The COAST of CHANCE

by ESTHER & LUCIA CHAMBERLAIN
Illustrations by Hallstatter
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SYNOPSIS.

At a private view of the Chatworth pearls, among the well known Philadelphia Chatworth, Flora Bellamy, who was wearing a sapphire the ring in its frames. Flora Gilmer and Harry Chatworth, who had been engaged for the Chatworth gold, with a beautiful sapphire set in the band. Flora discovers that the sapphire is missing. Harry Chatworth accuses the ring is discovered. Flora attitude "indifferent" at the club and Harry Chatworth, who had been her escort, and that the missing ring has been found on the Cove idol. In desperation re-engagement ring, which Harry Chatworth had given Flora for a fancy Cat Harry and Kerr are concerned in the mystery. Kerr also thinks that Flora has taken the ring. A reward of $1000 is offered for the return of the ring. Harry Chatworth forces Flora to declare Kerr. They make an appointment. Kerr sends an engagement ring.

CHAPTER VI—Continued.

In the middle of the block, such a little block from the fronts of the others, the goldsmith's shop showed a single, dark window; and the pale glow through it proclaimed that the worker in metals preferred another light to the sun. The threshold was worn to a hollow that surprised the foot; and the interior into which it led them glowed so suddenly around them after the broad sunlight, that it was a moment before they made out the little man behind the counter, sitting bunched up on a high stool.

"Hello, Joe," said Harry, in the same voice that hailed his friends on the street corners, but the goldsmith only nodded like a nodding mandarin, as if, without looking up, he took them in and sensed their errand. He wore a round, blue Chinese cap drawn over his crown; a pair of strange goggles had a mask over his eyes, and his little body seemed to poise as lightly on that high stool as a wisp. If there were no more flesh in it than in his long, slender fingers that so swiftly manipulated the metal. Save for that glitter of gold on his glasses, and the grin of a lighted breadstuff was dark, cloistered and cluttered.

Over everything was spread a dim haze of age like dust. It enveloped the little man behind the counter, not with the frailness that belongs to human age, but with that weathered, petished hardness which time brings to authentic of wood and metal. In good, he appeared so like a carved idol in a curio shop that Flora was a little startled to find that he was look-ing at her.

"Harry," she murmured to Cressy, who was stirring the contents of a box with a disdainful forefinger, "this little man gives me the shivers."

"Old Joe!" Harry smiled indulgent.

"He's a queer customer. Been quite a fixture here in Chatsworth for 20 years. Say, Joe, heap bad?" and with the back of his hand he flicked the tray away from him.

The little man unbobbed his knees and descended the stool. He stood straight behind the counter. He dropped a backslider eye to the box. "Velly nice," he murmured with vague, falling inflection.

"Oh, rotten!" Harry laughed at him. "You no like?"

"No. No like. You got something else—something nice?"

"No." He was like a door closed in the face of their hope—that falling inflection, that blank of vacuity that settled over his face and his whole drooping figure. He seemed to be only mutely awaiting their departure to climb back again on his high stool. Harry still leaned on the counter and grinned ingratiatingly. "Oh, Joe, you good fellow. You got something pretty—maybe?"

The flutter of vacuity parted just a crack—let through a gleam of intense intelligence. "Maybe" The gold smith chuckled deeply, as if Harry had accomplished perpetual some joke—some particularly clever conjurer's trick. He edged out behind the counter, past the grinning brazier, and shuffled into the back of the shop where he opened a door.

Flora leaned a cupboard, but the vista it gave upon was a long black, incredibly narrow passage, that stretched away into gloom with all the suggestion of distance of a road going over a hilltop. Down this the goldsmith went, with his straw slippers clapping on his heels, until his small figure merged in the gloom and presently disappeared altogether, and only the faint flipper-flap of his slippers came back growing more and more distant to them, and finally dying into silence. In the stillness that followed while they waited they could hear each other breathe.

Then came the flipper-flap of the goldsmith's slippers returning. The sound snapped their tension, and Harry laughed.

"Lord knows how far he went to get it!"

"Across the street!" Flora wondered.

"Or under it, and it won't be worth two bits when it gets here." He peered at the little man coming toward them down the passage, flapping and shuffling, and carrying, held before him in both hands, a square, deep little box.

It was a worn, nondescript box that he set down before them, but the jealous way he had carried it had suggested treasure, and Flora leaned eagerly forward as he raised the cover, and Harry peered the blaze of a jewel raw. She saw at first only dull shards of metal tumbled one upon the other. But, after a moment's peering, between them she caught glancing intermittent light. Her fingers went in to retrieve a heap of heavy silver, in the midst of which was sunk a flawed topaz. She admired a moment the play of light over the imperfection.

"But this is, I Chinese," she objected, turning her surprise on Harry.

"Lots of em are." These men speak everywhere."

She heard him dreamily. She was thinking, as she turned over the tumble of damaged jewels, that things so pretty might have been perfect. To find a perfect thing in this place would be too extraordinary to hope for. Long, long after, and the next, she found herself wishing it might be this same little crooked triangle. No! Then this blue one—large. The setting made nothing for it. It was a plain, thin, round hoop of palisade brass, and the battered thing seemed almost too feeble to hold the sapphire stone. But the stone, she looked it full in the eye, the big, blazing, blue eye of it. She held it to the light.

She felt Harry move behind her. She knew he couldn't help looking at it. For how, by all that was marvelous, had she for a moment doubted it? Down to its very heart, which was near to black, it was clear fire, and outward towards the facets struck flashing brilliants hose with signed white cross-lights that dazzled and mesmerized.

"Harry," she breathed, without taking her gaze from the jewel, "I've found. "do look at this!"

She felt his hand on her. Then with an abrupt "Let's see it," he took it from her—held it to the light, laid it on his palm, looked sharply across the counter at the shopkeeper, then back at the ring with a long scrutiny like one, too, had a flash of excitement.

"Is it—good?" Flora faltered.

"Fine!" Harry said, and taking her third finger by the tip, he slid on the thin circle of metal.

She breathed high, looking down at the stone with eyes absorbed in its blue fire. It was too beautiful. The feeling it brought her was too sharp for pure pleasure. It was dimly like fear. Yet instinctively she shut her hand about the ring. She murmured out her wonder.

"How in the world did such a thing come here?"

"Oh, not so strange," Harry answered. "Sailors now and then pick up a thing of value that they think is lies—get hard up, and pawn it—sell it without any lies. Tree-charge"—he held hand indicated the shopkeeper—"takes in anything—let's, anything worth their while; and wait, and wait, and wait until they see just the moment—and turn it to account."

It might be because Harry's eyes were so taken with the jewel that his tongue ran recklessly. He had spoken low, but Flora sent an anxious glance to be sure the shopkeeper hadn't overheard. She had meant only to glance, but she found herself startled into eyes that stared back from the other side of the counter. That wide, unshaking scrutiny filled her whole vision. For an instant she saw nothing but the dance of scintillant pupils in Tilen, with a little gasp she clutched at her companion's arm.

"Oh, Harry!"

His glance came quickly round to her. "Why, what's the matter?"

She murmured, "That Chinaman has blue eyes."

He looked at her with good-natured wonder.

"Why, Flora, haven't you blue on the brain? I believe he has though." He peered into the counter. He dropped a backslider eye to the box. "Velly nice," he murmured with vague, falling inflection.

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