



## At Odds with Love (Best of Betty Neels)

By *Betty Neels*

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When Jane needed help, she was amazed that it was the charismatic surgeon Nikolaas van der Vollenhove who tore himself away from his busy schedule to come to her rescue. A renowned workaholic, it was obvious that he had no time for anything—or anyone—in his life. Which was why his marriage proposal came as such a shock. Just why exactly did he want Jane for his wife, if it wasn't for love?

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## **At Odds with Love (Best of Betty Neels) By Betty Neels Bibliography**

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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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The October afternoon was drawing to a misty close and the last rays of the sun, shining through the latticed window, highlighted the russet hair of the young woman sitting by it. It shone upon her lovely face too and gave her green eyes an added sparkle as she stared out at the garden beyond, the knitting in her lap forgotten for the moment.

It was quiet in the room save for the faint ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the sighing breaths of the old lady in the bed as she dozed. It was a pleasant room, low-ceilinged, its walls papered in an old-fashioned pattern of flowers, the furniture for the most part ponderous Victorian; the small person in the bed was dwarfed by her surroundings, perched up against her pillows. She stirred presently and the girl got up and went to the bedside.

'You've had a nice nap, Granny. If you're quite comfortable I'll go and get the tea-tray.' She had a charming voice and she spoke cheerfully. 'I'll light a lamp, shall I?' And when the old lady nodded, she added, 'It's a beautiful evening—I do love this time of year.'

The old lady smiled and nodded again and the girl went away, down to the kitchen of the rambling old house where Bessy the housekeeper was making the tea. She looked up as the girl went in.

'Ad a nap, 'as she? The dear soul—wore out, she must be.' She put a plate of wafer-thin bread and butter on the tray. 'And time you 'as a bit of fresh air, Miss Jane. I'll sit with 'er while you take a turn round the garden when you've had your tea.'

Jane leaned across the table and cut a slice of bread, buttered it lavishly and said thickly through a mouthful, 'Thank you, Bessy. I'll take Bruno and Percy and Simpkin with me—just for ten minutes or so.'

She gobbled up the rest of her bread and butter and picked up the tray. She was a tall girl with a splendid shape, dressed rather carelessly in a cotton blouse, a well-worn cardigan and a long wide skirt.

The housekeeper eyed her as she went to the door. 'You didn't ought ter look so shabby.' She spoke with the freedom of an old and faithful servant. 'Suppose some nice young man should call?'

Jane gave a gurgle of laughter and Bessy said severely, 'Well, you may laugh, Miss Jane, but there's Dr Willoughby coming regular to see your granny.'

'He is an engaged man, Bessy, and several inches shorter than I am.'

She went back upstairs to heave the old lady gently up against her pillows and give her her tea. She would eat nothing, though, and Jane thought that she looked paler than usual.

'feel all right, Granny?' she asked casually.

'A little tired, dear. Have you seen to Bruno and the cats?'

'I'm going to take them into the garden presently and give them their supper. They're all splendid.' She added in what she hoped sounded like an afterthought, 'Dr Willoughby might be coming this evening instead of tomorrow...'

'A nice young man. A pity he's going to marry. He would have done very well for you, Jane. You're twenty-seven and you've given up a good nursing career to look after me here, buried in the country.'

'I like being here,' protested her granddaughter. 'I like the country and I haven't met a man I want to marry yet.'

'Though you've had your chances...?'

'Well, yes, I dare say I'm fussy.' She rearranged the pillows as Bessy came into the room. 'There now—I'm off to see to the animals.'

Only when she got downstairs she went to the phone first and dialled Dr Willoughby and asked him to come and see her grandmother. 'I don't think she's any worse, but I'm uneasy...'

She saw to the cats and Bruno next. Bruno was a corgi and the cats were both ginger, one middle-aged and dignified and the other much younger, with eyes as green as Jane's and a thick ruff of fur under his chin. They all paced round the large garden in the gloom and presently went indoors to settle before the fire in the small sitting-room Jane used now that her grandmother was no longer able to come downstairs and use the big drawing-room. She had just settled them, piled companionably into one basket, when the doctor arrived and she took him upstairs.

He was a youngish man with a large country practice and he had been looking after Mrs Wesley since she first became ill. He greeted her easily and, previously prompted by Jane, observed that he had a busy day on the morrow, and, since he was passing, he had decided to pay her a visit.

