

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 Crow Idol, mysteriously disappears. Harry Cressy, who was present, describes the ring to his fiancée, Flora Gilsey, and her companion, 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. \$5000 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 Crow 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. Flora's interest in Kerr increases. She decides to return the ring to Harry, but tells her to keep it for a day or two. Ella Buller tells Flora that Clara is setting her cap for her father, Judge Buller. Flora believes Harry suspects Kerr and is waiting to make sure of the reward before unmasking the thief. Clara seems to be intent about something. Kerr and Clara confess their love for each other.

CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

The child furtively tested her coin, biting it as if to taste the glitter, and Flora waited, lost, given up by herself, passively watching for the room to be filled again with his presence. He was back after a long minute, and this time took up his stand at the door, where, pushing aside the tight-drawn curtain a little, from time to time he looked out into the street. Sometimes his eyes followed the cracks of the plastered wall, sometimes he studied the floor at his feet; every moment she saw he was alert, expectantly watching and waiting; and though he never looked at her sitting behind him, she felt his protection between her and the darkening street. She sat in the shadow of it, feeling it all around her, claiming her as it would claim her henceforth, from the world. A ghost of light glimmered along the curtains of the window, and stopped, quivering, in the middle of the curtained door. Then he turned and beckoned her. Sheer weakness kept her sitting. He went to her, took her face between his hands, and looked into it long and intently.

"You don't want to go!" The words fell from his lips like an accusation. His sudden realization of what she felt held him there dumb with disappointment. "You have won me," her look was saying, "and yet I have immediately become a worthless thing, because I am going; and I don't believe in going." She felt she had failed him—how cruelly, was written in his face. But it was only for a moment that she made him hesitate. The next he shook himself free.

"Well, come," he said. She felt that all doors would fly open at his bidding. She felt herself swept powerless at his will with all the yielding in her soul that she had felt in her body when his arms were around her. He had taken her by the hand—he was leading her out into the gusty night, where all lights flared—the gas-lights marching up the street over the hill into the unknown, and the lights gleaming at her, like eyes in the dark bulk of the carriage waiting before the door. It all glimmered before her—a picture she might never see again—might not see after she passed through the carriage door that gaped for her. The will that had swept her out of the door was moving her beyond her own will, as it had moved her that morning in the garden, beyond all things that she knew. There was no feeling left in her but the despair of extreme surrender.

She found herself in the carriage. She saw his face in the carriage door as pale as anger, yet not angry; it was some bigger thing that looked at her from his eyes. He looked a long while, as if he bade her never to forget this moment. Then, "I'll give you 24 hours," he said. "This man will take you home." He shut the carriage door—shut it between them. Before she had gathered breath he had straightened, fallen back, raised his hat, and the carriage was turning. Flora thrust her head, straw hat and ribbons, out of the window.

"Oh, I love you!" she called to him. She sank back in the cushions and covered her face with her hands.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Goblin Tactics.

For a little she kept her face hidden, shutting out the present, jealously living with the wonderful thing that had happened to her. It was as wonderful as anything she had dreamed might come when she had written him that letter. And if she needed any proof of his love, she had had it in the moment when he had let her go. There he had transcended her hope.

He had been wonderful in a way she had not expected. He had shown her so beautifully that he could be reached in spite of his obsession. Might not she hope to touch him just

a little further? Was there any height now that he might not rise to? She seemed to see the possible end of it all shaping itself out of his magnanimity. She seemed to see him finally relinquishing his passion for the jewel, and his passion for her for the sake of something finer than both. She looked out of the window. The flickers of gas-lamps fell intermittently through it upon her. Her queer vehicle was rattling crazily—jolting as if every spring were at its last leap. She was out of the quiet, blue street. Montgomery avenue, with its lights, its glittering gilt names and Latin inscriptions, was traveling by on either side of her. The voice of the city was growing louder in her ears, the crowd on the pavement increased. She sat looking out at the maze of moving lights and figures without seeing them, intent on an idea that was growing clearer, larger, moment by moment in her mind.

