

Pretenders

Prior to the Great War

HOYT BRAINERD

George D'Arcy Chadwick

"I—I fancy so," he stammered. There was reproach in his face, but Priscilla was ruthless and the instinct of self-preservation was strong within her.

"Would it bother you too much to get me one?" she asked, sweetly polite, but wrapped in conventionality as a garment. "Strawberry, if they have it. The rooms are so hot, aren't they? It's a shame to send you into that melee again."

"Not at all. I'm delighted."

He was civil but perplexed. The change had come so suddenly. She had seemed so kind. What had he said? What had he done? Nothing; but perhaps in another moment he would have—and what right had he? A sudden thankfulness illumined his face and, as he turned away, it was Priscilla who was puzzled.

Why should he look so relieved? It was odious of him. She almost wished she had allowed him to go on. She was half tempted to stay and see what he could be induced to say, but—a vision of confession and its consequences rose before her. No; she must escape while she could. She sprang to her feet and moved swiftly toward the door, but stopped suddenly. A pretty, elaborately gowned woman, with a gray-haired, distinguished-looking man by her side, was coming slowly along the hall, absorbed in her companion, talking volubly, vivaciously, in a voice unmistakably American. Priscilla stared at her compatriot for an infinitesimal fraction of a second, recognition flooding her eyes and consternation following close behind. Then, turning, she sought refuge in a window alcove, partly drawing the heavy curtain behind her.

That Betty Allison should arise out of her past to block the road to safety! Betty Allison, who would know her at a glance, and whose curiosity was sure to have outlived her marriage into the British nobility. There would be no escaping Betty without giving a detailed explanation of her presence in London and at the wedding. Priscilla could actually hear the rapid fire of questions, Where are you staying? With whom are you travelling? Who brought you here?

FROM behind the friendly shelter of the curtain the girl peered out, waiting nervously for the propitious moment. At any time the Nice Man might come back with the strawberry ices and then it would be too late to run away.

The high American voice sounded more and more clearly, the figures of the woman and man appeared outside the wide open doors of the morning room. In another moment they would have passed; but during that moment, Lady Betty perceived a divan ranged against the wall directly opposite the open doors and paused before it, with a laughing word to her companion who, nothing loath, sank upon the low seat beside her.

Lady Betty's voice had sunk to a murmur. It gave place now to the lower, deeper murmur of a man's voice, a voice much too fervent for mere society nothings. Really, Lord Kilrose should look after Betty. The voice suddenly achieved nonchalant lightness. Some one must be coming down the hall. Priscilla's prophetic soul announced the Nice Man; and when she looked out, cautiously, there he stood in the doorway, his eyes searching the empty room, his face an eloquent study in disappointment.

The couple on the divan were watching him idly. Priscilla debated the situation. She could not stay there in the alcove indefinitely. She certainly could not go out and meet Betty. Perhaps, if they grasped the idea that there was a tete-a-tete scheduled for the morning room, a fellow feeling or a desire for privacy might make the intruders move on. The Nice Man had come into the room and was standing beside the chair in which Priscilla had been sitting when he left her, his expression still one of surprise, tingled deeply with annoyance and regret.

Priscilla moved so that he could see her, though her face was hidden from the woman on the divan.

"I'm here," she said in a nervous little voice. "It was so warm. There is a little more air here by the window."

The man's face cleared miraculously and he joined her.

"I was in a beastly funk, you know—afraid you had gone. You're not feeling faint, are you? I'll open the window."

He suited the action to the words; and, as she looked out into the garden, Priscilla's longing for flight swelled to monumental proportions.

"I wonder whether one could get out, that way," she said.

"Out where?"

"To the street."

"I suppose so; but who wants to get out to the street?"

Truth rushed to her lips.

"I do," she said with fervor.

He stared blankly at her.

"But, if you want to go away—" he began, somewhat stiffly.

An overwhelming desire to cry came upon her. If anything could make the situation worse, tears would do it; but she felt them coming. The lump in her throat was swelling, swelling, her self-control crumpling up little by little.

"If you want to go—" repeated the offended young man at her side.

"Oh, I do, I do!" she urged. The quiver in her voice caught his ear; and, as he looked down at her, he saw something glistening on her eyelashes. His bewilderment deepened. She was not snubbing him. She was appealing to him. He did not understand, but his manhood

rose to meet the appeal.

"There's some one I want to avoid," she explained. "Someone it would be dreadfully embarrassing for me to meet; and if I could go out quietly, through the garden—Do you think it is possible? Do you truly?"

Her voice was tremulously eager. The man stepped out through the long French window and looked about him.

"The area entrance is around the other side; but we couldn't go out there anyway. That would look jolly queer. There must be a garden door somewhere in the wall. I've an idea it's around the corner of the shrubbery down there. Shall we try for it?"

"If anyone should see us?"

"We are passionately fond of gardens. There's probably a door somewhere through which one could walk out into this particular garden without exciting comment. Even if the balcony scene has an audience, it will probably be credited to whim—or sentiment; and I don't imagine anyone will see us."

He was using the first person plural freely and Priscilla found it comforting. She was no longer alone in her adventure. Gathering her trailing skirts around her, she stepped out through the window.

