

The Amiable Pretenders

By Eleanor Hoyt Brainerd



"I'd rather meet a nice man than see the Abbey," Priscilla Warrington admitted to herself, as she whirled down Piccadilly in a hansom and eyed the passers-by.

The sentiment may have indicated low tastes; but it must be urged in extenuation that, during two months on the Continent, Priscilla had met many beautiful cathedrals, and no nice men. Not that the men had been unappreciative. From Naples to Berlin, from Budapest to Paris, resplendent officers, roystering students, gallant citizens of many types, had invited her smiles; but she had not dared to smile.

"In our country," she explained, when writing to a home friend, "one knows that a man will stop when one crosses one's fingers and says 'King's X'; but I doubt, I seriously doubt, whether these heavenly angels, in comic-opera clothes, understand the rules of the game."

And so, being a wise young woman, with a wholesome respect for unknown explosives as well as a mighty curiosity concerning them, Miss Warrington had, while traveling, restricted her smiles to the ranks of bell boys, waiters, and porters, and had eliminated from her calculations all men who could not be tipped. The small coin of the realm, so she found, furnished an excellent line of demarcation. Now, at the end of June, Priscilla was established in England, and was finding difficulty in keeping her smiles from becoming catholic. As she looked from her cab, she reflected that there was something very satisfying about tweeds and bowlers, after a surfeit of uniforms and caps. These big, sturdy men, with the strong mouths and the boyish eyes, reminded her of the dear, safe, comfortable men at home. They looked as though they might know the rules of the game and abide by them.

"But I don't know any of the creatures," sighed Priscilla; then she brightened. Weren't the rest of her party well under way for Windsor? Hadn't she a whole, smiling June day all to herself? Wasn't she wearing her smartest frock and hat in honor of the Clarksons, with whom she was going to have tea, after seeing the Abbey and St. Margaret's?

"Stop at St. Margaret's first," she said blithely to the cabby, as he turned into Westminster; and when he drew up before the church and she stepped out with a froufrou of chiffons, she signed to him to wait. Extravagance, of course; but this was a day for extravagance.

The slender figure was swallowed by the old gray doorway. Inside the church there was a shadowy quiet, rose perfumed. A few tourists buzzed about, under the eye of a dignified verger, but Priscilla did not join them. She was a mercurial young woman, prone to shifting moods; and now, all of a sudden, she felt distinctly "churchy." The word is her own; but it describes well enough the vague, yearning emotionalism which prompted her to slip into an out-of-the-way pew and drop upon her knees. When she rose the tourists had vanished, but a group of fashionably dressed folk had replaced them, and others were drifting in.

"There's going to be a service," thought Priscilla, still in soulful mood. "I believe I'll stay for it."

She settled back in her seat; but, gradually, she realized that the character of the gathering was scarcely devout. Everybody seemed to know everybody else, and conversation, though subdued, flowed freely. The girl's brain searched and found the answer to the riddle. A wedding!

A very swell wedding! All outsiders, save her, had been shooed out of the church; but she had been overlooked. Of course she was an intruder; but leaving now would be in the nature of looking a gift horse in the mouth; so she stayed until the ceremony had been performed, the bridal party had trailed down the aisle, and the crowd was preening itself for flight. Then she passed out into the sunlight, through the ranks to which she did not belong.

Motors and carriages galore were in waiting. One by one, they received their aristocratic freight and rolled away; and, as Priscilla stood watching, a hansom forced its way in between a big Panhard and a luxurious victoria and a smiling jehu beckoned to her. She stepped into the cab, the driver cracked his whip, and they were off in the wake of the coroneted carriages and the gorgeous cars. The cabman waited for no order, and in her excitement she overlooked the fact that the Abbey was still unseen and that she had not given the Clarksons' address. Not until the procession turned off from Pall Mall and was bowling along past Green Park did it dawn upon her that she was still attending the wedding. The guests were all going on to the reception, and the driver had taken it for granted that she was one of the elect. Her hand went hastily up toward the little window in the top of the cab,

hesitated, stopped short, dropped back into her lap. It would be fun to see where the bride lived. The procession halted. Far down the line guests were leaving their carriages and mounting the steps of a big imposing house. Now was the time for escape—not now; the street was blocked. It would be necessary to stay in line and follow the empty vehicles to the first corner beyond the house. Little by little, the cab jerked its way toward the spot where the awning and the carpet ran down to the curb.

