

A close-up photograph of several pink flowers, likely peonies, with delicate petals and visible stamens. The flowers are set against a soft, light pink background. The overall aesthetic is romantic and elegant.

BETTY NEELS SHORTS

134

AN ORDINARY
GIRL

Mills & Boon M&B

Betty Neels

An Ordinary Girl

«HarperCollins»

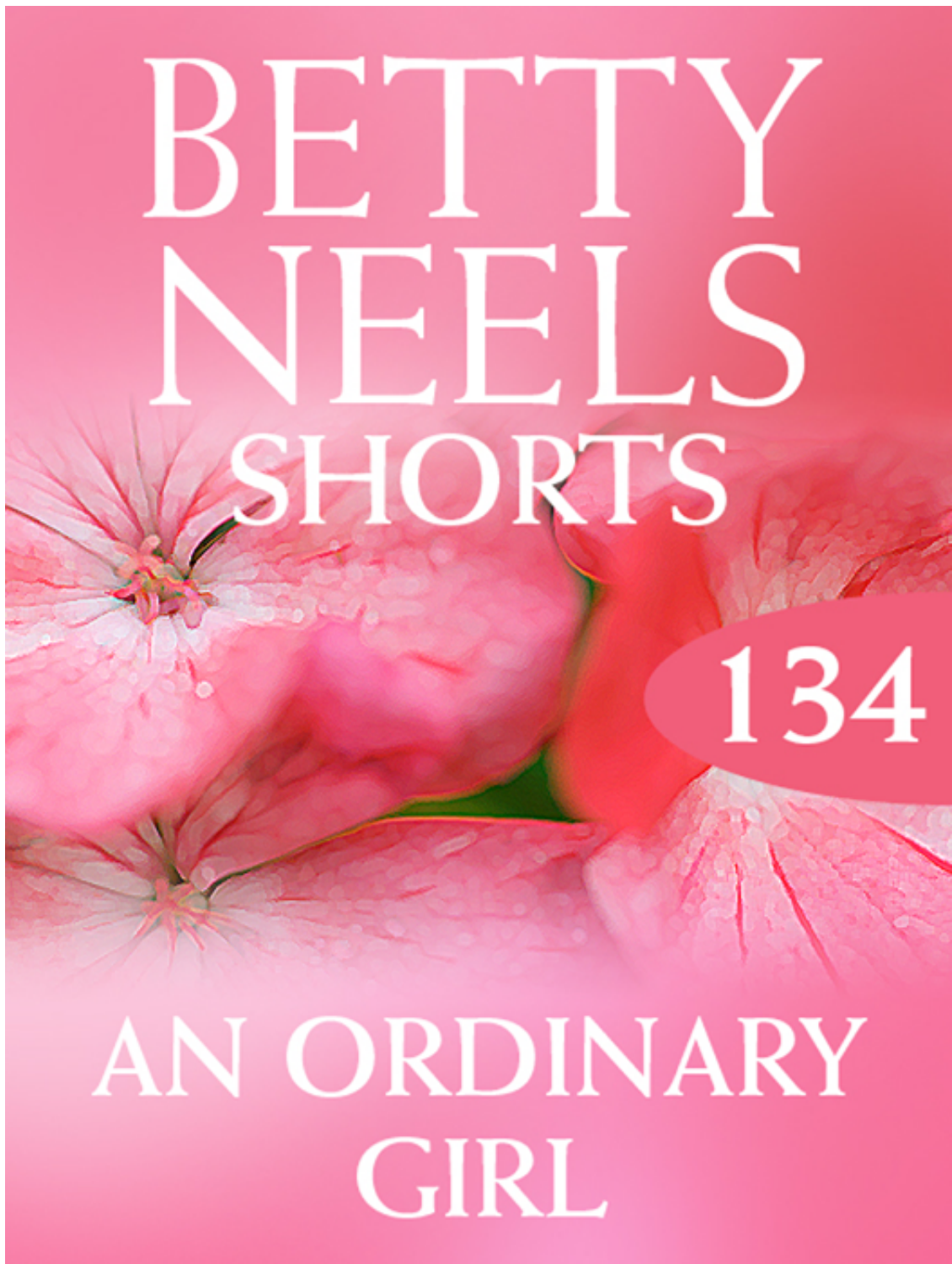
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An Ordinary Girl / B. Neels — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon M&B)

