

# the CHArms

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AT FIRST, everything seemed all right. She was fourteen — immersed in writing pen-pal letters and collecting charms. Actually, she was not as interested in pen-pals as in charms; yet, both indispensably went hand-in-hand. She received charms in the form of an orange and a palm tree from a girl in California, a coin from a pal in Hongkong, and a Buddha from another in Thailand. In return, she sent out embroidered piña handkerchiefs, native placements, and necklaces of *beatilis* seeds.

Her keeping too much to herself worried her mother. Her mother thought she ought to be in Lina's despedida dinner or in Clara's birthday party instead of staying up late morning over zany letters. Her mother couldn't stand the thought of a Blanco growing up to be an introvert; or worse a misanthrope.

"Hush, mother," Doris would comfort her, "don't be too pessimistic. Remember, she is still a baby."

She was not a baby any more, her inner being would cry out in mute protest. She scorned everyone who classified her in any category of her contemporaries. Contemptuous of the seemingly dull school socials and of spineless girl friends who swooned over immature, equally spineless boys, she obstinately withdrew deeper and deeper into her shell, imprisoning herself within the walls of her fancies and created her own world, a labyrinth of sophisticated maturity and childishness.

Let them assume true what they think true, she thought bitterly. Let the whole human race call her anything it liked and she wouldn't care. After all, her real identity was safe within herself.

Everything outside of her self was really all right. Even David was okay. So was Doris, her only sister. Doris was twenty-two and David twenty-six. The

wedding was set for December, only six months away. She was to be the bridesmaid. That was all right too. She couldn't care less. Then David started noticing her and things ceased to be all right.

It all started one morning. It was mid-July and the day was unusually sunny and bright. She was in her favorite nook — a bench beneath the intertwining bougainvillea vines. The bower



was at right angles with the porch and parallel to the promenade. She was engrossed in a letter written by a boy from Turkey which she had received only that morning. The lacy pattern sunlight and shadow rippled on the letter and on her arms every time the bougainvillea quivered in the wind.

She was in such a position — a lone, somber figure with hair in a single queue dangling on her left breast, when Doris and David came along. David traipsed with a jaunty air, bringing himself forward effortlessly. Doris, who barely came up to David's shoulder, had to double her steps to catch up with his long strides.

"Good morning, my chamois. What have you got there?" It was more of a public announcement than a greeting, she thought.

David had started calling her chamois, the first time he saw her gracefully and fast her nimble feet could carry her when she ran.

She inwardly seethed with anger against such an intrusion to her privacy. She cringed in annoyance when David boldly reached forward for the letter.

"It must be from a boy friend, the way she conducts herself, Doris." David continued to tease. She sprang up as if to attack.

"It is not so . . . and it is absolutely none of your business!" Then, she took her leave, ignoring Doris protests.

"You got an eccentric for a sister, Doris. Pull the end of the tether in the right direction while she is still young and malleable." David's voice trailed after her.

That afternoon, the Blanco family was gathered in the veranda, enjoying the afternoon breeze and the iced tea with lemon, when David arrived. He was practically an accepted member of the family now, coming and going as he pleased. Surprisingly, he came up directly to her and gave her queue a playful tug, and said:

"Get into a pair of slacks. You are going bowling with me."

She only stared at him. The morning incident was still fresh in her mind. When she did not move, he swung her up on her feet with

one gesture, then gave her an explosive smack on the buttocks.

"Go on and be a good girl."

She was about to turn angrily upon him when she caught the disapproving glint in her father's eyes. She stood up and left the room, banging the front door shut to accentuate her displeasure.

David was a gay and adept bowler. He was affable and irresistibly piquant. She began to relax. She even beamed with pleasure when David pretended to be beaten. She went home sharing David's esprit.

Bowling was followed by other events. Her apathy towards David turned into eager expectancy. She was conscious of a warm feeling which was new to her.

David was also a graceful swimmer, lithe as a fish. He dove with form and finesse. He was, moreover, a star in tennis; a master in chess. David . . . redoubtable David. She enjoyed most of all the tete-a-tete dinners with him. Doris became an obscure figure in the background.

She became more fastidious and selective in her dresses. She grew fond of russet, apple-green, variable shades of blue, and pastel colors in place of the usual immaculate white and drab ash-gray ones. She was now an animated being easily provoked to laughter by good humored jokes. The charms lay forgotten in the huge jewelry box.

The night before the wedding came. Her dreams shattered like a fallen crystal ball. Her air castles crashed and fell noiselessly like withered petals. The stark reality that was going to unfold the next day came down upon her in a forceful shock. The brutal awakening made her weak that she had to lie down. She could feel her strength ebbing away.

She lay there for a long time, staring blankly at the ceiling; for a while, stunned, and for the moment, lost in thought.

"You are a quaint child, my chamois," she remembered David said once.

"I am not a child anymore, David. I am not," she had protested. That was the first time she had argued the point openly. The

whole world should know she had grown-up . . . most especially David!

"You will grow up far more chic than your sister," still rang in her ears.

"Wait David, wait . . . Just four years more," she wanted to say. Did not Grandma marry at eighteen? Then she turned prone and stifled a sob on the pillow.

Wait, this is all a mistake! She could almost hear David say. I realized that I don't love you enough, Doris. My chamois and I really belong to each other.

And what about her mother and father? Her parents would surely be on her side if only they can know how deeply in love she was.

But David was not even in love with her. She was going to be his sister-in-law after tomorrow, and that was all.

After a while, she crawled out of bed, headed for the ornate stand, and took the jewelry box. The charms glistened under the yellow light of the lampshade. Thirteen charms hung from a silver chain. They were lifeless cold metals in her fingers, nothing more. She was still musing over them when a soft knock sounded on the door. Doris came in, a beautiful bride-to-be.

"Dinner's ready sweetheart," she said.

She briefly contemplated the charms once more, then brought them forward before Doris, almost nonchalantly.

"This is my wedding gift for you," she whispered.

"A bracelet charms! It's beautiful. But truly, sweetheart, you can't be serious. You love it too much . . ."

"No. Keep it. I don't want it anymore."

Doris could not understand. She was about to say something but changed her mind, and smiled deferentially instead.

"Thank you, sweetheart. I'll take good care of it. I promise."

She put out the light and walked out with Doris, leaving behind her shell of letters and the empty jewelry box.