

THE LIBERAL SHORT STORY

CHAMPAGNE FOR THREE

By Elita Wilson

"Now I've really got to be going," Patricia said, picking up her bag and gloves. "And if you take my advice, Gerry, you'll keep your eyes open for a rich husband instead of looking for a job."

"It will be a year before you're making twenty dollars a week and that isn't a drop in the bucket. College graduates are a dime a dozen in this town. Keep your chin up, youngster. With a face like yours you won't have any trouble."

Now Patricia was gone and Gerry slumped disconsolately in her chair. Patricia was undoubtedly right. A year with an employment agency had given her a true picture of the situation in the city. Marriage probably was the best solution.

With that thought her eyes again met those of the good looking chap at the bar whom she had earlier discovered watching her as he sipped his scotch and soda. This time he was whispering to her waiter.

Gerry swept the fashionable cocktail lounge, gay with a smart assemblage of debbs and young-men-who-work in Wall Street and wondered when she would see the inside of the place again. Only this morning her mother and she had sat down together in the small quarters they received in exchange for Mrs. Thayer's services as housekeeper of a fashionable Park avenue apartment, and faced the fact that it was up to Gerry to go to work.

"It's not what I had planned for you," Mrs. Thayer said wistfully. "I had such a wonderful time at your age. Europe every summer, Florida in the winter. It doesn't seem fair."

All day Gerry had been trying to figure out some way. That was why she had asked Patricia to meet her.

The waiter came over and removed her empty glass.

"The young gentleman over at the bar would like to buy you a drink," he said.

Gerry's head shot up. The "young gentleman" was smiling. Some nerve!

"Bring me my check," she said crisply, reaching for her purse. Then, on a sudden impulse, added: "And tell the gentleman I'll have a martini."

Her eyes were smiling as she turned them back to the bar. The waiter nodded discreetly and drew out a chair—and then Gerry was looking into the nicest pair of eyes and trying to accept the situation with poise and casualness.

"Well, nobody can say that we didn't try to be properly introduced," Gerry laughed. "I'm Geraldine Thayer."

"I'm Stephen Winslow. Want the pedigree?"

"Not necessary," Gerry declared. "I know all about you. Your father has a brokerage house and he's in Europe. Your sister was married in June. I read the papers. You rowed on the Harvard crew in 1933..."

"And I'm twenty six, have no entanglements and right at this moment I'm having a perfectly swell time—thanks to you." They clinked glasses.

Suddenly Gerry noticed that the crowd had thinned out. She glanced at her wrist watch.

"It's six thirty!" she exclaimed. "I must go."

Winslow called for the cheque. As they emerged onto Madison avenue he beckoned to a taxi, but Gerry drew back.

"Oh you needn't take me home," she said quickly. "It's only a short distance. I'll walk."

"Then I'll walk with you. Maybe you will have dinner with me?"

"I'll meet you at the Waldorf later," she suggested desperately. "At 8 o'clock."

"Eight o'clock," he nodded. "You will dress?"

"Of course. Now I must go—really." She knew that after she had hurried off he was standing there looking curiously after her. At the corner she turned and waved.

With troubled eyes, Mrs. Thayer listened to Gerry's account of her meeting with young Winslow. At last she said: "Perhaps it might be wiser to tell him the truth."

"Never!" declared Gerry. "He'll think I'm a fortune hunter. No we have got to figure out something else."

They dined on the Starlit Roof. Winslow bowed to friends but seemed anxious to keep Gerry to himself. From the Roof they went to one of the smartest night clubs. As they danced, Gerry kept thinking: "If I never see him again, this will be a night to remember."

And as if echoing her thoughts Stephen drew her closer and said softly: "I wish this night never had to end."

But it did. And now the moment Gerry had known was inevitable suddenly was staring at her. They were getting into a taxi. She had to give him her address. When he had repeated it to the driver he settled back and asked curiously:

"Have you lived there long?"

"Oh about two years. That is my mother has. I've been away at college."

"I know people in that building. Maybe you know them—"

Gerry's heart contracted. "I don't know any one there," she interrupted.

"That's New York," he laughed. "You can live next door to people all your life and never know them." Before he let her out of the cab he took her hand and said whimsically: "At this stage Emily Post says the young lady should ask the young man to call."

like that—all at once can't it?"

