

# BETTY NEELS



130

AN INDEPENDENT  
WOMAN

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Betty Neels

**An Independent Woman**

«HarperCollins»

## **Neels B.**

An Independent Woman / B. Neels — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon M&B)

Mills & Boon presents the complete Betty Neels collection. Timeless tales of heart-warming romance by one of the world's best-loved romance authors. A hard man to resist... But a perfect man to marry? Julia Gracey has always lived by the rule that women should stand on their own two feet. But every time there's a problem, Professor Gerard van der Maes always seems to be on hand with the perfect solution! Gerard seems determined to sweep Julia off her feet— and she is adamant that she won't let him take over her life! But when Julia is about to lose her home, Gerard offers one final proposition that she finds impossible to resist— marriage!

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**“I hope I never meet the professor again.”**

Julia snipped savagely at a length of curtain intended for a dress.

“Well, I don’t suppose you will—he’s a bit grand for us....” Ruth said.

“Why do you say he’s so grand?”

“He’s at the very top of the tree in the medical world and he’s got a Dutch title, comes from a very ancient family with lots of money...”

“Huh,” said Julia. “Probably no one’s good enough for him.”

Ruth replied mildly, “You *do* dislike him, don’t you?”

## 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, and yet she began writing almost by accident. She had retired from nursing, but her inquiring mind still sought stimulation. Her new career was born when she heard a lady in her local library bemoaning the lack of good romance novels. 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. She was a wonderful writer, and she will be greatly missed. Her spirit and genuine talent will live on in all her stories.

# **An Independent Women**

## **Betty Neels**



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## CHAPTER ONE

THE street, like hundreds of other streets in that part of London, was shabby but genteelly so, for the occupants of the small turn-of-the-century houses which lined it had done their best; there were clean net curtains at the windows and the paintwork was pristine, even if badly in need of a fresh coat. Even so, the street was dull under a leaden sky and slippery with the cold sleet.

The girl, Ruth, looking out of the window of one of the houses, frowned at the dreary view and said over her shoulder, 'I don't think I can bear to go on living here much longer...'

'Well, you won't have to—Thomas will get the Senior Registrar's post and you'll marry and be happy ever after.'

The speaker who answered, Julia, was kneeling on the shabby carpet, pinning a paper pattern to a length of material. She was a pretty girl, with a quantity of russet hair tied back carelessly with a bootlace, a tip-tilted nose and a wide mouth. Her eyes under thick brows were grey, and as she got to her feet it was apparent that she was a big girl with a splendid figure.

She wandered over to the window to join her sister. 'A good thing that Dr Goodman hasn't got a surgery this morning; you've no need to go out.'

'The evening surgery will be packed to the doors...'

They both turned their heads as a door opened and another girl, Monica, came in. A very beautiful girl, almost as beautiful as her elder sister. For while Julia, she of the russet hair, was pretty, the other two were both lovely, with fair hair and blue eyes. Ruth was taller than Monica, and equally slender, but they shared identical good looks.

'I'm off. Though heaven knows how many children will turn up in this weather.' Monica smiled. 'But George was going to look in...'

George was the parish curate, young and enthusiastic, nice-looking in a rather crumpled way and very much in love with Monica.

They chorused goodbyes as she went away again.

'I'm going to wash my hair,' said Ruth, and Julia got down onto her knees again and picked up the scissors.

The front doorbell rang as she did so, and Ruth said from the door, 'That will be the milkman; I forgot to pay him...I'll go.'

Professor Gerard van der Maes stood on the doorstep and looked around him. He had, in an unguarded moment, offered to deliver a package from his registrar Thomas, to that young man's fiancée—something which, it seemed, it was vital she received as quickly as possible. Since the registrar was on duty, and unlikely to be free for some time, and the Professor was driving himself to a Birmingham hospital and would need to thread his way through the northern parts of London, a slight deviation from his route was of little consequence.

Now, glancing around him, he rather regretted his offer. It had taken him longer than he had expected to find the house and he found the dreary street not at all to his taste. From time to time he had listened to Thomas's diffident but glowing remarks about his fiancée, but no one had told him that she lived in such a run-down part of the city.

