

The COAST of CHANCE

By ESTHER
& LUCIA
CHAMBERLAIN
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SYNOPSIS.

At a private view of the Chatworth personal estate, to be sold at auction, the Chatworth ring, known as the Crew Idol, mysteriously disappears. Harry Cressy, who was present, describes the ring to his fiancée, Flora Gilsey, and her chaplain, Mrs. Clara Britton, as being like a heathen god, with a beautiful sapphire set in the head. Flora meets Mr. Kerr, an Englishman, at the club, in discussing the disappearance of the ring, the exploits of an English thief, Farrell Wand, are recalled. Flora has a fancy that Harry and Kerr know something about the mystery. Kerr tells Flora that he has met Harry somewhere, but cannot place him. \$20,000 reward is offered for the return of the ring. Harry admits to Flora that he dislikes Kerr. Harry takes Flora to a Chinese goldsmith's to buy an engagement ring. An exquisite sapphire set in a hoop of brass, is selected. Harry urges her not to wear it until it is reset. The possession of the ring seems to cast a spell over Flora. She becomes uneasy and apprehensive. Flora meets Kerr at a box party. She is startled by the effect on him when he gets a glimpse of the sapphire. The possibility that the stone is part of the Crew Idol causes Flora much anxiety.

CHAPTER X.—Continued.

"Then isn't it for us to show them that we are more than usually civilized? I can't run away from him like a frightened little native."

"Of course; but that is where I come in; it's what I'm for—to get rid of such things for you."

Clara had risen, and stood considering a moment with that same sweet, impersonal eye which Flora found it hardest to comprehend.

"What I mean," she explicitly stated, "is that if he should undertake to carry out his preposterous suggestion, and call this afternoon, I am quite ready, if you wish, to take him off your hands."

This last took Flora's breath away. It had not occurred to her that Clara had overheard. It shocked her, frightened her; and yet Clara's way of stating the fact, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, made Flora feel that she herself was in the wrong to feel this.

"You're very kind," she managed to get out; and that seemed to leave her committed to hand Kerr over, tied hand and foot, when she wasn't sure at all she wanted to.

"Then shall I tell Mrs. Herrick that you will consider the house?" said Clara, already in the act of departure. "She is to call to-day to go into it with me more thoroughly. Thus far we've only played about the edges."

Her eyes strayed toward the dressing table as she passed it, and as she reached the door she glanced over the chiffonier. It was on the tip of Flora's tongue to ask if she had mislaid something, when Clara turned and smiled her small, tight-curved smile, as if she were offering it as a symbol of mutual understanding. Curiously enough, it checked Flora's query about the straying glances, and made her wonder that this was the first time in their relation that she had thought Clara sweet.

But there was another quality in Clara she did not lose sight of, and she waited for the closing of a door further down the hall before she drew the sapphire from under her pillow.

With the knocking at the door her first act had been to thrust it there. The feeling that it was going to be hard to hide was still her strongest instinct about it; but the morning had dissipated the element of the supernatural and the horrid that it had shown her the night before. It seemed to have a clearer and a simpler beauty; and the hope revived in her that its beauty, after all, was the only remarkable thing about it.

Her conviction of the night before had sunk to a shadowy hypothesis. She knew nothing—nothing that would justify her in taking any step; and her only chance of knowing more lay in what she would get out of Kerr; for that he knew more about her ring than she, she was convinced. She was afraid of him, yet, in spite of her fear, she had no intention of handing him over to Clara. For on reflection she knew that Clara's offer must have a deeper motive than mere kindness, and she had a most unreasonable feeling that it would not be safe.

Yet Clara would do a kindness if it did not inconvenience her, and surely this morning she had been kind. Still Flora felt she didn't want to reveal anything until she was a little surer of her own position. When she knew better where she stood she would know what she could confide to Clara. Meanwhile, if there was any one to whom she could turn now it would surely be Harry.

Yet, if she did, what a lot of awkward explanations! She could not return the sapphire without giving a reason, and what a thing to explain—that she had not only worn it, but, in a freak, shown it to the one of all people he most objected to.

