***The Art of saying ‘No!’***

 *by Veronica Heley*

 *Three old friends meet for coffee and to share problems*

‘Persistence,’ said Kerry as he sipped his espresso, ‘is usually considered a virtue.’

 Bruce, the almost-retired accountant, was bald, brown and knew a thing or two. He said, ‘But . . .? What’s the catch?’

 ‘Sorry,’ said Kerry. ‘Talking to myself. Bad habit.’ Kerry was a widower who had turned his big house into lodgings for students. His kindly, lined face and gentle ways belied the strength of his faith, and he often acted as a life raft to the youngsters under his roof.

 ‘I thought you might be referring to me,’ said big Leo, stirring yet more sugar into his hot chocolate. ‘I know we’re all three of us still working after a fashion, but you two seem to have got it sorted. Kerry has help to run his house, and Bruce doesn’t take on any more accounts than he can easily handle. I thought that when Dora and I down-sized to a flat by the shops I’d have time to spare, but the church seems to regard my being Property Steward as a life sentence. Every time I say I need to give up some of the work, they say there’s no one else to do it. Dora says I’m killing myself. She’s right. I’m beginning to lose sleep.’

 Bruce didn’t take him seriously. ‘Go away on a cruise. Lose your keys, accidentally on purpose.’

 ‘You know I can’t do that.’ Leo unwrapped a chocolate biscuit and took a bite out of it.’ Then, seeing their amusement, added, ‘Yes, I know I’m supposed to be on a diet, but I have to keep fuelling myself up to keep going.’

 Kerry shook his head, smiling, at Leo. ‘As I said, persistence is usually considered a virtue. But you could also call it obstinacy.’

 ‘If you mean me,’ said Leo, laughing, ‘Then you’re right. I keep on keeping on, but I must admit I’m looking for a way out. Dora’s got so fed up she’s threatening to go on holiday by herself.’

 ‘You’ll think of something,’ said Bruce. He looked at Kerry. ‘Now what brought the word “persistence” to mind for you?’

 ‘It’s absurd,’ said Kerry, ‘but I rather think I’m being pursued with a view to matrimony.’

 ‘What!’

 ‘You mean . . .?’

 ‘A widow who’s recently moved into the area and joined our church. She’s been giving me a lift there on Sundays.’

 Bruce was amused. ‘You think she’s after more than your company on the way to church? Does she save you a seat in church beside her?’

 Leo crowed. ‘Don’t tell me: people at church are beginning to see you as a couple?’

 ‘You may laugh,’ said Kerry, trying and failing to smile. ‘But that’s exactly what’s happening.’

 Bruce was happy in his second marriage. ‘Second time round can be very comfortable.’ He was a man who didn’t wear his heart on his sleeve. He struggled to explain. ‘After my first wife died, there was a big hole in my life till I got to know Sally. Nowadays, when I enter the front door, I feel as if I’m coming home.’ He laughed. ‘That sounds ridiculous, but you see what I mean?’

 ‘I do,’ said Kerry. ‘But I don’t get that feeling with Mrs Pargeter.’

 Leo’s dear wife was still with him, for which he gave thanks even when she nagged at him to cut down on church work. ‘Maybe this widow of yours is a good cook?’

 ‘She keeps bringing me sweet things to eat, but I prefer savouries.’ Kerry looked at his watch. ‘I must be going. It’s the birthday of one of my students and I’ve got to buy a card for her. Same time next week?’

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Kerry stopped half way up the hill to sit down on a convenient wall, and look back at the view. It was a pleasant sight in the springtime, with the yellow and pink of budding leaves forming a haze over the trees. The footballers were out in force in the distant park, and birds fluttered to and fro. Sparrows stripped crocus petals . . . he wondered why they did that . . . and in a garden nearby some daffodils formed a solid bank of gold.

 He was always amazed at the number of flower shapes and colours that God had devised. Look at the brilliant yellow of a forsythia bush over there!. How dull the world would be if colours had never been invented!

 A car chugged up the hill, and he caught his breath. Was that Mrs Pargeter, on the rampage, looking for whom she might devour?

