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A HAPPY MEETING

Betty Neels



“Am I being snubbed, Cressy?”

“Snubbed?” Cressida was so shocked at the idea, that she put a hand on Aldrik’s arm. “How could I ever

snub you? I don’t know what I should have done without you.”

He stared at him, suddenly and blindingly aware that she didn’t know what she’d do without him.

He said slowly, “I just don’t think you need to be concerned about me any longer. I don’t think I am explaining myself very well....”

“Then don’t try,” he advised her briskly. “Simply enjoy your new life and have a happy Christmas.”

As he gave her a brightly wrapped box, she wished he would kiss her. But he didn’t. He simply said goodbye and left.

Cressida lay awake for a good deal of that night. Love, she reflected, was by no means all it was cracked up to be.

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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CHAPTER ONE

THE day had been warm for early October but now the sun was low on the horizon and there was a chilly breeze. The quiet country road running between the trees was full of shadows; in an hour or so it would be dusk. The girl sitting on the grass verge shivered a little and put her arm around the lean, unkempt animal beside her: a half-grown dog in a deplorable condition, the rope which had held him fast to a tree still dangling from his scraggy neck. It was when she had found him not an hour earlier and struggled to free him that he had knocked her down. She had fallen awkwardly and twisted her ankle, and getting herself as far as the road had been a nightmare that she was relieved to have done with. Now she sat, more or less patiently, hoping for help. Two cars had gone past since she had dragged herself and the dog to the road but although she had waved and shouted neither of them had stopped. She studied her ankle in the dimming light; it had swollen alarmingly and she hadn't been able to get her shoe off; there was nothing to do but wait for help, although, since the road was not much more than a country lane connecting two villages, there didn't seem much chance of that before early morning when the farm tractors would begin their work.

'We may have to spend the night,' she told the animal beside her, for the sound of her voice was a comfort of sorts, 'but I'll look after you, although I'm not sure how.' The animal cowered closer; she could feel its ribs against

her side, and she gave it a soothing pat. 'It's nice to have company, anyway,' she assured him.

Dusk had fallen when she heard a car coming and presently its headlights swept over them as it passed.

'That's that,' said the girl. 'You can't blame anyone for not stopping...'

However, the car was coming back, reversing slowly until it was level with them and then stopping. The man who got out appeared to her nervous eyes to be a giant and she felt a distinct desire to get up and run, only she couldn't. He came towards her slowly and somehow when he spoke his voice was reassuringly quiet and calm.

'Can I help?' he asked, and his voice was kind too. 'You're hurt?'

He stood for a moment looking down at her; a small girl with no looks, too thin, but even in the deepening dusk her eyes were beautiful.

'Well, not really hurt, but I twisted my ankle and I can't walk.' She studied him carefully and liked what she saw. This was no young man out for an evening's ride but a soberly clad man past his first youth, his pale hair silvered at the temples. He was good-looking too, though that did not matter. 'I would be very grateful for a lift as far as Minton Cracknell; it's only a couple of miles along the road. I live there.'

'Of course, but may I look at your ankle first? I'm a doctor and it looks as though it needs attention.'

He squatted down beside her, and, when the dog growled, put out a large hand for the beast to sniff. 'We must have that shoe off,' he told her, and got out a pocket knife and cut the laces.

'I'm going to hurt you,' he said, and did despite his gentleness. 'Good girl. Catch your breath while I get some bandage from the car.'

He was gone and back again before she had had the time to wipe away the tears on her cheeks; she hadn't said a word while the shoe was coming off but she hadn't been able to stop the tears. He handed her a handkerchief without a word and said cheerfully, 'It will feel much better once I've strapped it up. You will have to get it X-rayed tomorrow and rest it for a day or two.'

He got to his feet. 'The dog is yours?' he asked.

'Well, no—I—I heard him barking as I came along the road and he'd been tied to a tree and left to starve; he accidentally tripped me up as I was freeing him...'

'Poor beast, but lucky for him that you heard him. Will you adopt him?'

He was talking idly, giving her time to pull herself together.

'Well, I don't think I can—my stepmother doesn't like dogs—but I can give him a bed and a meal and see if there's anyone in the village...'

'Well, let's get you home,' he said kindly, and scooped her up with a word to the dog, who needed no encouragement but climbed into the back of the car after the girl had been settled in the front seat.

'He'll make an awful mess,' she said apologetically, 'and it's a Bentley, isn't it?'

