

The COAST of CHANCE

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SYNOPSIS.

At a private view of the Chatworth personal estate, to be sold at auction, the Chatworth ring mysteriously disappears. Harry Cressy, who was present, describes the ring to his fiancée, Flora Gilsey, and her chaperon, Mrs. Clara Britton, as being like a heathen god, with a beautiful sapphire set in the head. Flora discovers an unfamiliar mood in Harry, especially when the ring is discussed. She attends "ladies' night" at the club and meets Mr. Kerr, an Englishman. It comes out that the missing ring has been known as the Crowl. Its disappearance recalls the exploits of Farrel Wand, an English thief. Flora has a fancy that Harry and Kerr are concerned in the mystery. Kerr tells Flora that he has met Harry somewhere, but cannot place him. A reward of \$50,000 is offered for the return of the ring. Harry admits to Flora that he dislikes Kerr. They make an appointment to select an engagement ring.

CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

In the middle of the block, sunk a little back from the fronts of the others, the goldsmith's shop showed a single, filmed window; and the pale glow through it proclaimed that the worker in metals preferred another light to the sun's. The threshold was worn to a hollow that surprised the foot; and the interior into which it led them gloomed so suddenly around them after the broad sunlight, that it was a moment before they made out the little man behind the counter, sitting hunched up on a high stool.

"Hullo, Joe," said Harry, in the same voice that hailed his friends on the street corners; but the goldsmith only nodded like a nodding mandarin, as if, without looking up, he took them in and sensed their errand. He wore a round, blue Chinese cap drawn over his crown; a pair of strange goggles like a mask over his eyes, and his little body seemed to poise as lightly on his high stool as a wisp, as if there were no more flesh in it than in his long, dry fingers that so marvelously manipulated the metal. Save for that glitter of gold on his glass plate, and the grin of a lighted brazier, all was dark, discolored and cluttered.

Over everything was spread a dimness of age like dust. It enveloped the little man behind the counter, not with the frailness that belongs to human age, but with that weathered, polished hardness which time brings to antiques of wood and metal. Indeed, he appeared so like a carved idol in a curio shop that Flora was a little startled to find that he was looking at her.

"Harry," she murmured to Cressy, who was stirring the contents of a box with a disdainful forefinger, "this little man gives me the shivers."

"Old Joe?" Harry smiled indulgently. "He's a queer customer. Been quite a figurehead in Chinatown for 20 years. Say, Joe, heap bad!" and with the back of his hand he flicked the tray away from him.

The little man undoubted his knees and descended the stool. He stood breast-high behind the counter. He dropped a lack-luster eye to the box. "Velly nice," he murmured with vague, falling inflection.

"Oh, rotten!" Harry laughed at him. "You no like?"

"No. No like. You got something else—something nice?"

"No." It was like a door closed in the face of their hope—that falling inflection, that blank of vacuity that settled over his face, and his whole drooping figure. He seemed to be only mutely awaiting their departure to climb back again on his high stool. But Harry still leaned on the counter and grinned ingratiatingly. "Oh, Joe, you good fien." You got something pretty—maybe?"

The curtain of vacuity parted just a crack—let through a gleam of intense intelligence. "Maybe." The goldsmith chuckled deeply, as if Harry had unwittingly perpetrated some joke—some particularly clever conjurer's trick. He sidled out behind the counter, past the grinning brazier, and shuffled into the back of the shop where he opened a door.

Flora had expected a cupboard, but the vista it gave upon was a long, black, incredibly narrow passage, that stretched away into gloom with all the suggestion of distance of a road going over a horizon. Down this the goldsmith went, with his straw slippers clapping on his heels, until his small figure merged in the gloom and presently disappeared altogether, and only the faint flipper-flap of his slippers came back growing more and more distant to them, and finally dying into silence. In the stillness that followed while they waited they could hear each other breathe.

Then came the flipper-flap of the goldsmith's slippers returning. The sound snapped their tension, and Harry laughed.

"Lord knows how far he went to get it!"

"Across the street?" Flora wondered.

"Or under it. And it won't be worth two bits when it gets here." He peered at the little man coming toward them down the passage, flapping and shuffling, and carrying, held before him in both hands, a square, deep little box.

erly forward as he raised the cover, half expecting the blaze of a jewel-case. She saw at first only dull shanks of metal tumbled one upon the other. But, after a moment's peering, between them she caught gleams of veritable light. Her fingers went in to retrieve a hoop of heavy silver, in the midst of which was sunk a flawed topaz. She admired a moment the play of light over the imperfection.