 No, no. He scolded himself. She was a perfectly decent woman who had long ceased to mourn for her dead husband, and was on the lookout for company. The fact that her voice grated on his ears and that she thought she always knew best about everything, was neither here nor there. What was it she’d been complaining about yesterday? Hay fever, or cats? Hay fever caused by cat hairs? Perhaps both?

Kerry had been a widower long enough to understand that he enjoyed his own company and being able to spend time with God. He liked to withdraw into himself for a few moments of prayer whenever he felt like it. Other people might think him absent-minded and unworldly but he had his circle of friends and plenty of social contact with all the young people under his roof. He Skyped regularly with his daughter in New York. He had a cleaner, and a cook who came in to help him cook supper for his students several times a week. It was enough.

 He wished he hadn’t complained about Mrs Pargeter to Leo and Bruce. They had their own concerns, and didn’t need to be bothered with his.

He sighed. The fact was that he really didn’t know how to deal with the woman. She was lonely while he, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, was not.

He’d been grateful when she’d first offered him a lift to church. But he’d always enjoyed the walk there, when he could linger to admire other people’s gardens and perhaps stop for a chat with a neighbour. Now and then one or two of the students came with him, but not since Mrs Pargeter arrived. She was a non-stop chatterer. He felt as if his ears were aching when she’d been with him for a while.

She’d wanted to hear all about the hostel, and had insisted on coming in to see how he’d arranged the rooms. Ludmilla, his delightful and efficient cook, hadn’t been pleased when Mrs Pargeter had criticised the way she crimped the pastry edging of her pies. Mrs Pargeter had then suggested she could do better than Ludmilla at buying staple foods in bulk. That hadn’t gone down well, either. In fact, Ludmilla’s usual smiles had turned upside down into frowns. What would he do if Ludmilla gave in her notice? It didn’t bear thinking about.

Almost every day now Mrs Pargeter – who wanted him to call her Viola – popped in with a card, tickets for a concert or a suggestion for a drive out. It was good of her, but he was beginning to feel, well, hunted.

*Well, never mind me, Lord. Leo’s problem is far more pressing. He’ll drive his blood pressure up and suffer a stroke if he’s not careful. He needs help, but I don’t know what to say to him. Working for the church is a privilege, but being overworked is not good, is it? All suggestions welcome.*

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Bruce put his key in the lock of his front door, and relished the warmth that flowed around him as he entered. It wasn’t just the central heating, either. His dear Sally came to meet him with a kiss, her eyes bright with news.

 ‘Guess what! Your friend Kerry’s a dark horse. He’s about to get married again. Has he asked you or Leo to be his best man?’

 Bruce shed his coat. ‘Most unlikely.’

 ‘I met her in town this morning. She’s bubbling over with happiness, though she made me swear not to tell anyone – yet.’

 ‘*She* may be bubbling over with happiness, but *he* is not. Sally, this is nonsense. He has no intention of marrying again.’

 Sally hung up his coat. ‘Oh, you men are so blind! Mark my words, it’s going to happen.’

‘Sally, come and sit down. Listen to me. I know you like to see all your friends as happily married as we are, but Mrs Pargeter is not right for Kerry. No, let me finish. When I first met you—’

‘You were still grieving for your dear wife, and I was still in shock after my husband died. You rescued me, and we lived happily ever after.’

‘We had to iron out a few wrinkles, deal with each other’s priorities, but fundamentally we want the same things out of life. So when problems arise, we listen to one another, don’t we? And if we make mistakes, we soon sort them out.’

Sally put his hand to her cheek. ‘Yes, we do.’

‘Together, we have something special. You know I don’t wear my heart on my sleeve, but—'

She put her finger across his lips. ‘I know. The Valentine card you sent me this year said it all.’

He reddened, remembering the rather over-the-top message of love. ‘Hrrmph. Yes. Quite.But I am not Kerry, and you are not Mrs Pargeter.’

‘She wants me to call her Viola.’

‘Seriously, do you like her as a person?’

Sally started to speak. Stopped herself. Frowned. ‘I don’t suppose we’d ever be bosom friends. She is a bit bossy, and she never stops talking.’

‘I gathered as much. How do you think Kerry reacts to that?’

