

PRETTY MISS NEVILLE

BY B. M. COOPER

CHAPTER XLII

THE PROPOSAL

"For I believe I have his heart, as much as he has mine."

The wedding I got coming home from the picnic resulted in a severe cold, and I was confined to bed for more than a week. Very dull and feverish and stupid I felt, in spite of constant visits from Mrs. Vane, who, seated on the foot of my bed, daily unobscured herself of all the news she could gather for my edification. She had been down at the A. B. C. Ground, and had had three sets of tennis, played with a very so-so partner, and been beaten. Captain Beresford and Miss Ross were playing, too; and she was not much either. Or she had met Captain Beresford and Miss Ross riding. Or she had seen them sitting together in the library, or walking in the Government Garden. All the rest of her news fell on unheeding ears. The most startling current "gossip" the most unlikely engagements, the most killing jokes were lost on me. But the above casual remarks, dropped in the course of conversation, were just so many sore stabs, and after she had left me to rest, in perfect innocence of heart, I would lie awake nearly all night, trying to staunch these all but mortal wounds with the lint of common sense. No wonder that the doctor was surprised at my pale and languid appearance, and asked auntie very mysteriously if there was consumption in our family.

At last, after ten weary days in bed, I was promoted to the sofa in the drawing-room; every one made a great fuss about me, notably Colonel Vane, who half lived on the road to the library, changing my books, and who loaded me with all kinds of delicate attentions in the shape of fruit and flowers. I always got on with elderly people, and my friend's husband, a smart, dapper, spruce little man, and one of the most delightful companions I ever met, was no exception to the general rule.

"The way—the barefaced way—that you and George flirt is really scandalous," Mrs. Vane would say; "I really shall have to send him to the club—to board him out! I declare it will come to that. He has sent off to Bombay for all the new songs for you. I told you (triumphantly) you would never compare him to Major Percival."

"Don't name him," I interrupted, fretfully.

"Well, then, I won't vex you, my poor, sick Nora. By the way, do you know that your Cousin Maurice has been here nearly every day this week; he was closeted with Uncle Jim for nearly an hour yesterday. Shall I tell you the reason?" she said, coming over and kneeling beside me.

"Shall I tell you?"

"If you like," I replied, wearily.

"I had such a long talk with him the night before last, at the Morrisons' dance, and I told him the whole history about Major Percival. He had never heard the rights of it before."

"Well?" I asked, eagerly.

"Well, my dear child, he was simply furious. Those people with dark gray eyes, can look angry if you like. He was in kind of white, cool, polite passion, and asked me who had horsewhipped your *fiancee*. I referred him to you."

"There were six competitors altogether, and they went away to a capital start. I stood on the box, holding on by Mrs. Vane, and literally quivering with excitement as they tore down the hill close by Cavalier third. Round the sweep at the bottom he was pulling up fast; and it was evident that he and a very handsome gray Arab had the race between them. It was nearly a dead heat as they ran into the straight—almost locked together; but, thanks to Maurice's superior jockeyship, Cavalier won by a head!"

"Hoorah! hoorah!" cried Rody, who had also shared the box-seat, and almost upset me twice. "Ireland forever!" he shouted exultantly, as he leaped down, and dashed into the crowd.

"That boy will certainly have to be consigned to a lunatic asylum yet," exclaimed Mrs. Vane, as she shut up her parasol. "Hoorah, hoorah, indeed! He has carried off half the lace frilling at the bottom of my dress, and nearly knocked me down!"

"Many of our friends came up to the carriage and congratulated me on my success; and, after a little, Maurice, uncle, and Rody arrived—a triumphant trio."

"There's your bracelet, Nora," said Maurice, tossing up the case into my lap. It was certainly very handsome, and I was immediately beset by a considerable crowd, thirsting to see the prize. Auntie and Mrs. Vane were in ecstasies with it, and Rody actually tried to clasp it on his sun-burned wrist. When I turned to make my acknowledgments to Maurice, he was gone.