The girl who answered the door more than made up for the surroundings. If this was Ruth, then Thomas must indeed be a happy man.

He held out a hand. 'Van der Maes, a colleague of Thomas. He wanted you to have a parcel and I happened to be going this way.'

'Professor van der Maes.' Ruth beamed up at him. 'How kind of you.' She added, not quite truthfully, 'I was just going to make coffee...'

He followed her into the narrow hall and into the living room and Ruth said, 'Julia...'

‘If it’s money you want there’s some in my purse...’ Julia didn’t look up. ‘Don’t stop me or I’ll cut too much off.’

‘It’s Professor van der Maes.’

‘Not the old man from across the street?’ Julia snipped carefully. ‘I knew he’d break a leg one day, going outside in his slippers.’

Ruth gave the Professor an apologetic glance. ‘We have a visitor, Julia.’

Julia turned round then, and looked at the pair of them standing in the doorway. Ruth, as lovely as ever, looked put out and her companion looked amused. Julia got to her feet, looking at him. Not quite her idea of a professor: immensely tall and large in his person, dark hair going grey, heavy brows above cold eyes and a nose high-bridged and patrician above a thin mouth. Better a friend than an enemy, thought Julia. Not that he looked very friendly...

She held out a hand and had it gently crushed.

‘I’ll make the coffee,’ said Ruth, and shut the door behind her.

‘Do sit down,’ said Julia, being sociable.

Instead he crossed the room to stand beside her and look down at the stuff spread out on the carpet.

‘It looks like a curtain,’ he observed.

‘It is a curtain,’ said Julia snappishly. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him that by the time she had finished with it it would be a dress suitable to wear to an annual dance which the firm she worked for gave to its employees. A not very exciting occasion, but it was to be held at one of London’s well-known hotels and that, combined with the fact that it was mid-February and life was a bit dull, meant that the occasion merited an effort on her part to make the best of herself.

She remembered her manners. ‘Do you know Thomas? I suppose you’re from the hospital. He’s Ruth’s fiancé. He’s not ill or anything?’

‘I know Thomas and I am at the same hospital. He is in splendid health.’

‘Oh, good. But horribly overworked, I suppose?’

‘Yes, indeed.’ His eye fell on the curtain once more.

‘You are a skilled needlewoman?’

‘Only when I am desperate. What do you do at the hospital? Teach, I suppose, if you are a professor?’

‘I do my best...’

‘Of what? Professor of what?’

‘Surgery.’

‘So you’re handy with a needle too!’ said Julia, and before he could answer that Ruth came in with the coffee.

‘Getting to know each other?’ she asked cheerfully.

‘Thank you for bringing the parcel, Professor. I’m sorry you won’t see Monica—she runs the nursery school here. Luckily I’ve got the morning off from the surgery, and Julia is always here, of course. She works at home—writes verses for greetings cards.’

Ruth handed round the coffee, oblivious of Julia’s heavy frown.

‘How very interesting,’ observed the Professor, and she gave him a quick look, suspecting that he was amused. Which he was, although nothing of it showed on his face.

Ruth asked diffidently. ‘I suppose Thomas hasn’t heard if he’s got that senior registrar’s job? I know he’d phone me, but if he’s busy...’

‘I think I can set your mind at rest. He should hear some time today. He’s a good man and I shall be glad to have him in my team in a senior capacity.’ He smiled at Ruth. ‘Does that mean that you will marry?’

She beamed at him. ‘Yes, just as soon as we can find somewhere to live.’ She went on chattily, ‘An aunt left us this house, and we came here to live when Mother and Father died, but I think we shall all be glad when we marry and can leave it.’

‘Your other sister—Monica?’ encouraged the Professor gently.

‘Oh, she’s engaged to the local curate; he’s just waiting to get a parish. And Julia’s got an admirer—a junior partner in the firm she works for. So you see, we are all nicely settled.’

He glanced at Julia. She didn’t look at all settled, for she was indignantly pink and looked as though she wanted to throw something. She said coldly, ‘I’m sure the Professor isn’t in the least interested in us, Ruth.’ She picked up the coffee pot. ‘More coffee, Professor?’

