

**SHINING PALACE**

By  
**CHRISTINE WHITING PARMENTER**

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WNU SERVICE

James, still slightly ruffled, snorted like an angry horse.

"Very pretty. Very pretty indeed; but you must consider the fact that my—Nora has been accustomed to every luxury. Hardship is something she doesn't dimly glimpse. You're twenty-seven, and according to Nora you've accumulated only a thousand dollars. If she's mistaken, I apologize. If she's right, what, may I ask, have you to offer her compared to what dozens of the men she knows could offer?"

So it was war! The young man comprehended.

"I've a clean bill of health, sir. When I was a kid of nineteen and carried a message from a wonderful English girl who had stayed at home because she was going to have a baby, to her husband stationed in China (a man, by the way, whom you'd have been proud to introduce to Nora), and found the fellow living with—Well, I won't go into details; but it gave me a jolt which wasn't easy to forget. I've rubbed elbows with a lot that's sordid, Mr. Lambert, but I've hurt no woman. Balance that, please, against my depleted bank account."

"Well, Daddy?" she prodded after a moment.

"This is all very well," responded James, "all very commendable; but it doesn't change the financial aspect of the case. Suppose," he said, turning to Don, "suppose you persuade this girl of mine to marry you. What assurance can you give me that, unless I continue to support her, she won't during the next ten years or so, know poverty and hardship?"

"Only this," said Don, and held up two strong, browned fists. It was an argument more eloquent than words, but the older man refused to see it.

For a moment there was a silence so profound that one was conscious of the crackling fire and rain beating against a window at the far end of the big room. Then James said quickly, as if to get it over: "I suppose you know that Nora is not my daughter—I should say, my legal daughter?"

Don nodded.

"What he means, Don," explained Nora, throwing a perfectly amicable glance to James, "is that I'm not entitled to one penny of the Lambert fortune. So if you've that in mind, darling, Dad's giving you a tactful chance to vamoose gracefully."

"I'm still here," said Don, his eyes smiling at her.

Watching the young people, James stirred uneasily.

"Nora misunderstood me," he went on. "She often does, though I think she knows I wouldn't be unjust to her. If at my death her brother inherits more than she does, it's not because I adopted him legally when I married his mother, but because he's helped build up the business I started as a youngster. What I referred to was—See here, Nora, suppose you leave me alone with this young man."

A laugh of merriment bubbled from Leonora.

"Poor Father! You can't get used to this generation, can you? We're so outspoken! Don knows the whole story, darling: how when you went at the call of my poor, dying, deserted mother and found me, a gangling six-year-old whose birth record named you as my father, you took me home and treated me exactly as if I were your own, though you knew, with no shadow of a doubt that I was the child of—"

"Leonora!"

She raised her head, meeting his shocked eyes gravely.

"Well, Dad, it's true, isn't it? I

had to tell him. Don knows what an angel you've been to me, and that I'd do anything on earth for you short of giving him up. You really shouldn't ask me to do that, you know."

"Not when I believe it's for your own happiness?" asked James. Then, as the girl shook her head, he added: "Well, clear out, both of you. I've got to think things over. Clear out."

CHAPTER II

It was long past midnight when James Lambert went upstairs. "Thinking things over" had been a devastating process that led him back to his first amazing glimpse of Leonora, her thin little legs dangling forlornly from a straight-backed, uncomfortable chair beside a bed on which lay the body of her mother.

He had come in answer to a frantic telegram, the first word Iris had vouchsafed him since the note he had found after she went away. But he was too late. She had been dead almost three hours; and ever since (the woman who ran the rooming house said afterwards), the child had sat there, refusing to move, to eat, to cry, holding tight in one small, clenched fist a scrap of paper which she had promised her mother to give to "the dear, kind father" who was coming for her, and to no one else.

James never forgot the shock of Nora's presence in that silent room. While he stood below on a sagging, littered porch, the landlady had told him that his wife "was gone, poor soul," but because he was expected "the body" had not been removed; and added, remembering the little girl: "She's in the fourth-floor-back, Mister, and if you don't mind I won't go up. My heart's not good and them stairs is something awful."

James did not want her to go up. He was about to look upon the face of his dead wife, the woman who had betrayed him, but whom he had never forgotten nor ceased to love. He was vastly stirred—stirred and horrified that she had been living in so sordid a place. He had pictured her sharing a life of luxury with her Italian lover—had even attended the man's concerts in the futile hope of catching a glimpse of his beloved amid the audience. It was plain now that the fellow had deserted her—damn him!—left her to die in poverty and among strangers.

Ascending those steep and narrow stairs, James Lambert's heart pounded with indignation. His whole form trembled as he stepped into the gloomy room. Out of deference to the dead a shade at its one small window had been partly lowered, and, closing the door, he stood for a long moment with his back against it, breathing heavily.

