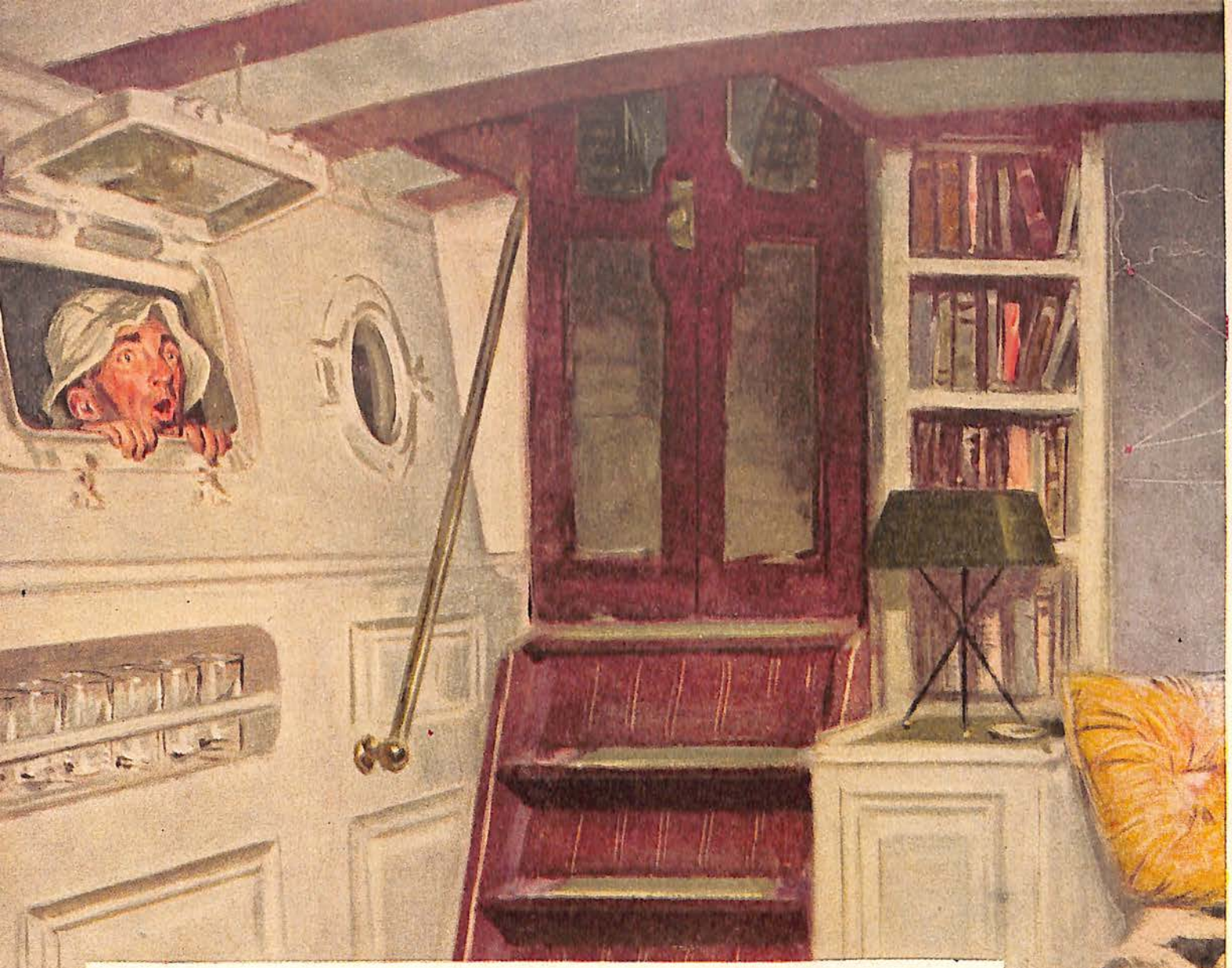

GOOD, BETTER, WORSE

● Charlie Goodrich was a model of upright behavior. He had never been anything else—people in Marthasport said wonderingly to each other—even as a boy. Now that he was a young man of twenty-five, he didn't smoke or drink or gamble or consort with reprehensible companions. As he was a vestryman at the church and an assistant Scoutmaster, Charlie's unfailing rectitude was put to good purpose.