Kerr's appearance in her garden—his capture of her—had not been the fantastic freak it had seemed. He had had his purpose. He had taken her out of her environment; he had carried her beyond succor or menace just that he might carry them both so much further and faster through their differences. They had not reached the point of agreement yet, but might they not on some other ground, where they could be unchallenged? It seemed to her if she could only meet him on her own ground for once—instead of for ever on Clara's or Harry's—only meet him alone, where beyond their reach, it might be accomplished, it might be brought to the end she so wished.

The hack, which had been moving along at a rapid pace, slowed now to a walk among the thickening traffic, and from a mere moving mass the crowd appeared as individuals—a stream of dark figures and white faces. Her eyes slipped from one to another. Here one stood still on the lamp-lit corner, looking down, with lips moving quickly and silently. It was strange to see those rapid, eager, moving lips with no sound from them audible. Then her eyes were startled by something familiar in the figure, though the direct down-glare of the ball of light above him distorted the features with shadows. She pressed her face against the window-glass in palpitating doubt. It was Harry.

She covered in the corner of the carriage. In a moment the risks of her situation were before her. Had he seen her? Oh, no, at least not yet. He had been too intent on whomever he was talking to. She peered to make sure that he was still safely on the street corner. He was just opposite, and now that the eddy of the crowd had left a little clear space around him, she saw with whom he was talking. It was a small, very small, shabby, nondescript man—possibly only a boy, so short he seemed. His back was toward her. His clothes hung upon him with an odd un-Anglo-Saxon air. He was foreign with a foreignness no country could explain—Italian, Portuguese, Greek—whatever he was, he was a strange foil to Harry, so bright and burnished.

The hack was turning. She realized with dismay that it was turning sharp around that very corner where they stood. Suppose Harry should chance to glance through its window and see Flora Gilsey sitting trembling within. The hack wheezed and cramped, and all at once she heard it scrape the curb. Then she was lost! She looked up brave in her desperation, ready to meet Harry's eyes. She saw the back of his head. For a moment it loomed directly above her, then it moved. He was separating from his companion. With one stride he vanished out of the square frame of the window, and there remained full fronting her, staring in upon her, the face of his companion.

Back flashed to her memory the goldsmith's shop—dull hues and odors all at once—and that wide unwinking stare that had fixed her from the other side of the counter. The blue-eyed Chinaman! In the glare of white light, in his terrible clearness and nearness, she knew him instantly.

The hack plunged forward, the face was gone. But she remained nerveless, powerless to move, frozen in her stupefaction, while her vehicle pursued its crazy course. It was clattering up Sutter street toward Kearney, where at this hour the town was widest awake, and the crowd was a crowd she knew. At any instant people she knew might be going in and out of the florists' shops and restaurants, or passing her in carriages. And what of Flora Gilsey in her morning dress and garden hat, in a night-hawk of a Telegraph Hill hack, flying through their midst like a mad woman? They were the least of her fears. She had forgotten them. The only thing that remained to her was the memory of Harry and the blue-eyed Chinaman together on the street corner.

She had been given a glimpse of that large scheme that Harry was carrying forward somewhere out of her sight—such a glimpse as Clara had given her in the rifling of her room, as Ella had shown in her hysterical revelation. Again she felt the threat of these ominous signs of danger, as a lone general at a last stand with his troops clustered at his back sees in front, and behind, on either side of him, the glitter of bayonets in the bushes.

She was in the midst of the tangled traffic of Kearney street. Swarming lights and crowds were all



"Why, You Poor Child, What's Happened to You?"

around her. She peered forth cautiously upon it. She saw a florid face, a woman she knew casually—and there her eyes fastened, not for the woman's brilliant presence, but for what she saw directly in front of it, thrown into relief upon its background—a short and shabby figure, foreign, blue-eyed, reticent, the figure of a blue-eyed Chinaman.

He was standing still while the crowd flowed past him. This time he was alone. He seemed to be waiting, yet not to watch, as if he had already seen what he was expecting and knew that it must pass his way. It was uncanny, his reappearance, at a second interval of her route, standing as if he had stood there from the first, patient, expectant, motionless. It was worse than uncanny.