The man looked amused. 'I don't suppose there will be any lasting damage,' he observed. 'Where do you live exactly?'

'If you go through the village it's the house on the right behind a high brick wall. It's called the Old Rectory. My father inherited it from his father; it's been in the family for years...'

She glanced at his profile. 'You've been very kind.'

'I'm glad that I happened to pass by, Miss...?'

‘Preece, Cressida Preece.’ She added shyly, ‘You’re not English, are you?’

‘Dutch. Van der Linus—Aldrik van der Linus.’

She said politely, ‘Your English is quite perfect. Oh, here’s the village.’

The narrow main street of the little place was empty; it was the hour of high tea and lights shone from windows as they passed the small houses lining it.

‘It’s just along here, past the church...’

The houses had petered out and the car’s lights touched on the brick wall and an open gate. The drive was short, ending in a small sweep before a nice old house, not over large but solidly built. The man got out but before he reached the door it was opened by a severe-looking woman with iron-grey hair drawn back into a bun. She had a long thin face and sharp, very dark eyes, and she was dressed in a shabby dress under a white apron.

She looked at the man with a belligerence which he ignored.

‘I have brought Miss Preece home,’ he told her. ‘She has damaged her ankle. If you will tell me where her room is, I will carry her indoors. I think there is no lasting damage but she should rest it for a few days.’

The woman didn’t answer him but brushed past him and out to the car.

‘Miss Cressida, what has happened? Are you hurt? You must get to your bed...’

The girl spoke matter-of-factly, ‘Moggy, dear, I’m quite all right, just sprained an ankle. Mother’s not back?’ There was a hint of anxiety in her voice, and the man, who had come to stand by the car, frowned.

‘No, thank the lord. We’ll get you indoors.’ Moggy heard a faint growl from the back seat and exclaimed ‘What’s that—an animal...?’

‘A dog, Moggy. I found him tied to a tree. We’ll have to hide him tonight and tomorrow I’ll go to the village and try and find a home for him.’ Cressida undid her seatbelt. ‘He must have a meal, he’s starved.’

‘She’ll not allow it. We’ll get you to your room and I’ll feed him and take him down to old Mr Fellows and ask if he will keep the beast in his shed...’

‘It might be advisable to get Miss Preece up to her bed,’ said the man gently, ‘and since I gather the dog is not welcome here I’ll take him with me. I’m going in to Yeovil; there’s a good vet there.’

‘A vet?’ said Cressida sharply. ‘He’s not to be put to sleep...’

‘Certainly not. And now, if I may, I’ll carry you indoors and perhaps when we have you settled this animal might be given a small meal.’ And at her look of doubt, ‘I give you my word that he’ll be properly looked after.’ He had spoken quietly but Moggy stood back without a word and allowed him to lift Cressida from the car and carry her into the house.

‘Up the stairs,’ she told him gruffly, ‘and down that passage beyond the landing.’

He went up the wide oak staircase unhurriedly, carrying Cressida with no effort, and waited while Moggy went ahead of them and opened a door at the end of the passage.

The room was small and plainly furnished and Dr Van der Linus frowned again, for it seemed to him that it was a room suitable to a servant, not the daughter of the house. He laid her gently on the bed and stooped to take a look at the ankle.

‘I suggest that you take a couple of paracetamol before you settle for the night,’ he observed, ‘and be sure and get your doctor to come and look at it in the morning.’

He may wish to re-strap it and give you instructions as to treatment. You will need to keep off your feet for a few days but he will do what is necessary.' He stood looking down at her. 'Have you paracetamol? Take two as soon as possible with a drink.'

He took her hand in his large one. 'A most unfortunate accident, but you will be quite all right again very shortly. And don't worry about the dog, I'll see that it comes to no harm. Goodbye, Miss Preece.'

She didn't want him to go; a sensible girl, inured to accepting what life had to offer her, she wished very much that he would stay. But that, of course, was impossible; he was a complete stranger who had happened to turn up just when he was most needed. Then she thanked him in a polite voice tight with pain and watched his vast back go through the door with regret. At least the dog would be safe and her stepmother had been away from home. She comforted herself with that.

Dr van der Linus trod slowly down the staircase with Moggy leading the way. In the hall he stood still. 'You will look after Miss Preece? She is in a good deal of pain, but get her into bed with a warm drink and the paracetamol and she should sleep. Her own doctor will prescribe what he thinks fit.' He smiled down at the severe face. 'Could I bother you for some water for the dog, and perhaps a slice of bread?' And at her nod, 'May I know your name?'

