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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.

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Brand she knew, indeed, but only by sight. She had met Constance and Enid occasionally, at arm's length, so to speak, regarding them truly as dangerous young persons where marriageable sons were concerned. Enid had justified her suspicions, and her ladyship had yielded so far as to give her approval to an engagement she could not prevent.

Circumstances had conspired to force her hand. Stanhope, being an outspoken young man, had made no secret of his desperate resolve to rescue Enid, so the newspapers supplied the remainder of the romance, and even Lady Margaret herself had contributed to it under the magnetic influence of the hour.

It was one thing, however, to be thrilled with the adventures of the rock-bound people, but quite another to figure prominently in connection with a social scandal of the first magnitude. She knew Penzance too well to hope that the incident would sink into oblivion. Obviously, the matter could not rest in its present stage. She must expect disagreeable disclosures, significant head-shakings of those who knew little and wanted to know more. All the tea-table artillery of a small town would be focused on her defensive position were she loyal to the girl whom her son had chosen as his help-mate.

This same son, too, after he had recovered from the amazement of Mrs. Vansittart's dramatic departure and Brand's admission, betrayed a composure that was distinctly irritating.

"You won't mind if we smoke, mother," he said.

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"The situation requires tobacco. Don't you feel like that, Pyne?"

"If Lady Margaret doesn't object, I admit that different sorts of poison might act as tonics," answered Pyne. "Here, uncle, try a brandy and soda. Lady Margaret, a glass of champagne. I've been expecting a disturbance, but didn't look for it tonight."

"Why do you say that, Charlie?" asked Mr. Traill, rising and stretching his limbs as a man who tests his bones after a heavy fall.

"It was hanging around, just as one prophesies a storm after an electrical feeling in the air. Mrs. Vansittart recognized Brand, and made her calculations accordingly. Let us give her the credit due to her. As soon as she discovered him, the marriage project was off."

"I had that kind of impression myself. Glad I mentioned it to you, now."

"Of course you are. I'll bet any reasonable sum that Mrs. Vansittart intended to leave Penzance tomorrow as soon as she had made you understand that she could not, under any circumstances, become my aunt."

A ghost of a smile flitted across Mr. Traill's face. His nephew's way of putting things was delightfully unequivocal.

"What we are apt to lose sight of," continued Pyne, "is the manner in which Brand received what must have been a staggering blow. He met his wife tonight after a separation of more than twenty years. And how he

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took it! When he spoke, it was really in her behalf. The thing is too amazing. Of course, now that the thunder and lightning have started, the sky will clear all the sooner."

"Unhappily such affairs do not arrange themselves so readily," snapped Lady Margaret. She was becoming more angry with each wave of reflection. "Young men like you do not realize the effect of such — such unpleasant exposures on family life. How will the early history of her parents affect the future of Constance Brand? As for the other girl —"

Her ladyship threw up her hands in helpless abandonment. To her mind, the adoption of poor Enid, the sea-waif, assumed a darker appearance now that Brand's matrimonial adventures revealed sinister features.

Jack Stanhope caught her by the shoulder.

"Mother," he cried, "before you say another word let me tell you something you ought to know. Enid is Mr. Traill's daughter!"

Now this good woman loved her son dearly. All her thoughts were of him and for him. Her look of blank incredulity yielded to the confirmation she saw writ on all three faces.

She burst into tears.

"Apparently I am the last person to be taken into anybody's confidence," she sobbed.

"Madam," said Mr. Traill, bending over her, "in this instance, at least, you have no cause to feel aggrieved. Neither the girl herself, nor her sister by

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adoption, nor Mrs. Vansittart, to whom, until the past half-hour, I considered myself to be engaged, is aware of the undoubted fact which your son has just told you. Let me say that I, as her father, am proud to think she has won the affections of such a man as Stanhope. There is no reason why you, his mother, should not be equally satisfied with the pedigree and prospects of my daughter."

His calm assumption of a rank equal if not superior to her own was convincing to a woman of her temperament. Assuredly that evening was a memorable one to her ladyship. The repose of Vere de Vere was rudely shocked for once. Nevertheless, the knowledge that her lifelong ambition had been realized in a way little dreamed of by any of those most concerned was in itself consoling. Mr. Traill, quite unconsciously, loomed large in the social eye of Penzance, and the widowed lady had not been so long withdrawn from the wealth-worshipping world of London as to be wholly unleavened with the worship of the golden calf.

So it was with quickened interest that she set herself to listen to the story of Enid's parentage, and, if her fear of local gossip-mongers shrank as her perception of Enid's real social position increased, much may be forgiven to the motherly sentiment that no wife can be too good for an excellent son.

Meanwhile Brand and the sorrow-laden girls, ushered by obsequious servants to the entrance hall, were constrained to comfort themselves with true British phlegm in view of the interest caused by their appearance.

