

THE PILLAR of LIGHT

... By ...
Louis Tracy,

Author of
"The Wings
of the Morning"

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[CONTINUED.]

"I did not regret, I have never regretted, the outcome of the duel. He was mortally wounded and was carried to his house to die. I fled from Paris to escape arrest, but the woman in whose defense I encountered him behaved most cruelly. She deserted me and went to him. Ask Mrs. Sheppard. She was your English nurse at the time, Constance. It was she who brought you to England. I never met my wife again, I believe, on my soul, that she was innocent of the greater offense. I think she rebelled against the thought that I had slain one who said he worshiped her. Anyhow, she had her price. She remained with him, in sheer defiance of me, until his death, and her reward was his wealth. Were it not for this we might have come together again and striven to forget the past in mutual toleration. The knowledge that she was enriched with that man's gold maddened me. I could not forget that. I loathed all that money could give—the diamonds, the dresses, the insane devices of society—to pour out treasure on the vanities of the hour. By idle chance I was drawn to the lighthouse service. It was the mere whim of a friend into whose sympathetic ears I gave my sorrows. It is true I did not intend to devote my life to my present occupation. But its vast silences, its isolation, its seclusion from the petty, sordid, money grabbing life ashore, attracted me. I found quiet joys, peaceful days and dreamless nights in its comparative dangers and privations. Excepting my loyal servant and friend, Mrs. Sheppard, and the agent and solicitors of my estate, none knew of my whereabouts. I was a lost man and, as I imagined, a fortunate one. Now, in the last week of my service—for I would have retired in a few days, and it was my intention to tell you something, not all, of my history, largely on account of your lovmaking, Enid—the debacle has come, and with it my wife."

"Father," asked Constance, "is my mother still your wife by law?"

"She cannot be otherwise."

"I wonder if you are right. I am too young to judge these things, but she spoke of her approaching marriage with Mr. Traill in a way that suggested she would not do him a grievous wrong. She does not love him as I understand love. She regards him as a man admirable in many ways, but she impressed me with the idea that she believed she was doing that which was right, though she feared some unforeseen difficulty."

Brand looked at her with troubled eyes. It is always amazing to a parent to find unexpected powers of divination in a child. Constance was still a little girl in his heart. What had conferred this insight into a complex nature like her mother's?

"There is something to be said for that view," he admitted. "I recollect now that Pyne told me she had lived some years in the western states, but he said, too, that her husband, the man whose name she bears, died there. My poor girls, I do, indeed, pity you if all this story of miserable intrigue, this squalid romance of the law courts, is to be dragged into the light in a town where you are honored. Enid, you see now how doubly fortunate you are in being restored to a father's arms!"

"Oh, no, no!" wailed Enid. "Do not say that. It seems to cut us apart. What have you done that you should dread the worst that can be said? And why should there be any scandal at all? I cannot bear you to say such things."

"I think I understand you, dad," said Constance, her burning glance striving to read his hidden thought. "Matters cannot rest where they are. You will not allow—my mother—to go away—a second time—without a clear statement as to the future and an equally honest explanation of the past."

This was precisely the question he dreaded. It had forced its unwelcome presence upon him in the first moment of the meeting with his wife, but he was a man of order, of discipline. The habits of years might not be flung aside so readily. It was absurd, he held, to inflict the self torture of useless imaginings on the first night of their home coming after the severe trials of their precarious life on the rock.

Above all else it was necessary to reassure Constance, whose strength only concealed the raging fire beneath, and Enid, whose highly strung temperament was on the borderland of hysteria.

He was still the arbiter of their lives, the one to whom they looked for guidance. He rebelled against the prospect of a night of sleepless misery

for these two, and it needed his emphatic dominance to direct their thoughts into a more peaceful channel.

So he assumed the settled purpose he was far from feeling and summoned a kindly smile to his aid.

"Surely we have discussed our difficulties sufficiently tonight," he said. "In the morning, Constance, I will meet Mr. Traill. He is a gentleman and a man of the world. I think, too, that his nephew will be resourceful and wise in counsel beyond his years. Now we are all going to obtain some much needed rest. Neither you nor I will yield to sleepless hours of brooding. Neither of you knows that not forty-eight hours ago I made myself a thief in the determination to save your lives and mine. It was a needless burglary. I persuaded myself that it was necessary in the interests of the Trinity Brethren, those grave gentlemen in velvet cloaks, Enid, who would be horrified by the mere suggestion. I refuse to place myself on the moral rack another time. In the old days when I was a boy the drama was wont to be followed by a more lively scene. I forbid further discussion. Come, kiss me, both of you. I think that a stiff glass of hot punch will not do me any harm, nor you, unless you imbibe freely of that champagne I saw nestling in the ice pail."

