

***Because
of a
Parrakeet***

Beatrice Redpath

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Because of a Parrakeet

*What are you to do if one person,
and one person alone, makes you
dizzy with happiness, by just being
near? This was Nancy's problem.*

By BEATRICE REDPATH

ILLUSTRATED BY RALPH PALLEN COLEMAN

A large grey touring car slipped around the corner, purring softly like a cat. A girl in an orange colored sweater leaned out and waved a friendly hand to the man with Nancy Grant. Color came into his face. He was obviously embarrassed. Nancy turned from watching the car that was being swiftly swallowed in a cloud of dust, and noticed his embarrassment with a shock.

"I didn't know that you knew Elsa Cartwright," she said, wonderingly.

"She comes into the bank often. That's a splendid car, isn't it? It's a new one, bought last week."

What a casual manner! It was almost, yes, almost as though he did not want to speak about Elsa Cartwright, to her. But that was too ridiculous. He could not know the Cartwrights well. It was the first intimation that he knew them at all. She looked curiously at Hugh from beneath the brim of her hat.

The flush had receded from his face, but he avoided her eyes. She felt a sharp twinge of surprise, amusement—but was it altogether amusement?

It was natural that Hugh should have met Elsa Cartwright in the bank, but why this curious embarrassment? She could not understand. A girl like Elsa Cartwright would never bother herself about the teller in the bank at Medford! She would want someone measurably more important than that.



"I've been such a cur, Nancy. . . ."

Hugh puzzled her. She was so much older than he, except in the matter of years, so much wiser about life. She knew that some women loved best when they could feel a protecting tenderness towards their man. That was how she felt for Hugh. She did not look up to him. She did not even admire him. But she loved him. She was sure of that; in spite of certain weaknesses of which she was aware.

Sometimes she had even wished she did not love him. It would be easier to love where you admired and respected. But if you loved for no particular reason, but just because that person, and that person alone, could start a little fountain bubbling inside of you, and make you feel little shivers of happiness whenever he came into a room, why, you *had* to love.

She looked ahead of her, down the long street that was splashed with sun and shadow. Tall elms arched far overhead, shutting out the bright blue blaze of the sky. At the street's end she could see the line of the lake, silver in the sun, a shimmering ribbon drawn across the horizon. Women sat on their front porches, sewing or knitting. An occasional man, in shirt sleeves, pushed a lawn mower over his neat square of lawn. Nancy nodded and smiled to most of them, while several called to inquire if her mother had recovered from her bad cold.



“such a miserable cur,” said Hugh in a voice that threatened to break.

“Oh, she’s quite well again, thank you, Mrs. Hoskins. She’s coming over to see you soon.”

But Nancy’s manner was preoccupied. She was thinking of something altogether different. Was Hugh embarrassed because Elsa Cartwright had seen him walking with her, or because she had seen Elsa Cartwright wave to him in an intimate manner. She did not know.

The Cartwrights came to Medford for the summer months. Their wide spreading house with its many verandas and carefully hedged lawns, was a mile out of town. They always brought a house party with them, and had a succession of summer visitors, which made them independent of the people in Medford. To one large dance during the season, the entire town

was invited, indiscriminately. For the rest of the time the Medford people were never invited to the house. The Cartwrights quite obviously did not belong to Medford.

Elsa Cartwright, the only daughter, was in her early twenties, a small, vivid person, with flashing eyes and teeth. She made Nancy think of some bright-colored, tropical bird. She had black hair which she brushed into a smooth black cap on her head. Her cheeks were touched with bright color. Nancy sensed that Hugh would be considerably impressed by Elsa Cartwright's looks, and the atmosphere of wealth surrounding her. But she could not imagine Elsa Cartwright being bothered with Hugh. A teller in the bank, with a tiny salary, would not be worth her while, even for the amusement of a passing flirtation.

Surely Hugh was not such a goose that he could be flattered by any slight attention that she might have paid him, in the bank. Nancy felt a stab of jealousy as she wondered what would happen if Elsa Cartwright actually took a fancy to Hugh. It was hideous that she should have any such doubts and fears about the man whom she was to marry. But she had them—horrid, black doubts, that crept insidiously across the face of the sun, and blotted out all the color of life.

Sometimes it surprised her that Hugh should care for her at all. She was so mouse colored—mouse colored hair, and grey, grey eyes. She had none of Elsa Cartwright's quick charm. Her frocks were queer little things that she herself made out of a few yards of material, bought at a summer or a mid-winter sale. She did not see how he could love her much; but he had told her so often that he did, she was forced to believe him.

