

The Pillar of Light

"But —" she panted, in that unnerving whisper — "I treated you so vilely. I left you to join the man you had fought to save me. I deserted my husband and my child for the sake of the money he bequeathed to me. In the lust of wealth I strove to crush you out of my heart. And now that God has humbled me I must humble myself. Stephen, I am not your wife. I obtained a divorce —"

"Nanette," he cried, "I cannot bear to see you kneeling at my feet. I ask no revelations. I forgive you any wrong you may have done me, fully and freely, as I hope to be forgiven."

She yielded to his pleading and allowed him to raise her. For an instant she was clasped to his breast.

"It would be happiness to die in your arms, Stephen," she said wildly. "I do not deserve it, I know, but Heaven is merciful."

The dreadful idea possessed him that in her weak state this passionate wish might be granted.

"Nanette!" he cried, "you must control yourself. If you will not promise to sit down and talk quietly I will leave you."

She obeyed him instantly.

"I don't care how much you scold me," she said, "but you must not go away. I meant to see you before I left Penzance. I came here that night. I looked through the window. I saw my daughter and her adopted sister listening to you and weeping because of a mother's shame. Then I must have lost my senses. I

The House That Stood Upon a Rock

ran away. I remember nothing else until I woke up to find Constance caring for me — in your house."

He tried to break in upon the trend of her thought. This was by no means the line he had intended to pursue. His hope was to soothe and calm her, to part from her in amity and without giving her cause to deplore a loss of dignity.

"I am only too pleased that when illness overtook you you were committed to my care and to Constance. Poor girl! She thought you were dead."

"Did you tell her that?"

"No, but I allowed it to be assumed, which is the same thing."

"When did she know the truth?"

"In the hotel — after you left the room. I had to say something. It was — better — for you — that I should say you were my wife."

"So, even in that trying moment, you strove to shield me from unjust suspicions. Stephen, how could I have acted towards you as I did?"

Again he endeavored to lead her to talk of the future rather than the past.

"There is one great surprise in store for you," he said. "But it is a pleasant one in every way. Enid is Mr. Traill's daughter."

"I am glad," she said simply. "I do not understand, but you must tell me another time. Just now, I can think only of you, and of myself. You *must* listen, Stephen. I will do all that you demand, hide myself anywhere, but you must know everything. When

The Pillar of Light

we parted, when I deserted you to nurse a dying man, I was foolish and wilful, but not wholly abandoned. Nor have I ever been. I was rich enough to gratify my whims, and, for a time, I lived in Paris, on the Riviera, in Florence and in Biarritz. But I was always meeting people who knew you, and, although my wealth, and perhaps my good looks, kept me in a certain set, I felt that our friends invariably took your side and despised me. That embittered me the more. At last your father died, and I saw some vague reference to your disappearance from society. I employed agents to trace you. They failed. Then I went to America and lived on a ranch in Nebraska, where I obtained a divorce from you on the ground of desertion. Desertion, Stephen! That was the plea I raised."

She gave a mocking little laugh. Brand, thinking it best to fall in with her mood, sat in silence on a chair which he had drawn close to the window. From his house he could see the wide sweep of Mount's Bay. The Trinity tender was steaming out from the harbor. It struck him as an extraordinary fact that this was the day of his relief had he served his full two months on the rock.

Today, by his own design, the second era of his checkered career would have come to a peaceful close. Within a little while he would have taken Constance, and Enid, if unmarried, on that long-contemplated Continental tour. But the hurricane came, when "the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm," and the pillar, the refuge of his distress, became the centre of influences destined to mold his life afresh.

The House That Stood Upon a Rock

What did it all mean? He bowed his face into his hands. He heard his wife's low, sweet voice continue:

"I lived there nearly six years. Then my manager died. He was an Englishman named Vansittart. Within a month his wife died. There was some fever about the place, and I became frightened. A longing for the old life seized me, and I went East, but not as Mrs. Brand, the name which I always bore in Nebraska. I had done with it and with you, as I thought — Constance never entered my mind save as a feeble memory — so I became Mrs. Etta Vansittart."