"But this isn't Chinese," she objected, turning her surprise on Harry. "Lots of 'em aren't. These men glean everywhere."

She heard him dreamily. She was wishing, as she turned over the tumble of damaged jewels, that things so pretty might have been perfect. To find a perfect thing in this place would be too extraordinary to hope for. Yet, taking up the next, and the next, she found herself wishing it might be this one—this cracked intaglio. No? Then this blue one—say. The setting spoke nothing for it. It was a plain, thin, round hoop of palpable brass, and the battered thing seemed almost too feeble to hold the solitary stone. But the stone! She looked it full in the eye, the big, blazing, blue eye of it. She held it to the light.

She felt Harry move behind her. She knew he couldn't but be looking at it. For how, by all that was marvelous, had she for a moment doubted it? Down to its very heart, which was near to black, it was clear fire, and outward towards the facets struck flaming hyacinth hues with zigzag white cross-lights that dazzled and mesmerized.

"Harry," she breathed, without taking her gaze from the thing in her hand, "do look at this!"

She felt him lean closer. Then with an abrupt "Let's see it," he took it from her—held it to the light, laid it on his palm, looked sharply across the counter at the shopkeeper, then back at the ring with a long scrutiny. His face, too, had a flush of excitement.

"Is it—good?" Flora faltered. "A sapphire," he said, and taking her third finger by the tip, he slid on the thin circle of metal.

She breathed high, looking down at the stone with eyes absorbed in the blue fire. It was too beautiful. The feeling it brought her was too sharp for pure pleasure. It was dimly like fear. Yet instinctively she shut her hand about the ring. She murmured out her wonder.

"How in the world did such a thing come here?"

"Oh, not so strange," Harry answered. "Sailors now and then pick up a thing of whose value they have no idea—get hard up, and pawn it—still without any idea. These chaps"—and his bold hand indicated the shopkeeper—"take in anything—that is, anything worth their while; and wait, and wait, and wait until they see just the moment—and turn it to account."

It might be because Harry's eyes were so taken with the jewel that his tongue ran recklessly. He had spoken low, but Flora sent an anxious glance to be sure the shopkeeper hadn't overheard. She had meant only to glance, but she found herself staring into eyes that stared back from the other side of the counter. That wide, unwinking scrutiny filled her whole vision. For an instant she saw nothing but the dance of scintillant pupils. Then, with a little gasp she clutched at her companion's arm.

"Oh, Harry!"

His glance came quickly round to her. "Why, what's the matter?"

She murmured, "That Chinaman has blue eyes."

He looked at her with good-natured wonder.

"Why, Flora, haven't you blue on the brain? I believe he has, though," he added, as he peered across the counter at the shopkeeper, whose gaze now fluttered under narrowed lids; "but why in the world should blue eyes scare you?" His look returned indulgently to Flora's face.

She could not explain her reason of fear to him. She only whispered back, "But he is awful!"

"Oh, I guess not," Harry grinned, and turned his back to the counter, "only part white. Makes him a little sharper at a bargain."

But, in spite of his off-handedness, Flora saw he was alert, touched with excitement.

"Do you like it, Flora?" he said. "Do you want it?"

"It is the most beautiful thing I ever saw, but—" She could not put it to him why she shrank from it. That feeling which had touched her at the first had a little expanded, the sense of the sapphire's sinister charm. She faltered out as much as she could explain. "It's too much for me."

"Oh, I guess not," he said again, and with that he seemed to make an end of her hesitation. She let him draw the ring off her hand with a mingled feeling of reluctance and relief. She saw him turn briskly to the shopkeeper.

"Now, Joe, how much you want?" That much she heard as she turned away with a fear lest it might, and a hope that it would be, too much for him.

She lingered away to the door, through whose upper glazed half she saw the street swarming and sunny, picked out with streamers of red and squares of green. The murmur of traffic outside was faint to her ears. The murmur of the two voices talking on inside the shop momentarily grew fainter. She looked behind her and



It Was Hers! She Did Not Believe It.

saw them now in the back of the shop, close by the grinning brazier.

