

SHIFTING SANDS

By . . .
Sara Ware Bassett
© by the Penn Pub. Co.
WNU Service.

SYNOPSIS

The future of the youthful and comely "Widder" Marcia Howe is a conversational tit-bit among housewives of Wilton. Eligible bachelors and widowers also are interested. Marcia's married life has been unhappy, but she is lonely at times, and has invited her late husband's niece, Sylvia Hayden, whom she has never seen, to visit her. Marcia takes to the girl at once, while Sylvia finds her aunt more like a sister. A stranger, on the verge of exhaustion, finds his way to Marcia's home, his power-boat having run aground in the fog. He has Marcia hide a package containing jewelry. Elisha Winslow, town sheriff, brings news of a jewel robbery on a neighboring estate. The stranger gives his name as Stanley Heath. Marcia, though uneasy, is unwilling to believe Heath a thief. Sylvia, by chance, discovers the jewels, and is convinced that Heath is author of the robbery. She realizes that Marcia herself must have hidden the jewels.

CHAPTER V—Continued

"Good! Then you can stay a little while," he coaxed. "Now answer this question truthfully, please. You heard what Doctor Stetson said about my returning to New York today. I don't want to be pig-headed and take a risk if it is imprudent; that is neither fair to others nor to myself. Still, it is important that I go and I am anxious to. What is your advice?"

"I think you are too ill. Can't anything be done from here?"

"Such as—"

"Letters, telegrams—whatever you wish. I can telephone or telegraph anywhere. Or I can write."

Surprise stole over his face, then deepened to admiration.

"You would do that for me—blindfolded?"

"Why not? I simply want to help. I always like to help when I can."

"Even when you do not understand?"

Piercingly his eyes rested on her face.

"I—I—do not need to understand," was her proud retort.

For the fraction of a second their glances met. When he spoke his voice was low—imperative.

"Marcia—come here!"

She went—she knew not why.

"Give me your hand."

Again, half-trembling, half reluctant, she obeyed.

He took it in his and bending, kissed it.

"I will stay and you shall telegraph," was all he said.

She sprang to fetch paper and pencil, as if welcoming this break in the tension.

"I'm afraid I cannot write plainly enough with my left hand," he said.

"Will you take down the message?"

"Certainly."

"Mrs. S. C. Heath."

Her pencil, so firm only an instant before, quivered.

"Have you that?"

"Yes."

"The Biltmore, New York City."

"Yes."

"Everything safe with me. Do not worry. Marooned on Cape Cod with cold. Nothing serious. Home soon. Love, Stanley."

"Got that?"

"Yes."

Had something gone out of her voice? The monosyllable was flat, colorless. Heath looked at her. Even her expression was different—or did he merely imagine it?

"Perhaps I would better just glance over the message before you send it—simply to make sure it's right."

"Let me copy it first," she objected.

"Copy it? Nonsense! What for? Nobody's going to see it."

He reached for the paper.

Still she withheld it.

"What's the trouble?"

"It isn't written well enough. I'd

rather copy it."

"Why?"

"It's wobbly. I—I—perhaps my hands were cold."

"You're not chilly?"

"No—oh, no."

"If the room is cool you mustn't stay here."

"It isn't. I'm not cold at all."

"Will you let me take the telegram?"

She placed it in his hand.

"It is shaky. However, that's of no consequence, since you are to phone Western Union. Now, if you truly are not cold, I'd like to dictate a second wire."

"All right."

"This one is for Currier," he said.

"Mr. James Currier, The Biltmore, New York City. Safe on Cape with My Lady. Shall return with her later. Motor here at once, bringing whatever I need for indefinite stay."

"Stanley C. Heath."

"Got that?"

"O. K.," nodded Marcia.

This time, without hesitation, she passed him the paper.

"This, I see, is your normal handwriting," he commented as he placed the messages side by side.

"Hadh't I better go and get off the messages?" suggested Marcia, rising nervously.

"The station might be closed. Often it is, at noontime."

"It doesn't matter if they don't go until afternoon."

"But there might be some slip."

He glanced at her with his keen eyes.

"What's the matter?"

