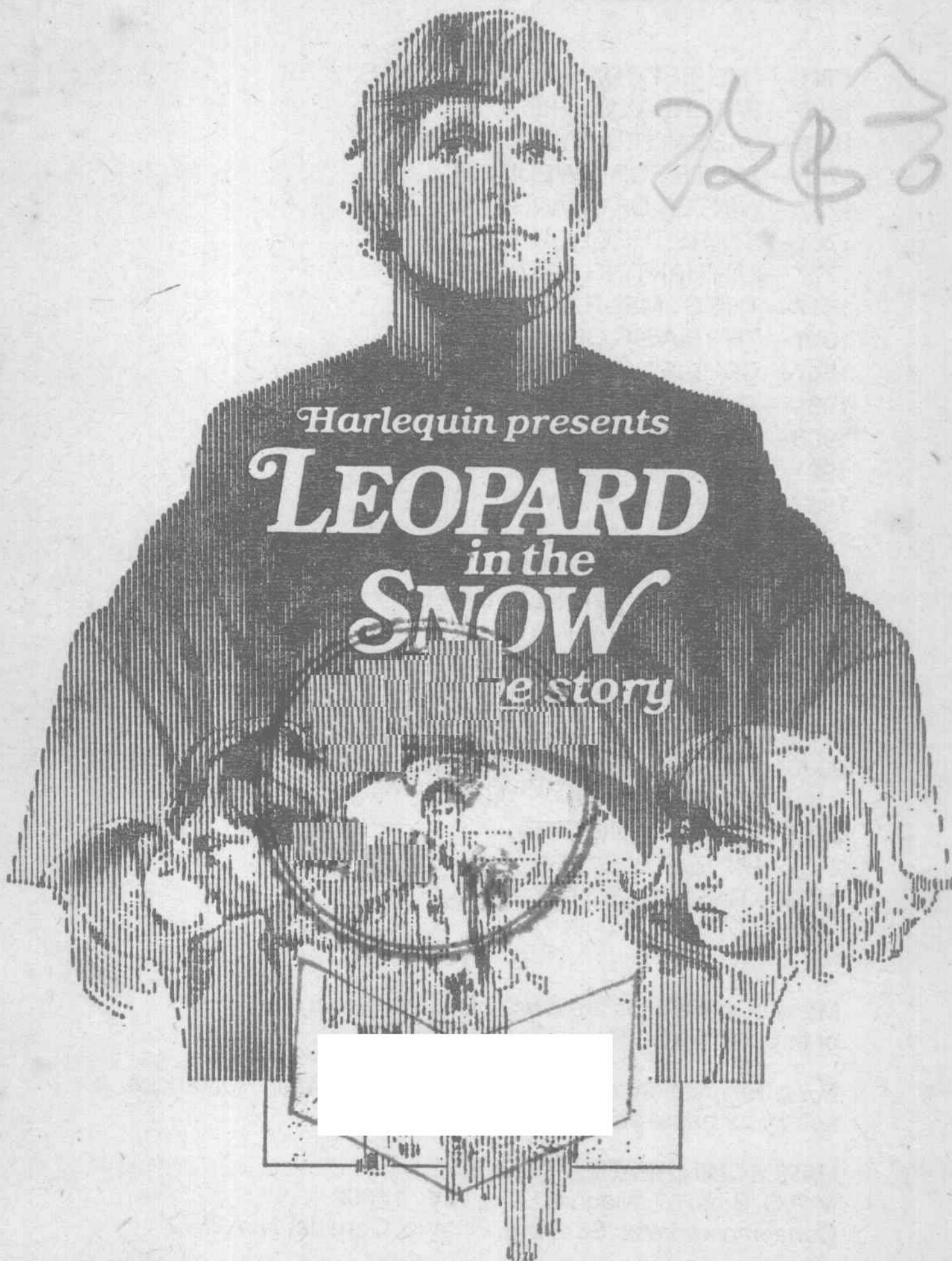
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by

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THE sluice room at the end of Men's Surgical at St Jude's Hospital was deplorably out of date; built in Victorian times, it was always damp and chilly, its white-tiled walls and heavy earthenware sinks doing nothing to alleviate its dismal appearance.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 an old-fashioned as the sluice, with a row of beds on either side and because it was take-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 re-grouped 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 eosino-