

Shifting SANDS

by Sara Ware BASSETT

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SYNOPSIS

The future of the still youthful and comely "Widder" Marcia Howe, recently released by death from her idling husband, is a conversational tit-bit among housewives of the little hamlet of Wilton. Eligible bachelors and widowers also are interested. Marcia is lonely, and has invited her late husband's niece, Sylvia Hayden, whom she has never seen, to visit her. A stranger, on the verge of exhaustion, finds his way to Marcia's home. Secretly, he asks Marcia to hide a package containing jewelry. She does so. Elisha Winslow, town sheriff, brings news of a jewel robbery nearby. The stranger gives his name as Stanley Heath. Sylvia, by chance, discovers the jewels, and naturally believes Heath is a robber. She realizes that Marcia must have hidden them, and decides to say nothing, putting the gems back in their hiding place. Marcia admits to herself that she has altogether too deep an interest in her guest, but is powerless to overcome it. Heath has wired "Mrs. S. C. Heath," New York, saying he is safe. He also orders a man named Currier to come at once. Sylvia, in her room, bedsheets herself with the jewels. At Marcia's approach she hides them there.

CHAPTER V—Continued

Therefore, a very different Marcia Howe responded to Stanley Heath's summons. She was now all gentleness, friendliness, and shyly penitent. Stanley, again master of himself, welcomed her with amazement. Could man ever fathom a woman's moods, he asked himself? Why this chastened and distractingly adorable Marcia? Well, if he could not fathom her, he at least was grateful for her understanding. Nevertheless he did mentally observe he had not dreamed her to be so many-sided or credited her with a title the fascinations he had so unexpectedly discovered her to possess. "Here I am, Mr. Heath. What can I do for you?" was her greeting. This time she did not hesitate, but went directly to the chair beside his bed and sat down. He smiled and, meeting his eyes, she smiled back. This was better. Heath sighed a sigh of relief. "I've been thinking, since you went down stairs, about Currier. He ought to arrive late tonight or early tomorrow morning. He will start the moment he gets my wire. Although he will not know in which house I am quartered, he will have the wit to inquire, for he has more than the ordinary quota of brains. I don't know what I should do without him. I shall have him leave the car in the village and after he has delivered over the clothing he is to bring, he can take the noon train back to New York, carrying the jewels with him." "I see," nodded Marcia. She did not see. Nevertheless she heartily welcomed the intelligence that the jewels with their damning evidence, if evidence it was, were to be removed from the house. The sooner they were out of the way the better. If they were not damning evidence they at least were a great responsibility. Suppose something were to happen to them? Suppose somebody suspected they were in the house? "So," continued Stanley Heath, "I think sometime today when you have a good opportunity you'd better get the case and bring it up here. I shall then have it here in my room and I can hand it over to Currier without any trouble." "I'll go fetch it now. Sylvia has gone to the village and this is a splendid chance," cried Marcia. "Fine!" "I'll be right back." He heard her speed down the stairs and listened to her step in the room below. Then there was silence. A few moments later she came racing back, white and breathless. "They're gone!" she cried. "The place is empty! The jewels are not there!" Her terror and the fear lest her pallor foreshadowed collapse produced in Heath that artificial calm one sometimes sees when a strong nature rears itself in and calls upon its reserve control. The man thought only of how to quiet her. Reaching out, he touched her hair. "Hush, Marcia. The jewels will be found. Don't give way like this. I cannot bear to see you. The whole lot of them are not worth your tears." "But you left them in my care. It was I who suggested where to hide them," she moaned. "I know. And it was a splendid idea, too. I could not let that sheriff of yours peel off my clothes and find the diamonds on me. He isn't a man of sufficient imagination—or perhaps he is one of far too much. I am not blaming you—not in the least. We did the best we could in the emergency. If things have gone wrong, it is no fault of yours."

