



Romantic Encounter (Best of Betty Neels)

By Betty Neels

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Editorial Review

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. 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. Her spirit and genuine talent live on in all her stories.

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Florence, cleaning the upstairs windows of the vicarage, heard the car coming up the lane and, when it slowed, poked her head over the top sash to see whom it might be. The elegant dark grey Rolls-Royce, sliding to a halt before her father's front door, was unexpected enough to cause her to lean her splendid person even further out of the window so that she might see who was in it. The passenger got out and she recognised him at once. Mr Wilkins, the consultant surgeon she had worked for before she had left the hospital in order to look after her mother and run the house until she was well again—a lengthy business of almost a year. Perhaps he had come to see if she was ready to return to her ward; unlikely, though, for it had been made clear to her that her post would be filled and she would have to take her chance at getting whatever was offered if she wanted to go to work at Colbert's again; besides, a senior consultant wouldn't come traipsing after a ward sister...

The driver of the car was getting out, a very tall, large man with pepper and salt hair. He stood for a moment, looking around him, waiting for Mr Wilkins to join him, and then looked up at her. His air of amused surprise sent her back inside again, banging her head as she went, but she was forced to lean out again when Mr Wilkins caught sight of her and called up to her to come down and let them in.

There was no time to do more than wrench the clean duster off her fiery hair. She went down to the hall and opened the door.

Mr Wilkins greeted her jovially. 'How are you after all these months?' he enquired; he eyed the apron bunched over an elderly skirt and jumper. 'I do hope we haven't called at an inconvenient time?'

Florence's smile was frosty. 'Not at all, sir, we are spring-cleaning.'

Mr Wilkins, who lived in a house with so many gadgets that it never needed spring-cleaning, looked interested. 'Are you really? But you'll spare us a moment to talk, I hope? May I introduce Mr Fitzgibbon?' He turned to his companion. 'This is Florence Napier.'

She offered a rather soapy hand and had it engulfed in his large one. His, 'How do you do?' was spoken gravely, but she felt that he was amused again, and no wonder—she must look a fright.

Which, of course, she did, but a beautiful fright; nothing could dim the glory of her copper hair, tied back carelessly with a boot-lace, and nothing could detract from her lovely face and big blue eyes with their golden lashes. She gave him a cool look and saw that his eyes were grey and intent, so she looked away quickly and addressed herself to Mr Wilkins.

'Do come into the drawing-room. Mother's in the garden with the boys, and Father's writing his sermon. Would you like to have some coffee?'

She ushered them into the big, rather shabby room, its windows open on to the mild April morning. 'Do sit down,' she begged them. 'I'll let Mother know that you're here and fetch in the coffee.'

'It is you we have come to see, Florence,' said Mr Wilkins.

'Me? Oh, well—all the same, I'm sure Mother will want to meet you.'

She opened the old-fashioned window wide and jumped neatly over the sill with the unselfconsciousness of a child, and Mr Fitzgibbon's firm mouth twitched at the corners. 'She's very professional on the ward,' observed Mr Wilkins, 'and very neat. Of course, if she's cleaning the house I suppose she gets a little untidy.'

Mr Fitzgibbon agreed blandly and then stood up as Florence returned, this time with her mother and using the door. Mrs Napier was small and slim and pretty, and still a little frail after her long illness. Florence made the introductions, settled her mother in a chair and went away to make the coffee.

'Oo's that, then?' asked Mrs Buckett, who came up twice a week from the village to do the rough, and after years of faithful service considered herself one of the family.

'The surgeon I worked for at Colbert's—and he's brought a friend with him.' 'What for?'

'I've no idea. Be a dear and put the kettle on while I lay a tray. I'll let you know as soon as I can find out.'

While the kettle boiled she took off her apron, tugged the jumper into shape and poked at her hair. 'Not that it matters,' she told Mrs Buckett. 'I looked an absolute frump when they arrived.'

'Go on with yer, love—you couldn't look a frump if you tried. Only yer could wash yer 'ands.'

Florence had almost decided that she didn't like Mr Fitzgibbon, but she had to admit that his manners were nice. He got up and took the tray from her and didn't sit down again until she was sitting herself. His bedside manner would be impeccable.

They drank their coffee and made small talk, but not for long. Her mother put her cup down and got to her feet. 'Mr Wilkins tells me that he wants to talk to you, Florence, and I would like to go back to the garden and see what the boys are doing with the cold frame.'

She shook hands and went out of the room, and they all sat down again.

'Your mother is well enough for you to return to work, Florence?'