Oh! she must push the thought of Elsa Cartwright from her mind. It was stupid to let it spoil this sparkling afternoon.

“Hugh, I've a splendid piece of news. Uncle Archie is going to send us a cheque to buy our furniture. We can get the rug we wanted, and the table with the lions carved on the legs, and the darling little tea set. Oh, aren't you glad, Hugh? Say you're glad.”

A slightly morose expression veiled Hugh's features.

“If I don't get an increase soon,” he said, in a dry, empty voice, “we can't possibly be married in the Autumn.”

Nancy's eye lashes flew wide apart. She stared at him in bewilderment. Why—why, there had never been any question about postponing their wedding until he got an increase. Hugh had been saving money for the

furniture. It had been hard to save, and she had found that she had expensive tastes, when she had been so sure that she had such simple ones. But, now, Uncle Archie's cheque would make everything easy.

A dazed doubt made her look at Hugh penetratingly. He was paying no attention to her. He was staring across the street with that unfamiliar expression. The Cartwright's motor was drawn up at a shop, across the road. Nancy took a long, soft breath.

"I didn't know that you expected an increase," she said in a sober voice, "you had one such a short time ago."

"Well, if they don't consider I'm worth more than they are paying me, I'll get out of the bank. Other men get positions where they can make more in a week than I make in a year. There's no reason why I shouldn't get something decent, is there?"

It was queer to hear Hugh talking like this. She could not understand him. All her joy was evaporating, like dew under a hot sun. She felt dry, shrivelled up, with no pleasure left in anything.

"No, I suppose not," she said, hating his tone of lofty defiance. It was silly, oh so silly. And, then, all at once she felt immensely sorry for him. Hugh was not particularly clever. It must be hard to see other men succeeding, because of brains or influence, or because of some fantastic piece of luck.

She would be content to live in Medford, in the house that they had picked out, with the queer red roof that dipped almost to the ground on one side, and the tiny leaded windows, stuck in just anywhere. Hugh was all she wanted, to have him always beside her. But perhaps having her was not enough to satisfy him. She had not thought of that before.

"It's hard to get the kind of positions you mean without luck or influence," she said, careful not to add "brains."

"Perhaps I have some influence," he retorted, his chin up, a swaggering bravado in his tone.

She looked at him speculatively.

"I suppose you mean the Cartwrights?"

"What if I do? Mr. Cartwright is connected with all sorts of things. It would be easy for him to get me in somewhere."

“I didn’t even know that you knew them. Do you know the whole family?”

“I’ve been there a number of times.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He gave his head an impatient toss.

“Oh, I knew what you and everyone else in Medford thinks of them. You think they’re too gay, too fast; all that sort of thing. It makes me tired. Just because they know how to live. Most of the people in Medford are so narrow they could slip through a key-hole. If anyone shows a bit of life, why . . .”

He finished with a contemptuous shrug.

She was quiet for a moment. What a horrible afternoon. And it had started out to be so gay, so happy.

“It seems funny you never told me you went there when they seem such friends of yours. That’s all I meant to say. I don’t think they are too gay. I’m sure they’re awfully nice. But I’m sure they’d probably find Medford dull. We have to spend such a lot of time thinking about stupid things that they never have to think about.”

“That’s true enough. They don’t talk about making jam or cutting out frocks, as though it were of national importance.”

“I don’t suppose they talk about it at all.”

“They don’t.”

Nancy winced at his tone. It was almost rude. How queer he was to-day. It was almost as though he were angry with her for being poor; or was it for some other reason? She wondered.

“I’m going there to play bridge to-night,” he said casually.

“To-night?” she echoed, faintly. Then he did not remember that he had been going to take her on the river? Well, it did not matter. She walked some distance without speaking. The sunlight had become a wide yellow blur. She felt strongly inert. Everything in the world she cared about was slipping, slipping away in front of her, and she couldn’t move—she couldn’t even stretch out her hand to keep it.

“They don’t play the kind of bridge we play in Medford,” his voice sounded remote as though he were speaking to her over a long distance

telephone. “You have to keep your mind on the game. The other night I had wonderful luck. I won’t tell you what I won.”

She looked at him, startled. She had not thought of that before. He saw her expression and laughed with easy confidence.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about me. I wasn’t born yesterday. Besides, I’m lucky at cards. If I want to get a position from old Cartwright, it’s worth it even if I did lose a month’s salary. You’ve got to take chances in life, or you’ll never arrive anywhere. I’ve always plodded along in a rut. I’m sick of it. I’m not going to do it any more.”