"Why not?" A flush came into Priscilla's cheeks, a sparkle into her eyes. Why not? All her traditions, inherited and acquired, rose to offer conclusive answers to the question; but she put them aside. Even the veriest Puritan may have his moment of madness. Priscilla's was upon her. The spirit of adventure had her in its grip, and she flung the proprieties, the deencies, to the wind. In so large a crowd, who would ever know? She had always wanted to do something really shocking. Here was her golden opportunity. The fates had cast it at her feet.

The cab was stopping, a magnificent being in livery was opening the doors, the time for hesitation was past.



"I don't belong in there. I wasn't invited."

A young person, with the air of a Vere de Vere, paid and dismissed a mildly intoxicated cabman, trailed an unmistakably Parisian frock along the crimson carpet, and ran the gauntlet of more magnificent beings in livery.

A moment later she found herself alone in a crowd and awake to her iniquity. Now that she stopped to think, the thing was horrible, an offense against every law of good breeding. She must escape. Panic descended upon her; she started toward the door, and, at that moment, a pleasant masculine voice drew into her ear, "Awful crush, isn't it?"

Priscilla gave a little gasp of terror. Guilt was written upon every line of her face, but the man with the admiring eyes did not seem to notice her dismay.

"Lady Mary makes an attractive bride," he was saying when the culprit regained her self-possession sufficiently to listen. "They say the old Duke has been very keen about this match. He does look pleased, doesn't he? Do you know, you are looking a bit fagged. Can I get you anything?"

"Fagged!" Prostrated was the more adequate word; and yet—and yet—a returning joy of life was making itself felt in Priscilla's heart. Had she not said she would rather meet a nice man than see the Abbey? Well, she had not seen the Abbey; but here was a man, and indications pointed to his being "nice." Priscilla's spirits rose. He seemed like a direct answer to prayer; and, though undeserving, one need not be unappreciative. And so she smiled at him, deliberately, radiantly, fully realizing that he was not bell boy nor waiter nor porter, quite convinced that she would not be allowed to tip him for service rendered. He caught the smile and exchanged another for it.

"So hungry as that?" he asked "Famished."

He took possession of her, steered her through the crowd, found a seat for her in a little morning room out of the confusion, and left her there while he went on forage. She nestled back comfortably among the cushions and watched him hurrying down the hall. Even his back was likable, such a fine straight, broad-shouldered, capable sort of a back. There was a man who would get the best of whatever lay beyond the dining-room doors. And yet there was a theory that the way of the transgressor was hard! Priscilla shook her head. The way of the transgressor, like the descent to Avernus, was easy; and so it seemed—joyous, withal.

The Nice Man was back in a few moments, bearing plunder that justified belief in him.

"The best I could do, short of reaching scores of England's noblest and felling the buffet over their bodies," he said gayly.

"It looks delicious," Priscilla murmured; but, unexpectedly, a scruple had come out from under the anesthetic which had overwhelmed it, with all of its kind, and was assuring the hungry young woman that she couldn't possibly eat the food of hosts who did not even know her. When it came to the breaking of bread—well, having swallowed a camel, one ought not to strain at a gnat; but every wrongdoer draws a line somewhere. Now, the Nice Man was different. He hadn't actually been provided by the Duke. There would be no mortal sin against the laws of hospitality in appropriating him, so long as he himself was willing.

Apparently, the Nice Man had no curiosity in regard to the girl's name or home or friends. That she had brown eyes, with golden lights in them, and brown hair with distracting ripples