All at once an idea, wild and illogical enough, jumped up in her mind: Couldn't this miserable vehicle that was lumbering like a disabled bug move faster and rattle her on out of reach of the glare, the publicity, the threat of discovery, and, above all, of her discomfiting notion?

She thrust her head far out and addressed the driver. "Go as fast as you can, faster! and I'll give you twice what he gave you." The words rang so wildly to her own ears that she half expected the driver to peer down like an old bird of prey from his perch and demand her reason. But he made no sound or sign. It may have been that in his time he had heard even wilder requests than hers. He only sent his whip cracking forward to the ears of the lean horse, and the cab began to rattle like a mad thing.

Flora leaned back with a sigh of relief. The mere sensation of being borne along at such a rate, the sight of houses, lamp-posts, even people here and there, flitting away from the eye, unable to interrupt her course, or even to glimpse her identity, gave her a feeling of safety. The more she was getting into the residence part of the city, the more deserted the streets, the closer shut the windows of the houses, the more it seemed to her as if the night itself covered and abetted her flight. So swiftly she went it was only a wonder how the cab held together. She had never traveled more rapidly in her light and silent carriage. Now they whirled the corner and plunged at the steep rise of a cross street. Just above, over the crown of the hill, she saw the sky, moonless, blackish, spattered with stars. Then against it a little fluttering shape like a sentinel wisp—the only living thing in sight. It was incredible, impossible, horrible that he should be there, in front of her, waiting for her who had driven so fast—too fast, it had seemed, for human foot to follow. By what unimaginable route had he traveled? She was ready to believe he had flown over the housetops. And above all other horrors, why was he pursuing her?

The carriage was abreast the Chinaman now, and immediately he took up his trot, for a little while keeping up, dodging along between light and shadow, presently falling behind. At intervals she heard the patter, patter, patter of his footsteps following; at intervals she lost the sound, and shadows would engulf the figure, and she would wait in a panic for its reappearance. For she knew it was there somewhere, on one side of the street or the other. But, oh, not to see it! To expect at any moment it might

start up again—heaven knew where, perhaps at her very carriage window. Her unconscious hand was doubled to a flat upon her breast, fast closed upon the sapphire.

With all her body braced, she leaned and looked far backward, and far forward, and now for a long time saw nothing. The distance was empty. The glare of arc-lights showed her the shadow of her own progress—the shadow of her vehicle shooting huge and misshapen now on the cobbles, now along a blank wall, wheels, body and driver, all lurching like one; now heaped on each other, now tenuously drawn out, now twisting themselves into shapes the mind could not account for. For here, whirling the corner, the carriage seemed to wave an arm and now between the wheels, fast twinkling, she saw a pair of legs. She leaned and looked, so mesmerized with this grotesque appearance that it scarcely troubled her that all the way down the last long hill she knew it must be that a man was running at her wheel.

The warm lights of her house were just before her, offering succor, stiffening courage. It would be but a dash from the door of the cab to her own door. There was no second course, once the cab stopped. She felt that to lurk in its gloom would mean robbery, perhaps death. She thought without fear, but with an intense calculation. Her hand held the door at swing as the cab drew up. Before it should stop she must leap. She gathered her skirts and sprang—sprang clean to the sidewalk. The steps of her house rushed by her in her upward flight. Her bell pealed. She covered her eyes.

For the moment before Shima opened the door there was nothing but darkness and silence. She had never been so glad of anything in her life as of the kind, astute, yellow face he presented to her distressed appeal.

"Shima," she panted, "pay the cab; and if there's any one else there say that I'll call the police—no, no, send him away." There was no question or hesitation in Shima's obedience. Through the glass of the door she watched him descend upon his errand, until he disappeared over the edge of the illumination of the vestibule. She waited, dimly aware of voices going on beyond the curtains of the drawing room, but all her listening power was concentrated on the silence without—a silence that remained unbroken, and out of which Shima returned with the same imperturbable countenance.

"He wants ten dollars." "Oh, yes, give him anything," Flora gasped. If that was all the Chinaman had followed her! But her relief was momentary, for instantly Shima was back again.

