

PRETTY MISS NEVILLE

BY B. M. CROKER

CHAPTER XI—CONTINUED

When I had gained the retirement of my own apartment I slammed and locked the door, and, throwing myself on my bed, gave way to a torrent of tears—tears of anger and mortification, tears of wounded pride and passion—but very, very bitter tears all the same.

How blind I had been not to have recognized my position from the first—not to have seen that Maurice was an unwilling instrument in grandfather's hands. I had taken everything for granted, lived on at Gallow as if it were as much my home as ever!

Oh, miserable, shameless girl!—a girl of seventeen, with the common sense, the most worldly wisdom, and happy-go-lucky confidence in her surroundings of a child of twelve—I had never realized that I was one day to become Mrs. Beresford of Gallow. I put the idea of being engaged to Maurice in an out-of-the-way corner of my brain, and rarely brought it forth—it would never come to anything, I felt certain; it was preposterous, impracticable, and incredible.

At last the veil had been torn from my eyes; now I beheld my true position with the most appalling distinctness; now I could easily understand grandfather's anxiety to save, to hoard money—it was for me. Now I readily interpreted the cause of Maurice's pale, averted face, that dim autumn evening just three years ago—I was the cause of that also.

My mind was in a perfect chaos as after a while I roused myself, and sat on the edge of my bed with my head buried in my hands; but even so, and in the dark, hot flashes raced up to the very roots of my hair, as I thought of grandfather's bargain.

"Hates you! detests you! forced to marry his pauper cousin, to save his mother from starvation!"—these sentences kept ringing in my ears till my brain felt downright giddy. There was no sleep for me that night—actually none for me, who might have gained a medal when the Seven Sleepers. My heart beat so fast, and in such a wearisome little pat, pat, pat that it gave me no rest, and my mind, generally so empty and so bare, was thronged with visions of the past and future.

"Who told you all this?" he asked reddening visibly, and evidently much confused.

"Miss Fluker, last night, in the presence of the Misses Curry!"

"Dear, dear, dear!" he exclaimed fretfully, pushing his egg away as if it were an importunate petitioner.

"Then it is true, Mr. French?" I asked, brusquely, looking him straight in the face. "You are a clergyman, and of course you would not deceive me."

"Yes, it's true in a way," he replied, reluctantly. "Your grandfather managed it, in fact, arranged the whole business. But Maurice Beresford if not averse to the match now. He is quite reconciled to the idea; he sees that it is all for the best. I can show you his letters. He speaks of you most kindly."

"I have not!" I exclaimed forcibly; "and I tell you distinctly, Mr. French that I would rather die—yes die—than marry my cousin Maurice—now" (as much as to say, "make a note of that"), "and you may tell him so, I added recklessly."

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. French, leaning back in his chair and looking at me helplessly.

"Not at all," I interrupted; "I am glad I know—it was a kindness to tell me, though not intended as such."

"Dear, dear, dear!" I don't know what I am to do with you, Nora. You really must obey me; what will Miss Fluker say when she hears all this?" regarding me with visible uneasiness.

wife would test his powers in that line shortly.

"Do you mean to keep me with you against my will?" I asked with blazing eyes.

"Certainly I do! A girl in her teens has no business to have a will. I will keep you under my own eye till Maurice Beresford comes to relieve me of my charge. I distinctly forbid you to think of breaking off your engagement. Understand me, Nora; I am only acting for your good."

"I will not hear of it!" he answered irritably. "Your father's relations have nothing to say to you, if any exist. You have surprised me very much, Nora—painfully surprised me. Your independence must be curbed. I can now understand what Miss Fluker means by your ungovernable temper."

"I called these flowers of speech from many others, all of the same hue, and all showered on me with a liberal hand by my extremely irate governess. She pursued me with more than Corsican vengeance, and my life was becoming unbearable. She worried me, and bullied me from morning till night. I worked myself, or rather she worked me into such a nervous state that her very step overhead or on the stairs made me tremble; while her sudden entrance into a room caused me to start violently."

