

## PRETTY MISS NEVILLE

BY E. M. CROSSER

## CHAPTER XXXV

MRS. ST. UBS BRINGS US SOME NEWS

Yet the first bringer of unwelcome news Hath but a losing office; and his tongue Sounds ever after as a sullen bell Remembered knolling a departed friend.—2 Henry IV.

One morning our party at chotah-hazre was unexpectedly reinforced by Mrs. St. Ubs and Colonel Gore, who rode into the compound just as we were sitting down to table. Mrs. St. Ubs was in exuberant spirits; she beamed on every one (Major Percival especially) as she drew off her gloves, and helped herself to a piece of buttered toast. I knew by her air of supreme satisfaction that she had something unpleasant to say, and my angry proved perfectly correct. For a time an afternoon dance the previous day was the only topic discussed, and Mrs. St. Ubs, seated between uncle and Major Percival, was, as usual, pitiless in her criticisms. Two unfortunately stout young ladies were cruelly discomfited. "They were in themselves," she declared, "amplified to make up a set of sixteen Lancens, there being sufficient substance in each for at least two couples. If I were them I would starve myself sooner than attain such elephantine proportions; and it is positively wicked to allow them to ride. Where is the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals? where are the police? It is really melancholy to see two young women of such monstrous dimensions."

"I do not think they are so particularly stout," said auntie, apologetically; "at any rate, their handsome faces go a long way toward redeeming their figures."

"An acute and ill-regulated love-affair might have a happy effect. Love is a very thinning malady," remarked Colonel Gore, plaintively.

"Hardly worth while to break their hearts for the sake of their figures," observed Mrs. Vane, in her usual off-hand manner.

"Talking of broken hearts," exclaimed Mrs. St. Ubs, addressing herself pointedly to me, and accompanying her remark with a steady, significant stare. "I had a letter from Florry Thompson yesterday. She is at Cheetapore, you know."

"Is she? I did not know," I returned, indifferently.

"Captain Beresford is there too," she pursued, with an emphasis that was downright rude.

"Is he?" I again answered; but this time my face was a beautiful flame color.

"He has quite got over his unlucky love-affair. He and the same—easily consoled!" still directing her remarks remorselessly to me.

"You will be glad to hear that he has made a miraculous recovery, and is engaged to the general's daughter, Miss Ross. But, of course, you have already heard the news."

This little conversational bomb had quite the intended effect. It produced an awkward and embarrassed pause. Auntie upset the sugar-basin, uncle scowled at me, and I became of a still deeper and finer shade of crimson.

"An A polo-player, and a good-looking fellow, Beresford," ejaculated Colonel Gore, reflectively.

"Is he not?" returned Mrs. St. Ubs; "but Florry Thompson says he is greatly altered and has become quite thin and haggard-looking."

"Then I suppose I am to infer that he has had a love-affair, and been taking a trial of the prescription recommended for the Misses Parr?" observed Major Percival, with the innocence of ignorance.

"Oh, yes; he has had a very severe attack," returned Mrs. St. Ubs; "he was desperately in love with a certain young lady"—looking sweetly at me—"and she threw him over—at any rate, gave him his 'javanb' most effectively. But Nora can tell you all about it far better than I can, can't you dear? You were in the secret."

What had I ever done to Mrs. St. Ubs that she should put me to torture in this manner, and hold me up to public shame? For my tell-tale face was an ample explanation to any one. "Those who ran might read."

"Nora is a capital person for keeping a secret," observed Mrs. Vane, coming to my rescue; "and if Captain Beresford has confided in her his secret is perfectly safe; she will never divulge it to mortal. By the way, Mrs. St. Ubs, is it true that you are going home this hot weather?"

"Yes, thank goodness! You can't imagine how glad I am; how charmed I shall be when I see the last of this hateful country!"

"Hateful country!" echoed auntie. "Why, I always thought you liked it so much."

