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THE Secret OF THE MARSHBANKS

• BY KATHLEEN NORRIS •

W.N.U. RELEASE

THE STORY SO FAR: Charlotte (Cherry) Rawlings, an orphan, knows almost nothing about her early history when, according to the wishes of her guardians, Judge Judson Marshbanks and Emma Haskell, she becomes the secretary of Mrs. Porteous Porter, wealthy San Francisco invalid. Busy as she is, Cherry sees the Judge from time to time and meets the members of his household; his dictatorial old mother; Amy Marshbanks, debutante daughter of his dead brother Fred; and Fran, his gay young second wife. Cherry soon learns through Emma that her mother (never married) had been Emma's sister Charlotte; that her father was the Judge's brother Fred—Amy's father—and that shortly after Cherry and Amy were born, Cherry's mother had switched the two babies. Cherry is really Amy Marshbanks! The Judge confirms the amazing story but to protect Amy's mother burns certain papers that would have proved its truth. Meanwhile Cherry had fallen in love with Kelly Coates, a young artist (who for a time had been infatuated with Fran Marshbanks); and Amy is determined to marry Count Mario (Gogo) Constantino. The Judge is shot to death in his library and everybody is under suspicion. Kelly finally convinces Cherry that he is over his infatuation for Fran and she happily agrees to marry him. Amy flies to Reno to marry Gogo. Cherry discovers there are gunpowder marks on Fran's negligee. Police find love letters Kelly had written to Fran. She confesses, saying she shot the Judge during a quarrel over Kelly and the police take them both to headquarters for questioning. Kelly doubts Fran's story. George Comstock, a lawyer, writes Amy stating he has a document her father left for her.

Now continue with the story.

CHAPTER XVIII

Kelly, shedding his coat and hat, drew Cherry into the drawing room. "You're hot!" he said anxiously. "Feel all right? You haven't caught cold?"

"No, I've been near a fire. Kelly, what's happened?"

His hair was mussed; his eyes were dark with fatigue. He put his arms about her, and their cheeks touched.

"What a comfortable person you are, Cherry!" he said. "But your face feels hot, sweetheart."

"Has it been horrible, Kelly?"

"Well, bad. Yes," he admitted.

"But they don't believe he, Kelly?"

"They didn't for a while. I don't know what they believe now."

"You told them she was lying?"

"I told them the truth. I feel sorry for her, but I wish I knew what she's after."

"They'll not believe her," the girl said confidently.

"They didn't begin with. But after several hours—you know, Cherry," Kelly said interrupting himself, "it occurred to me for the first time today what a conviction means to an innocent man. It happens. It's even happened when it was carried as far as execution."

"Oh, hush!" she said impatiently.

"Yes, I know. But I'm not talking about myself. I'm just saying that there have been cases of innocent men being convicted. It's the damndest feeling. Evidence piling up, and men whose mentality isn't of the first order weighing it and misconstruing it and coming to their own conclusions. Hours going by and smoke thick in the air, and a woman as white as a sheet answering and sitting still and answering again. 'Mr. Coates and I had often said we wished my husband was out of the way.' 'Mr. Coates had told me of poisons, without ever mentioning that he thought we would ever use them.'"

"She didn't say that!"

"Over and over. She had them guessing, all right!"

"But what did you say?"

"That I had never had the slightest animosity toward the Judge, that I couldn't understand Mrs. Marshbanks' statements. . . . I only stopped in to see you a minute, dear. I'm on my way home; I'll be back tomorrow."

"Kelly!" Instinctively she clung to him, her eyes frightened. "Don't go away! If I could only go with you! If we could only be alone over there, out of all this, where it's cool and quiet, just by ourselves! If we could have a fire, talk and forget it all!"

"We will, Cherry. This won't last long. Before you know it we'll be heading for San Rafael, we'll get that license, and have lunch, and then go back to Topcote, and fuss around getting it ready. . . ."

