

# A Question of Credentials

By HARRIET GAYLORD

It was nearly eleven when Nora Vincent paused in the doorway of the Russell Hotel and looked uncertainly at her watch.

"Shall I call you a cab, miss?" asked the stalwart porter.

"I was going to Westminster Abbey," said Nora doubtfully, "but it's really too late, isn't it?"

Nora was adorably careless. She and her mother had arrived in London late the night before; they were travelling without a maid; it had been unusually hard to find gloves that were mates when she was dressing, and by actual count she had had to sew on five buttons. Even now she was frantically tugging one long, wrinkled glove above her elbow as she smiled appealingly at the porter. Nora "had a way with her," where any male man was concerned, from royalty, before whom she had recently made her bow, to the uncouth Hungarian miners in Montana who grinned their sheepish devotion to the daughter of the "Boss." Perhaps neither the tawny, wavy mass of hair, nor the appealing brown eyes, nor the merry mouth and upturned chin, nor the voice which wooed protection and made a man feel that there was no height of chivalry unattainable, given the moment and the hope of this girl for a lifetime; perhaps no one of these alone sufficed to explain the inevitable capitulation, but the combination invariably proved deadly fatal.

"I am afraid you would be rather late, miss, but there's always sure to be people late at Westminster." Somehow he did not want to have her disappointed.

She hesitated.

"But I could go to Westminster next Sunday and be ready on time, couldn't I?" Nora always expected hope to triumph over experience. "And to-day I might go somewhere near here, don't you think? Isn't there some very interesting church that I really ought to see?"

"Have you ever been to the Foundling Hospital, miss?"

"Why, no; and I've heard of it so many times. I'd love to go there. Is it near?"

"Just around the corner in Guilford-street." They were standing on the curb, and he pointed to the left. "Just straight on. You couldn't miss it. They have a very nice service and music there every Sunday morning, miss, and you will be quite in time."

"Oh, thank you so much. I know I shall enjoy it." Nora always addressed subordinates as if they were her equals, but they were not less conscious of the gulf between them, and never dared presume.

Light hearted, glad to be again in dear old London, with graceful, lithe walk she turned into Guilford-street just too late to see a cab drive up behind her, laden with luggage. A young man leaped out, gave hurried directions to the driver, passing him even his umbrella and overcoat, then swung into an easy pace behind Nora. He was tall, with good shoulders, and just now there was a curiously alert, triumphant expression on his fine, strong face.

They passed with the others through the great gateway and up the long path, Nora wholly unconscious of her attendant. When she reached the entrance and saw the man standing there with the plate for alms, she opened her purse. Alas! not even a sixpence lurked within. She stepped to one side and shook the purse upside down upon her palm. In vain! She had changed her money to a

new purse the night before, and in her hurry this morning had seized her old daily companion from the debris on her dressing-table.

"Do allow a compatriot to supply your need," said a masculine voice at her elbow. "I brought my purse with me to-day for just such an exigency."

Nora looked with startled eyes into the face of the tall young man, and evidently liked what she read there. She smiled, and for a reason known only to herself, blushed enchantingly.

"Oh, if you only would!" she murmured. "How much do you think I ought to borrow?"

"The contents are at your service."

"A half sovereign, perhaps—or would a whole one be better? It is for charity, isn't it?"

"I think a whole sovereign will be sufficiently generous. You mustn't be too extravagant, you know. See, I shall put two on the plate, and then you will owe me one. I shall tell you my name and address after the service, and you must be honest and pay your debts. As you are quite alone, I consider it my duty to act as your escort so as to see that you get safely back to your mother."

Nora looked puzzled.

"You really ought to go to church, oughtn't you? Should you go if I don't let you stay with me?"

"No. I shall go straight to Charing Cross and leave for Paris."

"There might be a railway accident if you travel on Sunday, mightn't there?" she suggested dubiously.

"That is highly probable, and we ought to go into church now. These people are staring at us."

"They think you are my brother. Perhaps we ought to go in, though, if we want seats. We shouldn't want to stand up all through the service, should we?"

"Certainly not. Shall we go upstairs?"

They turned and ascended to the right gallery, where the verger seated them close to the tiers of seats rising high to the ceiling on each side of the organ. Like well-conducted church people, they knelt and said their prayers. As they sat back on the narrow, uncomfortable wooden seats, he whispered:

"While I was saying my prayer I decided to show you my first credential at once. Don't start, please, or the verger will put me out for disturbing you."

He took out his watch and opened the back of the case. Her own face, slightly bent forward, with eyes cast down and an adorable expression she had never seen in her mirror, met her astonished gaze. A furious blush surged over the flesh and blood face of the original.

"Why!" she whispered. "That looks like me."

"Doesn't it? Do you wonder I wanted to know you after wearing that in my watch for a year?"

"Who is she?"

He looked at her penetratingly, then answered:

"Wait for the next credential."

The tones of the organ stole soothingly into the silence. Confused, bewildered, amazed, exultant for a reason she alone knew, Nora found it hard to think of anything but the astounding revelation of a moment before. She was a clever little actress, however, and with apparent coolness turned her attention to the scene before her. There was nothing ecclesiastical in the architecture of the chapel, with its unobtrusive little altar at the east wall, and the obtrusive reading and preaching desks at the west end.