'Mogford—Miss, but Miss Cressy always calls me Moggy, since she was knee-high.' She went ahead of him. 'I've some soup on the stove; perhaps a drop of that would do the beast some good, then I'll go and see to Miss Cressy.'

She led the way into the kitchen and poured soup into a bowl and broke some bread into it. 'You won't be

long?' she asked anxiously. 'Mrs Preece doesn't hold with animals. It's a mercy that she's out . . . there'll be a fuss enough over Miss Cressy.'

'Yes. I'm sure your mistress will be upset,' observed Dr van der Linus smoothly.

'Upset? Oh, she'll be upset, all right.' She glanced at the clock. 'She'll be back in twenty minutes or so, you'd best hurry.'

Dr van der Linus's eyebrows rose but all he said was, 'I'll be very quick. Shall I leave the bowl behind a bush for you to collect later?'

His companion nodded. 'Thank you for your trouble. You've been most kind.'

She shut the front door upon him and he went to the car, let the dog out while it ate and drank hungrily and then ushered it back in. He had driven a couple of miles and was almost at Templecombe when a car flashed past him. There was a woman driving. Probably Mrs Preece, he reflected as he turned off the road to take the short cut to Yeovil and the vet.

That gentleman, roused from his comfortable chair by the fire, peered at the dog standing dejectedly on the end of its rope. 'My dear Aldrik, what on earth have you here?'

'A dog, John. I have acquired him from his rescuer who is unable to offer food and shelter. Found tied to a tree on the other side of Minton Cracknell.'

'Want me to have a look? He's in pretty poor shape.' He patted the dog's matted head. 'I didn't know you were over here. Staying with Lady Merrill? You must come and dine one evening before you go back.'

He led the way through the house and out again into a yard at the back to his surgery. 'How is the old lady?'

'In splendid form. Her years sit lightly on her.' He heaved the reluctant dog on to the examination table, gentling him with a steady hand.

'Over here on holiday or doing some work?'

'Oh, a little of both. I've had a week in Edinburgh; I'm going on to Bristol to give a series of lectures and then back to London before I go home.'

'Well, dine with us before you leave. Molly will be disappointed if you don't. How about one evening next week? Any evening, take pot luck.'

'I should like that. May I give you a ring?'

The vet was bending over the dog. 'He hasn't anything broken as far as I can see. Half starved—more than half—and ill-treated—look at these sores. Do you want me to get him fit, or...?'

'Get him fit, will you? I promised his rescuer; a dab of a girl with huge brown eyes.'

John looked up. 'You say he was found near Minton Cracknell? That would be Cressida Preece. She brought me a cat a month or two ago—in a bad way, paid to have her cured of burns, quite nasty ones as a result of some lout tying a squib to her tail. She's still paying me, a bit at a time.'

'And yet she lives in a pleasant house...?'

'Yes but I fancy her life isn't as pleasant. Her father died some months ago; she lives with her stepmother. Unfortunately he left everything to her under the impression, one presumes, that she would provide for his daughter.'

Dr van der Linus stroked the trembling dog's head. 'Surely in this day and age the girl can leave home and get a job?'

‘One would think so, though I don’t imagine she’s trained for anything. What shall I do? Get this beast fit and let her know?’

‘No. I’ve taken rather a fancy to him. I’ll take him with me when I go back to Holland. May I leave him with you? My grandmother will be wondering where I have got to.’

‘Give me a ring in the morning, and we’ll see how he is after some food and a night’s sleep.’

The doctor got back into his car and drove away from the town, going north and presently turning into a maze of side-roads which brought him eventually to a small village lying between hilly country. It was indeed a small place, with a church, a handful of cottages, and a handsome vicarage, a shop and a duck pond. He drove through it before turning in between red-brick pillars surmounted by weatherbeaten lions and following a drive between thick undergrowth. It ended in a wide gravel sweep before a red-brick house of the Queen Anne period, light streaming from its windows and ringed around by trees. Dr van der Linus, getting out of his car, thought how welcoming it was. The door was opened as he reached it and a dignified old man, rather shaky on his legs, wished him a good evening and offered the information that Lady Merrill was in the small drawing-room.

‘I’m late, Baxter—I got held up. Give me ten minutes before you serve dinner, will you?’ He clapped the old man gently on the shoulders and crossed the hall to one of the open doors.