At the bank, where he was a trusted employee, he was always the picture of courtesy, no matter how crowded the bank or how hot the day, and showed particular patience with querulous old ladies and little children reluctantly depositing their first sticky specie. Whatever the circumstances, nobody ever received a harsh word, a harsh look, or even a harsh thought from Charlie. (*Continued on page 167*)

by Lawrence Williams

ILLUSTRATED BY TOM LOVELL

Good, Better, Worse

(*Continued from page 64*)

Charlie's truly unflagging uprightness seemed quite as unaccountable to Charlie as it did to everyone else. He had simply been good for so long he didn't know how to be anything else. He had been raised by two maiden-lady aunts—and the guiding principle for conduct in life, as enunciated by these two ladies, was simple, clear, and precise. "Be good," they had told the infant Charlie and the pubescent Charlie and the adolescent Charlie, "and you will be happy."

Pursuing the first half of this injunction with commendable energy, Charlie waited for its logical conclusion. But something was wrong. He was good—but he wasn't happy. Not very often.

On the rare occasions when he was alone with the exquisitely lovely Emily Dolger, who also worked in the bank, he was in paradise itself. That it was a fool's paradise, however, he had only to look into Emily's huge brown eyes to know. There was no doubt that Emily was kind and polite and smiled brightly at him. But she didn't know or care about or return the great, swelling wave of love that swept out to her from Charlie's heart.

There seemed to be only one answer. Pushing his maiden aunts' precept all the way, Charlie reasoned that if he was not happy it was simply because he had not been good enough. He determined to do better.

THEN, one day in June, an incident occurred in the First National Bank of Marthasport that held the germ of a revolution far more profound than met anybody's eye at the time. Charlie, as assistant cashier, was alternating between his desk and—it being a small bank and the summer traffic heavy—the third teller's window. He was distracted from his duties only when Emily Dolger crossed the bank floor on her way to or from the office of Mr. Halsworthy, the president.

Emily's businesslike excursions Charlie followed with painful attentiveness. Through the grating of the teller's cage—grim bars that separated him from his heart's desire, Charlie thought poetically—he watched the trim, lithe figure, the dancing golden-brown hair, the incomparably lovely face, and had to start a whole column of figures over again on his adding machine.

Chance brought Emily to the bank floor when, about eleven o'clock, Olivia Marshall came in like a dazzling sweep of blown autumn leaves.

In a fashionable summer resort like Marthasport, the natives had grown hardened to almost anything that turned up during July and August. Summer visitors brought disorder and prosperity to the town and were something people learned to endure, like floods in low countries. But Marthasport was not prepared for the advent of Olivia Marshall. Very few places would have been.

Everyone who could walk had seen Olivia Marshall the previous winter on

the screen of the Bijou Theater on Water Street. The film had starred Miss Marshall in the tragic role of a slave girl of very nearly incredible powers of seduction.

All in all, Olivia Marshall had made a firm impression on all the theatergoers of Marthasport, but it would have been a safe bet that none of them ever expected to see her treading their own venerable cobbles along Summer Street. But here she was, standing in the doorway of the First National Bank.

She was dressed in trim flannel slacks, with a broad belt that emphasized the astonishing slimness of her waist, and an emerald-green cardigan. Her slightly slanting eyes, famous for the pages of silent suggestion they could speak, were hidden behind a pair of slanting dark glasses. Olivia Marshall in the flesh was every bit as impressive as Olivia Marshall the Technicolor slave girl.

She paused for a moment in the doorway, as if undecided where to go, and in that moment an unearthly hush dropped over the bank. Howie Meeker and Fenton Sammis, the two other tellers, who had been working out the weekly baseball pool by the water cooler, looked as though they had been struck by lightning, eyes fixed, jaws hanging.

