

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 mysteriously disappears. Harry Cressy, who was present, describes the ring to his fiancée, Flora Gilsley, and her chaperon, Mrs. Clara Britton, as being like a heathen god, with a beautiful sapphire set in the head. Flora discovers an unfamiliar mood in Harry, especially when the ring is discussed.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

The picture gallery was new, an addition; and the plain, narrow, unexpected door in this place, where all was high, arched, elaborate and flourished, was like a loophole through which to slip into a foreign atmosphere. This atmosphere was resinous of fresh wood; the light was thick with drifting notes; the carpets harshly new, slipping beneath the feet on the too polished floor; the bare bones of the place yet scarcely covered. But its quiet was after all comparative. There were plenty of people lingering in groups in the center of the gallery, which was dusky, eclipsed by the great reflectors that circled the room, throwing out the pictures in a bright band of color around the walls. People leaning from this border of light back into the dusk to murmur together, vanished and reappeared with such fascinating abruptness that Flora caught herself guessing what sort of face, where this nearest group stood just on the edge of shadow, would pop out of the dark next.

She was ready for something extraordinary, but now, when it came, she was taken aback by it. It gave her a start, that toss of black hair, that long, irregular, pale face whose scintillant, sardonic smile was mercilessly upon the poor, inadequate picture-face fronting him. His stoop above the rail was so abrupt that his long, lean back was almost horizontal, yet even thus there was something elegant in the swing of him—in the careless twist of his head, around, to speak to the woman behind him. The light above struck blind on the glass in one eye, but the other danced with a genial, a mad scintillation. The light of it caught like contagion, and touched the merest glancer at him with the spark of its warm, ironic mirth. The question which naturally rose to Flora's lips—"Who in the world is that?"—she checked; why, she didn't ask herself. She only felt as she followed Clara, trailing away across the floor, that the interest of the evening which had promised so well, beginning with the Chatworth ring, had been raised even a note higher. Her restive fancy was beginning again. All the footlights of her little secret stage were up.

Clara turned to the right, following a beckoning fan, and Flora, dallying with her anticipation, reasoned that now they must circle the room before they should face him—the interesting apparition. It was a pilgrimage of which he on the other side was performing his half. Perfunctorily talking from group to group, conscious

now and again of the lagging Clara or Harry, she could nevertheless keep a sly eye on the stranger's equal progress. The flash of jet, and the voluminous, substantial shoulders of the lady so profusely introducing him, were an assurance of how that pilgrimage would terminate, since it was Ella Buller who was parading him. She even wondered before which of the florid pictures at the far, other end of the room, as before a shrine, the ceremony would take place.

She kept her eyes fixed on the paintings before her, and as she moved down from one to another, and the voices of the approaching group drew nearer, one separated itself from the general murmur, so clear, so resonantly carried, so clean-clipped off the tongue, that it stood out in syllables on the blur of sound which was Ella Buller's conversation. It had color, that voice; it had a quality so sharp, so individual that it touched her with a mischievous wonder that he dared speak so differently from all the world about him. Then, six pictures away, she heard her own name.

"Why, Flora Gilsley!" It was Ella's husky, boyish note. "I've been looking for you all the evening! How d'y'do, Harry?" She waved her hand at him. "Why, how d'y'do, Mrs. Britton? I wouldn't let papa go to supper until I'd found you. 'Papa, I said, 'wait; Flora and Harry will be here.' Besides," she had quite reached Flora's side by this time and communicated it in an impressive whisper, "I want you to meet my Englishman." She looked over her shoulder, and largely beckoned to where the blunt and florid Buller and his companion, with their backs to what they were supposed to be looking at, were exchanging an anecdote of infinite amusement.

Buller's expression came around slowly to his daughter's beckoning hand, but the Englishman's face seemed to flash at the instant from what he was enjoying to what was expected of him. In the flourish of introductions, across and across, Flora found herself thinking the reality less extraordinary than she had at first supposed. Now that Mr. Kerr was fairly before her, presented to her, and taking her in with the same lively, impersonal interest with which he took in the whole room, "as if," she put it vexedly to herself, "I were a specimen poked at him on the end of a pin," it stirred in her a vague resentment; and involuntarily she held him up to Harry. The comparison showed him a little worn, a little battered, a little too perfunctory in manner; but his genial eyes, deep under threatening brows, made Harry's eyes seem to stare rather coldly; and the fine form of his long, plain face, and the sensitive line of his long, thin lips made Harry's beauty look—well, how did it look? Hardly callous.

