

The COAST of CHANCE

By ESTHER
G. LUCIA
CHAMBERLAIN
Illustrations by M. G. Kettner
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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 Miss Smeese, Flora Gilsey, and her chambermaid, 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, Earl Wood, 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. \$500 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 rummaging her dressing room. Flora refuses to give up the stone to Kerr, and suspects him of being the thief. Flora's interest in Kerr increases. She decides to return the ring to Harry, but he tells her to keep it for a day or two. Miss Buller tells Flora that Clara is setting her cap for her father, Judge Buller. Flora believes Harry suspects Kerr.

CHAPTER XV.—(Continued.)

"But Judge Buller has already vouched for that man," she said quickly, "so he must be all right."

Kerr inclined his head to her with a smile.

"Buller is easily taken in," said Harry calmly. Under the direct, the insolent meaning of his look Flora felt her face grow hot—her hands cold. Harry could sit there taunting this man, hitting him over another man's back, and Kerr could not resent it. He could only sit—his head a little canting forward—looking at Harry with the traces of a dry smile upon his lips.

She thought the next moment everything would be declared. She sprang up, and, with an impulse for rescue, went to the door of the smoking-room. "Judge Buller," she called.

There was a sudden cessation of talk; a movement of forms dimly seen in the thick blue element; and then through wreaths of smoke, the judge's face dawned upon her like a sun through fog.

"Well, well, Miss Flora," he wanted to know, "to what had action of mine do I owe this good fortune?"

She retreated, beckoning him to the middle of the room. "You owe it to the bad action of another," she said gayly. "Your friends are being slandered."

Harry made a movement as if he would have stopped her, and the expression of his face, in its alarm, was comic. But she paid no heed. She laid her hand on Harry's arm. "Mr. Kerr is just about to accuse us of being impostors," she announced. She had robbed the situation of its peril by gaily turning it exactly inside out. The judge blinked, puzzled at this extraordinary statement. Harry was disconcerted; but Kerr showed an astonishment that amazed her—a concern that she could not understand. He turned at her. Then he laughed rather shakily as he turned to her with a mock gallant bow.

"All women impose upon us, madam. And as for Mr. Cressy"—he fixed Harry with a look—"I could not accuse him of being an impostor since we have met in the sacred limits of St. James'."

The two glances that crossed before Flora's watchful eyes were keen as thrust and parry of rapiers. Harry bowed stiffly.

"I believe, for a fact, we did not meet, but I think I saw you there once—at some embassy ball."

The words rang to Flora's ears, as if they had been shouted from the banquet. In the speaking pause that followed there was audible an unknown hortatory voice from the smoking room.

"I tell you it's a damn-fool way to manage it! What's the good of twenty thousand dollars' reward?" Flora stretched nervously at the back of her chair. She seemed to see the danger of discovery piling up above Kerr like a mountain.

The judge chuckled. "You see what you saved me from. They've been at it hammer and tongs all the evening. Every man in town has his idea on that subject."

"For instance, what is that one?" Kerr's casual voice was in contrast to his guarded eyes.

The judge looked pleased. "That one? Why, that's my own—was, at least, half an hour ago. You see, about that twenty-thousand-dollar proposition—" They moved nearer to him. They stood, the four, around the red velvet-covered table, like people waiting to be served. "The trouble is right here," said the judge, emphasizing with blunt forefinger. "The crook has a pal. That's probable, isn't it?"

Harry nodded. Flora felt Kerr's eyes upon her, but she could not look at him.

"And we see the thing is at a dead-end, don't we? Well, now," the judge went on triumphantly, "we know if any one person had the whole ring it would be turned in by this time. That is the weak spot in the reward

policy. They didn't reckon on the thing's being split."

"Split? No, really, do you think that possible?" Kerr inquired, and Flora caught a glimmer of irony in his voice.

"Well, can you see one of the chaps trusting the other with more than half of it?" The judge was scornful. "And a fellow needs a whole ring if he is after a reward." He rolled his head waggishly. "Oh, I could have been a crook myself!" he chuckled, but his was the only smiling face in the party.