Then, apparently unaware of the electric silence she had created, Olivia Marshall walked straight to Charlie's window and bestowed on him the world's most dazzling smile. "I'd like to open an account," she said, in a throaty voice. "I hope you can help me."

Charlie, who, like everyone else, had seen the slave-girl picture, felt his throat go dry and hated himself for it. He was intensely conscious of Emily Dolger's standing a few feet away. Passionately, he was determined to show Emily Dolger that he was impervious to all charms but hers, loyal, even face-to-face with Salome herself. Indeed, this was so very close to the literal truth that Charlie got a grip on himself.

"Certainly," he said formally. "If you'll just fill out this new-accounts form eighty-seven-R for us—"

"That's terribly kind of you."

"Not at all," said Charlie, and he looked straight over Olivia Marshall's dark head and smiled loyally at Emily.

When the form was finally filled out, it struck Charlie as a little irregular that Olivia Marshall's local address was a yacht called *Sea Witch*, in the harbor, but the check she presented for deposit was of such formidable size that he knew Mr. Halsworthy would okay it.

At last Olivia Marshall gathered up her things, put them in her bag, and again smiled the dazzling smile at Charlie. "You've been terribly sweet," she said, in a confidential voice that carried to every corner of the silent bank. On her way to the door, she lightly pulled the pigtail of a scraggly little girl in a sunsuit, murmured, "Hello, lamb," and vanished, as though she had never been.

THE second evening after the arrival of Olivia Marshall in Marthasport was one to which Charlie had been eagerly looking forward for three and a half months. It was the night of the inauguration of the drive for a new hospital, and the drive was to be launched with a dance and supper in Cyrus Bacon Memorial Hall. Charlie was going to escort Emily Dolger.

WHEN he had asked her, Charlie had believed he had seen a hesitant look flicker across her brown eyes; but in a town the size of Marthasport, for a girl to say she is already engaged for a given night three and a half months in the future has an unlikely sound. Anyway, Emily's father was chairman of the drive committee. The important thing was that she was going, and going with Charlie, and as he drove toward the Dolgers' house in his freshly pressed suit in his newly washed car, Charlie could feel his love for Emily swelling up and filling him until he thought he would burst with it if Emily wouldn't take a little of it to herself.

A barrier of reserve around her when she was with him, Charlie felt, walled off the real girl and presented him with an artificial Emily. With other people, he knew, there was no wall around her; her lovely laugh was spontaneous and genuine, her brown eyes were unveiled and frank. It was almost as though—incredible as it sounded—she were afraid of him.

"Shall we get a glass of punch, Charlie?" Emily said, at the end of a dance, breaking into his unhappy reverie. "It's nonalcoholic."

"Oh, yes, Emily," Charlie answered, releasing her quickly. "I should have thought of it myself. Excuse me."

When each had a glass of punch, they found two chairs in a corner of the hall, and Charlie produced a package of cigarettes, which he opened with the deliberation of a man cracking a safe.

"Why, Charlie!" Emily said. "Don't tell me you've started—"

"Oh, no," Charlie interrupted her. "They're for you. I noticed you like this kind, so I brought some along."

He held a match for her, and Emily took a few puffs. Then, for some reason, she stopped really smoking the cigarette and only held it rather guiltily.

Charlie opened the conversation with a safe topic. "I hope your father has a very successful drive for the new hospital. We could certainly use a new hospital."

"Well, as a matter of fact," Emily said, and she frowned in the most endearing way imaginable, "Daddy's run into a little trouble getting volunteer workers to solicit money. You know how people are."

"I'm awfully sorry to hear that, Emily."

"Not everybody's as generous with their time as you are."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Charlie replied, and his heart sang a joyous song. "It's not very agreeable work, going around ringing doorbells and asking for money."

"No, it's not," Emily agreed. "Particularly asking summer people, who don't

live here and don't care about a new hospital anyway."

"Yes, that's true. I certainly wouldn't be any good at it."

