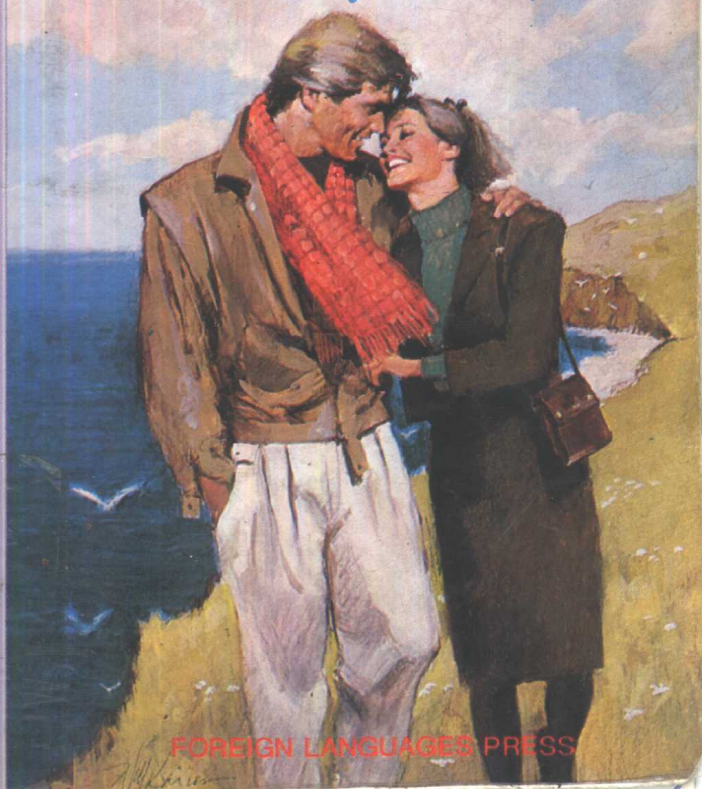




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AN UNLIKELY ROMANCE

Betty Neels



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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“Marriage is a serious affair.”

The Professor paused before continuing, “And it occurred to me that I may have been overhasty in broaching the subject. Nevertheless, I hope that you have given it your consideration. Perhaps, though, you have a boyfriend of your own—or you may not wish to marry.”

His voice was quiet and very faintly accented.

“Me? A boyfriend? Heavens, no. At least—” Trixie hesitated “—not since I started my training.”

“You have no objections to being married, do you?”

“None at all,” she told him soberly, and thought what a strange conversation they were having.

“So you will consider becoming my wife? But perhaps I am too old?”

“Pooh,” she said. “Age hasn’t anything to do with it.” And it was at that moment, looking up into his concerned face, that Trixie fell in love.

Betty Neels is well-known for her romances set in the Netherlands, which is hardly surprising. She married a Dutchman and spent the first twelve years of their marriage living in Holland and working as a nurse. Today, she and her husband make their home in an ancient stone cottage in England's West Country, but they return to Holland often. She loves to explore tiny villages and tour privately owned homes there in order to lend an air of authenticity to the background of her books.

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An Unlikely Romance

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CHAPTER ONE

TRIXIE DOVETON, trundling ~~old~~ Mrs Crowe from the bathroom back to her ward, ~~allowed a small~~, almost soundless sigh to escape her lips. The ward doors had been thrust open and Professor van der Brink-Schaaksma was coming unhurriedly towards her. He had a sheaf of papers under one arm and a book, one finger marking his place, in his other hand. He wasn't due for another twenty minutes and Sister Snell was already hurrying after him, intent on heading him off with a cup of coffee in her office while her nurses raced around getting the patients into the correct state of readiness. He was always doing it, reflected Trixie, rolling Mrs Crowe's ample person into her bed; arriving early, not arriving at all, or arriving half an hour late, tendering the politest of apologies when he discovered his mistake, his brilliant mind engrossed in some ticklish problem concerning endocrinology, a science of which he was a leading exponent. Trixie took another look at him while she tucked Mrs Crowe into her blankets; he was such a nice man—the nicest she had ever met, not that she had actually met him, only seen him from time to time on the ward or in one of the corridors, either with his nose buried in some book or other or surrounded by students. She was quite sure that he wasn't even aware that she existed. He was towering over Sister Snell now, smiling gently down at her rather cross face, a tall, very large man, his pale hair grey at the temples, his eyes heavy-lidded and, she suspected, quite unaware of his good looks. He

glanced up and she glanced away quickly, and when she peeped again it was to see his massive back disappearing through the doors.

