

SHIFTING SANDS

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SYNOPSIS

The youthful and comely "Widder" Marcia Howe has her late husband's legs. Sylvia Hayden, living with an A stranger, exhausted, finds his way to Marcia's home. His power-plant ran aground in the fog. He-velly, 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, bedsacks 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 the gems back. 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, but replacing the jewels, he makes plans, with Eleaser Crocker, for arresting Heath. Currier arrives. Marcia over- hears Heath tell how he got the gems, and is forced to believe him guilty. Currier, with Marcia, inves- tigates 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 Eleaser come to arrest Heath. The jewels, of course, are not found.

CHAPTER IX—Continued

"I shall not soon forget that, Syl- via, nor the splendid loyalty you've shown today. I shall always re- member it. Whatever happens, please realize that I am grateful," Heath said earnestly. "Run along, now, and fetch Marcia."

It was some moments before Marcia answered the summons, and when at last she came, it was with downcast eyes, and evident reluctance.

"Tell me, please, exactly what happened down stairs," Heath smiled.

She related the incident tersely; without comment.

"And that is all?" he inquired when convinced she had no inten- tion of speaking further.

"That is all."

"Thank you. Now what do you think is best for me to do? I should like your opinion."

"But how can I give a just opin- ion? I cannot judge," she burst out as if goaded beyond her pa- tience. "I know none of the facts."

A radiance, swift as the passage of a meteor, flashed across Stanley Heath's face and was gone.

"Suppose you yourself had taken those jewels and were placed in this dilemma?" pressed he.

"The case would not be similar at all. I do not believe you took the jewels," was the quiet answer.

"Marcia! Marcia! Why don't you believe I took them? Have I ever told you I did not take them? Ever led you to suppose me innocent?"

"You have never told me any- thing about it."

The man restrained an impulse to imprison her hands in his.

"Suppose I did take them?" he went on in an even, coolly modu- lated voice. "Suppose the case stands exactly as this shrewd-eyed Wilton sheriff suspects it does? What am I to do?"

He saw the color drain from her face.

"I only know what I should do, were I in your place. I should go through with it—clear my soul of guilt."

"And afterward?"

"Start over again."

"That would be very difficult. The stigma of crime clings to a man. My life would be ruined were I to pursue such a course."

"Not your real life. You would, of course, lose standing among your supposed friends; but you

would not lose it among those whose regard went deeper. Even if you did—what would it matter?"

"But to be alone, friendless! Who would help me piece together the mangled fragments of such a past—for I should need help; I could not do it alone? Do you imagine that in all the world there would be even one person whose loyalty and affec- tion would survive so acid a test? Do you know of anyone?"

She leaped to her feet.

"Why do you ask me?" she de- manded, the gentleness of her voice chilling to curtness. "You have such a helpmate near you—or should have."

"I don't understand," pleaded the man, puzzled by her change of mood.

"Perhaps we'd better not go into that now," was her response. "I must go."

"Wait just a moment."

"I cannot. I must get dinner."

"Never mind the dinner! Some- times there are things more impor- tant."

"To think of a man saying that!"

The ring of the telephone chimed in with her silvery laughter.

"I'll go, Sylvia," she called with a promptness that indicated the in- terruption was a welcome one.

"It's long distance," she called to Heath. "Mrs. Heath wishes to speak with you. Slip on your bath- robe and come."

Heath took the receiver from her hand.

"Joan? This certainly is good of you, dear. Yes, I am much better, thank you. Bless your precious heart, you needn't worry. Currier will be back late tonight or early tomorrow morning and he will tell you how well I am progressing. Yes, he has the jewels. Put them in the safe right away, won't you?"

"I can't say when I shall be home. Something has come up that may keep me here some time. I cannot explain just now. It is the thing you have always predicted would happen to me sometime. Well, it has happened. Do you get that? Yes, I am caught—hard and fast. It is a bit ironic to have traveled all over the world and then be taken captive in a small Cape Cod village. I'll let you know the first minute I have anything definite to tell."

"Good-by, dear. Take care of yourself. It's done me a world of good to hear your voice."

Heath returned the receiver to its hook and in high spirits strode back into his room.

Marcia's chair was empty.

She was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER X

THE days immediately following were like an armed truce.

Marcia watched Sylvia. Sylvia watched Marcia. Heath watched them both. Warmly wrapped in rugs, he now sat out on the shel- tered veranda where he reveled in the sunshine.