"I gave him ten dollars, the cabman." Now she gasped again. "Oh, the cabman! But the other one!" For an instant Shima seemed to hesitate; glancing past her shoulder as if there was something that he doubted behind her. Then as she still hung on his answer he brought it out in a lowered voice.

"Madam, there was no one else there."

CHAPTER XIX.

The Face in the Garden. With her hand at her distressed forehead she turned, and saw, be-

tween the curtains of the drawing-room, Harry, and behind him Clara, looking out at her with faces of amazement, and she fancied, horror. Harry came straight for her.

"Why, you poor child, what's happened to you?"

She gave him a look. She couldn't forget the scene in the red room, but the mixture of apprehension and real concern in his face went far toward melting her. She might even have told him something, at least a part of the truth, but for that other standing watching her from the drawing-room door. With Clara, there was nothing for it but to ignore her disordered hair, her hat in her hand, her ruffle torn and trailing on the floor.

She put on a splendid nonchalance, as if it were none of their business. "Oh, I am sorry if I kept you waiting."

It was Clara who spoke to her, past Harry's blank astonishment. "Why, we don't mind waiting a few moments more while you dress."

"I shan't have to dress." Such a statement Flora felt must amaze even Shima, waiting like an image on the threshold of the dining-room. But if these people were waiting to be amazed she felt herself equal to amazing them to the top of their expectations.

"Oh, but at least go up and let Marrika give you some pins," Clara protested, hurrying forward as if fairly to drive her.

"Thank you, no, this will do," Flora said. On one point she was quite clear. She wasn't going to leave those two together for a moment to discuss her plight; not till she could first get at Harry alone. Then and there she turned to the mirror and with her combs began to catch back and smooth the disorder of her hair, seeing all the while Clara's reflection hovering perturbed and vigilant in the background of her own.

While her hands were busy seeming to accommodate Clara, her mind was marshaled to Clara's outwitting. The only thing to do was to tell nothing. Let Clara spend her time in guessing. Unless by some wild chance she had seen Kerr in the garden she couldn't come near the truth of what had happened. But what was to be done with Harry? Harry was too close to her to be ignored.

At that dreadful dinner, where she sat a conscious frustrater of these two silent ones, glancing at Harry's face, she knew that if she didn't attack she would be attacked by him. It was here in the midst of the noiseless passings of Shima, watching Harry's suspicious glances flashing across the table at her strange disorder, that the idea occurred to her of a way out of it. She was bold enough to try a daring thrust at the mystery. If ever a hunter was to be led off on a false scent, Harry was that one. She was amazed at the sudden, fearless impulse that had sprung up in her. She wasn't even afraid to say to him under Clara's nose, "Harry, I want you to myself after dinner. Come up into the garden study."

He was very willing to follow her. She thought she detected in his alacrity something more than curiosity or concern. It seemed almost as if Harry was ashamed of that scene in the red room, and anxious to make it up with her. He even tried before they had reached the head of the stairs.

"Oh, Flora—I say, Flora, I—"

But an explanation between them was the last thing she wanted just then. She fairly ran, leaving him panting in the wake of her airy skirts. For the first time since the thing began Clara was left out completely. Flora knew she was even left out of a possibility of listening at the key-hole. For the bright, tight, little room into which Harry followed her was approached by a square entry and a double door. The room itself overhung the garden as a ship's deck overhangs the sea. Leather books and long red curtains were the note of it. She and Harry had often been here together before.

He hadn't got his breath. He had hardly shut the door on them before she began. "Well, something has happened." She had his attention. His other purpose was arrested. "Oh, something extraordinary. I would have told you on the spot, only I thought you would rather Clara didn't know it."

"I?" That left him staring. "What have I to do with it?" At this she gave him a long look. "It was through you he ever had the chance of seeing me. I mean the blue-eyed Chinaman. He has followed me all the evening. He followed me here to the very door." Flora's array of facts fell so fast, so hard, so pointed, that for a moment they held him speechless in the middle of the room.

Any fleeting suspicion she might have had of his complicity in the Chinaman's pursuit vanished. He showed plain bewilderment. For a moment he was more at sea than herself. The next she saw the shadow of a thought so disturbing that it sharpened his ruddy face to harshness. He stepped toward her. "What did he say to you?" He loomed directly above her, threatening. "Nothing. He didn't say anything. But I know he followed me quite to the house. I saw his shadow—all the way down the hill."