'He's a nice chap, ain't he?' observed Mrs Crowe. 'No side to him neither.'

She beamed at Trixie's face; she was a friendly girl who would always find time to say a few words, offer sympathy when needed and even, when her seniors weren't looking, put in a few curlers for such of her patients who needed to be smartened up for visitors. She would have enlarged upon this but Staff Nurse Bennett, racing up and down like a demented sergeant major, had come to a halt by the bed.

'Nurse Doveton, for heaven's sake get a move on. Professor van der Brink-Schaaksma's here, far too soon of course, and the place is like a pigsty and you standing there gossiping. It's time you learned to be quicker; you'll never make a good nurse at this rate. All this mooning about...'

She hurried away, saying over her shoulder, 'Find Nurse Saunders, she's in one of the treatment-rooms, and tell her to make sure all the path lab reports are on the trolley.'

Trixie patted Mrs Crowe's plump shoulder and trotted off obediently. She was a small girl, nicely plump with a face which, while not plain, was hardly pretty; her nose was too short and her mouth too large, but it curved up at the corners and her smile was charming. Only her eyes were beautiful, large and hazel with pale brown lashes to match the neat head of hair under her cap. She was twenty-three years old, an orphan and prepared to make the best of it. She had the kindest of hearts, a romantic nature and a good deal of common sense, and she liked her job. In another year she would have com-

pleted her training, despite Staff Nurse Bennett's gloomy prediction. She was aware that she would never be another Florence Nightingale, but at least she would be earning her living.

Nurse Saunders was in a bad mood; she had had words with her boyfriend on the previous evening and had no chance of seeing him for several days to come. She listened to Trixie's message impatiently, thumped down the tray of instruments she was holding and said, 'Oh, all right. Just put these away for me and look sharp about it. Why can't the man come when he's supposed to?'

She didn't give Trixie a chance to answer, but went into the ward, slamming the door behind her.

Trixie arranged the instruments tidily in the cupboard, tidied up a tiny bit and opened the door; the professor wouldn't have finished his coffee yet. She would have time to slip into the sluice-room and find something to do there. The coffee must have been tepid or the professor's mouth made of cast iron, for he was there, in the ward, only a few yards away, deep in talk with Dr Johnson, while Sister hovered at his other side against a reverent background of medical students, and behind them the furious face of Staff Nurse Bennett. Trixie, intent on a prudent retreat into the treatment-room, took a step backwards, tripped over her own feet and tumbled untidily to the floor. She had barely touched it when the professor paused in the discussion, stooped forward, plucked her back on to the offending feet, dusted her down, patted her on her shoulder without apparently having looked at her and resumed his conversation. It had all happened so quickly that beyond a startled look from Sister and grins from the students the unfortunate incident might never have been. Trixie, edging her way to a discreet distance, doubted if the professor had no-

ticed her; he was notoriously absent-minded, and he would have done the same thing for a child, an old lady or an overturned chair.

In the fastness of the sluice-room she polished and scrubbed everything in sight; it wasn't her job but she felt that she should make amends for annoying Staff Nurse Bennett, and—once that young lady had had the chance to tell her—Sister.

Sure enough, later that morning she was told to go to Sister's office where she was reprimanded by that lady. 'Professor van der Brink-Schaaksma is not to be bothered in such a manner, Nurse Doveton. He has far more important things to do than picking up girls off the floor. How could you be so clumsy?'

'I was surprised,' observed Trixie reasonably, 'and he need not have picked me up—I mean I didn't ask for help or anything like that.' She smiled kindly at her senior, who was quite scarlet with ill temper. 'I'm so sorry if it upset you, Sister. It was most tiresome of me but I don't think the professor noticed anything.'

Sister Snell said crossly, 'It is to be hoped not. Go and do Mrs Watts's ulcer and then take her down to physiotherapy. When are you off duty?'

'Five o'clock, Sister, and then I have a day off.'

The day with its manifold tasks wore on. Because Mrs Watts had held things up by feeling sick, Trixie was late for her midday dinner. The canteen was almost empty by the time she got there, although several of her friends were still sitting over their cups of tea. She fetched boiled cod—it was Friday—and mashed potatoes and parsnips, and joined them.