For Kerr's was pale, schooled to a rigid self-control.

And Harry's was crimson and swollen, as if with a sudden rush of blood. His twitching hands, his sullen eyes, responded to Judge Buller's last word as if it had been an accusation.

"It makes me damned sick, the way you fellows talk—as if it was the easiest thing in the world to—" He broke off. It was such a tone, loose, harsh and uncontrolled, as made Flora shrink.

As if he sensed that movement in her, he turned upon her furiously.

"Well, are we going to stand here all night?" He took her by the arm.

She felt as if he had struck her. Buller was staring at him, but Kerr had opened the door through which she had entered, and now, turning his back upon Harry, silently motioned her out.

She had a moment's fear that Harry's grasp, even then, wouldn't let go. Indeed, for a moment he stood clutching her, as if, now that his rage had spent itself, she was the one thing he could hold to. Then she felt his fingers loosen. He stood there alone, looking, with his great bulk, and his great strength, and his abashed bewilderment, rather pathetic.

But that aspect reached her dimly, for the fear of him was uppermost. Her arm still burned where he had grasped it. She moved away from him toward the door Kerr had opened for her. She passed from the light of the crimson room into the dark of the passage. Some one followed her and closed the door. Some one caught step with her. It was Kerr. He bent his dark head to speak low.

"I don't know why you did it, you quixotic child, but you must not expose yourself in this way, for any reason whatsoever."

The light of the crowded rooms burst upon them again.

"Oh," she turned to him beseechingly, "can't you get me away?"

"Surely." His manner was as if nothing had happened. His smile was reassuring. "I'll call your carriage, and find Mrs. Britton."

When Flora came down from the dressing-room she found Clara already in the carriage, and Kerr mounting guard in the hall. As he handed her in, Clara leaned forward.

"Where is Mr. Cressy?" she inquired.

"He sent his apologies," Kerr explained. "He is not able to get away just now."

Flora lay back in the carriage. She was dimly aware of Clara's presence beside her, but for the moment Clara had ceased to be a factor. The shape that filled all the foreground of her thought was Harry. He loomed alarming to her imagination—all the more so since, for the moment, he had seemed to lose his grip. That was another thing she could not quite understand. That burst of violent irritation following, as it had, Judge Buller's words! If Kerr had been the speaker it would have been natural enough, since all through this interview Harry's evident antagonism had seemed strained to the snapping point.

But poor Judge Buller had been harmless enough. He had been merely theorizing. But—wait! She made so sharp a movement that Clara looked at her. The judge's theory might be close to facts that Harry was cognizant of.

For herself she had had no way of finding out how the sapphire had got adrift. But hadn't Harry? Hadn't he followed up that singular scene with the blue-eyed Chinaman by other visits to the goldsmith's shop? Why, yesterday, when he was supposed to be in Burlington, Clara had seen him in Chinatown. The idea burst upon her. Harry was after the whole ring. He counted the part she held already his, and for the rest he was groping in Chinatown; he was trying to reach it through the imperturbable little goldsmith. But he had not reached it yet—and she could read his irritation at his failure in his violent outburst when Judge Buller so innocently fung the difficulties in his face. She knew as much now as she could bear. If Harry did not suspect Kerr, it would be strange. But—Harry waiting to make sure of a reward before he unmasked a thief! It was an ugly thought!

And would he wait for the rest now—now that the situation was so galling to him? Might not he just decide to take the sapphire, and with the evidence of that, risk his putting his hand on the "Idol" when he grasped the thief?

The carriage was stopping. Clara was making ready to get out. She braced herself to face Clara in the light with a casual exterior—but when she had reached her own rooms she sank in a heap in the chair before her writing-table, and laid her head upon the table between her arms.

In her wretchedness she found her-



"I Mean It, I Mean It," He Assured Her.

self turning to Kerr. How stoically he had endured it all, though it must have borne on him most heavily! How kind he had been to her! He had not even spoken of himself, though he must have known the shadows were closing over his head.