"Oh, *you'd* be good at it. You'd probably be perfectly wonderful at it," Emily said. "But I certainly don't think it would be fair to ask you. I mean, you already do so much with the Scouts and the choir and the old peop—"

"It's not so much that I wouldn't have the time," Charlie interrupted, in embarrassment at this itemization of his good works, "as I just don't think I'd be very good at it. But if you really think, Emily—"

"Charlie," Emily said, and there was something close to awe in her voice, "I think that's the most generous thing I've ever heard of."

"You do?"

"I certainly do. I think—" Emily suddenly leaned toward him and took one of his hands in hers—"I think you're an absolute darling."

Charlie reeled. An absolute darling!

"I'll work at it just as hard as I can, Emily," he said with great earnestness, "knowing it's something you—ah—you and your father—want to succeed."

AND that's how it happened that, bright and early Sunday morning, Charlie was trudging from house to house along the fashionable beach section of town, following a list of addresses and armed with a great sheaf of printed pamphlets full of statistics.

It was hard going. There was no doubt about that. To convince a man who lived in White Plains, say, that it was in his personal interest to help build a new hospital in a distant New England village, where he happened to be spending a vacation, was a problem.

"But what would you do, sir," Charlie said earnestly to one such man, who was trying to get to the beach for a swim, "if you had a sudden attack of appendicitis and the hospital facilities were inadeq—"

"I'd fly to Boston, of course," said the man, fidgeting impatiently.

There seemed to Charlie to be a core of logic in this reply, and he gave up the appendicitis hypothesis in later interviews. Still, it wasn't always like this. One old lady, who had been coming to Marthasport summers for over twenty years and remembered Charlie as a little boy, gave him a check for twenty-five dollars, and a number of others gave him five- and ten-dollar bills when he reminded them that the contribution was deductible from their income tax.

At eleven, Charlie raced to the Congregational Church, sang four quick hymns with the choir, passed the plate, and was back on the job by twelve-thirty. His list waned with the afternoon sun, and his wallet grew fatter. By five-thirty, he had two hundred and twenty dollars in contributions, which seemed big in one way but pretty small when you figured that the new hospital was going to cost one and a half million dollars. He wanted to do better, to stagger Emily with the size of his haul and the

devotion to duty that it would represent.

There were only two more names on his list. The next to the last was "Miss Olivia Marshall, *Sea Witch,* harbor."

Charlie swallowed hard. He knew the size of Miss Marshall's bank account, and the vision of it pressed him on, although there seemed, at the same time, something inescapably ludicrous about discussing the cost of nurses' uniforms and X-ray machines with the siren of the slave world.

He marched resolutely to the wharf. There he borrowed a dory from old Harold Dow, who rented boats to fishing parties of summer people. Charlie murmured something about the hospital, and shoved off. He was aware that, through the offices of Harold Dow—a gossip of Homeric capabilities—everyone in town would presently know he had visited the *Sea Witch;* but then, why shouldn't they know? His motive was exemplary. He must get over his nagging sense of guilt in order to do his job really well.

THE *Sea Witch* was an impressive power cruiser of some seventy or eighty feet, lying gleaming-white and rakish at her mooring in an isolated patch of water a hundred yards offshore. Charlie drew alongside a short mahogany ladder let over the rail and looked up uncertainly.

A man was peering down at him, a tall, hungry-looking man, wearing a white yachting cap several sizes too small and holding an empty glass. He wore enormous tortoise-shell glasses, which gave him the look of a watching owl. They stared at each other for a moment.

Finally the man spoke. "Abaft," he said sepulchrally, "abaft, man, and fleet your mizzen sheets."

"Beg pardon?" said Charlie.

The man continued to stare down at him and then seemed to lose interest. "I had been led to believe this was a seafaring community," he said critically, and started to wander away.

"Oh—sir!" Charlie called hurriedly. "Sir, if I might—I'm from the hospital-drive committee. I have Miss Olivia Marshall's name on a list, and I wonder if I could see her for a moment."

The owlish man raised his empty glass in an inexact beckoning gesture. "Livvy!" he shouted toward the afterdeck. "The man is here to take you to the hospital. He's no sea dog, I might as well tell you."

"No, no, you've got it mixed," Charlie began, but the man suddenly disappeared.