Nevertheless the most sensible thing clearly was to go through with it and confess to Harry. Then she must communicate with him at once. No—she would wait until after breakfast. There was plenty of time. Kerr would not come until the afternoon. But after breakfast, she wondered if it wouldn't be as well to ring him up at luncheon time? Then she would be sure of finding him at the club. Meanwhile she dared not let the

sapphire out of her grasp; and yet she could not wear it on her hand. She had thought of the pear-shaped pouch of gold which it was her custom to wear; but the slender length of chain that linked it to her neck was too frail for such a precious weight. At last she had fastened it around her neck on the strongest chain she owned, and thus she carried it all the morning under her bodice with a quieter mind than had been hers on the first day she had worn it, when there had been nothing to explain her uneasiness.

She was alone at luncheon, and in a dream. She glanced now and then at the clock. She rose only ten minutes before the hour that Harry was in the habit of leaving the club. She went upstairs slowly and stopped in front of the telephone. She touched the receiver, drew her hand back and turned away. She shut the door of her own rooms shortly after her.

But when at last Kerr's card was handed in to her it gave her a shock, as if something which couldn't happen, and yet which she had all along expected, had come to pass.

In her instant of indecision Marrika had got away from her, but she called the girl back from the door and told her to say to Mrs. Britton that Mr. Kerr had called, but that Miss Gilsey would see him herself.

She started with a rush. Half-way down the stairs she stopped, horrified to find what her fingers were doing. They were closed around the little lump that the ring made in the bosom of her gown, and she had not known it. What if she had rushed in to Kerr with this extraordinary manifestation? What if, while she was talking to him, her hand should continue to creep up again and yet again to that place, and close around the jewel, and make it evident, even in his hiding-place? The time had come when she must even hide it from herself. And yet, to creep back up the stair when she made sure Kerr must have heard her tumultuous downward rush! It would never do to soundlessly retreat. She must go back boldly, as if she had forgotten nothing more considerable than a pocket handkerchief.

Yet before she reached the top again she found herself going tiptoe, as if she were on an expedition so secret that her own ears should not hear her footsteps. But she went direct and unhesitating. It had come to her all in a flash where she would put the sapphire. The little buttoned pocket of her bath-robe. There it hung in the bathroom on one unvarying peg, the most immovable of all her garments, safe from the excursions of Marrika's needle or brushes, not to be disturbed for hours to come.

She passed through her bedroom, through her dressing-room into the bathroom. The robe was hanging behind the door. It took her a moment to draw out the ring and disentangle its chain, and while she was doing this she became aware of movings to and fro in her bedroom. She drew the door half open, the better to conceal herself behind it, and at the same time, through the widened crack of the jamb, to keep an eye on the dressing room, and hurried lest Marrika should surprise her. But nevertheless she had barely slipped the ring into the little pocket and re-fastened the flap, when Clara opened the bedroom door and stood looking into the dressing-room.

Her lifted veil made a fine mist above the luster of her eyes. She was perfect to the tips of her immaculate white gloves, and she wore the simple, sober look of a person who thinks himself alone. Then it wasn't Flora, Clara was looking for! She was looking all around—over the surface of every object in the room. Presently she went up to the dressing-table. She laid her gloved hands upon it, and looked at the small objects strewn over its top. She took a step backward and opened the top drawer. She reached into it, and delicately explored.

Flora could see the white gloves going to and fro among her white handkerchiefs, could see them find, open and examine the contents of her jewel-box. And the only thing that kept her from shrieking out was the feeling that this abominable thing which was being enacted before her eyes couldn't be a fact at all.

