

PRETTY MISS NEVILLE

BY E. M. COOPER

CHAPTER XXXIX

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE

"To be, or not to be, that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing, end them?" Hamlet.

For some time after Mrs. Vane's departure I missed her dreadfully; I had no one to whom I could open my heart, and my mind was in a state of miserable confusion. What had possessed me to accept Major Percival? was a question I was asking myself by night and by day.

With my aunt's sanction—never! This match was for my good, and although I appeared indifferent to my own interests she was not. It was for my happiness; and when people think they have your welfare in view how firm they can be! Auntie was adamant. I turned to uncle; he was pitiless as Fate. As a last resource I applied to Major Percival, feeling my way with a few vague little generalities and distant allusions, then broad hints; but all were alike ineffectual.

"You are looking uncommonly well this morning, Nora," he said, gazing at me approvingly. "Nothing suits you so well as white. In your white gown, with this green background, you look—like—let me see—like one of those lilies we are pale; than you used to be," he added, reverently, rolling a cigarette between his forefinger and thumb.

"Am I?—Major Percival, I want to say something to you, and I don't know how to say it; but I must speak," I said, in a hurried, husky voice. "I wish—to put an end to our engagement."

"Your aunt and uncle are not aware that you wish to jilt me? You have not their sanction?" I shook my head; my tongue refused its office.

"Now listen to me, Nora, while I put the matter clearly before you." I cannot recollect all he said; but this I know, that within five minutes I was in a state of nervous excitement, my "ridiculous reasons" were scattered to the four winds; he was an accomplished rhetorician, and disposed of them with ludicrous facility.

"I had never professed to love him; with a warm liking he was satisfied. We were just as suitable to each other as we had been eight months previously. The news of our engagement had gone far and wide. His friends were delighted to think he was going to marry at last. My diamonds and carriages were in preparation, my relations had given their hearty sanction; we had gone too far to go back.

"That is easy answered," he replied, possessing himself of both my hands. "You are young, you are charming, you are good tempered"—"Yes?—you are without comparison the prettiest girl in India, the 'destroying angel,' as you are called, and I have made up my mind that you shall be my wife."

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"I don't believe you care two straws for Major Percival, and if you don't love him, don't marry him. Even at the foot of the altar it would be better to change your mind than give your hand without your heart. You will think me a sentimental noodle, but just listen to me, Nora. You know what my home is, not a very happy one, not like yours; I am palpably de trop, and my mother is most desirous to see me settled, as she calls it; well, I had an excellent offer, as you may have heard, a very desirable parti in many ways, but as I did not care about the man I would not marry him; I had actually the hardihood to return home single, to brave all my relations, and to eat never repented it—never; I still possess my own self-respect and my independence. I am still Nellie Fox, spinster, aged twenty-four, and bidding fair to be an old maid. Nevertheless, I would rather go out washing or charring than marry a man I did not love, and I would have thought that you would have shared my sentiments. Confide in me, Nora; tell me what is the trouble you have in your mind. Two heads are better than one."

"Nothing, nothing," I answered, with a hysterical laugh; "you are full of ridiculous fancies." Then, suddenly leaning my head on her shoulder, my long pent up feelings found vent in hot tears. Slipping down on the floor, I buried my face in her lap, and wept as if my heart would break. After a while I made a heroic effort and composed myself, drying my eyes and endeavoring to smile my long drawn sob. "You are my friend, Nellie," I said, taking her hands in mine; "never, never speak of this folly of mine—never, never love me; it means nothing. I dare say every one feels a little low and depressed when they are going to be married," I concluded, with a watery smile, as I hurried away to bathe my tell tale cheeks.

TO BE CONTINUED

ONE CHRISTMAS EVE

"Don't come with me, Sister. You would only embarrass me," Mrs. Wilkinon exclaimed playfully, but more than half in earnest. "But do tell me what to say to them. I haven't an idea." She looked down at the little French nun with an anxious face.

The Sister shrugged her shoulders, laughing. "Oh, it is your heart must tell you that, Mrs. Wilkinon. I cannot." She laughed again and passing on, disappeared into one of the many rooms that opened off the long corridor, leaving Mrs. Wilkinon standing alone at the entrance of a ward crowded with men, many of whom were crippled, most of whom were old and decrepit, and all of whom were penniless.