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Содержание

MILLS & BOON	7
CHAPTER ONE	8
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	17



An
Ordinary Girl
Betty Neels



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CHAPTER ONE

PHILOMENA SELBY, the eldest of the Reverend Ambrose Selby's five daughters, was hanging up sheets. It was a blustery March morning and since she was a small girl, nicely rounded but slight, she was having difficulty subduing their wild flapping. Finally she had them pegged in a tidy line, and she picked up the empty basket and went back into the house, where she stuffed another load into the washing machine and put the kettle on. A cup of coffee would be welcome. While she waited for it to boil she cut a slice of bread off the loaf on the table and ate it.

She was a girl with no looks to speak of, but her face was redeemed from plainness by her eyes, large and brown, fringed by long lashes beneath delicately arched brows. Her hair, tangled by the wind, was brown too, straight and fine, tied back with a bit of ribbon with no thought of fashion. She shook it back now and got mugs and milk and sugar, and spooned instant coffee as her mother came into the kitchen.

Mrs Selby was a middle-aged version of her daughter and the years had been kind to her. Her brown hair was streaked with silver-grey and worn in a bun—a style she had never altered since she had put her hair up as a seventeen-year-old girl. There were wrinkles and lines in her face, but the lines were laughter lines and the wrinkles didn't matter at all.

She accepted a mug of coffee and sat down at the table.

'Mrs Frost called in with a bag of onions to thank your father for giving her Ned a lift the other day. If you'd pop down to Mrs Salter's and get some braising steak from her deep-freeze we could have a casserole.'

Philomena swallowed the last of her bread. 'I'll go now; the butcher will have come so there'll be plenty to choose from.'

'And some sausages, dear.'

Philomena went out of the house by the back door, and down the side path which led directly onto the village street. When she reached the village green she joined the customers waiting to be served. She knew that she would have to wait for several minutes. Mrs Salter was the fount of all news in the village and passed it on readily while she weighed potatoes and cut cheese. Philomena whiled away the time peering into the deep-freeze cabinet, not so much interested in braising steak as she was in the enticing containers of ice cream and chocolate cakes.

Her turn came, and with the steak and sausages wrapped in a not very tidy parcel she started off back home.

The car which drew up beside her was silent—but then it would be; it was a Bentley—and she turned a rather startled face to the man who spoke to her across the girl sitting beside him.

'We're looking for Netherby House, but I believe that we are lost ...'

Philomena looked into the car, leaning on the window he had opened.

'Well, yes, you are. Have you a map?'

His companion thrust one at her and she opened it out, pausing to smile at the girl as she leaned further in.

'Look, this is Nether Ditchling—here.' She pointed with a small hand, reddened by the cold wind. 'You need to go through the village as far as the crossroads—' her finger moved on '—go right and go to Wisbury; that's about three miles. There are crossroads at the end of the village. Go right, and after a mile you'll see a lane signposted to Netherby House. Can you remember that?' she asked anxiously.

She looked at him then; he had a handsome, rather rugged face, close-cropped dark hair and blue eyes. They stared at each other for a moment, and she had the strange feeling that something had happened ...

'I shall remember,' he told her, and smiled.

Philomena gave her head a little shake. 'People often get lost; it's a bit rural.' She withdrew her head and picked up her steak and sausages from the girl's lap, where she had dumped them, the better to point the way on the map. She smiled as she did so and received a look of contempt which made her blush, suddenly aware that in this elegant girl's eyes she was a nonentity.

'So sorry. It's only sausages and steak.'

She didn't hear the small sound which escaped the man's lips and she stood back, hearing only his friendly thanks.

Her mother was still in the kitchen, peeling carrots. 'Philly, you were a long time ...'