In the gray hours of the morning she wrote him. She dared not put the peril into words, but she implied them. She vaguely threatened; and she implored him to go, avoiding them all, herself more than any; and, quaking at the possibility that he might, after all, overcome her, she declared that before he went she would not see him again. She closed with the forbidden statement that whether he stayed or went, at the end of three days she would make a sure disposal of the ring. She put all this in reckless black and white and sent it by the hand of Shima. Then she waited. She waited, in her little isolation, with the sapphire always hung about her neck, waited with what anticipation of marvelous results—avowals, ideal farewells, or possibly some incredible transformation of the grim face of the business. And the answer was silence.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Heart of the Dilemma.

There is, in the heart of each gale of events, a storm center of quiet. It is the very deadlock of contending forces, in which the individual has space for breath and apprehension. Into this lull Flora fell panting from her last experience, more frightened by the false calm than by the whirlwind that had landed her there. Now she had time to mark the echoes of the storm about her, and to realize her position.

From the middle of her calm she saw many inexplicable appearances. She saw them everywhere, from the small round of Clara's movement to the larger wheel of the public aspect. Clara was taking tea with the Bullers, and the papers had ceased to mention the Crew Idol.

It had not even been a nine days' wonder. It had not dwindled. It had simply dropped from head-lines to nothing; and after the first murmur of astonishments at this strange vanishing, after a little vain conjecture as to the reason of it, the subject dropped out of the public mouth. The silence was so sudden it was like a suppression. To Flora it shadowed some forces working so secretly, so surely, that they had extinguished the light of publicity. They must be going on with concentrated and terrible activity in cycles, which perhaps had not yet touched her.

So, seeing Maj. Purdie among the crowd at some one's "afternoon" where she was pouring tea, she looked up at his cheerful face and high bald dome with a passionate curiosity. He knew why the press had been extinguished, and what they were doing in the dark. She knew where the sapphire was—and where the culprit was to be found. And to think that they could tell each other, if they would, each a tale the other would hardly dare believe. Amazing appearances! How far away, how foreign from the facts they covered! But Maj. Purdie had the best of it. He at least was doing his duty. He was standing stiffly on one side, while she hesitated between, trying desperately to push Kerr out of sight

before she dared uncover the jewel. But he wouldn't move. In spite of all she had done, he wouldn't.

Across the room that very afternoon she caught the twinkle of his resisting smile. He had had her letter then for two days, and still he had come here, though he'd been bidden to stay away; though he had been warned to keep away from all places where she, or these people around her, might find him; though he had been implored to go, finally, as far away as the round surface of the world would let him.

By what he had heard and seen in the red room that night, he must know her warning had not been ridiculous. And there was another threat less apparent on the surface of things, but evident enough to her. It was the change in Clara after she had begun her attack on the Bullers, her appearance of being busy with something, absorbed with, intent upon, something, which, if she had not secured it yet, at least she had well in reach. And that thing—suppose it had to do with the Crew Idol; and suppose Clara should play into Harry's hands!

For Kerr's escape Flora had been holding the ring, fighting off events, and yet all the while she had not wanted to lose the sight of him. Well, now, when she had made up her mind finally to resign herself to the dreariness of that, might he not at least have done his part of it and decently disappeared? So much he might have done for her.

He was playing her own trick on her, but her chances for getting at him again were fewer than his had been with her. She could not besiege him in his abode; and in the places where they met, large houses crowded with people, the eye of the world was upon her. For how long had she forgotten it—she who had been all her life so deferential toward it! Even now she remembered it only because it interfered with what she wanted to do.

For the eye of her small society was very keenly upon Kerr. She realized, all at once, that he had become a personage; and then, by smiles, by lifted eyebrows, by glances, she gathered that her name was being linked with his. She was astonished. How could their luncheon together at the Purdies', their few minutes' talk in the shop, have crystallized into this gossip? It vexed her—alarmed her, how it had got about when she had seen him so seldom, had known him scarcely more than a week. It was simply in the air. It was in her attitude and in his, but how far it had gone she did not dream, until in the dense crowd of some one's at-home she caught the words of a young girl. The voice was so sweet and so prettily modulated that at its first notes Flora turned involuntarily to glimpse the speaker, a slender creature in a delicate mist of muslin, with an indeterminate chin and the cheek of a pale peach.