Did he not know that he was not big enough to leave the rut? How could she tell him? She looked at him wistfully. She hated that over-confident tone, but she was not going to preach to him. She was not going to begin by interfering; she did not believe in it. One had to go one’s own way in life, she could not live his life for him. But in that moment—she wished that she did not love him.

She wished it many times during the next few weeks. She saw little of him. When she did see him he was either gay and sure of himself, or morose and preoccupied. It was not Hugh at all, as she had known him. It was like talking to a stranger. She felt, too, that nothing she spoke of interested him. He never mentioned their wedding in the Autumn. Apparently he considered it postponed until he had found a better position. She did not know and she would not ask. Then one day, she had not seen him for more than a week, she wrote him the briefest of notes breaking off their engagement.

She half expected that he would come to her immediately, and beg her to reconsider what she had written. She was so sure that he would come that she had already planned in her mind exactly how she would answer him. She would be a little cold and formal at first, gradually softening, until, at last, she was held close in his arms. But the days piled up, and he did not come.

It was finished, then? She tried to make herself believe that she did not care about him any more, but nothing seemed to have any purpose or meaning. What was she living for? Just to get up and look at her sad little face in the mirror, and then go through a lot of mechanical movements throughout the day, until she crept back into her small white room, that was filled with dead dreams. Oh, she knew that she loved him, and she pondered, wonderingly, how little admiration had to do with love.

She met him on the street several times. He acknowledged her bow, stiffly, and passed on without speaking. That was the hardest thing to forgive.

“I’d hate him,” Babs Davidson said fiercely once when they had met Hugh and he had given Nancy that wooden bow.

“What are you to do if you can’t?”

“I don’t see how you can do anything else.”

How little Babs knew.

“I’m glad that you’re not going to marry him. I used to see them pass our house every day. That was before you knew anything about it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Babs?”

“I hate telling disagreeable things. I thought you’d get tired of him, and then you wouldn’t care. And here you are, caring still. It’s beyond me.”

“*She’s* so pretty, she’s like a gorgeous little parrakeet with wonderful plumage.”

“She wouldn’t be pretty if she didn’t have her plumage. Nancy, you’re coming to the dance? You’re not going to be stupid about that?”

“I’m coming.”

“You’ll have the most wonderful time.”

Nancy almost laughed. A wonderful time! She wondered if she would ever have “a wonderful time” again. But she had to go on with life somehow; she had to take an interest in things again. Hugh would be there—she would see him—and that would be something. Oh, yes, that *would* be something.

She tried to steel herself to a cool indifference the night of the dance, and she did manage to enjoy herself the earlier part of the evening, up to a certain point. The long spreading lawns that dipped to the lake were dotted with Chinese lanterns, that swung like solemn red and yellow moons from every tree. Gay dance music floated out into the gray and silver garden like sharp splashes of bright color. Across the lake a reluctant moon shone through a mist. Voices and laughter drifted from the shadow of the trees, where hammocks were slung, and cushions tossed down upon the velvety grass.

Nancy caught glimpses during the evening of Hugh dancing with Elsa Cartwright, who was more than ever like a brilliant tropical bird, carrying a huge orange feather fan, a spray of the exotic feathers in her black hair. When Hugh was not dancing with Elsa he stood about on the verandas with a group of men, never glancing at Nancy even when she passed close beside him. But she did not want him to look at her or speak to her; it would be empty and purposeless.

She grew tired of dancing in the long rooms with their glazed yellow floors, which caught the reflection of the lights that winked and twinkled behind hanging crystal globes; tired of watching Hugh's fair head lowered to that small dark head with the flaming feather.

She asked her partner to take her into the garden and they strolled down to a small summerhouse at the far end, beside which a fountain, like a spire of fretted crystal, was spangling the darkness with diamond spray.

"Let me get you an ice," her partner said, persuasively, as she sat down in the cool darkness of the summerhouse. "I'll be back in a minute."

She was glad for him to leave her a few moments—glad to be by herself. Her face felt as though it must crack from the forced smile she had worn all evening. She sat pleating the filmy grey material of her dress into tiny pleats, and listening to the soft splashing of the fountain; trying not to think; trying so hard not to feel.

Men had told her that she was looking pretty. What did it matter how she looked when Hugh did not see her? She was only a grey mouse. Hugh wanted someone brilliant, someone gay and sparkling, someone with close black hair and restless black eyes.