"Matter?"

"Yes, with you? All of a sudden you've turned easterly."

"Have I?" Lightly, she laughed.

"I probably have caught the habit from the sea. Environment does influence character, psychologists say."

"Nevertheless, you are not fickle."

"How do you know? You know an amazing amount about me, seems to me, considering the length of our acquaintance," she observed with a tantalizing smile.

"I do," was the grim retort. "I know more than you think—more, perhaps, than you know yourself. Shall I hold the betraying mirror up before you?"

"The mirror of truth? God forbid! Who of us would dare face it?" she protested, still smiling, but with genuine alarm.

"Now do let me run along and send off the messages. I must not loiter here talking. You are forgetting that you're ill. The next you know your temperature will go up and Doctor Stetson will blame me."

"My temperature has gone up," growled Stanley Heath, turning his back on her and burying his face in the pillow with the touchiness of a small boy.

Sylvia, meanwhile, had heard Stanley Heath call Marcia and hailed her aunt's departure from the kitchen as an opportunity for which she had been anxiously waiting.

No sooner was the elder woman upstairs and out of earshot than she tiptoed from her room, the monogrammed handkerchief in her pocket.

She had pried out the brick and had the jewel-case in her hand, wrapped and ready for its return when conversation overhead suddenly ceased and she heard Marcia pass through the hall and start down stairs.

Sylvia gasped. There was no chance to put the package back and replace the brick, which fitted so tightly that its adjustment was a process requiring patience, care and time.

Flustered, frightened, she jammed the jewel case into her dress and frantically restoring the brick to the yawning hole in the hearth as best she could, she fled up the back stairs at the same moment Marcia

descended the front ones.

Once in her room, she closed and locked the door and sank panting into a chair to recover her breath.

Well, at least she had not been caught, and in the meantime the jewels were quite safe.

She took the case stealthily from her pocket. Now that the gems were in her possession, it certainly could do no harm for her to look at them—even try them on, as she had been tempted to do when she first discovered them. Probably never again in all her life would she hold in her hand so much wealth and beauty.

Accordingly she unwound the handkerchief and opened the box.

There lay the glistening heap of treasure, resplendent in the sunshine, a far more gorgeous spectacle than she had realized.

She clasped the diamonds about her neck; fastened the emerald brooch in place; put on the sapphire pendant; then added the rings and looked at herself in the gold-framed mirror.

What she saw reflected dazzled her. Who would have believed jewels would make such a difference in one's appearance? They set off her blond beauty so that she was suddenly transformed into a princess.

She really ought to have jewels. She was born to them and could carry them off. There were myriad women in the world on whom such adornment would be wasted—good and worthy women, too.

Then a voice interrupted her reverie.

It was Stanley Heath calling.

She heard Marcia reply and come hurrying upstairs.

Guiltily Sylvia took off her sparkling regalia; tumbled it unceremoniously into its case; and slipped it into the drawer underneath a pile of night-dresses. Then she softly unlocked the door and sauntered out.

It was none too soon, for Marcia was speaking to her.

"Sylvia?"

"Yes."

"How would you feel about going out to the village for the mail and to do some errands? The tide is out and you could walk. Prince needs a run."

"I'd love to."

"That's fine. Here's a list of things that we need at the store. You're sure you don't mind going?"

"No, indeed. I shall enjoy being out."

"She's dreadfully anxious to get us out of the way, isn't she, Prince?" commented young Sylvia as she and the setter started out over the sand.

"Now what do you suppose she has on her mind? She's up to something. Marcia isn't a bit of an actress. She's too genuine."

Marcia, standing at the window watching the girl, would have been astonished enough had she heard this astute observation.

She did want Sylvia out of the way. The girl had read her correctly.

She must telephone the messages to the stationmaster at Sawyer Falls, the adjoining town where the railroad ended and the nearest telegraph station was.

She got the line and had no sooner dictated the telegrams than she heard Heath's voice.

During the interval that had elapsed since she had left him, both of them had experienced a reaction and each was eager to make amends.

Marcia regretted her flippancy. It had been childish of her to give way to pique and punish Heath simply because it was proved he had a wife. Why should he not be married?