"But you trusted me. I ought to have watched. I should not have left the kitchen day or night," declared Marcia, lifting her tear-stained face to his. "You have been there most of the time, haven't you?" "I went to see them get the boat off yesterday." "Still, some one was here. Sylvia was in the house." "Yes, but she knew nothing about the jewels and therefore may not have realized the importance of staying on deck. All I asked her to do was to remain within call. She may have gone upstairs, or into another room." "When she comes back, you can ask her. Now we must pull ourselves together, dear," went on Stanley gently. "It is important that we do not give ourselves away. Sylvia may know nothing and if she does not, we must not let her suspect." She rose but he still held her hand, a common misery routing every thought of conventionality. The firmness and magnetism of his touch brought strength. It was a new experience, for during her life with Jason, Marcia had been the oak—the one who consoled, sustained. For a few delicious moments, she let herself rest, weary and unresisting, within the shelter of Stanley Heath's grasp. Then she drew away and, passing her hand across her forehead as if awakening from a dream, murmured: "I'd better go down. Sylvia will be coming." "Very well. Now keep a stiff upper lip." "I will—I'll do my best." Even as she spoke the outer door opened, then closed with a bang. "There's Sylvia now. I must go." The girl came in, aglow from her walk. "I'm awfully sorry I banged the door," she apologized. "A gust of wind took it. I do hope I didn't wake up Mr. Heath. Here's the marketing. And Marcia, what do you suppose? I had



"Hush, Marcia. The Jewels Will Be Found."

a letter from Hortie Fuller—that fellow back home that I've told you about. He's sent me a five-pound box of candy and he wants to come to Wilton and spend his summer vacation." The girl's eyes were shining and she breathed quickly. "Of course I don't care a button for Hortie. Still, it would be rather good fun to see him. It seems ages since I've laid eyes on him. You know how it is—you get used to a person who is always under foot. You have to think about him if only to avoid stepping on him. And after all, Hortie isn't so bad. Thinking him over from a distance, he really is rather nice. Come and sample the candy. It's wonderful. He must have blown himself and sent to Chicago for it, poor dear! I'll let you see the letter, all except the part which is too, frightfully silly. You wouldn't care about that. I don't myself." Sylvia shrugged her shoulders. Alas, this was no moment to talk with her, and artfully draw from her the happenings of the previous day. Inwardly distraught but outwardly calm, Marcia took the letter and tried valiantly to focus her attention upon it. To her surprise, it was a manly, intelligent letter, filled with witty gossip, to be sure, yet written in delightfully interesting fashion. "Your Mr. Fuller sounds charming," she said as she gave it back. "Oh, Hortie is all right—in some ways." Patronizingly slipping the letter into her pocket, Sylvia shifted the subject. Nevertheless, a betraying flush colored her cheeks. "Now we must start dinner, mustn't we? Don't you want to ask Mr. Heath which way he prefers his eggs—poached or boiled? And Marcia, while you're there, do put a pair of fresh pillow-slips on his pillows. The ones he has are frightfully tumbled. I meant to do it this morning." As the door closed behind the elder woman, artful young Sylvia smiled. "There! That will keep her busy for a few moments at least. I know those pillow-cases. They fit like a snake's skin and are terribly hard to get off and on." She crept into the hall and listened. Yes, Marcia and Stanley Heath were talking. She could hear her aunt's gentle insistence and the man's protests. That was all she wished to know. The pillow-cases were in process of being taken off.