Silly Hugh! Did he not know, oh, did he not know that love was not a valueless thing to be thrown away, tossed upon the rubbish heap as though of no value?

Two figures passed near and stopped opposite the sparkling fountain. Nancy could see dimly through the interlacing branches of the vine that cloaked the summerhouse, the shimmer of a girl's dress, and a man's tall figure. She could hear the murmur of voices and she wondered if she should let them know that she was there. Her partner would be returning in a moment and then they could move away.

A sudden sharp laugh sounded from the girl in the shimmering dress.

"Don't be ridiculous," the voice was thin, scornful, "you don't really suppose that I would marry *you*."

Nancy felt a heat rush all over her body. Her cheeks flamed with a curious shame—shame for Hugh—oh, shame for Hugh. It was Hugh out there beside the fountain, still murmuring in that passionate low voice, while a thin trickle of laughter came from the girl. How she hated her now, that little parrakeet, with her brilliant orange feathers, and her slow moving fan.

Some days after the dance she saw Hugh walking along the street with some horrid looking men. His face was unusually flushed, and there was a strange disorder about his clothes. He avoided her eyes, lifting his hat as though he were not thinking of what he was doing. What had happened to make him look like that? Why was he walking with those men? Did he not care, any more, about anything; was he going to sink down and down? Hugh was so easily influenced. And if he had chosen these men as his companions—oh, she couldn't understand it.

What could she do about it? Nothing! He did not want to speak to her or look at her. Was he feeling bitter because Elsa Cartwright had laughed at his love-making? She supposed that was the matter. Now he would be reckless, and she would be unable to stop him. He would say it was none of her business to interfere, if she were to try and give him any advice. But it *was* her business, because she loved him. Love made him belong to her, in spite of what he might think.

She lay in the hammock that evening, thinking of Hugh and of what a miserable tangle he had made of it all. She could hear her father reading the evening paper to her mother, inside. She could hear the continuous rustling of the newspaper, and then her father's voice drifted through the open windows.

“Here's another bank clerk who has shot himself. By the way, Mary, I was talking to Herron in the bank to-day. It made me feel well satisfied that Nancy's engagement to young MacNair is broken. Herron says the boy has been playing for pretty high stakes lately at the Cartwrights. He thinks MacNair has got in beyond his depth.”

“You don't mean, Frank, that Mr. Herron thinks that Hugh has taken money from the bank?”

“Well, he's having the inspectors to go over the books to-morrow.”

“Frank, that's dreadful.”

“Well, I'm glad our child isn't engaged to him, any more. That's all that concerns me. Of course I'm sorry for MacNair, but I'm afraid he's got no

backbone. Anyone can influence him. It's too bad, for he's an attractive young devil."

"I'm afraid he's been foolish. The hard part is that Nancy still cares for him in spite of everything. She'll feel this terribly."

"Nonsense, my dear, perfect nonsense. Why, she went off to the dance the other night as gay as a little lark. She's forgotten all about MacNair. Girls of twenty don't break their hearts as easily as that."

Nancy sat bolt upright, straining her hands together in her lap. Every word that her father had said was like a piece of ice falling with a cold thud on her heart. Was Hugh really in trouble? She started to her feet, trembling. What was that about a bank clerk shooting himself? Suppose Hugh did the same—suppose he shot himself—because he could not find a way out of his troubles, and he did not care what became of him. She held to the ropes of the hammock; sick and dizzy.

She had that cheque which Uncle Archie had insisted upon sending. It was up-stairs in the white ivory box on her dressing table. She could get it, and—well, what then? How could she get it to Hugh, and if she did, how could she make him take it? The inspectors were coming to-morrow. Any thing that was done must be done at once.

She moved slowly towards the door, trying to think what she could do. She could get the cheque anyway, and she went flying up the stairs to her room. She found the cheque, and slipped it inside the ribbon around her waist. Then she went slowly down again, wondering what she could do next.

"Are you going out, darling?"

"Just for a few minutes, Mums."

She walked slowly up the shadowy street, still not knowing quite what to do. But she knew she must do something quickly. The thought of that bank clerk who had shot himself, made her feel cold. There was no one to help Hugh except herself. She did not care how he treated her, what he said to her, if only she could make sure that he was safe. That was all that really mattered. As long as Hugh was alive and well and happy, life was precious. What a fool she had been to be so miserable all these weeks. Love was bigger than she had known. She was only learning how to love—to love so that it did not matter, in the least, whether the person one loved gave in return. How ignorant she had been. Now she wanted to give to Hugh, to give

all she had and was and not care that he had not even a smile for her in return. *That* was love.

