

CHAPTER VIII—Continued

He looked at her with a humorous twist of mouth. "What? So seldom?"

She was impatient if he wouldn't be snubbed; but at the worst she wouldn't be cornered. "Oh, dear, no— but people who come at other times take a chance."

"Does that mean that I may take mine tomorrow?"

He was pressing her too hard. Why was he so anxious to see her, as he had not been the first night or yesterday, or even ten minutes ago? She, who, ten minutes ago, would have been glad, now was doing her best to put him off.

She couldn't escape yet, for the figures on the stage were still gesticulating and trilling, and the people around her, in the small inclosure where she sat, hemmed her in so that she could no more move away from Kerr than if she had been that impaled specimen he had made her feel at their first meeting.

It seemed unreal, and yet it had made her forget everything else—the stage, the people around her and even the very sapphire that had generated her inexplicable situation. She drew her glove over the ring. The lights were dimmed. It would be hard to get at the great flash of the jewel. And besides she didn't trust it. She couldn't tell in what direction it might strike out a spark of horror next.

The rustle of final departure was all about her. The people in the box were stirring and beginning to stand up, and Flora saw Kerr turn and look at her. She wanted some one to stand between herself and Kerr, and it was Harry that she turned, not alone that she was so large and so strong, but because she thought she saw in him an inclination to step into that very place where she wanted him. She saw he was a little sullen, and though she didn't suspect him quite of jealousy, she wondered if he had not a right to be angry with her.

She had stepped her head to the carriage door, when Harry stopped and took one of the damp papers from a crumpled pack. She saw the headlines. It covered half the sheet—the great figure that was offered for the return of the Chatworth ring.

CHAPTER IX

He hunted her down. And what had followed that? Why, she was back again to the great figures in the paper. At first it seemed as though she had taken a clean leap from one subject to another. She had in no way connected them. But all at once she was connected. She couldn't separate them. She didn't know whether she had been stupid not to have seen them before, or whether she was stupid to see them now. For the thought that had sprung up in her mind was monstrous. It started her so broad awake that she sat up in bed to meet it the more alertly. She sat up trembling. She felt like one who has walked a long way in a wood, hearing crafty footsteps following in the bushes. And now the beast had sprung out, and she was panting, terrified, not knowing which way to run.

The room was dark except for now and again the yellow square of light, from some lamp in the solid apparatus of the night, and, yes, of the day before, and the night before that. Oh, she had known well enough that there had been something wrong at the goldsmith's shop. She had felt it even before she had seen the sapphire, and she knew how it had held them, both herself and Harry! To have moved Harry it must be something indeed! Had he suspected it then, or had he only wondered if he had suspected why hadn't he spoken of it? Well, her appalling fancy prompted, hadn't he spoken of it?—though not to her. There flashed back to her the memory of him there in the back of the shop with the blue eyed Chinaman. How furiously he had assailed the little man! How unmercifully with what a dissatisfied air he had looked at the ring even after it was on her finger, as if, after all, he had not compassed what he wanted. She could be sure that the monstrous idea which had overtaken her had, however fleetingly, flashed before Harry's mind in the goldsmith's shop. But surely he couldn't have entertained it for a moment. That was impossible, or he would never have let her take the sapphire—Harry, who had seen the ring, the very Crew idol itself, within the 24 hours.

A little heathen god curled round himself with a big blue stone on the top of his head. Harry hadn't said what sort of stone it was; but Kerr had said it was a sapphire. There was a sapphire on her hand now. She touched it with her finger tips cautiously, as if to touch something hot, so near to her! In the same way she touched it with her own hand! It was too much to be alone with in the dark! She reached out softly, as if she feared to disturb some threatening presence lurking around her, and touched the small night lamp on the table by her bed. The shade was yellow, and that contended with the blue of the sapphire, but couldn't break its light. With the first flash of its splendor in her face she felt certain that she was in a trap. She shook the ring quickly off her finger and it fell with a light clatter on the table's marble top—fell with the sapphire face down and all its light hidden. She took it up again a little fearfully, as if it might have some harm; and again while she looked at it she seemed to see that nothing that happened about this jewel could be too extraordinary. If only it had been less wonderful, less beautiful, she would not have felt so terribly afraid! She put it back on her finger, and for a moment held her hand over it, as if she imprisoned a living thing.