Harry still breathed quickly. "Where—how did he come across you?"

She'd been prepared for the question. "I was driving down Sutter street and he saw me at the carriage window."



Harry stood tense, poised, catching everything as she tossed it off; then as if all at once he felt the full weight of the burden, "Lord!" he said, and let himself down heavily into a chair. It was plain in his helpless stare that he knew exactly what it all meant. Laying her hands on the high chair-arms, leaning down so that she could look into his face, Flora made her thrust.

"What do you think he wants?" she gently asked. It was as if she would coax it out of him. His answer was correspondingly low and soft.

"It's that damned ring."

She heard her secret fear spoken aloud with such assurance that she waited, certain at the next moment Harry's voice would people the silence with all the facts that had so far escaped her. But when, after a moment of looking before him he did speak, he went back to the beginning, which they both knew.

"You know he didn't want to part with it in the first place."

"Yes, yes; but he did," Flora insisted.

"Well," he answered quickly, "but that was before—" He caught himself and went on with a scarcely perceptible break: "He may have had a better offer for it since."

He couldn't have put it more mildly, and yet that temperate phrase brought back to her in a flash a windy night full of raucous voices and the great figures in the paper that had covered half a page—the reward for the Crow Idol. Could it be that—that such so overwhelming to human caution and human decency which Harry had cloaked by his grudging phrase "some better offer"? What else could he mean? And what else could the blue-eyed Chinaman mean by his strange pursuit of her?

"Some one must have wanted it awfully," Flora tried again, keeping step with his mild admission.

Harry covered her with an impressive stare. "There's something queer about that ring," he nodded to her. He was going to tell her at last! She gazed at him in expectation, but presently she realized that nothing more was coming. He had stopped at the beginning. She tried to urge him on.

"Queer, what do you mean?" She was feigning surprise.

He looked at her cautiously. "Why, you must have noticed it yourself when we were at the shop. And now, to-night, his having followed you."

She could see him hesitate, choosing his words. She knew well enough her own fear of saying too much—but, what was Harry afraid of? Did he suspect her feeling for Kerr? Was that why he was holding back, leaving out, giving her the small, expurgated version of what he knew. She tried again, making it plainer.

"You think the ring is something he ought not to have had; something that belongs somewhere else?"

He looked away from her, around the room, as if to pick up his answer from some of the corners. "Well, anyway, it's lucky we waited about that setting," he said with quick irrelevance. "If you're going to be annoyed in this way you'd better let me have it."

Why hadn't she thought of that! It was what any man might say, after hearing such a story as hers, yet it was the last thing she had thought of, and the last thing she wanted.

"Oh, leave it with me," she quavered, "at least till you're sure!"

"Oh, no!" He gave his head a quick, decided shake. "If something should come out, you wouldn't want to be mixed up in it."

"Then why not give it back to the Chinaman?" she tried him.

"Oh, that's ridiculous." He was in a passion. His darkening eyes, his swelling nostrils, his aspect so out of proportion to her mild and almost playful suggestion, frightened her. He saw it and instantly his mood dropped to mere irritation. "Oh, Flora, don't make a scene about it. This thing has been on my mind for days—the thought that you had the ring. I was afraid I had no business to let you have it in the first place, and what you've told me to-night has clean knocked me out. I don't know what I'm saying. Come, let me have it; and if there's anything queer about the business, at least we'll get it cleared up."

But, smiling, she retreated before him.

"Why, Flora," he argued, half laughing, but still with that dry end of irritation in his voice, "what on earth do you want to keep the thing for?"

By this time she backed against the window and faced him. "Why, it's my engagement ring."

He looked at her. She couldn't tell whether he was readiest to laugh or rage.

"You gave it to me for that," she pleaded. "Why shouldn't I keep it, until you give me a real reason for giving it up? If you really know anything, who don't you tell me?" She was sure she had him there; but he burst out at last:

(TO BE CONTINUED.)