Brand raised his head and looked at her again. She was speaking now in a curiously subdued tone. She was giving evidence against herself, and giving it truly.

"In Newport, Saratoga, and the Adirondacks in summer, in New York during the winter, I lived in a drowsy content. People who take drugs must reach that state, but their condition is pitiable when they are aroused. Many men asked me to marry them. I laughed at the idea. At last I met Mr. Traill. We were friendly for quite five years. I came to Europe, to the Engadine, where I found that Mrs. Stephen Brand's troubled life was forgotten, but Mrs. Vansittart, the rich widow, was popular. There I saw Mr. Traill again. He offered me marriage, and I fancied it would be well to ally myself with a man so distinguished and widely known on both sides of the Atlantic. I did not love him. I respected and admired him — that was all. I accepted him, but stipulated that I should go back to the States and wind up my affairs there, returning to Paris for the

The Pillar of Light

wedding. That was necessary, if I would maintain my deception. So, Stephen, after a lifetime of vagary and wandering, this is the result. I am bespattered by the mud of my own acts; I see my forgotten daughter grown to beautiful womanhood; I meet my husband, whom I might have loved and honored, patiently following the path into which my neurotic impulses drove him. Stephen, do you think my punishment is completed?"

The bitter self-condemnation in her voice was not defiant but subdued. She had traveled far in spirit through the Vale of Tears since the Gulf Rock barred her onward progress.

Though she asked a question she seemed to expect no answer. Brand, thinking to render her task less trying, was still looking through the window and watching the steady churning of the tender towards Carn du and thence to the lighthouse.

At last he spoke:

"When I entered this room," he said, "I meant to avoid a scene which must have been as exhausting to you as it is painful to me. Yet as it happens, it is well for both of us that you have lifted the veil from what has gone before. Now it should be dropped—forever."

"Tell me what you wish me to do. I will obey."

"Don't you think it will be better if we defer a final settlement? You have already taxed your frail powers beyond their limit."

"No, Stephen. Speak now. I will not faint nor yield to weakness. I will live. Have no fear. Death

The House That Stood Upon a Rock

does not come as a skilful healer of the wounded conscience. It may be sought, and I have thought of that. But Constance would suffer, and, if it will spare her pain, I will endure to the end. Surely I owe her that reparation. I committed moral suicide once in my life. Let it suffice!"

The fixed plan of the study, with its carefully arranged phrases, was not so readily acceptable to the man now. What would become of his wife if he drove her forth, this time of his own accord, to live in mournful solitude, brooding over a wasted life and looking forward only to an occasional visit from her daughter?

A host of impossible ideas jostled in his brain. He strove desperately to find some easy way of suggesting the settlement which appealed to him as the fitting one, but his soul revolted from the notion of formulating a decree of banishment against this ethereal, ghost-like creature who had been thrust back into his very keeping from out the heart of the storm.

He stood up and faced her, careless whether or not the stress of inward conflict in his eyes belied the calm gravity of his words.

"Perhaps you are stronger than I," he said. "We must meet again, tomorrow or next day. Some of the young people will be returning soon. If you wish it, I will not tell them I have seen you."

"It is for you to decide, Stephen."

She seemed to be quite hopeless, resigned to any twist or turn of fate. Here was a broken woman, indeed, and the spectacle was torturing. He had never under-

The Pillar of Light

stood her as a bright young girl and a bride of nineteen. He did not understand her now. A man of his oak-like qualities could not grasp the nature of a woman who bent as a reed before each puff of wind.

It was hard to utter even a commonplace farewell. She held him by her very helplessness. But the rapid trot of a horse caught his ears, and, whilst he stood irresolute, he saw Constance alighting from the dog-cart. His wife looked out, too. They heard their daughter laughingly regret that she could not ask Mr. Pyne to luncheon — meals were irregular events just then.