'A car stopped on its way to Netherby House; they'd got lost. A Bentley. There was a girl, very pretty and dressed like a fashion magazine, and a man driving. Mother, why is it that sometimes one meets someone one has never met before and it seems as though one has known them for always?'

Mrs Selby bent over the carrots. She said carefully, 'I think it is something which happens often, but people don't realise it. If they do then it is to be hoped that it may lead to happiness.'

She glanced at Philly, who was unwrapping the sausages. 'I wonder why they were going to Netherby House. Perhaps their eldest girl has got engaged—I did hear that it was likely.'

Philly said, 'Yes, perhaps that's it. They weren't married, but she had an outsize diamond ring ...'

Her mother rightly surmised that the Bentley and its occupants were still occupying her daughter's thoughts. She said briskly, 'Will you make your father a cup of coffee? If he's finished writing his sermon he'll want it.'

So Philly went out of the kitchen, across the cold hall and along a passage to the back of the house, which was a mid-Victorian building considered suitable for a vicar of those days with a large family and several servants. The Reverend Selby had a large family, but no servants—except for Mrs Dash, who came twice a week to oblige—and the vicarage, imposing on the outside, was as inconvenient on the inside as it was possible to be.

Philly skipped along, avoiding the worn parts of the linoleum laid down years ago by some former incumbent, and found her parent sitting at his desk, his sermon written. He was tall and thin, with grey hair getting scarce on top, but now, in his fifties, he was still a handsome man, with good looks which had been passed on to his four younger girls. Philly was the only one like her mother—something which he frequently told her made him very happy. 'Your mother is a beautiful woman,' he would tell her, 'and you are just like she was at your age.'

They were words which comforted Philly when she examined her face in the mirror and wished for blue eyes and the golden hair which framed her sisters' pretty faces. But she was never downcast for long; she was content with her lot: helping her mother run the house, helping with the Sunday School, giving a hand at the various social functions in the village. She hoped that one day she would meet a man who would want to marry her, but her days were too busy for her to spend time daydreaming about that.

The driver of the Bentley, following Philomena's instructions, drove out of the village towards the crossroads, listening to his companion's indignant voice. 'Really—that girl. Dumping her shopping in my lap like that.' She shuddered. 'Sausages and heaven knows what else ...'

'Steak.' He sounded amused.

'And if that's typical of a girl living in one of these godforsaken villages—frightful clothes and so plain—then the less we leave London the better. And did you see her hands? Red, and no nail polish. Housework hands.'

'Small, but pretty, none the less, and she had beautiful eyes.'

He glanced sideways at the perfect profile. 'You're very uncharitable, Sybil. Ah, here are the crossroads. Netherby is only a mile ahead of us.'

'I never wanted to come. I hate engagement parties ...'

'I thought you enjoyed ours.'

'That was different—now we're only the guests.'

The house was at the end of a narrow lane. It was a large, rambling place, and the sweep before the front door was full of cars.

Sybil sat in the car, waiting for him to open the door. 'I shall be bored stiff,' she told him as they walked to the door, and he looked at her again. She was more than pretty, she was beautiful, with perfect features and golden hair cunningly cut. But just now she looked sulky, and her mouth was turned down at the corners. 'That stupid girl and now this ...'

But once she was inside, being greeted by their host and hostess and the various friends and acquaintances there, the sulky look was replaced by smiles and the charm she switched on like a light. She was in raptures over the engagement ring, laughed and talked, and was the picture of a dear friend delighted to join in the gossip about the wedding. At the luncheon which followed she kept her end of the table entranced by her witty talk.

'You're a lucky fellow, James,' observed a quiet little lady sitting beside the rather silent man. 'Sybil is a lovely young woman, and so amusing too. When do you intend to marry?'

He smiled at her. 'Sybil is in no hurry, and in any case we're short-staffed at the hospital. I doubt if I could find the time. She wants a big wedding, which I understand takes time and organising.'

Kind, elderly eyes studied his face. There was something not quite right, but it was none of her business. 'Tell me, I hear that there is a scheme to open another ward?'

