

SHIFTING SANDS

By . . .
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SYNOPSIS

The youthful and comely "Widder" Marcia Howe has her late husband's niece, Sylvia Hayden, living with her. A stranger, exhausted, finds his way to Marcia's home. His powerboat ran aground in the fog. Secretly, he asks Marcia to hide a package containing jewelry. She does so. There comes news of a jewel robbery nearby. The stranger gives his name as Stanley Heath. Sylvia discovers the jewels, and is sure Heath is a robber. Marcia feels that she has too deep an interest in her guest, but is powerless to overcome it. Heath wires "Mrs. S. C. Heath," New York, saying he is safe. He also wires 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 them to him. They are gone! Sylvia secretly puts back the gems. Elisha Winslow, the sheriff, by accident, finds the jewels, and has no doubt they are the stolen gems, and Heath is a thief. Saying nothing to Marcia, but replacing the jewels, he makes plans, with Eleazer Crocker, for arresting Heath. Currier arrives. Marcia overhears Heath tell how he got the gems, and is forced to believe him guilty. Currier, with Marcia, investigates the hiding place—and finds the gems! He returns to New York with them. His references to "Mrs. Heath" convince Marcia that her tender dream has been a foolish one. Elisha and Eleazer come to arrest Heath.

CHAPTER VIII—Continued

"I know, Eleazer, I know," Elisha stammered. "It may, mebbe, seem queer to you. I just hadn't got round to the business in hand, that's all. I'm comin' to it in time. I've made a start. I was just leadin' up to it in a sorter tactful way."

"There ain't no way of bein' tactful when you're arrestin' folks. You've got the thing to do an' you have to go straight to it."

"Arresting folks?" Marcia repeated, looking from one man to the other.

"Yes. Since Lish is so spineless at his job, I may's well tell you what we come for. Pretty kind of a sheriff he is."

"You better look out, Eleazer Crocker, how you insult an officer of the law," Elisha bawled angrily. "Say a word more an' I'll hail you into court."

"If you don't land me there faster'n you do Heath I shan't worry," jeered Eleazer.

"Heath? Mr. Heath?" Marcia repeated.

"Yes. We come over here this mornin' to place Mr. Stanley Heath under arrest," Eleazer announced.

"Of what are you accusing Mr. Heath?" Marcia demanded.

"Of the Long Island robbery," Eleazer answered.

"You mean to say you think him a thief?"

"We know he's one—leastways Elisha does."

"I—yes! I'm tōl'able sure. I have evidence," Elisha replied. "At least I figger I have."

"Shucks, 'Lish!" Eleazer cried. "Where's your backbone? You figger you have! Don't you know it? Ain't you beheld the loot with your own eyes?"

Elisha nodded.

"Then why on earth don't you stand up in your boots an' say so?"

The door opened and Sylvia entered, then stopped, arrested on the threshold by the sound of angry voices.

Marcia, with whitened lips but with face grave and determined, remained with her back to the stairway door, her eyes never leaving Elisha Winslow's. There was something in her face Sylvia had never seen there—a light of battle; a fierceness as of a mother fighting for her child; a puzzling quality to which no name could be given.

Suddenly, as the girl studied her, recognition of this new characteristic flashed upon her understanding. It was love!

Anger, perhaps terror, had forced Marcia into betraying a secret no other power could have dragged from her.

"What proof have you?" Marcia demanded.

Elisha shifted from one foot to the other.

"I've seen the jewels," he whispered. "They're here—in this room, under that brick. I've seen 'em."

With finger pointing dramatically toward the hearth, Elisha strode forward.

Sylvia, however, sprang before him, standing 'twixt him and his goal.

"What a ridiculous story, Mr. Winslow!" she cried. "What a fantastic yarn! Do you imagine for one moment there could be anything hidden under those bricks and Marcia and I not know it? Why, one or the other of us has been in this room every instant since Mr. Heath arrived. When could he get the chance to hide anything? There is nothing here, Mr. Winslow, truly there is nothing. I swear it."

"Nevertheless, let him look, Sylvia. Let them both look."

Sylvia was upon her knees now on the hearth, and the men, hesitating to remove her by force, halted awkwardly.

Marcia regarded her first with startled incredulity—then with coldness.

So Sylvia loved Heath, too!

She was fighting for him—fighting with all her feeble strength.

A pang wrenched the older woman's heart.

What if Heath had played a double game—made love to Sylvia as he had made love to her? If so—if the man were a mountebank the sooner they both found it out—the sooner the world knew it, the better.

If, on the other hand, he was innocent, he should have his chance.

"Get up, Sylvia," she said. "The sheriff must search. He must do his duty. We have no right to prevent it."

Her face was pale, her lips tightly set.

The brick was lifted out.

