

SHIFTING SANDS

By . . .
Sara Ware Bassett
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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, 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. The jewels, of course, are not found, and the sheriff leaves discomfited. Heath compels Marcia to admit she loves him, but she insists this must be the end of their association, and he, thinking she will not face the "disgrace" of his confessing his theft of the jewels, reproaches and leaves her, giving himself into custody of the sheriff.

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They followed him to the door. It was then that Marcia sprang forward and caught Elisha's arm. "Where are you taking him, Elisha?" she demanded, a catch in her voice. "Remember, Mr. Heath has been ill. You must not risk his getting cold or suffering any discomfort."

"You need have no worries on that score, Marcia," replied the sheriff kindly, noticing the distress in her face. "I'll look out for him."

"Where is he going?"

"To my house for the present," Elisha answered. "I've a comfortable spare room and I figure to put him in it 'til I've questioned him and verified his story."

"He's a friend of yours—I ain't forgettin' that, I shall treat him 'coridin'ly, Marcia."

"Thank you, Elisha—thank you a hundred times."

There was nothing more to be said.

Heath bowed once again and the two men walked down to the float where they clambered with the luggage into Elisha's dory and put out into the channel.

Sylvia loitered to wave her hand and watch them row away, but Marcia, as if unable to bear the sight, waited for no further farewell.

But by noon she was, to outward appearances, entirely herself. She had not been able, to be sure, to banish her pallor or the traces of sleeplessness; but she had her emotions sufficiently under control to talk pleasantly, if not gaily.

That day and the next passed in much the same strained fashion. It was not until the third morning that the barriers between the two collapsed.

Marcia had gone into the living room to write a letter. She sat down before the desk and started to take up her pen when Sylvia heard her utter a cry.

"What's the matter, dear?" called the girl, hurrying into the other room.

"Oh, how could he!" moaned the woman. "How could he be so cruel!"

"What has happened, Marcia?"

"Stanley—he has left a check—money—thrown it in my face! And I did it so gladly—because I loved

him. He knew that. Yet he could leave this—pay me—as if I were a common servant. I had rather he struck me—a hundred times rather."

The girl took the check. It was filled out in Stanley Heath's clear, strong hand and was for the sum of a hundred dollars.

"How detestable of him!" she exclaimed. "Tell me, Marcia—what happened between you and Mr. Heath? You quarreled—of course I know that. But why—why? I have not wanted to ask, but now—"

"I'll tell you everything, Sylvia. I'd rather you knew. I thought at first I could keep it to myself, but I cannot. I need you to help me, dear."

Marcia unfolded the story of her blind faith in Stanley Heath; her love for him—a love she could neither resist nor control—a love she had known from the first to be hopeless. She confessed how she had struggled to conceal her feelings; how he himself had resisted a similar attraction in her; how at last he had discovered her secret and forced her to betray it.

"Of course I realized we could not go on," she explained bravely. "That we loved one another was calamity enough. All that remained was for him to go away and forget me—return to his wife, his home, and his former life. Soon, if he honestly tries, this infatuation will pass and everything will be as before. Men forget more easily than women. Absence, too, will help."

"And you, Marcia?"

"I cannot give up my love. It is all I have now. Oh, I do not mean to mourn over it, pity myself, make life unhappy. Instead, I shall be glad, thankful. You will see. This experience will make every day of living richer. You need have no fears for me, Sylvia. You warned me, you know," concluded she with a pathetic little smile.

"I was a brute! I ought to have shielded you more," the girl cried. "I could have, had I realized. Well, I can yet do something, thank heaven. Give me that check."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Return it, of course—return it before Stanley Heath leaves town. I'll take it over to Elisha Winslow's now, this minute."

"Don't say anything harsh, Sylvia. Please do not blame him, or—"

"I'll wring his neck!"

"Oh, please—please dear—for my sake! I can't let you go if you go in that spirit," pleaded Marcia in alarm.

"There, there—you need not worry for fear I shall maltreat your Romeo, richly as he deserves it," was the response. "I could kill him—but I won't—because of you. Nevertheless, I warn you that if I get the chance, I shall tell him what I think of him. He is terribly to blame and ought to realize it. No married man has any business playing around with another woman."

"I am half afraid to let you go, Sylvia."