So this was where his adored Iris had lived—and died! The man's sad eyes dragged slowly around the place, avoiding instinctively the bed where lay all that was left of something he had cherished. God, what a room! The dim light could not hide what seemed to James its dreadful poverty: the broken window stuffed with an old skirt; the sagging bureau propped with a block of wood; the shabby rug, a small, mute pair of shoes beside a chair.

His stricken glance came to the bed at last, and seeing that rigid form beneath a sheet, hard tears that had been suppressed for seven years, suddenly blinded him. More shaken than seemed possible after so long a time, he took one dazed step forward, then, dashing the mist out of his eyes with an impatient hand he saw—Nora.

Unprepared for her presence, even for her existence, James was for the moment without speech; something about the patient,

drooping figure—the soft, gold hair like that of his lost Iris, gripped him strangely. He came still nearer, staring down at the child with pitying eyes.

"Whose—whose little girl are you?" he questioned, though he knew the answer.

"Mamma's," said Nora. She looked up wearily. "Are you my father—the dear, kind father who's going to take me—home?"

"She told you that?" he asked, and his voice trembled.

"Yes," said the child. Then, quite without warning, her mouth worked pitifully, dreadfully. Her small, cold hand extended the crumpled paper. "She—she gave me this—for you. I—I'd like to go home now, please,



"She gave me this for you."

if you don't mind. It's bedtime, isn't it? I'm pretty tired." And then, her strange calm breaking, she wailed suddenly: "I want Mamma! I—I want Mamma!"

Her tears were the best thing that could have happened, for both of them. In comforting Nora, James himself found comfort. For those painfully scrawled words on the scrap of paper tore his heart. Deserted only a month before her baby was born, too proud to appeal to the husband she had wronged so grievously yet giving the child his name because she had no other, Iris had at the last turned to him, asking protection for her little Nora.

Nor did she ask in vain. From the moment when James lifted the heartbroken, lonely child into his arms, Leonora had never lacked a father. Indeed, the knowledge that Iris had known he would not fail her, was the man's greatest comfort. Nora was barely six years old at the time. She grew into a happy, sweet-tempered little girl who accepted the good things which came to her without question, and often without thanks. They were a part of life. The bare, cold room where she had kept her unchildlike vigil, became at last only a vague memory, a memory dimly painful of something she must have dreamed. Not until a tragic day when she was thirteen did James Lambert realize that the child had accepted him literally as her own father. He returned from business late one afternoon to find her sitting alone in the twilight. This was unusual, for Nora loved gaiety and young companions. He asked, puzzled and a bit worried: "What's the matter, dear? Not sick, are you?"

"No," she answered. "I was trying to—remember."

Her voice was husky, and, still troubled, James came nearer.

"Remember what?"

"Things," said Nora. "Things about—about my—" She hesitated, looked up at him; and it seemed to her foster-father that the girl had left childhood far behind in the few hours since they had last met. "Tell me," she said, "was Mamma really a—a bad woman? Aren't you my father? Is that why Ned hates me? Don't I belong to anyone—anyone in the whole world?"

"My God!" cried James, profoundly shocked. "You belong to me! Where did you hear . . ."

Then, as upon that other day of tragedy, Nora's self-control gave way and the story was sobbed out in those loving, fatherly arms that had never failed her—the old, old story of hearing the tale from some spiteful playmate. Perhaps, James pondered as he held her close, perhaps Nora had been growing a trifle arrogant. Ned had complained on more than one occasion that his little sister "put on airs." His father had thought the comment mere jealousy on the boy's part; for despite the ten years' difference in their ages, Ned was jealous of Leonora. The two had never understood each other nor got along. Well, he sighed, the time had come when his girl must learn the truth, though it would hurt them both; so, as tenderly as such truth can be told, James told her.

Nora had gone to boarding school after that; then to college, where she majored in music.

Then came Europe, a gorgeous, colorful six months to Nora—a lonely, dragging time to James. And on the way home, because her companion insisted on taking a one-class boat, she met Don Mason who ever since, James Lambert told himself, had been "eternally hang-

ing around the house," that is, he wasn't trailing off to some landish place where no one in senses would consider going. E during his absences the fellow written every day; and Leonora who took a Pullman chair for hour's journey, was thrilled by adventures in towns where the wasn't even a clean hotel!

"It is," James had confessed to Ned the day before, "an infatuation beyond my understanding."

"And if she marries him," Ned predicted, "you'll be supporting 'er all their lives, Dad. Don Mason is no good. He's a rolling stone. An what, will you tell me, does Ned know about economy? Nothing. You've spoiled that girl."

It would have been some satisfaction to the girl in question had she known that James told her brother brusquely to "mind his own business"—that he would look after Leonora. It was seldom indeed that his much-loved son caused this somewhat fiery man to lose his temper; but now he was worried, and Ned's well-aimed criticism touched a tender spot. So the younger man had gone home rather disgruntled to tell Corinne that Nora was "pulling the wool over Dad's eyes in great shape"; and that evening at the Country Club they both had been noticeably cool to Don.

