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Winnie Childs The Shop Girl

C. N. (Charles Norris) Williamson

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THE SHOP GIRL

THE SHOP GIRL

CHAPTER I

THE DRYAD DOOR

It was a horrible day at sea, horrible even on board the new and splendid *Monarchic*. All the prettiest people had disappeared from the huge dining-saloon. They had turned green, and then faded away, one by one or in hurried groups; and now the very thought of music at meals made them sick, in ragtime.

Peter Rolls was never sick in any time or in any weather, which was his one disagreeable, superior-to-others trick. Most of his qualities were likable, and he was likable, though a queer fellow in some ways, said his best friends—the ones who called him "Petro." When the ship played that she was a hobby-horse or a crab (if that is the creature which shares with elderly Germans a speciality for walking from side to side), also a kangaroo, and occasionally a boomerang, Peter Rolls did not mind.

He was sorry for the men and girls he knew, including his sister, who lay in deck chairs pretending to be rugs, or who went to bed and wished themselves in their peaceful graves. But for himself, the wild turmoil of the waves filled him with sympathetic restlessness. It had never occurred to Peter that he was imaginative, yet he seemed to know what the white-faced storm was saying, and to want to shout an answer.

The second morning out (the morning after the *Monarchic* had to pass Queenstown without taking on the mails or putting off enraged passengers) Peter thought he would go to the gymnasium and work up an appetite for luncheon. He had looked in the first day, and had seen a thing which could give you all the sensations and benefits of a camel ride across the desert. He had ridden camels in real deserts and liked them. Now he did not see why waves should not answer just as well as dunes, and was looking forward

to the experiment; but he must have been absent-minded, for when he opened what ought to have been the gymnasium door, it was not the gymnasium door. It was—good heavens!—*what* was it?

Peter Rolls, the unimaginative young man, thought that he must be in his berth and dreaming he was here. For this room that he was looking into could not possibly be a room on a ship, not even on the *Monarchic*, that had all the latest, day-after-to-morrow improvements and luxuries. The very bread was to-morrow's bread; but these marvellous creatures could not be supplied by the management as improvements or luxuries of any kind. Peter seemed to have opened a door into a crystal-walled world peopled entirely by dryads.

He thought of dryads, because in pictures, beings called by that name were taller, slimmer, more graceful, more beautiful, and had longer legs than young females of mortal breed. There were five of them (at least he believed there were five), and though it was eleven o'clock in the morning, they were dressed as if for the prince's ball in the story of "Cinderella." Unless on the stage, Peter had never seen such dresses or such girls.

He heard himself gasp; and afterward, when he and a wave together had banged the door shut, he hoped that he had said: "I beg your pardon." He was so confused, however, that he was not at all sure he had not blurted out "Good Lord!"

For a moment he stood as still as the sea would let him in front of the door, burning to open it again and see if the girls were really there. But, of course, he could not do that. He would have been almost inclined to believe they were wax figures if they had not moved, but they had moved.

They had been—sprawling is not a word to use in connection with dryads—yet certainly reclining, in easy chairs and on sofas, and had started up as the door opened to stare at him. One had laughed. Peter had shut the door on her laugh. He had brought away a vague impression that chairs, sofas, and carpet were pale gray, and that the dryads' dresses of wonderful tints, sparkling with gold and silver and jewels, had been brilliant as tropical flowers against the neutral background. Also, when he came to think of it, he wasn't sure that the walls were not mostly made of mirrors. That

was why he could not be certain whether he had seen five dryads or five times five.

"The dryad door," he apostrophized it romantically, keeping his balance by standing with his feet apart, as old men stand before a fire. It was a very ordinary-looking door, and that made the romance for Peter in giving it such a name—just a white-painted door, so new that it smelled slightly of varnish—yet behind it lay dream-land.

Of course Peter Rolls knew that the tall, incredibly lovely beings were not dryads and not dreams, although they wore low necks, and pearls and diamonds in their wonderful, waved hair, at eleven o'clock of a stormy morning on board an Atlantic liner. Still, he was blessed if he could think what they were, and what they were doing in that room of mirrors without any furniture which he could recall, except a very large screen, a few chairs, and a sofa or two.