Clara took out an old pocket-book, shiny with years, shook from it a shower of receipts, newspaper clippings, verses. She let them lie. She took out a long violet box with a perfumer's seal upon it. It held a bunch of dried violets. She took out a bonbonniere of gold filigree. It was empty. A powder box, a glove box, a froth of lace, a handful of jewelers' boxes, a jewel fang loose into the drawer. This she pounced upon. It was a brooch! She let it fall—turned to the chiffonier; upended the two vases of Venetian glass, lifted the lids of jars and boxes, finally came to the drawers. One by one she took them out, turned the contents of each rapidly over, and left them standing, gaping white ruffles and lace upon the floor.

Her eye fell upon the waste basket. She turned it upside down, and stooped over the litter. She gathered it up in her white gloves and dropped it back. Then, for the first time, she glanced at the bathroom door; stood looking at it, as if it had occurred to her to look in the soap dish. Then she turned again to the room, to the dressing-table. She put back the pasteboard jewelers' boxes, the jew-

eled pin, the laces, which she shook out and folded daintily, the glove and powder boxes, the gold bonbonniere, the long violet box, the leather pocket-book—each deftly and unhesitatingly in the place from which she had taken it, and all the heaps of white handkerchiefs.

One by one she laid back in the chiffonier drawers the garments, properly and neatly folded, that she had so hastily snatched out of them. She slid back the last drawer into the chiffonier, and rose from her knees, lightly dusting off the front of her gown; went to the closet door and closed it. She stood before it a moment with a face perplexed and thoughtful, then turned alertly toward the outer door.

Flora stood as if she were afraid to move, while Clara crossed her bedroom, stopped, went on and closed the outer door behind her. And even after that soft little concussion she stood still, burning, choking, struggling with the overwhelming force of an affront whose import she did not yet realize.

Why, she had thought that such things couldn't happen! She had thought that people's private belongings, like their persons, were inviolable. In the shame of it she could no more have faced Clara than if she had surprised Clara naked.

She snatched the ring out of the pocket of her gown and clutched it in her hand. Was there no place in the world where she could be sure of safety for this?



"You Can't Get It Away from Me, and I Shan't Give It to You."

With trembling fingers she fastened it again to the chain about her neck. She thought of Kerr downstairs waiting for her. Well, she would rather keep it with her. Then, at least, she would know when it was taken from her. Still in the fury of her outraged faith, she passed through her violated rooms, and slowly along the hall and down the stairs.

CHAPTER XI.

The Mystery Takes Human Form.

He turned from the window where he had presented a long, drooping, patient back, and his warm, ironic mirth—the same that had played with her the first night—flashed out at sight of her. But after a moment another expression mixed with it, sharpened it, and fastened upon her with an incredulous intensity.

She stood on the threshold, pale, and brilliant still in her blaze of anger, equal, at last, to anything. Kerr, as he signaled to her with every lineament of his enlivened face, his interest, his defiance, his uncontrollability, was not the man of her imaginary conversations. He was not here to be used and disposed of; but, as he came toward her, the new admiration in his face was bringing her reassurance that neither was she. The thought that her moment of bitter incredulity had made her formidable gave her courage even to smile, though she grew hot at the first words he spoke.

"You should not be brave and then run away, you know."

She thought of her rush up the stairs again. "I had to go back to see Mrs. Britton." (Oh, how she had seen her!)

"Ah, I thought you only ran back to hide in your doll's house."

She laughed. Such a picture of her! "Well, at any rate, now I've come

out, what have you to say to me?"

"Now you've come out," he repeated, and looked at her this time with full gravity, as if he realized finally how far she'd come.

She had taken the chair in the light of the eastern windows. She lay back in the cushions, her head a little bent, her hands interlaced with a perfect imitation of quietude.

He looked down upon her from his height.

"You know what I've come for," he said, "but now I'm here, now that I see you, I wonder if there's something I haven't reckoned on." He looked at her earnestly. "If you think I've taken advantage of you—if you say so—I'll go away, and give you a chance to think it over."

It would have been so easy to have nodded him out, but instead she half put out her hand toward him. "No; stay."

He gave her a quick look—surprise and approbation at her courage. He dropped into a chair. "Then tell me about it."

