

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 Crew Idol mysteriously disappears. Harry Cressy, who was present, describes the ring to his fiancée, Flora Gibsey, and her chaperon, Mrs. Clara Britton, as being set in a heathen god, with a beautiful sapphire set in the head. Flora meets Mr. Kerr, an Englishman, in discussing the disappearance of the ring, the exploits of an English thief, Farrell Wand, are recalled. Kerr tells Flora that he has met Harry somewhere, but cannot place him. \$30,000 reward is offered for the return of the ring. 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 is startled by the effect on Kerr when he gets a glimpse of the sapphire. The possibility that the stone is part of the Crew Idol causes Flora much anxiety. Unseen, Flora discovers Clara ransacking her dressing room. Flora refuses to give or sell the stone to Kerr, and suspects him of being the thief. She decides to return the ring to Harry, but he tells her to keep it for a day or two. Ella Butler tells Flora that Clara is setting her cap for her father, Judge Butler. Flora believes Harry suspects Kerr and is waiting to make sure of the reward before unmasking the thief. Kerr and Clara confess their love for each other. Clara is followed by a Chinaman.

CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

"Well, for a fact, I know it is stolen!" He leaned toward her; and his arms, still flung out with the hands open as argument had left them, seemed to her frightened eyes all ready for her, ready with his last argument, his strength.

She pressed back against the glass until she felt it hard behind her.

"Harry," she whispered, "if you care anything, if you ever want me for yours, you'll take your hands away." She meant it; she was sincere in that moment, for all she shrank from him. Her body and mind would not have been too great a price to give him for the sapphire.

Then all at once she felt her arm around her neck. She couldn't move her body. She could only turn her head from his hot breath. For a moment he held her, and yet another moment; and then, terrified at what this strange immobility might mean, she raised her eyes and saw he was not looking at her. Though he held her fast he was not conscious of her. Straight over her head he looked, through the window and down into the garden. Her eyes followed. It lay beneath, the wonder of its morning aspect all blanched and dim. She saw the silhouette of rose branches in black on the sky. She saw the flowers and bushes all one dull tone. But in the midst of them the oval of the path shone white; and there, as in the afternoon, standing, looking upward, was the dark figure of a man.

Her heart gave a great leap. Just so she'd been summoned once before that day, but what infernal freak had fetched him back to repeat that dangerous sally, and brought him finally into his enemy's grasp? She tried to make a gesture to warn him, and just there Harry released her, dropped her so that she half fell upon the window-seat, and made a dash across the

room for the light. In a moment they were in darkness. In a moment, to Flora pressed against the window, the garden sprang clear, and on the formless figure below the face appeared, white in the starlight looking up. She cried out in wonder. It was not Kerr. It was the blue-eyed Chinaman.

After her haunted drive, after her escape, after Shima's search, he was there, still inexorably there; small, diminished by the great facade of the house, but looking up at it with his calm eye, surveying it, measuring its height, numbering its doors, trying its windows. Harry was beside her again. He was tugging frantically at the window. It resisted. She saw his hands trembling while he wrestled with it. Then it went shrieking up and he leaned out.

"What do you want?" he called, and, though he used no name, Flora saw he knew with whom he was speaking. The Chinaman stood immobile, lifting his round, white face, whose mouth seemed to gape a little. Harry leaned far out and lowered his voice.

"Go away, Joe! Don't come here; never come here!" There was a quiver in his voice. Anger or apprehension, or both, whatever his passion was, for the moment it overwhelmed him, and as the Chinaman stood unmoved, unmoving, at his commands, Harry turned sharp from the window and dashed out of the room. Flora heard him running, running down the stairs. She hung there breathless, waiting to see him meet the motionless figure; but while she looked and waited that motionless figure suddenly took life. It moved, it turned, it flitted, it mixed with shadows, became a shadow; and then there was nothing there.

In her turn she ran, up and up a twisted side stair, shortest passage to her own rooms. At least lock and key could keep her safe for the next few hours. After that she must think of something else.

CHAPTER XX.

Flight.

By five o'clock in the morning she was already moving softly to and fro, so softly as not to rouse the sleeping Matrika. By seven her lightest bag was packed, herself was bathed, brushed, dressed even to hat and gloves, and standing at her window with all the listening alert look of one in a waiting room expecting a train. She was watching for the city to begin to stir; watching for enough traffic below in the streets to make her own movement there not too noticeable. Yet every moment she waited she was in terror lest her fate should take violent form at last and assail her in the moment of escape. She listened for a foot ascending to her room with a message from Clara demanding an audience. She listened for the peal of the electric bell under Harry's hasty hand—Harry, arrived even at this unwarranted hour with heaven knew what representative of law to force the sapphire from her.

