

SHIFTING SANDS

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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. A stranger, on the verge of exhaustion, finds his way to Marcia's home. He has her hide a package containing jewelry. Elisha Winslow, the sheriff, brings news of a jewel robbery nearby. The stranger gives his name as Stanley Heath. Marcia, though uneasy, is unwilling to believe him a thief. Sylvia, by chance, discovers the jewels, and is convinced that Heath is a robber. She realizes that Marcia must have hidden the jewels. Deciding to be silent, she puts them back in their hiding place. Marcia realizes that she has altogether too deep an interest in her guest, but is powerless to overcome it. Heath wires "Mrs. S. C. Heath," New York, that he is safe. He also orders a man named Currier to come at once. Sylvia, in her room, bedecks herself with the jewels. At Marcia's approach she hides them there. Heath asks Marcia to bring him the jewels. They are gone. Heath makes light of the loss.

CHAPTER V—Continued

To her surprise, it was a manly, intelligent letter, filled with town gossip, to be sure, yet written in delightfully interesting fashion.

"Your Mr. Fuller sounds charming," she said as she gave it back.

"Oh, Hortie is all right—in some ways." Patronizingly slipping the letter into her pocket, Sylvia shifted the subject. Nevertheless, a betraying flush colored her cheeks. "Now, we must start dinner, mustn't we? Don't you want to ask Mr. Heath which way he prefers his eggs—poached or boiled? And Marcia, while you're there, do put on a pair of fresh pillow-slips on his pillows. The ones he has are frightfully tumbled. I meant to do it this morning."

As the door closed behind the elder woman, artful young Sylvia smiled.

"There! That will keep her busy for a few moments at least. I know those pillow-cases. They fit like a snake's skin and are terribly hard to get off and on."

She crept into the hall and listened.

Yes, Marcia and Stanley Heath were talking. She could hear her aunt's gentle insistence and the man's protests. That was all she wished to know. The pillow-cases were in process of being taken off.

Up the stairs flew Sylvia, to return a second later, the jewel case swathed in its loose wrappings.

An anxious interval elapsed before the brick was pried out and the case slipped beneath it. Nevertheless the feat was accomplished, and triumphant, relieved, happy Sylvia set about preparing dinner.

What a long while Marcia was staying upstairs! Why, one could change a dozen pillow-cases in this time.

"I guess they are tighter than I remembered them. I needn't have rushed as I did," pouted Sylvia. "What can she be doing?"

When at last Marcia returned, something evidently was wrong.

"What's the matter?" demanded Sylvia. "Is Mr. Heath worse?"

"Worse? No indeed. What made you think so?"

"You look fussed."

"Do I? You'd be fussed had you wrestled with those pillow-slips as I have," was the reply. "Either the pillows have swelled or the cases have shrunk frightfully. Well, they are on now, anyway."

"Come and get dinner then. I'm starved. My walk has made me hungry as a bear. You must go out this afternoon, Marcia. It is a glorious day and you need to be pepped up."

To her surprise, Marcia demurred.

"Thank you, dear, but I think I won't go out today. I'd rather sit here and read. I'm too tired to go out."

"The air would rest you."

"Not today, dear," Marcia said with finality. "I have some mending to do and lots of other little things that I have been saving up for a long time. Since I prefer to stay, why don't you tramp up the shore and see 'My Unknown Lady'? She is beautiful and you haven't seen her yet."

"Well, if your mind is made up, I suppose there is no use in my trying to change it. I would like to see the boat."

"I'm sure you would. Stay as long as you like. There will be nothing to do here. Mr. Heath will probably sleep and in the meantime I shall get my sewing done."

As Marcia spoke the words, her mind was busy.

So Sylvia had not stirred from the kitchen on the previous afternoon! The theft of the jewels must, then, have taken place during the night.

Nevertheless, she was puzzled, for she had no memory of finding anything awry when she came down at sunrise to lay the fire.

When had the gems been taken, and who had taken them? No wonder she craved solitude to ponder the conundrum! This, however, was not the paramount reason she desired to be alone.

Despite the enigma of the jewels; despite the mystery surrounding Stanley Heath, deep in her heart something that would not be stilled was singing—singing!

CHAPTER VI

IN THE meantime, the throng of neighbors Sylvia had precipitately left in the village post office had received their mail and reached that anticipated interval for gossip which never failed to be stimulating.

Zenas Henry was speaking: "A mighty fine little girl—that Sylvia," commented he. "A high stepper! We'd oughter tie her down to Wilton so'st she won't go back west. She's too pretty to be spared from the Cape."