After a moment, he was back again, and beside him was Olivia Marshall.

Charlie stood up quickly and tried to bow, nearly upsetting the dory. "Good evening, Miss Marshall," he said, rocking wildly. "I—"

"See what I told you?" said the man.

"Why, it's the lamb from the bank!" Olivia Marshall cried. "Aren't you the lamb from the bank?"

"Well, in a way," Charlie said uncomfortably, and started to explain.

"Not now!" she interrupted. "You can tell me later. You're just in time for Adverbs. Come on up, lamb. Hurry!"

The exact significance of this invitation was lost on Charlie, but at least it was an invitation. He clambered up the ladder, clutching a stack of hospital leaflets under one arm, and was scuttled along the deck to where three people sat under an awning, drinking and talking.

"Look!" Olivia shouted, pushing Charlie before her into the very center of the group. "A new actor for Adverbs!"

There were unaccountable, exuberant exclamations of joy, followed by a swift rattling of names, none of which Charlie caught. Charlie was welcomed with frenzied enthusiasm. The party had plainly not just begun.

Charlie stood at the center of this merry company in acute discomfort. His eyes got a hunted look. Somehow, he dropped the hospital pamphlets to the deck, which reminded him of his duty. This, in turn, reminded him of Emily. He cleared his throat. "I'm awfully sorry to be disturbing you all like this," he said, "but—but I could get right back to shore right now and not bother you any more if I could just talk for a minute to Miss—"

"No, no, no, no, no, lamb, you've entirely lost the thread," Olivia Marshall interrupted, gliding up to him and firmly grasping his lapels. "We're all going to play a game."

Charlie stared at her. Suddenly a strange panic gripped him. "Oh, no, I couldn't possibly play a— Thank you. Really. I've got to get right— I mean, the hospital committ—"

"Steady, steady." Olivia Marshall spoke soothingly in her mysterious, throaty voice. Her perfume enveloped him like a moonlit orange grove. "We'll build your old hospital, lovey," she said gently, "but we don't want to muck up my nice party while we're doing it, do we? Would a couple of hundred dollars build a wing or two?"

"My, that's certainly very generous, all right," Charlie said, involuntarily drawing backward. It seemed to him that Olivia Marshall's slanting eyes had grown perceptibly slantier. "Mighty generous. That means you'll get not only the regular sticker for your window, but a little bronze—"

"Then five hundred ought to build the whole thing," Olivia interrupted again. "So we'll play our game and have a lovely time, and later we'll do something about the hospital." She swirled gracefully around to the others. "Downstairs, lambs," she said. "It'll all be better downstairs."

BEFORE he knew what was happening to him, Charlie was being bumped inexorably down the companionway ahead of the owlish man named George. Like a trapped animal in a cage, he looked around wretchedly at the big, handsome cabin.

Olivia Marshall was talking from the other end of the cabin, explaining the

game—to him alone, apparently, since nobody else seemed to be listening. She stood in a splash of electric light. In the bright frame of light, her dark, glossy hair gleaming, her magnificently sculptured face animated with pleasure, she was a sight to give strong men pause.

She waved a glass at Charlie for emphasis. "Now, I'll go out first," she said. "The rest of you choose an adverb, and when I come back, I'll tell each one something to act out in the 'Manner of the Adverb'—that's the name of the game—and try to guess what the adverb is. Understand? You'll be a doll at it."

"You mean," Charlie began miserably, "that if a particular adverb—"

"That's right, lamb. Good-by, everybody! I'm going! Don't take too long!" She disappeared.

A great haggling and wrangling commenced among the other four in the cabin. Charlie listened silently. Finally someone suggested "stuffily." They compromised on that and called Olivia back.

She stood to one side of the lighted space and summoned them one by one. They all acted with violent enthusiasm, but none of them managed to convey to Olivia what the adverb was.

Charlie took no pleasure at all in these antics. All he could think of was that his own turn was coming relentlessly closer. His heart began to beat wildly. He couldn't breathe. All the joy of five hundred dollars and Emily's praise fled his mind in his growing panic, leaving only the terrifying present.

