

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, known as the Crew Idol, mysteriously disappears. Harry Cressy, who was present, describes the ring to his fiancée, Flora Cressy, and her chaperon, 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. \$2,000 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. Unseen, Flora discovers Clara ransacking her dressing room. Flora refuses to give or sell the stone to Kerr, and suspects him of being the thief.

CHAPTER XIII.

Thrust and Parry.

My dear Flora: I am going out early and shall not be back to dinner.

CLARA.
Flora let the little note fall as if she disliked the touch of it. She was relieved to think she would not have to see Clara that day. It was her desire never to see Clara again. If only they could part here and now! How she wanted to shake the whole thing off her shoulders! How foolish not to have gone to Harry when she had first made up her mind to! For why, after all, make him any explanations? Suppose she should just take the ring to him and say: "It gives me the shivers, Harry. Let's take it back and get something else." If he didn't suspect the sapphire already, he would never suspect it from that.

But did she really want Harry to rid her of the ring? She would get hold of him first and then she would see what she would do.

She stepped into the hall with all the confidence of one who has fully made up her mind to carry matters with a high hand; but at the telephone she hesitated. Calling him up at such an hour of the morning demanding his attendance on such a fanciful errand—wouldn't he think it odd? No, he would think it the most natural thing in the world for her to be so flighty. Reassured, she gave the club number and stood waiting, listening to the half-syllables of switched-off voices and the crossing click, click, that was bringing her fate nearer to her. She heard some one coming up the stairs and down the hall toward her. Marrika stood stolid at her elbow.

"Mr. Cressy," she pronounced.

"Yes, yes," said Flora, with the club clamoring in her left ear.

"He is down-stairs," said Marrika.

Flora nearly let the receiver fall. Harry here? What a piece of luck! But here on his own account, at such an hour—how extraordinary!

"Hello, hello," persisted the club.

"What's wanted?"

"Why, I—" Flora stammered. "It's a mistake; never mind. I don't want him now." She hoped that Harry had not heard her as he came in, since it was his informal fashion to await her in the large entrance hall. She didn't want to spoil the chance he had given her of seeming off-hand about the ring. But the hall was empty, and as she descended the stairs she amused herself with the fancy that Shima had had a vision, and that she would still have to ring up the club and explain to the attendant that, after all, she wanted Mr. Cressy.

Then from the drawing-room threshold she caught sight of Harry standing in the big bay window of the drawing-room, in the same spot where Kerr had awaited her the afternoon before. Harry was tall and large and freshly colored, and yet he did not fill the room to her as the other man had done. He met her, kissed her, and she turned her head so that his lips met her cheek close beside her ear. She did not positively object to his kissing her on the lips, but her instinct was strong to offer him her cheek. He had sometimes laughed at this, but now he resented it. He insisted on his privilege, and she was passive to him, conscious of less love in this than assertion of possession.

"You are not going to Burlington, are you?" she asked him with her first breath.

He looked down at her with a flushed and sulky air. "What difference would that make to you? I am, as it happens, but I suppose you think that's no reason for disturbing you so early." He was angry, but at what, she wondered, with creeping uneasiness.

"What is the matter?" she urged.

"Are things going crookedly at Burlington?"

"Things are going as crooked as you please," he said at Burlington. Sit over there," he said, nodding toward the window-bench; "I want to talk to you."

Harry had the air of one about to scold, and certainly Flora thought if anybody was carrying matters with a high hand, it wasn't herself; but she

didn't follow his direction. She continued to stand, while he, sitting on the table's edge, drumming the top of his hat, gloomily regarded her.

"Well?" she persisted, troubled by this look of his, and this silence.

"Look here," he began, "I have to be away a couple of days and I wish you'd do me a favor."

Flora's thought flew to the ring. Was he going to ask for it back, to have it reset, as he had promised on the threshold of the goldsmith's shop? Here might be the chance she had hoped for of getting rid of it. She grasped at it before she had time to waver.

"I wonder if it's the very favor I was going to ask of you?"

But he didn't take it up. He seemed hardly to hear her, as if his mind was too much absorbed with quite another question—a question that the next moment came out flat. "What was that Kerr doing here yesterday?"

She was taken aback, so far had her apprehension of Harry's jealousy slipped into the background in the last 24 hours. But her consciousness that Harry was not behaving well, even for a jealous man, made her take it up all the more lightly.

"Why, he was calling, chatting, taking tea—what anybody else would do from four to six. What in the world gave you the idea that he was doing anything extraordinary?"

"Well," he said, "you shouldn't do the sort of thing that makes you talked about."