But all her household was still un-stirring when at last she went, soft step after step, down the broad and polished stair and across the empty hall. She went quiet, direct, determined, not at all as she had fled on her other perilous enterprise only yesterday. She shut the outer door after

her without a sound and with great relief breathed in the fresh and faintly smoky air of morning.

She walked quickly. It was a cross-town car bound for quite another locality that she climbed aboard. It was filled only with mechanics and workmen with picks and shovels. She sat crowded elbow to elbow among odors of stale tobacco, stale garlic, stale perspiration, and looking straight before her through the car window watched the aspect of the city, still gray, grow less gleaming and formal and finally quite dirty, and quite, quite dull.

This was all as she had intended, very much in the direction of her errand, and safe. But in Market street the car line ended, and she was turned out again in this broad artery of commerce where she was in danger of meeting at any moment people she knew. She made straight across the thoroughfare to its south side, turned down Eighteenth and in a moment was hidden in Mission street.

It was ten o'clock in the morning, three hours since she had left her house and a most reasonable time of daylight, when Flora turned out of the flatness of "south of Market street" and began to mount a slow-rising hill.

As she neared the hilltop she glanced at a card from her chaperon, consulting the address upon it. Then anxiously she scanned the house-fronts. It was not this one, nor this; but the square white mansion she came to now stood so far retired at the end of its lawn that she could not make out the number. As she peered a young girl came down the steps between the dark wings of the cypress hedge, a slim, fair, even-gaited creature dressed for the street and drawing on her gloves. As she passed Flora made sure she had seen her before. There was something familiar in the carriage of the girl's head and hands; something also like a pale reflection of another presence. Pale as it was, it was enough to reassure her that this was the house she wanted.

This appearance of the place began to bring before Flora the full enormity and impertinence of her errand, but though her heart beat on her side as loud as the brass knocker upon the door, she had no mind for turning back.

A high, cool, darkly gleaming interior, mellow with that precious tint of time which her own house so lacked, received her. And here, as well as out of doors, all the while she sat waiting she felt that protected peace was still the duty of the place. To Flora's eager heart time was streaming by, but the tall clock facing her measured it out slowly. Its longest golden finger had pointed out five minutes before the sweeping of a skirt coming down the hall brought her to her feet.

Mrs. Herrick came in hatless, a honeysuckle leaf caught in her gray crown of hair, geraniums in her hand. Flora had never seen her so informal and so gay.

Flora apologized. "I knew if I came at this hour I should interrupt you, but really there was no help for it." She glanced down at her satchel. "I had to go this morning, and before I went I had to see you about the house. I'm going down to look at it—and to stop a while."

Mrs. Herrick hesitated, deprecated. "But you know Mrs. Britton wasn't satisfied with the price I asked."

"Oh," said Flora promptly, "but I shall be perfectly satisfied with it, and I want to take possession at once."

The positive manner in which she waved Clara out of her way brought up in Mrs. Herrick's face a faint flash of surprise; but it was gone in an instant, supplanted by her questioning, puzzled consideration of the main proposition.

"Oh, I hope you haven't come to tell me you want it changed," she protested. "You know it's quite absurd in places—quite terrible indeed. It's 1870 straight through, and French at that; but even such whims acquire a dignity if they've been long cherished. You couldn't put in or take out one thing without spoiling the whole character."

"But I don't want to change it, I want it just as it is," Flora explained. "It isn't about the house itself I've come, it's about going down there. You see there are—some people, some friends of mine. I haven't promised them to show the house, but I have quite promised myself to show it to them, and they are only here for a few days more. They are going immediately."

She was looking at Mrs. Herrick all the while she was telling her wretched lie, and now she even managed to smile at her. "I thought how lovely it would be if you could go there with me. I should like so very much to be in it first with you, to have you go over it with me and tell me how to take care of it, as it's always been done. I should hate to do it any disrespect."

Her hostess smiled with ready answer. "Of course I will go down. I should be glad, but it must be in a day or two. Indeed, perhaps it would be better for you to have your people first, and I can come down, say Monday afternoon or Tuesday."

Flora faced this unexpected turn of the matter a little blankly. "Ah, but the trouble is I can't go down alone."

It was Mrs. Herrick's turn to look blank. "But Mrs. Britton?"

"Mrs. Britton isn't going with me; she can't."