"The morning of my interview with Mr. French I had returned home with weary, exhausted footsteps, not having tasted a morsel for nearly twenty hours; but a large bunch of brown bread, and a cup of milk, surreptitiously procured from big Mary, had renewed my flagging energies. I met Miss Fluker face to face in the hall: a sudden elevation of her nose, and a general stiffening of her demeanor, had been the only notice she bestowed on me, although both she and I knew that I richly deserved a first-rate scolding for my non-appearance at the breakfast-table. She nevertheless stayed her tongue, for she felt that she had said quite enough, if not too much, the previous evening."

"I passed up to the now deserted, battered, ink-stained school-room, and, dragging out my old mahogany desk (that might almost claim to be a piece of furniture) I sat down to write three letters.

"Strike while the iron is hot," "Delays are dangerous," and "Who hesitates is lost" were all mottoes very much to my taste; so, selecting a sheet of pea-green foreign paper, without a moment's hesitation I commenced to write a fiery, not to say furious, letter to my Cousin Maurice. It mattered not that I took the most audacious liberties with Lindley Murray as I warmed to my work—if I conveyed my meaning quite plainly and thoroughly I did not care a fig. I told him that I had discovered the bargain my grandfather had made on my behalf, and that I declined my share in it, with many thanks—here was endeavoring to be sarcastic. Thinking that this was hardly sufficiently forcible, I added "that I would rather drown myself in the pond in the garden, rather die twice over, than marry him under any circumstances; that I had hitherto been living on his charity, but that I now begged to relieve him of his incumbrance, as I was about to leave Gallow forever; and that as long as he lived he might be very certain that he would never again see or hear of Nora O'Neill."

always mine, and that a line of any time to their agents in Liverpool would be sufficient to procure me a passage and an outfit. This arrangement fitted in admirably with my present dilemma. I wrote to her, accepting her invitation, and telling her that I was now determined to leave Gallow, and leave it without delay, for reasons I would explain when we met. I sent her a most engaging, coherent, rambling communication, lucid on one point only, viz., that I was going to make my home with her, to take her name, and to be her adopted daughter, and that I was venturing this step entirely on my own responsibility.

The third effusion was a short note to the shipping agents, inclosing my aunt's last letter, informing them that I purposed proceeding to India (about the last week in September. I fixed on this date as I knew that Mr. French and Miss Fluker intended going about that time to a large auction at the other end of the county. They were to be the guests of a brother clergyman, and would be absent, oh, joy for at least two days. When I had finished my correspondence a great load seemed to be lifted from my mind. I closed my desk, washed my ink fingers, and put on my hat—for I was a young woman who did nothing by halves—I carried the letters down to the village, and posted them with my own hands. Then I sat down, so to speak, to await events.

Morning after morning I emptied the letter-bag with an eager hand; but at last it came, the looked-for missive from Liverpool. I knew its blue envelope the instant I saw it, and putting it in my pocket, I sallied forth to read it alone. It was short, concise, and very much to the point, and it simply notified me that my passage had been secured in the *Coruna* sailing from Liverpool to Bombay on the 29th. of September—in three weeks' time. My heart beat very fast at the thought, as I read over my news that lovely autumn morning, perched on my favorite stile. I began to make small preparations for departure. I drew all the remainder of my "sheep money" (eleven pounds ten shillings) out of the Post-office Savings Bank. Grandfather gave me a lamb every year, which I kept and sold when it was fat; hence my savings. I gradually and carefully took leave of all my haunts, as the time for leaving came round. The day before the auction was a busy one with me. Latterly I had been so silent and discreet that I was left very much to myself, and I made good use of my leisure; I packed my meager wardrobe—a goodly supply of under-linen made by my own fingers, my mother's miniature, a few favorite books, my old habit and whip. My worldly belongings were not difficult of transportation. Then I took a solemn farewell of Patsy and Sweetlips. I went to their cottages after tea and told them I was going away, but I could not tell them where; and that I would write to them, and send them presents. Sweetlips was both amazed and displeased. He vowed "he would go straight and tell on me unless I gave up the name of the people to whom I was going, and told him all about it." On this point he was inexorable.

