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HEARTS AFIRE

By MARY CHRISTIE

CHAPTER 69

"I'M THROUGH WITH YOU!"

"Yours? Impossible! I tell you, Will's just given it to me!" And Janet stared from the ruby up at her employer, and then back again at the lovely jewel.

But Mrs. Vansittart held her ground.

"I'd wager five thousand dollars to a dime, that's my missing ring! Where did you Will get hold of it?"

Janet drew back. Any aspersion on her beloved was worse than a direct aspersion on herself.

"Are you insinuating—"

"Now, don't be foolish." Mrs. Vansittart patted her arm. "Be a sensible girl and let me see the ring. There's an inside marking that's so faint you can hardly see it, but I'll bet it's there. That will prove beyond a doubt to whom the ring belongs."

"You want me to take it off?" From haughtiness Janet's voice became almost a wail. "Don't you know that's awfully unlucky?"

"Nonsense girl." Mrs. Vansittart's manner was as cool and bracing as a breeze from off the sea. "Here, slip the thing off a minute, and let me have a look at it."

Janet to clear her beloved Will, had to comply. She did so reluctantly.

Mrs. Vansittart took the circlet over to the window, and examined its inside closely, turning and twisting it about.

Then she gave an excited cry. "The markings there, right enough. Come here, Miss Mercer." She took a small magnifying glass from her pocket. "I'm so short-sighted that I usually carry this about with me. I'll look through it. Ah yes! quite distinct! See!"

Janet peered through the glass, and did observe some tiny signs inside the circlet, very faint. One undeniably was the letter V.

"The ring was a gift from my late husband. He scratched his initials here. I remember he looked quite sentimental," rambled on the older woman. Then, returning to the mys-

tery:—"And you say your sweetheart gave you this today? But where did he get it from, I'd like to know?"

Janet bit her lip. "You can ask him yourself. He's calling for me in a few minutes' time."

Mrs. Vansittart seemed embarrassed at the approaching interview.

"Lind of awkward, isn't it? As though I were taking him to task! Not, of course, that he has anything to do with the mysterious disappearings that are going on!"

"How do you mean?"

The other nodded sagely. "Something queer about this house. A sort of 'jinx' on it. Things walk off by themselves."

"Nonsense!" Janet was eminently practical. "You mean there's thieving?"

"If you'd call it that! D'you know—" lowering her voice—"I never could believe the little Page girl tried to steal that money and the diamonds that were in her sash!"

"Of course you couldn't," Janet flared, in quick defense of her friend. "She's as honest as the day. Some spiteful creature who had 'had a down' on her, or who was afraid of being caught themselves, did it. I'll wager every cent I possess that Prudence didn't."

Ensued a pause. Janet kept turning the ring nervously in her fingers. What would Will say when he saw that she had taken it off?

Will was so touchy. Their love-affair had had its stormy passages. Indeed, it seemed as though the squalls had considerably outnumbered the spells of sunshine.

And now—today of all todays—trouble boded.

She knew Will. Quick-tempered, super-sensitive, on the look-out for 'sights', it was the irony of fate that the ring he'd given her, which should be the happy token of a happy future, was to be made the subject of an inquisition that was bound to be distasteful, if not actually leading to a quarrel.

Mrs. Vansittart slipped out of the nursery just as Will's shadow appeared at the open French windows. "Ready, Janet?" His usually rather moody face was smiling.

"What do you say we go to the movies tonight? I hear there's a funny one about married life, and we'd best be forearmed!"

"Sh! Lucia's sleeping." Janet stepped out to the lawn, and laid a hand upon her lover's arm.

His quick glance rested on the bare fingers.

"Where's the ring?" The question came with the sharpness of pistol-shot.

"I—there's something funny about it," stammered Janet. Will's sudden change of manner putting her at a disadvantage. "Where did you get it, Will?"

"This wasn't what she meant to say, at all. It was badly worded, brusque.