Heath had been quite frank about the message and its destination. On

thinking matters over, it occurred to Marcia he might have considered this the easiest way to inform her of things he found it embarrassing to put into words.

And she?

Instead of appreciating his honesty, chivalry, gentlemanly conduct as she should have done, and receiving it graciously, surprise had betrayed her into displaying resentment.

She was heartily ashamed of herself. No matter how much it humbled her pride, she must put things right. Fortunately it was not too late to do so.

Therefore, a very different Marcia Howe responded to Stanley Heath's summons.

She was now all gentleness, friendliness, and shyly penitent.

"Here I am, Mr. Heath. What can I do for you?" was her greeting.

This time she did not hesitate, but went directly to the chair beside his bed and sat down. He smiled and, meeting his eyes, she smiled back. This was better.

Heath sighed a sigh of relief.

"I've been thinking, since you went down stairs, about Currier. He ought to arrive late tonight or early tomorrow morning. Although he will not know in which house I am quartered, he will have the wit to inquire, for he has more than the ordinary quota of brains. I don't know what I should do with-

place is empty! The jewels are not there!"

Her terror and the fear lest her pallor foreshadowed collapse produced in Heath that artificial calm one sometimes sees when a strong nature reins itself in and calls upon its reserve control.

The man thought only of how to quiet her. Reaching out, he touched her hair.

"Hush, Marcia. The jewels will be found. Don't give way like this. I cannot bear to see you. The whole lot of them are not worth your tears."

"But you left them in my care. It was I who suggested where to hide them," she moaned.

"I know. And it was a splendid idea, too. I could not let that sheriff of yours peel off my clothes and find the diamonds on me. He isn't a man of sufficient imagination—or perhaps he is one of far too much. I am not blaming you—not in the least. We did the best we could in the emergency. If things have gone wrong, it is no fault of yours."

"But you trusted me. I ought to have watched. I should not have left the kitchen day or night," declared Marcia, lifting her tear-stained face to his.

"You have been there most of the time, haven't you?"

"I went to see them get the boat off yesterday."

"Still some one was here. Sylvia was in the house."

"Yes, but she knew nothing about the jewels and therefore may not have realized the importance of staying on deck. All I asked her to do was to remain within call. She may have gone upstairs, or into another room."

"When she comes back, you can ask her. Now we must pull ourselves together, dear," went on Stanley gently. "It is important that we do not give ourselves away."

She rose, but he still held her hand, a common misery routing every thought of conventionality.

The firmness and magnetism of his touch brought strength. It was a new experience, for during her life with Jason, Marcia had been the oak—the one who consoled, sustained. For a few delicious moments, she let herself rest, weary and unresisting, within the shelter of Stanley Heath's grasp. Then she drew away and, passing her hand across her forehead as if awaking from a dream, murmured:

"I'd better go down. Sylvia will be coming."

"Very well. Now keep a stiff upper lip."

"I will—I'll do my best."

Even as she spoke the outer door opened, then closed with a bang.

"There's Sylvia now. I must go."

The girl came in, aglow from her walk.

"I'm awfully sorry I banged the door," she apologized. "A gust of wind took it. I do hope I didn't wake up Mr. Heath. Here's the marketing. And Marcia, what do you suppose? I had a letter from Hortie Fuller—that fellow back home that I've told you about. He's send me a five-pound box of candy and he wants to come to Wilton and spend his summer vacation."

The girl's eyes were shining and she breathed quickly.

"Of course I don't care a button for Hortie. Still, it would be rather good fun to see him. After all, Hortie isn't so bad. Thinking him over from a distance, he really is rather nice. Come and sample the candy. It's wonderful. He must have blown himself, and sent to Chicago for it, poor dear! I'll let you see the letter, all except the part which is too frightfully silly. You wouldn't care about that. I don't myself."

Sylvia shrugged her shoulders. Alas, this was no moment to talk with her, and artfully draw from her the happenings of the previous day.

Inwardly distraught but outwardly calm, Marcia took the letter and tried valiantly to focus her attention upon it.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



"Hush, Marcia. The Jewels Will Be Found."