Then, without looking again, she got out of bed and went to the window. It overlooked the dark steep of the garden, the light of the water, the light of the plane of the water. She looked far out. Black houseposts marched against the bay, and between them, light by light, her eyes followed the street lamps down to the shore. If one could recover from such a nightmare as this it would be by leaning out into the air, and facing the dark. These shapeless roofs, low and low her the night made mysterious; and yet they covered people that she knew—her friends—kind, safe people! There had been nights when the city, with its very window, had seemed to her a savage place; but now she was wretched fear that stood behind her, the fear that had got inside her house, that had slipped unseen through the circle of friends, that stood behind her in the level in even the broadest plain of possibility, which could hold knowledge of so particular and piercing a quality as his look had implied. There had been so much more than curiosity or surprise in it. She could hardly face the memory of it, so cruelly it had struck her. There was no doubt in her mind that Kerr had seen the ring. Some where in the pageant of his experience he had met it, known it—but what he wanted of it—

She broke off that thought, and looked long at the little flame of the lamp. It was strange; but there was no doubt in her mind that he wanted it. That had been the strongest thing in his look. She felt herself picking her way along a very narrow path, one step over either edge of which would plunge her chasm deep. Now she snatched at a frail sapling to save herself. The fact that Kerr knew her stone didn't prove it belonged to the Crew idol. And if it didn't—if it wasn't the crown of the heathen god, then her whole dreadful supposition fell to pieces. But she hadn't proved it and the simplest way was just to ask Kerr. Her chance for that was the chance he had fought so hard for, the chance of their meeting the next day.

She hadn't wanted that meeting when he had first asked her for it in the box. She had feared it then, and all the more she feared it now, because now she would have to do more than defend herself. She would take the offensive; she would make the attack, now that she had a question to ask. Why should the thought of it frighten her? If this was not the Crew sapphire she would be no worse off than

she had been. If it was, her course would be clear. It seemed it should be simple, it should be easy to face Kerr with her question; but she was possessed by the apprehension that it would be neither. Would the question she had to ask be a safe thing to give him? And if she dared undertake it and should be overpowered after all—then everything would be lost.

What the "everything" was she feared to lose would not come clear to her. The only thing that did emerge definitely from the agitation of her mind was the knowledge that this question that had been thrust upon her made it tenfold more difficult to meet Kerr. And yet to refuse to meet him now would be as cowardly as throwing the ring out of the window.



THE LIGHT OF OTHER FINGERS MADE HER RESTLESS.

but she had heard that they were looking, and she did me the favor"—Clara smiled a little dryly—"of telling me first."

Flora looked reflective. "I've never seen it, but they say it's beautiful." "It is, in a way," Clara grudgingly admitted, but it isn't new; and the ridiculous part is that she will let it go only on condition that it shall not be done over. It is in sufficiently good shape, but it stands now just as Colonel Herrick furnished it 40 years ago.

"Why, I should love that!" Flora frankly confessed, and gave a wistful glance at the walls around her, wondering how long before the soft, dark bloom of time, of use and wont, should descend on their crude faces.

"At any rate, he is odd enough to be genuine," she said with a gleam of malice. "Oh, no doubt of that," Clara mildly assented; "but genuine what?" "Why, gentlemen, I wanted to recall it for Clara's glance seemed to give it a double significance. "I mean," she added, "just one of those chronic travelers who have nothing else to do and whose only amusement is to pick up scraps of information." She frowned. "At least that was the idea he gave of himself." She broke off, doubly angry that she had tried to explain Kerr, and tried to explain herself, when the circumstances required nothing of the sort. She was sure Clara would miss her nervousness though Clara made no sign. Her eyes only traveled a second time to Flora's hands, as if among the flare of red and white jewels she was expecting to see another color. To Flora's palpitating consciousness the look was a perfect connection with Clara's next remark.

reached the door she glanced over the chiffonier. It was on the tip of Flora's tongue to ask her if she would mind something when Clara turned and smiled her small, tight curled smile, as if she were offering it as a symbol of mutual understanding. Curiously enough, it checked Flora's query about 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 that did not escape her, and she watched 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 a quiet thing 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 quality about it, but that 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, nothing, nothing, nothing 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 own 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 to accept the little sapphire; she seemed to take her companion's help, while she left her so much at sea as to the real facts. But, after all, it was Clara who had forced the issue.

She thought a good deal about Clara while she was dressing. A good many times lately she had looked forward to the fall, the time of her marriage, when their rather tense relationship would be ended. This house in the country, which was to be her little bachelor's fling, was to be Clara's last commission for her.

Think how she would, she could not feel as if she were ungratefully abandoning Clara. Clara had done so well for her in their three years together! There surely must be immediately forthcoming for such a remarkable person another large opportunity, and yet she couldn't help recalling that first boarding house where Clara was temporarily shelved; where, nevertheless, she had not conceded an inch of her class, nor a ray of her luster to circumstance. This surprising luster was a gleam that had been in the very heart of her clothes and accessories, the way she traveled and the way she smiled. It was the bloom of luxury she kept about her person through all her varying surroundings. She had never tried to rise above the level of her position; she was there already; and she never came down.

Flora knew it was for just her air of being ready that she had trusted Clara, and for that she had never associated with her had never failed to find her companion ready wherever their common interests were concerned. She had no reason for not trusting Clara now, except the knowledge that her interests would be separated, and her feeling that Clara's prudence must already be by way of looking out for itself alone.