The next best thing to the forbidden one—opening the door again to ask the beings point-blank whether they were pipe dreams or just mermaids—was to go on to the gymnasium and inquire there. Toward this end young Mr. Rolls (as he was respectfully called in a business house never mentioned by his sister) immediately took steps. But taking steps was as far as he got. Suddenly it seemed a deed you could not do, to demand of an imitation-camel's attendant why five young ladies wore evening dress in the morning in a room three doors away.

After all, why should a camel attendant dare to know anything about them? Perhaps they were merely amusing themselves and each other by trying on all their gladdest clothes. There might be girls who would think this a good way to kill time in a storm. Yes, conceivably there might be such girls, just as there might be sea serpents; but, though Peter Rolls was too shy to have learned much about the female of his species, the explanation did not appeal to his reason.

His mind would persist in making a mystery of the mirror-walled room with its five dazzling occupants, and even the bumpings of the imitation camel could not jerk out of his head speculations which played around the dryad door. He was as curious as *Fatima* herself, and with somewhat the same curiosity; for, except that in

one case the beautiful ladies had their heads, and in the other had lost them, there was a hint of resemblance between the two mysteries.

Peter Rolls wondered whether he would like to ask his sister Ena if she knew the visions, or even if, being a woman, she could form any theory to account for them. It would be interesting to see what she would say; but then, unless she were too seasick, she would probably laugh, and perhaps tell Lord Raygan.

As for the visions themselves, only one had spirit enough left in her to be able to laugh at being thought a dryad or a mystery. She alone of the five would have known what "dryad" means. And she could always laugh, no matter how miserable or how sick she was.

That day she was very sick indeed. They were all very sick, but she could not help seeing, at her worst, that it was funny.

"For heaven's sake, what are you giggling at?" snapped the longest, slimmest, most abnormal dryad, diaphanously draped in yellow, when she could gasp out an intelligible sentence after an exhausting bout of agony.

"Us," said the girl who could always laugh, a vision in silver.

"Us? I don't see anything funny about us!" groaned a tall dream in crimson and purple.

"Funny! I should think not!" snorted a fantasy in emerald.

"It makes me worse to hear you laugh," squealed a radiance in rose.

"I wish we were all dead, *especially* Miss Child," snarled the last of the five, a symphony in black and all conceivable shades of blue. Because of this combination, the Miss Child in question had named her the "Bruise."

"Sorry! I'll try not to laugh again till the sea goes down," Miss Child apologized. "I wasn't laughing at any of *you* exactly, it was more the whole situation: us, dressed like stars of the Russian ballet and sick as dogs, pearls in our hair and basins in our hands, looking like queens and feeling like dolls with our stuffing gone."

"Don't speak of stuffing. It makes me think of sage and onions," quavered the tallest queen.

"Ugh!" they all groaned, except Winifred Child, who was to blame for starting the subject. "Ugh! Oh! Ugh!"

When they were better they lay back on their sofas, or leaned back in their chairs, their beautiful—or meant to be beautiful—faces pale, their eyes shut. And it was at this moment that Peter Rolls burst open the door.

As he had observed, the waxlike figures moved, sat upright, and stared. This sudden disturbance of brain balance made them all giddy, but the surprise of seeing a man, not a steward, at the door, was so great that for a moment or two it acted as a tonic. Nothing dreadful happened to any one of the five until after the smooth black head had been withdrawn and the door closed.

"A man!" breathed Miss Devereux, the abnormally tall girl in yellow chiffon over gold gauze.

"Yes, dear. I wonder what he wanted?" sighed Miss Carroll, the girl in rose.

The one in green was Miss Tyndale, the one in black and blue Miss Vedrine, all very becoming labels; and if they had Christian names of equal distinction to match, the alien known at home simply as "Win" had never heard them. They called each other Miss Devereux, Miss Carroll, Miss Tyndale, and Miss Vedrine, or else "dear."