'Yes, for premature babies. It's still being discussed, but we need more incubators.'

'You love your work, don't you?'

'Yes.'

She saw that she wasn't going to be told more and asked idly if he had enjoyed the drive down from town.

'Yes, it's a different world, isn't it? Last time I saw you, you were making a water garden. Is it finished?'

They turned to their neighbours presently, and then everyone left the table to stand around talking, or walked in the large formal garden, and it was there that Sybil found him presently.

'Darling, we simply must leave. I'm so bored. Say that you take a clinic this evening and that you have to be back by seven o'clock.' When he looked at her, she added, 'Oh, darling, don't look like that. It's such a stuffy party.'

She had a lovely smile, so he smiled back and went in search of their hostess.

Having got her own way, Sybil was at her most charming self, keeping up amusing talk as they drove back to London. As he slowed through Nether Ditchling she said with a laugh, 'Oh, this is the place where we talked to that plain girl with the sausages. What a dull life she must lead. Shall we be back in time to have dinner together somewhere I can dress up? I bought the loveliest outfit the other day—I'll wear it.'

'I must disappoint you, Sybil. I've a pile of paperwork, and I want to check a patient at the hospital.'

She pouted prettily, clever enough to know that he wasn't to be persuaded. She put a hand on his knee. 'Never mind, darling. Let me know when you can spare an evening and we'll go somewhere special.'

He drove her to her parents' flat in Belgravia and went straight to the hospital—where he forgot her, the luncheon party and the long drive, becoming at once engrossed in the progress of his small patient. But he didn't forget the girl with the sausages. That they would meet again was something he felt in his very bones, and he was content to wait until that happened.

March had come in like a lamb and it was certainly going out like a lion. Winter had returned, with wind and rain and then the warning of heavy snow. Professor James Forsyth, on his morning round one Saturday morning, was called to the phone. 'An urgent message,' Sister had told him.

It was Sybil. 'James, darling, you're free this afternoon and tomorrow, aren't you? I simply must go to Netherby. I've bought a present for Coralie and Greg and it's too large to send. Will you be an

angel and drive me down this afternoon? I promise you we won't stay, and we can come straight back and dine somewhere. I thought tomorrow we might go to Richmond Park. The Denvers are always inviting us to lunch and I'm dying to see their new house.'

Professor Forsyth frowned. 'Sybil, I have asked you not to phone me at the hospital unless it is an urgent matter.'

'Darling, but this *is* urgent. I mean, how am I to get this wretched present down to Netherby unless you drive me there?' She added with a wistful charm which was hard to resist, 'Please, James.'

'Very well, I'll drive you down there and back. But I can't take you to dinner this evening and I need Sunday to work on a lecture I'm due to give.'

He heard her murmured protest and then, 'Of course, darling, I quite understand. And thank you for finding the time for poor little me. Will you fetch me? I'll have an early lunch. I can be ready at one o'clock.'

As they left London behind them the dark day became darker, with unbroken cloud and a rising wind. Their journey was half done when the first idle snowflakes began to fall, and by the time they were driving through Nether Ditchling it was snowing in earnest.

Sybil, who had been at her most charming now that she had got what she wanted, fell silent.

'Will ten minutes or so be enough for you to deliver your gift? I don't want to linger in this weather.'

She was quick to reassure him. 'Don't come in; I'll only be a few minutes. I'll explain that you have to get back to town.'

At the house she said, 'Don't get out, James. If you do they'll want us to stay for tea. I'll be very quick.'

She leaned across and kissed his cheek, got out of the car and ran up the steps to the front door, and a moment later disappeared through it.

The doctor sat back and closed his eyes. He was tired, and the prospect of a quiet day at home was very welcome. Peaceful hours in his study, making notes for his lecture, leisurely meals, time to read ...

He glanced at his watch; Sybil had been gone for almost fifteen minutes. He could go and fetch her, but if he did they might find it difficult to leave quickly. He switched on the radio: Delius—something gentle and rather sad.