Up the stairs flew Sylvia, to return a second later, the jewel case awathed in its loose wrappings. "If I can only scramble it in there before she comes," whispered she. "I shall draw the first long breath I've taken since last night." An anxious interval elapsed before the brick was pried out and the case slipped beneath it. Nevertheless the feat was accomplished, and triumphant, relieved, happy Sylvia set about preparing dinner. What a long while Marcia was staying upstairs! Why, one could change a dozen pillow-slips in this time. "I guess they are tighter than I remembered them. I needn't have rushed as I did," pouted Sylvia. "What can she be doing?" When at last Marcia returned, something evidently was wrong. "What's the matter?" demanded Sylvia. "Is Mr. Heath worse?" "Worse? No indeed. What made you think so?" "You look fussed." "Do I? You'd be fussed had you wrestled with those pillow-slips as I have," was the reply. "Either the pillows have swelled or the cases have shrunk frightfully. Well, they are on now, anyway." "Come and get dinner then. I'm starved. My walk has made me hungry as a bear. You must go out this afternoon, Marcia. It is a glorious day and you need to be pepped up." To her surprise, Marcia demurred. "Thank you, dear, but I think I won't go out today. I'd rather sit here and read." "Nonsense, Marcia! You're getting middle-aged and lazy. You'll lose your nice slim, hipless figure if you don't watch out." "I'm too tired to go out." "The air would rest you." "Not today, dear," Marcia said with finality. "I have some mending to do and lots of other little things that I have been saving up for a long time. Since I prefer to stay, why don't you tramp up the shore and see 'My Unknown Lady'? She is beautiful and you haven't seen her yet." "I'd love to—if I cannot coax you to go out." "You can't. I'm adamant on not stirring out of this room." "Well, if your mind is made up to that extent, I suppose there is no use in my trying to change it. I would like to see the boat." "I'm sure you would. Stay as long as you like. There will be nothing to do here. Mr. Heath will probably sleep and in the meantime I shall get my sewing done." As Marcia spoke the words, her mind was busy. So Sylvia had not stirred from the kitchen on the previous afternoon! The theft of the jewels must, then, have taken place during the night. Nevertheless, she was puzzled, for she had no memory of finding anything awry when she came down at sunrise to lay the fire. When had the gems been taken, and who had taken them? No wonder she craved solitude to ponder the conundrum! This, however, was not the paramount reason she desired to be alone. Despite the enigma of the jewels; despite the mystery surrounding Stanley Heath, deep in her heart something that would not be stilled was singing—singing!

CHAPTER VI

In the meantime, the throng of neighbors Sylvia had precipitated left in the village post office had received their mail and reached that anticipated interval for gossip which never failed to be stimulating. Clustered about the counter loitered the standbys. Zefas Henry was speaking: "A mighty fine little girl—that Sylvia," commented he. "A high stepper! We'd oughter tie her down to Wilton so'st she won't go back west. She's too pretty to be spared from the Cape." "I figger you'd have trouble keepin' her here," rejoined Sam Nickerson, the postmaster. "She's got a beau in her home town. Had a letter an' a box of candy from him today. Same writin' an' same postmark on both of 'em, I noticed." "Didn't by any chance see the name, did you, Silas?" Eleazer Crocker inquired. "Wal, come to think of it, it did catch my eye. You know how such things will. Fuller, he's called. Horatio Fuller." "Horatio Fuller, eh?" Eleazer repeated. "Kinder high soundin'. Wonder who he is? From Alton City, you say?" Silas nodded. "That was the address." "Never heard of the place," Capt. Benjamin Todd put in. Thoughtfully Zenas Henry stroked his chin. "If everybody knew where all the blasted places in the country were, what use would they have for maps? 'Twould put the map-makin' folks clean out of business. Say, Ephraim," inspired by a bright idea, "you're the mail carrier. You'd oughter be primed on the location of places. Where's Alton City?" "Alton City? Hanged if I know. To hear you talk, anybody'd think 'twas my job to tote round the country deliverin' letters in person at the doors of every house in the United States." "But you must have some notion 'bout geography. Ain't you got no pocket atlas nor nothin'?" "I may have a small map somewhere; I carry most everything," Ephraim grinned. With deliberation, he began to dig through the contents of his many pockets.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

WHY BAY TURNS YELLOW

La Jolla Bay, near San Diego, Calif., had this summer a visitation of "yellow water," unique in that region both because of the prominence of yellow and the extremely small size of the causative organism, says the Collecting Net, published in the interests of marine biological laboratories. No satisfactory identification of this organism has been obtained. Individuals had a length of only about six-thousandths of a millimeter. They had four flagella. The case was also remarkable on account of the entire absence of other plankton organisms during the period of its noted abundance, from about July 27 to August 7.

Time to Tell

A woman is as old as she looks before breakfast.

MUCH IN LITTLE

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