Her tone dared him to say yes and delay his departure.

He had a second cup, and she hated him. And she thought he would never go.

When he did, he shook hands, with the observation that the dress would be a success.

Ruth went with him to the door. When she came back she said, ‘He’s got a Rolls; you ought to see it.’ She glanced at Julia’s kneeling form. ‘You were a bit rude, dear. And he’s such a nice man.’

Julia snipped savagely at a length of curtain. ‘I hope I never meet him again.’

‘Well, I don’t suppose you will. He’s a bit grand for us...’

‘There’s nothing wrong with a rising young surgeon and a member of the clergy.’ She’d almost added *and a junior partner in a greetings card firm*, but she didn’t, for Oscar, accepted as her admirer by everyone but herself, didn’t quite fit. Curiosity got the better of her.

‘Why do you say he’s grand?’

‘He’s at the very top of the tree in the medical world and he’s got a Dutch title—comes from an ancient family with lots of money. Never talks about himself. Thomas says he’s a very private man.’

‘Huh,’ said Julia. ‘Probably no one’s good enough for him.’

Ruth commented mildly, ‘You do dislike him, don’t you?’

Julia began to wield her scissors again. ‘Dislike him? I don’t even know him. Shall we have Welsh rarebit for lunch? I’ll make some scones for tea. Monica will be ravenous when she gets home; she never has time to eat her sandwiches. And if you’re going to the shops you could bring some steak and kidney and I’ll make a pudding.’ She added, ‘Filling and cheap.’

She spoke without rancour; the three Gracey sisters, living together for the sake of economy in the poky little house a long-dead aunt had bequeathed to them, had learned to live frugally. The house might be theirs, but there were rates and taxes, gas and electricity, clothes and food to be paid for. None of them had been trained to do anything in the business world, having been left suddenly with nothing but memories of their mother and father, killed in a car accident, and a carefree life in a pleasant old house in the country with never a thought of money worries.

It had been Julia who’d got them organised, refusing to be daunted by unexpected debts, selling their home to pay off the mortgage, arguing with bank managers, solicitors, and salvaging the remnants of her father’s ill-advised investments. Once in their new home, it had been she who had urged the rather shy Ruth to take the part-time job as a receptionist to the local doctor while she looked for work for herself and Monica joined the staff of the local nursery school. But Julia had had no luck until, searching through the ads in the local paper, she’d seen one from the greetings card company.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, she had decided, and had sat down to compose a batch of verses and send them off. Much to her surprise, the firm had taken her on. It was badly paid, but it meant that she could work at home and do the housekeeping and the cooking. And they managed very well.

Ruth had met Thomas when she had gone to the hospital to collect some urgent path. lab. Results for Dr Goodman, and soon they would marry. Monica, although she liked children, had never been quite sure that she wanted to stay at home, especially in such alien surroundings, but then George had come one day to tell the children Bible stories and all ideas of going out into the glamorous world

to find a job more to her liking had faded away. They would have to wait to marry, of course, until George had a parish. In the meantime she was happy.

Which left Julia, twenty-four years old, bursting with life and energy. Because she had a happy nature she didn't allow herself to dwell on what might have been, but wrote her sentimental little verses, kept the house clean and tidy and, being clever with her needle, dressed herself in a style which, while not being the height of fashion, was a passable imitation.

It was fortunate, she supposed, that Oscar, her admirer—for he was only that at the moment, although he promised to be rather more when it was convenient for him to be so—had absolutely no taste in clothes. That horrible professor might sneer in a well-mannered way at the curtain, but Oscar wouldn't suspect. Indeed, even if he did, he would probably approve, for he was of a frugal nature when it came to spending money. He was persistent too. She had tried, over and over again, to shake him off, to suggest that she would make him a most unsuitable wife, but he refused to be shaken and, despite the countless excuses she had given, she was committed to attend the annual dance given by the greetings card firm.

Rightly, Ruth and Monica had urged her to go and enjoy herself. But neither of them had met Oscar, and she had given way because she knew that they both felt unhappy at the idea of her being left alone when they married. When she allowed herself to think about it she felt unhappy about that too.