"The ladies' race" was the last event of the day, and soon heavily laden carriages commenced to leave the course. Uncle insisted on my driving home, and in a short time we were also under way, having previously conferred a seat to Rody, which he declined.

"Barney Magee is going to drive me home," and Beresford too; Barney has a nailing good horse, and I'm going to drive; you see if I don't pass everything on the road. I'll be in Ooty before you can say 'Jack Robinson.'"

"What to make of whom, madam?" inquired Colonel Vane, entering the room in dinner garb.

"What to make of Nora's cousin, Captain Beresford," she replied, walking up to her husband, and sticking a rose in his button-hole.

"The same as every man you know, myself included—make a fool of him, to be sure."

"Be quiet, George, this is no joking matter. For once, your sweet, clever, pretty little wife—laying her hands on his shoulders, and looking him full in the face—'did you hear me, sir?—your sweet, pretty, clever little wife is completely up a tree!'"

There were three days' racing at Ooty, or rather, at the Pykara road, three miles away. The first day it poured, and spoiled the sport, people's good dresses, and people's good tempers. It is not conducive to merry mood to be standing under an umbrella (and receiving the drippings of about four others) in sheets of rain, with your favorite boots in a puddle, and your smartest frock becoming every moment further advanced on the road to ruin. Even with a companion—a pleasant companion—under the same silken shelter (cotton or alpaca *parapluies* don't exist, even in my imagination), even with these extenuating circumstances, I deny that a wetday's racing is either pleasant or profitable. The last day of the races was fine; crowds ventured forth in their second best. Uncle and I rode, and auntie and Mrs. Vane went in a large, hired open carriage. Mrs. Vane and I shared the box on the course, and had a splendid view. The start was downhill; certainly it was a most uninviting piece of ground; but, considering everything, was wonderfully flat for the hills. Maurice won a hurdle race, and Rody was a good second for the "Planter's Cup." Altogether I had been extremely interested, and had lost a pair of spectacles to Uncle Jim and a pair of riding gloves from Mrs. Vane.

"They are getting up a race for 'ladies' horses—horses here on the course, to be ridden by gentlemen nominated by the owners," said Rody, swinging himself up on the fore-wheel beside me. "Beresford wants to know, Nora, if you'd like him to ride your horse? He won't have half a bad chance!"

"Are you going to enter Cavalier?" inquired Maurice, coming up at this moment, "because if you care about it, I'll ride him. There are five entries already, but only one of them has any turn of speed, and I think Cavalier could show him the way."

"Yes, and that conceited little beggar, Tommy Pim, is going to steer him, and he is swaggering all over the place, telling the ladies to put the gloves on and back his mount. If you beat him, Beresford, I shall skip like a young lamb," cried Rody, encouragingly.

"Well, Nora, have you made up your mind? The stewards are giving a very handsome bracelet. It is actually here on the ground. You may as well have a shot for it as any one else," said Maurice. "Am I to enter Miss Neville's Cavalier?"

"Yes, I should like it very much," I replied, hesitatingly; "but, you know, Rody can ride for me. You will have to ride for Miss Ross."

"Bosh! Why should he ride for Miss Ross?" interrupted Rody, rudely. "Anyway, her 'gee' is no good, and she's not going to run."

"Very well then, Maurice, if you will ride for me, I shall be very much obliged to you."

"All right," he returned; "there's no time to be lost. Come along, French!" and the two young men hurried off at once in quest of Cavalier, who, half asleep, nodding his head over his squinting eyes, little dreamed of the treat and honor that were in store for him.

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As we drove out of the enclosure we were passed at a rapid pace by Rody, Maurice, and a hare-brained Irish boy, in a very high dog cart, with a very high stepping steed. "Good by," cried Rody, sportively saluting us with his whip. "I'll tell them know you are coming. I suppose you'll be in to breakfast to-morrow." This was a cruel gibe at our hired horses, who were certainly anything but free goers. It seemed to me that Rody was a most rash and reckless driver, judging by the way he flourished his whip about, and whirled round corners. It was all a gentle slope down hill now, and our horses' heads being set toward home, they trotted along at a good pace and held their own well. After we had gone about a mile we found the road blocked in front, and subsided to a slow jog. I was seated with my back to the horses, of course, as became my youth. As I sat nursing my bracelet about and indulging in a brown study, a shout and a loud crash on the road ahead of us caused me to start.