A smothered cry escaped Sylvia and was echoed.

"Why—land alive—there's nothin' here!" gasped the sheriff.

"I told you there was nothing!" Sylvia taunted, beginning to laugh hysterically.

"Wal, 'Lish, all I can say is you must either 'a' been wool gatherin' or dreamin' when you conceived this yarn," Eleazer jeered.

"I warn't," hissed Elisha, stung to the quick. "I warn't dreamin'. Them jewels was there. I saw 'em with my own eyes. I swear to heaven I did." He confronted Sylvia. "They was there, young lady, warn't they? You know they was. That's why you was so scairt for me to look. You've seen 'em. Deny it if you dare."

"Of course I deny it."

"Humph! But Marcia won't. You can lie if you want to save the skin of that good-for-nothin' critter upstairs—though what purpose is served by your doin' it I can't see. But Marcia won't. If she says them jewels warn't here I'll believe it. Come now, Marcia. Was there ever diamonds an' things under this brick or warn't there?"

"Yes."

"You saw 'em?"

As if the admission was dragged from her, Marcia formed, but did not utter, the word:

"Yes."

"There! Then I ain't gone daffy! What I said was true," Elisha exclaimed, rising in triumph and snapping his finger at Eleazer.

"The jewels were Mr. Heath's. He hid them for safe keeping."

"A likely story! He stole 'em—that's what he did."

"Prove it," challenged Marcia,

with sudden spirit, a spurt of crimson burning on either cheek.

"Prove it?" Elisha was taken aback. "Wal, I can't at the moment do that. I can't prove it. But even if I can't, I can make out a good enough case against him to arrest him on suspicion. That's what I mean to do—that's what I come for an' what I'll do fore I leave this house."

"Mr. Heath is sick."

"I guess he ain't so sick but what I can go up an' cross-examine him."

"I ask you not to go. I forbid it. Drop this matter for a day or two, Elisha. Mr. Heath shall not leave the house. I promise you that. Leave him here in peace until he is well again. When he is able to go—with you I will telephone. You can trust me. When have I ever been false to my word?"

"I don't see why the mischief you're so crazy to stand 'twixt this Heath chap an' justice, Marcia. The feller's a scoundrel. That's what he is—an out an' out scoundrel. Not only is he a thief but he's a married man who's plottin' behind your back to betray you—boastin' openly in telegrams he is."

"What do you mean?"

"I wouldn't like to tell you. In fact I couldn't. 'Twould be repeatin' what was told me in confidence," hedged Elisha, frightened by the expression on the woman's face.

"I have a right to know about the telegrams you mention. Will you tell me or shall I call up the Sawyer Falls operator?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake don't do that," Elisha pleaded. "Artie Nickerson would be ragin' mad did he find out I told you. If you must know what the message was, I can



"The Jewels Are Gone and You Must Go, Too."

repeat it near 'nough, I reckon. It ran somethin' like this:

"Safe on Cape with my lady. Shall return with her later."

"And that was all?" inquired Marcia calmly.

"All! Ain't that enough?" Elisha demanded.

As she vouchsafed no reply, he presently continued:

"I don't want you should think I told you this, Marcia, with any unfriendly motive. It's only that those of us who've seen you marry one worthless villain don't want you should marry another. You know that well's I."

The woman raised her hand to check him.

"I'm aware 'tain't pleasant to hear me say so out loud, but it's God's truth."

"Marcia!" Sylvia burst out.

"Marcia!"

"Hush, dear. We'll talk of this later. Elisha, I think I must ask you and Eleazer to go now."

"You ain't goin' to tell me where the jewels are?"

"I don't know where they are."

"Nor nothin' 'bout—'bout the telegram?"

"Nothing except to thank you for your kind intentions and say you quoted it correctly. I sent it for Mr. Heath myself. 'My Lady,' as you have apparently forgotten, is the name of Mr. Heath's boat."

"My land! So 'tis," faltered Elisha. "I'm almighty sorry, Marcia—I ask your pardon."

"It's all right. Just leave us now, please."

The door banged behind the discomfited officials.

CHAPTER IX

THE torrent of words Sylvia had until now held in check broke from her:

"Was it true, Marcia—what they said about Uncle Jason I mean? Was it true?"

"I'm afraid so, dear."

"But you never told me; and you never told Mother, either. Of course I see why. You didn't want her to know because it would have broken her heart. I hate him! I hate him for making you unhappy and spoiling your life! Was Jason as bad as they said, Marcia? Ah, you don't have to answer. There is no need for you to try to reconcile your desire to spare me—spare him—with the truth. He was as bad—probably much worse. Dear, dear Marcia." Impulsively Sylvia bent her lips to the hands so tightly clasped in hers. "I cannot imagine," she rushed on, "why, when one of my family has made you so wretched as he did, you should have wanted another in the house. Had I suffered so I should never have wished to lay eyes on any more Howes as long as I lived."