"I figger you'd have trouble keepin' her here," rejoined Sam Nickerson, the postmaster. "She's got a beau in her home town. Had a letter an' a box of candy from him today. Same writin' an' same postmark on both of 'em, I noticed."

"Didn't by any chance see the name, did you, Silas?" Eleazer Crocker inquired.

"Wal, come to think of it, it did catch my eye. You know how such things will. Fuller, he's called, Horatio Fuller."

"Horatio Fuller, eh?" Eleazer repeated. "Kinder high soundin'. Wonder who he is? From Alton City, you say?"

Silas nodded.

"That was the address."

"Never heard of the place," Capt. Benjamin Todd put in.

Thoughtfully Zenas Henry stroked his chin. "If everybody knew where all the blasted places in the country were, what use would they have for maps? 'Twould put the map-makin' folks clean out of business. Say, Ephraim," inspired by a bright idea, "you're the mail carrier. You'd oughter be primed on the location of places. Where's Alton City?"

"Alton City? Hanged if I know. To hear you talk, anybody'd think 'twas my job to tote round the country deliverin' letters in person at the doors of every house in the United States."

"But you must have some notion 'bout geography. Ain't you got

no pocket atlas nor nothin'?"

"I may have a small map somewhere; I carry most everything," Ephraim grinned. With deliberation, he began to disgorge upon the counter the contents of his many pockets.

"Ought to be in my breast pocket," thrusting his hand inside his pea-coat. "My eye! If I ain't forgot that telegram!" he abruptly exclaimed. "The station-master at Sawyer Falls gave it to me when he handed out the mail. It clean went out of my mind. It's for that chap Heath who's stayin' over at 'The Widder's.'"

"S'pose I was to take it over," Elisha Winslow suggested eagerly. "I'm willin' to."

"Fur's that goes, I can carry it," Capt. Phineas Taylor piped.

"Now, there's no use in all you fellers volunteerin'," Eleazer Crocker asserted. "I'm goin' straight over to Marcia's, as it happens, soon's I've et my dinner, an' I'll take the telegram."

With an air of authority, he held out his hand.

The crowd fell back.

Early afternoon found Marcia alone in the Homestead sitting room. Sylvia had gone up the beach. Stanley Heath was asleep; and at last the delicious interval of solitude which the woman coveted was here.

She could not work. Try as she would, her mind wandered off into byways too fascinating to be resisted—byways which no matter how remote their windings, invariably led her back to Stanley Heath.

Eleazer could not have chosen a more inopportune moment to drag her back to earth.

With a frown and a deep sigh, Marcia went reluctantly to let him in.

"Wal, now ain't it nice to find you by yourself!" was his greeting. "The kitchen looks cozy as can be. Where was you settin'?"

"I was in the front room, but perhaps we better drop down here so I can listen in case Mr. Heath should call."

"Anywhere you say. Wherever you are suits me."

"I'll just run in and put the screen round the fire and get my mending," Marcia replied a trifle uneasily. "I'll be right back."

Left to himself, Eleazer smiled a smile of satisfaction.

The kitchen was warm, Marcia was alone and apparently not busy. Could circumstances be more propitious? Fortune certainly was with him. Today, this very afternoon, he would take his future in his hands and put to her the question he had so often determined to put.

When Marcia came back he was primed and ready to begin his declaration.

"Weather's been fine, ain't it?" he started out.

Marcia took up her sewing.

"Do you think so?" questioned she, raising her brows. "Seems to me we've had lots of rain and fog."

"Wal, yes, now you mention it I do recall a few thick days. Still, spring is comin'."

"I'll like to shingle the south ell this spring," announced Marcia, giving a disconcertingly practical twist to the conversation. "How many shingles do you suppose it would take?"

Eleazer frowned. The dialogue was not proceeding along the lines he had mapped out.

"I'd have to reckon that out. It's a good notion, though, to make the ell tight. That's what the birds are doin'. They're gettin' their nests built an' kinder pickin' out their mates."

"I did not realize you were so much interested in birds, Eleazer," Marcia exclaimed. "I have a fine bird book I must lend you. It's in the other room. I'll fetch it."

Springing up, she disappeared.

"Drat it!" murmured Eleazer. "Could anything be more exasperatin'? An' me neither knowin' nor carin' a hang whether a bird's a robin or a sparrow." He wandered

to the window. "Oh, heavens, who's this comin'? If it ain't 'Lish Winslow! Now what in thunder does he want, buttin' in?"

Eleazer threw open the door.

Before he could speak, however, Elisha puffed and out of breath bawled:

"Where in the name of goodness did you put the engine-house key, Eleazer? Whipple's hen house is afire, an' we've hunted high and low for it."

"My soul an' body," Eleazer gasped. "I clean forgot to leave it. Must be in my pocket."