Flora's heart went quick and little. She held herself very still, afraid in her tense consciousness lest her slightest movement might betray her. She only moved her eyes to look up at him questioningly, suspending acknowledgment of what he meant until he should further commit himself.

"I mean the sapphire," he said. He waited.

"Yes," she answered coolly. "I saw that it interested you last night, but

doubt. After saying so much, was he going to say nothing more? She had a feeling that she had not heard the worst yet, and when he turned back to her from the other end of the room there was something so haggard, so harassed, so fairly guilty about him that if she had ever thought of telling him the truth of how she came by the ring she put it away from her now.

But beneath his distress she recognized a desperate earnestness. There was something he wanted at any cost, but he was going to be gentle with her. She had felt before the potentiality of his gentleness, and she doubted her power to resist it. She fanned up all the flame of anger that had swept her into the room. She reminded herself that the greatest gentleness might only be a blind; that there was nothing stronger than wanting something very much, and that the protection of the jewel was very thin. But when he stood beside her she realized he held a stronger weapon against her than his gentleness, something apart from his intention.

He was speaking, almost coaxingly, as if to a child. "I understand," he was saying. "I know all about it. It's a mistake. But surely you don't expect to keep it now. It will only be an annoyance to you."

She turned on him. "What could it be to you?"

Kerr, planted before her, with his head dropped, looked, looked, looked, as if he gave silence leave to answer for him what it would. It answered with a hundred echoes ringing up to her from long corridors of conjecture, half-articulated words breathing of how extraordinary the answer must be that he did not dare to make.

"What will you take for it?" he said at last.

She was silent. With a sick distrust it came to her that it was the very worst thing he could have said after that speaking silence.

She stepped away from him. "This thing is not for sale."

He stared at her with amazement; then threw back his head and laughed as if something had amused him above all tragedy.

"You are an extraordinary creature," he said, "but really I must have it. I can't explain the why of it; only give the sapphire to me, and you'll never be sorry for having done that for me. Whatever happens, you may be sure I won't talk. Even if the thing comes out, you shan't be mixed up in it." He had come near her again, and the point of his long forefinger rested on her arm. She was motionless, overwhelmed with pure terror, with despair.

"Why not give it to me now," he urged, "since, of course, you can't keep it? I could have it now in spite of you."

Everything in her sprang up in antagonism to meet him. "I know what you are," she cried, "but you shan't have it. You have no more right to it than I. You can't get it away from me, and I shan't give it to you."

He had grown suddenly paler; his eyes were dancing, fastened upon her breast. His long hands closed and opened. She looked down, arrested at the sight of her hand clenched just where her breath was shortest, over the sapphire's hiding-place.

He smiled. How easily she had betrayed herself! But she abated not a jot of her defiance, challenging him, now he knew its bidding-place, to take the sapphire if he could. But he did not move. And it came to her then that she had been ridiculous to think for an instant that this man would take anything from her by force. What she had to fear was his will at work upon hers, his persuasion, his ingenuity. She thought of the purple irises, and how he had drawn them toward him in the crook of his cane—and her dread was lest he meant to overcome her with some subtlety she could not combat.

The click of a moving latch brought his eyes from hers to the door.

"Some one is coming in," he said in a guarded voice. It warned her that her face showed too much, but she could not hope to recover her composure. She hardly wanted to. She was in a state to fancy that a secret could be kept by main force; and she turned without abatement of her reckless mood and took her hand from where she had held it clenched upon her breast and stretched it out to Mrs. Herrick.

The lady had stood in the doorway a moment—a long-featured, whitish, modeled face, draped in a dull green veil, a tall figure whose fowing skirts of black melted away into the background of the hall—before she came forward and met her hostess' hand with a clasp firm and ready.

"I'm so glad to find you here," she said. She looked directly into Flora's eyes, into the very center of her agitation. She held her tremulous hand as if neither of these manifestations surprised her; as if a young woman and a young man in colloquy might often be found in such a state of mind.