"I wish we could think he wanted to see us!" remarked Miss Tyndale.

"I hope he didn't notice the basins," added Miss Vedrine

"I think we hid them with our trains," said Miss Carroll.

"Was he nice looking?" Miss Vedrine had courage to ask. She had wonderful red hair, only a little darker at the roots, and long, straight black eyelashes. A few of these had come off on her cheeks, but they were not noticeable at a distance.

"I don't know, I'm sure, dear," replied Miss Devereux, a fawn-eyed brunette, who was nearest the door. "There wasn't time to see.

I just thought: 'Good heavens! have we got to parade?' Then, 'No, thank goodness, it's a man!' And he was gone."

"What should we do if a woman did come, and we had to get up?" wondered Miss Vadrine, whose great specialty was her profile and length of white throat.

"She wouldn't be a woman; she'd be a monster, to care about clothes in weather like this," pronounced the golden-haired Miss Carroll. "Parade indeed! I *wouldn't*. I'd simply lie down and expire."

"I feel I've never till now sympathized enough with the animals in the ark," said Miss Child, who had not chosen her own name, or else had shown little taste in selection, compared with the others. But she was somehow different, rather subtly different, from them in all ways; not so elaborately refined, not so abnormally tall, not so startlingly picturesque. "One always thinks of the ark animals in a procession, poor dears—showing off their fur or their stripes or their spots or something—just like us."

"Speak for yourself, if you talk about spots, please," said Miss Devereux, who never addressed Miss Child as "dear," nor did the others.

"I was thinking of leopards," explained the fifth dryad. "They're among the few things you *can* think of without being sick."

"I can't," said Miss Devereux, and was. They all were, and somehow Miss Child seemed to be the one to blame.

"We were just getting better!" wailed Miss Vadrine.

"It was only a momentary excitement that cheered us," suggested Winifred Child.

"What excitement?" they all wanted indignantly to know.

"That man looking in."

"Do you call that an excitement? Where have you lived?"

"Well, a surprise, then. But *would* we have been better if it had been madame who looked in?"

The picture called up by this question was so appalling that they shuddered and forgot their little grudge against Miss Child, who

was not so bad when you were feeling well, except that she had odd ways of looking at things, and laughed when nobody else could see anything to laugh at.

"Thank heaven, she's a bad sailor!" Miss Devereux cried.

"Thank heaven, all the other women on board are bad sailors," added Win.

"If madame was well she'd think *we* ought to be," said Miss Carroll. "She'd dock our pay every time we-- Oh, *this* is bad enough, but if she was well it would be a million times worse!"

"Could anything be worse?" Miss Tyndale pitifully questioned, for just then the ship was sliding down the side of a wave as big as a millionaire's house.

"Yes, it would be worse if we were wearing our waists slender this year," said Win.

"Down, down, wallow, wallow, jump!" was the program the *Monarchic* carried out for the twentieth time in half as many minutes. Slender waists! Oh, horrible to think of, unless you broke in two and death ended your troubles!

"Let's try breathing *in* as she goes up and *out* as she goes down. I've heard that works wonderfully," said Win.

They tried, but it worked disappointingly that time. Perhaps it was the ship's fault. It was impossible to time her antics with the most careful breathing.

"Oh, why did we leave our peaceful homes?" moaned Miss Vedrine.

"I didn't," whispered Win.

"Didn't what?"

"Leave my peaceful home. If I'd had one I shouldn't be here."

This was the first time she had volunteered or had had dragged out of her a word concerning her past. But at the moment no one could be keyed to interest in anything except preparation for the next wave.

In the veranda cafe Peter Rolls was asking his sister Ena if she knew anything about five incredibly beautiful girls in evening dress shut up together in a room with walls made of mirrors.