"I see," Mrs. Herrick with a long, soft scrutiny seemed to be taking in more than Flora's mere words repre-

sented. "And you wouldn't put it off until she can?"

"I couldn't put it off a moment," Flora ended with a little breathless laugh. "I do so wish you would come down with me this morning, for I must go, and you see I can't go alone."

Mrs. Herrick, sitting there, composed, in her cool, flowing, white and violet gown with the red flowers in her lap, still looked at Flora inquiringly. "But aren't there some women in your party old enough to make it possible and young enough to take pleasure in it?"

Flora shook her head. "Oh, no," she said. Her house of cards was tottering. She could not keep up her brave smiling. She knew her distress must be plain. Indeed, as she looked at Mrs. Herrick she saw the effect of it.

Her heart sank. If only she had told the truth—even so much of it as to say there was something she could not tell. What she had said was unworthy not only of herself but of the end she was so desperately holding out for. Now in the lucid gaze confronting her she knew all her intentions were taking on a dubious color, stained false, like her words, under the dark cloud of her own misrepresentation. Yet they were not false, she knew. Her motives, the end she was struggling for, were as austere as truth itself. She could not give up without one bold stroke to clear them of this accusation.

"Do you think there's anything queer about it?" she faltered.

"Queer?" To Flora's ears that sounded the coldest word she had ever heard. "I hardly think I understand what you mean."

"I mean is it that you think there's more in what I'm asking of you than I have said?" The two looked at each other and before that flat question Mrs. Herrick drew back a little in her chair.

"I have no right to think about it at all," she said.

"Well, there is," Flora insisted. "There's a great deal more. I am sorry, I should have told you, but I was afraid. I don't know why I was afraid of you, except that in this matter I've grown afraid of every one. It's true that there may be people going down—at least, a person. But it isn't, as I let you think it, a house party at all. It's for something, something that I can't do any other way—something," she had a sudden flash of insight, "that, if I could tell you, you would believe in, too."

Mrs. Herrick's look had faded to a mere concentrated attention. "You mean that there is something you wish to do for whoever is going down?"

"Oh, something I must do," Flora insisted.

Mrs. Herrick considered a moment. "Why can't he do it for himself?" she threw out suddenly.

It made Flora start, but she met it gallantly. "Because he won't. I shall have to make him."

"You?" For a moment Flora knew that she was preposterous in Mrs. Herrick's eyes—and then that she was pathetic. Her companion was looking at her with a sad sort of humor. "My dear, are you sure that that is your responsibility?"

Flora's answering smile was faint. "It seems as strange to me as it seems absurd to you, but I think I have done something already."

"Are you sure, or has he only let you think so? We have all at some time longed, or even thought it was our duty, to adjust something when it would have been safer to have kept our hands off," Mrs. Herrick went on gently.

"Oh, safer," Flora breathed. "Oh, yes; indeed, I know. But if something had been put into your hands without your choice; if all the life of some one that you cared about depended on you, would you think of being safe?" Flora, leaning forward, chin in hand, with shining eyes, seemed fairly to impart a reflection of her own passionate concentration to the woman before her.

Mrs. Herrick, so calm in her reposeful attitude, calm as the old portrait on the wall behind her, none the less began to show a curious sparkle of excitement in her face. "If I were sure that person's life did depend on me," she measured out her words deliberately. "But that so seldom happens, and it is so hard to tell."

"But if you were sure, sure, sure?" Flora rang it out certainly.

Mrs. Herrick in her turn leaned forward. "Ah, even then it would depend on him. And do you think you can make a man do otherwise than his nature?"

Flora answered with a stare of misery. "I know what you must be thinking—what you can not help thinking," she said, "that the whole thing is unheard-of—outrageous—especially for a girl so soon to—to be—"

She caught her breath with a sob, for the words she could not speak. "But there is nothing in this disloyal to my engagement, even though I cannot speak of it to Harry Cressy; and nothing I hope to gain for myself by doing what I am trying to do. If I succeed it will only mean I shall never see him—the other one—again."

Mrs. Herrick rose, in her turn beseeching. "Oh, I can't help you go into it! It is too dubious. My dear, I know so much better than you what the end may mean."

"I know what the end may mean, and I can't keep out of it."

"But I cannot go with you." There

was a stern note in Mrs. Herrick's voice.

"I'm afraid I didn't quite realize how much I was asking of you. You have been very good even to listen to me. It's right, I suppose, that I should go alone."

Mrs. Herrick looked at her in dismay. "But that is impossible!" Then, as Flora turned away, she kept her hand. "Think, think," she urged, "how you will be misunderstood."