Flora's first emotion was a guilty relief that, after all, her face had not betrayed Kerr. But she had no sooner murmured his name to Mrs. Herrick, no sooner had that lady's gray eyes lighted upon him, than they altered their clear confidence. The situation as reflected in Flora looked naive enough, but there was nothing naive about Kerr. The very perfection of



his coolness, there in the face of her burning agitation, was appalling.

Mrs. Herrick's face was taking on an expression no less than wary. What he was, Mrs. Herrick could not dream. She could not even suspect what Flora believed. But in the light of her terrible discovery Flora dared not have him suspected at all.

Now, if she had ever in her life, she talked over the top of her feelings; and though at first to her ears her voice rang out horribly alone, presently Mrs. Herrick was helping her, adding words to words. It was the house they spoke of, the San Mateo house, the subject about which Flora knew Mrs. Herrick had come to talk; but to Flora it was no longer a subject. It was a barrier, a shield. In this emergency it was the only subject large enough to fill the gap, and much as Flora had liked the idea of it, she had never built the house so large, so vivid, so wonderfully towering to please her fancy as she was doing now to cover Kerr. With questions she led Mrs. Herrick to spin out the subject, to play it over with lights and shades, to beat all around it. And all the while she knew that Kerr was watching her.

The lady's clear gray eyes traveled between Flora's face and his. Under their steady light there was a strange alertness, as if she sat there ready enough to avert whatever threatened, but anxious to draw her skirts aside from it, distrusting the quality, hating to have come in upon anything so dubious. When the hall door opened and closed she listened as if for a deliverer; and when Clara appeared between the portieres she turned to her and met her with a flash of relief, as if here at last was a safe quantity. Clara was still wearing her hat, with the veil pushed up in a little mist above her eyes, and still had her white gloves on. The sight of Mrs. Herrick's hand soliciting the clasp of those gave Flora a curious sensation.

She looked from one face to another, and last at Kerr's. She shut her eyes an instant. Here was a thief. He was standing in her drawing-room now. She had been talking with him. She opened her eyes. The fact acknowledged had not altered the color of daylight. It was strange that things—furniture and walls and landscape—should remain so stolidly the same when such a thing had happened to her! For she had not only spoken with a thief, but she had shielded him.

CHAPTER XII.

Disenchantment.

Then this was the end of all romance? She must turn her back on the charm, the power, the spell that had been wrought around her, and, horror-struck, pry into her own mind to discover what lawless thing could be in her to have drawn her to such a person, and to keep her, even now that she knew the worst, unwilling to relinquish the thought of him. His depravity loomed to her enormous; but was that all there was to be said of him? Did his delicacy, his insight, his tempered fineness, count for nothing beside it?

She couldn't believe that this one spot could make him rotten throughout. Her mind ran back into the past. She could not recall a word, an action, or a glance of his that had shown the color of decay. He had not even been insincere with her. He had come out with his convictions so flatly that when she thought of it his nonchalance appalled her. He had been the same then that he was now. But the thing that was natural for him was impossible for her, and she had found it out—that was all.

Yet the mere consideration of him and his obsession as one thing was intolerable. She curiously separated his act from himself. She thought of it, not as a part of him, but as something that had invaded him—a disease—something inimical to himself and others, that mixed the thought of him with terrors, and filled her way with difficulties. Now it was no longer a question of how to meet him, but of how she was not to. It was not his strength she feared, but her own weakness where he was concerned. Her tendency to shield him—she must guard against that—and that disturbing influence he exercised over her, too evidently without intention. But he would be hard to avoid. This way and that she looked for a way out of her danger, yet all the while she was conscious that there was but one plain way of escape open to her. She could give the sapphire back to Harry within the 24 hours.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Boy's Ignorance.
Son—Pa, I don't want to wear those old pants of yours; they're too big and the kids give me the laugh.

Father—Niver mind th' kids. Ye'll grow into thim pants.

Son—But why can't I wear my old ones till I do grow into yours?

Father—Is that th' irritat' in y'r iddycation! How kin ye expect 't grow into mine without wearin' thim?—Illustrated Sunday Magazine.