Wildly he began to search.

"You're a fine head of the fire department, you are!" roared Elisha. "If you'd put your mind on town business 'stead of on Marcia Howe, we'd all be better off. Traipsing over here to see her in the middle of the day, palmin' off that telegram as an excuse. You better go straight back to the village fast as you can leg it an' carry the key with you," went on the accuser. "Don't wait for nothin'. I'll explain to Marcia."

"But I've got to see her. I've got to speak to her private," protested the wretched official. "I want to give her somethin'."

"Give it to me. I'll hand it to her."

Elisha's extended palm was not to be ignored.

"This—this—telegram," quavered

Eleazer.

"I ain't had a chance to—"

"Do you mean to say you ain't given her that telegram yet?"

"I was intendin' to. I was just about to when—"

"Wal, of all the—" words failed Elisha. "Here, give it to me," he commanded. "I can be depended on to deliver messages if you can't. I'll see she has it. In the meantime, the best thing you can do is to hoof it to town quick's ever you can."

"Ain't you comin'?"

"I? No. Fire's ain't in my line. Long's Marcia's here by herself an' ain't busy, I'm goin' to pay her a call," Elisha grinned. "I've got to deliver the telegram."

"You might be needed at the fire."

"I shan't be," was the calm reply. "Not unless there's somethin' criminal about it."

The unlucky fire chief had no choice.

"Drat it!" raged he, as he strode off across the sand. "Drat it! Ain't that just my luck!"

Either the book for which Marcia searched was not to be found or she was in no haste to return to her awaiting suitor.

Whatever the explanation, her absence lengthened from a few moments into a quarter of an hour.

In the meantime Elisha, like his predecessor, was formulating his

mode of attack. Before another

snatched the prize from him; before Heath with his yacht and his monogrammed silken garments recovered his strength, he would put his fate to the test.

He strolled up to the stove and, standing on the hearth with his back to the fire, rocked back and forth on his heels reflectively.

As he did so, a brick beneath his feet rocked with him.

Elisha looked down.

He saw it was quite loose.

"That thing's goin' to trip up somebody some fine day," commented he. "It oughter be cemented."

Producing his knife, Elisha pried the brick from its place.

As he lifted it out, a handkerchief came with it disgorging at his feet a flat, blue leather case.

If the sheriff's eyes bulged when he caught sight of it, they all but popped from his head when, egged on by curiosity, he pressed the catch on the box.

Quick as a flash the whole situation clarified in his mind.

These were the widely heralded Long Island jewels; and the thief who had stolen them was here beneath this roof!

Of course Marcia did not know. Even though a friendship existed between herself and Heath, she was unquestionably ignorant of the nefarious means by which he earned his living.

Far from cherishing anger or resentment toward the person who posed his villainy and prevented her from sacrificing herself to such an unprincipled adventurer, would she not regard her rescuer with deepest gratitude? Elisha's head whirled.

Nevertheless, confused though he was, it was clear to him he must not make a mis-step and neglect to perform his official duty with dignity.

Heath was ill. There would be no danger of his leaving the Homestead at present, especially as he had no suspicion the jewels had been discovered.

The best plan was for him to return to the mainland; get his badge and handcuffs; find out what formalities such a momentous event as an arrest demanded; and return later and round up the criminal.

He did not dally. Carefully putting the gems back where he had found them, he placed the telegram upon the table and went out, softly closing the door behind him.

It flashed into his mind that as the tide was coming in it might be well to borrow Marcia's boat and row back to shore.

This would serve two purposes. He would reach home sooner; and Heath, cut off by the sweep of the channel, would in the meantime be unable to escape.

Never had Elisha rowed as he rowed that day! The dory fairly leaped through the water. Reaching shore, he sprang from it and dragged it up on the sand. Then, trembling with excitement, he set out for home.

He was almost at his gate when to his consternation he saw Eleazer puffing after him.

"You 'pear to be kinder stirred up, 'Lish," Eleazer commented. "What's the matter?"

Elisha determined upon a sudden and bold move.

"Say, Eleazer," began he cautiously, "Did you ever see a man arrested?"

"Wal, I dunno as I ever did—not really. I've seen it done, though, in the movies."

"That oughter be up-to-date an' proper. Just how was the proceedin' put through?"

Thoughtfully Eleazer regarded the toes of his boots.

"Wal, near's I can recollect, the policeman went up to the criminal an' grabbin' him by the arm says: 'You villain! I've got you now. Scram!'"

"I s'pose the policeman wore a badge an' carried handcuffs."

"Oh, law, yes. But what's the game? What do you want to know for?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)



When Marcia Came Back He Was Primed and Ready to Begin His Declaration.