The light of it showed what would have been otherwise dark. It showed her Harry, straddling, hands in pockets, hat thrust back, a silhouette as hard as if cast in cold metal. The aspect of him, thus, was strange, not quite unlike himself, but giving her the feeling that she had never known how much Harry smoothed over.

Whatever they were arguing about, she found it hard to go on standing thus with her back to it, and for so long, while her expectancy tightened, and her unreasonable idea that she did not want the ring, more and more took hold of her. If he did not want to sell it, why not let it go—the beautiful thing!

She thought she would call Harry and suggest it—but no. She hesitated. She would give them a chance to finish it themselves. She would count ten pigtails past the window first.

She turned, and there they were yet. They had not moved. The shadow of the gesticulating little Chinaman danced like a bird on the wall, and before him Harry glowed, immovable, but ruddy, as if the hard metal whereof he was cast was slowly heating through. The thought came to her then. Harry was iron! The hard shade of his profile on the wall, the stiff thrust of his lips, the forward thrust of his head on his shoulders gave her another thought. Was Harry also brutal?

What she expected of Harry, a violent act or a quick relaxation of his iron mood, she had not time to consider, for the shopkeeper had moved. He was jerking his head, his thumb, and finally his arm in the direction of the long, dim passage—such a pointed direction, such a singular gesture, as to startle her with its incongruity. What had that to do with the price of the ring? And if it had nothing to do with the price of the ring, what had they been talking about? Her small scruple against knowing what was going on behind her was forgotten. Indeed, now she was oblivious of everything else. She was taking it in with all her eyes, when Harry turned and looked at her. And, oddly enough she thought he looked as if he wondered how she came there. She saw him return to it slowly. Then, in a flash, he met her brilliantly. He came toward her out of the gloom, holding the ring before him, as if with the light of that, and the flash of his smile, he was anxious immediately to cover his deficit.

"I had the very devil of a time getting it," he said. "The little beggar didn't want to let me have it." But there was a subsiding excitement in his face, and a something in his manner, both triumphant and troubled, which his explanation did not reasonably account for.

"Harry"—she hesitated—"are you quite sure it's all right?"

"All right!" The sudden edge in his voice made her look at him. "Why, it's genuine, if that's what you mean."

It hadn't been, quite; but her meaning was too vague to put into words—a mere sensation of uneasiness. She watched Harry turn the ring over, as if he were reluctant to let it go out of his hands. And then, looking at her, she thought his glance was a little uncertain. She thought he hesitated, and when he finally slid the ring over her finger, "I wouldn't wear

it until it is reset. It's hardly decent."

"Yes," she assented; "Clara will laugh at us."

"She won't if we don't show it to her until it's fit to appear. In fact, I would rather you wouldn't. As it is now the thing doesn't represent my gift to you."

She felt this was Harry's conventional streak asserting itself. But even she had to admit that an engagement ring which was palpably not gold was rather out of the way.

"You'd better keep it a day or two and look it over and make up your mind how you want it set, and then we'll spring it on them," he advised.

But now it was finally on her finger, she did not want to think it would ever have to be taken off again.

CHAPTER VII.

A Spell Is Cast.

It was hers! She did not believe it. It had been done too quickly. It seemed to her she had hardly felt Harry slip it on her finger before they had left the shop; that she had hardly shaken off the musty inclosed atmosphere, before Harry had left her on the corner of California and Powell streets—left her alone with the ring!

She went over whole dramas—imaginary histories of chance and circumstance—woven about the ring, as she walked up and down the long windy hills, westward and homeward, the blue bay on the one hand beaten green under the rising "trade," and the fog coming in before her. With the experience of the morning, and the exercise and the lively air, her spirits were riding high. From time to time she had the greatest longing to peep again at the sapphire, but not until the house door had closed after her did she dare draw off her glove and look. It was still glorious. What a pity she must take it off!

But even in the refuge of her own rooms the ring incircled Flora with unease. The light of it on her finger made her restless. It wasn't that she was apprehensive of it, but she could not forget it. She could hear the maid Marrika moving about in the room beyond. She slipped it off her finger on to the dressing table, and it lay among her laces like a purple prism, cast by some unearthly sun in a magic glass. She had jewels, rubies even—the most precious—but nothing that gave her this sense of individual beauty, of beauty so keen as to be disturbing. She emptied her jewel casket in a glittering heap around it. It shone out unquenched.