Having sworn him to Masonic secrecy, I related my prospects, showed him my aunt's letter, and expressed his fears. "The last of the old family, and going away! Well, 'tis no place for the likes of you now. But, Miss Nora darlin', it's a terrible thing for a young slip of a girl like you to be going out in the world in this way—across the says too! It's drowned you'll be, and getting your throat cut among all them black nagurs besides," he observed impressively.

"No fear, Sweetlips; lots of people go to India and come home safe and sound."

"Ay," suddenly brightening up. "True for ye! Sure, now I think of it, Mr. Maurice is out there. You're going out to the same country," with a knowing look for which I could have beaten him, "and you'll make the match from your uncle's house, where, no doubt, he'll be calling" (as if India was a village), "and you'll come home, the two of you together, and keep up Gallow in the role old style."

"Never!" I almost shrieked. "Mr. Maurice may keep up what style he likes, but not with me."

"See now, don't be talkin' nonsense who else would be with you? Sure, aren't ye going after him?" returned Sweetlips, resolutely. There was not the smallest use in arguing with him, I knew from years of experience, so I at once bid him farewell. He went so far as to kiss my hand and bless me. Poor Sweetlips, I always knew his bark was worse than his bite. But who would have believed that we would have parted in tears?

save the sick man; and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him."

This is sufficient proof that Extreme Unction is a sacrament instituted by Christ, because it is an outward sign of the interior spiritual grace which is promised. This general precept also proves that the apostles were accustomed to administer this sacred rite; and all Christians previous to the sixteenth century, whether in communion with the Catholic Church or not have constantly and everywhere held Extreme Unction to be a sacrament instituted by Our Lord.

Even the learned Protestant Leibnitz candidly admits "there is not room for much discussion regarding the union of the sick. It is supported by the words of Scripture, the interpretation of the Church, in which pious and Catholic men safely confide. Nor do I see what any one can find reprehensible in that practice which the Church accepts."

THE RETURN
The lilacs bloomed in the doorway when Stanley Davis went to say good-by to Mary Lewes. It had rained that morning, and the soft spring air, now warm and soft and sunny, seemed bathed in the clean, sweet perfume of the flowers. One specially fine bush leaned over the porch rail as if in welcome, and when Mary answered the door a spray of lilac, tucked in her bright hair to please the baby, nodded down to the little head cradled in the "divine hollow" of her neck.

Stanley who thought Mary like a flower herself, felt his heart leap at sight of her blue eyes, her pink cheeks, her rosy lips, and the frame of wavy gold that set off her white throat and forehead. And for smiles such as that which crowned her beauty, kingdoms had been lost and won.

Mary, charmed by the beckoning sunshine, would have sat on the porch; but Stanley mutely waved her into the dim, cool parlor.

"Put down the youngster, Mary," he said, when they were seated, "and talk to me a little. I've something to say, and I can't stop long. Grew's sent for me, and I'm going West to-night."

The pink cheeks paled a little; but the red lips smiled on bravely. "I can't put the baby down," the girl answered softly. He's teething and fretful; the only way I can keep him quiet is to hold him. But I can talk just as well with him in my arms, Stanley, and I want to hear all about your trip."

"It isn't going to be a trip, Mary," the boy's voice was low and a trifle unsteady. "Grew says that the chance he offers will be permanent if I want to work hard, and I—I'll have to stay out there for some years at least. That's why I want to talk to you, Mary. You know how I love you, Mary, me and go with me, or anyway, tell me when I can come back to get you as my wife."

The blue eyes reflected Paradise briefly; but the little head was shaken in denial. "I can't, Stanley," and her tone, in turn, trembled, "How can I leave home now? Sheila's only five, and Billy eleven, and then there's the baby. You know how they and father need me. What would they do if I went away just now?"