She put away her sewing and started on the household chores, and found herself thinking about the Professor. He seemed a tiresome man, and she suspected that it would be hard to get the better of him. Probably he was horrid to his patients.

Professor van der Maes, contrary to Julia's idea, was treating the endless stream of patients attending his clinic with kindness and patience, his quiet voice reassuring, his smile encouraging. He was a tired man, for he worked too hard, but no patient had ever found him uncaring. But that was a side which he seldom showed to anyone else. The nursing staff who worked for him quickly learnt that he would stand no nonsense, that only their best efforts would suit him, and as for his students—he represented the goal they hoped to obtain one day. A good word from him was worth a dozen from anyone else, just as a quiet reprimand sent them into instant dejection. They called him the old man behind his back, and fiercely defended any criticism anyone was foolish enough to utter.

The Professor remained unmoved by other people's opinion of him, good or bad. He was an excellent surgeon and he loved his work, and he had friends who would be his for life, but he had no use for casual acquaintances. He had a social life when his work permitted, and was much sought after as a dinner party guest. Since he was unmarried, he could have taken his pick of any of the women he met. But, although he was a pleasant companion, he showed no interest in any of them. Somewhere in the world, he supposed, there was the woman he would fall in love with and want for his wife, but he was no longer young and he would probably end his days as a crusty old bachelor.

It wasn't until he was driving back to London a few days later that he thought about the three Gracey sisters. Ruth would make Thomas a good wife: a beautiful girl with her shy smile and gentle voice. He thought only fleetingly of Julia. Pretty, he supposed, but sharp-tongued, and she made no effort to be pleasant. She was the last person he imagined would spend her days writing sentimental verses for greetings cards, and what woman in her senses wore dresses made from curtains? He laughed, and forgot her.

The dance was ten days later, and, since the firm had had a good year, it was to be held at one of the more prestigious hotels. There was to be a buffet supper before everyone went to the hotel ballroom, and Ruth and Monica, anxious that Julia should enjoy herself, lent slippers and an old but still magnificent shawl which had belonged to their mother. They sent her there in a taxi—an unnecessary expense, Julia protested; the journey there would have been a lengthy one by bus but far cheaper. However, they insisted, privately of the opinion that Oscar could have come and fetched her instead of meeting her there...

The dress, despite its origin, was a success, simply made, but it fitted where it should, and unless anyone had actually seen the curtain, hanging in the spare bedroom, one would never have known...

Julia walked out of the taxi feeling quite pleased with herself, straight into the Professor's person.

He set her tidily on her feet. 'Well, well, Miss Julia Gracey. Unexpected and delightful.' He looked around him. 'You are alone?'

She bade him good evening in a choked voice. 'I am meeting someone in the hotel.'

She glanced around, looking without much hope for Oscar. There was no sign of him, of course. He had said that he would be at the hotel entrance, waiting for her. She supposed that she would have to go inside and look for him. She was not easily daunted, but the hotel's imposing entrance and the equally imposing appearance of the doorman daunted her now, and how and by what misfortune had the Professor got here? Surely he hadn't anything to do with greetings cards?

It seemed not. He said easily, 'I'm meeting friends here. We may as well go in together.' He paid the cabby and took her arm. 'Your friend will be looking for you inside?'

He was being kind, with a casual kindness it was impossible to resent. She sought frantically for something to say as the doorman opened the doors with a flourish and they joined the people in the foyer.

There was no sign of Oscar. She had been a fool to accept his invitation; she didn't even like him much.

'Let me have your shawl,' said the Professor. 'I'll let the girl have it.' And he had taken it from her and left her for a moment, returning with a ticket which he tucked into the little handbag hanging from her wrist.

She found her tongue then, 'Thank you. I'll—I'll wait here. Oscar will find me...'

'Oscar?' She mistrusted his casual voice. 'Ah, yes, of course. And if I'm not mistaken this must be he...'