"It sounds like heaven!" she stammered, laughing through tears. Then she raised her face for his last kiss.

May stopped Cherry as she was slowly and thoughtfully mounting the stairs.

"Would you go in to see Mrs. Jud, please?" the maid said.

Cherry's voice was all reluctance and distaste. "Did she ask to see me?"

"She did before ever Mr. Coates left. She was so upset we telephoned the doctor."

"Cherry," Fran said, in a tragic, quiet voice. "Sit down, won't you? Has Kelly been talking to you?"

"Yes, we were talking," Cherry said coldly. And then suddenly breaking, and sinking on her knees before the bed, "Fran, how could you! You know you had nothing to do with this all, and you know Kelly didn't!"

"I think I'm going crazy," Fran whispered, her eyes closed, her feverish hand tight on Cherry's. "I suddenly—suddenly wanted it all to



"I think I'm going out of my mind!" she said in a whisper—

be over—to be out of it! And Kelly had loved me, Cherry. . . ."

Still acting, Cherry's heart, opened on a sudden impulse of hope and confidence, closed again in despair.

"What do you think they will do?"

Fran breathed the question, not opening her eyes.

"I don't know what they'll do. I know it will ruin his life," Cherry answered bitterly.

"Oh, no, no, no! Oh, my head!"

Fran murmured. "Amy's here," she announced faintly.

"Yes, I know," Cherry sat back on her heels, chilled and weary.

"They stopped off here on their way to Del Monte," she said.

"They're not on their way anywhere until they find out the meaning of that notice from Comstock. I never knew anyone to show his hand quite as plainly as Gogo did!"

"You saw him?"

"No, but she came in—here a few minutes ago to find you. She'd been crying. And married yesterday!"

"She wanted me?"

"Yes. It seems Gogo couldn't wait to go down to the office tomorrow, and telephoned the lawyer to-night. Comstock's coming up at half past eight. He asked Gogo if he knew how to get in touch with you, and Gogo said you were right here."

"Tonight?"

"And Cherry," Fran said, opening her tired beautiful eyes, "about this other thing, don't judge me too hard! I never would have dragged Kelly in. They did that—these great husky beasts of men—asking me question after question!"

"But why should you say you did it, Fran?" Cherry demanded simply.

"Because I did it," Fran persisted. "Or at least I know who did!" she added half aloud. "Or at least I think I do."

"But you wouldn't say who did it to protect Kelly, Fran?"

"Why should I? Nobody's protecting me. I'm sick of the whole thing."

Fran tossed on her pillows.

"I think I'm going out of my mind!" she said in a whisper.

"I'm going down to dinner, Cherry," she added, "I can't stay here and think or I'll go mad!"

At dinner they all talked trivially by fits and starts. When the lawyers arrived Cherry and Gogo and Amy took them into the drawing room, and sat solemnly facing them.

George Comstock opened a long envelope and took from it another long envelope. He asked which of the young women was Amelia Marshbanks, and upon Amy claiming the title, handed it ceremoniously to her.

Amy opened it. The lawyer then stretched his hand for it, and she surrendered it obediently enough. He read it aloud.

"My dear daughters, if both of you survive until the day set for the reading of this will," it began. Cherry's head was rocking.

" . . . beg you, my daughters, who read this, to believe that it was only the conviction that my child by my wife could not possibly survive, and my hope that the substitution of Charlotte's baby in her place would be an act of charity to all concerned. . . ."

It was true. The expressions on the faces of the others told her; she was Amelia Marshbanks, Amy was Charlotte Rawlings. The long mystery had come to its end. . . .

The voices about Cherry seemed suddenly loud and confusing. She remembered saying, "Air!" and then everything was blackness.

Cherry awoke three days later to a new world. She had been vaguely, uncomfortably conscious of what was going on about her through long nights and sleepy days. Now it was morning.

