

MYSTERY HOUSE

By KATHLEEN NORRIS

The name drew Page's attention to another member of the group—a tiny, nervous-looking woman with large brown freckles on a paler brown face, and sunken bright brown eyes. This woman now advanced with a nervous smile, and extended her hand to Page as she said:

"You're Miss Hazelyne, of course. I'm Flora Mockbee." The deep sonorous voice was the voice Page had heard reading.

There were two other persons in the room. During this little scene one of them had been completely dominating the others. Page was introduced now to Mrs. Prendergast, and bent a little to put her slim hand in the old woman's rather heavy, puffy one. A broad woman, with keen dark eyes; dark hair not yet entirely gray; a coarse yet not unkindly big mouth; a coarse and yet oddly pleasant deep voice.

"You chose nice weather," she said, grimly humorous.

Didn't I? Page said. She smiled at them all; her eyes went to the doctor's eyes. He had shed his outer garments and was stuffing a pipe, his back to the fire. Page noted that Babs Preston did not miss a move of his.

The sixth person, completing the group, was a boy of perhaps twenty-five; fair, handsome, burned as brown as an Indian. He was informally dressed in loose white trousers neither new nor clean, white flat-heeled shoes, and a roll-top white sweater that had seen many seasons' wear. He had a book in his hand, and occasionally looked up from it with a worried expression to glance at the group by the fire.

"Lynn," Randall Harwood said, noting one of these glances, "would you like to say 'How d'you do' to this young lady?"

"How d'you do," the young man said lifelessly, with a strange attentive look, and returned with a sort of nervous hurry to his book.

Well so here she was established in her new job. Page was uneasy no longer. The storm was still splashing outside, the wind whining, the sea crashing on the rocks, but in here there was warmth and excitement.

Mrs. Prendergast was talking with Randall Harwood. Every word the rather coarse old voice said confirmed Page's amused impression that the old lady was

more than half in love with the handsome grave young doctor, too. He was regaling her with odds and ends of town gossip.

"It's a rotten show, Duchess. I was bored to death!"

"Yes, you were," Mrs. Prendergast growled, smiling at him fondly. "All those pretty girls!"

"Pretty girls! What do you think I am a sophomore?"

Babs Preston was listening, smiling coquettishly, her head tipped to one side. Lynn was sunk in his book, his long lean body awkwardly sprawled in his chair; Miss Flora was leafing the pages of her own book restlessly, as if she would willingly resume the interrupted reading. And yet Page knew somehow that Flora was not really interested or absorbed; only pretending to be to save herself—what? Embarrassment or self-consciousness or what?

"Well, let's go downstairs," the old lady said presently. She heaved the heavy silks and laces, the chains and ribbons that enveloped her; the doctor put a steady hand under her elbow; Miss Flora, a wheeled chair deep in silk comforters manipulated by her lean brown hands, was on the other side.

The transfer of the awkward heavy old body was made. Mrs. Prendergast settled herself with a grunt, and the whole party was off for a cold and draughty progress through the halls, descending the creepy stairs that led to passages, rooms—rooms—more rooms, that lay between the big upstairs sitting room and the dining room. Page began to think it was all crazy again.

The dining room, finally reached, was not large. A handsome table was set for six; a fire burned cheerfully in a beautiful fire-place of shining blue-and-white Dutch tiles. But one side of the room was opened upon a sort of gallery, and beyond the gallery Page could dimly see gaunt walls and windows beyond.

"We got those tiles ourselves in Holland, Trudy and I," Mrs. Prendergast said. "They're worth any amount of money today. They're not making them any more. This house, you'll see for yourself tomorrow, Miss—Miss—Hazelyne," she went on, taking the name from Miss Flora, who supplied it in a low tense tone, "is a museum of treasures. I've got half a million dollars' worth of stuff here. You show her the Florentine ceiling tomorrow, Rand. What's the matter, Flora?" she ended, with a sudden change of tone.

Miss Flora's head was sunk forward, and her lower lip gripped under her prominent teeth. She looked up suddenly, with a sort of sullen pride, and said, "Why, nothing at all," in a voice of quiet resentment, but not before Page had seen her in the first position, staring fixedly into space with an intensity of expression that seemed almost mad.

She's probably in love with Dr. Harwood, too, Page thought with a little thrill.

(To be Continued)

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—By Ad Carter