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The hour was not late, about half past nine. Even whilst the hall porter was summoning a cab the news spread, within and without, that the lighthouse-keeper and his daughters, whose exploits filled the minds of all men, were standing near the door.

Several people, complete strangers, came to them and offered warm congratulations. A smart journalist pressed forward and wove his own complimentary utterances into an interview. A crowd gathered quickly on the pavement. Policemen, those marshals of every English demonstration, cleared a path for them through the throng. So, with smiling words on their lips and anguish in their hearts, they made a triumphal exit. How little could the friendly enthusiasts who cheered them realize that these three had been atrophied by the deadly malevolence of fate in the very hour when a great achievement had ended happily.

Enid suffered almost as keenly as Brand and his daughter. Their joys and sorrows were hers. The startling nature of Brand's avowal rendered it difficult for either Enid or Constance to piece together certain fragmentary memories of Mrs. Vansittart's odd behavior during her enforced sojourn on the rock. So thoroughly had she shattered those dimly outlined impressions by the quietly vivacious charm of her manner at dinner that they both experienced a jumble of sensations. A terrified woman, in wet and torn clothing, cowering in the gaunt interior of a storm-girt lighthouse, is a very different being when attired in expensive garments and surrounded by the luxuries of a first-class hotel.

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It was a relief to drive to their cottage in silence, yet, so easily moulded is our human clay, it was a greater relief when the tension of the noisy rattle of the cab was relaxed. It cost some effort to assure Mrs. Sheppard, a buxom, motherly soul of sixty or thereabouts, that they could not possibly eat any supper. The effort was forthcoming. They pleaded weariness, and at last they were alone.

Constance knelt by her father's side when he dropped listlessly into the armchair placed in his accustomed corner.

"Now, dad," she said, bravely unemotional, "there will be no more tears. Tell me all that I ought to know."

Enid drew a hassock to his feet and seated herself there, clasping her hands about her knees.

"Whatever she did I am sorry for her," said the girl decisively. "And she cannot have been a really bad woman, dad, or *you* would not have loved her once."

Brand sighed deeply. His strong will had deserted him for a little while. He shrank from the ordeal before him. Why should he be called on to sully the mirror of his daughter's innocence by revealing to her the disgrace of her mother?

Constance caught something of the dread in his soul.

"Don't tell me if it hurts you, dad. I am content to bear more than I have borne tonight if it lessens your sufferings," she whispered.

He placed an arm around each of them.

"It is God's will," he said, "that I should have to

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face many trials at a period when I expected nothing but some few years of quiet happiness."

"Nothing in this world can part us from you," said Constance.

"Oh, nothing," agreed Enid solemnly, nestling closer. Her earnestness was helpful. He smiled wistfully.

"You forget, Enid, that there is a grave chance of you, at any rate, leaving me for another," he said.

She blushed.

"That is the worst of girls getting married," she protested. "They are supposed to be delighted because they are going to live with strange people. Girls who are of that mind cannot be happy at home. If I thought that being married to Jack implied separation from you and Constance —"

"You would give him up, and weep your eyes out." He pressed her pouting lips together as he went on: "Now, my dear ones, I wish both of you to be prepared for very unexpected changes. Two most important events in your lives have taken place within a few hours. Constance, if you saw your mother tonight, Enid also saw her father. I have known for two days that Enid's father is Mr. Traill."

For an instant, it must be confessed, Constance and Enid alike feared that the mental and physical strain he had undergone had temporarily deranged him. It was not sheer incredulity but real terror he saw in their eyes. Somehow, their self-effacement in his behalf touched him more keenly than anything else had done during this troubled period.

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He bowed his head. A strong man in agony cannot endure the scrutiny of loving eyes.

"Enid," he said brokenly, "my words to you must be few. Good fortune needs but slight explanation. The proofs of my statement I do not possess, but Mr. Traill's letter to me could not have been written by such a man if he were not sure of his facts. Here it is. Read it aloud."

He handed her her father's plain-spoken communication. Constance, incapable of deeper depths of amazement than those now probed, looked over her sister's shoulder. Together they deciphered the somewhat difficult handwriting of a man whose chief task for years had been to sign his name.

This drawback was good in its result. They persevered steadily to the end. Then Enid, the comforter, broke down herself.

"It cannot be true, dad," she cried. "I have been one of your daughters all my life. Why should I be taken from you now?"

"I believe it is quite true," said Brand quietly, and the need there was to console her was beneficial to himself. "Mr. Traill speaks of proofs. You have met him. I exchanged barely a word, a glance, with him, but it is not believable that he would make these solemn statements without the most undeniable testimony."

"Indeed, Enid," murmured Constance, "it sounds like the truth, else he would never have spoken so definitely of my father's first claim on your affections."

Brand stroked the weeping girl's hair.