Well, James pondered, perhaps he had spoiled Leonora. He closed his eyes as from the room beyond drifted the tender, haunting strains of a Chopin Nocturne. Nora was playing, and, much as James loved to listen, this gift of her musician father subtly disturbed him.

It was late when he went to bed; and in the morning he gave Nora his ultimatum.

"If I'm to consider your happiness, my dear, there's but one way out. I'll give that boy a job. I don't say that he must keep it for a lifetime; but he must prove that he's got the stability to stick at something that will support you. A year ought to show that, Nora; and you're both young. If at the end of that time he has saved money and shown himself even fairly efficient, I'll say no more."

"Even if he throws up the job next day?" asked Leonora.

Her father looked at her, his eyes a trifle hard.

"You think he would?"

"I think," she answered, speaking thoughtfully, "that a year in an office—especially in Ned's office, will finish Don, Father."

"You feel then, that my proposal is unfair?"

Nora glanced up, a wistful smile lighting her face as she responded: "Not as you view things, Daddy. But to Don it will be—well—a year out of life. What would you do, I wonder, if I ran away with him?"

"I should disinherit you," said James, and meant it. Then, as she remained silent: "Is that what you're considering, my dear?"

Don accepted James Lambert's offer.

"I fear I won't make a successful office worker, sir; but I can try," he said. And James responded with unfeigned heartiness:

"That's all I ask."

To Nora the young man was more explicit.

"Remove that worried frown at once," he told her sternly. "Your father's right, of course—that is, right from his own viewpoint. If I can't serve a year for you, Nora, I'm no good. We'll make a game of it, beloved—mark off each day on a calendar, and when the time is up we'll forge our chains and sail away together,

"Into the sunset's turquoise marge,  
To fairyland Hesperides,  
Over the hills and far away . . .!"

He kissed her, and lifting her chin to look into her eyes, saw with satisfaction that the smiles which had vanished from them were back again. His girl wasn't to know, Don vowed, the jail sentence that year ahead appeared to him. She wasn't to realize that his only reason for submitting was to save her the sorrow that any trouble with Lambert would have meant. For in his wildest imagination this young man could not see himself a part of the hustling throng which jammed the subway every morning. The thought of joining it turned him a little sick.

And there was Ned!  
If anyone had accused Ned Lam-

dear, you don't mind being a bit late 'll—"

She broke in then with sudden understanding: "Of course we won't go if you're used up, Don."

"But you wanted to go, Nora!" He spoke in genuine distress. "You've been looking forward to it—a lot. See here, would you go without me? Tag along with Corinne and Ned? Honestly, darling, I'm all in. Too tired to eat."

Said Nora, very quietly: "Are you keeping something back, Don? Are you sick?"

A reassuring laugh came over the wire.

"Of course not! But I haven't been sleeping well for weeks, if you want the truth; and last night was rather the worst on record. I didn't close my eyes till daylight, and disgraced myself by nodding in the office just as your highly efficient brother entered the room! The air was close, you know. It sort of drugged me. A warning kick from a kind little stenog was all that saved my priceless reputation. Don't worry, dear. I'll be O. K. tomorrow; but—don't think me a piker, will you?"

"Crazy!"

"And you'll go to the dance with Ned? Promise?"

She laughed and told him to sleep the clock around; but she didn't go to the dance.

Next evening the girl said out of a silence: "Don—it's appalling."

Watching her lover closely she had observed, with something of a shock, how those months of confinement had changed his whole appearance. It had been a gradual change, of course, and seeing him daily Nora had not realized the growing hollows below his cheek bones, or that the tan born of years in the open was quite gone, leaving his face with an unnatural pallor. Even his sea-blue eyes that made her think of sun-lit, dancing water, were more opaque, more lifeless; and his feet which always seemed to touch earth lightly, dragged now as he crossed the room to sit beside her.

"What's appalling, beloved?"

"You," said Nora. "I—" (her voice trembled) "I'm not worth the price, Don."

He kissed her, not pretending to misunderstand.

"I'm the best judge of that, dear. Play to me, won't you—something that'll make me believe there are things in the world like brooks, and birds, and wind on the prairie? I'm stifled."

It was the first admission of the sort that he'd allowed himself to make.

Nora played for an hour, lilted Gypsy strains at first that led Don's troubled spirit far away to the "green pastures and still waters" for which it hungered.

The music grew quieter . . . Old things . . . things one remembered . . . Rubinstein . . . Mendelssohn . . . Ah! Beethoven! The Moonlight Sonata, played as only Nora played it . . . So quiet; so sure; so firm and yet so tranquil . . .

When the last note of that matchless lullaby had died away, Don was asleep, his head pillowed on one arm, his face more peaceful than it had been for many weeks.