"My dear Mrs. Neville! how could you imagine any such thing? I loathe the very name of India. It has nothing but disagreeable associations for me."

"Really, I am surprised to hear you say so," put in Mrs. Vane (between whom and Mrs. St. Ubs a kind of brilliant guerrilla warfare raged), with a simple smile. "I always understood that you were born, brought up, and married out here."

"Plenty of people are born in India and hate the country. You may be born in a pigsty, but it does not follow that you are a pig."

"No, not always," responded Mrs. Vane, as if somewhat dubious, or only half convinced.

"Well, I must say that I like India," said uncle, rubbing his hands cheerfully, "although I was not born out here."

"Oh, you are a regular old Anglo-Indian," returned Mrs. St. Ubs, contemptuously. "You have been out here so long that you have forgotten what Europe is like."

"Pardon me, I do nothing of the kind. I have a soft corner for my native land, but, all the same, in my opinion, the gorgeous East is not half a bad billet. In the first place, I commend to your notice the rupees—"

"What rupees can compensate for being broiled alive?"

"Well, in these days of punkah, ice machines, thermostats, and hill stations, I do not think there is so much to complain of," said uncle firmly. "Can any European climate surpass the hills? and why should the natives of foggy England, frosty Scotland, and rainy Ireland be so excessively fastidious? Then look at our scenery," waving his hand toward our sandy avenue; "what a field for painters and artists! and for sportsmen, what a country!"—waxing enthusiastic in large and small game, from an elephant to a snipe, from a bison to a quail, and no game laws to speak of!

"Oh, if you are going to talk shikar, I have no chance; and I shall go," said Mrs. St. Ubs, making a feint of searching for her whip and gloves.

"Well, shikar has no charms for ladies, but it has very great attractions for most men. However, you, my fair friends, have every reason to speak well of India also. You are social divinites out here—"

"queens of society, with nothing to do but dress and dance and flirt, and receive universal attention."

"I don't agree with you at all. I for one, deny that we are one bit more thought of than we are in England," returned Mrs. St. Ubs, sharply.

"And, at any rate, you must admit that your beloved India is the hot-bed of scandal and gossip," she concluded, triumphantly.

"Not a bit worse than its neighbors," said Mrs. Vane, metaphorically seizing a weapon and striking into the conversation. "Take any small country town. Take an English colony abroad, you will find gossip and scandal just as rampant, nay, worse. I don't attempt to deny that there are wicked people in India as well as elsewhere. There are mischief makers and snakes-in-the-grass in every country," she concluded, looking fixedly at Mrs. St. Ubs.

"Well, I must say that I think people get on together out here capitally. They are more drawn toward each other than at home," remarked auntie, good-humoredly.

"Look at the wonderful kindness and hospitality one meets with. Why, in this large station there is not one hotel, none being required. Anglo-Indians have some good points, you will allow?"

"I allow that India has very eloquent defenders, and very fine foliage plants, and that you have a superb collection, Mrs. Neville. Come, Major Percival," said Mrs. St. Ubs, rising, and coming, and I will introduce you to Mrs. Neville's black caladrius. You are nearly as great a fern maniac as I am myself."

"Always at Mrs. St. Ubs's service," he replied, bowing with an air of great gallantry, and escorting her toward the garden with deferential alacrity.

The party thus broken up dispersed, leaving Mrs. Vane *à tête à tête* with me.

"She scored off you this morning, Nora," said my companion, nodding toward me impressively as she stood up and shook some crumbs out of her pretty crepe wrap. "She came here on purpose to fire that shot about Maurice Beresford, and it certainly went home. My poor child, can you not learn to control your blushes?—they almost amount to a disease in your case. Mrs. Stubbs is now employing that wicked little tongue of hers in retailing all your miserable peccadilloes to Major P. Ere this he is quite *au fait* with your dearest secrets, and has the history, revised and enlarged, of your flirtation with Maurice at his finger ends."

