

White Butterflies By MILDRED BARBOUR

CHAPTER 65 THE SCARLET BRAND

The spring evening was closing in. Shirley walked slowly down the country road. It was growing dark and a chilly wind had sprung up. Her dainty footwear was splashed with soggy mud, but she took no notice. The western sky flamed with a crimson afterglow; the frogs had begun their nightly chorus in the shadows down by the pond, a black cloud of rooks flew past her, but she did not see them.

She had been walking for two hours. Only two hours since she had left Judge Thorne's office! It seemed an eternity, an endless nightmare. Only three hours since Miss Liz had left the old Rand library with a story but half told! A story to which the old judge had added the climax. Not willingly, nor easily. Only after tears and pleading, after Shirley's last despairing: "Well, if you won't tell me, there must be others who will."

Miss Liz's heart had failed her at the crucial moment, when she had related the bare facts of Mary Lou's death. Shirley knew now the story that had been whispered about her unhappy mother during her brief married life. She knew now why she herself was shunned by her neighbors. She knew clearly, too, why Rodney had put her out of his life; why Miss Liz had avoided her.

The daughter of a murderer! The niece of a thief! She who had been so proud! A sob choked her. Hot, stinging tears blinded her, and she brushed them impatiently away with a chilled little hand. She knew the whole truth now. She knew that Rodney Sheldon, in making restitution for her to the Rand estate, had ruined his aunt and himself. He had bought safety for her and for Louis, but he had bought his own destruction.

She walked on and on through the opening dusk, plunging recklessly through roads that were awash with spring freshets. The chill wind was numbing her; her lips were growing blue. She stumbled, for the road was becoming rough. Once she fell, and felt icy water seeping through her thin cloth skirt. Once a light shone out from a house near the road, a door opened, and a voice hailed her, but she hurried on. Once a dog came up to her, sniffing in friendly fashion, and she put out her hands to it and sobbed when it licked her fingers.

The night had long since come when she checked her purposeless flight with an exclamation of wonder and incredulity. Before her, she saw the long beam of light that shone at intervals from the old-fashioned lanterns above the Rand doorway. She realized then that she had walked in a circle. She was home again.

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She opened the garden-gate and went slowly up the path between the borders of plants that would soon put forth their choicest blooms—but not for her. She passed the space on the lawn, from which Joel Rand had ordered the Cape jasmine removed, at the request of his young wife. She knew that story now; knew, too, that Bianca, before the birth of her child, had brought the blossom that had caused her such emotion into the room where Mary Lou had died, hoping, perhaps, to gain forgiveness, perhaps attempting to atone to the bright life her hand had crushed out. And now, in the darkness, made to live again by the dampness of the spring night, the scents stored up for twenty years were released on the air. To the fanciful, they lived again—those fragrant blossoms that the ill-starred young bride had been arranging when the hand of her rival struck her down. Thought her daughter: "Poor Bianca! She believed that, in her remorse, she couldn't think of Bianca as 'mother,' nor of Joel Rand as 'father.' There was, only Louis, the thief. She was indeed orphaned."

Shirley told Daisy that she didn't care for any dinner, and dismissed her and Tom for the night. When they had gone to their own quarters, she sat for a time before the library fire, still in her muddy, wet clothes. She was unconscious of bodily chill, but it seemed to her that her heart would never beat warmly again. After a while, she rose and took a candle from the mantel. The house was very still. From the walls the portraits of dead and gone hands looked down upon their only descendant.

To Shirley, their painted eyes were accusing; but she met them bravely, and forced herself to make a tour of the room, stopping before each portrait and looking long into the pictured face, as if she would engrave its image forever on her heart. She was saying her farewell! Farewell to her dream! Farewell to the home that might have been! Farewell to peace and security and the joy of living. Farewell to love! It was late when she had finished her sad little pilgrimage. The clock on the stairs was striking midnight. She returned to the library, where the fire had burned itself out, and unlocking the old secretaire, took from a drawer, as she had once seen Louis do, the miniature of Bianca Van Dorn. As she looked at the beautiful, willful face, something stirred in her; there was born an infinite pity and a tenderness for the unhappy mother whom she had never known.

"I am going to take you with me," she told the bit of ivory in her palm. "We don't belong here, you and I. We have no right— Her voice faltered. She bowed her head and her tears splashed on her hands. . . . When old Tom came in to build the fires in the morning, he found his young mistress dressed for traveling, hatted and gloved, with her bag in hand. She was very composed, but her eyes looked as though she hadn't slept. She told the old servant that she was going away for an indefinite period.

Carrying her own bag, she walked to the railroad station, trying not to think of that other morning, so long ago, when she had encountered Rodney Sheldon there and had known in her heart that she loved him. At the turn of the road, she looked back for one last glimpse of the home of her ancestors. The early sunlight glistened on its slate roof; the lilacs were bursting into bloom in the garden. Across the fields of blue grass, still glistening with dew, the windows of the Sheldon place gave back the sunlight through the dark clump of oaks. Blinded by sudden tears, Shirley picked up her bag and walked on.