"But you're all such awful actors, lambs!" Olivia Marshall shouted. "Now, let's see." She pointed one finger straight at Charlie, then turned it over and beckoned with it. "You pretend the president is here and introduce him to me."

Charlie tottered forward. Complete silence fell over the others. The lights seemed to him blinding. He opened his mouth, made only a croaking sound, cleared his throat, and said, in an almost natural voice, "Mr. Eisenhower, I should like to—ah—take this opportunity to present Miss Olivia Marshall. Miss Marshall, this is our—the president of the United States."

"Stuffily!" shrieked Olivia Marshall.

Bedlam broke loose. Everybody shouted at once. Their praise for Charlie knew no bounds. George kept pounding him on the back. Another man told him he had a sort of Hank Fonda quality. Everyone had another drink.

A CURIOUS change began to take place in Charlie. He began to feel better. He even smiled modestly. There really wasn't much to the game, when you got right down to it. It was a little too bad, perhaps, that he had made his triumph acting out a word like "stuffily"—he would have preferred something like, say, "swashbucklingly"—but he didn't quibble. He sat up alertly now, anxious to miss nothing and perhaps even repeat his success.

The game grew noisier; the adverbs became more original and inexact, the acting more uproarious. There was no

way for Charlie to guess that the seeds of disaster had already been planted.

After the game had gone on for something more than an hour, it was George-the-playwright's turn to go out, and the others settled on "thoroughly."

George was summoned, and for a moment he stared owlishly around, presumably thinking. Then he said, "Livvy, bring Charlie up here in the light."

Charlie and Olivia Marshall did as they were told, and stood side by side in the stark pool of light, waiting. Charlie even felt a pleasant anticipation, another chance to test his histrionic skill.

"Now," said George, retiring to a seat in the darkness, "kiss him."

Without pausing a single second, Olivia Marshall threw herself at Charlie and kissed him—"thoroughly." To say that Charlie had never before experienced anything of the kind is to say nothing. For a moment, he struggled weakly. Then a kind of paralysis crept over him, leaving him as limp and purposeless as a wet newspaper.

After a period of time that could have lasted anywhere from a few seconds to an hour and a half, she let him go. Charlie nearly fell down. He teetered there, staring in front of him. In fact, so impaired were his reflexes that it was some time before he realized that what he was staring at was the grinning face of Harold Dow, from whom he had borrowed the dory.

HAROLD'S disembodied face and hands hung suspended in a porthole not far away. From this limited vantage point, Harold could probably not see much of the rest of the cabin; but from his expression, there was no doubt that he had got a very good look at Charlie and Olivia Marshall. As Charlie's eyes finally began to focus once more and the full horror of his position gradually bore in on him, the face of Harold Dow receded swiftly and vanished.

A desperate frenzy took hold of Charlie, a desperation that was a physical pain. In the receding face of Harold Dow, who would make sure the story reached every ear in Marthasport by sunrise tomorrow, Charlie had seen the utter and complete ruin of everything that was dear to him in life—the end of his high reputation for unfailing uprightness, the end of Emily Dolger, the end of everything. Suddenly, more than anything else, Charlie wanted to get away, to get off this boat and away from these people, who had, in an hour and something, brought the carefully ordered edifice of his life crashing down.

His desperation gave him an unaccustomed firmness. He simply said he had to go, and he went. As he climbed down to the dory, Olivia Marshall tucked the hospital check into his breast pocket, and as he pulled away toward shore, she called after him, in a voice that echoed like a hammered bell across the quiet harbor, "By-by, lamb! Come back soon!"

It was nearly eight when he finally walked up Summer Street to Mr. Dolger's office. The office was dark. Charlie

● See the Good Housekeeping Consumers' Guaranty—page 6

put his little stack of loot into an envelope, and as he did this, Olivia Marshall's check stared up at him. He loathed the sight of it. Its very size now seemed only to incriminate him. He wanted to burn it, to tear it to shreds, but it was not his to destroy. Wretchedly, he dropped it in with the rest and slipped the envelope through the letter slot.