The same day after dinner Major Percival and I had the drawing room to ourselves, with the exception of Boycie Towers, who was lying flat on the floor, supporting his head on his hands, and deep in "Gulliver's Travels." I was well accustomed to Boycie, and he was no more restrained on Major Percival's conversation than if he had been a dog.

"My fiancé was lazily turning over auntie's large photographic album, and making remarks on its contents *en passant*. 'Nice little woman, Mrs. St. Ubs,' he remarked, leaning back in his chair and half closing his eyes. 'Very agreeable, and lots to say for herself,' shutting his eyes and enjoying some delicious retrospection. After a pause he lifted his eyelids suddenly and said, 'A great friend of yours too, Nora, she tells me.'"

"Oh, dear no," I answered brusquely.

"Well, she certainly said so, at any rate."

"Then she told you a great fib," I returned, hotly.

"Well, never mind, my little Nora, you need not be so excited. I am sure Mrs. St. Ubs is the last person in the world to thrust her friendship upon any one. I see how it is, she is a bit of a coquette, and you are in the same line yourself, eh?" pausing again and regarding me complacently; "she says—she tells me"—and he hesitated.

"Well, what am I, according to Mrs. St. Ubs?"

"The greatest flirt in Mulkapore," he returned, with provokingly distinct utterance.

"Story number two," I replied, scornfully.

"Well, as any rate, you are credited with a vast number of proposals. Come, make me your confidant; confession is good for the soul," hatching his arm-chair closer to mine.

"Not in this case," I answered with a laugh. "I shall not satisfy your curiosity. Suppose you go on looking at the photographs; you have not seen half. You should not listen to gossip."

"But you had half a dozen proposals, Nora. I'm not at all jealous. I admire their discrimination, and am sorry for your rejected admirers."

I could see that he was rather proud of my victims; he considered that they adorned his chariot-wheels, he having carried off the conqueror of the slain.

It was no use begging or coaxing. I would not confess, so he resumed his occupation of acting the part of critic to all our friends and acquaintances. Most of them fared but ill at his hands, till he came to Maurice. Maurice taken in half-length cabinet size, and in all the glory of his uniform. I would fain have skipped him; but Major Percival interposed a firm white finger, and gazed at the photograph critically.

"Now that's what I call a thoroughbred-looking fellow," he observed impressively, as if the original had now received a kind of honorable mention, a *cachet* that would distinguish him for the rest of his life. "Who is he? Don't know his face."

"He is Captain Beresford—my cousin," I answered, with all the composure I could assume.

"Oh, indeed. He was rather *epais*, was he not? One of the victims? Come, come, my little Nora, your face tells the tale your tongue refuses to utter."

"What tale!" cried Boycie, aroused by the magic word, and walking on his knees to Major Percival's side.

"Oh, that's Captain Beresford, Nora's other sweetheart! Awfully spoony on her—he was!"

"Boysie, how dare you say so?" I cried, with cheeks like flame.

"I heard mother say that he was in love with you, so there!" retorted the imp, folding his arms and glaring at me defiantly; and it's true, too! I saw you myself that night at the picnic—shall I tell? Do you dare?" continued this malignant urchin, looking at me with his head on one side, an air of keen, malicious inquiry.

"Tell what you please; it is all the same to me," I answered, recklessly. "You have nothing to repeat about me, or—oh—Captain Beresford that is of the smallest consequence."

An impudent closing of his left eye was the only responsive Boycie vouchsafed, and, leaning heavily on Major Percival's knee, he raised himself to an upright position, yawned, stretched, picked up "Gulliver," and then found speech.

"Never mind. I was only taking a rise out of you, old girl. Keep your cool! Your auntie is making some cocoanut rock. I wonder if it is nearly ready. I think I'll go and see."

So saying, Master Boycie, having made a frightful face behind Major Percival's back, put his book under his arm and lounged out of the room.

