

SHINING PALACE

By
CHRISTINE WHITING PARMENTER

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WNU SERVICE

THE STORY

CHAPTER I—James Lambert tries in vain to dissuade his beautiful foster-daughter, Leonora, from marrying Don Mason, young "rolling stone" whom he likes but of whom he disapproves according to his conventional business-man standards. He tells her, "Unless a house is founded upon a rock, it will not survive." Leonora suspects the influence of her half-brother, Ned, always jealous of her since the day his father brought her home from the deathbed of her mother, abandoned by her Italian baritone lover. Don arrives in the midst of the argument, and Lambert realizes the frank understanding between the two.

CHAPTER II—Sitting up late into the night, Lambert reviews the whole story of Nora as a child, at boarding school, studying music abroad, meeting Don on the return trip. In the morning he delivers his ultimatum, to give Don a job with Ned for a year's showdown. When Nora suggests the possibility of running away with Don, Lambert threatens disinheritance. Don agrees to the job, but before a month is over, his nerves are jumpy, he cannot sleep at night, he is too tired to go out much with Nora, and admits to her that he feels stifled. Nora soothes him with her music. He falls asleep and his face is more peaceful than it has been in many weeks.

CHAPTER III—Nora grows quieter, and broods over Don, complains to her father of Ned's spying on him, and decides that rather than see Don's spirit broken, she will run away. She urges her father to put an end to the futile experiment. James Lambert is obdurate and angry. Lambert tells her that if Don quits she will quit with him; that he will be through with her. He adds that if she tires of her bargain it will be useless to come to him for help.

CHAPTER IV—With the coming of spring, Don is full of unrest and wanderlust, and takes long walks at night. One evening a poor girl speaks to him, and in his pity for her, he gives her money. A car passes at that moment, flashes headlights and moves on. A terrific heat wave ushers in the summer, and Nora refuses to go to the country with her father. Ned, meanwhile, insinuates to his father about Don's evenings away from Nora, but Lambert refuses to listen. Meanwhile, Don broods over the undermining of his morale.

A sense of joyous release possessed Don Mason as he closed the door of that hated office behind him. In fact, he stormed down three flights of stairs before realizing that he was six stories above ground, and paused to await an elevator. But as he stood there watching for a red signal, all his elation in the combat vanished suddenly, leaving an almost physical nausea in its wake.

For in those first ecstatic moments he had forgotten Nora.

Now, at thought of her, his own small triumph was completely lost in the knowledge that it would make things harder for her, make them, indeed, well nigh unbearable. What had he brought her anyway, he asked himself, save trouble and problems? Perhaps the kindest thing that he could do was to obey her brother's furious command and go away.

Half dazed, Don went out into the mid-day sunlight which beat down pitilessly on his throbbing head. Yes, he would go away—leave Nora to the life of ease and luxury that should be her portion. But (his fighting spirit rising) damned if he'd go before she's heard his version of this morning's trouble! And there was no time to lose. Already Ned and his father might be on their way to her. But he could telephone—prepare the girl for what was coming; and wouldn't it hurt less to say good-by if he did not see her?

Hot and breathless though the small booth was, Don closed the door. No one save Nora must hear what he had to say. If she were out . . . But no, that was her own "hello" coming across the wire. He said, making the words as light as possible: "That you, Nora? I had to call to tell you some bad news. A half hour back I lost my temper—knocked down your estimable brother, so—so I'm on my way."

There was a silence. Then: "Your—your way where, Don?"

"Anywhere—out of this cursed city," he answered, his voice gruff because the consternation in her own had made him a little sick. "Your father's right, Nora. I'm not

good. That's why I'm leaving; not because His Royal Highness ordered me out of town. Remember that."

"But—what possessed you to do such a thing, Don?"

Her voice was steadier now, which gave him courage.

"That's why I called you, Nora," he said quietly. "I wanted my side of the story to reach you first. I—I tried my darnedest to be fair, dear. He saw me talking to that girl I told you of—the kid I gave the money to, you know. Soon as I realized what he was driving at I told him the whole story; but—well, he didn't believe it, Nora. That's all, I think."

Don's voice was crisp, hard, brittle. Recalling the insult, hot rage ran over him like little flames.

Said Nora, breathlessly: "You don't mean—you can't mean, Don, that Ned called you a liar?"

"Not in so many words, perhaps, but what he said amounted to the same thing. Oh, he had it coming to him, Nora! I'm not even sorry, except for your sake. He's got the idea firmly planted in his head that after I say good-night to you, I—Well, fill in the story for yourself. It's not pretty, but it doesn't require a great deal of imagination."

"Oh, Don! He—he couldn't have meant that!"

"He did, my dear. I want you to know that I had provocation. I apologized afterwards, if that matters; but of course this puts an end to—everything."

There followed a pause, a noticeable pause before he heard her say: "Meaning—me, Don?"

He answered, forcing his voice to steadiness: "I'm afraid so. I can't let you quarrel with your father for my sake, Nora."

