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THE Secret OF THE MARSHBANKS BY KATHLEEN NORRIS W.N.U. RELEASE

THE STORY SO FAR: An orphan since the age of seven, Charlotte (Cherry) Rawlings knows almost nothing about her early history. Judge Judson Marshbanks, her co-guardian with Emma Haskell, arranges for her to leave Saint Dorothea's, and tells her that Emma has obtained for her a secretarial position with the wealthy Mrs. Porteous Porter, of San Francisco, where Emma is housekeeper. She is first to go to the Marshbanks mansion. When she arrives she dines alone with the Judge as Fran, his young wife, and his niece, Amy, are dining out. Kelly Coates, an artist, drops in and Cherry feels ill at ease in her convent clothes. Cherry becomes bitter when she overhears Fran and Amy make laughing reference to her and her clothes. Her surroundings are luxurious when she takes up her job with old Mrs. Porter, but after several weeks she finds life almost monotonous.

CHAPTER V

So Emma and Ferny propped her up comfortably and arranged the lights becomingly, and were barely finished as the clock struck the half-hour after seven, when Dorothy and her mother came in to preen themselves under the old lady's approving eyes; to admire her and be praised themselves. And in another half-hour three or four mothers were there, and quite a little reception was going on in the upstairs sitting room. At Cherry's suggestion the arriving guests were to be sent upstairs in detachments; she went below at half-past eight to find sixty of them milling about enjoying a succession of cocktails, and was reminded of old days at Saint Dorothea's and school theatricals as she sent them up in parties of six.

Unexpectedly, Cherry found Amy Marshbanks in the center of an admiring circle, and hated herself for the wretched little prick of jealousy that rose even through her newfound sense of ease and power. She looked for Fran and Kelly Coates, but they were evidently coming later; they were not in sight. When the time came for her to say to Amy that if she would please—would any four of them—go upstairs and say good evening to Mrs. Porter, Amy stared at her amusedly, entirely without recognition, and said in an undertone to an adoring boy beside her: "What's the big idea? Is Nurse telling us to say we had a nice time?"

There was a small library known as "the den" tucked away under the wide turn of the stairway. The door into the hall was open, but when Cherry approached it to answer the telephone in the hall near it she had no idea that anyone was in the room.

The voice on the telephone was that of an agitated gentleman who was bringing a lady up from Hillborough and had had the misfortune to break a spring while driving. They had sent for a taxi.

Cherry's eyes moved absently to the open door of the den, and rested incuriously upon a pair of satin slippers that in their turn were resting upon one of the tasseled taboretts that stood before the fire.

The wearer of these slippers, whoever she was, was sunk so deep in a great chair in the comfortable position she had assumed her heels were at least as high as her head. The frelight twinkled on the slippers and on the swirl of her vermilion velvet gown; she was evidently whispering, for Cherry heard no words distinctly.

Cherry went upstairs with her message that Miss Trotter and Mr. Buddy Brown would be a little late, to find the detachments coming and going between the downstairs rooms and Mrs. Porter's apartments, and any serious consideration of dinner as far removed as ever.

Emma said with her usual air of stern but repressed annoyance that this would never do, and just as the delayed couple arrived from Hillborough, at twenty-two minutes past nine, the eight-o'clock dinner began to take shape and form, guests straggled toward the tables and looked for name cards, and waiters began to serve smoking cups of madrilene.

It was at this moment that the couple whose privacy she had observed sauntered from the den. Cherry, halfway up the stairs to find Keno and ask the little Japanese maid to keep an eye open for a lost evening bag of silver and amethysts, happened to see them come out. She paused on the stairs to watch them make their leisurely way toward the dining room. They stopped once in the lower hall, the man speaking earnestly, the woman listening with a bent head, giving him only an occasional swift upward glance.

Kelly and Fran. Kelly and Fran. The sight made Cherry feel first a little weak, and then heart-sick. They had come supposedly to keep an eye on the younger crowd, to help with the party. They had really come to seize an opportunity of being alone and unobserved together. Of course! Of course!

All her bright, vague hopes for what this evening might bring were destroyed instantly. Everything was a dull and dreary blank now; Cherry hated every detail of the party, dragged herself through the next hour or two by sheer force of will. There was plenty for her to do, for the cocktail hour had been a time of great confusion, and the



Couples were leaving the dining room to dance for a few minutes.—

downstairs rooms were a scene of wild disorder.

During this busy, hurried time, messages were constantly coming downstairs from Mrs. Porter, up to whose room Cherry ran a dozen times. Her employer wanted blandly to know if everything was going nicely, was enthusiastic as to her own share of the festivities and would like another cup of that delicious madrilene. Ming Wo so rarely made madrilene and she had always been so fond of it!

The dinner party had progressed to the breast of milk-fed chicken with Virginia ham and mushrooms and to procure another cup of the soup was like returning to some event of the dim past. When that was accomplished, Mrs. Porter was delicately picking at some rich concoction of crab meat and allowed the soup to cool untouched.

Bridge and backgammon had been set out in one of the parlors now; the orchestra concealed behind the inevitable palms was playing provocative dance music.

Couples were leaving the dining room to dance for a few minutes.

—were returning to play absently with alligator-pear or frozen pudding. Cherry looked into the upstairs bedroom to find Alma and Hatty deep in a muttered conversation.

"They're doin' nothin' but makin' fun of the old lady," said Hatty. "Her champagne's good enough for them, and her dinner's good enough for them, but 'Oh, ain't she a scream,' and 'Ain't this a queer old vault!' and 'Lord, my dear, you let me into this; I never would have come.'"