"That makes me talked about?" It made her pause in front of him.

"Why, yes, it isn't like you. It never happened before. Look here, I drop into the Bullers' yesterday; find Clara sidled up to the judge; look around for you. 'Hello,' I say, 'where's Flora?' 'Oh,' says she, 'Flora's at home amusing Mr. Kerr.' 'Amusing Mr. Kerr!' he repeated. 'That's a nice thing to hear.'"

Flora went red. She walked down the room from him to give her suddenly tumultuous heart time. However little he might guess the real trend of her interview with Kerr, she couldn't hear him come near it without apprehension. She was angry, helplessly angry at Harry that he had taken this moment for his stupid jealousy. But she was more angry at Clara, since such a speech on Clara's part wasn't carelessness.

She tried to laugh him out of it.

"Why, Harry, I never saw you jealous before!"

"It's all very well to say that—and you know I've never made a row about the other Johnnies. I knew you didn't care for any of them."

Her eyes narrowed and darkened.

"And you take it for granted I care for Mr. Kerr?"

"Oh, no, no!" He pushed his hand through his hair with an irascible gesture. "But it's plain enough you like him—you women always like a fellow that flourishes—but that's not the sort of man I care to see hanging around my girl."

Flora stood leaning on the table, breathing a little hurriedly, feeling rather as if she had been shaken. Harry, standing with his hands in his pockets, looked not unlike the threatening image he had appeared in the back of the goldsmith's shop.

"Of course, the fellow can talk," he admitted, "and he has a manner. But Lord knows where he comes from or who he is. Why, even the Bullers don't know."

Flora turned sharply on him. "Who told you that?"

"The judge. He picked him up at the club."

"Well," she kept it up, "some one had to introduce him there."

Harry smiled. "You wouldn't care to bow to some of those club members?"

"Harry, do you know how you sound to me?" She was trembling at the daring of what she was going to say. "You talk as if you knew something against him?"

Her statement seemed to bring him up short. "No, no, I don't," he said hastily.

She made a little gesture of despair. How was she to count on Harry if he was going to behave like this? How trust him when he was shuffling so?

She made one more bold stroke to make him speak out.

"Harry, you do know something about him! I know you have seen him before."

"Why, yes, I've seen him before. But that's got nothing to do with it." He looked surprised that she should seem to accuse him of it, and she wondered if he could have forgotten how he had denied it before.

"And that isn't why you distrust him?"

The devil's tattoo that he beat on his hat stopped.

"I don't distrust him."

"Well, dislike him, then. When was it you saw him before?"

"Isn't it enough for me to tell you that I don't want you to see him?"

"Oh!" She turned away from him. Every nerve in her was in revolt. Then he really wasn't going to tell her anything. He was keeping her out of it as if she were a child. She had relied on him to return the ring. She had counted upon his indifference and good nature. And he was neither indifferent nor good-natured. All desire of even mentioning the ring to him left her; and as to giving him her confidence—these hints that he had thrown out about Kerr—they might be mere jealousy—but he might have



"Why, Harry, I Never Saw You Jealous Before!"

actual knowledge, knowledge that, with her own fitted to it, would make for him a complete figure. She caught her breath at the thought of how near she had come to actually betraying Kerr. Until that moment she had not realized that through all her waverings her one fixed intention had been not to betray him.

Harry had risen and was buttoning his overcoat. "You know you're never at home if you don't want to be," he said.

She stood misleadingly drooping before him. But though her appearance was passive enough for the most exacting lover her will had never been in more vigorous revolt. She knew Harry was taking her weariness for acquiescence, and she let him take it so. She even followed him into the hall, and with a vague idea of further propitiation, nodded away Shima and opened the door for him herself.

The fog was a chasm of white outside. Harry turned on the brink of it.

"By the way, where's Clara?"

"Why, do you want to see her? She will be out all day. She's dining with the Willie Herricks."

"No, I don't want to see her, but, by the way, she's not dining with the Willie Herricks; she's dining with the Bullers. I heard her make the engagement yesterday."

"Oh, no, Harry, I'm sure you're mistaken."

"Well, it doesn't matter. All I want to know is, why did you show that ring to Clara before it was set?"

She was genuinely aghast. "I did not," she flashed. "What made you think I had?"

He shrugged. "Well, she asked me where we got it. I don't see why women always talk those things over."

He was looking at her inquiringly.

"Well, I haven't," she said quickly. "Have you?"

He looked out upon the fog. "Told her where we got it, do you mean? No, I just chaffed her. I'd look out, if I were you. She strikes me as damned curious." He stood a moment on the threshold, looking from Flora to the chasm of fog outside, as if he were choosing between two chances. "I think I'll take that ring this morning," he said slowly.