Yet Clara would do a kindness if it did no longer annoy her, and yet 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 tell what she could confide to Clara. Meanwhile, if there was any one to whom she could turn now it would surely be Harry.

Yet before she reached the top again she found herself going tiptoe, as if she were on an expedition so quiet that her own steps 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 bathrobe. There it hung in the bathroom on one unvarying peg, the most immovable of all her garments, safe from the excursions of Marrika's needles 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 movements to the door of her bedroom. She drew a quick breath, and she felt a sudden 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 barely slipped the ring into the little pocket and refastened the flap, when Clara opened the bedroom door and stood looking into the dressing room.

Clara experienced a sharp start of surprise, and then of wonder. Here was Clara sitting, seeking her outfit! Here she stood, brushed and polished, and finished to a pitch of virtue, again taking Flora at a disadvantage, hiding behind her own door. But at the least she was grateful that Clara had not reached the middle of the dressing room and stood still.

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 a little above the strata 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 hanging 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 open pocketbook, shiny with use, she shook from it a shower of receipts, newspaper clippings, verses. She let them lie. She took out a long violet box with a perforator's seal upon it. It held a bunch of keys, and she looked at them, a bonnet of gold filigree. It was empty. A powder box, a glove box, a froth of lace, a handful of jeweler's boxes, a jewel fang loose into the drawer. This she pounced upon. It was a brooch! She let it fall—turned and ran to the dressing table, 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. She took up daintily, in her white kid fingers, slippers, she opened the drawers, pulled out and rifled, with their contents heaped up and streaming over the floor.

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, and looked into the dressing table. She put back into the pasteboard jeweler's boxes, the jeweled pin, the laces, which she shook out and folded daintily, the glove and powder boxes, the gold bonnetiere, the long violet box, the leather pouch, each with its own unshakingly in its place, one 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 pitched out of the door. Then, sun streaming all into the room, struck gleams in her pale hair and struck blindingly upon the heaps of white around her, and made two dazzling points of her gloved hands that moved as deftly as hands uncovered. She slid back to the last drawer in the chiffonier, and, looking into the room, she turned 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 door. She looked into the mirror she looked into it, and touched her hat straight again, but the action was subconscious. Clara wasn't thinking of it.

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 her own knowledge that she did not yet realize. Out in her sunny dressing room all the outraged furniture stood meek and in order, frauding the eye to believe that nothing had happened! She felt she couldn't look things in the face a moment longer, she turned up her face in the folds of her dressing gown.

Why, she had thought that such things couldn't happen! She had thought that people's private belongings, like their persons, were inviolate. They all always talked, she had talked about such things as if they were mere nothing. They had talked about the very taking of the Crew idol as if it were a splendid joke! But she had not dreamed what such things were like when they were near. When they were held up to you, when they were like this! 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. Why she had no place in the world where she could be sure of safety for this!

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 kiss 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.

Meanwhile she dared not let the sapphire out of her hand, and yet she could not wear it on her hand. She had thought of the tear 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 fragile for such a precious weight. Her 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 quite sure she was going to give back the sapphire to Harry, yet she couldn't help picturing to herself what her meeting with Kerr would have been, supposing she had checked differently. As the morning slipped by she found herself doubting that he would come at all. Her attitude of the night before had surely been enough to discourage any one. If he didn't come she knew that she would be disappointed.

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 to come to 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 room, and returned to her room.

She did not try to—because she couldn't—understand her own proceeding. She merely sat, listening, as it seemed to her, for hours.

CHAPTER X

A Lady Unveiled

SHE awakened in the morning to some one knocking. She thought the sound had been going on for a long time, but now she was finally roused, it had stopped. This was odd, for no one came to her in the morning except Marrika, and it was tiresome to be thus imperatively bestirred before she was half awake. Now the knocking came again with a level, unimpetuous repetition, and she called, "Come in!" at which Clara, in a pale morning gown, promptly entered—an apparition as cool and smooth and burnished as if she had spent the night, like a French doll, in tissue paper.

Clara's coming in the morning was an unheard of thing. Flora was taken aback.

"Why, Clara?" she was blank with astonishment. She sat up, flushed and troubled, and started blinking. "I hope I didn't keep you knocking long." "Oh, no, indeed; only three taps," Clara looked straight through Flora's astonishment, as if there had been no such thing in evidence. She drew up a chair and sat down beside the bed. It was a rocking chair, but it did not sway with her calm pulse. In the fine flush of her morning attire, with her hands placidly folded on her knee, she made Flora feel taken at a disadvantage, thus scarcely awake, disheveled and all but stripped. But Clara, if she looked at anything, but Flora's eyes, looked only at her hands, one and then the other as they lay upon the coverlet.

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