"An' they says, 'How early can we get out and go somewhere and dance?'" added Alma.

Cherry was the more disturbed to hear the maids' views because they confirmed an uneasy and ashamed impression of her own. An impression that the flattery and kisses that went on in Mrs. Porter's room were not sincere, that behind the old lady's back there were patiently resigned sighs and shrugs, and a good deal of the raising of amused and contemptuous eyebrows. Mrs. Porter's dinner dance for the debutantes would be long remembered, but not with the gratitude she imagined. The words "horror" and "awful" and "lousy" and "just about the limit!" would be used more often than more complimentary terms. Cherry felt a sudden rush of resentment, of pity for her employer.

Stepping back into the hall, and going to look down at the lower floor, to see if the dinner was about over, Cherry was shocked suddenly to hear the sound of sobbing. Who was crying?

It came from Dorothy's room. Cherry went softly toward it, and as the door stood open a crack, she pushed it further open and went in. Dorothy, her party frock crushed into stringy lumps, was lying across the bed crying bitterly. She had a chiffon handkerchief pounded into a wet ball in her hand, and was digging at her eyes with it, and snuffling and sobbing like a heart-broken child of three.

The endless evening dragged its way to midnight, and the guests began to disperse. Mrs. Porter, when they came in to say their good-byes, protested kindly. It was early yet! Why, when she was a girl they had often danced right into the morning! But the pretty girls and the hoarse, polite young men were firm. Some of the boys were working, they explained; they had to keep early office hours. By twos and fours they dwindled away.

Cherry knew that they were all going off somewhere else to dance. She heard them promise one another to meet later. She heard them laughing at their evening's entertainment, and their "Whews!" of relief as they disappeared into the darkness outside the front door. The whole thing had been ridiculous and a failure, she decided, going downstairs for the twentieth time that evening to see if the bridge players were still at their game.

Fran was playing hard. Two other tables were deserted, littered with cigarette ashes and chocolate frills, scribbled scores and torn paper. She was returning upstairs again for the purpose of asking Emma if she could stay up to put out lights, when Kelly Coates came down stairs, met her halfway, smiled at her and

arrested her with a hand on her arm.

"Sit down here a minute," he said, immediately seating himself on the landing's top step. "How's it gone? Had any fun out of it? I've seen you coming and going and didn't know whether it was any fun for you or not. Get your candy?"

"Oh, it was wonderful, Mr. Coates."

"Not your first box of candy, I suppose?"

Cherry was too dizzy to know what she said by the way of reply. She tried to make it grateful. But merely talking to him confused her. The lost evening was suddenly aglow with color and light. She was to have her moment after all!

In her agitation she said exactly what she would have wished not to say. Swallowing hard and with a nervous, quick laugh, she asked, "Didn't . . . didn't Mrs. Marshbanks look lovely tonight?"

For a minute his expression was so odd that she was terrified. He didn't like her saying that! Then he said briefly, "Lovely."

Blundering on, in spite of a half-defined feeling that he would not like to talk about her, Cherry said, "I used to think she was almost—well, homely. But when you know her face you see that she's beautiful!"

He had folded his arms, in a favorite gesture of his, and was looking at her seriously.

"Fran," he said simply. But the word brimmed with some secret magic for him, and she felt its echoes reach her, and was chilled. "The Randalls are taking her home," he added. "I've got to be on my way back to Sausalito. But you—what kind of time have you had?" he asked after a moment.

"Rotten," she said, suddenly hungry for his sympathy and understanding. It was unwise, it was impulsive, she knew it, even as the ground slipped away from beneath her feet. "I hate that Amy!" she said. "That is, I don't hate her," she amended it, "but she treats me as if I wasn't there—didn't count."

"I suppose so," he conceded with a thoughtful look. "Give it time," he went on, with a little stress on the last words, "give it time. You'll leave Amy behind you some day, and then this will all seem very small-girl stuff. Patience, Cherry." His use of her name, his serious consideration for her ill-timed outbursts destroyed the last shred of her reticence. She was tired, excited, jealous, lonely; she wanted somehow to hold him, and blindly reached for whatever claim upon his interest she could find.

"No matter what I did," she said, looking down shyly and fingering the ornamental end of one of the brass rods that held the stair carpet in place. "No matter what I did I would never matter to you, I know that! You'd never think of me as anything but a girl from Saint Dorothea's who didn't count—you'd go on falling in love with Mrs. Marshbanks—of course," Cherry floundered on wretchedly. "I know I'll never be like that—dressed that way and playing bridge and all; she's been in Europe—but if I had clothes and money—if my husband was as wonderful as Judge Marshbanks—I couldn't—I know I couldn't . . ."

She stopped in a terrifying silence. She could not raise her eyes. As Kelly got to his feet she rose too, but still she could not look at him.

"I'm sorry," she said thickly, when she could not bear it an instant longer.

"Well!" the man said dryly, on a surprised breath, as she came to a horrified and frightened pause. And forcing herself at last to meet his eyes, Cherry saw that he was smiling, in a sort of annoyed indulgence, as one might smile at a forward child. At the look her soul died within her. Those eyes could never again hold anything but contempt and dislike for her. Presently with a nod and a quiet "Good night" he left her, descended the stairs. Then the front door closed and he was gone.

For the first time in her life, Cherry spent an entirely wakeful night. Her wearied mind thrashed over and over again the last episode of the ill-starred party; her weary body twisted and struggled in a physical misery that matched the torture in her soul.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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