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THE Secret OF THE MARSHBANKS BY KATHLEEN NORRIS

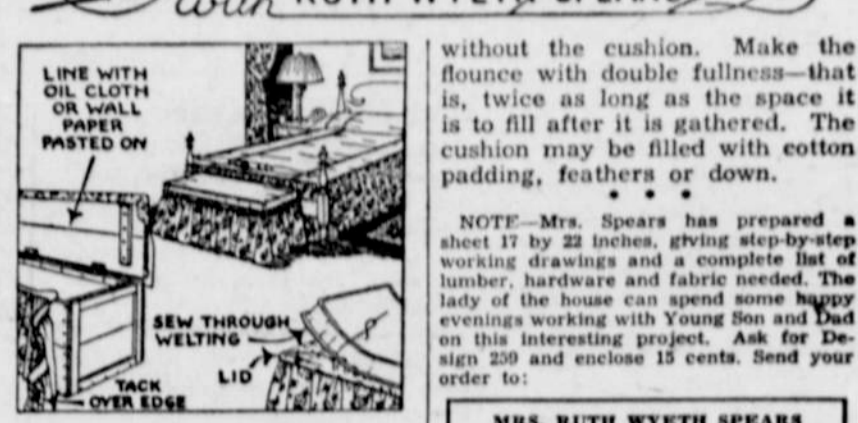


THE STORY SO FAR: Charlotte (Cherry) Rawlings, an orphan at Saint Dorothea's convent school since she was seven, knows almost nothing of her early history. Judge Judson Marshbanks and Emma Haskell are her guardians and when she is twenty, Emma gets her a secretarial job with Mrs. Porter in San Francisco, for whom Emma is housekeeper. At the Marshbanks mansion she meets the judge's dictatorial old mother; Amy, rich debutante daughter of his dead brother, Fred; and Fran, his gay young second wife. Emma tells Cherry that her unmarried sister Charlotte was Cherry's mother and she learns from the judge that Amy's father was also her father. Kelly Coates, a young artist, takes Cherry along so Fran will visit his studio. Cherry can see he is very much in love with Fran and is jealous. Mrs. Porter dies and Cherry goes to Stanford University, living with the Pringles at Palo Alto. Fran tells Cherry she has decided to do the honorable thing and see Kelly no more. Soon afterward he asks Cherry to marry him, although Fran will always be the "unattainable woman." Her answer is no; she wants no Fran in the background. Emma tells Cherry that she is not Charlotte Rawlings but Amy Marshbanks, her sister having secretly exchanged the babies. Judge Marshbanks confirms this, saying he has a statement Fred swore to on his deathbed. His mother, unobserved in a deep chair, overhears this, seizes the papers and throws them into the grate fire. Amy, twenty-one in a few days, is going to marry Count Gogo Constantino. Kelly calls to see Cherry and congratulates her on being Amy Marshbanks. Cherry is happy when Kelly says he hasn't seen Fran in weeks. Now continue with the story.

CHAPTER XIV

"I never guessed it because it isn't true," Amy answered, in proud distaste. "It is true, my child. Your father was a fascinating man. Women were drawn to him." "Cherry and I are the same age," Amy protested. "He was married. I don't—of course, I don't believe it!" "Cherry was born two months too soon. Her mother was Charlotte Rawlings, the younger sister of Emma Haskell, who was your grandfather's nurse for years—my housekeeper after that." "You are not hurting me," Cherry said steadily, interrupting. "You are talking of Amy's mother." Amy turned to Cherry, pathetic and bewildered. "What is all this, Cherry? What's she talking about? I think my grandmother's losing her mind. What's it all about?" "I saw Emma a few weeks ago, up in the mountains," Cherry began, speaking in a voice suddenly hoarse and weak. "She told me that—that there had been a mistake in—in you and me—in our identities. Amy, when we were just newborn babies." "Of which there is absolutely no proof!" put in the old lady harshly. "There was proof. Judge Marshbanks will tell Amy so if she asks him," Cherry was beginning, when Amy interrupted again in her turn: "You mean I'm not Amy Marshbanks, and my father's and mother's child and Grandfather Wellington's grandchild? But that's so idiotic." "You are right, Amy," said Mrs. Marshbanks, more quietly than she had yet spoken. "You are absolutely right, my darling, and I am proud of you. And now, girls, no more of it. It's late, and I am going to bed. Good night, Amy." "What do you suppose got her?" Amy asked in a whisper when they were in the hall. "She gets the most crack-brained ideas! Come into my room, Cherry. No, come on in a minute. Is any of that true? Was my father really your father, too?" "Emma says so," Cherry admitted, sick of the whole thing. "Uncle say so?" "Yes. Yes. He told me long ago. When I was here after Mrs. Porter died." "Honest?" Amy asked, between a smile and a frown. And Cherry could see that she was not wholly displeased with the idea. "So Emma and my father—" mused Amy, a deep dimple appearing in her flawless little cheek. "Not Emma. Emma's younger sister, Charlotte. She was only nineteen. She was just out of boarding school." "That makes us cousins, doesn't it?" Amy asked, still marveling at the strangeness of it. "No, it doesn't," she corrected it quickly. "It makes us half sisters!" Cherry was standing looking at the other girl steadily. "I think I'll go to bed, Amy. I'm terribly tired." She went to her room and began slowly to undress. Before she fell asleep she heard Fran and the judge come in, and Amy's voice in the hall: "Uncle Jud, could I speak to you a minute?" "Tonight?" said the judge's pleasant voice in answer. "If I could, Uncle!" "All right, trot down to the library, there's a fire there," Cherry heard him say, and then Fran's voice, "If it's that comic-opera count, Jud, be firm with her!" He followed Amy down, and there was silence abovestairs. Cherry nervously excited, got into bed intending to wait until Amy came up, and to gather, if she could from Amy's manner how the conference had gone. But she was too sleepy. Long before the light in the hall went out she was deep in dreams. They were troubled dreams.

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