

Rapture Beyond

by KATHARINE NEWLIN BURT

THIRTEENTH INSTALLMENT

Miss Jocelyn Harlowe came into that room quickly with her proudest grace.

Marcella said, "This is my daughter, Mr. Cating. She has been told of—my loss."

"May I question Miss Harlowe?"

"Why, yes, I suppose you may. Sit down a moment, Jocelyn. I have called in a private detective. He must move very carefully."

She sat down and directed her calm eyes upon the stranger's great expressionless and unbraying orbs.

"You were at home last night?"

"Yes, Mr. Cating."

"At what hour did you retire?"

"About ten o'clock."

"You sleep in the small bedroom halfway down the passage?"

"Yes."

"I've not yet examined your room. May I go in now?"

"May he, Mother?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so."

Marcella's hesitation was curious. It was as though she offered and then withdrew opportunity for investigation.

Jocelyn went first along the hall. For a merciful twenty minutes the inspection of her own room was delayed. Cating stayed first to examine Mary's quarters, Marcella having told him that the woman had gone out for half an hour and that it might be well to take advantage of her absence for this purpose.

During that twenty minutes Jocelyn took down her skirt and tam-o'-shanter and jacket from the closet hanger and hook, folded them as flaily as she could and hid them between her mattress and the springs. Later, she thought, she must throw them into the river.

Mr. Cating came in at his leisure and made a quick and sharp examination of her closet, her bathroom, her window and her fire escape. He looked down for some time at the court below with its opening into the alley.

He went forward again with Marcella and the endless tormenting patter of his questions continued for an hour. Thereafter he made another inspection of the apartment and took fingerprints of all the household and at long last departed.

No sooner had he gone than Jocelyn came quickly to the sound of her mother's terrible weeping.

Marcella crouched down on the brocaded sofa and cried as a victim of long torment might have cried at its abrupt cessation. Jocelyn knelt beside her.

"Mother, dearest! Don't, please don't. Can't we let the jewels go and be happy? We have each other, we have Felix."

"Marry him. Marry him," gasped Marcella.

"Yes, I will. As soon as you like. Next week. I've told him so."

"Ah! Thank God! Then you'll be safe."

"Mother, what are you afraid of? I can't leave you in any danger."

"There's no danger. Nothing real. I am not afraid."

"Mother, you're ill with fear!"

"No. No. It's what I live with always. Jocelyn, let me go now, I'll—I'll calm myself. Cating will find them. Meanwhile I must forget. We'll talk about your wedding."

"You won't tell me then, Mother, the story of your jewels?"

For an instant she thought she would be struck. Her mother's arm was lifted.

"Go to your room. How dare you question me? I'll tell you nothing. Not a word. There is no story. Why shouldn't I have jewels? Why do you think such things? Leave me alone, I don't want anyone; I want to be alone."

Jocelyn remained alone at her window to stare out at the strange lighted city . . . of Mars,

of Martian . . . no, of her own strange race; and to think out coldly and fiercely what must now be done before her wedding day.

She said to Lynda Sandal, "You must find Nick, if he is to be found, and persuade him to return the jewels."

She said to Jocelyn Harlowe, "Before you marry Felix Kent you must prove to Ayleward and to yourself that you do not fear the contents of that safe."

And speaking in the character of Mrs. Felix Kent she said to both these girls, "You must be very careful and you must not be afraid."

The least careful thing she did was to dress that night in the tam and the jacket and the pleated skirt and to climb out of her bedroom window. She meant to find Nick if she could and to persuade him to return the jewels. She would also leave with him the outer semblance of Lynda Sandal for destruction and return in the clothes she carried in a parcel under her right arm.

But she found that Nick was no longer in his rooms nor was Jock Ayleward. They had really gone and had left her no message or address.

She stood on the doorsteps after Fuji had shut her out. She could think of no possible way, without police assistance, of discovering Nick's whereabouts.

Her lonely and fearful cogitation in that lonely and obscurely fearful street was broken by the opening of the door behind her. It opened just wide enough to admit a man whose body for all its solidity seemed to melt through the narrow space. She turned and faced Quayle.

"Lookin' for Jock Ayleward, girl?"

"I'm looking for Nick Sandal, but—"

"I'll take you there, baby, if you sweeten the pot."

"I simply don't know what you mean."

"What's the information worth to you, baby?"

"I'll give you a dollar, two dollars, if you will tell me the address."

He caught both her hands, felt the fingers through her gloves and dropped them.

"No diamonds tonight, eh?"

She was thankful she had slipped off her engagement ring when she had changed her clothes.

"What you got in that bundle? How much swag you got with you?"

"Ten dollars—on my word of honor."

"Bologney! A swell dame like you? Fork it out then, girlie. I'll deliver the goods."

"Not yet. First tell me where Nick is?"

"No, baby. But I'll take you there . . . on my word of honor!"

He mimicked her swift proud young voice so perfectly that she was startled. "Come on now. Have some sense. For a dime, I'd frisk you, bundle and all."

She gave him her money. He went past her rapidly and she followed him. She knew that she was in danger, even in great danger, but she could think of no other swift and certain way of finding Nick.

At the corner of the building they had left, Quayle turned into a passage that without his guidance she would not have seen at all. It ran between blind high walls and smelled of sewage.

It debouched presently into an alleyway almost as narrow and, after a few steps along the gutter of this, Quayle stopped at a door.

"Nick's up there, first landing, the door under the light. I'll wait for you," said Quayle.

"No. They—they will take me home."

"Just as you say, baby. You're as cute as they make 'em, anyway."

She escaped his hands and fled upstairs.