"Oh!" He drew back. "So it isn't good enough for you? Is that it?"

"No. No. It's lovely. But tell me where did you get it?"

For answer, he drew from his pocket a little satin-covered case bearing the name of the best jeweller in the vicinity.

"Isn't that guarantee enough?"

"You—you're positive you bought it there?" persisted Janet.

Will flushed darkly. He completely misunderstood the reason of those queries.

"She thinks I've been tight with my money—that the ring's cheap. She's like all women—wanting to look a gift-horse in the mouth!"

Aloud he said, sarcastically:—"Maybe you'd like to go back to the store and change it? Or maybe the money would be more useful to you? Eh?"

"Don't be angry, Will." She bit her lips, to steady them. "I know it's abominable of me, questioning you, but I must know if the ring really did come from Rogers Bros.—consulting the name on the satin box."

"And if I won't tell you, then I suppose you'll tramp straight there and find out for yourself? Have—have women no decency at all?"

"You don't understand, dear—" She tried to touch him on the arm again, but he drew back, resentment on his face.

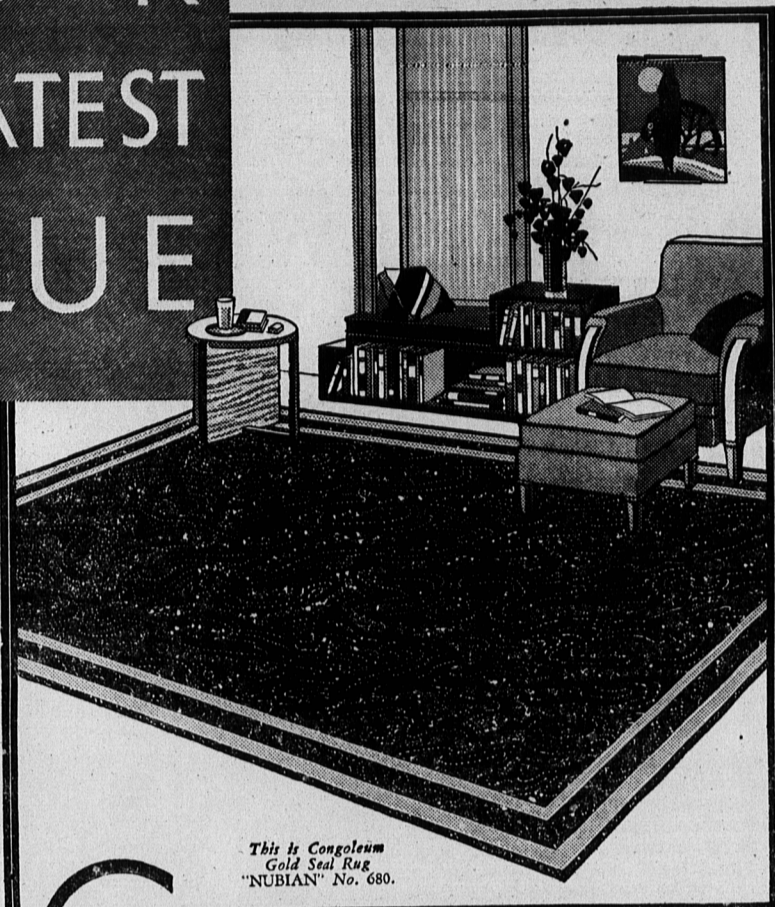
"I understand only too well. You value what I give you only by the grandeur of the store it comes from. Well, I won't keep up my pitiful attempt at deception, since you've been too clever for me! The satin-box from Rogers Bros., was my mother's—I liked it because it was so pretty, and she let me take it, and the ring looked fine in it—but the ring itself I bought for sixty-dollars, in a pawn-shop—yes, a pawn-shop!—you can laugh all you want to, for I'm finished with you, Janet!"

He snatched the ruby ring from her fingers, and hurled it with all his might and main far into the bushes!

(To be Continued.)

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