He didn't stay long but checked her pulse and examined her chest as he always did, bade her a cheerful goodnight and asked Jane to go down with him. 'I have some pills which will help your breathing,' he explained.

'You were quite right,' he told Jane as she ushered him into the sitting-room. 'Mrs Wesley isn't so well and I suspect a small pulmonary embolism. Will you allow me to call in a specialist? Nowadays it is possible to operate and remove the clot—I know it's a grave risk because of your grandmother's age, but at least we shall have taken the best advice possible.'

'Oh, please—do whatever you think is best. Can he come quickly, this specialist?'

'He's a busy man but I have met him—he was already making a name for himself when I was a houseman. He's not always in this country, though. I'll try and get hold of him this evening and let you know. Meanwhile, you know what to do for your grandmother and please don't hesitate to phone if you're worried.'

He went away, leaving Jane standing in the charming room with its slightly shabby brocade curtains and graceful Regency furniture. After a moment or two she went back upstairs, remarking as she went into Mrs Wesley's room, 'Shall I read to you? What do you feel like? Something soothing or one of your whodunnits?'

Her grandmother chuckled, a whisper of sound hardly to be heard. 'Shall we have Trollope? I suspect Dr Willoughby wouldn't want me to get too excited.'

*'Phineas Finn...'*

It was after Mrs Wesley had been settled for the night and the house was quiet that Dr Willoughby phoned. 'We shall be with you tomorrow around midday. He's a good man, the best—rest assured, if there's anything that can be done he'll do it.'

They came the next morning and Jane, as a slight concession to the consultant's visit—for she was sure that he was a worthy man and no doubt aware of that worth—put on a blue cotton sweater over a darker blue denim skirt. She would have put her abundant hair up, only her grandmother needed more attention than usual and there wasn't time, so she brushed it hard and tied it back.

'At least you're tidy,' grumbled Bessy, 'not but what you look half your age.'

'Oh, Bessy, what does it matter how I look, if only they can do something for Granny?'

She heard Dr Willoughby's rather elderly ford coming along the drive to the house as she was putting the finishing touches to Mrs Wesley's hair; ill she might be, but the old lady still had her small vanities.

They came up the old uncarpeted staircase unhurriedly with Bessy ahead of them to open the door and usher them in, and Jane looked up expectantly. She hadn't been sure what to expect but her expectations had been coloured by the various consultants at the hospital where she had been a ward sister: older men, dignified and a little remote, made so by the knowledge that they had crammed into their heads over the years. This man, towering beside Dr Willoughby, didn't tally with her guess; he was still young, not yet forty, she judged, a giant of a man and heavily built. He was good-looking, too, with a high arched nose and a thin mouth above a determined chin, and when he was introduced as Professor van der Vollenhove he offered a large cool hand, and looked at her briefly from eyes the colour of a winter sea, pale and cold, and indifferent to her.

With her grandmother, however, it was an entirely different matter. He sat down beside her bed and talked to her in a slow, slightly accented voice and presently he set about examining her. Dr Willoughby had gone to stand by the window, and Jane, by the bed, ready to do whatever was asked of her, had ample opportunity to study the professor at close quarters.

His suit was superbly tailored, she noticed, his linen pristine, the gold cufflinks plain. She was pleased that there was no sign of baldness in his thick grizzled hair; it must have been very pale brown when he was younger. It pleased her when he said something to make her grandmother chuckle weakly and he laughed himself. He was probably quite nice when one got to know him.

She eased Mrs Wesley into a more comfortable position and stepped back from the bed. The professor was talking in a quiet voice and she couldn't hear all that he was saying, but he sounded reassuring without being hearty and her grandmother looked cheerful.

They shook hands presently, his large one engulfing her small bony one very gently, and then he got up. 'You are in very capable hands,' he observed. 'Dr Willoughby and I will have a talk and probably try out some further treatment. I will come and see you again if I may?'

Jane saw the hope in her grandmother's pale little face. 'Please do. Jane will get you coffee downstairs.' She turned to look at her. 'Run along, dear, and look after the gentlemen. I should like to rest for a little while.'

Jane led the way downstairs, ushered the two men into the drawing-room where Bessy had lighted a fire and went along to the kitchen. In answer to the housekeeper's look she said, 'They haven't told me anything yet, Bessy. I'll tell you when they do. I'll take the tray in—you pop up and make sure Granny's all right, will you?'

She poured the coffee from the silver coffee-pot into...

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