Sybil was sitting by the fire in her friend Coralie's sitting room. The wedding present was open beside them and there was a tea tray between them. Another few minutes wouldn't matter, Sybil had decided, and a cup of tea would be nice. While they drank it details of the wedding dress could be discussed ...

She had been there for almost half an hour when she glanced at the clock.

'I must go. It's been such fun and I quite forgot the time. James will be wondering what's happened to me.' She gave a little trill of laughter. 'It's such a good thing he always does exactly what I want.'

She put on her coat and spent a few moments examining her face in her little mirror. She added a little lipstick and went down to the hall with Coralie. Saying goodbye was a leisurely affair, too, but the butler had opened the door and she hurried out into the blinding snow.

The doctor had the door open for her. He leaned across to shut it as she got in and asked in a quiet voice, 'What kept you, Sybil? A few minutes was the agreed time.'

'Oh, darling don't be cross. I haven't been very long, have I? Coralie insisted that I had a cup of tea.' She turned a smiling face to him.

'You were half an hour.' His voice was expressionless.

Her smile disappeared. 'What if I was a bit longer than I said? I won't be ordered around and I won't be hurried. Now for heaven's sake let's get back to town.'

'That may not be possible.'

He drove carefully, for the snow was drifting and visibility was almost non-existent. The big car held the road well, but it was now pitch-dark and there was no lighting on the narrow country roads. He came to the crossroads, drove through Wisbury and onto the crossroads after it. It was as he drove into Nether Ditchling that a flashing blue light from a police car parked on the side of the road brought him to a halt.

A cold but cheerful face appeared at the window. The professor opened it and a policeman, muffled against the weather, poked his head in.

‘Road’s closed ahead, sir. Are you going far?’

‘London.’

‘Not a chance. They’ll have the snowploughs out on the main roads, but they won’t get here much before tomorrow afternoon.’

‘Is there no other way? We’ve come from Netherby.’

‘Just had a message that the crossroads at Wisbury are blocked. You’d best put up here for the night.’

Sybil said suddenly, ‘I won’t. I must be taken to London. Of course there’s another road we can use ...’ Both men looked at her, and she added furiously, ‘Well, do something, can’t you?’

A tall figure in a hooded cape had joined them.

‘Officer Greenslade? Can I be of help to you?’

‘Reverend—I’ve suggested that these folk put up in the village, for they can’t go anywhere else tonight.’

‘Then let me offer them a meal and a bed.’

The Reverend Selby poked his head through the window in his turn. ‘Your car will be safe enough here. My wife will be delighted to help you.’

Professor Forsyth got out and made his way round to Sybil’s door. ‘That’s most kind of you—we shan’t be too much trouble?’

‘No, no—and Greenslade, if anyone else needs shelter send them along to the vicarage.’

Sybil, for once mute, was helped up the short drive to the vicarage door and into the hall, where she stood watching the men shed their coats and cloak. She looked forlorn and very pretty, but the only feeling the professor had for her was one of exasperation. Nevertheless he unbuttoned her coat and took it off her, and then held her arm as they followed their host through the hall and into the kitchen.

This was a large room, with an old-fashioned dresser, a vast table with an assortment of wooden chairs around it and an elderly Aga giving out welcome warmth.

Mr Selby led the way to the two shabby Windsor chairs by the Aga, gently moved a cat and kittens from one of them, and said, ‘My dear, we have guests. The road is closed and they can go no further.’

Mrs Selby gave them a warm smile and said, ‘You poor things. Sit down and I’ll make tea—you must need a hot drink.’

Professor Forsyth held out a hand. ‘You’re most kind and we’re grateful. My name’s Forsyth—James Forsyth. This lady is my fiancée, Miss Sybil West.’

Mrs Selby shook hands and turned to Sybil. ‘This is horrid for you.’

Sybil lifted a lovely wistful face. ‘Yes, I’m so cold and hungry, and we should be in London. If I could go to bed, perhaps I could have a small meal on a tray ...’