"I have tried not only to forgive but to forget. I have closed the door on the past and begun a new life."

"And now into it has come this Stanley Heath," the girl said.

For the fraction of a second Marcia did not reply; then almost inaudibly she murmured:

"Yes."

Sylvia slipped one of her strong young arms about the bowed shoulders.

"It just seems as if I could not bear it," she burst out.

"Sylvia, look at me. Tell me the truth. Do you, too, love Stanley Heath? Was that the reason you fought against Elisha's finding the jewels? Tell me. I must know."

"No," she answered without hesitation. "At first he did fascinate me. I changed my mind, though, later on. Not because on acquaintance he became less charming. It wasn't that. If anything, he became more so. I just—changed my mind. As for the jewels, I could not bear to let that 'litle runt of a sheriff win out. You see, I thought the gems were there under the brick and that when you urged him to search, you did not know it."

"I had known all along they were in the house, for I stumbled upon them by accident one day when I was here alone; but I had no idea you had. I truly believed Mr. Heath had hidden them beneath the hearth, and I was determined Elisha should not find them."

"You think Mr. Heath took the jewels?" asked Marcia, slowly.

"Certainly I do. Don't you?"

"No. I do not believe it," was the stubborn protest.

"I realize, dear, it is hard for you to own it," soothed Sylvia. "We hate to admit the faults of those we—we—care for. Still, nothing is to be gained by remaining blind to them. Perhaps Mr. Heath was horribly tempted to commit this sin. We do not know. We are not his judges. The thing for us to do is to help him out of the mess he is in. Aid him to escape. You love Stanley Heath. Don't you want to see him go free?"

"Not if he is guilty."

"Well, nobody is going to round up Mr. Heath if I can prevent it," asserted Sylvia, throwing back her head. "If you won't help him get away, I will. He must go in the boat—now—today."

"The boat has gone. Mr. Currier arrived this morning after you had gone and took the boat back with him."

"And the jewels?"

"Yes, the jewels, too."

"Humph! So that's where they are!"

"Yes."

"Pretty cute of him to make so neat a get-away! What sort of man was he? A gentleman like Mr. Heath?"

The older woman colored.

"Well, no. At least he—he—Oh, he was polite and had a nice manner—a quiet voice."

"But he was different from Mr. Heath—an inferior—one who took orders," interrupted Sylvia. "In other words, he is the hands and Mr. Heath the brains of the team."

"How can you, Sylvia?"

"Because I must, Marcia—because we must both look this affair in the face. Confess the circumstances are suspicious."

"They seem to be," she owned with reluctance.

"Have you considered them?"

Sylvia inquired.

Marcia drew her hand across her forehead.

"I—I—yes. I have thought them over. I don't understand them at all. Nevertheless, I do not believe Stanley Heath is guilty," was the proud retort.

Sylvia's patience gave way.

"Go your own way then," she snapped. "Go your own way and if by and by you regret it—as you surely will—do not blame me. Don't blame me, either, if I do not agree with you. Stanley Heath shall never remain here and be betrayed to the law. Stick to your grim old puritanism if you must. I'll help him get away."

She started toward the stairway.

"Sylvia, come back here!" Marcia cried.

"I shall not come back."

Marcia rushed after her, but it was too late.

Sylvia was gone.

Stanley Heath was lying with expectant face turned toward the door when Sylvia entered.

"What's the rumpus?" he demanded.

"I guess you know. There is no use mincing matters or beating about the bush. The jewels have gone and you must go, too."

The man looked dumfounded.

"Don't misunderstand me, please," Sylvia rushed on. "I'm not blaming you—nor judging you. I don't know why you took them. You may have been tempted beyond your strength. That is none of my business."

"You believe I stole them?"

"Certainly I do."

"Suppose I didn't?"

"I expected you'd say that," was the calm retort. "Let it go that way if you prefer. I don't mind. What I want to do is to help you to get away."

"Even if I am guilty?"

"Yes. I just can't bear to have that mean little sheriff who's after you catch you."

"What's that?"

"That wretched Elisha Winslow who came here this morning with Eleazer Crocker tagging at his heels. In some way they had found out about the jewels and where you had hidden them. They wanted to come upstairs and arrest you post haste; but Marcia wouldn't allow it."

"Marcia heard the story, too?"

"Of course."

"Poor Marcia. What does Marcia say? I think I'd better talk with her first."

"Don't! It will only be a waste of time. Marcia is hard, merciless. Her conscience drives her to extremes. Even should you get her opinion, you would not follow it. But I'll send her to you—if I must. But remember, I warned you."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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