"It came that way to me," Mrs. Thayer answered quietly, "and it was a beautiful experience. But now you mustn't worry because I have a plan. The Frasers won't be occupying their apartment until they return from Newport next month."

"The Frasers?"

"They have the penthouse, exquisitely furnished. I have the keys..."

Gerry's face brightened. "And we will pretend that that is our home? Oh, mother you're a miracle worker!"

At 8.30 the telephone rang. Mr. Winslow was calling.

"Send him up," Gerry instructed. She hurried out of the small suite and was waiting at the elevator when it reached the top floor.

"I came to show you the ropes," Gerry smiled brightly, taking Winslow by the hand. She led him to the small self-running elevator that served the penthouse occupants. He appeared to hesitate. "Come on," Gerry laughed. "It's safe enough."

They entered and she pushed the button. "Next time you can do it yourself," she said.

The door slid open. They stepped into a large foyer decorated with exquisite murals. They went into a drawing room where carpets muffled the sound of their footsteps. Gerry's mother in a dinner gown—relic of better days—was reading by the soft glow of a priceless Chinese lamp.

"This is Stephen Winslow, mother."

The mother measured the young man as she acknowledged the introduction. Yes, he seemed to be all that Gerry had said.

The evening was all that mother and daughter had wished for. Winslow talked interestingly of his spring trip to China. Then the three of them went into the big dining room where the table was gleaming with the Frasers' best linen and silver. In a wine bucket was the champagne chilled to just the right temperature.

"I'm afraid you will have to open it, Mr. Winslow," Mrs. Thayer said as Gerry and she sat down.

"Then I'll take it to the pantry," he laughed. "I once decorated our ceiling with champagne."

He left them. Gerry reached over and squeezed her mother's hand but Mrs. Thayer put a warning finger to her lips and picked up the salad fork and spoon. "Pass your plate, dear," she said.

"Gerry picked up the plate but it never reached her mother's hand. Instead, it went crashing to the floor as she half rose fear staring out of her eyes."

A man, who had entered the apartment unheard, was standing in the doorway.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

Mrs. Thayer tried to answer but no sound came from his lips.

At that moment Stephen Winslow came out of the pantry. The stranger looked up quickly, then his consternation turned to surprise.

"Uncle John!" Stephen cried setting the bottle down and going toward the older man with outstretched hand. "This is a surprise. I didn't expect you back for weeks. I want you to meet my guests, Mrs. Thayer and her daughter, Gerry. You see I took Aunt Emma up on her offer to let me use the apartment."

"I have met Mrs. Thayer," said Fraser, bowing but not unbending. "She is the—"

"Yes—she is the housekeeper here. And we are just having a bite of supper. Won't you join us Uncle John?"

"Thanks, but I think I will turn in," he smiled. "I'm returning to Newport in the morning after a conference. Make yourself at home."

When he was gone, Gerry jumped up and ran around to Stephen.

"If this is your idea of a prank, then I hope you've had your fun. Personally I think—I think it was pretty cruel of you. You could have told me you knew about mother and me. Come, mother."

"Gerry," he said earnestly, "I never meant to hurt you. I didn't know my uncle was coming home. I wasn't going to let you know for a long time that I knew everything about you ever since our first meeting."

"I asked the doorman after I followed you home the other day. I felt it was all a lark with you and that I might never see you again. I couldn't let you go out of my life that way. Gerry, look at me." Unwillingly Gerry lifted her eyes and when Stephen saw the hurt in them he caught her to him.

"Little lunatic," he laughed softly. "Don't you know that when a fellow loves a girl the way I love you it doesn't matter where or how she lives? That nothing matters to him as long as he gets her? Right from the start I loved you because you were different from the other Park avenue brats. Say, I'll bet this is the first time a fellow has ever proposed with his mother-in-law looking on. Look! Your mother is on my side, Gerry!"

POOR ENCOURAGEMENT

He had been trying all evening to summon the courage to tell her. It was a thing that really required a great deal of intrepidity. She was his ideal. Slim, brown-eyed, beautiful golden hair. As he gazed at her he finally made up his mind.

"Darling," he said, "I love you. If I asked you to be my wife, what would be the outcome?"

"It depends," came the reply, "very much on the income."

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