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offers were made to care for them until their relations should be forthcoming, but the man to whom they clung would not listen to any such proposal.

"I guess they're happy with me," he said. "I will see them through their present trouble."

Childlike, they had eyes and ears only for the prevalent excitement. At last Elsie asked him:

"Where's mamma? You said she was sick. But the men haven't carried her off the ship, an' she wasn't in the boat."

"Don't you worry, Elsie," he said. "I'm going to take you to a big house where you will find everything fixed just right."

His uncle and Mrs. Vansittart approached. The lady's face was no longer hidden.

"What are you going to do with those children?" she inquired.

"There's none here to claim them," he said. "I can't let them leave me in that haphazard way."

"Let me help you. It is a woman's privilege."

She stooped towards the tiny mites.

"You dear little babes," she said softly, "I can take mother's place for a time."

They knew her quite well, of course, and she seemed to be so much kinder and nicer now in her smart clothes than she was in the crowded disorder of the bedroom.

Mamie looked at Elsie, and the self-reliant Elsie said valiantly:

"Mamie 'n' me 'll be glad, if Mr. Pyne comes too."

Mr. Traill, who had never before seen tears in Mrs.

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Vansittart's eyes, found a ready excuse for her womanly sympathy.

"It seems to me," he said genially, "we are all of one mind. Come this way, Etta. And mind you stick close to us, Charlie, or the hall porter will throw you out if you attempt to enter the hotel in that costume."

He rattled on cheerfully, telling them how clothiers and milliners, and all the store-keepers in the town if they were needed, would wait on them at the hotel.

"In a couple of hours," he said, "you both can obtain sufficient things to render you presentable for a day or two. Don't forget we dine at eight. We ought to be a jolly party. I have asked Stanhope and his mother and those two girls to join us."

"Oh," cried Mrs. Vansittart faintly, "you must excuse me. I—"

"Now, Etta, my dear, you will not desert us tonight. Why, it seemed to me to be the only way in which we could all come together at once. I am only too sorry that Mr. Brand cannot be present. Surely he might have been spared from further duty at the lighthouse after what he has endured."

"They offered to relieve him at once, but he declined," said Pyne.

He looked out of the window of the carriage in which they were driving to the hotel. Constance had told him of the dinner arrangement, but he wished to ascertain if the definite absence of the lighthouse-keeper would tend to reassure Mrs. Vansittart.

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He was not mistaken. She did not reply at once. When she spoke it was with a sigh of relief.

"I will not be very entertaining, I fear, but the young people will have plenty to tell you."

"For goodness sake, Etta, don't class yourself among the old fogies," cried Mr. Traill. "Look at me, fifty-five and lively as a grasshopper."

"Please, is Mamie 'n' me 'vited, too?" whispered Elsie to Pyne.

"You two chicks will be curled up among the feathers at eight o'clock," he told her. "Don't you go and worry 'bout any dinner-parties. The sooner you go to sleep, the quicker you'll wake up in the morning, and then we're going out to hunt — for what, do you think?"

"Candies," said Mamie.

"Toys," cried Elsie, going one better.

"We're just going to find two of the loveliest and frilliest and pinkiest-cheeked dolls you ever saw. They'll have blue eyes as big as yours, Elsie, and their lips will be as red and round as yours, Mamie. They'll talk and say — and say all sorts of things when you pinch their little waists. So you two hurry up after you've had your supper, say your prayers and close your eyes, and when you open them you'll be able to yell for me to find that doll-store mighty sharp."

"Say, Charlie," cried his uncle, "I never heard you reel off a screw like that before. Now, if I didn't know you were a confirmed young bachelor, I would begin to have suspicions. Anyhow, here's the hotel."

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Two hours later, when uncle and nephew met in the private sitting-room where busy waiters were making preparations for dinner, Traill drew the younger man to the privacy of a window recess.

"Charlie," he confided, "affairs are in a tangle. Do you realize that my marriage was fixed for today?"

"That's so," was the laconic answer.

"Of course the wedding was postponed by fate, and, to add to my perplexities, there is a new attitude on Mrs. Vansittart's part. It puzzles me. We have been friends for some years, as you know. It seemed to be a perfectly natural outcome of our mutual liking for each other that we should agree to pass our declining years together. She is a very beautiful and accomplished woman, but she makes no secret of her age, and the match was a suitable one in every respect."