For a minute or two she looked about her shyly, at a loss how or where to begin. She had never before done more than send an offering of money and small gifts, but that year she felt that it would be a good thing to distribute her Christmas presents herself, accompanying each with a kind word. She had reckoned without taking her excessive timidity into account.

So she stood in the doorway, irresolute, embarrassed, and sorely tempted to turn and run away. Miserably conscious of some twenty weary eyes, she would probably have done so had she not looked for relief at the one man who was paying no heed to her. His beads had been slipping slowly through his stiff, horny fingers and as she glanced at him he reverently kissed the Crucifix and laid them aside. Then he, too, looked at her but without much show of interest.

"Thank you very much," he said, and as she lingered he rose with difficulty and offered her his chair—the only one at his disposal. She saw then that one of his legs had been cut off above the knee.

Mrs. Wilkinon took the chair though she did not understand the look of shame on his face and knew that he would far rather be left alone. But she felt that he needed help and that if she could win his confidence she might, out of her abundance, find a way to give him a fresh start without wounding his self respect.

With the help of a crutch the man crossed the room for a second chair and while he was gone Mrs. Wilkinon picked up the book which he had laid down when she spoke to him. She hoped that it might furnish an opening for their conversation. What was her astonishment when she saw that, instead of the light novel she had expected to find it, it was a well bound copy of Milton with a marker slipped between the leaves at the Hymn to the Nativity. "I see that you are fond of the very best. This is magnificent, isn't it?" she exclaimed when he returned; and in her enthusiasm she quite forgot that she was trying to make talk.

"Yes," he assented eagerly. "The first part is particularly fine. I used to—"

He stepped short, suddenly remembering that a love of the classics must seem strangely out of place in one in his position. Mrs. Wilkinon understood and she had sufficient tact to talk on as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "It makes very fitting reading for to day. And Craslow's too—I love it. But how few people care for these things now-a-days. Christmas has come to be such a busy day here in America that we have almost lost sight of the meaning of the festival."

Just at this juncture a bright faced richly dressed child about seven years of age peered in at the door of the ward, and catching sight of Mrs. Wilkinon, ran toward her laughing gleefully.

"Why, Eileen! I told you to wait quietly for me in the parlor." "Yes, I know, Mamma," the child answered a little crestfallen at not being welcomed more cordially, "but perhaps you were even hungrier and colder and friendlier. We have grown richer and richer but how could we enjoy the money without you?"

Pat was smiling happily. "You see Eileen, I lost my leg in a railway accident fifteen years ago. That handicapped me in the race—and I had not been a swift runner at best." The smile had died from his face and his voice trembled over the last words. "Before my sister had time to say anything he asked haltingly if I half afraid to hear her answer, 'Father—is he—is he with you still, Eileen?'"

"Yes, yes, Pat. You must come home with me now. What a merry, merry Christmas he will have after all these years of waiting and watching for you!"—Florence Gilmore.

"It is little Eileen!" he cried. "Oh Eileen!" He kissed her in an ecstasy of joy, but suddenly she sank back into his old chair and burying his face in his trembling hands sobbed convulsively.

Meanwhile the other men in the ward burning with curiosity and friendly interest, watched the trio closely and strained their ears to overhear their conversation.

Mrs. Wilkinon was unconscious of everyone except her poor unfortunate brother whom she and her father had followed to America twenty years before ever since. She put her arms about him, sobbing with him as she tried to comfort him.

"Oh Pat, we have searched for you for years! Every morning we have hoped that before evening you would come, and every night we have gone to bed disappointed. We have been so unhappy about you, Pat, dear, dear Pat—Eileen, speak to your uncle."

He took her little hand in his and he knew that you were Uncle Pat or I would have called you that at first. You don't look like the picture Grandpa carries in his watch. He told me it was Uncle Pat but its much prettier. All at once she smiled radiantly. "Mamma, I won't have to say that long prayer about finding Uncle Pat any more mornings, will it?"

Mrs. Wilkinon interrupted her prattle. "Oh Pat, why didn't you come to us? You could have found us so easily." He muttered something about being a failure and ashamed and afraid of not being welcome.

"But, Pat, you know that it was to be with you that we came to America—and then we couldn't find you. What difference could it have made to us whether or not you were making money?"

Pat did not answer at once but when he did he looked her squarely in the face. "If I had succeeded, Eileen, I would have written, but I have been no good—no good. I always hoped to get a start at last. I would have gone to see you if I had."