No wonder that he had tossed what she had thought was love upon the scrap heap as worthless. It *had* been worthless. How could she have expected him to value it?

There was a light in Hugh's room over the bank. What could she do now?

She picked up a stone and threw it lightly up to the half-opened window. It hit the bricks and bounced away.

She picked up another stone. It was hard to throw straight when your hands were trembling. This time it tapped against the window pane before it fell back into the street. A shadow moved across the blind, and Hugh stood looking down at her.

"Hugh, I must speak to you," she said, trying to keep her voice loud and clear, "could you come down for a moment?"

He appeared to hesitate. She was terrified he would refuse. With a long sigh of relief she saw him turn from the window, saw the light in the room go out. Was he coming down? She waited, biting her lips nervously, scarcely breathing. The door opened at the side of the bank, and Hugh stepped, bareheaded, into the street.

"Hugh—please do not be angry with me—I overheard Dad saying—something. I thought I should tell you."

If he would only speak. If only he would help her instead of standing there, wooden and dumb. She held a fold of her dress tightly in either hand to keep her hands from trembling.

"The inspectors—" she faltered. "Mr. Herron has sent for the inspectors. He thinks—he thinks—oh, Hugh, is it true? Tell me is it true?" she faltered, incoherently, a longing appeal in her voice.

"Is that all you wanted to tell me, Nancy?"

"No, not all."

He wasn't angry. His voice sounded tired. He had an expressionless look. She slipped her fingers inside the ribbon at her waist, and brought out the blue slip of paper. "I wanted to give you this, Hugh—just in case—you needed it."

It was all said at last. He stood looking at her, without making a movement to take it. She moved nearer and thrust it awkwardly into his hand.

“Please, Hugh, please. It is Uncle Archie’s cheque.”

He retreated sharply at that and she was afraid that, now, he was angry. How stupid she was to have done it so clumsily.

“Couldn’t you take it from me?”

“I’m not quite as bad as that, Nancy,” he said with more color in his voice than when he had spoken before; but she felt that it was the color of tears. She stood in helpless indecision.

“You’re quite right in what you think,” he said, “I have taken money to pay my debts. But I would rather stand the consequences than take your money, Nancy.”

“Just because it’s mine, Hugh? It’s going to hurt so much if you will not take it.”

She could see his face, white, expressionless, staring back. It seemed to her an age before he put out his hand and took from her the slip of blue paper.

“If you really want to lend me this, Nancy,” he said in a smothered tone, “why, then I’ll take it. I don’t know why you’re bothering about me. I’m not worth it. I’ve got to tell Mr. Herron anyway—but this will put things straight for the inspectors.”

They stood silent, looking at one another for a moment, and then Nancy turned rapidly away.

“Nancy,” she heard him say, but she dared not turn back. If she stayed for another moment she would have flung her arms over her face, and cried and cried. Oh, poor Hugh! All his old self-confident manner had left him. He seemed like a little lonely boy. But he was safe—*she* had made him safe. He might have done anything in the mood that he was in. But now, even if he had to leave the bank and go away, even that was not as terrible. She could love him still. Nothing mattered as long as he was safe.

Nancy was watering the delphiniums that grew along the fence, the next afternoon, when she saw Hugh coming down the street. She saw him while he was still some distance away, and little sparks ran along her

arms until they reached her finger tips. She wanted to hide behind the tall blue flowers; she wanted to stay just where she was. She heard him stop beside the gate.

And then she looked up suddenly. The sparks burned until they stung and brought a mist of tears to her eyes.

“Nancy, I’ve told Mr. Herron that you lent me the money to put it straight for the inspectors,” he said, in a voice that threatened to break, “he doesn’t want me to send in my resignation. I told him I thought the best return I could make to you would be to leave the town. I’ve been such a miserable cur, Nancy—such a miserable cur.”

She put down the heavy watering can, not noticing the water splashed over her shoes. She was silent while he looked hungrily at her. She could see that he was hers again—hers, if she wanted him. Did she want him? Oh, ridiculous question! You may not admire—you may not respect—but what are you to do if one person, and one person alone, makes you dizzy with happiness, by just being near? What are you to do—what are you to do?

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Because of a Parrakeet* by Beatrice Redpath]