"May, I feel wonderful," she suddenly said to the maid. "Was I very sick?"

"Well, we had the doctor come in once," May said, "and then yesterday he looked in when he was here to see Mrs. Marshbanks."

"Was Mr. Coates here?"

"Right along until this morning. He went home to get some sleep. He's coming back. Mrs. Marshbanks," May pursued with a jerk of her head toward Fran's room, "retracted. That's what they call it. She confessed and then she said he did it, and then she retracted that."

A great wave of utter thankfulness and peace to match the relief of her body went through Cherry's soul.

"Mrs. Marshbanks said she'd not been telling the truth?"

"Said she didn't know what she'd been saying. She and Mr. Coates had a long talk about it yesterday."

"Oh, my God. I think thee!"

Cherry said, in her soul. Her breakfast had come; she fell upon it ravenously.

Cherry finished her coffee and the tray was taken away. She lay lazily looking about, going from a half sleep into a real sleep and waking much later to see Kelly sitting watching her.

"Feeling all right?" he asked. May tells me you had some breakfast. Good girl."

"It's so good to see you!" she said with a little effort. "Don't—don't go away."

"You are the Marshbanks heiress. Your grandfather Wellington left you a pot of money."

"That was really true then?"

"That was really true. Your father, Frederick Marshbanks, left an unequivocal statement, and old Judge Comstock, the one who died, also left a paper confirming it. Your father believed you were dying; his wife had taken the other child to her heart, and as time went by I suppose it grew harder and harder to think of undoing it all."

"What's Gogo doing?"

"He's keeping very mum. But he looks years older."

"What will Amy have, Kelly? What money will she have?"

The next visitor, unannounced, was old Mrs. Marshbanks. She came in carrying her knitting, spoke quietly to Cherry as if this were the most natural procedure in the world, and seated herself comfortably near the bed.

"Amy came into my room a few minutes ago," said the old lady, "to tell me that you had made her a very generous offer."

"She won't accept it," Cherry told her.

"She may not have any choice," said her grandmother dryly. "She mentioned it to him, and I gathered that it made a big difference in his plans. Amy's married now to a man in whose country women don't count at all. He'll accept or he'll refuse things, he'll do the deciding, from now on."

Cherry's face brightened as Kelly appeared in the doorway. He spoke to the old lady, asking her solicitously of her health.

"Well," Kelly said, "I came in here with news this afternoon, ladies. Dreadful news, and yet news that is going to be a relief to us all. The mystery is over. They have made—or they are making at this moment—an arrest."

"Fran!" both women whispered together.

"Not Fran, no. But Fran knew all the time—What's that?"

"What would have been enough and more than enough for you and me, Marchioness."

The name brought back her color and her smile.

"Not the Porter money. But she'll have some of the money he left her long ago. And the legacy the judge left, supposedly to you. She is you, now. And what her grandmother can leave her. Plenty. Plenty, if she hadn't brought Gogo in."

Cherry's eyes were far away; she spoke thoughtfully: "Kelly, have I quite a lot of money?"

"You have indeed, Marchioness. Under a capitalistic system you have done well. I don't know how much. It'll take weeks to get things straightened out."

Kelly watched for a moment the pale cheeks and dropped eyelashes, and then telling her not to worry about anything, he went quietly out.

Dozing and waking, and sometimes seeing May quietly busy in the room, and once seeing Kelly's silhouette against the window, Cherry let the day slip by in utter rest and peace. But she was wide awake, and feeling more like herself every minute when at dusk the door opened softly, and Amy looked in.

"Oh, I wanted to see you, Amy!"

The girl came in with a perfunctory smile, a perfunctory question about Cherry's health. She went at once to a chair at the window and balanced herself on its wide arm.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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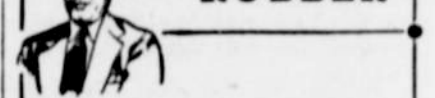
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