Marrika was coming in, and quickly Flora swept the jewels and the sapphire back into the casket, turned the key upon them and thrust it back in the far corner of the drawer. She would give every one a great surprise when the ring was properly set. She glanced nervously over her shoulder to see if Marrika had noticed her action. The Russian had been moving to and fro between the wardrobe and the dressing table with a droning thread of song.

All the while Flora was being combed and laced and hooked her eyes were alertly on the dressing table drawer that remained a little open; and presently she caught herself vaguely speculating on how, after she had been fastened up and into her

clothes so securely, she could dispose upon herself the sapphire. How had she arrived at this consideration? No course of reasoning led up to it. She was annoyed with herself. If she wasn't going to wear the ring on her finger, and show it, why did she want to take it with her at all? For fear it might be lost? Lost, in her jewel box, in the back of the drawer! She blushed for herself.

Through the long afternoon it was more apparent to her than the faces of the people around her. She was restless to get back to it, but people talked interminably. At the luncheon they talked of Kerr. Flora knew these girls felt a little resentment that she had so easily captured Harry Cressy; for Harry had been more than an eligible man in the little city. He had been an eligible personage. Not that he had money; not that his family tree was plainly planted in their midst; but that without these two things he had achieved what, with these, the people he knew were all striving for. He stood before them as the embodiment of what they most believed in—perfect bodily splendor, and perfect knowledge of how to get on in the world; and the fact that he wouldn't quite be one of them, but after five years still stood a little off—made him shine with greater brilliance, especially in the eyes of these girls. It was hard, they seemed to feel, that such an apparently remote and difficult person should have succumbed so easily; and now that a new luminary of equal luster was apparent in their sky, Flora felt their remarks a little triumphantly aimed at her.

But between the thread of interest the table group wove together, kept flashing up her furtive desire to be away, to be at home, to see what had happened to the sapphire. Of course, she knew that nothing could have happened; but she wanted to look at it, to open the casket and see the flash of it before her eyes.

They were dining early that night on account of the Bullers' box party, but it was nearly eight o'clock before Flora reached the house. And it was, of course, for that reason that she ran upstairs—ran wildly, regardlessly, before the eyes of Shima—and along the hall, her high heels clacking on the hard floors, and through her bedroom to the dressing room, snatched open the table drawer, unlocked the casket with a twitch of the key—and, ah, it was there! It was really real! Why, what had she expected? She was laughing at herself.

She was gay in her relief at getting back to the sapphire, but at the same time she was already wondering what she should do about it that night—take it with her or leave it alone? Dared she wear it on her finger under her glove? Clara might notice the unfamiliar form of the jewel through the thin kid. Flora watched her curiously across the table that evening, wondering what was that quality of her by which she acquired. Hitherto Flora had accepted it as a fact without question, but now she had a desire to place it. It was not beauty, for Clara was pretty, like a polished Greuze, she was colorless and flavorless, lacking the vivid heat of magnetism. More probably it consisted in a certain sort of sweetness Clara could produce on occasions, a way she had of looking and speaking which Flora could only describe as smooth.

She made up her mind to leave the sapphire at home; but in her last moment in her room the resolution failed. Harry, of course, would be angry if he knew, but Harry wouldn't see the thing under her glove.

She came down to where Clara was waiting for her, with the guilty feeling of a child who has cpeened a contraband cake; but the way Clara looked her over made her conscious that she had not concealed her excitement.

CHAPTER VIII.

A Spark of Horror.

They found Harry waiting for them in the theater lobby. He had come up too late from Burlingame to do more than meet the party there. The Bullers were already in the box, he said, and the second act of "I Pagliacci" just beginning.

As they came to the door of the box the lights were down, the curtain up on a dim stage, and the chorus still floating into the roof, while the three occupants of the box were indistinguishable figures, risen up and shuffling chairs to the front for Flora and Clara. It was too dark to distinguish faces.

But dark as it was, Flora knew who was sitting behind her. She heard him speaking. Under the notes of the recitative he was speaking to Clara. The pleasure of finding him here was sharpened by the surprise.

Then, as the tenor took up the theme, all talking ceased—Ella's husky whisper, Clara's smoother syllables, and the flat, slow, variable voice of Kerr—the whole house seemed to sink into stiller repose; the high chords floated above the heads of the black pit like colored bubbles, and Flora forgot the sapphire in the triple spell of the singing, the darkness, and the face she was yet to see.