'You're late,' observed Mary Fitzjohn accusingly. She was a girl who took pride in plain speaking, correcting people and telling them if they had a ladder in their tights

or their caps were on crooked. She had a good opinion of herself and was tolerated in an amused way.

Trixie lavished tomato sauce on the fish. 'Mrs Watts felt sick.' She began to gobble her dinner. 'I must go over to my room and pack a bag. I've got a day off.'

'Going home?' a fat girl with a pretty face asked.

'Yes. It's Margaret's birthday.'

'A party?'

'Well, a cocktail party.'

'What will you wear?' chorused several voices.

'There's the blue crêpe or that brown velvet. The brown, I think—after all, it is October.'

'Surely you should have something new and smart for a cocktail party?' asked Mary, looking down her nose.

'Me? I shan't know anyone there—Margaret has masses of friends, you know, and I don't know any of them. I mean I don't intend to dazzle them—it's her party...'

'I should have thought——' began Mary, and was silenced by a general chorus of 'shut up'. Trixie dealt with treacle tart, swallowed her tea and darted off; there was still ten minutes before she needed to be back on duty and in her room she packed an overnight bag with neat efficiency, straightened her cap and made her way from the nurses' home to the ward once more. She wasn't really looking forward to the party; she had lived with Aunt Alice and Uncle William ever since her parents had died in an accident when she was ten years old, and although they had educated her, fed her and clothed her and in their way been kind to her, she had never been quite happy, for somehow the knowledge that they were doing their duty and at the same time resenting her being there had been borne in upon her before very long. As she had grown she had realised that their interest was

centred on their daughter Margaret, pretty and popular and spoilt, and as soon as she had left school Trixie had suggested that she should train for a nurse, but to her surprise this was frowned upon. Margaret had no intention of doing anything and Aunt Alice had realised that if Trixie were allowed to leave home there might be raised eyebrows over the fact that, while her own daughter stayed at home enjoying herself, their ward had to earn her own living. So Trixie had spent several years making herself useful around the large house at Highgate, meeting very few people, for Aunt Alice had let it be known that she was a shy girl and disliked social occasions, and she might have been there still if one of Margaret's more eligible men friends hadn't started to show an interest in Trixie, and, since she hadn't liked him very much and gave him no encouragement, he'd begun to feel himself quite interested and serious about her. It was time, decided Aunt Alice, to do something about the matter. Trixie had been told that, now that she was older and with no prospect of marriage in sight, if she still wished to do so she might apply for training at one of the London teaching hospitals. Something she'd done very quickly before anyone could change their minds. She wasn't quite twenty-one when she began her training, which from Aunt Alice's point of view was very convenient, for there was no opportunity to celebrate the occasion. Trixie was given a gold watch and lunch at the Ritz on her day off and told to go to Highgate whenever she wished. 'For your room will always be ready for you, Trixie,' said her aunt. 'We shall miss you; you have been like a second daughter to us.'

Somehow the remark had sounded final.

She didn't get off duty very punctually; she wasn't a clock-watcher and the patients knew that, so that she

was always the one to fill last-minute water jugs, find lost spectacles and exchange someone's magazine with someone else's. She changed quickly, caught up her overnight bag and hurried to catch a bus to Highgate. The bus queue was long and impatient and by the time she got to Highgate it was almost seven o'clock. Her uncle and aunt dined at eight o'clock and she had been warned that there were to be guests. She arrived hot and tired to be greeted with barely concealed impatience by her aunt.

'Really, Trixie, you might at least try to be punctual for once. This is Margaret's birthday celebration, after all. Tomorrow I shall want you to arrange the flowers for the party, you do them so well...'

Trixie went up to the second-floor room, which, as Aunt Alice had pointed out, reasonably enough, would do very well for her now that she came home so seldom, and got into the brown velvet, did her face and her hair and slipped into the drawing-room just as the first guests were arriving.

The dinner party was really for their old friends, Margaret's godparents and a sprinkling of aunts and uncles, none of whom would have enjoyed her birthday party but who would have been hurt if uninvited.

Trixie, between two elderly gentlemen, brothers of Aunt Alice, ate her dinner and made dinner-table conversation, something she did very nicely, so that they remarked upon her quiet charm to Aunt Alice later that evening.

'Nice girl,' said one of them. 'Can't think why she hasn't been snapped up. Make a splendid wife.'

'Very shy and withdrawn and engrossed in her nursing,' Aunt Alice observed with a snap. 'Of course, dear Margaret is quite different...'