Ena Rolls was not in a mood to answer irrelevant questions, especially from a brother; but Lord Raygan and his sister were there, and pricked up their ears at the hint of a mystery. She could not be cross and ask Peter kindly to go to the devil and not talk rot, as she would have done if the others had been somewhere else. But then, were it not for Lord Raygan and his sister and mother, Miss Rolls would be flat in her berth.

"Five incredibly beautiful girls in evening dress!" repeated Lord Raygan, who, like Peter, was a good sailor.

Ena Rolls wanted him to be interested in her, and not in five preposterous persons in evening dress, so she replied promptly to Peter's question: "I suppose they must be Nadine's living models. We all had cards about their being on board and the hours of their parade to show the latest fashions. You saw the card, I suppose, Lady Eileen?"

"Yes," returned Lord Raygan's flapper sister. "It's on the writing-desk in that darling sitting-room you've given Mubs and me."

Ena felt rewarded for her sacrifice. She and Peter had engaged the best suite on board the *Monarchic*, but when Lord Raygan and his mother and sister were borne past Queenstown in most unworthy cabins (two very small ones between the three), Ena had given up her own and Peter's room to the two ladies. It was a Providential chance to make their acquaintance and win their gratitude. (She had met Raygan in Egypt and London, and sailed on the *Monarchic* in consequence.)

"The stewardess told me before I moved down," she went on, "that Mme. Nadine had taken the ship's nursery this trip for her show, and fitted it with wardrobes and mirror doors at immense expense. I'm afraid she won't get her money back if this storm lasts. Who could gaze at living models?"

"I could, if they're as beautiful as your brother says," replied Lord Raygan, a tall, lanky, red-headed Irishman with humorous eyes and

a heavy jaw. He was the first earl Ena had ever met, but she prayed fervently that he might not be the last.

Peter somehow did not want those pale dryads sacrificed to make a Raygan holiday. He regretted having remarked on their beauty. "They looked more like dying than living models when I saw them," he said.

"Let's go and see what they look like now," suggested Raygan. "Eh, what, Miss Rolls?"

"I don't know if men *can* go," she hesitated.

"Who's to stop them? Why shouldn't I be wanting to buy one of the dresses off their backs for my sister?"

"What a *melting* idea! You do, don't you, dear boy?" the flapper encouraged him.

"I might. Come along, Miss Rolls. Come along, Eily. What about you, Rolls? Will you guide us?"

"Let's wait till after lunch," said Ena. She hoped that it might disagree with everybody, and then they would not want to go.

"Oh, no!" pleaded Lady Eileen O'Neill. "We may be dead after luncheon, and probably will be. Or Rags'll change his mind about the dress. Nadine's dresses are too heavenly. I've never seen any except on the stage, worn by wonderful, thin giantesses. All her gowns are named, you know, Rags: 'Dawn,' or 'Sunset,' or 'Love in Spring,' or 'Passion in Twilight,' and poetic things like that."

"Can't be very poetic bein' sick in 'em, by Jove! for those girls in the nursery," remarked Rags, "especially if they've got a sense of humour."

(One of them had. The shimmering sheath of silver and chiffon she wore to-day, as it happened, rejoiced in the name of "First Love." It was all white. She was being very careful of its virginal purity; but it occurred to her that unless the sea's passion died, the frock would soon have to be renamed "Second Love," or even "Slighted Affection," if not "Rejected Addresses.")

Urged by Eileen, who would think her a "pig" if she refused, Ena reluctantly uncurled herself from a safe and graceful position on a

cushioned sofa. The result was alarming. Her swimming head warned her that if she did not instantly sit down again something too awful to think of in the presence of an earl would happen.

"You'd better go without me. I'm not very keen," she faintly explained, appealing to Peter with her eyes.

He contrived to understand without asking stupid questions, as some brothers would, and hurried the others off to the room of the mirrors. No longer was it a room of mystery; yet romance, once awakened, cannot be put to sleep in a minute, and Peter Rolls's heart beat with excitement or shyness, he was not sure which, as Lady Eileen O'Neill knocked at the dryad door.