"Hallo!" cried a gentleman who was riding past: "I say, that's a bad accident!"

"What is it?" I inquired, jumping up and looking over the coach-box. I shall never forget the sight that met my eyes. I saw the horse and dog cart that Maurice and Rody were driving rolling down the steep "kud," or precipice, at the side of the road—a fall of more than one hundred feet. Over and over it went. I saw it turn over three times, and I could look no longer.

"The horse took fright and shied, and jumped over the bank!" explained the stranger, with a pallid face. "I'll go on and see if I can lend any assistance," he added, cantering ahead.

I looked at auntie and Mrs. Vane, and then made a movement to spring out of the carriage after him.

"Stay where you are, child," said auntie, seizing my arm; "it may not be so bad as it looks."

But, in spite of her reassuring speech, her face was as pale as death, and her lips were quivering.

"They were all thrown out on the road, I'm sure," said Mrs. Vane, taking both my hands in hers and squeezing them tightly. We were four carriages away from the scene, and the road was now quite jammed with horses, and people on foot running past excitedly.

"I must go, I will go!" I said, struggling; "anything is better than this awful suspense."

"You will only be in the way," exclaimed auntie; "have patience, the gentleman will bring us word immediately. You may be sure your uncle is there. Now Nora, I insist," holding me back.

"Patience! It was easy to say 'patience' when every second seemed a year of agony."

At last the stranger returned; his florid face was ashy white, and his lips were working nervously as he moved his horse close up to the carriage.

"Well?" we all said in a breath, "what has happened? Is any one hurt?"

"It is a bad business," he replied, gravely; "two of the fellows are not much the worse, but the third, a fellow called Beresford, who was caught in the reins—"

"Yes, what of him?" asked Mrs. Vane, in a voice that seemed far away.

"He has been killed stone dead."

I heard no more. There came a strange rushing and buzzing in my ears, and I fainted—for the first time in all my life.

How long I remained in this state I cannot say, but when I came to myself I was lying on a carriage-rug on the grass at the side of the road. Auntie, with anxious face, was chafing one hand and Mrs. Vane the other. The neck of my habit was open, and I felt very cold and wet about my face and hair.

"Where am I?" I said, coming to, with a long sigh. "What is the matter?" I cried endeavoring to start up.

"Oh!" I said, as recollection came, "oh!" I said, covering my face with my hands and shuddering with horror. "I remember all."

"Nora, my dear child," said auntie, "it was not as bad as you thought. He is not killed!"

"Not killed?" I gasped, removing my hands and looking at her with intense anxiety.

"I'm as good as two dead men yet," Nora, said a voice beside me, and there, unless my eyes deceived me, stood Maurice, with concern and amazement plainly depicted in his face. He was bleeding from a cut in the temple; his arm was bound up in an impromptu sling; his face was pale, and his coat all torn and covered with earth, but, nevertheless, he was most palpably alive. Oh, the relief of that moment! Oh, the long, long breath I took! The revulsion of feeling was such that I very nearly fainted for a second time—with joy.

There was no doubt that I had disgraced myself. I had thought that Maurice was dead, and had fainted in the most open and notorious manner on the high road. And here he was alive, and looking at me with grave and anxious eyes!