The room was a pleasant one, a little old-fashioned but light and airy with some rather massive furniture and thickly carpeted. The doctor crossed to a chair by the fire and the old lady sitting in it turned a smiling

face to him as two Pekinese dogs hurried to meet him. He bent to pat them before stooping to kiss his grandmother.

'My apologies for being late, my dear. I was unexpectedly delayed.'

'Did the lecture not go well?'

'Oh, very well. I was forced to stop on my way...'

'Pour yourself a drink and tell me about it.'

Which he did. 'Was she pretty, this girl?'

'Pretty? To tell you the truth, I can't remember how she looked. She had nice eyes and a very pleasant voice.' He sounded indifferent and presently they talked of other things. He didn't think of the girl again.

Cressida, with Miss Mogford's help, had got herself into bed. Her ankle hurt abominably but the paracetamol was beginning to take effect. Moggy had arranged a small footstool in the bed so that her foot was free of the bedclothes and perhaps by the morning it would be better. Staying in bed was a luxury her step-mother disapproved of. Hopefully she wouldn't come home until late and need know nothing about it until the morning. She drank the tea Miss Mogford brought her and was urged to go to sleep, and she did as she was bid. She was awakened half an hour later by the entrance of Mrs Preece, a woman who in her youth had been enchantingly pretty and now in middle age, by dint of dieting ruthlessly, going to the best hairdressers so that her once golden hair should show no hint of grey, using every aid to beauty which caught her eye in the glossy magazines she favoured and wearing the floating draperies which gave her the look of helpless femininity which hid a nature as cold and hard as steel, preserved the illusion of sweetness of character.

‘What is all this nonsense I hear from Miss Mogford?’ she wanted to know. ‘And why are you in bed? It’s barely nine o’clock? Really, Cressida, I hardly expect a healthy girl of four and twenty to loll around like this.’

Cressida, used to her stepmother’s manner towards her, sat up in bed. ‘I’m in bed because I can’t stand on my foot and it’s very painful. I dare say it will be all right by the morning.’

‘It had better be—I’ve the Worthingtons coming to dinner and I want the flowers done and the silver epergne properly polished.’ She sighed heavily. ‘I’ve a splitting headache; I was forced to come away early from the party. I shall go to bed and can only hope that Miss Mogford will spare the time to bring me a hot drink and run my bath.’

She went away without saying goodnight and Cressida wriggled down into her bed again, wide awake now and aware that her ankle was hurting. It was too soon to take any more paracetamol. She tugged her pillows into comfort and allowed her thoughts to roam.

The man who had brought her home had been nice; not just nice, he had treated her...she sought for words—as though she mattered; and since she knew only too well that her looks were negligible she had appreciated that. He had been surprised when he’d seen her room, she had noticed that at once, but since she wasn’t going to see him again she didn’t think that mattered. She knew that the few friends she had in the village were at a loss to understand why she stayed at home when it was so obvious that she wasn’t welcome there now that her father was dead. She had never told anyone that she stayed there because of Moggy. Moggy had no home of her own; she had worked all her life for Cressida’s parents, never able to save because she had a married

sister whose husband had become paralysed soon after they had married and had lived for many years, a helpless wreck, his life made bearable by the extras Moggy's earnings had helped to buy. Now at fifty-eight years, she had two more years before she could draw her pension and receive the annuity Mr Preece had left her. Until then there was nothing else she could do but stay with Mrs Preece, since that lady had led her to understand that unless she remained in her employ until her sixtieth birthday her annuity would be cancelled. Since Miss Mogford, for all her severe appearance, was afraid that no one else would employ her in any case, and, over and above that, had set her heart on going to live with her now widowed sister where she would enjoy a snug retirement, she stayed on, managing the house with the help of girls from the village and Cressida. It was only because Cressida understood Moggy's situation that she stayed. Two years, she told herself repeatedly, would soon pass, and once Moggy was safely esconced with her sister she herself would feel free to go away. She had no idea what she would do, she hadn't been trained for anything but she was handy about the house and even in this day and age there were old ladies who needed companions. A roof over her head and some money to spend was all she expected until she had found her feet.

It was a great pity that her father, that most trusting of men, had left everything to her stepmother, under the impression that she would give Cressida an allowance. Instead of that, Mrs Preece had lost no time in making it quite clear that that was out of the question. Cressida would have to help Miss Mogford and in return she would be clothed and fed and be given pocket money.

Cressida, after a number of indignant protests, had had every intention of leaving, only to be stymied by