"You don't trust me? Don't you believe I love you?"

"I am afraid you love me too much, dear."

"I do love you, Marcia. I never dreamed I could care so intensely for anyone I have known for so short a time. What you did for my mother alone would make me love you. But aside from gratitude there are other reasons. I love you for your own splendid self, dear. Please do not fear to trust me. I promise you I will neither be unjust nor bitter."

"Take the check then and go. I wish I were to see him."

"Well, you're not! Let him do the explaining and apologizing. Let him grovel at your feet. That's what he ought to do!"

Tucking the check into the wee pocket of her sweater, Sylvia caught up her pert beret and perched it upon her curls.

"So long!" she called, looking back over her shoulder as she opened the door. "So long, Marcia! I'll be back as soon as ever I can."

The haste with which she disappeared suddenly precipitated her into the arms of a young man who stood upon the steps preparing to knock.

"Hortie Fuller," cried Sylvia breathlessly. "Hortie! Where on earth did you come from?"

Her arms closed about his neck and he had kissed her twice before she swiftly withdrew, rearranging her curls and saying coldly:

"I cannot imagine what brought you here, Horatio."

CHAPTER XI

"I can't imagine," repeated Sylvia, still very rosy and flustered, but with her most magnificent air, "what brought you to Wilton—I really cannot."

"Can't you?" grinned Horatio cheerfully.

"No, I cannot."

From his superior height of six-feet-two, he looked down at her meager five feet, amusement twinkling in his eyes.

"You wrote me to come, didn't you?" he presently inquired.

"I wrote you to come!"

"Well, at least you led me to suppose you'd like it if I were here," persisted Horatio. "Toward the bottom of page two you said: 'I am positively homesick'; and in the middle of the back of page three you wrote: 'It seems years since I've seen you.'"

"What if I did?" answered the girl with a disdainful shrug.

Nevertheless the dimples showed in her cheeks.

"And that isn't all," Horatio went on. "At the end of page five you wrote: 'Would that you were here!'"

Sylvia bit her lip.

"That was only a figure of speech—what is called poetic license."

"Then you didn't mean it when you said you wished I was here." Horatio was obviously disappointed.

"Why, of course I am pleased to see you, Horatio. It is very nice of you to come to the Cape to meet my aunt and—"

"Darn your aunt!" he scowled. "I didn't come to see her. I am not interested in aunts."

"Take care! I happen to be very keen on this aunt of mine. If she didn't like you, you might get sent home. Don't be horrid, Hortie. I truly am glad you've come. You must make allowance for my being surprised. I haven't got over it yet. How in the world did you contrive to get away at this season? And what sort of a trip did you have?"

"Swell! I stopped overnight in New York at the Gardners. Mother wanted me to deliver a birthday cake to Estelle, who, you may remember, is the mater's god-daughter. She's a pipkin, too. I hadn't seen her since she graduated from Vassar."

Sylvia listened.

She did not need to be told about the Gardners.

They had visited Horatio's family more than once and rumor had it the elders of both families would be delighted were the young people to make a match of it.

"I'm surprised you did not stay longer in New York," Sylvia observed, gazing reflectively at her white shoe.

"New York wasn't my objective. I came on business, you see. Dad gave me two months off so I could get married."

Sylvia jumped.

"I was not aware you were en-

gaged," murmured she in a formal, far-away tone.

"I'm not," came frankly from Horatio Junior. "But I'm going to be. In fact I chance to have the ring with me this minute. Want to see it?"

"I always enjoy looking at jewels," was her cautious retort.

Horatio felt of his pockets. "Where on earth did I put that thing?" he muttered. "Hope I haven't lost it. Oh, here it is."

He took out a tiny velvet case and sprang the catch.

"Oh, Hortie! Isn't it beautiful!" Sylvia cried. "It fairly takes away my breath."

"Try it on."

She shook her head.

"It wouldn't fit me. My hands are too small. Well, I suppose I might try it to please you. But I know it will be too large."

She slipped it on her finger.

"Why, it does fit. How odd!"

"Looks rather well on, doesn't it?" was his comment.

"It is a beautiful ring."

Horatio, standing behind her, twice extended his arms as if to gather her into "them and twice withdrew them, deciding the action to be premature.