She should have been glad to see him, and she might well have been if he had expressed regret at not meeting her promptly. But all he did was thump her on the shoulder and say heartily, 'Sorry old lady. I got held up; so many people wanted to have a chat.'

He looked her up and down. 'Got yourself a new dress for the occasion? Not bad, not bad at all...'

His glance fell upon the Professor, who had made no attempt to go away.

'Do I know you?'

Julia, aware of the Professor's eyes fixed on the curtain, said tartly, 'No, Oscar, you don't. This is Professor van der Maes. He knows Ruth's fiancé.'

Oscar looked uneasy under the Professor's cool gaze. 'Nice to meet you. Come along, Julia, I'll find you somewhere to sit; I've one or two important clients to talk to, but we'll be able to dance presently.'

He nodded in a condescending manner at the Professor, who took no notice but said pleasantly to Julia, 'I do hope you have a happy evening,' and, as Oscar turned away rudely to speak to a passing couple, 'but I doubt it.' He looked amused. 'I can't say that I agree with Oscar about your dress, but then I know it's a curtain, don't I?'

He was sorry the moment he had said it; for a moment she had the look of a small girl who had been slapped for no reason at all. But only for a moment. Julia stared up into his handsome face. 'Go away, Professor. I don't like you and I hope I never see you again.'

She had spoken quietly but she looked daggers at him. She turned her back then, surprised at how upset she felt. After all, she hadn't liked him the first time, and she couldn't care less if he jeered at the dress or liked it. If Oscar liked it, that was all that mattered, she told herself, not believing a word of it. But presently, when Oscar had finished his conversation, she went with him to the hotel

ballroom, to be sat on one of the little gilt chairs and told to wait awhile until he had the leisure to dance with her.

A not very promising prospect—but quickly lightened by a number of men who, seeing a pretty girl sitting by herself, danced her off in rapid succession. Which served Oscar right by the time he found himself ready to partner her.

‘Some of these modern dances are not dignified,’ he told her severely, propelling her round the ballroom with correct stiffness. ‘You would have done better to have sat quietly until I was free to come to you.’

‘But I like to dance, Oscar.’

‘Dancing in moderation is splendid exercise,’ said Oscar, at his stuffiest.

They came to a dignified halt as the music stopped. Julia spoke her thoughts out loud. ‘Do you want to marry me, Oscar?’ she asked.

He looked at her with astonishment and displeasure.

‘My dear Julia, what a very—very...’ he sought for the right word ‘...unwomanly remark to make. I must only hope it was a slight aberration of the tongue.’

‘It wasn’t anything to do with my tongue; it was a thought in my head.’ She looked at him. ‘You haven’t answered me, Oscar?’

‘I have no intention of doing so. I am shocked, Julia. Perhaps you should retire to the ladies’ room and compose yourself.’

‘You sound like someone in a Victorian novel,’ she told him. ‘But, yes, I think that would be best.’

The ballroom was at the back of the hotel; it took her a few moments to find the cloakroom where the Professor had left her wrap. She would have to take a bus, she hadn’t enough money for a taxi, but it wasn’t late and there were plenty of people about. She wrapped the vast mohair shawl she and her sisters shared for evening occasions round her and crossed the foyer, comfortably full of people. And halfway to the door the Professor, apparently appearing from thin air, put a hand on her arm.

‘Not leaving already?’ he wanted to know. ‘It’s barely an hour since you arrived.’

She had to stop, his hand, resting so lightly on her arm, nevertheless reminding her of a ball and chain. She said politely, ‘Yes, I’m leaving, Professor.’ She looked at his hand. ‘Goodbye.’

He took no notice; neither did he remove his hand.

‘You’re upset; you have the look of someone about to explode. I’ll take you home.’

‘No, thank you. I’m quite capable of getting myself home.’

For answer he tucked her hand under his elbow. ‘Your Oscar will come looking for you,’ he said mildly.

‘He’s not my Oscar...’

‘Ah, I can’t say that I’m surprised. Now, come along. This is indeed a splendid excuse for me to leave with you—a pompous dinner with endless speeches to which I have been bidden.’

He had propelled her gently past the doorman, out into the chilly night and, after towing her along gently, popped her into his car, parked nearby.