CHAPTER II

BALM OF GILEAD

It was the worst possible moment for the dryads. But when their tear-wet eyes beheld a girl and two men, some deep-down primordial pride of womanhood rushed to their rescue and, flowing through their veins, performed a miracle beyond the power of any patent remedy. The five forlorn girls became at need the five stately goddesses Mme. Nadine paid them to be. (Winifred Child, by the way, was not paid, for she was not a goddess by profession. But she got her passage free. It was for that she was goddessing.)

Miss Devereux was the leader, by virtue, not of extra age, no indeed! but of height, manner, and experience. She apologized, with the most refined accent, for Mme. Nadine, who was "quite prostrated"; for Mme. Nadine's manageress, who was even worse; and for themselves. "I'm afraid we must do the best we can alone," she finished with unconscious pathos.

"It's a shame to disturb you," said Peter Rolls.

Miss Devereux and her attendant dryads turned their eyes to him. They had fancied that he was the man who had burst in before and burst out again; now they were sure. If he had been a woman, they would have borne him a grudge for coming back and bringing

companions worse than himself; but as he was a man, young, and not bad looking, they forgave him meekly.

They forgave the other man for the same reason, and forgave the girl because she was with the men. If only they could behave themselves as young ladies should through this ordeal! That was the effort on which they must concentrate their minds and other organs.

"Not at all," returned Miss Devereux, every inch a princess. "We are *here* to be disturbed." (Alas, how true!)

She smiled at Lady Eileen, but not patronizingly, because a mysterious instinct told her that the plain, pleasant young girl in Irish tweed was a "swell." The men, too, were swells, or important in some way or other. One exerted one's self to be charming to such people and to keep the male members of the party from looking at the other girls. "Would you like to see something else, different from what we are showing? Evening cloaks? Day dresses? We have a number of smart little afternoon frocks--"

"I think that white dress is the *meltingest* thing I ever saw," said Lady Eileen, who had walked into the room without waiting for Miss Devereux's answer to Peter Rolls's objection.

She was a kind-hearted girl, but, after all, living models were living models until they were dead, and she wasn't going to lose the chance of getting a dreamy frock out of Rags! All the goddesses were on their mettle and their feet now, though swaying like tall lilies in a high wind and occasionally bracing themselves against mirrors, while Lady Eileen was in the biggest chair, with Raygan and Peter Rolls standing behind her. The men also were offered chairs by Miss Vedrine with a lovely play of eyelashes, but refused them: the chairs, not the eyelashes, which no man could have spurned, despite their scattered effect.

"The white dress, *moddam?*" (It thrills a flapper to be called "*moddam.*") "It is one of the latest designs and considered perfect for a *débutante*. No doubt you know it is Mme. Nadine's custom to name her inspirations. Come here, if you please, Miss Child! This is 'First Love.'"

"Looks like it," remarked Lord Raygan, as Miss Child obeyed. He might have meant the wearer or the dress. Peter Rolls flashed a

gimlet glance his way to see which. He felt uncomfortably responsible for the manners of the visitors and the feelings of the visited. But the face of Rags was grave, and no offence could be taken. Peter Rolls withdrew the glance, though not before Winifred Child had it intercepted and interpreted.

"I believe he's a nice fellow," was the thought that slid through her mind as, like a chicken on a spit, she turned and turned to let Lady Eileen behold "First Love" from every point of view.

"Rippin', but a foot too tall for you," said Rags, more because it amused him to prolong the scene than through a real desire to criticise. "You don't go in for bein' a sylph."

Another backhanded compliment for the wearer, if she cared to accept it; but she was beautifully unconscious and, for once, not laughing. Her eyes looked miles away. Peter Rolls wondered to what land she had gone.

The girl appeared to be gazing over his head; but, as a matter of fact, she could see him perfectly. He had black hair and blue eyes, shrewd perhaps, yet they might be kind and merry; just now they looked worried. She thought him not handsome, but tanned and thin (she detested fat men) and somehow nice. Win wondered if she were taller than he. She hated being taller than men, though she owed her present engagement to her height and length of limb.