At the station she sent a cable to Oscar Bertrand at the Sea Nymph's regular port of call. It read: "I have reconsidered, and will accede to your wishes on conditions stated in letter that follows."

CHAPTER 66 UNDER THE CHERRY-BLOSSOMS Springtime in Washington. With the sky tranquil and blue, with Japanese cherry-blossoms rimming the Tidal Basin with jonquils and tulips and pale hyacinths lifting their heads in the park. With Forsythia, like a golden flame, along the gray walls of Highland Terrace. Springtime along the wide, grassy avenues, where the fat gray pussy-willow buds carpet the sidewalks and purple wisteria climbs over ancient doorways. Serenely silver runs the river, between its green banks; tranquilly blue are the Virginia hills. On the lawns the first robins hunt for food. Rodney Sheldon, bronzed and lean, swung down the steps of the State Department and, crossing the green Mall, struck into the heart of Potomac Park, where it curves to follow the river. He had been in Washington for three days, arranging for his release from the consular service. Isabelle had insisted that he resign. "Seven more days of freedom!" He jeered his mind against the thought of how endless that time would seem, if it were Shirley, and not Isabelle, whom he was to marry. His heart rebelled against this marriage of convenience, for that was the only name for it. Isabelle was buying him, she was selling himself, to save Miss Liz and the Sheldon stables; to undo the harm he had done in serving Shirley. Springtime filled his mind with thoughts of Shirley. And, as though his longing conjured her out of the sunlit air, he saw her coming toward him under the arch of the cherry-blossoms along the path. She was the incarnation of spring, clad in her favorite soft gray, with jonquils at her breast. And the petals of the cherry-blossoms drifted down upon her like a benediction. Her eyes had a look of haunting wistfulness, and on her face was an expression of exaltation. They came together without a word. The flames that leaped to life at the contact of their hands enveloped them. In silence their eyes met. The past was forgotten; the future was not yet born, in that exquisite moment. Rodney's voice almost broke as he said huskily: "We can't go on this way, Shirley. We love each other." Joy, dazzling and triumphant, flamed in her heart. He loved her! He loved her still, for all that had passed! "It was a long minute before they came back to bitter reality. Then Shirley said very quietly: "Shall we walk a little way under the trees? We have so much to say to each other, haven't we?" He nodded, his eyes drinking in her loveliness. She drew a quick little breath. "I am here to meet Mr. Bertrand," Rodney said finally. "It was a long time before he answered slowly: "And I am here to meet my fiancée." They were both silent after that, walking very slowly under the arching trees. "My—Mr. Bertrand is coming to Washington to meet me," Shirley said presently. "We are to leave on his yacht, directly he arrives. I have been expecting him every day for nearly a week. Tomorrow surely he will come." "There was no sound, except the soft stirring of the new leaves above their heads, and far across the water the faint, hoarse siren of a boat. Rodney met her confidences, with his own. "The girl I am going to marry—you saw her on the island—is in New York with her mother, buying her trousseau. She will join me here in a few days." "Shirley asked: "You are returning to your post, after the—honey-moon." He shook his head. "I'm going to Kentucky to take over the Sheldon farms." Shirley's little: "Oh!" was scarcely more than a breath, but it told a story all its own. She had a brief vision of that dear, serene—she forgotten place and the



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old house. And that girl, with her rouged cheeks and bold eyes, would be mistress there. She said, with difficulty: "I have never had a chance to thank you for what you did for my uncle and me. It was wrong of you—and wonderful and good and generous. You have made me very ashamed, but I shall repay you." He wasn't even listening. He was looking across the river. She saw how haggard his eyes were, and how bitter the lines around his handsome mouth. He said irrelevantly: "Heaven knows, I don't want to be disloyal to Isabelle, but I can't help remembering that, if it hadn't been for your uncle's interruption that night at the Prom, you might have been married to me today, instead of to Bertrand." Shirley's eyes opened wide. "But I am not married to Mr. Bertrand!" He swung round to face her, his face white under his tan. "Shirley, don't tell me that you—that he—"

She corrected him gently: "I shall be married to him, as soon as he arrives. That is why I am waiting here. He wished it so, for some reason. You know he is very eccentric; he will not come ashore, even to be married. So I must go to the yacht." He had heard only her first words. His face was aflame with joy. He seized her hands, heedless of passers-by. "Come with me, quickly. Never mind anything else in the world. Nothing else matters. . . . I thought you were already married, or I could never . . . Not even for Aunt Liz. Come!" He was quite incoherent now, and she, flushed and shaken and carried away by some force stronger than herself, stammered: "Where?" "To the nearest minister! . . . Shirley, we love each other. We must have each other . . ."