"What would he think of me? What could he think of me? Well, at a right, merely as my cousin, I had a right to faint for him; he was a near relative and an old friend. I hoped he would consider that and not think—and not think—what? I did not choose to mention the other alternative, even to myself. I made a rapid recovery, and, assisted by auntie and uncle, resumed my hat and staggered to the carriage, feeling most fearfully ashamed of myself. Maurice was offered, and accepted, a seat home; and now the whole particulars of the accident were told. No one was much hurt, but the horse was killed, and the dog-cart lay 150 feet below the road, smashed to atoms. Rody had escaped with a few bruises. Beresford had occupied the back seat, and got off scot free, having jumped out when he felt the horse rising to the bank. "Faith," he said naively, "when I saw that the beast was inclined to kill himself and us, says I to myself, 'I'll be no party to the transaction,' and I made myself scarce." Maurice had been entangled in the reins, and had come off worst; but by some miracle the second roll over freed him, and he was lucky enough to escape with a few cuts and bruises and a sprained wrist; he had been stunned at first, and seeing him lying so pale and motionless, and gathering a hint from the excited crowd—always prepared to make the worst of a similar catastrophe—our stranger acquaintance had brought us the bad news post-haste. As we passed the scene of the late disaster I could not restrain a shudder as I saw the broken bank, the torn up ground, and far-away down below the red wheels of the dog cart, and a brown inanimate mass.

"You thought I was killed did you, Nora?" said Maurice, with an odd kind of tremble in his usually steady voice.

"Of course I did," I answered, rather crossly.

"How did it happen? tell us all about it," said Mrs. Vane, impatiently. "I don't know when I got such a fright."

"Oh, it was partly Rody's fault; he drives like 'Jehu, the son of Nimshi,' and in a happy-go-lucky fashion. I only wonder we were not upset before. I never saw such a reckless whip. He thought he was driving the twig, I dare say, he added, looking at me. "Anyway, when we came to a block in the road, he tried to pull up sharp, and to settle the matter, gave the horse a cut of the whip. He made one bounce, broke the reins, and, feeling his head free, turned sharp round and jumped the ditch in a second. I shall not easily forget the sensation of going across the country on wheels."

"No, indeed, it was not. 'Naught was never in danger,' I replied rashly."

"Then you must have been overcome on Beresford's account! Phew!" and he gave a long, shrill, ear-piercing whistle. "Sits the wind in that quarter? Well, there's nothing like beginning with a little aversion—or, indeed, a good deal. I leave him in your hands with the utmost confidence. You can avenger us of that lost business when you are married to him, Nora! I've never forgiven him to this day."

"Rody," I exclaimed, reddening, "you are unbearable. Your rudeness and vulgarity are intolerable."

"You would like to box my ears, just as you did in the good old times; now, wouldn't you? But hark! He comes! as they say in the play. Enter the hero of the piece—*excut*!" (waving his hands) "all minor characters—hero and heroine—love scene—tableau!"

"Hush, hush. Do be quiet, you horrid boy!" said Mrs. Vane to the irrepressible youth, as at that moment uncle and Maurice walked into the veranda.

I only remained long enough to give them each a cup of tea, and then, with an excuse of the vaguest description, I effected my exit. Rody, with Maurice in the room, was a good deal more than I could stand; so I fled to my own snugery, and looked at my finery for the evening.

Drugs had already spread my ball-dress on the bed; it was a combination of black tulle and black satin, and large eye daisies, and was both beautiful and new; my long black gloves and satin shoes rested side by side with my fan and handkerchief, and my bouquet stood on the dressing-table in a tumbler of water. Nothing was left for me to do. I dared not return to the drawing-room; it opened on the same veranda as my room, and I could distinctly hear Rody's loud, hilarious laugh leading the van in all the mirth. They were evidently enjoying themselves very much, I thought regretfully; but to return to brave Rody, and to be quizzed about Maurice before his very face; was beyond the limits of my endurance.

"And where is Rody now?" asked auntie, very sternly.

"Looking after the remains of the dog cart and the carcass of the horse. Unfortunately, both were borrowed. Barney Magee had only 'the lend of the loan of them' himself."

"And Rody will have to pay for them?" I cried in dismay, "and he has not a rupee left. He told me he had drawn his month's pay in advance. Wretched boy, what will he do?"

"We will all pay," said Maurice carelessly.

"For having your necks nearly broken by that wild boy?" cried auntie, who was extremely wroth with Rody.