He was a brilliant talker—one who gave unexpected, original twists to the conversation—twists that taxed one's power of repartee. Here indeed was a hitherto un- dreamed of Stanley Heath, a man whose dangerous charms had mul- tiplied a hundredfold and who, if he had captivated Marcia before now riveted her fetters with every word he spoke, every glance he gave her.

In loving this stranger of whom she knew so little, she had set her heart upon a phantom that she knew must vanish. The future, grim with foreboding, was constant- ly drawing nearer.

There were, alas, but two ways of life—the way of right and the way of wrong, and between them lay no neutral zone. But her rebel heart

would play her false, flouting her puritan codes and defying the creeds that conscience dictated.

Meantime while Marcia thus wrestled with the angel of her best self, Sylvia accepted the situation with characteristic lightness. She knew more already about men than did Marcia—much more. Long ago they had ceased to be gods to her. She jested fearlessly with Heath, speaking a language with which he was familiar and one that amused him no end.

Marcia felt jealousy clutching at her heart.

One day, passing through the hall, she saw Sylvia's golden head bent over the table as she dashed off page after page of a closely writ- ten letter.

It was a pity the elder woman could not have read that letter, for it would not only have astonished but also have enlightened her and perhaps quieted the beating of her troubled heart.



"You—Know," She Faltered, Her Arms Creeping About His Neck.

It was a letter that astonished Sylvia herself. Nevertheless, much as it surprised her, her amazement in no way approached that of young Horatio Fuller when he read it.

Now, Horatio's mother was a woman of colorless, vaguely de- fined personality indicative of little guile and still less determina- tion. She listened well, never interrupted; never offered com- ment or advice; never promised anything; and yet when she said, as she invariably did, "I'll talk with your father, dear," there was al- ways infinite comfort in the ob- servation.

That was what she said today after a conversation with Horatio Junior.

Accordingly that evening after Horatio Senior had dined, and dined well, Mrs. Horatio gently im- parted to Alton City's leading citi- zen the intelligence that his son, Horatio Junior, wished to go east; that he was in love; that, in short, he wished to marry.

Horatio Senior raged; he tramped the floor; he heaped on the head of the absent Horatio Junior every epithet of reproach his wrath could devise, the phrases driving idiot and audacious puppy appearing to afford him the greatest measure of relief.

At last when breathless and pant- ing Horatio Senior, like an alarm clock, ran down and sank exhaust- ed into his chair, Mrs. Horatio ventured the irrefutable observa- tion that after all Horatio Junior was their only child, and Sylvia Hayden was a nice little thing. This drew fire.

Horatio Senior sputtered some- thing about "nothing but a penni- less school-teacher—a nobody."

Very deliberately then Mrs. Ho- ratio murmured pleasantly that if she remembered rightly this had been the very objection Horatio

Senior's father had made to their own marriage.

At this Horatio Senior flushed scarlet and said promptly that his marriage had been ideal; that his Jennie had been the one wife in the world for him; that time had proved it—even to his parents; that she was the only person on earth who really understood him.

After this nothing was simpler than to discuss just when Horatio Junior had better start East.

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Had Sylvia dreamed when she licked the envelope's flap with her small red tongue and smoothed it down with her pretty white finger she was thus loosing Alton City's thunderbolts, she might, perhaps, have hesitated to send the letter she had penned and perhaps would not have started off so jauntily late that afternoon to post it.

Toward six o'clock she telephoned she was at the Doanes and Henry and his mother—the old lady she had met on the train the day she arrived—wanted her to stay to sup- per. He would bring her home early in the evening. There would be a moon—Marcia need not worry.

Marcia had not thought of worry- ing until that minute, but now, in spite of knowing Sylvia was safe and in good hands, she be- gan, paradoxically enough, to worry madly. Timidly as a girl she sum- moned Stanley Heath to the small, round table.

"Sylvia isn't coming," she ex- plained, all blushes. "She tele- phoned she was going to stay in town."

"My, but you are a marvelous cook," Heath remarked, during the progress of the meal.

"Oh, not really. You're hungry—that's all. Things taste good when you are."

"It isn't that. Everything you put your hand to is well done. You're a marvelous person, Marcia."

"You are talking foolishness."

"Every man talks foolishness once in his life, I suppose. Perhaps I am talking it tonight because our time together is so short. I am leaving here tomorrow morning."

