

SHIFTING SANDS

By SARA WARE BASSETT

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WNU Service

CHAPTER XI—Continued

—12—

"Yes. Don't look so horrified, Hortie. I realize it seems queer, unconventional; but you'll understand better when you see Marcia. She is no ordinary person."

"I shouldn't think she was." Sylvia ignored the comment. "Well, anyway, the robber hid the loot and of course Marcia and I did all we could to protect him."

"Then one day the Wilton sheriff heard over the radio there had been a jewel robbery on Long Island, and stumbling upon the hidden gems, arrested Mr. Heath."

"Mr. Heath?" "The thief, Hortie! The thief! How can you be so stupid?"

"I get you now. You must admit, though, this is some story to understand."

"I know it sounds confused, but in reality it is perfectly simple if you'll just pay attention. Well," the girl hurried on, "I cannot stop to explain all the twists and turns but anyway, the sheriff brought the burglar to Wilton and Marcia is broken-hearted."

"Broken-hearted! I should think she'd be thankful to be rid of him."

"But you keep forgetting she's in love with him."

"Well, do you wonder I do? What kind of a woman is your aunt? What sort of a gang have you got in with anyway?"

"Hush, Hortie! You mustn't talk like that," Sylvia declared. "This affair is too serious. Marcia and the—the—she and Mr. Heath love one another. It is terrible, because, you see, he has a wife."

"I should call that a stroke of Providence, myself."

"Horatio, I think you are being very nasty. You are joking about something that is no joking matter."

"I beg your pardon, dear. I wasn't really joking. Don't be angry. But this yarn is unbelievable—preposterous," explained the man, taking her hand and gently caressing it.

"Well, when Mr. Heath went away from the homestead, he left behind him a hundred dollars in payment for what Marcia had done for him. It almost killed her."

"She—she—thought she ought to have had more, you mean? A hundred dollars is quite a sum in these days. She would better have grabbed it tight and been thankful. My respect for the bandit chap is rising. I should call him an honest gentleman."

"It is useless to talk with you, Horatio—I can see that," Sylvia said, stiffening. "A delicate affair like this is evidently beyond your comprehension. You cannot understand it. All you do is to make light of every word I say."

"I'm not making light. On the contrary I guess I am taking the situation far more seriously than you are. I don't like the moral tone of this place at all. It looks to me as if you had got into most undesirable surroundings. The sooner you are married to me, young woman, and out of here the better. As for this remarkable aunt of yours—"

"Stop, Horatio! Stop right where you are," bridled Sylvia. "One more word against Marcia and back home you go so fast you won't be able to see for dust. I'm in earnest, so watch your step."

"The woman has bewitched you," frowned Horatio.

"She has. She bewitches everybody. She'll bewitch you."

"Not on your life!"

"Wait and see. Mr. Heath will bewitch you, too."

"The—the—?"

"Yes, the burglar, bandit, thief—whatever you choose to call him. You'll admit it when you meet him. We are going there now."

"To—to—call?"

"To return the check I just told you about. You're the stupidest man I was ever engaged to, Horatio. Why, can't you listen?"

"I am listening with all my ears." "Then the trouble is with your imagination," Sylvia said in her loftiest tone.

They walked on in silence until presently the girl stopped before the gate of a small, weather-beaten cottage.

"Well, here we are at Elisha's," she remarked, turning in at the gate.

"What's he got to do with it?" "Mercy, Hortie. You'll wear me to a shred. Elisha is the sheriff. I'm going to coax him to let me see the prisoner."

They walked up the narrow clamshell path, bordered by iris and thrifty perennials. As they did so, the sound of a radio drifted through the open window.

Sylvia peeped in. Elisha, too intent on the music to hear her step, was sitting before the loud speaker, smoking.

"I've come to see Mr. Heath," she shouted above the walls of a crooning orchestra.

"I ain't sure as I'd orter let you see him," hesitated Elisha.

"I'll take the responsibility." "Say, who you got with you?" called the sheriff.

"He's nobody—just my fiancé."

"Your what?"

"The man I am going to marry."

"You don't tell me! So you're gettin' married, are you? Good lookin' feller! I heard at the post office you had some chap in the offin'. But to let him see Mr. Heath—I dunno as 't would be just—"

"Where I go Horatio goes," Sylvia retorted.

Elisha weakened.

"Wal, in that case—" he began.

She waited to hear no more.

"Come on, Hortie," she called.

Leaving Elisha absorbed in a saxophone solo, the two rounded the corner of the cottage and found themselves in the presence of Stanley Heath.

CHAPTER XII

"SYLVIA!" he exclaimed, springing up and advancing toward her with outstretched hand. "Sylvia! What a brick you are to come!"

Angry as she was, when face to face with him she could not resist the contagion of his smile.