This mixed impression the two men gave her was disconcerting. She was all the more ready, to be wary of the stranger. She had begun with him in the way she did with every one—instinctively throwing out a breastwork of conversation from behind which she could observe the enemy. But though he had blinked at it, he had not taken her up, nor helped her out; but had merely stood with his head a little canted forward, as if he watched her through her defenses.

"But San Francisco must seem so limited after London," she had wound up; and the way he had considered it, a little humorously, down his long nose, made her doubt the interest of effies to be reckoned in round numbers.

"It's all extraordinary," he said. "You're quite as extraordinary in your way as we in ours."

"Oh," she wondered, still vexed with his inventory, "I had always supposed us awfully commonplace. What is our way, please?"

"Ah," he said, measuring his long step to hers as they sauntered a little, "for one thing, you're so awfully good to a fellow. In London"—and he nodded back, as if London were merely across the room—"they're awfully good to the somebodies. It's the way you take in the nobodies over here that is so astonishing—the stray leaves that blow in with your 'trade,' and can't show any credentials but a letter or two, and their faces; and those"—his diablerie danced out again—"sometimes such deucedly damaged ones."

It was almost indecent, this parade of his nonentity! She wanted to say: "Oh, hush! Those are the things one only enjoys—never talks about." But instead, somewhere up at the top of her voice, she said: "Oh, we always look up our silver!"

"But even then," he quizzed her, "I wonder how you dare to do it?"

"Perhaps we have to, because we ourselves are all—" (without any credentials but those you mention,) she had been about to say—but there she caught herself on the very edge of giving herself and all the rest of them away to him;—"all so awfully bored," she mischievously ended with the faintest, faintest possible yawn behind her spread fan.

He looked as if she had taken him by surprise; then laughed out. "Oh, that is the way they don't do here," he provoked her. "You mustn't, when I'm not expecting it."

"Then what are you expecting?" she inquired a little coolly.

"Well," he deliberated, "not expecting you to get me ready for a sweet, and then pop in a pickle; and presently expecting, hoping, anxiously anticipating, what you really care to say."

He was expecting, she looked maliciously, more than he was likely to get; but the fact that he did see through her to that extent was at once delightful and charming. She swayed back into the shadow beyond the dazzling line of light. She wanted to escape his scrutiny, to be able to look him over from a safe vantage-ground. But he wouldn't have it. An instant he stood under the torrent of white radiance, challenging her to see what she could—then followed her in to her retreat. "Shall we sit here?" he said, and she found herself helplessly cut off and isolated with the enemy.

She couldn't withhold a little grudging pleasure in the sharpness with which he had turned her maneuver and the way it had detached them from the surrounding crowd. For there, in the dusky center of the room, it was as if they watched from safe covert the rest of their party exposed in the glare of light; though not, as Flora presently noted, quite escaping observation themselves. For an instant Harry turned and peered toward them with a look in his intentness that struck Flora as something new in him and made her wonder if he could be jealous. She turned tentatively to see if Kerr had noticed it, and surprised his glance in a quick transition back to hers.

"By your leave," he said, and took away her fan, which in his hand presently assumed such rhythmic motion that it ceased to be any more present to her than a delicate current of air upon her face.

He was not, she felt sure, in spite of his light manipulation of her fan, a person who cared to please women, but one of that devastating sort who care above everything to please themselves, and who are skilful without practice; too skilful, she feared, for her defenses to hold out against if he intended to find out what she really thought. "Aren't we supposed to be looking at the pictures?" she wanted to know.

He turned his back on the wall and its attendant glare. "Why pictures," he inquired, "when there are live people to look at? Pictures for places where they're all half dead. But here, where even the damnable dust in the street is alive, why should they paint, or write, or sculpt, or do anything but live?" His irascible brows shot the query at her.

Again the proposition of life—whatever that was—was held up before her, and as ever she faltered in the face of it. "I suppose they do it here," she murmured, with a vague glance at the paintings around her, "because people do it everywhere else."

His disparagement was almost a snarl. "That's the rotten part of it—because they do it everywhere else! As if there wasn't enough monotony in the world already without every chap trying to be like the next instead of being himself!"

"But if you have to be what people expect?"

"People don't want what they expect—if you care for that." He waved it away with his quick white hand.

"But you have to care, unless you want to be queer." Her poor little secret was out before she knew, and he looked at it, laughing immoderately, yet somehow delightfully.