Trixie was busy the next day; there were flowers to arrange, the telephone to answer and help to give to her aunt's cook and housemaid, and later the bits and pieces to unpack and arrange from the caterers.

Margaret wandered in and out, unpacking her presents and leaving a trail of paper behind her, pleased with herself and everyone else. She had thanked Trixie for the silk scarf she had been given, asked in a casually friendly fashion about her work and wandered away again without waiting for a reply. Although they were cousins and brought up together and, for that matter, got on well, Margaret had always adopted a slightly condescending manner towards Trixie—the poor relation, presentable enough and a pleasant companion when there was no one else around, and now quite rightly earning her own living. From time to time Margaret took her out to lunch or to the cinema and went home feeling that she had done her duty and been kind to her cousin.

Dressed in the brown velvet, Trixie took a look at herself in the looking-glass inside the old-fashioned wardrobe. Her reflection didn't please her. The dress was well made, nicely cut and fitted her person well, but there was nothing about it to attract a second glance. She wished that she had Margaret's glorious fair hair, cascading around her pretty face in a riot of curls, but her own pale brown hair was fine and straight and long and she had always worn it in a chignon so that its beauty was quite hidden. She put a final dab of powder on her nose and went downstairs.

Margaret had any number of friends. The big drawing-room was soon crowded, and Trixie sipped sherry and went around greeting the people she knew, young men and women she had known since her school days, but

the majority of those there were unknown to her, smart and noisy, ignoring the other guests.

Presently she came face to face with Margaret, who caught her by the arm. 'Hello— isn't this fun? I say, Mother's just had a phone call from Colonel Vosper—he was invited to dinner yesterday and had to refuse, now he's phoned to say he'll come for half an hour just to wish me many happy returns. He's bringing a stuffy professor with him—they're going to some dinner or other! This isn't quite their scene, is it?'

'If they're going to a dinner,' said Trixie matter-of-factly, 'they won't stay long, will they? Aunt Alice has gone to the door. It must be the colonel; shouldn't you be there too?'

'I suppose so.' She paused to look Trixie over. 'That's a pretty awful dress you're wearing—brown doesn't suit you, you look like a church mouse.' She added, casually kind, 'You'd look nice in green or blue—you ought to get yourself some pretty clothes.'

She drifted away, a sight to gladden the eyes in her golden sequinned jacket and layered silk skirt. Trixie watched her progress through the crowded room, but not enviously, for she hadn't an envious nature, only wondering if a sequinned jacket would do for her own person what brown velvet quite obviously could not.

There was a little bustle at the door as the colonel came in; an elderly man, still upright and handsome. His companion followed him in and paused to talk to Aunt Alice and then Margaret, so that Trixie had ample time to study Professor van der Brink-Schaaksma, immaculately handsome in black tie.

She gave a little gasp of surprise and retired prudently behind a group of people, from where she surveyed his progress through the room with Margaret. Her cousin

was exerting her charm, a pretty hand on his arm, looking up into his face in open admiration. He was so completely out of his element, thought Trixie. He had put every other man in the room in the shade, but he was unaware of it; indeed, although he was smiling down at her cousin, listening to her chatter, she had the strong impression that he was probably contemplating some tricky aspect of endocrinology. She had seen that absorbed look on his face often enough to recognise it.

She had moved back even further, intent on keeping out of his line of vision, and it was unfortunate that her aunt should call her by name in her rather loud voice.

'Trixie,' cooed Aunt Alice, *fortissimo*, 'come here, dear, the colonel wants to see you.'

There was nothing for it but to abandon her dark corner and make her way across the room to where the old gentleman stood, and of course at that same moment Margaret and the professor had paused to speak to someone and had turned round to watch her. She was unable to avoid his glance, but she gave no sign of recognition, and, to her great feeling of relief, nor did he.

Well, why should he? He had never actually looked at her on the ward and she was dressed differently. She retired to a sofa with the colonel for the kind of chat her companion enjoyed; he was holding forth about politics, modern youth and modern warfare to a listening audience. Trixie was a very good listener. He got up to go presently. 'A nice little talk, my dear; I wish we could have stayed longer but we must attend a function, as you may know.' He looked around him. 'Where is Krijn? Ah—with Margaret. Such a very pretty girl, even an absent-minded professor may be forgiven if he falls under her spell.'