"I'm glad to see you so well," she said. "This is Mr. Horatio Fuller of Alton City."

Horatio looked Heath up and down and then stepped forward and gripped his hand with unmistakable cordiality.

"Mighty glad to know you, sir," was his greeting. "You seem to have got yourself into a jam. If there is anything I can do—any way I can be of service—"

"Horatio, you forget we are not here to make a social call," interrupted Sylvia, who had by this time regained her routed chilliness and indignation. "On the contrary, Mr. Heath, we have come on a very painful errand. We are returning this check to you."

She extended it toward him, gingerly holding its corner in the tips of her fingers as if it were too foul a thing to touch. "It was outrageous of you, insulting, to leave a thing of this sort for Marcia—to attempt to pay in cash—kindness such as hers."

"I'm sorry," Heath stammered.

"Sorry! You couldn't have been very sorry, or you would have sensed such an act would hurt her terribly."

Horatio Fuller fumbled nervously with his tie.

"You deserve," swept on young Sylvia with rising spirit, "to be

thrashed. Hortie and I both think so—don't we, Hortie?"

Horatio Junior turned crimson. "Oh, I say, Sylvia, go easy!" he protested. "Don't drag me into this. I don't know one darn thing about it. Suppose I just step inside and listen to the news flashes while you and Mr. Heath transact your business. It will be less awkward all round. If you want me you can speak."

Nodding courteously in Heath's direction, Horatio Junior disappeared.

"Your Mr. Fuller is a man of nice feeling," Stanley Heath declared looking after him. "I congratulate you."

"Thank you." "Everything is settled then?" She nodded.

"I hope you will be very happy." She did not reply at once. When she did, it was to say with a humility new and appealing:

"I shall be. I never appreciated Hortie until now. I was too silly, vain—feather-headed. I have realized it since knowing Marcia."

"We all want to be different after we have seen Marcia," Stanley Heath said gently.

The girl searched his face.

"I cannot understand you, Mr. Heath," she said. "What has Marcia done that you should have left her as you did? Hasn't she believed in you through thick and thin? Stood up for you against everybody—going it blind at that? Few women would have had such faith in a stranger."

"I realize that. You do not need to tell me," he answered. "It is precisely because she has gone so far I believed her capable of going farther yet—the whole way."

"Well, hasn't she?"

He shook his head.

"No. She has fallen short—disappointed me cruelly. When it came to the final test, her affection collapsed. Oh, she has been wonderful," he added quickly. "Do not think I fail to appreciate that. She has far out-distanced every woman

I ever have known. I simply expected too much of her, doubtless the impossible. Human nature is frail—a woman's heart the frailest thing of all. I have always said so."

"You wrong Marcia," cried Sylvia hotly. "Her heart is not frail. Neither is she the weak sort of person you have pictured. In all the world you could not match her loyalty or the depth of her affection. If after the experience we three have lived through together you have not discovered what she is, it is futile for me to attempt to show you."

"You came into our lives like a meteor—entirely detached from everything. We knew nothing about you and in the face of damaging evidence you offered neither Marcia nor me one word of explanation."

"When you were taken ill, we both nursed you—I willingly, she devotedly. Here lay another difference had you been able to detect it. What happened as a result of this enforced intimacy? You know—know far better than I."

"I fell in love with Marcia," replied the man without an instant's hesitation.

"You fell in love!" Sylvia repeated, her lip curling. "You call it love—the poor thing you offered her! Why, Marcia would have gone to the world's end with you, Stanley Heath, had she the right. She would have faced any humiliation for your sake. If prison doors closed upon you, she would have remained faithful until they swung open and afterward followed you to any corner of the earth in which you chose to begin a new life."

"That's where you're wrong, Sylvia," contradicted Heath. "Marcia was not ready to do that. I tried her out and she refused. When I told her I should return to her, and asked her in so many words whether she was willing to face shame and public scorn for my sake she turned her back on me. She could not go to that length."

"Are you sure she understood?" asked Sylvia, stepping nearer and looking fearfully into his eyes. "There is a shame Marcia never in this world would face for any man."

"It is the shame of wronging another woman; destroying a home. In the villages where we have been brought up, we believe in marriage as a sacred, enduring sacrament—not a bond to be lightly broken. When you offered Marcia less than that—"

"I never offered Marcia any such shameful position, Sylvia," cried Stanley Heath. "I would not so far insult her."

"But you are married."

"That is a lie. Who told you so?"

"The—the telephone message. I heard you call her Joan."

"But, Sylvia, Mrs. Stanley Heath is not my wife. She is my young step-mother, my father's widow. I always have called her Joan."

"Oh! I beg your pardon."