The room was lighted by one hissing gas jet on the wall. It was bare, dirty, silent, but showed

ed traces of recent occupancy. Facing her against another door, a playing card was fastened to the panel by a knife. This card was the Knave of Diamonds. She saw that on a sort of cot against another wall, with his face in his arms, Jock Ayleward lay asleep.

She wanted to see only Nick and stepped softly forward to look for him in the room behind that murderously decorated door.

But Jock started and rose up, disheveled. He was dressed like a workman in a flannel shirt and corduroy trousers.

He hurried toward her, saw that she looked from him to the card against the door and flushing faintly he laughed in a key of triumph.

"Got him, haven't I? You've brought the letters!"

She forced herself to a cold and measured utterance. "I didn't come here in your interests, Mr. Ayleward. I haven't anything for you. I came to get something of value. Is Nick here?"

"He's asleep inside there. He's been ill again. That night, when you were here—no, not here—"

"You mean last night?"

"Saints in heaven, was it only last night?"

"Yes. It was last night while you kept me in your rooms that Nick went to see me. Perhaps you both knew that I had gone out. He came and stole my mother's jewels."

Jock came at her round the corner of a table. His right hand shot out and snapped about her wrist.

"Now call Nick a thief again, you lying—"

"I'm not afraid of you," she said evenly although his face close above hers was almost terrible. "I've called Nick a thief because, though it has hurt me horribly, I absolutely believe that he is one. I know he took the jewels."

"Don't let him hear you say that. Don't let him know you think it. You'll kill him! If he took jewels they're his own."

"Do you know that?"

"I don't know anything," he had abruptly lost his voice and could speak only in a whisper, "except that I am in hell loving you."

"You've decided to throw us over and to make your conscience easy and to ride clear, you've saddled Nick with some blasted theft you think you've discovered."

"Stop. Do you imagine I am happy?"

"Happy? Why should I care?"

She passed him presently and went toward the door on which her fiancé suffered impalement in effigy.

Nick's head, high on a mound of dingy crumpled pillows, frightened Lynda. Her breath caught sharply and, not knowing what she did, she clutched at Ayleward's arm.

"He's—?"

"He's asleep," Jock whispered. "But that's how he looks now when he sleeps. Do you want to wake him up and call him a thief?"

Nick's hollow eyes opened, saw Lynda and he smiled the crooked charming smile.

"Smart girl!" he said huskily. "How'd you find us? You're dead right, Jock. Not easy to lose a woman."

Lynda sat down beside him and drew his hands into both of her own. She was in tears. Jock left them.

"Nick darling," thief or not thief she loved him, "you've been sick again?"

"Pretty bad this time. Got wet," his face was wickedly amused, "climbing up a fire escape into a lady's bedroom window. I thought I was stealing a march on my jailor, Jock Ayleward, and all the while he had the lady to himself."

"Father—Nick—something has happened."

"Ken's found out about me and thrown you over?"

"No. On the contrary, I've decided to marry him almost at once. In a few days."

"Good. That's very sensible of you."

"I must tell you, Nick."

"Oh, sure. The something that happened to you!"

"It didn't happen to me, Nick, but to my mother. And it happened last night. Someone broke in."

"Don't tell me someone has stolen her jewels."

"Yes, Nick. They were hidden behind the little altar in her shrine, that alcove where she prayed, and last night someone entered the apartment, found that difficult hiding place and emptied it. The jewels must be very valuable. I saw them once, a sort of web of stones, diamonds and emeralds and sapphires and rubels too."

"You make my mouth water. We could live like kings, couldn't we, Lynda, if we only had them. I could kidnap you and take you to Bohemia on the other side of the sea."

She rose in panic, in contrition. "Nick, you're tired. Can I get you something?"

He gestured faintly to a glass of medicine beside his bed and she held it, pungent and cloudy,

to his lips. He drank it and lay back.

"Good night," he whispered. "You'll be married—?"

"Next Wednesday at noon. St. Peter's." She discovered tears pouring down her face.

"God bless the bride! I hope you catch the thief in time to wear the web of jewels on your wedding day. If I can hobble I'll be at the church step to scare the color from your poor little Lynda-face; but unlike most fathers I won't give you away. Good-by to Lynda Sandal."

She kissed him with wet salty lips. He touched her cheek with his hand and smiled teasingly.

She went out, feeling her way. She would have gone straight through the outer room and from it if she had not found Jock barring her exit.

"So you think you can just walk over me and out like that, Miss Harlowe?"

"Naturally I think I can walk out of my father's rooms when I please."

"Well, you can't. You must learn something. Thieves are not such easy gentlemen to deal with."

"It was you who took the jewels? Jock, give them to me!"

"What'll you give me for them?"

"What have I got to give?"

"One thing you haven't got: an imagination. But I believe that I can stimulate it."

She found her hands captured in one of his, herself caught up against his hardness, her face turned forcibly and she was kissed upon the lips by a mouth so fierce, so starved, that all memory of Felix's lover-kisses was burned at once away. She turned faint in his tight arms.

When she could see and hear, Jock was bending over her. He was holding water to her lips.

"Please let me go."

"Are you—can you—?"

"Yes. I'll be well when I am—when you are—not so close to me."

She got herself shakily to the door and opened it.

"I shall be married to Felix Kent next Wednesday. Between now and Wednesday I'll go through the safe in his office where I've found out certainly that any such papers as you imagine may exist would necessarily be kept. I will prove to you that I am not afraid of finding them. And by my decision to marry Mr. Kent so quickly I hope that I have proved to you that I did not hesitate because of anything you've ever said to me."

Also you must know of course that there was never any question of—of a duel—for me. I am engaged to marry the man I want for my husband. You are to me—a convict and a thief. I have—a horror of you."

(Continued Next Week)

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