"Doesn't it take two to make a quarrel, Don?"

"Not with a man like him. Besides . . ."

"Besides what, dear?"

"Only what I've said before. I guess he's right—about me, Nora. He's shown me up in my true colors. I'll never be that important member of society—a good provider. I'm just a wash-out; and in the end you'll be better off if you let me go."

The girl said, after a moment in which something told her lover that she was fighting tears: "Is that what you want, Don? Are you so—so weary of everything that I seem a burden?"

This was too much. Don simply couldn't bear it.

"Oh, Nora!" he said gently. "Nora—my dear!"

It was the heartbreak in his voice that decided Leonora. She said, drawing a quick breath: "Listen Don. (It's all right, Central. I know we're talking over time.) Listen, dear. Have you had lunch yet?"

This practical question brought him a little smile, as one smiles sometimes in the face of tragedy.

"Not yet. Forgot completely. It's not every day I knock a fellow down, Nora! And it's so hot. My head—"

"Is it still bad?"

"It's fierce, Nora."

"Well, get some bread and milk, Don. You need it. (This call will set you back a whole week's pay, darling!) Then go to your room and pack. I'll be outside there in a taxi as soon as possible. If I'm late, wait for me. I've got to see you. Promise you'll wait, Don?"

What else could he do?

As for Nora, she hung up the receiver and sat quite still for a time, thinking. It seemed incredible that after all Don's patience and forbearance, this was the end! Another tragedy for her father. (How could she bear it?) Happiness tarnished by regrets for herself and Don. Yet there was no other way—could be no other way for them now. James would believe Ned's version of the encounter. He would be angry past all forgiving. Nora knew. Anything she might say to him would be quite futile—useless. A scene would only hurt them both; but could she do the easy thing—leave him as her mother had done so many years ago with merely a letter of farewell? Being Nora, remembering the refuge his arms had been to a frightened child who had watched with death, she could not. Her father deserved better than that, though he would be unyielding. Nora knew how unyielding he would be . . .

She arose at last, going up the wide staircase slowly, almost re-

luctantly. Somehow this home had never seemed so dear to her, nor so desirable. Passing her father's room she paused a moment, recalling the many times a little girl, waking to bad dreams, had scampered into his big bed for comfort. And now she must leave him—hurt him cruelly. Would he understand some day—forgive her?

Nora packed, slipped into the cool, dark dress that would be her wedding gown; forgot her father's picture (the one taken specially for her when she went to college); opened her suitcase and placed the photograph where it would not be broken. A queer, hard lump rose in her throat. It hurt her. She worked fast—fast, so that she would not weep and when all was done, stood at the door a while, letting her eyes dwell lovingly on every detail of the room—her own first room.

Would her father leave it just as it was, she wondered—just as they'd furnished it together for her sixteenth birthday? James was fastidious about such things. It was the one point on which they never clashed. What a time they had had over her rose-tiled bathroom! Her father had fussed. Each fixture must be the finest—the most perfect. The antique bed they had picked up at an auction in the country. How he had glowed over the satin-smooth mahogany—dear Dad! As for the rug—they had hunted the city over for that rug. It must be Oriental, James insisted, yet it must blend with the soft rose hangings at the windows. They had found it at last: an exquisite Persian that might have been woven for a queen's boudoir. Even Nora, thoughtless about money, had

blinked at the price; and her father had laughed at her.

Well, that was over! The girl took one long look and turned away. It was so dreadful to go without farewells. Even dear Martha Berry, James Lambert's housekeeper, who, Nora believed, loved her as devotedly as any mother, had left that morning to oversee the opening of the country house. How still everything seemed as she went downstairs! "As still," she murmured, "as if someone had just died here." Nora paused then, hand on the latch and said: "Good-by dear, darling home. Good-by. I will come back—some day . . ."

Her eyes were wet with tears when, a moment later, she told the chauffeur to drive her to James Lambert's office.

Don never heard the story of that interview, but, knowing his girl, he understood that she could not talk about it. For James in his anger had been unjust, the first time in all their years together. At the last Nora had said, her face curiously colorless as she stood with her back against the door:

"You are mistaken, Father. I am not ungrateful. I have been thoughtless sometimes, but I have never been ungrateful. Please believe that. I love you—terribly, perhaps more than I ever did before. It kills something in me to go like this—leaving you angry. But you have Ned, who is almost your whole world, Father; and Don has no one but me. Try after I'm gone, won't you, to see my side of it? Between us all we have done something to Don—hurt him unspeakably. He's lost faith in himself, and I've got

to help him get it back. Without my help he might never get it back, Father. And I love him as you once loved my mother. Can't you remember that, Dad, and—understand?"

Silence. A broad back turned to her.

"I—I am going now, Father . . . Won't—won't you say good-by?"

And still only that dreadful silence, a silence which seemed, somehow, alive with tears . . . A closing door . . .

It was ten years before James heard her voice again.

(Continued Next Week)

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