They rose obediently. Although they knew he was acting a part on their account, they were sensible that he was adopting a sane course.

Enid tried to contribute to the new note. She bobbed in the approved style of the country domestic.

"Please, Sir Stephen," she said, "would you like some lemon in the toddy?"

Constance placed a little copper kettle on the fire. Their gloom had given way to a not wholly forced cheerfulness—for in that pleasant cottage sorrow was an unwelcome guest—when they were surprised to hear a sharp knock on the outer door.

At another time the incident, though unusual at a late hour, would not have disturbed them. But the emotions of the night were too recent, their subsidence too artificially achieved, that they should not dread the possibilities which lay beyond that imperative summons.

Mrs. Sheppard and the servant had retired to rest, worn out with the anxious uncertainties of events reported from the lighthouse.

So Brand went to the door and the girls listened in nervous foreboding.

They heard their father say:

"Hello, Jenkins, what is the matter now?"

Jenkins was a sergeant of police whom they knew.

"Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Brand, but an odd thing has happened. A lady, a stranger, met me ten minutes ago and asked me to direct her to your house. I did so. She appeared to be in great trouble, so I strolled slowly after her. I was surprised to see her looking in through the window of your sitting room. As far as I could make out she was crying fit to break her heart, and I imagined she meant to knock at the door, but was afraid."

"Where is she? What has become of her?"

Brand stepped out into the moonlight. The girls, white and trembling, followed.

"Well, she ran off down the garden path and tumbled in a dead faint near the gate. I was too late to save her. I picked her up and placed her on a seat. She is there now. I thought it best before carrying her here—to tell you."

Before Brand moved Constance ran out, followed by Enid. In a whirl of pain the lighthouse keeper strode after them. He saw Constance stooping over a motionless figure lying prone on the garden seat. To those strong young arms the slight, graceful form offered an easy task.

Brand heard Enid's whisper:

"Oh, Connie, it is she!"

But the daughter, clasping her mother to her breast, said quietly:

"Dad, she has come home, and she may be dying. We must take her in."

He made no direct answer. What could he say? The girl's fearless words admitted of neither "Yes" nor "No."

He turned to the policeman.

"I am much obliged to you, Jenkins," he said. "We know the lady. Unless—unless there are serious consequences will you oblige me by saying nothing about her? But stay. When you pass the Mount's Bay hotel please call and say that Mrs. Vansittart has been seized with sudden illness and is being cared for at my house."

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant, salut-



"Oh, Connie, it is she!"

ing. As he walked away down the garden path he wondered who Mrs. Vansittart could be and why Miss Brand said she had "come home."

Then he glanced back at the house into which the others had vanished. He laughed.

"Just fancy it," he said; "I treated him as if he was a bloomin' lord. And I suppose my position is a better one than his. Anyhow he is a splendid chap. I'm glad now I did it, for his sake and the sake of those two girls. How nicely they were dressed. It has always been a puzzle to me how they can afford to live in that style on the pay of a lighthouse keeper. Well, it's none of my business."

CHAPTER XVIII.

LADY MARGARET took her departure from the hotel at an early hour. Her son went with her. Their house was situated on the outskirts of the town, and, although Stanhope would gladly have remained with the two men to discuss the events of this night of surprises, he felt that his mother demanded his present attention.

Indeed, her ladyship had much to say to him. She, like the others, had been impressed by Mrs. Vansittart's appearance, even under the extraordinarily difficult circumstances of the occasion. The feminine mind judges its peers with the utmost precision. Its analytical methods are pitilessly simple. It calculates with mathematical nicety those details of toilet, those delicate nuances of manner, which distinguish the woman habituated to refinement and good society from the interloper or mere copyist.

It had always been a matter of mild wonder in Penzance how Constance Brand had acquired her French trick of wearing her clothes. Some women are not properly dressed after they have been an hour posing in front of a full length mirror; others can give one glance at a costume, twist and pull it into the one correct position and walk out perfectly gowned, with a happy consciousness of all its well.

Every Parisienne, some Americans, a few Englishwomen, possess this gift. Constance had it, and Lady Margaret knew now that it was a lineal acquisition from her mother. The discovery enhanced the belief, always prevalent locally, that Brand was a gentleman born, and her ladyship was now eager for her son's assistance in looking up the "Landed Gentry" and other works of reference which define and glorify the upper ten thousand of the United Kingdom. Perhaps that way light would be vouchsafed.

Being a little narrow minded, the excellent creature believed that a scandal among "good" people was not half so scandalous as an affair in which the principals were tradesmen "or worse."

She confided something of this to her son as they drove homeward and was very wroth with him when he treated the idea with unbecoming levity.