"Ah, if you think the social game is the game that counts! I had expected braver things of you. The game that counts, my girl," he preached it at her with his long white hand, "the game that is going on out here is the big, red game of life. That's the only one that's worth a guinea; and there's no winning or losing, there's no right or wrong to it, and it doesn't matter what a man is in it as long as he's a good one."

"Even if he is a thief?" The question was out of Flora's lips before she could catch it. It was a challenge. She had meant to confound him; but he caught it as if it delighted him.

"Well, what would you think?"

He threw it back at her. "What hadn't she thought! How persistently her fancy had played with the question of what sort of man that one might be who had so wonderfully put his hand under a glass case and drawn out the Chatworth ring."

"Oh," she laughed dubiously, "I suppose he is a good one as long as he isn't caught."

"What!" His face disowned her. "You think he's a renegade, do you? A chap in perpetual flight, taking things because he has to, more or less pursued by the law? Bah! It's a guild as old, and a deal more honorable, than the beggar's. Your good thief is born to it. It's his caste. It's in his blood. It isn't money that he wants. If he had a million he'd be the same. And it isn't a mania either. It's a profession." The Englishman leaned back and smiled at her over the elegance of his long, joined finger-tips.

She looked at him with a delighted alarm, with an increasing elation; but whether these arose from his lawless declarations and the singular way they kept settling before her more vividly moment by moment the possible character of the present keeper of the Chatworth ring, or whether it was just the sight of Kerr himself as he sat there that stirred her, she didn't try to distinguish.

"But suppose he was your own thief," she urged; "took your own things, I mean," she hastily amended, "and suppose he turned out to be some one you knew and liked?" She hesitated. She had come at last to what she really wanted to say. She had brought out a question that had been teasing her fancy at intervals all the while he had been talking, and he had not even heard it. He wasn't even looking at her. She had caught him off his guard. He was looking across her shoulder straight down the dim vista of the room to the little blaze of bordering light. He was looking at Harry. No, Harry was looking at him. Harry was looking with a steady, an intent gaze, and Kerr meeting it—it might have been merely the blank glare of his monocle—seemed, to Flora, to meet it a little insolently. She fancied in the instant something to pass between the two men, something which, this time, she did not mistake for jealousy—a shade too dim for defiance or suspicion, a deep scrutiny that struggled to place something, some one.

Flora felt a sudden wish to break that ferocious scrutiny. It had broken her little moment. It had shattered the personal, almost intimate note that had been sounded between them. The look Kerr turned back to her was vague, and stirred in her a dim resentment that he could drop it all so easily.

"Shall we join the others?" It was the voice with which she had begun with him, but her eyes were hot through their light mist of lashes, and he threw her a comprehending glance of amusement.

"Oh, no," he assured her, "we can't help ourselves. They are going to join us."

Ella Buller, in the van of her procession, was already descending upon them. Her approach dissipated the last remnant of their personal moment. Her presence always insisted that there was nothing worth while but instant participation in her geniality, and whatever subject it might at the moment be taken up with. This conviction of Ella's had been wont to overawe Flora, and it still overwhelmed her; so that now, as she followed in the trail of Ella's marshaled force, she had a guilty feeling that there should be nothing in her mind but a normal desire for supper.

Yet all the way down the great stair, "the Corridors of Time," where the white owl glared his glassy wisdom on the passings and counter-passings, she was haunted with the thought that Harry had seen the extraordinary Kerr before; not shaken hands with him, perhaps—perhaps not even heard his name; but somewhere, across some distance, once glimpsed him, and had never quite shaken the memory from his mind. For there was something marked, notable, unforgettable in that lean distinctiveness. Against the sleek form of the men they met and shook hands with, he flashed out—seemed in contrast fairly electric. She saw him, just ahead of her where the crowd was thickening in the door of the supper room, making way for Clara through the press with that exasperating solicitude of his that was half ironic.

The room, hot, polished, flaring reflections of electric lights from its glistening floor, announced itself the heart of high fastivity, through the midst of which their entrance made an added ripple. The flushed faces of the women under their flowers, un-

der their pale-tinted hats, with their smiling recognitions to Clara, to Flora, to Ella, smiled with a sharpened interest. It proclaimed that Kerr was a stranger, and, in a circle which found itself a little stale for lack of innovations, a desirable one.