"Just think," Flora heard her saying, "he went to see her three times in two days, but to-day, did you notice, he wouldn't look at her until she went up and spoke to him. I don't see how a girl can! Harry Cressy—" She moved away and the words were lost. Flora looked after her. For the moment she felt only scorn for the creature who had clapped that

interpretation upon her great responsibility. These people around her seemed poor indeed, absorbed only in petty considerations, and seeing everything down the narrow vista of the "correct." Her eyes followed the young girl's course through the room, easy to trace by her shining blond head, and the unusual deliciousness of her muslin gown. She stopped beside two women, and with a certain sense of pleasure and embarrassment Flora recognized one of them—Mrs. Herrick. She caught the lady's eye and bowed. Mrs. Herrick smiled, with a gracious inclination in which her graceful shoulders had a part.

It gave Flora the sense Mrs. Herrick's presence always brought her, of protection, of security, and the possibility of friendship finer than she had ever known. She started forward. But Mrs. Herrick, presenting instantly her profile, drew the young girl's hand through her arm and moved away.

Flora winced as if she had received a blow. The other people who had heard the same gossip of her had been, on account of it, all the more amused and anxious to talk to her.

She felt herself judged—judged from the outside, it is true—but still there was justice in it. She had been flying in the face of custom, ignoring common good behavior, in short, sticking to her own convictions in defiance of the world's. And she must pay the penalty—the loss of the possibility of such a friend.

But it was hard, she thought, to pay the price without getting the thing she had paid for. It was more like a gamble in which she staked all on a chance. And never had this chance appeared more improbable to her than now. For if Kerr valued the ring more than he valued his safety, what argument was left her?

CHAPTER XVII.

The Demigod.

On the third day she opened her eyes to the sun with the thought: Where is he? From the windows of her room she could see the two pale points and the narrow way of water that led into the western ocean. Had he sailed out yonder west into the east, into that oblivion which was his only safety, for ever out of her sight? Or was he still at hand, ignoring warning, defying fate?

She drew out the sapphire and held it in her hand. The cloud of events had cast no film over its luster, but she looked at it now without pleasure. For all its beauty it wasn't worth what they were doing for it. Well, to-day they were both of them to see the last of it. To-day she was going to take it to Mr. Purdie, to deliver it into his hands, to tell him how it had fallen into hers in the goldsmith's shop—all of the story that was possible for her to tell.

She had made it out all clear in her mind that this was the right thing to do. It hadn't occurred to her she had made it out only on the hypothesis of Kerr's certainly going. It had not occurred to her that she might have to make her great moral move in the dark; or, what was worse, in the face of his most gallant resistance. In this discouraging light she saw her intention dwindle to the vanishing point, but the great move was just as good as it had been before—just as solid, just as advisable. Being so very solid, wouldn't it wait until she had time to show him that she really meant what she said, supposing she ever had a chance to see him again? The possibility that at this moment he might actually have gone had almost escaped her. She recalled it with a disagreeable shock, but, after all, that was the best she could hope, never to see him again! She ought to be grateful to be sure of that, and yet if she were, oh, never could she deprive him of so much beauty and light by her keeping of the sapphire as he would then have taken away from her!

She would come down then, indeed, level with plainest, palest, hardest things—people and facts. Her romance—she had seen it; she had had it in her hands, and it had somehow eluded her. It had vanished, evaporated.

She leaned and looked through the thin veil of her curtains at the splendid day. It was one of February's freaks. It was hot. The white ghost of noon lay over shore and sea. Beneath the city seemed to sleep gray and glistening. The tops of hills that rose above the up-creeching houses were misted green. Across the bay, along the northern shore, there was a pale green coast of hills dividing blue and blue. Ships in the bay hung out white canvas drying, and the sky showed whiter clouds, slow-moving, like sails upon a languid sea.

She looked down upon all, as lone and lonely as a deserted lady in a tower, lifted above these happy, peaceful things by her strange responsibility. Her thoughts could not stay with them; her eyes traveled seaward. She parted the curtains and, leaning a little out, looked westward at the white sea gate.