‘Ah.’ She sighed. ‘No, I suppose he wouldn’t like it. He looks so gentle and soft, but that’s just on top. He likes his peace and quiet. But everyone’s different. Look at us. We’re not exactly conventional, are we? You do the cooking and organise the cleaning, and I do the garden and tell you how wonderful you are. But perhaps she could make life at the hostel easier for him?’

‘I think she’d make his life hell.’

‘Oh.’ She thought about that. ‘Maybe he has such a fondness for her, that he can overlook her faults? She’d run the hostel efficiently, wouldn’t she?’

‘Would a woman like that listen to students’ problems, console them when they are unhappy, and agonise with them when they got into trouble or lost someone they loved? Would she pray with them, and for them, and be firm with them when they strayed?’

Sally rubbed his hand with fingers roughened by gardening. ‘If he loves her, he won’t mind. Either way, I don’t see that we can interfere.’ She looked out of the window. ‘I want to start cutting the winter jasmine back now, before tea. You don’t mind, do you?’

He stayed where he was after she’d disappeared into the garden. Was Sally right, and they ought not to interfere?

*Dear Lord, lord of love. I thank you for giving me such a warm, loving wife. I thank you for the serenity of a home in which we can have differences of opinion but respect what the other one says. I thank you for the friends you have given me. Both Kerry and Leo have problems. We all go to church, we all pray. If you want me to do more than pray, perhaps you’ll give me a sign?*

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Leo got home to find his wife sitting at a table, and looking at holiday brochures. She waved a couple at him. ‘I fancy Italy in June and a tour of the Greek Islands in September. Or shall I take a journey through Europe on the Orient Express?’

 Leo sat down opposite her. ‘How ever many holidays are you proposing to take?’

 ‘We didn’t have a holiday at all last year, what with the move and all. I rather fancy Lanzarote, but they say there’s a nice tourist side and I can’t remember whether it’s north or south. Or is that Tenerife?’ She gathered all the brochures together, and tapped them into a neat pile. ‘It’s up to you, Leo. I don’t seem to be able to stop you killing yourself, so I might as well act as if I were a widow already, and take holidays by myself.’

 ‘I *am* trying to cut down.’

 ‘I’ve heard that before. Several times. It’s up to you. Choose.’

 ‘I can’t let the church down.’

 ‘My mother used to say that charity begins at home. First put your own home to rights and then, if you’ve time over, give it to the church.’

 She pushed the phone towards him. ‘You’ve got to learn how to say “no”. Ring the chief steward now, and tell him you’ve had enough.’ She walked out, leaving him alone with the phone.

 Leo knew she was right. But . . .

 *Dear Lord above, show me what to do. Is it obstinacy on my part to hang on to my keys? I thought You wanted me to keep busy for you. There’s no one else available to do it. What will happen to the church if I resign? What’s more, it’s given me a measure of importance in the community.*

 *Ah, that’s pride speaking, isn’t it? If I’m doing it to look big in other people’s eyes, then I’m doing it for the wrong reason.*

*But who will take my place? Ah, but who will take my place if I kill myself from overwork?*

He rang the chief steward. ‘I’m sorry to give you bad news, but I’m resigning as Property Manager.’

‘You can’t!’

‘Yes, I can. It’s too much work for one person. You’ll have to find a committee member to take overall responsibility, and employ a part-time caretaker to do the nitty gritty.’

‘But . . .!’

Leo put the phone down, very gently. And heaved a sigh of relief.

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Bruce took Sally to the garden centre at least once a month. Today he made a beeline for the cafe while she went around with her trolley, selecting plants to buy. To Bruce’s surprise, he found Kerry in the cafe before him. ‘I’ve never seen you here before. I thought your garden was all grass and shrubs.’

 ‘I wanted to price a barbecue for the garden this summer. I came on the bus, door to door, practically. Is Sally with you?’

‘Why else would I be here? We can give you a lift back if Sally doesn’t completely fill the car with plants. I see you’ve got yourself a coffee. Fancy another?’

Kerry indicated his espresso. ‘I’m fine as I am, thanks.’

Bruce bought a cappuccino and took it to Kerry’s table, thinking that this was too good an opportunity to miss. He took a mouthful of coffee, and sat back. ‘There’s a rumour going around about you and Mrs Pargeter. Have you heard it?’

Kerry shook his head.

‘Second time around has been pretty good for me.’