Apparently the dominant note of their party was Ella's clamorous selection for the supper; but to Flora the more real thing was the atmosphere of excitement and mystery she had been moving in all the evening. She was pursued by the obsession of something more about to happen—something imminent—though, of course, nothing would; at least, how could anything happen here, to them? And by "them," she meant herself and these people around her so stupidly talking—the eternal repetition of the story she had read out that evening to Clara, and not one glimmer of light! She wondered if her obsession was all her own—or did it reach to one of them? Certainly not Ella; not Judge Buller, settled into his collar, choosing champagnes. Clara? She had to skip Clara. One never knew whether Clara had not more behind her smooth prettiness than ever she brought to light? Kerr? Perhaps. With him she felt potentialities enormous. Harry? Never. Harry was being appealed to by all the women who could get at him as to his part in the affair—what had been his sensations and emotions? But Flora knew perfectly well he had had none. He was only oppressed by the attention his fame in the matter, and the central position of their table, brought him. Protesting, he made his part as small as possible.

"Oh, confound it, if I can't get at my oysters!" he complained, leaning back into his group again with a sigh.

"You divide the honors with the mysterious unknown, eh?" Kerr inquired across the table.

"Hang it, there's no division! I'd offer you a share!" Harry laughed, and it occurred to Flora how much Kerr could have made of it.

"Pur'd'd like to share something," Buller vouchsafed. "He's been pawing the air ever since Crew cabled, and this has blown him up completely."

"Crew?" Flora wondered. Here was something more happening. Crew? She had not heard that name before. It made a stir among them all; but if Kerr looked sharp, Clara looked sharper. She looked at Harry and Harry was vexed.

"Who's Crew?" said Ella; and the judge looked around on the silence.

"Why, bless my soul, isn't it—Oh, anyway, it will all be out to-morrow. But I thought Harry'd told you. The Chatworth ring wasn't Bessie's."

It had the effect of startling them all apart, and then drawing them closer together again around the table over the uncorked bottles.

"Why," Judge Buller went on, "this ring is a celebrated thing. It's the 'Crew Idol!' He threw the name out as if that in itself explained everything, but the three women, at least were blank.

"Why celebrated?" Clara objected. "The stones were only sapphires."

Kerr smiled at the measure of fame.

"Quite so," he nodded to her, "but there are several sorts of value about that ring. Its age, for one."



He had the attention of the table, as if they sensed behind his words more even than Judge Buller could have told them.

"And then the superstition about it. It's rather a pretty tale," said Kerr, looking at Flora. "You've seen the ring—a figure of Vishnu bent backward into a circle, with a head of sapphire; two yellow stones for the cheeks and the brain of him of the one blue. Just as a piece of carving it is so fine that Cellini couldn't have equalled it, but no one knows when or where it was made. The first that is known, the Shah Jehan had it in his treasure house. The story is he stole it, but, however that may be, he gave it as a betrothal gift to his wife—possibly the most beautiful—his eyebrows signaled to Flora his uncertainty of that fact—"without doubt the best-loved woman in the world. When she died it was buried with her—not in the tomb itself, but in the Taj Mahal; and for a century or so it lay there and gathered legends about it as thick as dust. It was believed to be a talisman of good fortune—especially in love.

"It had age; it had intrinsic value; it had beauty, and that one other quality no man can resist—it was the only thing of its kind in the world. At all events, it was too much for old Neville Crew, when he saw it there some couple of hundred years ago. When he left India the ring went with him. He never told how he got it, but lucky marriages came with it, and the Crews would not take the house of lords for it. Their women have worn it ever since."

For a moment the wonder of the tale and the curious spark of excitement it had produced in the teller kept the listeners silent. Clara was the first to return to facts. "Then Bessie—" she prompted eagerly.

Kerr turned his glass in meditative fingers. "She wore it as young Chatworth's wife." He held them all in an increasing tension, as if he drew them toward him.

"The elder Chatworth, Lord Crew, is a bachelor, but, of course, the ring reverted to him on Chatworth's death."

"And Lord only knows," the judge broke in, "how it got shipped with Bessie's property. Crew was out of England at the time. He kept the wires hot about it, and they managed to keep the fact of what the ring was quiet—but it got out to-day when Purdie found it was gone. You see he was showing it—and without special permission."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Gling to Inherited Tongue.

After years of effort to spread the English language, the home tongue of the full-blooded Hawaiian is his aboriginal jargon. Exclusive of the half-whites in these islands there is but one family that talks the English language in its home. All the rest are as true to their inherited tongue as they are to their racial hue.



"Who in the World is That?"



"Even if He is a Thief?"