"There are some steps here; but they are rickety. Be careful." The man turned to lend the girl a hand. For a moment their eyes were on a level, his face was very close to hers, and something in the eyes, in the whole face, made her step carelessly, stumble, fall. He caught her, held her in his arms only a second longer than necessity demanded, and set her on her feet on the brick walk, with a scrupulously formal, "You're not hurt, I hope?"

"Oh, no, thank you. It was no fall at all."

THE girl replied with a conventional civility even more pronounced than the man's; but in her fast-thumping heart she felt she had fallen far, fallen fathoms deep into something—a something to which she refused to give a name. For the time being they had forgotten they were trespassers; but, rounding the shrubbery corner, they came upon a gardener busy with rose cuttings. Priscilla stopped short with a little exclamation of dismay; but the Nice Man demonstrated the superiority of his sex by a cheerful serenity. He even stood watching the gardener nonchalantly for a few minutes before he said in a matter-of-course tone:

"My man, there's a street door somewhere along here, isn't there? We'll go out that way to our cab and avoid the crowd."

The gardener rose, wiping his hands.

"Yes, sir. Just beyond the pear trees. I'll unlock it for you, sir."

He led the way, unlocked the door and stood respectfully aside. A coin changed hands.

"Thank you, sir. You'll be coming back. I'll leave the door unlocked, sir."

Priscilla drew a long, exultant breath. She had escaped. The worst was over—but was it? She looked dubiously at the Nice Man and her exultation ebbed. They would have to say good-bye now. He was signalling for a hansom; but there was a puzzled expression on his face.

"Now, why was he so sure I'd be coming back that way?" he said reflectively. Priscilla's glance travelled up past the handsome honest face with its boyish eyes, to the mop of blond hair which the wind had ruffled untidily.

"Your hat," she suggested.

"Oh, I say!"

A cloud of distress swept over his face, accenting the boyishness.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Don't you want to go back?"

"Well, hardly—hardly. Stupid ass to forget that hat!"

"Why not go and get it?"

"It won't look well, you know—if anyone should see me—climbing in a side window."

"But even if some one should see you and stop you, you'd only have to tell who you are and send word to one of the family."

"That's just it," the man began—and stopped. "That's the last thing I could do."



Rounding the shrubbery they came upon a gardener busy with rose cuttings.

Once more he checked himself and stood looking down miserably into the questioning eyes. At last he squared his shoulders resolutely.

"There's no use in dodging it. I may as well explain that I don't want to be dragged into the limelight. It wouldn't do me any good to send my name to the family. They wouldn't know it. They've never heard of me. I don't belong in there. I wasn't invited."

"What!"

Priscilla's exclamation was a subdued shriek, pregnant with feeling. The man read the feeling as horror.

"Yes, I know," he said wretchedly. "I ought to have told you. It's rather a dirty business, breaking into a man's home, but we can't always choose, and I never thought very much about it before. It was all off color to speak to you—caddish trick; but you looked so—you were so—you know one does things without stopping to think, sometimes."

"One does," admitted Priscilla with conviction. Her brain was in a whirl. What was the man? He talked like a burglar, and yet surely no burglar ever had eyes like the honest, unhappy pair looking into hers.

"And I hated to have it all come to an end."

There was no antecedent for the "it," but Priscilla seemed to understand.

"Why did you go?" she asked. "It wasn't your cabman?"

He looked surprised.

"Cabman! Oh, no. I walked. The Old Man sent me, you see."

"The Old Man?"

"YES; our editor. He got word that Z— was coming over from Paris for the wedding and going back on the two o'clock train—incog., and all that sort of thing, you know. So he sent me up to see if I could squeeze a word out of the old chap on his latest Eastern entanglement. The Duke's down on newspaper men—froths at the mouth if he meets one; so there was no use asking for the interview. Had to break in as one of the guests and watch for my chance. Beastly business. Don't know why any decent fellow does it; but some way or other the thing seems different when it's for your paper. I managed to duck the receiving line and was looking around for Z— when I saw you, and—Oh, well, I fell down on the story, but I knew there was another man waiting at the train, and he'd get the interview some way or other. I meant to look up my man; but it didn't seem worth while. Nothing seemed worth while except—There weren't any strawberry ices, all apricot," he ended lamely.

"You're a newspaper man?" Priscilla asked, breathlessly.

"Yes."

"Not a lord or an earl or anything?"

He gloomily disowned the whole British Peerage. The girl laughed!—a hysterical little laugh, full of smiles and tears, and relief and nerves—a laugh so complex that the man altogether failed to analyze it.

"Oh, it's too absurd! It's too perfectly absurd," she said, as she turned and climbed into the waiting hansom. The Man stood, staring after her, his eyes stormy, his jaw set in an ugly fashion.

She leaned forward, entreaty in her eyes.

"You'll have to get in. I can't tell you, with the cabman watching us."

"Into the cab?" He was amazed, incredulous.

"Oh, yes; do, please. I'm like the Ancient Mariner. I simply have to tell my story—but if I don't do it very soon, I won't have the courage to do it at all. Do get in."

He sprang into the cab. An interested eye peered through the aperture in the top and a beery voice asked, "Where to?"

The Man looked at Priscilla. (Continued on page 31)



Betty Allison, who arose out of her past to block the road to safety.