"We knew but too well that if you felt that you would be a help to us you would have come to share your good fortune with us. That only made it harder. We were certain that you were suffering somewhere—perhaps were even hungry and cold and friendless. We have grown richer and richer but how could we enjoy the money without you?"

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her children receive their first Holy Communion. There was one of the servants in the household who was master, and it was he who would row them to the cave.

The squire had invited many guests to the castle, and in those days the festivities were kept up until the 6th of Jan. The lady told the servant that she, too, expected a guest—a royal one—on Christmas eve, and that upon the stroke of 12 the gates and the main door of the castle should be thrown open in anticipation of his coming; that all the candles should be lighted, and that the minstrels should play.

Great was the excitement prevailing throughout the household that day. Many visitors were arriving, but the servants were awaiting the coming of the mistress' guest. The children, too, were eager for the appointed hour, but for a different reason. And yet their joy was somewhat dashed with sadness, for they considered they had nothing to bring to the Holy Infant that could be accounted a worthy gift.

They were consoled by their mother, who told them of the poor shepherdess of Nazareth, Morelai, who seeing the wise kings giving their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, wept because she had nothing. And God pitying her sent His angels to tell her to look in the snow, and there she found groning with the pure and white flower, fringed with a delicate pink, known as Helibore; and plucking it she entered the stable and gave it to the Christ Child. This is the only flower that blows through the snow of Christmas morn, and it is called the Christmas rose. It is said that it blooms only for the twelve days.

So the children gathered sea anemones and beautiful weeds, to lay at the feet of the Baby-King.

The holy night arrived, and the lady's orders were carried out to the letter, but still the Royal guest tarried. The squire, impatient for supper, asked from one of the servants the cause of the delay, and having been informed sent for his wife to explain for whom she waited. But, to his dismay, neither wife nor child could be found. The castle was searched, high and low, and the quest had all but given up the quest when the lady and her children entered. Their cloaks were powdered with snow and it was evident that they had been out of doors. The lady's face was radiant with happiness, and as she apologized to her guests she openly declared that she and her children had been at midnight Mass, and that they had received Holy Communion.

"Error was on all the guests' faces when her husband all but roared. 'We are not papists, madame, and yet you are liable to severe punishment if any of my servants choose to speak of your superstitious practices.'"

His anger knew no bounds. "Who is the guest," he asked, "for whom the gates were thrown open, and who has not thought it worth his while to come?"

"He came," she answered, "for, as well you know, it has been an ancient custom ever since Christianity came to Erin's shores, to open wide the doors on Christmas morn to welcome the Son of God and at least to offer Him shelter."

"Madam," he thundered, "I'll have no such customs here. I curse your creed, its practices and its priests! Where were you at Mass—at the Dripping Well, I'll be bound. (He knew nothing of the cave.) I'll have no papistical practices on my estate, and I'll give a welcome to your guest at daybreak."

After supper he called his steward, and gave orders that all the sweepings of the stables were to be thrown into the well at dawn—that weird hour when all Nature is asatir.

His orders were only too willingly executed; but a few hours afterwards, when the pale winter sun had risen over the snow clad land, lo! the fields butchers daisies and poppies; and fertile fields on which grazed numerous cattle and sheep.

ship broke the spell. He followed them at a safe distance, and from the great window on the landing, saw them hasten across the park, and take a path that led to the beach.

Then he remembered that it was the anniversary of his wife's death, and he shrewdly guessed that his daughters had been secretly attending Mass somewhere in the neighborhood. During the following week, though he watched morning after morning, they never left the castle.

But Christmas was approaching, and he was convinced that if the opportunity occurred they would attend midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. So when that night came he slipped unobserved from the castle, and made his way to the beach. The moon had not yet risen and as he had yet some time to wait, he sought shelter in a little cave. Warmly clad as he was the numbing coldness soon brought on a feeling of drowsiness, and the squire fell asleep.

He was awakened from his slumber by the sound of oars, and through the mist he saw numerous coracles gliding across the bay toward Seafeld. One was moored near his feet, and casting off the rope he took up the oars and followed them. Just round the headland he saw a brilliantly lighted cave, and to it all the coracles steered. Leaving their little boats on the beach the people silently entered the cave, and the squire went with them. Within a priest was saying Mass, and the squire was impelled to kneel in the rocky floor and join in adoration with his fellow worshippers—a vast, silent crowd, seemingly far too numerous for the little chapel. Gradually he became aware that those about him had been long dead. There were the friends of his children and youth; and there, in the farthest corner, were his father and mother, kneeling absorbed in devotion.