"No, no, no!" "You do love me!" he cried. "You can't deny it! Nothing else matters. Come!" CHAPTER 67 THE PERFECT DAY The sun was setting when the two young people turned their steps cityward. The chill of evening had descended, and a faint purplish mist was rising from the river. Shirley experienced a haunting sense of sadness more poignant than she had ever known. She was weary, after the strain of a great struggle. Yet, a little triumphant, too, over her victory. For she had made Rodney see that marriage for them was impossible;

that often forces were stronger than love. She hadn't told him why she was to marry Bertrand. It hurt her almost more than she could bear, but she let him surmise that she desired wealth and ease, rather than love, and that she was marrying the Vagabond Commodore because of his money. He said bitterly: "Heaven knows I have nothing to offer you. Nothing but a run-down farm and plenty of debts. To ask a girl who has been raised in luxury to share that future is really asking too much." "Stolen luxury," Shirley reminded him, with a sad little smile, but he brushed that aside. "With your beauty and wealth, you'll have the world at your feet. What could I give you to offset that?" She was silent, because she knew she must be strong for them both. She even kept herself from asking why he was marrying Isabelle Bannerman, and he didn't tell her. How could he say that he was saving Sheldon farms and the happiness of Miss Liz, lost through quixotic service to Shirley? Isabelle knew the terms of the bargain; it was she who had made it. Rodney had not deceived her. She knew he still loved Shirley. Rodney said bitterly, as they walked slowly up from the Park toward the lights that were beginning to glow along the Avenue. "Then, if you won't marry me, and your decision is final, I suppose this is good-by." She winced at the word, but he was staring straight before him, his eyes gloomy and resentful. "Not yet," she told him softly. "We've a little grace—tonight and maybe tomorrow. Let's spend it happily, forgetting the past and refusing to think of the future." "Together?" She nodded. "Let's pretend to go back three years to that spring at the University. Let's play we're going to be married after commencement; that nothing stands in the way. Let's have a beautiful day . . . or two . . . or three, without mentioning the future, or thinking of it, in so far as we can help doing so." "You're cruel," he told her. "You can't really love me, or you'd not be able to forget the whole hideous business." "Wouldn't you like to have even one perfect day to look back upon?" she asked him, and he answered sulkily: "Women may be content with memories, but it's poor fare for a man who loves some one with all his heart." In the end, when she pretended to withdraw her suggestion, he snatched at the crumb she offered him. Bitterly, he consented to the promise she wrung from him that there would be no further mention of the fate in store for them. He left her at her hotel. From her windows, Shirley could watch the river, where the Sea Nymph would lie when she came in from her long, weary voyage across tempestuous seas. Pausing while she dressed for the evening she was to share with Rodney—perhaps the last evening—she sank to her knees and breathed a little prayer for another day of respite. If only she might not wake to learn that the Sea Nymph had arrived during the night. Rodney came from his own hotel, having changed quickly and taken a taxi, even for the short distance, because he couldn't bear to waste a moment of the time, so brief, so precious. She wore a black satin frock like the one she had worn at his fraternity dance, so long ago, when they had thought they hated each other, because they were already madly in love and didn't know it. Looking into her lovely, candid eyes, he couldn't believe that she was the daughter of a murderer, or that she put wealth above love. It seemed impossible that she could sell herself to an old man for worldly things. And yet, he reminded himself bitterly, what was he doing that was more admirable? If he had loved her before, he cared now, more than ever, for he realized, when he was away from the spell of her presence that, except for her keeping her head when he lost his in his despair at their inevitable parting, he would have thrown to the winds his promise to Miss Liz that he would never make the daughter of Bianca Van Dorn his wife. Bitter and heart-sore as he was, he was grateful to Shirley for keeping him to his pledge. They dined and then went to the newest and smartest dancing-place and tried to pretend they were eighteen and twenty-two again.

Shirley seemed very gay. She carried him with her and made him dance and even laugh, occasionally. But, if, for a moment, she relaxed her efforts and the shadow of the future fell athwart the present, they sat silent, and the orchestra played in vain. Rodney said finally: "Let's get out of this. I can't stand it any longer." She rose and followed him. He halted one of the old-fashioned open hacks, quaint reminders of other days, drawn by sleepy, heavy-footed horses that plod along the river drives, indifferent to speeding ed the air. The next morning Rodney called for Shirley, and they rode in Rock Creek Park for several hours, trying very hard to pretend that one of the hired nags was Lady Jane. They lunched at a restaurant on the banks of the stream, where the waters from an old mill cascaded musically. Their table was laid under a drooping willow that swayed in the breeze and hid them from the other diners. The Sea Nymph had not arrived when Shirley awoke from dreams of Rodney. She kept her eyes closed for a long time, pretending that love and

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