"I see it all now," the man explained. "You have entirely misunderstood the situation. I'm a Junior. Since my father's death, however, people have got out of the way of using the term. Sometimes I myself am careless about it. So Marcia thought—"

"Of course she did. We both did. How were we to know?" Sylvia demanded.

"How, indeed? If an innocent citizen cannot visit a town without being arrested as a criminal within a week of his arrival, why shouldn't he be married without his knowledge? Circumstantial evidence can, apparently, work wonders."

Then suddenly he threw back his head and laughed.

"Bless you, little Sylvia—bless you for setting me right. I told you you were a brick and you've proved it. Thanks to you, everything is now straightened out. Here, give me your hand. How am I to thank you for what you have done? I only hope that young Horatio Fuller of yours realizes what a treasure he is getting."

"He does, Mr. Heath—he does," observed that gentleman, strolling at the same instant through the door and encircling his tiny bride-to-be with his arm. "Haven't I traveled half way across this big country of ours to marry her?"

"Oh, we're not going to be married yet, Hortie," demurred the girl trying to wrench herself free of the big fellow's hold.

"Certainly we are, my dear. Didn't I tell you this morning I came to get married? I was perfectly serious. Dad gave me two months' vacation with that understanding. I must either produce a wife when I get home or lose my job."

"Looks to me as if you had Mr. Fuller's future prosperity in your hands, Sylvia," Heath said.

"I'm not doing any worrying," smiled Horatio. "I—"

The sentence was cut short by

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the radio's loudspeaker:

"The much sought Long Island gem thief was captured this morning at his lodgings in Jersey City. Harris Chalmers, alias Jimmie O'Hara, a paroled prisoner, was taken by the police at his room on K— street. A quantity of loot, together with firearms and the missing jewels were found concealed in the apartment. The man readily admitted the theft. He has a long prison record."

For a second nobody spoke.

Then as if prompted by common impulse, the three on the piazza rushed indoors.

Elisha was sitting limply before the radio.

"Ain't it the beatree?" exploded the astonished sheriff. "That sends the whole case up in the air. All that's needed now to make me out the darndest fool on God's earth is for Eleazer's young nephew-lawyer in New York, who's checking up Heath's story, to wire everything there is O. K. If he does, I'll go bury my head. There goes the telephone. That's him! That's Eleazer—I'll bet a hat."

"Hello—Yes, I heard it.—You ain't surprised? Wal, I am. I'm took off my feet.—Oh, your nephew wired, did he, an' everything's O. K.? That bein' the case, I reckon there's no more to be said. I feel like a shrimp. How do you feel?"

Elisha hung up the receiver.

"Wal, Mr. Heath, the story you told Eleazer an' me is straight as a string in every particular," he announced. "You're free! There ain't nothin' I can say. To tell you I'm sorry ain't in no way adequate. You'll just have to set me down as one of them puddin'-headed idiots that was over-ambitious to do his duty."

"I shall not let it go at that, Mr. Winslow," Stanley Heath exclaimed, stepping to the old man's side and seizing his palm in a strong grip. "We all make errors. Forget it. I'm going to. Besides, you have treated me like a prince since I've been your guest."

"What I can't understand, Mr. Winslow, is why you didn't recognize he was a thoroughbred from the beginning," Horatio Fuller remarked.

"You've a right to berate me, young man—a perfect right. I ain't goin' to put up no defense. 'Twas the circumstances that blinded me. Besides, I had only a single glimpse of Mr. Heath. Remember that. After he was took sick I never saw him again. Had we got acquainted, as we have now, everything would 'a' been different. Findin' them jewels—"

"Great hat, man! I had a diamond ring in my pocket when I came to Wilton, but that didn't prove I'd stolen it."

"I know! I know!" acquiesced the sheriff. "Eleazer an' me lost our bearin's entirely. We got completely turned around."

"A thief with a Phi Beta Kappa key!" Jeered Horatio. "Godfrey!" Then turning to Sylvia, he added in an undertone: "Well, so far as I can see the only person who has kept her head through this affair is our Aunt Marcia."

Elisha overheard the final clause. "That's right!" he agreed with cordiality. "The Widder's head-piece can always be relied upon to stay steady."

"Whose head-piece?" inquired Stanley Heath, puzzled by the term.

"Marcia's. Here in town we call her The Widder."

"Well, you'll not have the opportunity to call her that much longer," Heath laughed.

"You don't tell me!" Elisha regarded him, open-mouthed. "Humph! So that's how the wind blows, is it? Wal, I can see this mix-up would 'a' ended my chances anyway. Marcia'd never have me after this. Disappointed as I am, though, there's a sight of comfort in knowin' she won't have Eleazer neither. He don't come out of the windly a whit better'n me. That's some thin'. In fact it's a heap!"

(TO BE CONTINUED)



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