James said evenly, ‘You’ll warm quickly here, and you have no need to go to bed.’ He stopped speaking as the door opened and two girls came in, both fair-haired and pretty and smiling.

‘We heard the car. Are you cut off from the outside world?’ One girl offered a hand. ‘I’m Flora and this is Rose. There are three more of us, but Lucy’s spending the weekend with friends and Katie’s finishing her homework. And Philly ...’

A door at the back of the kitchen opened, letting in a great deal of cold air, and Philomena, wrapped in a variety of coats and scarves, with her head tied in some kind of a hood, came in.

‘I got the chickens in, but we’ll have a job to get to them by morning.’

She cast off some of the garments and looked across the kitchen at the tall man standing beside her father. ‘Oh, hello, you were in that car ...’ She smiled at him and then saw Sybil, crouching by the Aga. ‘And you, too,’ she added cheerfully. ‘Are you going to spend the night?’

She had taken off the last coat and pulled the hood off her head. ‘I’ll go and make up some beds, shall I, Mother? Rose will give me a hand.’

‘Yes, dear.’ Her mother was pouring tea into mugs and inviting the professor to sit down. ‘Let me see. Miss ...’ She turned to Sybil with a smile. ‘West, isn’t it? You had better have Katie’s room; she can go in with you. Rose and Flora can share, and Mr Forsyth ...’ Her eye fell on the bag he was carrying. ‘Are you a doctor?’ When he nodded, amused, she said, ‘Doctor Forsyth can have the guest room.’

As Philly and Rose left the room she added, ‘They’ll put clean sheets on the beds, and if you’re tired, which I expect you are, you can go to bed when we’ve had supper.’

‘We are putting you to a great deal of trouble. Is there anything I can do?’

‘No, no. It’s stewed beef and dumplings, and there is plenty of it. Also there’s an egg custard in the Aga.’

‘Then if you’ve no need of Doctor Forsyth’s services, my dear,’ observed her husband, ‘I’ll take him along to my study while you and the girls get supper.’

There was the table to lay, more potatoes to peel, plates and cutlery to get from cupboards and drawers. Mrs Selby and Flora talked as they worked but Sybil stayed silent, fuming. A spoilt only child in a wealthy household, she had never done anything for herself. There had always been someone to wash and iron, cook meals, tidy her bedroom, to fetch and carry. Now she was dumped in this ghastly kitchen and James had left her with no more than a nod.

He would pay for it, she told herself silently. And if he and these people expected her to sit down and eat supper with them, they were mistaken. Once her room was ready she would say that she felt ill—a chill or a severe headache—and they would see her into bed and bring her something on a tray once she had had a hot bath.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a bang on the front door and voices. Philly ran to open it and returned a moment later with an elderly couple shedding snow and looking uncertain.

‘Officer Greenslade sent them here,’ announced Philly. ‘They are on their way to Basingstoke.’

She began to unwind them from their snow-covered coats. ‘Mother will be here in a moment. Our name’s Selby—Father’s the vicar.’

‘Mr and Mrs Downe. We are most grateful ...’

‘Here’s Mother.’ Philly ushered them to the Aga and introduced them, and Flora pulled up chairs.

‘A cup of tea to warm you?’ said Mrs Selby. ‘There’ll be supper presently, and you’ll sleep here, of course. It’s no trouble. Here’s my husband ...’

The vicar and the professor came in together, and over mugs of tea the Downes reiterated their gratitude and, once warm, became cheerful.

Philly and her mother, busy at the Aga, rearranged the bedrooms.

‘Rose and Flora can manage in Lucy’s room; Mr and Mrs Downe can have their room.’ So Rose went upstairs again, and then led Mrs Downe away to tidy herself and find a nightie.

It was time she dealt with her own comfort, decided Sybil, since James was doing nothing about it.

‘I feel quite ill,’ she told Mrs Selby. ‘If I’m not being too much of a nuisance I do want to go to bed. If I could have a hot bath and just a little supper?’

Mrs Selby looked uncertain, and it was Philly who answered with a friendly firmness.

