

THE SECOND BULLET

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The second bullet by Robert Orr Chipperfield

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ROBERT ORR CHIPPERFIELD

**THE
SECOND BULLET**

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BY
ROBERT ORR CHIPPERFIELD



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Chapter I.

THE LADY AND THE ENIGMA.

“**W**HO is she, anyway?” Beatrice Ledyard placed her coffee cup upon the tabouret and raised her hazel eyes with a curious feline glint in them to her mother.

“My dear Trixy, what a question!” Mrs. Ledyard waved a plump hand deprecatingly. “I’ve been talking of Mrs. Hartshorne, and the invaluable aid she has given us in preparation for the Red Cross bazaar—”

“I know, but is she going to take charge of a booth herself? Is she going to appear in any capacity?” Trixy pursued. “Doesn’t it strike you as a bit odd that in all the six months she has been here in Eastopolis Mrs. Hartshorne has never appeared at any more public function than church?”

“You don’t mean that she might possibly be afraid of meeting embarrassing acquaintances from the past, do you Trixy?” a guileless voice asked sweetly from a low chair by the fern-banked hearth, and Bébé Cowles helped herself lazily to another lump of sugar. “It would be simply fascinating to find that we had an adventuress in our prosaic exclusive midst.”

“I mean that she has managed in this short space of time to get in with all of us and yet we know no more about her

than if she had dropped from the clouds. Who and what was Mr. Hartshorne? When did he die, if he is dead, as she claims? Did Mr. Hartshorne ever really exist?"

"Aren't you a trifle hard on her, Trixy? Of course she's made a slave of every unattached man in our set, but we're bound to get some of them back on the rebound! At any rate, it seems a bit late in the day to begin asking awkward questions." Bébé shook her golden head. "Your mother would never have taken her up, I am sure, had there been anything—well, baffling about her. Of course, we all followed dear Mrs. Ledyard's lead."

If Mrs. Ledyard divined a hint of amused malice in the childlike tones she rose majestically above it.

"I am not in the habit of committing social errors," she asseverated. "Anyone qualified to discriminate could see at once that Mrs. Hartshorne's breeding is unassailable and I think it is scarcely in good taste, Trixy, for you to utter vague insinuations against such a charming woman. If she avoids thrusting herself forward in public affairs it is due to her modest, retiring disposition; an attitude all too rarely encountered in these days. As for me, I don't know what I should have done without her on the National Defense Committee, to say nothing of the French Orphans and the Armenian Relief—"

"I'm insinuating nothing, mother; I am merely curious." Trixy was the only person living who dared to interrupt her mother. That dominant lady writhed. "I grant you that she has not attempted to establish an actual intimacy with any of us; rather, she has held us at arm's length. But may not that be as much against her as in her favor? As to her social position among us, of course, she has made herself indispensable to you in your war work and to Dr. Ferrine in parish matters; but the ladder of charity has

been used by every climber since our social system was organized. Aside from the fact that she has been absolutely silent about her antecedents, has she mentioned a single person of whom we have ever heard outside Eastopolis?"

"My dear, you are allowing your sudden prejudice to carry you to absurd lengths," her mother responded coldly. "I trust you will not permit your manner to betray it when she drops in later for bridge. Mr. Swarthmore is bringing her on from the Gaylors' dinner, you know."

"Neely Swarthmore doesn't appear to share your suspicions, Trixy," Bébé remarked slyly.

Trixy darted a scornful glance at her bosom friend, but she responded quietly enough.

"They are not suspicions, merely conjectures. There, the dining-room doors are opening!"

"I was wondering if your father would ever let them escape!" Mrs. Ledyard began, but the voices of the three men who completed the sextette of the little dinner party traveled before them as they crossed the music room, and made her pause.

"Marvelous! Most extraordinary business acumen for a woman!" The sleek, pompous tones of Wendle Braddock, President of the Eastopolis Trust Company, came unctuously to their ears. "She banks with us, you know, and I've attempted more than once to advise her in her financial deals, but events have proved the wisdom of her own decision."

"I know it!" Colonel Ledyard laughed genially. "Had the same experience myself with her, as she trades through me. She's invariably on the right side of the market."

"It is precisely this remarkable executive ability which makes her work in the parish invaluable," chimed in Dr. Perrine's rounded pulpit tones. "Extremely generous, too