A whistle, as of some child calling his mate, came sweetly in the silence. It was near, and the quavering, expectant note caught her ear. Again it came, sharper, imperative, directly beneath her. She looked down; she was speechless. There was a sudden wild current of blood in her veins. There he stood, the whistle, neither child nor bird, but the man himself—Kerr, looking up at her from the gay



oval of her garden. She hung over the window-sill. She looked directly down upon him, foreshortened to face, and even with the distance and the broad glare of noon between them she recognized his aspect—his gayest, of diabolic glee. There lurked about him the impish quality of the whistler that had summoned her.

"Come down," he called. "All sorts of wonders and terrors were beating around her. He had transcended her wildest wish; he had come to her more openly, more daringly, more romantically than she could have dreamed. All the amazement of why and how he had braved the battery of the windows of her house was swallowed up in the greater joy of seeing him there, standing in his 'grays,' with stiff black hat pushed off his hot forehead, hands behind him, looking up at her from the middle of anemones and daffodils.

"Come down," he called again, and waved at her with his slim, glittering stick. How far he had come since their last encounter, to wave at and command her, as if she were verily his own! She left the window, left the room, ran quickly down the stair. The house was hushed; no passing but her own, no butler in the hall, no kitchen-maid on the back stair. Only grim faces of pictures—ancestors not her own—glimmered reproachful upon her as she fled past. Light echoes called her back along the hall. The furniture, the muffled curtains, her own reflections flying through the mirrors, held up to her her madness, and by their mute stability seemed to remind her of the shelter she was leaving—seemed to forbid.

She ran. This was not shelter; it was prison. He was rescue; he was light itself. The only chance for her was to get near enough to him. Near him no shadow lived. The thing was to get near enough. She rushed direct from shadow into light. She came out into the sun, into the garden with its blaze of wintry summer, its whispering life and the free air over it. The man standing in the middle of it, for all his pot hat and Gothic stick, was none the less its demigod waiting for her, laughing. He might well laugh that she who had written that unfinching letter should come thus flying at his call; but there was more than mischief in him. The high tide of his spirits was only the sparkle of his excitement. It was evident that he was there with something of mighty importance to say.

Was it that her letter had finally touched him? Had he come at last to transcend her idea with some even greater purpose? She seemed to see the power, the will for that and the kindness—she could not call it by another word—but though she was beseeching him with all her silent attitude to tell her instantly what the great thing was, he kept it back a moment, looking at her whimsically, indulgently, even tenderly.

"I have come for you," he said. "Oh, for me!" she murmured. Surely he couldn't mean that! He was simply putting her off with that. "I mean it, I mean it," he assured her. "This doesn't make it any less real, my getting at you through a garden. Better," he added, "and sweet of you to make the duller way impossible."

She took a step back. It had not been play to her; but he would have it nothing else. He, too, stepped back and away from her.

"Come," he said, and behind him she saw the lower garden gate that opened on the grassy pitch of the hill, swinging idle and open. The sight of him about to vanish lured her on, and as he continued to walk backward she advanced, following.

"Oh, where?" she pleaded. "With me!" Such a guaranty of good faith he made it!

She tried to summon her reluctance. "But why?"

"We'll talk about it as we go along." His hand was on the gate. "We can't stop here, you know. She'll be watching us from the window."

Flora glanced behind her. The windows were all discreetly draped—most likely ambush—but that he should apprehend Clara's eyes behind them! Ah, then, he did know what he was about! He saw Clara as she did. She would almost have been ready to trust him on the strength of that alone. Still she hung back.

"But my things!" she protested. She held up her garden hat. "And my gown!" She looked down at her frail silk slounces. Was ever any woman seen on the street like this!

"Oh, la, la, la," he cut her short. "We can't stop to dress the part. You'll forget 'em."

She smiled at him suddenly, looked back at the house, put on her hat—the garden hat. The moment she had dreaded was upon her. In spite of her warning reason, in spite of everything, she was going with him.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Insufficient Data.
Blobs—What is Gussler like when he's sober?
Blobs—I don't know. I've only known him about nine years.