Getting in beside her, he asked, ‘Are you going to cry?’

‘Certainly not. And I have no wish to be here in your car. You are being high-handed, Professor.’ She sniffed. ‘I’m not a child.’

He looked at her, smiling a little. ‘No, I had realised that. Are you hungry?’

She was taken by surprise. ‘Yes...’

‘Splendid. And, since you are not going to cry and I’m hungry too, we will go and eat somewhere.’

‘No,’ said Julia.

‘My dear girl, be sensible. It’s the logical thing to do.’

He started the car. 'Let us bury the hatchet for an hour or so. You are free to dislike me the moment I see you to your front door.'

She was hungry, so the prospect of a meal was tempting. She said, 'Well, all right, but not anywhere grand—the curtain...'

He said quietly, 'I'm sorry I said that. You look very nice and it was unforgivable of me. We will go somewhere you won't need to be uneasy.'

He sounded kind and her spirits lifted. Perhaps he wasn't so bad... He spoiled it by adding, 'Is your entire wardrobe made up of curtains?' He glanced at her. 'You must be a very talented young lady.'

She was on the point of making a fiery answer when the thought of a meal crossed her mind. She had no idea why he had asked her out and she didn't care; she would choose all the most expensive things on the menu...

He took her to Wilton's, spoke quietly to the *maître d'*, and followed her to one of the booths, so that any fears concerning her dress were instantly put at rest.

'Now, what shall we have?' asked the Professor, well aware of her relief that the booth sheltered her nicely from the other diners. 'I can recommend the cheese soufflé, and the sole Meunière is excellent.' When she agreed he ordered from the waitress and turned his attention to the *sommelier* and the wine list. Which gave Julia a chance to study the menu. She need not have bothered to choose the most expensive food; everything was expensive.

When it came it was delicious, and cooked by a master hand. She thought fleetingly of Oscar, and applied herself to her dinner, and, being nicely brought up, made polite conversation the while. The Professor replied suitably, amused at that and wondering what had possessed him to take her to dinner. He went out seldom, and when he did his companion would be one of his numerous acquaintances: elegant young women, dressed impeccably, bone-thin and fussing delicately about what they could and couldn't eat.

Julia, on the other hand, ate everything she was offered with an unselfconscious pleasure, and capped the sole with sherry trifle and drank the wine he had ordered. And that loosed her tongue, for presently, over coffee, she asked, 'If you are Dutch, why do you live in England?'

'I only do so for part of the time. My home is in Holland and I work there as well. I shall be going back there in a few weeks' time for a month or so.'

'How very unsettling,' observed Julia. 'But I suppose you are able to pick and choose if you are a Professor?'

'I suppose I can,' he agreed mildly. 'What are you going to do about Oscar?'

'I dare say he won't find me a suitable wife for a junior partner...'

'And will that break your heart?'

'No. He sort of grew on me, if you see what I mean.'

He said smoothly, 'Ah—you have a more romantic outlook, perhaps?'

She took a sip of coffee. 'It's almost midnight. Would you take me home, please?'

Not one of the women he had taken out to dinner had ever suggested that it was getting late and they wished to go home. On the contrary. The Professor stifled a laugh, assured her that they would go at once, and signed the bill. On the journey through London's streets he discussed the weather, the pleasures of the English countryside and the prospect of a fine summer.

The street was quiet and only barely lit. He got out and opened the car door for her, before taking the door key from her. He opened the door and gave her back the key.

Julia cast around in her mind for something gracious to say. 'Thank you for my dinner,' she said finally, and, since that didn't sound in the least gracious, added, 'I enjoyed the dinner very much and the restaurant was—was very elegant. It was a very pleasant evening...'

She didn't like his smile in the dimly lit hallway. 'Don't try too hard, Julia,' he told her. 'Goodnight.'

He pushed her gently into the hall and closed the door soundlessly behind her.

‘I hate him,’ said Julia, and took off her shoes, flung the shawl onto the floor and crept upstairs to her bed. She had intended to lie awake and consider how much she disliked him, but she went to sleep at once.