"It was altogether an accident, Mrs. Neville. Indeed, you must not be angry with Rody."

"Well, thank God that none of you were killed. It's not his fault that you were not."

"We had an extraordinary escape. When I look down the place we went over I can hardly understand how we live to tell the tale."

I was silent nearly all the way home. I felt tired and sick, and altogether upset. Mrs. Vane, Maurice, and auntie chatted away together, just like old times. His spirits were as high as ever this evening, and he seemed bent on restoring Rody to auntie's good graces. The time passed like five minutes instead of half an hour, and we found ourselves at home. Maurice declined to come in, and took leave of us at the gate. He shook hands with auntie, with Mrs. Vane, and lastly, with me. Holding my hand in his, he said: "Nora, I hope you will be all right to-morrow, and able to come to the club ball. Keep a brace for me," he whispered, in a low tone, as the carriage moved on, and he disappeared.

"Keep a brace for me; keep a brace for me," kept lingering in my ears till I lost all sense and meaning. I tried to understand what it meant—what Maurice meant; Maurice, who treated me with the gravest, most frozen politeness on every occasion. And now he said, "Keep a brace for me." A good night's rest, a long, long sleep, restored me completely; and the next morning I was quite myself once more. Of course the races and the accident were abundantly discussed and talked about, and many were the visitors who came to see the bracelet and hear about the upset. As we dawdled over our five o'clock tea, Rody presented himself, and endeavored to carry off the accident with a high hand. But it was of no use. We scolded him well, and did our utmost to terrify him with prospect of an enormous bill for damages, and perhaps a law suit into the bargain.

"Oh, that's all right," he said with a knowing grin, totally unmoved by our apprehension on his behalf.

"Why, you know you haven't four annas, much less fourteen hundred rupees," I cried in indignant amazement.

"Never you mind, Miss Curiosity! it's not going to come out of your pocket. It's going to be all right; and the dog cart can be mended."

"The fact was, that Maurice was to pay, as I afterward discovered. Maurice had reasons of his own for being in an unusually generous humor."

"And so you fainted!" observed Rody, pointedly. "That was a pretty business, and all owing to alarm and anxiety of mind on my behalf!"

"No, indeed, it was not. 'Naught was never in danger,' I replied rashly."

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It occurred to no one that moving in a big new steel safe for the manager's office on the third floor could possibly threaten the lives of all the people in the store and make an awful situation for four or five hundred customers and clerks below the level of the pavement. That was because no one guessed that the man who was to move the safe across the stair landing on the third floor would get drunk at noon, and consequently neglect to shore up the floor properly. Now under the basement landing lay the big gas main that supplied gas for all the uses of the store, from the gas stoves in the kitchen department to the drop lights in the lamp department, and that had once supplied many store lights before electricity was used. So when the insufficiently supported landing on the third floor gave way, and the huge safe suddenly plunged down through it, and through the second floor and through the first floor, and through the basement landing, it struck the big gas pipe and broke it as a falling brick might break a glass tube.

By wonderful good fortune no one happened to be caught on the stairway landings, but the moment after the successive crashes many were, nevertheless, in terrible danger. From the broken main flowed a huge volume of choking, deadly gas, not only into the basement itself, but into the elevator shafts and stairways. And every spark of fire in the building became a possible source of fearful danger.

Dorry was in her high cupboard. The tremendous crash of the breaking stair landing frightened her so terribly, as, indeed, it also frightened every one. The little girl heard the screams of women and children; she saw the lights in the Welshback counter close by sink and go almost out; she saw a great cloud of dust puff gustily up the stairway, and a man—the elevator starter—run out of it and shout to warn people back. Whether she heard the word or not, she never knew, but she quickly guessed the truth.

In an incredibly short time she detected the smell of gas, but at first she did not heed it. The scene on the floor below her was too dismaying. Without guessing in the least what horror threatened them, customers and clerks alike fled from it. They ran back and away from the puffing dust. Jamming into groups and knots at corners, they strove and struggled, all the more frightened for being hindered.

