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The Golden Girl

By AGNES LOUISE PROVOST AND LADBROKE BLACK

continued

Frances smothered with a gasp of dismay. She had not dreamed that it had gone so far. Gorham leaned forward, his eyes steadily on hers. He spoke bluntly with no attempt at diplomatic fencing.

"I am interested in Gloria Staunton. I am sufficiently interested to be well call it jealous. I think there is another man, or was at one time, and I want to know where that affair stands. I want to know where she meets this man, or if they have quarrelled. I want to know"—he paused here and let his words drop deliberately—"whether she has always gone by the name of Staunton. You are in a position to get this information for me. If you can, I will cancel your account."

Mrs. Payne sat very still. This wretched creature was offering her pay to be a common spy! Her eyes flamed at him suddenly, but the flame died. The man in the case must be Jack Moreland. Why should Gloria Staunton take him away from her?

She turned to Gorham with a coolness which belied the throbbing excitement beneath.

"Oh, a love affair! That is quite interesting. Yes, suppose we call it a bargain. Will you excuse me now? I have several matters to attend to before we start."

As the door closed behind Gorham she pressed her hands against burning cheeks, but her eyes were bright and hard. So Gloria had secret meetings with Jack and was sufficiently identified with him for Gorham to know of it? She closed her eyes to Gorham's probably motives. She was a jealous woman fighting for the man she wanted to marry, and any weapons were fair.

XVII

Slight as it had been, that little disagreement with Frances Payne seemed to make a subtle change in the relationship between Gloria and her companion. Gloria purposely lingered in town until after the yacht trip was over, and returned to the Bluffs to find Frances apparently restored to good humor, but provokingly curious as to the nature of her errand to New York.

"There must be someone dreadfully fascinating there to make you tolerate the city in this weather," she said pointedly. "Do tell me, Gloria, I love a romance."

"I am afraid you will be disappointed, for all my engagements were hopelessly practical except that I ran across Bill Daimler the last day and lunched with him."

"Oh, Bill is always great fun," Mrs. Payne eyed her lazily. "Of course you know he is desperately in love with you."

"That is absurd." Mrs. Payne's soft laugh was a trifle malicious. "My dear Gloria, you are not very good at fibbing, are you? If you ever have a dark secret in the background of your life you will have a dreadful time concealing it."

For a moment Gloria's heart seemed to stand still. "I presume the best way is to keep away from dark secrets," she said lightly. "Did you say that the tennis tournament was still on? Suppose we go down."

Of course, Gloria argued to herself, it could be nothing more than a chance remark, but it left a lingering discomfort and a feeling of rebellion that it could affect her so. Another thing which disturbed her was the discovery one day that her dressing table had been ransacked. She was glad that several letters from Mr. Carver and her check book on the account of "G. S. Moreland" in a certain uptown bank were safely hidden elsewhere.

August slipped into September and they returned to town, once more settled in a huge hotel. October came, and with it Amy Chase's marriage. It was a church wedding and it was already late when Gloria and Frances arrived, passing through the canopyed way into a world of lights, of the fragrance of flowers, of low reverberations of organ music and the subdued rustle of many people. Colors delicate and vivid, and the wink and flash of gowns.

"It's a perfect crush!" Frances murmured, and turned for a moment to answer a question from Mrs. Daimler just behind them.

Hurrying ushers came and went. Alan Chase and Bill Daimler turned toward Gloria simultaneously, but a third usher was coming down the center aisle and reached her first.

"May I?" It was Jack, smiling down at her with a question in his eyes. That was all. The world—their world—was looking on.

"Surely!" She tucked her hand in the arm offered and they went down the aisle together to the companion of the softly rolling organ and the turning heads of the politely curious. He waited until she took her seat. Then he was off down the aisle again. Frances Payne was coming with Alan Chase, and he passed them with a quick and friendly smile.

A moment later, Frances Payne took her seat beside Gloria. She had been resorting to rouge of late, but even so her color was unusually high.

Less than an hour later, in the crowded rooms of the Chase home Gloria saw Jack coming toward her, threading his way expertly through chattering groups and stopping at every other one to respond to friendly greetings. Gloria had just left a flushed and radiant Amy, now Mrs. Tom Bates, and was talking to Amy's father when Jack appeared at her side. Frances Payne had drifted into another room with some people whom Gloria did not know.

"How do you do, Colonel?" Jack held out a friendly hand. "I promised Mrs. Chase that I would find you. She is with the bridal party. Miss Staunton may I substitute for the colonel?" The older man looked at the younger and smiled dryly. He had once been twenty-seven himself.

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Then he left him. "I don't believe Mrs. Chase sent for him," said Gloria accusingly. She was half vexed at herself for laughing at the high-handed manner in which he had supplanted Colonel Chase.

"Honor bright! I asked her to as soon as I saw you with him. Come, won't you let me find you a seat somewhere?"

She caught Bill Daimler's glance across the room and knew that he was puzzled to understand how she had come to be on terms of intimacy with his old friend. Then she afforded comparative seclusion. She lost sight of him as Jack guided her through the crowd to a seat where a bank of tropical plants "you are looking very stunning."

He sat down beside her and surveyed her with frank approval. "I am glad you like my gown."

She provokingly refused to apply the compliment to herself. But his eyes, warming suddenly, caught and held hers until she hurriedly changed the subject.

"I've met a number of your old friends besides the Daimlers. You know Mrs. Payne, don't you? She has come to stay with me."

"Why, yes, I've known Frances since I was in knickerbockers." He seemed a trifle puzzled. "I noticed that you came in together. Sort of a companion-chaperon affair?"

"Yes. It is rather amusing for me to need a chaperon now after looking after myself for so long," Gloria answered.

"I'll vouch for your ability to do it again." He laughed. "But talk no more. Remember that I have been an exile for months, and as for letters, well, nobody will ever

publish my correspondence after I die unless the Western Union keeps permanent records. But I am learning rapidly. From the looks Bill and Alan gave me I suspect that I shall be fighting duels yet. You are evidently having a gorgeous time."

"Yes," she said half defiantly, "I am having a wonderful time. But sometimes—" her voice hesitated, trailed into silence as her glance drifted beyond him. He looked at her quickly.

"Anything wrong? Has that brute Gorham—"

Her suddenly widened eyes entreated him to silence. On the other side of their screening bank of palms, between feathery splashes of green, Gloria had caught sight of a light gown. That change of effect of white and black could belong to no other than Frances Payne. They had selected the gown together and Gloria knew it as well as her own.

To be continued

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