‘Not for me.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘I’m sure. I’ve tried hinting. It doesn’t work. I hate to hurt her feelings, but I’m getting desperate. I came out here today because she wanted to take me shopping in town.’

Bruce thought he’d said enough. It was time to change the subject. ‘Did you find a barbecue you liked?’

‘All too expensive. You heard about Leo resigning?’

‘He’s kept that church building going, practically single-handed, for the last year.’

‘The stewards are calling a meeting to talk it over. They put a lot of pressure on him to stay on, but he said Dora had put her foot down and not given him any choice in the matter. I must say, he looks ten years younger now he’s made the decision.’

Sally arrived with her trolley full of plants, and kissed Kerry. ‘Lovely to see you, and yes, I know I’m buying too much, but I can’t resist. Just look what I’ve found!’ She handed Kerry a pack of gladioli. ‘Gardening’s such a delight, isn’t it? Who’d think that those tatty-looking brown lumps will produce such splendour in the summer? Those are yellow, Golden something. And those dead-looking roots are Golden Rod. I love yellow flowers.’

Kerry smiled. *Lord, how great thou art! From these dead-looking objects, great beauty arises. Death is not the end, but the beginning. As it was with you. The grave could not hold you. Glory, alleluia.*

He said, ‘Yellow and gold. What would the world do without yellow and gold?’

Bruce poked some big bulbs. *‘*What are those?’

‘Lilies,’ said Sally. ‘I plan to put them in the big planters outside the front door.’

Kerry frowned.  *Did I read somewhere that lily pollen poisons cats? Cats? Now, why didn’t I think of a cat?* He said, ‘I’d love a lift home, if you can squeeze me into the car, Bruce. Do you think you might drop round by the Cats’ Protection League on the way? If I can’t have a barbecue to entertain my students with in the summer, perhaps I could adopt a cat.’

Sally said, ‘Wouldn’t you rather have a dog?’

‘No, no. We always had a cat about the house when I was growing up, but my dear wife couldn’t abide them, so I forgot what a blessing they can be. Only, now I realise that a cat is exactly what I want.’

Bruce warned, ‘A cat that needs special diets or medical attention may end up costing you more than a barbecue.’

‘Not if I take out pet insurance. That’s the thing to do, isn’t it?’

Bruce and Sally exchanged glances. ‘Of course. Do you want a kitten, or a house-trained older cat?’

‘I’ll know when I see him.’

The cattery had a ginger tom with golden eyes, about six years old. His owner had gone into care and couldn’t keep him any longer. His name was Peter.

Peter and Kerry inspected one another.

Kerry smiled. ‘This is the one for me. I’d forgotten how much I like cats.’

Peter sniffed at Kerry’s outstretched fingers, jumped up onto his knees and settled down.

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Peter loved his new home, and within hours had become an object of adoration for the students, who vied with one another to pet him. Not that he was against being petted, but he knew who loved him most and he found his way up to Kerry’s flat whenever he wanted food or company.

 Mrs Pargeter started to sneeze as she pushed her way in through the front door. Peter was sitting on the stairs, giving himself a wash and brush up.

 ‘A cat!’ Mrs Pargeter screamed. ‘Get him out of here! Aaaatishoo!’

 ‘Oh, dear,’ said Kerry. ‘I’ll shut him in the kitchen till you’ve gone, shall I?’

 ‘I can’t abide cats!’ Mrs Pargeter’s eyes were streaming. ‘He’ll have to be put down.’

 ‘I’m afraid he’s here to stay,’ said Kerry. And then, because he’d known from the beginning that Mrs Pargeter was allergic to cat hairs, he tried to let her down gently. ‘I’m afraid I’m a great disappointment to you. Too old and set in my ways to appreciate what a fine woman you are.’

 Exit Mrs Pargeter, vowing never to set foot in his house again.

 On Easter morning the three friends went to church, to marvel anew at the miracle of Christ’s resurrection.

Bruce, from the bottom of his heart, thanked God for His many blessings.

Leo, who planned to go on holiday with his wife the following week, thanked God for His guidance. Members of his church were dividing up the duties he’d carried for so long. He rejoiced because he had the risen Christ in his life.

Kerry was content. *From darkness and despair to light and joy. Alleluia.*