"You can see as far through a stone wall as most people."

Pyne knew that his uncle's sharp eyes were regarding him steadily, but he continued to gaze into the street.

There was a moment's hesitation before Mr. Traill growled:

"You young dog, you have seen it too. Mrs. Vansittart avoids me. Something has happened. She has changed her mind. Do you think she has heard about Edith?"

"Edith! Oh, of course — Enid must be christened afresh. No; that isn't it. It would not be fair to you to say that I think you are mistaken. But, from

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what I know of the lady, I feel sure she will meet you fairly when the time comes."

"Ah, you agree with me, then?"

"In admitting a doubt — in advising the delay you have already suggested — yes."

"She told you what I had written?"

"More than that, she asked me if I was aware of its explanation."

"And you said?"

"Exactly what I said to you. You are both sensible people. I can hardly imagine that any misunderstanding can exist after an hour's talk."

Mr. Traill looked at his watch. A carriage stopped at the hotel.

"Here's Stanhope, and his mother," cried Pyne; so his uncle hurried off to receive his guests.

Lady Margaret was a well-preserved woman of aristocratic pose. But her serenity was disturbed. Although the land was ringing with the fame of her son's exploit, and her mother's heart was throbbing with pride, there had been tearful hours of vigil for her. Not without a struggle had she abandoned her hope that he would make a well-endowed match.

When Constance and Enid arrived she was very stately and dignified, scrutinizing, with all a mother's incredulity, the girl who had caused her to capitulate.

But Enid scored a prompt success. She swept aside the almost unconscious reserve with which Jack's mother greeted her.

"You knew," she murmured wistfully. "We did

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not. They would not tell us. How you must have suffered until the news came that he had escaped."

Lady Margaret drew the timid girl nearer and kissed her.

"My dear," she whispered, "I am beginning to understand why Jack loves you. He is my only son, but you are worthy of him."

Mrs. Vansittart's appearance created a timely diversion. She had obtained a black lace dress. It accentuated the settled pallor of her face, but she was perfectly self-possessed, and uttered a nice womanly compliment to the two girls, who wore white demi-toilette costumes.

"You look delightful," she said. "When all is said and done, we women should never despise our wardrobe. That marvelous lighthouse had one grave defect in my eyes. It was dreadfully callous to feminine requirements."

Here was a woman rejuvenated, restored to her natural surroundings. They accounted for the subtle change in her by the fact that they had seen her hitherto under unfavorable conditions. Even Pyne, not wholly pleased with her in the past, found his critical judgment yielding when she apologized sweetly to Lady Margaret for her tardiness.

"There were two children saved from the wreck. Poor little mites, how they revelled in a hot bath! I could not leave them until they were asleep."

"I needed two hot baths," said Pyne. "No. 1 dug

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me out of the shell, and No. 2 helped me to recognize myself."

During dinner there was much to tell and to hear. Mrs. Vansittart said little, save to interpose a word now and then when Constance or Enid would have skimmed too lightly the record of their own services.

They did not hurry over the meal. All were in the best possible spirits, and the miseries of the Gulf Rock might never have existed for this lively company were it not that four among them bore clear tokens of the deprivations they had endured.

A waiter interrupted their joyous chatter at its highest. He bent over Mr. Traill and discreetly conveyed some communication.

"I am delighted," cried the millionaire heartily. "Show him in at once."

He rose from his chair to do honor to an unexpected guest.

"You will all be pleased to hear," he explained, "that Mr. Brand is ashore, and has come to see us."

Mrs. Vansittart stifled the cry on her lips. The slight color which had crept into her pale cheeks yielded to a deathly hue. It chanced that the others were looking expectantly towards the door and did not notice her.

Brand entered. In acknowledging Mr. Traill's cordial welcome he smilingly explained his presence.

"My superiors sent me emphatic orders to clear out," he said, "so I had no option but to obey. I conveyed Mr. Emmett to suitable quarters and hastened home,

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but found that the girls were playing truant. My housekeeper insisted that I should eat, else she would not be satisfied that I still lived, but I came here as quickly as possible."

At that instant his glance, traveling from one to another of those present, fell on Mrs. Vansittart.