At length with a determined squaring of his shoulders, he locked his hands behind him and stood looking on while she continued to twist the ring this way and that.

"Well," yawned he after an interval, "I suppose I may as well put it back in the box."

"Don't you think it would be wiser if I took care of it for you, Hortie?" suggested she demurely. "You are dreadfully careless. Only



"Let Me Go, Hortie! Let Me Go!"

a moment ago you had no idea where the ring was. If it is on my finger you'll know exactly."

"Bully idea! So I shall! Now tell me where you're off to. You were in a frightful hurry when you burst through that door."

"So I was," agreed Sylvia. "And here I am loitering and almost forgetting my errand. Come! We must hurry. I've got to go to town. Want to row over?"

"You bet your life! Show me the boat."

Leading the way to the yellow dory, she took her place opposite him and he pushed off.

As they sat facing one another, her eyes roamed over his brown suit; his matching tie, handkerchief and socks; his immaculate linen; his general air of careful grooming, and she could not but admit he wore his clothes well. He was not a small town product.

Three years in an eastern preparatory school, followed by four years of college life had knocked all that might have been provincial out of Horatio Junior.

"Where do we land?" he asked.

"Anywhere."

He bent forward and with one

final magnificent sweep sent the nose of the dory out of the channel.

"Come on," he called, leaping to the beach.

"But—but, Hortie—I can't get ashore here. I'll wet my white shoes."

"Jump."

"It's too far. Pull the boat higher on the sand."

"Not on your life. Jump, darling! I'll catch you."

"I can't. It's too far."

"Nonsense! Where's your sporting blood? Don't be afraid, I'm right here."

"Suppose you shouldn't catch me?"

"But I shall."

"I don't want to jump," she pouted.

"You'll have to. Come on, Beautiful. You're wasting time."

"I think you are perfectly horrid," she flung out as she sprang forward.

An instant later she was in his arms and tight in a grip she knew herself powerless to loosen.

"Let me go, Hortie! Let me go!" she pleaded.

"I shall, sweetheart. All in good time. Before I set you free, though, we must settle one trivial point. Are we engaged or are we not?"

She made no answer.

"If we're not," he went on, "I intend to duck you in the water. If we are, you shall tell me you love me and go free."

A swift, shy smile illuminated her face.

"I—I—don't want to be ducked, Hortie," she murmured, raising her arms to his neck.

"You precious thing! You shan't be. Now the rest of it. Say you love me."

"I guess you know that."

"But I wish to hear you say it."

"I—I—think I do."

"That's a half-hearted statement."

"I—I—know I do, Hortie."

"Ah, that is better. And I love you Sylvia. Loving you is an old, old story with me—a sort of habit. I shall never change. You are too much a part of me, Sylvia. Now pay the boatman and you shall go. One is too cheap. Two is misery. The fare is three. I won't take less."

"I consider your methods despicable," announced the girl—when at last he reluctantly put her down on her feet. "You blackmailed me."

"I know my Sylvia," he countered. "Perhaps you'd rather I trudged back to New York tomorrow and offered the ring to Estelle."

"Silly! I was only fooling," she protested quickly, linking her arm in his. "This ring would never fit Estelle, dearest. Her hands are tremendous. Didn't you ever notice them? They are almost as large as a man's hands. I never saw such hands."

"She's an awful nice girl just the same."

"I don't doubt that. Come. We must quit fooling now and hurry or we shall never get home. Marcia will be frantic."

"Marcia?"

"My aunt. I have so much to tell you I hardly know where to begin," sighed Sylvia. "It is a long story. You see Marcia has fallen in love with a robber."

"A robber? Your aunt?"

"Uh-huh. I know it sounds odd, but you will understand it better after you have heard the details," nodded Sylvia. "This man, a jewel thief, came to our house one day shipwrecked and hurt, so we took him in. We didn't know then, of course, that he was a thief. Afterward, when we did, he was sick and we hadn't the heart to turn him out. In fact we couldn't have done it anyway. He was too fascinating. He was one of the most fascinating men you ever saw."

"He must have been," Horatio growled.

"Oh, he was. I myself almost lost my heart to him," confessed Sylvia earnestly. "Marcia did."

"Your aunt?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)