'Yes. Dr Collins saw her a few days ago. I must find someone to come in for an hour or two each day, but I must find a job first.' She saw that Mr Wilkins couldn't see the sense of that, but Mr Fitzgibbon had understood at once, although he didn't speak.

'Yes, yes, of course,' said Mr Wilkins briskly. 'Well, I've nothing for you, I'm afraid, but Mr Fitzgibbon has.'

'I shall need a nurse at my consulting-rooms in two weeks' time. I mentioned it to Mr Wilkins, and he remembered you and assures me that you would suit me very well.'

What about you suiting me? reflected Florence, and went a little pink because he was staring at her in that amused fashion again, reading her thoughts. 'I don't know anything about that sort of nursing,' she said, 'I've always worked in hospital; I'm not sure—'

'Do not imagine that the job is a sinecure. I have a large practice and I operate in a number of hospitals, specialising in chest surgery. My present nurse accompanies me and scrubs for the cases, but perhaps you don't feel up to that?'

'I've done a good deal of Theatre work, Mr Fitzgibbon,' said Florence, nettled.

'In that case, I think that you might find the job interesting. You would be free at the weekends, although I should warn you that I am occasionally called away at such times and you would need to hold yourself in readiness to accompany me. My rooms are in Wimpole Street, and Sister Brice has lodgings close by. I suppose you might take them over if they suited you. As to salary.'

He mentioned a sum which caused her pretty mouth to drop open.

'That's a great deal more—'

'Of course it is; you would be doing a great deal more work and your hours will have to fit in with mine.'

'This nurse who is leaving,' began Florence.

'To get married.' His voice was silky. 'She has been with me for five years.' He gave her a considered look. 'Think it over and let me know. I'll give you a ring tomorrow—shall we say around three o'clock?'

She had the strong feeling that if she demurred at that he would still telephone then, and expect her to answer, too. 'Very well, Mr Fitzgibbon,' she said in a non-committal voice, at the same time doing rapid and rather inaccurate sums in her head; the money would be a godsend—there would be enough to pay for extra help at the vicarage, they needed a new set of saucepans, and the washing-machine had broken down again.

She bade the two gentlemen goodbye, smiling nicely at Mr Wilkins, whom she liked, and giving Mr Fitzgibbon a candid look as she shook hands. He was very good-looking, with a high-bridged nose and a determined chin and an air of self-possession. He didn't smile as he said goodbye.

Not an easy man to get to know, she decided, watching the Rolls sweep through the vicarage gate.

When she went back indoors her mother had come in from the garden.

'He looked rather nice,' she observed, obviously following a train of thought. 'Why did he come, Florence?'

'He wants a nurse for his practice—a private one, I gather. Mr Wilkins recommended me.'

'How kind, darling. Just at the right moment, too. It will save you hunting around the hospitals and places...'

'I haven't said I'd take it, Mother.'

'Why not, love? I'm very well able to take over the household again—is the pay very bad?'

'It's very generous. I'd have to live in London, but I'd be free every weekend unless I was wanted—Mr Fitzgibbon seems to get around everywhere rather a lot; he specialises in chest surgery.'

'Did Mr Wilkins offer you your old job back, darling?'

'No. There's nothing for me at Colbert's...'

'Then, Florence, you must take this job. It will make a nice change and you'll probably meet nice people.' It was one of Mrs Napier's small worries that her beautiful daughter seldom met men—young men, looking for a wife—after all, she was five and twenty and, although the housemen at the hospital took her out, none of them, as far as she could make out, was of the marrying kind—too young and no money. Now, a nice older man, well established and able to give Florence all the things she had had to do without... Mrs Napier enjoyed a brief daydream.

'Is he married?' she asked.

'I have no idea, Mother. I should think he might be—I mean, he's not a young man, is he?' Florence, collecting coffee-cups, wasn't very interested. 'I'll talk to Father. It might be a good idea if I took the job for a time until there's a vacancy at Colbert's or one of the top teaching hospitals. I don't want to g...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Deborah Beaudry:

Playing with family within a park, coming to see the sea world or hanging out with friends is thing that usually you may have done when you have spare time, and then why you don't try matter that really opposite from that. A single activity that make you not sensation tired but still relaxing, trilling like on roller coaster you already been ride on and with addition details. Even you love Romantic Encounter (Best of Betty Neels), you are able to enjoy both. It is excellent combination right, you still desire to miss it? What kind of hang-out type is it? Oh occur its mind hangout fellas. What? Still don't buy it, oh come on its named reading friends.

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