The purdah had scarcely swung behind him ere Major Percival confronted me, standing erect with thumbs in the armpits of his waistcoat.

"Now, Nora," he said impressively, "I must insist on knowing what he means. I allude to the little beast who has just left. I insist upon some explanation," he added, with a solemnity that was absolutely tragic.

"What he said was perfectly true," I faltered, gazing intently at a certain pattern in a Persian rug. "I treated my cousin very badly—I never told him that I was engaged to you until—until too late," I stammered.

"Too late! What do you mean?"—very sharply.

"I mean he proposed to me. I—"

"Ah, and you refused him. Yes, I have heard all that," put in my auditor almost cheerfully. "You refused half a dozen, if all tales be true; but you did not encourage him, did you?"—eh, Nora?

"I believe I did, Major Percival. You shall hear the truth. I encouraged him, as you call it, but at first quite unconsciously. I always meant to tell him I was engaged to you, and somehow I put it off and put it off, and all the time he was thinking that I was free and that—that I liked him. He will never, never forgive me, and I shall never forgive myself."

I added in a whisper, conveying the idea of mental sackcloth and ashes.

"It was certainly a great mistake"—pleaded with my humility—"you ought to have let him know that"—shall we say "admiration?"—was not mutual whenever you saw that his devotion was becoming too flagrant. I suppose his disenchantment is now quite complete?" asked Major Percival, suspiciously.

"Quite, quite complete, most thoroughly complete!" I promptly answered.

"Well, well, then, if I grant you forgiveness and absolution for your little flirtation, I am sure he may. We will say no more about it," he added, reassuringly, "only be more guarded in future. Do not ensnare any more of these good-looking gunners," concluding my fiancé, nodding his head impressively as he turned to a pier glass, and began a most critical scrutiny of his left—his favorite—whisker.

Having satisfied himself that he had not seen a gray hair, and that his

tie, collar, and *tout ensemble* were entirely to his satisfaction, he took up his hat and gloves, and with an easy farewell to me set off to join a whist party at the club. Hardly had he left the house when Boycie came stepping into the room on tiptoe, a large lump of cocoanut rock in either hand, and a general stickiness pervading his appearance.

"Well, has the old fellow gone?" inquired this artless juvenile. "Yes, there he goes," he added, and good riddance of rubbish! I say Nora, wasn't I a brick, eh? What are you going to give me for not letting the cat out of the bag? and such a thundering big puss!"

"Cat! Puss!" I echoed, crossly; "what do you mean? 'Has softening of the brain set in at last?'"

"You remember the night of the picnic to the tombs?"

I nodded. Had I not good reason to recollect it?

"Well," putting a huge morsel of rock into his mouth, and buttonholing me by his now free and most unwhipped fingers, "I was strolling about before supper, and I came to the big pool, and I looked over the edge, and what do you think I saw?" accompanying the question with a diabolical wink.

I turned perfectly cold.

"Why, that fellow, Maurice Beresford, with his arm round your waist, Nora!"

TO BE CONTINUED

## THE GREATEST THING

"Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Ralph read the words and smiled. Yes, that was the condition of the world as large, and the little world of the village of Moreau had no reason for thinking itself exempt from general rules. Ralph had never been outside his native village any further than down to the river, about ten miles away. He had gone to the Sister's school, had completed the grammar grade and had started to work. For a long while he had earned his pittance at odd jobs in the office of a factory, and had finally won the lucrative position of bookkeeper in that establishment.

He has always shown more intelligence than the average boy in the village, so much that the Sisters urged his parents to send him to a Jesuit Boarding College to finish his education. But money was needed at home, and Ralph's greater good was sacrificed to the absolute demands of his younger brothers and sisters.