The stage was a narrow shelf of wood swung in that void, from which the voice sang, and a bare finger of light, followed it about from place to place. The sweet, searching tenor notes, the semblance of passion and really the gesticulating Frenchman



threw over all the stage, and the crescendo of the tragedy carried her into a mood that barred out Ella, barred out Clara, barred out Harry more than any; but, unaccountably, Kerr was still with her. He was there by no will of hers, but by some essence of his own, some quality that linked him, as it linked her, to the passionate subtleties of life. He seemed to her the eager spirit that was prompting and putting forward this comedy and tragedy playing on before her. She heard him reasserted, vigorous, lawless, wandering in the voice of the mimic strolling player, addressing his mimic audience. The appeal of the tenor to the voiceless galleries, "Underneath this little play we show, there is another play," seemed indeed the very voice of Kerr repeating itself.

The lights went up with a spring. A wave of motion flickered over the house, the talking voices burst forth all at once, and she saw him, really saw him for the first time that evening, as in her fancy, part of the audience; as in her fancy, neither applauding nor dissenting, yet with what a difference! He leaned back in his chair, and leaned his head a little back, as if, for weariness, he wished there were a rest behind it; and how indifferently, how critically, how levelly he surveyed the fluttered house, and the figures in the box beside him! How foreign he appeared to the ardent spirit who had dominated the dark; how emptied of the heat of imagination, how worn, how dry; and even in his sallience, how singularly pathetic!

She felt a lump in her throat, an ache of the cruellest disappointment, as though some masker, masking as the fire of life, had suddenly removed the coverings of his face and showed her the burnt-out bones beneath. She found herself looking at him through a mist of tears—there in the heart of publicly, in the middle of the circle of velvet curtains!

He turned and saw her. She watched a smile of the frankest pleasure rising, as it were, to the surface of his weary preoccupation. Something had delighted him. Why, it was herself—just her being there! And she could only helplessly blink at him. Was ever anything so stupid as to be caught in tears over nothing? He straightened and leaned forward.

"Really," he said, "you must remember that little man has only gone out for a glass of beer."

So he thought it was the tenor who had brought her to the point of tears. "Ah, why do you say that?" she protested.

He continued to smile indulgently upon her. "Would you really rather believe, it true?"

"I don't know. But I wish you hadn't thought of the beer."

He brought the glass of his monocle to bear full upon her. "Why not? It is all we make sure of."

"Oh, if to be sure is all you want," she burst out; "but you don't mean it! Wouldn't you rather have something beautiful you weren't sure of, than something certain that didn't matter?"

He nodded to this quite casually, as if it were an old acquaintance.

"Oh, yes; but the time comes round when you want to be sure of something. The sun never sets twice alike over Mont Pelee; but you can always get the same brand of lager to-day that you had the week before." He looked at her with a faint amusement.

"No, no! I won't believe you," she stoutly denied him. "There is more in life than you can touch. You're not like yourself to say there is not."

He laughed, but rather shortly.

"My dear child, forgive me; I'm sulky to-night. I feel, as I felt at 18, that the world has treated me badly. I've lost my luck."

"I'm sorry." Her tone was sweetly vague. What could be the matter with him? Then, half timidly, she rallied him. "If you go on like this, I shall have to show you my talisman."

"Oh, have you indeed a talisman?" he humored her. And it was as if he said: "Oh, have you a doll?" He did not even turn his head to look at her.

She was chilled. She felt the disappointment, that his quick smile had lightened, return upon her. She hardly noticed the rise of the curtain on the second little play, and the singing voices did not reach her with any poignancy. She was vaguely aware of movements in the box—of Harry's coming in, of Clara's little rustle making room for him, of the shift of Ella's chair away from the business of listening, toward him, and her husky whisper going on with some prolonged tale of dull escapade; but to Flora they all made only a banal background for the brooding silence of her companion.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Oasis of Love.

The mind's eye shows us love as the oasis in the Sahara of life; so, together, two set out to seek the haven of rest in the great journey. But, as the travelers approach, their paradise recedes; in just such measure as the pilgrims hasten, their Mecca retreats. Love is a witching chimera—life's most beautiful optical delusion.