She peered around a column at the children.

"Aren't they dears?" she whispered.

Tier upon tier of clean, ruddy girls' faces, surmounted by white caps, rose at her left, while on the other side of the organ the boys' faces beamed just as ruddily above their white collars and brown uniforms. Then the service began and the young voices rang out clearly in accord with the voices of the sextette choir. Nora's lip service was perfect, but her heart was a whirl of emotions. She had forgotten her prayerbook, of course, but the friendly verger supplied that deficiency. When the Psalms began, the man at her side dropped his hold of the book for an instant, took out his letter-case, and selecting one of two unmounted photographs, which seemed to her to be duplicates, slipped it over the page of the book they were sharing. Nora gasped. It was a snapshot of herself, sitting in the sand on the beach with a forlorn little baby in her arms, and the face in this picture was the one from which the miniature in his watch had been made. The latent soul of the mother sleeping in the girl had flashed to the surface, and the camera had caught it as it came. Instantly she recalled the moment when he must have surprised her at Atlantic City the summer before. A poor woman had been tugging a crying baby over the sand, and calling to her three other little children who were venturing dangerously near the surf. Nora had cried out:

"Oh, let me hold the baby while you go to the others, won't you?" and the child had nestled contentedly into her arms. The next day she and her mother had left for New York, and two days later they had sailed for a year abroad.

She turned the photograph over. On the other side was written in ink:

"For Nora Vincent when my search for her is rewarded."

"June, 1905."

"My second credential," he whispered, watching her keenly.

"Haven't you any you secured honestly?" she whispered back.

"Yes. Wait for the next."

"And meanwhile you might remember that you are in church," she suggested reprovingly.

But it was not so easy to remember that herself. Brain and heart were in a whirl.

"If he only knew!" she thought. "If I only dared to tell him! Doesn't it seem unbelievable? But, oh! I am in church. I must be good."

They knelt, and she peeped across to the little boys with red ties in the front row. Their hands were held palms together, their eyes were closed, their faces were solemn and cherubic. The little girls were holding their white aprons before their eyes, their brown arms pressed tightly against their breasts. They all looked so young, so innocent, so disciplined to monotony. It was beautiful, and perhaps they were as happy as they knew now to be, but oh! why was life so uneven? Why weren't they as happy as she, Nora Vincent, was? Why must they be just foundlings in an asylum, while she was the richest, happiest girl in all the world?

The sermon—she didn't hear the sermon. All she could hear was just a clump! clump! clump! somewhere inside of her.

"I must have heart disease," she de-

cided. "I don't want to die just yet. I want the next credential."

At last the service was over, and they rose from their knees.

"I think you must keep this for me until I reach the hotel," she murmured, passing him the photograph. "You see, I haven't any pocket, and it wouldn't be nice of me to crush it after you had been so good as to give it to me, would it?"

"There are only two in existence," he answered as he placed it back in his case. "Yours and mine, and the negative is destroyed."

"But don't you think it would have been more courteous to ask my permission?" she queried as they reached the top of the stairs.

"A girl doesn't often look as you looked at that moment. It was not possible to wait and risk the loss. Besides, I hadn't been introduced, and I hadn't made a collection of credentials. That was the very first time I ever saw you, remember."

"But now you mean to give me all three pictures, don't you? It wouldn't be right for me to allow a stranger to keep my photograph, would it?"

"No. I should be very averse to your allowing a stranger any such privilege. Personally I am not included in that category. I have known you daily and hourly for a year and one month."

"But you don't even ask my permission to keep my photograph!"

"No. I intend to ask your mother's permission when we reach your hotel. You are not of age yet, Nora."

"Oh! Nora misused. They were at the bottom of the stairs. "Where do you suppose all those people are going?" It seemed wise to change the subject.

"Let us follow and see."

They passed through a passage to where a stairway descended, then stopped as the children came marching down into their refectory and sang their grace. With the others they walked around among the tables, inspecting the long lines of faces eagerly intent on their Sunday dinner of cold meat and salad.

"It hurts me!" said Nora at last, with tears just behind her long lashes. "We ought not to stare at them so, ought we? Why have we so much and they so little? Sometimes it is awfully hard to understand God!"

"Ah! but think how much worse it might be," he answered. "They know nothing different, and that makes for happiness. It is a very wonderful charity."

"But it hurts me to see them, just the same." They were outside again. "Let's go home."

"And where is 'home'?" he asked lightly, though he did not fail to note her acceptance of him as a matter of course.

"We are at the Russell."

"And I was on my way to Switzerland to find you!"

"Oh! you are a very peculiar young man, don't you think?"

"Because I waited so long? I couldn't help that, you may be sure."

"No. I meant because you were trying to find me at all. It isn't customary, to take so much trouble for a girl you just see out on the beach, you know. But since you were coming, why did you wait?"

"First I had to arm myself with credentials, and then my father died. I had so much to arrange that this is the first chance I have had to come, Nora."

"Oh! and I joked about it! Forgive