

SHINING PALACE

By
CHRISTINE WHITING PARMENTER

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WNU SERVICE

THE STORY

Leonora Lambert persists in her intention to marry Don Mason although her foster-father, James Lambert, tries to dissuade her. Leonora suspects that her half-brother, Ned, has influenced their father. Lambert offers to give Don a job for a year, saying that if the pair elope, he will disinherit the girl. Don attempts the work offered but becomes nervous and tired, declaring he feels stifled. Nora is distressed and begs her father to end the experiment. Ned tries to induce her to doubt Don. When accused of having given money to a girl whom he had helped in charity Don knocks Ned down. He and Nora elope and settle down in Maine. Lambert refuses to communicate with them, but sends the girl her clothes and \$1,000. Don and Nora go to Capri for the winter. Their son is born while they are away, Don having work on a London paper. Don is sent to Cape Town, has typhoid, and his work suffers because of ill-health and worry. They return to America. A friend gives Nora a parting gift of a Kimberly diamond. They buy an old house in Maine and remodel it. They are sent to California on an assignment for the London paper.

On an October evening nearly three years later, James Lambert went slowly up the stairs to a room that Martha Berry called "my parlor." It was a pleasant room with crisp white ruffled curtains at the windows, and a scarlet square covering its center table; a room as prim and orderly as Martha herself, yet with a home-like quality about it too. It was here that both Ned and Nora had brought their childhood troubles to be smoothed away by Martha's gentle hand. It was here (though he did not suspect the fact) that James Lambert, during the years of Nora's absence, had brought his.

This was Martha's birthday. James never forgot the date, partly because it was Ned's birthday too, and years ago they had celebrated the event together; partly because it was his habit to remember the anniversaries which most men forget. Martha was not quite well, and the fact troubled him. She had been the prop and stay of his household for so many years. She had mothered his children, and James admitted with a little smile, mothered himself as well. They must take care that nothing saddened this faithful woman as she grew old.

The door to Martha's parlor stood wide open. She was expecting him. A fire burned in the small coal grate, and his accustomed chair was waiting by the hearth. Martha was waiting too. Her work basket and copies of a church weekly which usually occupied the center table, had been put away to make room for a display of birthday gifts; a vase of roses from Corinne and Ned; a cake, her name in fancy pink frosting on the top; a gift basket filled with stuffed dates; gray knitted bedshoes; gloves; two books, and a lace-edged handkerchief, obviously yellowed from being laid away.

James, glancing at the table, knew that he was expected to exclaim and admire. When it came to birthdays Martha was something of a child. Now, though she looked up with her customary smile of

greeting, he saw the unmistakable trace of recent tears. It was a distinct shock. Never before had Martha's clear gray eyes been clouded. He said, despite his inner perturbation: "Happy birthday, Martha!" and producing a small, white package from his coat pocket, presented it.

Martha said, as she had said on every previous occasion of the same sort: "You shouldn't have done it, Mr. Lambert," and proceeded to untie the cord with the eager fingers of one who was very glad he had!

Those fingers trembled as she held aloft the beautiful gold chain with its drop of flawless amethyst which was James Lambert's gift. Save for a watch which Nora had

given her years before, Martha had never owned so valuable an ornament. Regarding her closely, James saw that she was thrilled; though all she said was to repeat: "You shouldn't have done it, Mr. Lambert. When can an old woman like me wear anything so fine?"

"Every day," he answered, pleased that the trinket had made her smile. "That's what it's for, Martha. And now what have we here?" He moved toward the table. "Haven't you fared even better than usual?"

This was another stock remark, and Martha answered: "I have indeed! My roses came early this morning, as they always do. They bring to mind the days when Mr. Ned was a little fellow and we had our cakes together, here in my par-



"Haven't you fared even better than usual?"

lor. The books are from my nieces, Clara and Isabel. Now I've more time to myself I enjoy reading. Cook made the cake, as usual; and the other girls gave me the bedshoes and that handsome basket of stuffed dates. Help yourself, Mr. Lambert. A stuffed date ought not to hurt anyone. The gloves came from my niece Clara's husband, and . . ."

Martha paused. James, bending above the table, had lifted the handkerchief. There followed a silence before the woman said, gently, her voice trembling a little: "The handkerchief is from Miss Nora, Mr. Lambert. It came this morning."

If a bomb had exploded in Martha's parlor, James Lambert wouldn't have been more startled. He wheeled about, exclaiming in astonishment: "Nora! You say this handkerchief came from Nora?"

Martha nodded. "Sit down, Mr. Lambert. Though it may not be my place to speak of it, you're all of a tremble. Miss Nora has never forgotten old Martha's birthday — bless her loyal heart!—though in other years, since — since she went away, sir, I have not mentioned her gift for fear of hurting you."

The woman arose, went into her small bedroom, and returning with a package wrapped carefully in tissue paper, sat down once more and resumed her narrative.