"Stanley!"

Across the table he, caught her hand.

"I am well now and have no further excuse for imposing on your hospitality. I have accepted every manner of kindness from you."

"Don't call it that," she inter- rupted.

"What else can I call it? I was a stranger and you took me in. It was sweet of you—especially when you knew nothing about me. Now the time has come for me to go. Tomorrow morning I am giving my- self up to the Wilton sheriff."

"Oh, no—no!"

"It is the only square thing to do, isn't it?"

She made no answer.

He rose and came to her side, slipping an arm about her.

"Marcia, dearest! I am doing what you wish, am I not? You wanted me to go through with it."

She covered her face and he felt a shudder pass over her.

"Yes. But that was then," she whispered.

At the words, he drew her to her feet and into his arms.

"Marcia, beloved! I love you—love you with all my heart—my soul—all that is in me. You know it—know that every moment we have been together has been heav- en. Tell me you love me, dear—for you do love me. Don't deny it—not tonight—our last night togeth- er. Say that you love me."

"You—know," she faltered, her arms creeping about his neck.

He kissed her then—her hair, her eyes, her neck, her lips—long, burn- ing kisses that left her quivering beneath the rush of them.

Their passion brought her to her- self and she drew away.

"What is it, dear?" he asked.

"We can't. We must not. Some- thing stands between us—we have no right. Forgive me."

"But my dear—"

"We have no right," she repeat-

ed. "We must not love."

"But we do, sweetheart," was his triumphant cry. "We do!"

"We must forget."

"Can you forget?" he reproached.

"I—I can try."

"Ah, your tongue is too honest, Marcia. You cannot forget. Nei- ther can I. Our pledge is given. We belong to one another. I shall not surrender what is mine—never."

"Tomorrow—"

"Let us not talk of tomorrow."

"We must. We shall be parted then."

"Only for a little while. I shall come back to you. Our love will hold. Absence, distance, nothing can part us—not really. Tell me you love me so I may leave know- ing the truth from your own sweet lips!"

"I love you, Stanley—God help me!"

"Ah, now I can go! It will not be for long."

"It must be for ever, dear heart. You must not come back. Tonight must be—the end."

"You mean you cannot face to- morrow—the disgrace—"

"I mean tonight must be the end," she reiterated.

Through narrowed lids, he looked at her, scanning her averted face.

Then she heard him laugh bitterly, discordantly.

"I have, apparently, expected too much of you. I might have known it would be so. All women are alike. They desert a man when he needs them most. The prospect of sharing my shame is more than you can bear." Again he laughed. "Well, to- night shall be the end—tonight—now. Don't think I blame you. It is not your fault. I merely rated you too high, Marcia. The mis- take was mine—not yours."

He left her then.

Stunned by the torrent of his re- proach, she stood motionless, watching while, without a backward glance, he passed into the hall and up the stairs.

Even after he was out of sight, she remained immovable, her frightened eyes riveted on the door- way through which he had disap- peared.

Then she swayed, caught at a chair and shrank into it, her body shaking and her breath coming in gasping, hysterical sobs.

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Having no inkling of a change in the delightful relations that had for the past week prevailed in the Homestead, the atmosphere that greeted Sylvia when she came down the next morning was a shock.

Stanley Heath stood at the tele- phone talking to Elisha Winslow and on the porch outside were grouped his suitcase, overcoat and traveling rug. He was plainly ill at ease and had little except the most commonplace remarks to offer in way of conversation.

Marcia had not slept, as her pal- lor and the violet shadows beneath her eyes attested.

Although the girl did not under- stand, she sensed Marcia's need of her and rushed valiantly into the breach—filling every awkward pause with her customary sparkling chatter.

When at length breakfast was cut short by the arrival of Elisha Winslow, all three of the group rose with unconcealed relief.

"Wal, Mr. Heath, I see you're expectin' me," grinned the sheriff, pointing toward the luggage beside the door.

"I am, Mr. Winslow."

"I've got my boat. Are you ready to come right along?"

"Quite ready."

Heath went to Sylvia and took her hand.

"Thank you very much," mur- mured he formally, "for all you've done for me. I appreciate it more than I can say. And you, too, Mrs. Howe."

"I wish you luck, Mr. Heath," called Sylvia.

"Thanks."

"And I, too," Marcia rejoined in a voice scarcely audible.

To this the man offered no reply.

(TO BE CONTINUED)