He stood as one petrified. The kindly words of his host, the outspoken glee of the girls at his appearance, died away in his ears in hollow echoes. His eyes, frowning beneath wrinkled brows, seemed to ask if he were not the victim of some unnerving hallucination. They were fixed on Mrs. Vansittart's face with an all-absorbing intensity, and his set lips and clenched hands showed how utterly irresistible was the knowledge that, indeed, he was not deceived — that he was gazing at a living, breathing personality, and not at some phantom product of a surcharged brain.

She, too, yielding before the suddenness of an ordeal she had striven to avoid, betrayed by her laboring bosom that she was under the spell of some excitement of overwhelming power.

She managed to gain her feet. The consciousness that Constance, Enid, Lady Margaret even, were looking at her and at Brand with amazed anxiety, served to strengthen her for a supreme effort.

"Mr. Stephen Brand — and I — are old acquaintances," she gasped. "He may misunderstand — my presence here — tonight. Indeed — in this instance — I am not to blame. I could not — help myself. I am

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always — trying to explain — but somehow — I never succeed. Oh!”

With an agonized sigh she swayed listlessly and would have fallen had not Pyne caught her.

But she was desperately determined not to faint — there. This was her world, the world of society. She would not yield in its presence.

Her eyes wandered vaguely, helplessly, from the face of the man towards the others. Constance had hastened to her assistance, and the knowledge that this was so seemed to stimulate her to a higher degree. With fine courage she grasped the back of a chair and summoned a wan smile to her aid.

“You will forgive me — if I leave you,” she murmured. “I am so tired — so very tired.”

She walked resolutely towards the door. Brand drew aside that she might pass. He looked at her no more. His wondering daughter saw that big drops of perspiration stood on his forehead.

Mr. Traill, no less astonished than the rest, offered to conduct Mrs. Vansittart to her room.

“No,” she said, “I will go alone. I am used to it now, after so many years.”

There was a ring of heartfelt bitterness in her voice which appealed to more than one of the silent listeners.

As the door closed behind her, Brand seemed to recover his senses.

“I must ask your pardon, Mr. Traill,” he said quietly. “I assume that the lady who has just left us did not expect to see me here tonight. It would be idle to deny

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that the meeting was a shock to both of us. It revived painful memories.”

Mr. Traill, scarce knowing what he said, so taken aback was he, exclaimed hastily:

“Mrs. Vansittart claimed you as an old acquaintance. The odd thing is that you, at any rate, did not discover that fact earlier.”

The lighthouse-keeper looked round the table. He saw pain in many eyes, but in Pyne’s steady gaze there was encouragement.

“Mrs. Vansittart!” he said slowly. “Is that her name? I did not know. How should I, the recluse, hear of her? And in your first message to the rock you called her Etta. When I knew her her name was Nanette, for the lady who calls herself Mrs. Vansittart was my wife, is yet for aught I know to the contrary.”

“Father!” Constance clung to him in utmost agitation. “Do you mean that she is my mother?”

“Yes, dear one, she is. But let us go now. I fear my home-coming has brought misery in its train. I am sorry indeed. It was wholly unexpected. Poor Nanette! She ever deceived herself. I suppose she hoped to avoid me, as if fate forgot the tears in the comedy of life.”

“Can I not go to her?” asked Constance, white-faced and trembling.

“No, my child, you cannot. Has she claimed you? She cast you off once. I might have forgiven her many things — never that. Come, Enid! What need for

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your tears? We faced worse troubles together three days ago, and you, at any rate, can look forward to happiness. Good-by, Lady Margaret, and you, too, Mr. Traill. I will see you tomorrow, I hope. Forgive me for my unconscious share in this night's suffering."

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. VANSITTART GOES HOME

STEPHEN BRAND and the two girls passed silently down the broad stairs of the hotel unaccompanied by any of the others. There was nothing incomprehensible in this, nor any savor of discourtesy.

In the first place, Mr. Traill was so profoundly shocked by the lighthouse-keeper's revelation that he collapsed into a chair and remained there, bowed and wordless, for many minutes. Both Pyne and Stanhope did move towards the door, but Enid, watchful, self-sacrificing, eager to save those she loved from further pain, telegraphed an emphatic order to Stanhope to remain where he was, and Pyne murmured to him:

"Guess she's right, anyhow. We'll all feel a heap better in the morning."

The person who exhibited the clearest signs of distress was Lady Margaret. Her position was one of extraordinary difficulty. Three of the actors in the breathless scene which had been sprung on her with the suddenness of an explosion were absolute strangers in her life before that evening.