As the Mass proceeded contrition overwhelmed him, and his early piety and faith came back to him. The 'domine non sum dignus' he struck his breast with the earnestness of the publican of old, and cried, 'O, God, be merciful to me a sinner.'

They all received Holy Communion but him, and then they knelt in reverent thanksgiving. As the priest left the altar Gerald moved across to speak to his parents, when suddenly the light went out, and he was left groping in total darkness. Even the entrance to the cave was invisible to him, though he could hear the noise of the water as it broke in ripples on the strand.

Suddenly his hand touched something warm and soft, that moved. He hastily struck a light, and there before him was Lady Gerald's friend, the priest.

"God save my man; and what brings you here?" said the holy hermit. "Father," said the squire, "did you not say Mass just now?"

"No; for it is not yet the hour for my poor infants to come to welcome the infant Jesus in this humble cave."

"Then, Father," he said, "I have been guided here by the holy spirits." He then related all he had seen, and made his confession. He was still deep in prayer when his daughters arrived, and after them of the neighboring people. No one noticed him until the Communion, when he arose and knelt beside his children to receive the Holy Eucharist. They started as if he had been an apparition. They could scarcely believe it was he after all those years of heresy. But their Christmas joy was complete. The peasants' wish: "A Christmas without sorrow to ye," which would greet them on all sides in a little while would now be realized indeed.

The squire would have been quite prepared to sacrifice land and wealth, if need be, for the faith he had so long forsaken; but the persecution was less keen, and the renunciation unnecessary.

He became most devout and was often seen making the rounds on his bare knees at the Well of St. Brigit. He had a Calvary erected there, with seven resting places on each side for the Way of the Cross, and a large crucifix over the well. And his whole life became one of repentance, piety and charity.

One morning he was found kneeling at the foot of the cross with his beads in his hands, and his head bent low, as if kneeling the crucifix, but his spirit had flown to its maker. St. Brigit's Well is still one of the most beautiful of the lovely dripping wells in Ireland. It is situated on the wild, majestic west coast, and is a sanctuary of holy peace and devotion for the hush is only broken by the rejoicing of nature—the song of the thrush, the linnet and the blackbird; the drone of the bee, the chirping of the cricket, the musical monotone of the little brown frog that mounds like the D string on a violin; the rustling of the trees, stirred by the breeze from the sea; the echo of the surf as it tumbles on the sands; the scent of the lilac, the woodbine and the briar; and the drip, drip, drip of the crystal water as it falls on its bed of green moss.

A LEGEND OF CHRISTMAS EVE

ST. BRIGID'S WELL

I never pass Crugane Castle and its holy well but I think of its legends and its glories yet, though I've gone by late and early, I have never seen the quiet spirit of its repentant squire.

In Cromwell's reign of terror the owner of the castle abandoned his faith in order to save his estates, and in those days all the marsh and swamp ground that one now sees trailing along the Atlantic shore to the village of Seafeld, held fair meadows smiling in their rich green and gold, filled as they were with buttercups, daisies and poppies; and fertile fields on which grazed numerous cattle and sheep.

Old Squire Gerald had a great dowry with his wife—one of the Tatles, who, years before, had left the country and gone to Austria, and their descendants are there to this day—who, when she discovered that her husband had given up his religion, would have gone back to her own people with her children, and neither would she suffer priests to come to the castle. His serving men and women were all adherents of the new creed, and on them he imposed the task of watching their mistress and her children.

The lady herself seemed to be all ways bright and contented, though the squire would not allow her to go unattended beyond the castle grounds. But almost daily she and her child went to look their midday meal at the seashore; and from there she would send the servants back, and bid them not return until a certain hour. And each day a saintly priest who lived like many another in those wild times—concealed in a neighboring cave, came and instructed the children, and gave to their mother the consolations of her faith. The viands they brought with them sufficed not for their own meal, but for the necessities of the holy hermit. And before each dawn many of the neighboring peasants put off in their coracles, and came to the sea-girth room where the poor, devoted priest said Mass at the risk of his life; and where by his ministrations he helped them to keep their faith, and to bear the hardships and troubles put upon them.

Christmas was approaching and Lady Gerald was filled with anxiety to hear the midnight Mass, and see