His twenty-first summer was now at its height. The office was closed for the afternoon, and here he was, pondering over a little book of maxims and wise sayings. He had long been thinking—thinking seriously. He felt within him the craving and yearning of a noble heart to do and dare—to go out beyond the confines of his native village into the great world that was always beckoning him onward and upward, and to do the greatest thing man's powers could attempt. He felt within him the longing to be the center of a circle that would revolve about him; to stand aloft, the cynosure of all eyes; to sit upon the throne of greatness to be adored by all whose intellects were keen enough to recognize and whose wills were strong enough to reverence his undoubted superiority.

Strange to say, mingled with all this desire for eminence was a distracting, disheartening thought, Ralph was a good Catholic. And Sunday after Sunday as he knelt at the altar-rail to receive Holy Communion he had an unwelcome idea that God wanted him for the priesthood. Unwelcome, I say, because Ralph had all but given his heart to a pure young girl he had known almost all his life. That was why Ralph was so moody to-day. This old saying about greatness had been passed on him. He knew it was the greatest thing to give his heart entirely to God. And Ralph was honest enough to wish to do the greatest thing.

The wind sighed softly through the leaves. The birds flitted by him in chattering gladness. The sun wheeled through an hour's space of heaven, and Ralph sat there, the book still open and unread, his mind far down the labyrinthine ways of thought from which he could not escape. With a stern determination he finally arose and went quietly toward the house. His eyes were fixed and staring; his lips tightly drawn. There was resolve written in every line of his refined countenance.

He glanced at his watch—5 o'clock. There was still time before the evening meal. His walk lay down the village street some few blocks below his own modest home. These blocks he covered without looking to right or left. He opened a low wicket gate and slackened his pace as he entered a well-kept yard and saluted a black-eyed, black-haired girl in terms of easy though respectful familiarity.

"Busy, Mary?"

"No, Ralph. I was just reading that story about Eric you said you liked. Do you know, Ralph, I think what Eric needed was a real friend whose advice he could follow."

"No doubt."

"But I see Ralph, you're worried. What's the matter?"

"Mary, I've got something to say to you, and I don't know how to begin."

"Better begin right in the middle," she answered with a laugh.

"Well, I will. Now, don't stop me till I'm through, for I'm like a steam engine, all ready for a hard job. I've

been preparing a long while for it, and if you stop me I may explode."

"You'd better begin. You're exhausting all your steam on the preparation," she answered playfully.

"Mary, as far back as I can remember I have lived in this little town, working and slaving to earn an honest penny for my younger brothers and sisters. They are old enough now to look around for themselves, and I intend to follow the longing of my inmost soul. I have never told you, Mary, that I loved you. I did not know it myself at first. We have been playmates together, we have sat in the same schoolroom together, and we have grown from childhood into the sunshine of existence, hardly knowing that we were growing more and more into each other's lives. If that were all, Mary, it would be easy enough. I would take you out beyond this village and set you on the throne of womanhood. But at present, at present, I don't know what to do."

He paused. She looked at his quivering lips, his tear-dimmed eyes. His left hand clasped the back of the rustic bench, his right was hanging idly at his side. She did not dare to interrupt; she saw as once that his mood was a passionate one. And besides, she was afraid of her own tongue betraying a secret she had never dared breathe to a single soul.

"I don't know what to do," he continued. "There is God, calling me, calling me, and my heart knows it. I don't want to come. I know it is all strange to you, Mary, and I suppose you would think me blasphemous if I said I am now at the parting of the ways, where stand two pedestals. On one is God, on the other—You. Don't start so, Mary; I don't mean to be irreverent. And now the time has come for me to choose. True, if I take you, I shall not have to abandon God altogether. But I am not sure that I would be doing the greatest thing. When I kneel in the church and listen for the voice of God, I seem to hear within me the secret calling to abandon all, even you, Mary, and follow Him in the priesthood. Oh! If I could know, if I could have the courage!"