The time was between 1 and 2 o'clock in the afternoon—a little early for the greatest press of shoppers; but it was afterward estimated that over four hundred persons were caught in the basement. The stairways leading to the street were jammed at once. In the aisle nearest the notion counter scores of women scurried past Dorry's outlook, from one exit to another, frightened and crying. Men, running in every direction, shouted unintelligibly. Children clung to scared mothers or were rudely knocked aside.

Dorry also felt the thrill of fear. She stood, gripping the edge of her high shelf, and staring in utter fright. People were being jammed against the counters. Down in front of her a woman, caught in the press, screamed in fear and pain. Dorry became quite as much afraid of the crowd as of any other danger.

Then the first sickening puff of gas blew into her face. Her eyes turned instinctively to the low burning lights at the next counter. Nobody had thought to turn them out; in the exhibition row of lamps little points of flame, flickering and fluttering, tipped each jet, or showed as a yellow spot within each mantle. Any one of them might fire this horrid gas the moment that it became thick enough to burn!

Slipping from her cupboard down through the tiny door, Dorry limped along behind the counter to the stairs. Turning each rock, she shut off the flickering sparks completely. A man near her was trying to use the telephone, but was getting no reply. She wondered at his anger as he dashed the instrument aside.

Then, hardly knowing why, she crept promptly back and climbed up to her place. This was not attempting escape, certainly. But she knew that a lame little girl would have small chance just now, and besides, she felt the necessity of seeing things.

As she stood looking down again on the wild disorder about her, her thoughts went swiftly to the store above. In the basement there were no more open lights, but there were many on the upper floors. No one up there could yet know accurately what had happened. The man at the telephone came to her mind, and with a start, she realized that the connection was broken. A few people were escaping at the street doors, but they would hardly notify at once any one who could control the situation. If the gas mounted as fast as it spread, it might very soon make an explosive mixture with the air in an upper floor.

No one was trying to escape by the main stairway or the elevators now; over there in the haze of dusty Dorry could see no figure moving. Doubtless the stairs were crushed; doubtless the gas was already too strong in the shaft to permit the use of the cars. All the central portion of the room was clear now; every one was trying for the outer doors. People were being hurt the cries were not all of fear.

If she could only make them turn back and wait, or go slow! How quickly they might all escape, if they would only give themselves the chance! If outside help could only be summoned, the street stairway could be cleared; perhaps the gas could be shut off. But how could help be summoned or information given, when every exit was blocked by the panic-stricken people and the telephones were out of order?

Nobody thought of the escalator. It was habitually considered a means of descent only. A man was helping an old woman across from the front of the room to the rear, where a freight elevator was hopelessly overloaded and blocked. Another man was climbing up on the cases behind a counter, in an effort to reach a high ventilating window, but he could not reach it. Still another was running along on top of a counter beside one packed aisle, and shouting in the mob, who paid no attention to him.

Another puff of gas struck Dorry in the face. This time it was almost suffocating. It made her cough and choke; and she suddenly became conscious that she was trembling all over and crying helplessly. But she realized, too, that in the midst of all this panic she was standing idle. Was there not something that she could do? Across the nearest aisle, by the cases in the shoe department, was the lower end of the escalator. In the midst of all the riot, its machinery was grinding steadily on; stair after stair came over the edge of the floor above and, sliding down under the guard wall, disappearing in the floor below. Dorry had seen several people run toward it, look and turn away. A young girl, about her own age, who came rushing across the floor, stopped beside the moving stairway. When she saw that the steps were sliding downward, she turned from it in discouragement.

Instantly Dorry, remembering Joe's joke, screamed, "Oh, try it, try it! You can do it easily."

The girl heard her and looked up. Then turning she ran swiftly up the stairs. She gained on them, reached the top, and disappeared.

A woman, passing, saw her, and followed. She too, after a painful struggle, reached the top. Dorry cried out to a third, who came from somewhere at the rear of the store. This woman watched the climber and in a moment was leading three others to the place.

Absorbed