"You see, sir, it happened this way: When Miss Nora was only a wee girl she asked what I would like her to give me for a birthday present. I said, 'Get me a nice handkerchief, child, one that's a bit fancy for all mine are plain and when I take tea at the minister's

next week I must dress up.' I said it in fun, you know—as a sort of joke; but the child got one of my maids to take her to the five and ten cent store, Mr. Lambert, and she bought me a handkerchief—a fancy one as I believe you will agree. I have it here."

Martha had been slowly untying the tissue-wrapped package. It contained, James saw, a pile of neatly folded handkerchiefs. From the top she lifted one with a bright pink border. She spread it out. Something supposed to be a pansy embroidered in garish shades of red and purple, adorned each corner. James Lambert stared at it; but as he remained silent the woman said: "Her taste improved as she grew older."

"Which was indeed fortunate," reported James, surprised, even in that tense moment, to find his long dormant sense of humor still alive.

"So every year, Mr. Lambert, no matter how fine a gift Miss Nora gave me, there was always a birthday handkerchief as well. To tell the truth, nice handkerchiefs are a sort of weakness with me, and I think she knew it. Nice handkerchiefs and nice aprons. I never could abide the sort of aprons that (if you'll excuse my saying so) Mrs. Ned's maids are content to wear. Except during the years of war, when such extravagance would have been shameless, my own were linen."

Martha was spreading out a blue-edged square.

"This came when she was only ten, Mr. Lambert—the year she and Mr. Ned gave me the gold brooch. Notice the pretty border, sir, as refined as can be; though later she got them all white which was more suitable, except this lavender one she brought from Europe. Just look at the quality! It is sheer enough for a queen—so delicate that I have

"And you say," broke in James Lambert as if rousing suddenly, "you tell me that Nora has continued since her—her marriage, to remember you?"

"Did you think she would forget?" It was the nearest to a reproof that the loyal woman had ever dealt him. James did not speak, and after a moment she continued: "Yes, every year. No matter where she happened to be living, my birthday handkerchief has arrived on time. They have come from many countries, Mr. Lambert—Italy, England, Germany, even South Africa, if you'll believe it! Beautiful pieces of linen, all of them; but never an address so I could write and thank her. Note that, please. It was as if she felt you would not like me to write, sir—that if you wished her to hear news of us all you would write yourself. That's loyalty, isn't it? That's little Miss Nora! But last year . . ."

Martha paused so long that James Lambert stirred uneasily, and she said: "Maybe you noticed that I'd been crying a bit when you came in, sir? It was about Miss Nora. Something tells me that ill luck has befallen her and hers. It was a year ago that I began to worry. My handkerchief came, Mr. Lambert, but it was not a new one. It was one of a half dozen Mrs. Ned gave her one Christmas, and that I'd admired. I remembered distinctly the butterflies embroidered in all four corners. It had been nicely laundered; but I could not help wondering if Miss Nora was, maybe, too poor to buy one; and then I decided she might have been where she could not shop, so had sent one of her own. I tried to put the matter out of my mind, and now, you see, I wish that I had not."

Martha lifted Nora's birthday remembrance that had arrived that day, shook out its delicate folds and spread it across her lap.

"Do you see, Mr. Lambert, this is another that she had saved, because it was so handsome, I suppose. There near the center is a tiny place which has been mended. And that's not all, sir. It is quite yellow from being laid away—discolored. She had no time even to bleach it! That is why I was crying a little, Mr. Lambert. Don't you see, Miss Nora would never have sent old Martha a mended handkerchief if she could have bought a new one. And not to launder it! She may be sick, Mr. Lambert. I feel in my bones that things are wrong with her; while I, who would give my life for the poor lamb, and you, the only father she ever knew, are warm and comfortable, surrounded with every luxury."

There was a silence before the old woman continued, her voice trembling: "That is not right, Mr. Lambert. It is not Christian. Do not tell me that I am forgetting my place to say so. I know it. I have been your servant for more than half my life, sir; but I have been your friend as well; and you, the good Lords knows, have been a friend to me. There is no man in the world that I admire as I admire you, sir; but that does not blind me to your faults. Why should it? I have seen you show forgiveness that was almost heavenly; but you can be stubborn—too stubborn for your own good or the good of those that love you.

"I do not know what passed between you and Miss Nora before she went away. I do not know what bitter things you may both have said. I do not want to know. But we are getting old, Mr. Lambert, you and I; and old age is a lonely time, a sad time, unless one can look back over the years and say: 'I have done my best.' If you will remember, all Miss Nora asked was to marry the man she loved; and—There!" broke off Martha in confusion, "I did not intend to preach a sermon, to you of all people! But these things have lain heavy on my heart for years, Mr. Lambert, and I had to speak. If I have offended, I can only beg your pardon."

James Lambert arose slowly. He did not smile, but rested a gentle hand upon her shoulder for a moment.

"You are a good friend, Martha. You could not offend me if you tried. You have merely shown me the truth that, down underneath, I have known for a long time." He glanced at his watch. "Ned will be here to see you in a few moments, but—but I must be going down. There are things to — to think about."

(Continued Next Week)

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