"Someone else could take care of them," the lad demurred, even while his heart recognized the truth of her plea. Why should our happiness be sacrificed for your brothers and sisters? I wish me to remain at Gallow, and in despite of their both and carried it off, piping hot, to the old woman at the lodge.

But time was money, more than money, to me now; I had wasted a precious half-hour already, I must no longer delay. I persuaded them to carry down my portmanteau, while I followed with my bonnet-box, assuring them impressively at every step that I was acting for the best, that I would write to them, and send them money, and that they would be behaving very unkindly if they even wished me to remain at Gallow.

"There isn't anyone else," Mary interrupted. "You know how few relatives we have, scarcely a woman among them. You know how helpless a man is with little children, especially when he's got to work all day and can't even be home every evening. And mother gave the baby to you, Stanley—perhaps you'll love how much—but it wouldn't mean happiness to run away from my clear duty to marry you. And—and I love you too much to ask you to wait until I am free."

"Oh, look here, Mary," the speaker's eager youth strong in every word, "that's talking nonsense. If you love me, of course, you'll let me go away engaged to you. We may not be able to marry now; but later—You father," with hopeful recollection of certain whispered rumors, "will marry again, pretty sure, and then the children won't be in your charge any more. Let me—"

"That's looking rather far ahead, Stanley," her smile a little sad, "and even if father did marry again, it by no means follows that my responsibilities would be ended. Some women," the smile growing sadder, might not care to take charge of the children, and, anyway, I'd have to love and trust anyone pretty much before I'd be willing to turn over Sheila and Billy and the baby to her, even if she wished it. No, Stanley, as he showed signs of argumentative rebellion, "we mustn't think of getting married or engaged at present. We'll—we'll just be good friends."

The boy talked on; but the quiet firmness that underlay Mary's tenderness of nature won in the end—as both knew that it must. At last they rose, still talking, and walked to the front door. The lilac scented breeze was wafted in like a wave of purest affection, and Stanley's eyes grew longingly dim as it stirred the little ringlets about Mary's ears and temples. Just inside the door he detained her to utter a last beseeching word.

mine, anyway. You may not consider yourself engaged to me; but I shall be engaged to you, always. I'm your promised husband, sweetheart, no matter where I am nor how long we have to wait."

Again the wide eyes reflected Paradise over the firm lips that for duty's sake refused it. "No, dear," and Mary's voice was hardly more than a whisper. "I can't have it so. It wouldn't be fair to you. I can't think of marriage until the children no longer need me," with a brave if tremendous smile, "and you may have met any number of more charming ladies before that time. No, Stanley, just because I love you so, I'm going to insist that you're free."

A moment of tense silence, the warm air playing sweetly about them; then the boy leaned to the girl with a look that could not be denied.

"Kiss me just once, Mary?" he whispered, and with sudden passion she pressed a fervent caress on the lips that met hers so hungrily. The baby's head interfered somewhat; but the lad's arms inclosed the girl's figure, baby and all, in an embrace that almost came to life. Then Mary drew herself away quietly, hushed the stirring, fretting infant, and slipped her cold little right hand, roughened by household cares, into his own.

"Good-by, Stanley!" she murmured "Good-by, good luck, and God bless you! Write me as often as you like."

"You'll be faithful, Mary? You'll wait for me until you're ready to marry me?" he swiftly responded.

"You won't marry any other fellow because he can come and live here with the children and your father? You won't stop loving me because I'm not here?"

He was halfway down the steps now, and the girl's smile followed him like a benediction. "I shan't forget, and I shall be always faithful, Stanley," she assured him. "It's for your own sake that I leave you free."

"But you don't leave me free?" was his impulsive protestation. "I'm not free, Mary, and you know it! My heart's all yours, and always shall be! Haven't I told you that I'm engaged to you whether you're engaged to me or not? I'm your promised husband, even if you're not my promised wife!"