The Professor took himself off home, to his elegant Chelsea house, locked the Rolls in the mews garage behind it, and let himself into his home. There was a wall-light casting a gentle light on the side table in the hall and he picked up the handful of letters on it as he went to his study.

This was a small, comfortably furnished room, with rows of bookshelves, a massive desk, a chair behind it and two smaller ones each side of the small fireplace. Under the window was a table with a computer and a pile of papers and books. He ignored it and put the letters on his desk before going out of the room again and along the hall, through the baize door at the end and down the steps to the kitchen, where he poured himself coffee from the pot on the Aga and acknowledged the sleepy greetings from two small dogs.

They got out of the basket they shared and sat beside him while he drank his coffee: two small creatures with heavily whiskered faces, short legs and long, thin rat-like tails. The professor had found them, abandoned, terrified and starving, some six months earlier. It was apparent that they weren’t going to grow any larger or handsomer, but they had become members of his household and his devoted companions. He saw them back into their basket, with the promise of a walk in the morning, and went back to his study. There were some notes he needed to write up before he went to bed.

He sat down and pulled the papers towards him and then sat back in his chair, thinking about the evening. What had possessed him to take Julia out to dinner? he wondered. A nice enough girl, no doubt, but with a sharp tongue and making no attempt to hide the fact that she didn’t like him. The unknown Oscar was possibly to be pitied. He smiled suddenly. She had enjoyed her dinner, and he doubted whether Oscar rose much above soup of the day and a baked potato. He acknowledged that this was an unfair thought; Oscar might even now be searching fruitlessly for Julia.

When Julia went down to breakfast in the morning, Ruth and Monica were already at the kitchen table, and without wasting time they began to fire questions at her.

‘Did you dance? Was it a splendid hotel? What did you eat? Did Oscar propose? Did he bring you home?’

Julia lifted the teapot. ‘I danced three and a half times, and the hotel was magnificent.’

She shook cornflakes into a bowl. She didn’t like them, but, according to the TV ad, the girl who ate them had a wand-like figure—a state to which she hoped in time to subdue her own generous curves. She said, ‘I didn’t eat at the hotel.’ She took a sip of tea. ‘Oscar didn’t propose. I don’t think he ever will now. And he didn’t bring me home.’

‘Julia, you didn’t come home alone?’

‘No, Professor van der Maes drove me back.’

She finished the cornflakes and put bread in the toaster.

‘Start at the beginning and don’t leave anything out,’ said Ruth. ‘What on earth was the Professor doing there? He doesn’t write verses, does he?’

‘No. Though I’m sure he is very handy with a needle.’

Her sisters exchanged glances. ‘Why did you dance half a dance?’ asked Ruth.

Julia said through a mouthful of toast, ‘Oscar was annoyed because I hadn’t stayed on my chair to wait for him, so I asked him if he wanted to marry me.’

‘Julia, how could you...?’

‘He told me to go to the ladies’ room and compose myself, so I found my shawl and left, and the Professor was at the entrance. He said he was hungry and asked me if I was, and when I said yes, he took me to Wilton’s.’

‘Wilton’s?’ chorused her sisters, and then added, ‘The dress...?’

‘It was all right. We sat in a booth. It was a nice dinner. And then, when I asked him to bring me home, he did.’

Two pairs of astonished blue eyes stared at her. ‘What about Oscar?’

‘He was shocked.’

‘And the Professor? Whatever did he say?’

‘He said he wasn’t surprised that Oscar wasn’t mine.’

You will both be late for work...’

‘But why should the Professor take you out to dinner?’ asked Ruth.

‘He said he was hungry.’

‘You can be very tiresome sometimes, Julia,’ said Monica severely.

When they had gone Julia set about the household chores and then, those done, she made coffee and a cheese sandwich and sat down to write verses. Perhaps Oscar would be able to get her the sack, but on the other hand her verses sold well. The senior partners might not agree. For it wasn’t the kind of work many people would want to do and it was badly paid. She polished off a dozen verses, fed Muffin, the family cat, and peeled the potatoes for supper. Oscar, she reflected, wouldn’t bother her again.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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