The deliberate words came to her with a shock. But in the moment, while she looked into Harry's moody face, she realized how impossible to make a scene over what must still be maintained as a trivial matter between them—the mere resetting of a jewel; what should she do to put him off? She looked up at him and saw with relief that his face was turned from her to the fog, as if he had forgotten her. Then, still with averted head, as if he addressed the whiteness, or himself,—"No," he determined, "I won't. I'll take it when I come back." He pulled himself together with an effort, with a smile.

"That is," he turned to her, "if you're in no great hurry about the setting? Very well, then. In a day or two."

He plunged away into the fog. A few rods from the door he disappeared, but she could still hear his footsteps growing thinner, lighter, passing away in the whiteness.

CHAPTER XIV.

She stood where he had left her in the open doorway, with the damp ed-

unyielding stone of the ring under the thin bodice of her gown. She recalled the morning when she had gone to get it, before anything had happened and the lure of life had been so exquisite.

And yet she didn't wish herself back, but only forward. Now she had no leisure to imagine, to pretend, to enjoy, only the breathless sense that she must get forward. The chattering clock on her mantel warned her of the passing time and set her hurrying into her walking gown, her hat, her gloves, as if the object of her errand would only wait for her a moment longer. When, for the second time, she opened the house door, she didn't hesitate. She descended into the white fog that covered all the city.

Above her the stone facade of her house loomed huge and pinkish in the mist. Her spirits rose with the feeling that she was going adventuring again, leaving that house where for the last two days she had awaited events with such vivid apprehensions. She hurried fast down the damp, glistening pavement, seeing long, dim gray faces of houses glimmer by, seeing figures come toward her through the fog, grow vivid, pass, and hearing at intervals the hoarse, lonely voice of the fog-horn at "The Heads," reaching her from over many intervening hills. She did not feel sure what she should do at the end of her journey or what awaited her there. She knew herself a most unpracticed hunter, she, who all her life had been the most artful of quarry.

She turned in at the low gate of imitation grill in front of an enormous wooden mansion, with towers and cupolas painted all a chill slate gray, with fuchsias, purple and red, clambering up the front. She rang, and was admitted into a hall, ornate and very high, with a wide staircase sweeping down into the middle of it.

The maid looked dubiously at Flora and thought Miss Buller was not at home, but would see. Flora turned into the room on her left and set down among the Louis Quinze sofas and potted palms with a feeling that Miss Buller was at home, and, for one reason or another, preferred not to be seen. She waited apprehensively, wondering whether Ella was not seeing the world-in-general, or had really specified against herself. Could it be that Ella was one of those women whom Harry had alluded to as running after Kerr? In the short 24 hours every individual help she had counted upon had seemed to draw away from her—Kerr, whose understanding she had been so sure of; Clara, whose propriety had never failed; Harry, whose comfortable good nature she had so taken for granted! It seemed as if the sapphire, whose presence she was never unconscious of, for all she wore it out of sight, had a power like the evil eye over these people. But if it could turn such as Ella against her, why, the Brussels carpet beneath her might well open and let her down to deeper abysses than Judge Buller's wine-cellar.

She started nervously at the step of the maid returning. The message brought was unexpected. "Miss Buller says will you please walk upstairs?"

Flora was amazed. That invitation would have been odd enough at any time, for she and Ella were hardly on such intimate footing. But now she was ushered up the majestic stair, and from the majestic upper hall abruptly into a wild little cluttered sewing-room, and thence into a wilder but more spacious bedroom, large curtains at the windows, large roses on the carpet, and over all objects in the room a clutter of miscellaneous articles, as if Ella's hand-boxes, bureaus and work-baskets habitually refused to contain themselves.

From the midst of this Ella confronted her, still in her "wrapper" and with the large puff of her hair a little awry. Under it her face was curiously pink, a color deepening to the tip of her nose and puffing out under her eyes.

"Well, Flora," she greeted her guest. "You were just the person I wanted to see. Sit down. No, not there—that's my bird of paradise feather! Oh, no, not there—that's the breakfast. Well, I guess you'll have to sit on the bed."

Flora swept aside the clothes that streamed across it and throned herself on the edge of the high, white plateau of Ella's four-poster. Ella, for all her eager greeting, looked upon her friend doubtfully, and Flora recognized in herself a similar hesitation, as if each were trying to make out, without asking, what thoughts the other harbored.

"I was afraid I shouldn't see you at all," Flora began at last.