‘No bath. There’ll be just enough hot water for us all to wash—and if you go to bed now, I’m afraid we wouldn’t be able to do anything about your supper for a bit.’ She smiled, waving a spoon. ‘All these people to feed.’

‘But I’m ill ...’ Sybil’s voice was lost in a commotion at the door again.

It was PC Greenslade again, this time with a solitary young man, his short jacket and trousers soaking and caked with snow.

‘Got lost,’ said the policeman. ‘On his bike, would you believe it? Going to London.’

There was a general reshuffle as everyone moved to give the young man a place near the Aga. More tea was made and then the policeman, suitably refreshed, went back to his cold job while the young man’s jacket was stripped off him.

He thanked them through chattering teeth. He was on his way to see his girlfriend in Hackney, he explained. He was a seasoned cyclist, rode miles, he added proudly, but like a fool he’d taken a shortcut recommended by a friend and lost his way ...

‘You poor boy,’ said Mrs Selby. ‘You shall have a hot meal and go straight to bed.’

Professor Forsyth said quietly, ‘After a good rub down and dry clothes. You said that there will be no chance of a hot bath? He does need to get warm ...’

The vicar spoke. ‘If everyone here will agree, we will use the hot water for a bath for this lad. There will still be just enough for a wash for the rest of us.’

There was a murmur of agreement and he led the young man away.

‘But *I* wanted a bath,’ said Sybil furiously.

‘But you’re warm and dry and unlikely to get pneumonia,’ said James, in what she considered to be an unfeeling voice.

The electricity went out then.

He told everyone to stay where they were, flicked on the lighter he had produced from a pocket and asked Mrs Selby where she kept the candles.

‘In the cupboard by the sink,’ said Philly. ‘I’ll get them.’

There were oil lamps, too, in the boot room beyond the kitchen. He fetched them, lighted them, and carried one upstairs to the vicar and his charge. The people in the kitchen were surprised to hear bellows of laughter coming from the bathroom.

Philly had filled a hot water bottle, and when the Professor reappeared thrust it at him. ‘He’ll have to sleep in your bed,’ she told him, and when he nodded she went on, ‘I’ll bring blankets down here and when everyone has gone to bed you can have the sofa. You won’t mind?’

‘Not in the least. Shall I take some food up? Clive—his name’s Clive Parsons—is ready for bed.’

‘Mother has warmed some soup. Katie can bring it up—she’s the youngest. She’s been doing her homework; she’s very clever and nothing disturbs her until it’s finished. But she should be here in a minute.’

‘Homework in the dark?’ he asked.

‘She’ll be reciting Latin verbs or something. I told you she was clever.’

The professor, beginning to enjoy himself enormously, laughed, received the hot water bottle and, presently back in the kitchen, devoted himself to improving Sybil’s temper.

This was no easy task, for she had taken refuge in a cold silence, which was rather wasted as everyone else was busy relating their experiences in the snow and speculating as to what it would be like in the morning.

Presently the vicar came to join them. Katie had taken a bowl of soup with a dumpling in it up to Clive and had left him to enjoy it while they all gathered round the table.

The beef, stretched to its limits, was eked out by great mounds of mashed potatoes and more dumplings and was pronounced the best meal eaten for years. There was more tea then, and everyone helped to clear the table and wash up. Sybil’s wistful excuses that she would like to help but she had

to take care of her hands went unheeded. The professor, in his shirtsleeves, washed the dishes while Mr Downe dried them and Mrs Downe and Mrs Selby found more candles and candlesticks.

Philly had her head in the kitchen cupboard and the girls were laying the table for breakfast.

‘Porridge?’ queried Philly to the room at large. ‘For breakfast,’ she added.

There was a general murmur of agreement but Sybil said, ‘I thought porridge was what poor people in Scotland ate. I’ve never eaten it.’

The doctor said briskly, ‘Well, now will be your chance. It’s the best breakfast one can have on a cold winter’s morning.’

She glared at him. ‘If no one minds, I’ll go to bed.’

Philly gave her a hot water bottle and a candle. ‘I hope you feel better in the morning,’ she said kindly. ‘Remember about the hot water, won’t you?’