She waited for him to continue, but he did not. She looked at him, as his eyes wandered away over the lawn toward the house. If there was ever a look of heaven on a woman's face, it was on hers then. There was no hesitation, no doubt in her voice. Down, down, deep down in her noble heart, so far down that it almost made her scream with anguish, she crushed her own bitter torture, and came, like an angel of light, to this wavering soul. Thank God for such women as these! They are man's guardian angels and his true protectors. Mary touched Ralph's tightly clenched hand and restored him to the reality around him.

"Ralph, you ought to be the most thankful person in the world."

He did not answer. He stood there as though hewn out of marble. Instinctively her nobler nature manifested itself and proclaimed its superiority in the childlike submission of the man before her.

"You ought to be the most grateful man in creation, Ralph. Do you know, I think that is the grandest thing in the world. I have watched Father Livingston day after day, and have grown to reverence the priest-hood with the highest respect of my soul. God bless you, Ralph, if you have this vocation. What? You would dare to put me up against God and make your choice? Ralph, Ralph, for shame! How could I respect you, knowing that you had deliberately cast aside a vocation to the priesthood just to be with me? I should despise myself and in time grow to distrust you, lest you should meet another who could draw your love from me, as I had drawn it from God."

Whence did she derive the courage and strength to say it? Her own heart beat in discord to the strain her lips were uttering. Had she obeyed her natural impulse she would have thrown herself between her Creator and this his vacillating creature. Where did she get the soul to help this man before her in his wavering? She did not know.

"Then you tell me, Mary—"

"I would tell you to give yourself and God a chance."

"And go away to school? Begin again? I am twenty-one now. I would have to study for a long, long while."

"But the cause is worth it, Ralph. And you would have time to ponder over it all, and pray."

With every word she was tearing his very heart-strings. "Does she really care anything for me, after all?" he wondered. "How can she seem so cold?" Once he was tempted to ask her, but the word failed him. If he could have looked into her heart, he would have cursed the very thought.

"Then, Mary, we'll say good-bye to her."

"Yes, good-bye in the truest sense, for my only prayer is, Ralph, that God be with you."

He stood, the picture of despair. Beside him, every nerve quivering and trembling with emotion, stood a frail, pale girl.

"Mary, then you—"

He paused. His lips pressed tightly together. No, he could not ask the question.

"Then I wait, Ralph."

"Oh, Mary, I'm a selfish, ungrateful brute. I have been thinking only of my personal feelings all the time. This village has always been so narrow that it has even narrowed my own horizon until my world has grown to be myself. I did not think of you, so much as the angel you are. I thought of you only as the one per-

son, under God, that could satisfy my love. It was always I—I—I—I, and if there had been another who satisfied me better I should have cast you aside, totally disregarding your own unselfish love for me. I know it now; I am not fit to serve you."

There were tears in her eyes, and when she spoke her voice was husky.

"Ralph, there are things in this world that are great, and I should like to share them with you, if God so willed. But I should rather see you wretched, outcast, with every nerve broken, every hope shattered, every ambition crushed; I should rather see you wear your life away alone, unheralded, unknown, if only you were living a holy priest of God."

"But you, Mary! What will become of you? Even now the thought that some one else will come and claim you fills me with horror. There is no one fit to look at you, much less to have you as his bride."

She gazed out over the roof of her modest home. Her eyes, almost like those that painters give to beings of the celestial world, were clouded with a veil of moisture.

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pointing to a vacant chair, asked me if it was 'occupied'."

"The word struck me curiously, and I smiled. Then I raised my hat. 'No, ma'am,' I said; 'not if I can see well. May I offer it to you?'"

"She fluttered into it, and with a fetching smile volunteered the information that she had been to New York shopping. I bowed, glancing at the little reticule she carried (about three inches square), but, of course, I believed her! Then she volunteered another confidence, impelled no doubt, by my elderly presence and tell-tale garb:

"Reverend sir, do you know that I was an inmate of a convent in Montreal for nine years? As a pupil of, of course!"