Miss Devereux respectfully argued that appearances were deceitful. *Moddam* was quite as sylphlike as the model. Might the dress be sent to *moddam's* cabin to try? Then it came out that *moddam* was Lady Eileen O'Neill, and the four tallest dryads visibly brightened, not so much for the owner of the name as for her brother.

Their dull days had been dimly lightened by gossip on the ship, brought to them by a stewardess from Lord Raygan's native isle, who knew all about him: that he was an earl, that with his mother and sister he had booked from Liverpool to Queenstown, but, owing to the ferocity of the sea, had been unable to land and was being carried to America. Also that a rich young American and his sister had given up their suite to the ladies. This American was said to be of no birth, the son of some big shopkeeper, and far, far outside even the fringe of the Four Hundred; therefore the tallest dryads

did their best eyelash work for Lord Raygan. They were born British, hailing from Brixton or other suburban health resorts, and now they knew he was a "lord" the nickname of "Rags," which had sickened them at first, seemed interesting and intimate as a domestic anecdote about royalty.

Rags consented to buy the dress for his sister if it fitted and didn't cost a million pounds. The dryads thought this adorably generous, for the stewardess, who knew all about Lord Raygan, said that the "family had become impoverished; they were not what they had once been except in name, which was of the best and oldest in Ireland." Stewardesses can tell all the things that Marconi does not mention.

When the sale was settled Miss Devereux turned to Peter Rolls. "And you, sir?" she asked, slightly coquettish because he was a man, though not of the Four Hundred. "I suppose there's nothing we can do for you?"

"I suppose not," Peter was echoing, when something occurred to him. "Unless," he amended, "my sister would like to buy a dress. She's on board."

"Would she care to look at Mme. Nadine's designs?" suggested Miss Devereux. "We have wardrobes full of marvellous inspirations."

"The trouble is, she feels queer if she walks around much," said Peter.

"Perhaps she would trust you to pick out something she might see in her own room? Is she tall or short?"

"Not so tall as any of you."

"Things which would fit *this* young lady would be the best, then. Miss Child, Miss Vedrine will help you out of 'First Love' behind the screen and put you into the 'Young Moon.' What" — *sotto voce* — "are you laughing at *this* time?"

"Nothing," said the smallest dryad meekly, though she gurgled under her breath.

"We'd better go now, and I'll come back," hastily suggested Peter. "Don't bother to change behind the screen for us, please. I must ask my sister about the dress."

He got the others out, which was not difficult as far as Eileen was concerned. She could hardly wait to try "First Love."

Rags was determined to ask Miss Rolls if he shouldn't choose a frock for her. But she said no, she didn't want one. This would have seemed to settle the matter, and did for Lord Raygan, who sat down beside her, abandoning further thought of the dryads. Peter, however, returned in due course to the room of the mirrors, because Miss Child could not be allowed to get into the "Young Moon" in such weather for nothing.

She was in it when he arrived. And pluck, mingled with excitement, having had a truly bracing effect on the girls, in the absence of the peer they were nice to the plebeian. The girl in the "Young Moon," to be sure, had scarcely anything to say, but she had a peculiarly fascinating way of not saying it.

By the time Mr. Rolls had bought the "Moon" for his sister, he had become quite friendly with the other dryads, on the strength of a few simple jokes about green cheese and blue moons and never having dreamed he could obtain one by crying for it.

"I was wondering," he said at last, when he was about to go, "whether you'd care for me to bring you some Balm of Gilead?"

"Balm of Gilead?" all five, even the girl in the "Moon," exclaimed.

"Yes. Stuff for seasickness. Not that you *are* seasick of course. But the balm's a good preventive. Did you never hear of it?"

They shook their heads.

"It's the great thing our side of the water. I don't need it myself, but I know it's all right, because it's making my father a fortune."

"Did he invent it?" inquired Miss Carroll.

"No. But he named it and he sells it. It's the men who name things and sell things, not the ones who invent them, that get the money. My father is Peter Rolls, and I--"