Brand felt a timid hand grasping his, and a choking sob proclaimed that Constance's mother was crying.

He stooped with a motion that was almost a caress.

"Don't cry," he said. "I cannot bear it."

"I can bear anything, Stephen," she sobbed, "if only you will let me stay with you forever."

"Do you mean that, Nanette?" he gasped, incredulously.

"I have prayed, yes, dared to pray, that it might be so ever since I saw my child. She has brought us together again. Let us not part, for her sake, and for mine, Stephen, if it is not too late."

So Constance, hastening up the garden path, could not believe her eyes when she saw her father lift her mother into his arms and kiss her.

Mary, the maid, never ceased wondering why every other member of her sex in Laburnum Cottage should be tearful yet ridiculously happy that afternoon. Mrs. Vansittart wept, and Miss Constance wept, and Miss

The House That Stood Upon a Rock

Enid wept when she came in, whilst Mrs. Sheppard was weeping at intervals all day.

Nevertheless they were all delighted in their woe, and Mrs. Sheppard, although she cooked a tremendous dinner, never scolded her once.

It was also a remarkable thing that the invalid lady should insist that she was strong enough to come downstairs that evening. She did not eat a great deal, poor thing, but she looked ever so much better, and seemed to find all her pleasure in gazing alternately at the master and Miss Constance, and in listening to every word they said.

In the garden, next night, the moon being now very brilliant indeed, Pyne said to Constance that the step-aunt idea having fizzled out he guessed that the lady who figured in that unclassified degree of relationship would pose more satisfactorily as a mother-in-law.

He said other things that have been said in many languages since men began to woo women, but the phrases are hackneyed save to those who listen, and need not be repeated here.

But why two marriages should take place after extraordinarily short engagements, no one in all Penzance knew save Lady Margaret Stanhope, and she, *mirabile dictu* (being a woman), kept her counsel. It created no end of a sensation when Constance was described in the London newspapers as "only daughter of Sir Stephen Brand, Bart, of Lesser Hambledon, Northumberland." Local gossip quickly exhausted itself, as both weddings took place in London, the only available items being

The Pillar of Light

the magnificence of the diamonds given to Enid and Constance by Mr. Traill, and the fact that, in Constance's case, "the bride's mother" was described as "looking charming in a silver-gray costume trimmed with point d'Alencon lace."

Even when confronted with this momentous statement by Mrs. Taylor-Smith, Lady Margaret only shrugged her shoulders and purred:

"A romance, my dear, a romance of real life."

On the day following the departure of two happy couples for the Continent — Mr. and Mrs. Pyne to Italy, Lieut. and Mrs. Stanhope to the Riviera, with intent to meet in Rome at Easter — a quieter and more sedate couple took train at Waterloo for Southampton, bound for the Far West.

Although a Nebraska decree of divorce does not hold good in English law, Lady Brand wished to be married again in the State which sanctioned her earlier folly. Her husband agreed readily. Everybody, including Mr. Traill and Lady Margaret, had arranged to turn up at the north-country mansion in May. Provided there were no hurricanes, Sir Stephen thought his wife's health would benefit by the double sea voyage, and he was personally delighted to see the New World for the first time in her company.

Their steamer sailed from Southampton at 11 A.M. After dinner that night they were abreast of the Gulf Rock, and Brand pointed out to his wife its occulting gleam from afar.

"It makes me feel very humble," she said, after they

The House That Stood Upon a Rock

had watched its radiance darting out over the tumbling seas for a long time in silence.

"Why, sweetheart?" he asked.

"It is so solemn, so intense in its energy, so splendidly devoted to its single purpose."

"Now, it is an odd thing," he replied, as watchful to check her occasional qualms of retrospect as he had been during many a long night to keep that same light at its normal state of clear-eyed brilliance, "but it does not appeal to me in that way. It is winking portentously, as much as to say 'You old humbug, there you are, leaving me after all these years, and running away with your own wife.'"

THE END.