He went straight home, scrambled two eggs, ate them like a man taking poison, and went to bed. But there was no sleep for him. The room seemed to be full of eyes—the eyes of Marthasport, but particularly Emily's eyes—staring their accusation. They would never honor him again, those eyes he had tried so hard to please through his moral rectitude, his model behavior, his good works. All that was swept away. Charlie groaned aloud.

The next morning, he arrived at the bank precisely at his usual time. He went quickly to his desk, without looking to right or left, and pretended to become absorbed in a pile of monthly bank statements. The figures might as well have been so many chicken tracks, for all the significance they had for Charlie. His insides were churning crazily. His entire attention was concentrated on the front door of the bank, through which Emily must arrive at any moment. He meant to talk to Emily at once, with so impassioned an honesty that she would finally be convinced it had been only a game on the boat. He could only try.

Howie Meeker and Fenton Sammis came in, talking about their baseball pool. When they saw Charlie, they stood side by side and nudged each other elaborately, seeming to have lost their usual attitude of reluctant respect.

Charlie stared at them, opened his mouth to say something, and saw Emily coming through the front door. He leaped to his feet, pushed past Howie and Fenton, and caught her as she was passing the safe-deposit vault. "Oh, Emily," he said, his voice unsteady, "Emily, may I please speak to you for a moment? It's very important."

She stopped, and a stiffness in the set of her shoulders sent a wave of terror to his heart. "Well," she said icily, "I'm told you brought back lots of money for the hospital drive yesterday. Five hundred dollars from just one person—think of it. You must be very proud."

"That's what I want to explain to you. Emily, I—"

"I don't see why you should want to explain anything to me," interrupted Emily. "After all, I'm not your keeper. I'll admit I was pretty surprised to hear about your—your exploits, Charlie Goodrich; but then, I suppose we never know about people, do we?"

"But, Emily, if you'd listen—" Charlie began, but his voice was not strong, because he had just noticed an astounding thing. Across Emily's lovely brown eyes today there was no veil of withdrawal; no barrier of reserve was separating her from him. This was not the elusive Emily he had tried so hard to impress with good works, but a girl—real and direct as life itself—who was mad at him.

Mad at him! Maybe even jealous? The thought staggered Charlie with joy. For the first time in all the years he had known her, Emily was looking at him as though he were a real, living man. Not a faultless paragon, but another human being like herself, like other people. But much better than other people, because she was mad at him. Dizzily, Charlie decided that perhaps he would put off explaining to Emily about the game on the boat.

"Well, my goodness, I certainly can't stand here listening to you all day," Emily was saying. "Since you seem to want to talk so much, I suppose I can't prevent you from coming to the Blue Coffeepot at lunchtime. Although you probably won't be interested, since there won't be any movie actress there." She brushed past him and disappeared into Mr. Halsworthy's office.

Charlie moved slowly back to his desk and sat down, breathing in the golden haze of happiness that surrounded him. Then suddenly he thought something he had never thought before in his life. No doubt his maiden aunts had been right, he thought, in saying that if he were good he would be happy; but perhaps it was better to try to be only as good as most good people. An enormous peace settled over Charlie.

Howie Meeker was leaning over his desk. "Say, Charlie," Howie whispered, because the bank doors were opening and some customers were coming in, "nobody's taken the Red Sox for this week's pool. Do you want me to put your name down for them?" Howie was smiling at him—a friendly smile, the smile of one member of the imperfect human race to another.

Charlie smiled back. "Why, thanks, Howie," he said, and it was hard to believe his own voice was saying it so easily. "Sure. I'd like that very much."

THE END

Warden's Wife

(*Continued from page 61*)

and even a little girl had no difficulty differentiating between them. On the one hand, there were some two hundred prison employees and their families—people like us and the Duffys, the Gillettes, and the Whites. On the other hand, there were the men who worked in the prison gardens or attended to various jobs in and about the reservation. They had shaved heads, wore striped suits—and were much easier to get along with than the usual run of adults. Because they never gave me orders or inundated me with "don'ts," they ranked quite high in my estimation.

I became very fond of one of the