"Well, you wouldn't if it hadn't happened to be you," said Ella paradoxically. "Look at me; did you ever see such a sight?"

"You don't look very well," Flora cautiously admitted. "Why, Ella, you have been crying!"

"Yes, I've been crying," said Ella, mopping her nose, which still showed a tendency to distill a tear at its tip. "And it's perfectly awful to me to think you've been living so long in the same house with her."

Flora murmured breathlessly: "What in the world do you mean?"

"If you don't know, I certainly ought to tell you. I mean Clara," said Ella distinctly.

Flora, sitting up on the edge of the high bed with the tips of her little



shoes hardly touching the floor, looked at Ella fascinated, her lips a little apart. Ella had so exactly pronounced her own secret thought of Clara. She was breathless to know what had been Clara's performance at the Bullers'.

"Of course I've always known she was like that," said Ella, leaning back in her chair with an air of resignation. "She's always getting something. It's awful. It was the same even when we were at boarding-school. I suppose she never did have enough money, though her people were awfully nice; but she worked us all for invitations and rides in our carriages, and I remember she got lots through Lillie Lewis' elder brother, and he thought she was going to marry him, but she didn't. She married Lulu Britton's father; and I guess she worked him until he went under and they found there really was no money. So she's been living on people ever since." Ella rocked gloomily.

"But she does it so nicely," Flora suggested. She still had the feeling that it was not decent to own up to these most secret facts of people's failings.

"Oh, yes, she's a perfect wonder," Ella admitted grudgingly; "look at what she's done for you!" Ella's gesticulation was eloquent of how much that had been. "But don't you imagine she cares about you any more than she cares about me!" Ella began to cry again. "You were an awfully good thing for her, Flora, and now that you're going to be married she's got to have somebody else. But I do think she might have taken somebody besides papa."

Flora gasped. "Taken! Ella, what do you mean?"

"I mean married," said Ella. "Married!" For the time Flora had become a helpless echo.

"Oh, not yet," Ella defiantly nodded. "Not while there's anything left of me."

Flora stammered. "Oh, Ella, no. Oh, Ella, are you sure?" She felt a hysterical impulse to giggle.

"Well, I'd like to know why!" Ella snapped. "I'm sure papa is twice as rich as old Britton was, and twice as easy." She went off into sobs behind her handkerchief.

"Oh, don't, Ella, don't cry!" Flora begged, petting the large expanse of heaving shoulders. "I didn't mean anything. I was just silly. Of course it may be that she wants to marry him. But she never has before—at least, I mean, I don't believe she wants to now. What makes you think she does? What has she done?"

"Well," Ella burst out, "why is she coming here all the time, when she never used to, and petting papa? Why does she bother to be so agreeable to me when she never was before? Why does she make me ask her to dinner, when I don't want to?"

Each question knocked on Flora's brain to the accompaniment of Ella's furious rocking. She could not answer them, and Ella's explanation, absurd as it seemed, coming on top of her high expectations, wasn't impossible. It was like Clara to have more than one iron in the fire; but when Flora remembered the passionate intensity with which Clara had demolished the order of her room, she couldn't believe that Clara would pause in the midst of such pursuit to pounce on Judge Buller.

"Oh, Ella," Flora sympathetically urged, "I don't believe there's really any danger. And surely, even if she meant it, Judge Buller wouldn't be—"

"Oh, yes, he would," Ella cut her short. "Why, when she came yesterday he was just going out, and she went for him and made him stop to tea. Think of it—papa stopping to tea! And he was as pleased as Punch to have her make up to him. He has not the least idea of what she's after. Papa isn't used to ladies. He's always just lived with me."

This astonishing statement looking at Flora through Ella's unsuspecting eyes had nevertheless a pathos of its own.

"But I'll tell you one thing," Ella ended, still rocking vigorously; "if she comes here to-night to dinner when she knows I don't want her, I shall tell her what I think of her, before she leaves this house! See if I don't."

"Don't do that, Ella," Flora entreated, "that would be awful." She was certain that such an interview would only end in Clara's making Ella more ridiculous than she was already. "Let me speak to her. I don't mind at all," she declared bravely, and in a manner truly, though she was fully aware that speaking to Clara would be anything but a treat.

"Oh, would you?" said Ella eagerly. "I really would be awfully obliged. I hated to ask you, Flora, but I thought perhaps you might be able to—to, well, perhaps be able to do something," she ended vaguely. "Do you think you could?"

"I'll speak to Clara to-night," said Flora heroically, "or to-morrow," she added; "I'm afraid I won't see her to-night."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)