"My dear boy," she cried vehemently, "you don't understand the value of such credentials. You always speak and act as if you were on board one of your hectoring warships, where the best metal and the heaviest guns are all important. It is not so in society, even the society of a small Cornish town. Although I am an earl's daughter, I cannot afford to be quietly sneered at by some who would dispute my social supremacy."

As each complaisant sentence rolled forth he laughed quietly in the darkness.

"Mother," said he suddenly, "Mr. Traill and I have had a lot of talk about Enid during the past two days. I have not seen you until this evening before dinner, so I have had no opportunity to tell you all that has occurred."

"Some new imbroglio, I suppose," she said, not at all appeased by his seeming carelessness as to what the dowager Lady Tregarthen or Mrs. Taylor-Smith might say when gossip started.

"Well, it is, in a sense," he admitted. "You see, we are jolly hard up. It is a squeeze for you to double my pay, and, as I happened to inform Mr. Traill that I was going to marry Enid, long before he knew she was his daughter, it came as a bit of a shock afterward to hear that he intends to endow her with £200,000 on her wedding day. Now the question to be discussed is not whether

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the adopted daughter of a poor lighthouse keeper, who may be Lord This-and-That in disguise, is a good match for me, but whether an impeccable Lieutenant in the royal navy is such a tremendous catch for a girl with a great fortune."

Lady Margaret was stunned. She began to breathe quickly. Her utmost expectations were surpassed. Before she could utter a word her son pretended to misunderstand her agitation.

"Of course it was fortunate that Enid and I had jolly well made up our minds somewhat in advance, but it was a near thing, a matter of flag signals—otherwise I should have been compelled to consider myself ruled out of the game. Therefore, during your tea table tactics, if the dowager, or that old spitfire, Mrs. Taylor-Smith, says a word to you about Brand, just give 'em a rib roaster with Enid's two hundred thou', will you? While they are reeling under the blow throw out a gentle hint that Constance may ensnare Traill's nephew. 'Ensnare' is the right word, isn't it? The best of it is, I know they have been worrying you for months about my friendship with 'girls of their class.' Oh, the joy of the encounter! It must be like blowing up a battleship with a tuppenny hapenny torpedo boat."

So her ladyship—not without pondering over certain entries in the books of the proudly born, which recorded the birth and marriage of Sir Stephen Brand, ninth baronet, "present whereabouts unknown"—went to bed, but not to sleep, whereas Jack Stanhope never afterward remembered undressing, so thoroughly tired was he, and so absurdly happy, notwithstanding the awkward situation divulged at the dinner.

Pyne, left with his uncle, set himself to divert the other man's thoughts from the embarrassing topic of Mrs. Vansittart.

He knew that Brand was not likely to leave them in any dubiety as to the past. Discussion now was useless, a mere idle guessing at probabilities, so he boldly plunged into the mystery as yet surrounding Enid's first year of existence.

Mr. Traill, glad enough to discuss a more congenial subject, marshaled the ascertained facts. It was easy to see that here at least he stood on firm ground.

"Your father, as you know, was a noted yachtsman, Charlie," he said. "Indeed, he was one of the first men to cross the Atlantic in his own boat under steam and sail. Twenty years ago in this very month he took my wife and me, with your mother, you and our little Edith, then six months old, on a delightful trip along the Florida coast and the gulf of Mexico. It was then arranged that we should pass the summer among the Norwegian fjords, but the two ladies were nervous about the ocean voyage east in April, so your father brought the Esmeralda across, and we followed by mail steamer. During the last week of May and the whole of June we cruised from Christiania almost to the North cape. The fine, keen air restored my wife's somewhat delicate health, and you and Edith thrived amazingly. Do you remember the voyage?"

"It is a dim memory, helped a good deal, I imagine, by what I have heard since."

"Well, on the Fourth of July, putting into Hardanger to celebrate the day with some fellow countrymen, I received a cable which rendered my presence in New York absolutely imperative. There was a big development scheme just being engineered in connection with our property. In fact, the event which had such a tragic sequel practically quadrupled your fortune and mine. By that time the ladies were so enthusiastic about the seagoing qualities of the yacht that they would have sailed round the world in her, and poor Pyne had no difficulty in persuading them to take the leisurely way home, while I raced off via Newcastle and Liverpool to the other side. I received my last cable from them dated Southampton, July 20, and they were due in New York somewhere about Aug. 5 or 6, allowing for ordinary winds and weather."

"During the night of July 21 when midway between the Scilly Isles and the Fastnet they ran into a dense fog. Within five minutes, without the least warning, the Esmeralda was struck amidships by a big Nova Scotian bark. The little vessel sank almost like a stone. Nevertheless your father, backed by his skipper and a splendid crew, lowered two boats, and all hands were saved for the moment. It was Pyne's boat that his boats were always stored

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