"Oh, I shall have to bear that—from the people who don't know."

"Yes, and even from the one for whom you are spending yourself!"

Flora gave her head a quick shake. "He understands," she said.

"My dear, he is not worth it."

Flora turned on her with anger. "You don't know what he is worth to me!"

Mrs. Herrick looked steadily at this unanswerable argument. Her hold on Flora's hand relaxed, but she did not release it. Her brows drew together. "You are quite sure you must go?"

Flora nodded. She was speechless. "Did Mrs. Britton know you were coming to me?"

"No. She doesn't even know that I am going out of town. She must not," Flora protested.

"Indeed she must. You must not place yourself in such a false position. Write her and tell her you are going to San Mateo with me."

"Oh, if you would!" Tears sprang to Flora's eyes. "But will you, even if I can't tell you anything?"

"I shall not ask you anything. Now write her immediately. You can do it here while I am getting ready."

She had taken authoritative command of the details of their expedition, and Flora willingly obeyed her. She was still trembling from the stress of their interview, and she blinked back tears before she was able to see what she was writing.

It had all been brought about more quickly and completely than she had hoped, but it was in her mind all the while she indited her message to Clara, that Kerr, for whom it had been accomplished, was not yet informed of the existence of the scheme, or the part of guest he was to play. Yet she was sure that if she asked he would be promptly there. She wrote to him briefly:

At San Mateo, at the Herricks'. I want you there to-night. I have made up my mind.

As she was sealing it she started at a step approaching in the hall. She had wanted to conceal that betraying letter before Mrs. Herrick came back. She glanced quickly behind her, and saw standing between the half-open folding doors, the slim figure of a girl—slimmer, younger even than the one who had passed her at the gate—but like her, with the same large eyes, the same small indeterminate chin. Just at the chin the likeness to Mrs. Herrick faded with the strength of her last generation—but the eyes were perfect; and they gazed at Flora wondering. With the sixth sense of youth they recognized the enactment of something strange and thrilling.

Another instant and Mrs. Herrick's presence dawned behind her daughter—and her voice—"Why, child, what are you doing there?"—and her hands seemed apprehensive in their haste to hurry the child away, as if, truly, in this drawing-room, for the first time, something was dangerous.



CHAPTER XXI.

The House of Quiet.

The day which had dawned so still and gloomy was wakening to something like wildness, threatening, brightening, gusty, when they stepped out of the train upon the platform of the San Mateo station. Clouds were piling gray and castle-like from the east up toward the zenith, and dark fragments kept tearing off the edges and spinning away across the sky. But between them the bright face of the sun flashed out with double splendor, and the thinned atmosphere made the sky seem high and far, and all form beneath it clarified and intense.

There upon the narrow platform Mrs. Herrick hesitated a moment, looking at Flora. "What train do you want to meet?" she asked.

Flora stood perplexed. "I hardly know. You see I can't tell how soon my letter would reach—would be received."

"Then we would better meet them all," the elder woman decided.

They drove away into the face of the wet, fresh wind and flying drops of rain. Flora, leaning back in the carriage, looked out through the window with quiet eyes. The spirited movement of the sky, the racing of its shadows on the grass, the rolling foliage of the trees, seen tempestuous against flying cloud, were alike to her consoling and inspiring. She had never felt so free as now, driving through the fitful weather, nor so safe as with this companion who was sitting silent by her side. She was withdrawing away from all her complications.

The house, when finally it loomed upon them, with its irregular roofs topped by curious square turrets, with its deep upper and lower verandas, looked out upon by a multitude of long French windows, seemed too large, too strangely imposing for a structure of wood. But whatever of original ugliness had been there was hidden now under a splendid tapestry of vines, and Flora, looking up at the rose and honeysuckle that panopied its front, felt her throat swell for sheer delight.

For a moment after they had left the carriage they stood together in the porte-cochere, looking around them. Then half wistfully, half humorously, Mrs. Herrick turned to Flora. "I do hope you won't want to buy it!"

"Oh, I'm afraid I shall," Flora murmured, "that is, if—"

She left her sentence hanging, as one who would have said "if I come out of this alive," and Mrs. Herrick, with a quick start of protection, laid her hand on Flora's arm.

"If you must," she said lightly, "if you do buy it, then at least I shall know it is in good hands."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Exceeding Rapid.

"Were the colors fast on the new goods you bought?"

"Fast? My dear, they fairly ran into one another, they were that fast."



At All Her Household Was Still Unstirring When at Last She Went Step by Step.



"Oh, I'm Afraid I Shall," Flora Murmured; "That is If—"