The doctor abandoned the sink for a moment and went to the door with Sybil.

He gave her a comforting pat on the shoulder. ‘You’ll feel better in the morning,’ he told her bracingly. ‘We are very lucky to have found such generous kindness.’

He smiled down kindly into her cross face, aware that the feeling he had for her at that moment wasn’t love but pity.

Sybil shook off his hand and turned to Katie, waiting to show her the way, and followed her without a word.

There had been a cheerful chorus of ‘goodnight,’ as she went, now followed by an awkward silence. The professor went back to the sink. ‘Sybil has found everything rather upsetting,’ he observed. ‘She will be fine after a good night’s sleep.’

‘Which reminds me,’ said Philly. ‘Clive’s in your bed. I’ll get some blankets and a pillow for the big sofa in the sitting room. You’re too big for it, but if you curl up you should manage.’

Everyone went thankfully to bed, leaving the professor, with one of the reverend’s woolly sweaters over his shirt, to make himself as comfortable as possible on the sofa. As he was six foot four inches in his socks, and largely built, this wasn’t easy, but he was tired; he rolled himself in the blankets and slept at once.

He opened his eyes the next morning to see Philly, wrapped in an unbecoming dressing gown, proffering tea in a mug.

Her good morning was brisk. ‘You can use the bathroom at the end of the passage facing the stairs; Father’s left a razor for you. The water isn’t very hot yet, so I’ve put a jug of boiling water on the kitchen table for you.’

He took the mug, wished her good morning, and observed, ‘You’re up early.’

‘Not just me. Rose has gone to wake the Downes, but we thought we’d better leave Clive until you’ve seen him—in case he’s not well.’

‘Very well. Give me ten minutes.’

In a minute or two he made his way through the quiet cold house. Someone had drawn the curtains back and the white world outside was revealed. At least it had stopped snowing ...

He found the bathroom, shaved with the vicar’s cut-throat razor, washed in tepid water, donned the sweater again and went to take a look at Clive.

He had recovered, except for the beginnings of a nasty head cold, and professed himself anxious to go to breakfast.

‘No reason why you shouldn’t. If you’re still anxious to get to London as soon as the road’s clear I’ll give you a lift. We can tie your bike on the roof.’

With the prospect of the weather clearing, breakfast was a cheerful meal. The porridge was eaten with enthusiasm—although Sybil nibbled toast, declaring that she hadn’t slept a wink and had no appetite. But her complaining voice was lost in the hubbub of conversation, heard only by the doctor sitting next to her.

'If the snowplough gets through we will be able to leave later today,' he told her, and then, hearing Philly saying in a worried voice that the hens would be snowed in, he volunteered to shovel a path to their shed.

So, in the vicar's wellies and with an old leather waistcoat over the sweater, he swung the shovel for a couple of hours. When he had cleared a path Philly came, completely extinguished in a cape, carrying food and water to collect the eggs. 'Enough for lunch,' she told him triumphantly.

The worst was over; the sun pushed its way through the clouds, the snowplough trundled through the village and they lunched off bacon and egg pie with a thick potato crust to conceal the fact that six eggs had been made to look like twelve.

The Downes were the first to go, driving away carefully, hopeful of reaching Basingstoke before dark. Half an hour later the doctor left, with a transformed Sybil, wrapped in her coat and skilfully made up, bestowing her gratitude on everyone.

The doctor shook hands all round and held Philly's hand for perhaps a moment longer than he should have, then ushered Sybil into the car, followed by Clive. They had roped the bike onto the roof and Clive, despite his cold, was full of gratitude to everyone. Well, not Sybil. He had taken her measure the moment he had set eyes on her, and why a decent gent like the doctor could be bothered with her he had no idea. He blew his nose loudly and watched her shudder.

The Bentley held the road nicely, but travelling at a safe speed they wouldn't reach London before dark. The doctor settled behind the wheel and wished that they had been forced to spend a second night at the vicarage, although he wasn't sure why.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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