

THE LADY OF THE TOWER

A Continued Story of Romantic Adventure

CHAPTER XIX.—(Continued.)

By HEADON HILL

LANCE squared his broad shoulders, then with a queer laugh sat down rather heavily. "A good many things happened," he said in a voice which his hearers hardly recognized. "First I got the sack, in a letter from the firm handed me directly I dropped anchor. The chap from the office who came aboard with it—a new man I didn't know—looked at me as if I'd got the plague. No reasons given, or anything. I got myself put ashore and made for the office to demand explanations, though, of course, I guessed that the arms shipment was at the bottom of it. I hadn't gone three steps when I met Jones, the skipper of the 'Orinoco,' who told me that old Jacob was dead—murdered on the day we sailed."

"You had not heard of it at Santa Barbara, by cable?" asked Mrs. Pengarvan.

"I had heard nothing. The agents had not been notified. Well, I went along to the office, intending to have it out with that bright beauty, Wilson—now, God save us, head of the firm. I hardly knew the place. The old loft is fitted up with mahogany desks, and there were three clerks at work. But Wilson Polgleaze wasn't there. The clerks told me that he had started off in his car an hour before, and wasn't expected back during business hours. In the shop below, on my way out, I had a few words with Isaacs, the salesman. We have always been friendly, and he showed me the quarter where the wind sits. I am suspected of having murdered the old man."

"Not generally, I hope, dear," Mrs. Pengarvan interposed. "Not by those who know you. But Wilson Polgleaze for his own ends insinuates—"

"What ends?" Lance cut her short. "He has had the presumption to raise his eyes to Hilda, and has been seeking to frighten us into a bargain—her hand as the price of your safety. Needless to say we scorned his suggestions."

"I should think so indeed," Lance gritted his teeth.

"We were sure that when you returned you would be able to refute his vile calumnies."

But for all her brave words the mother glanced at her son with a covert anxiety which his answer failed to dispel.

"I am not sure myself," he laughed scornfully. "I am a plain sailor-man and no match for land-sharks. Ever since that blackguard turned up here at The Tower the night we shipped the arms I've been feeling that he had it up for me somehow. And when that ridiculous gunboat overhauled us I was sure of it. Poor old Tony Diaz! He took his gruel like a gentleman, and went to his death—a certainty, mind you, without the guns we had to throw overboard—with a smile. But after all it's better to be shot than to be hanged."

"Senor Diaz dead?" cried Mrs. Pengarvan and Hilda in unison, forgetting for the moment their own troubles in this news of one with whom they had been so pleasantly associated.

"Killed in battle. The intelligence only reached Santa Barbara after the mail had left. What is it? What's wrong?" Lance broke off.

For with a low moan Marigold had suddenly fallen in a swoon across the carved oak centre table, Hilda springing forward in time to break her fall and support her in her arms.

"Senor Diaz was very kind to the child," she explained. "Your news must have been a shock to her. We must have Martha in and carry her up to bed. She has been sorely tried lately."

The Lady of the Tower spoke so

calmly, almost coldly, that Lance and his mother exchanged one inquiring glance before they bestirred themselves. They did not know that this sudden distraction had come as a safety-valve to their loved one, and had probably kept her from a breakdown. She had been on the rack during Lance's narrative, tortured with the question: Where was Wilson Polgleaze? He had started in his car from Falmouth hours ago. What mischief had he wrought before he started? Why had he not arrived? Her odd composure was really the reflex of the control she had put upon herself during the agony of doubt she had been enduring.

When they reassembled, after Marigold had been tended and taken upstairs, Hilda had herself in hand again, and was able to conceal her fears that Wilson Polgleaze might arrive at any moment to claim her surrender. And as time passed her apprehension diminished, for that night at least. If her enemy had started with the intention of coming to The Tower he must have changed his mind, or he would have reached it long ago. What seemed more probable was that he had gone in some other direction before the delivery of her telegram.

SHE was therefore able to bear her part quite naturally in the consultation which lasted long after midnight. Lance had to be informed of all that had occurred in his absence, of the transfer of the mortgage to Simon Trehawke, and of the notice of foreclosure. But the item which had for him the most absorbing interest was Billy Craze's taking refuge at The Tower, and his recent unaccountable disappearance. He spoke of his argument with Antonio Diaz on board "The Lodestar" as to the cabin-boy's desertion being a bad omen for the success of their scheme, and of his suggestion that Billy might have "given the show away" to Wilson Polgleaze on the afternoon of their departure.

"Tony demonstrated clearly by facts and figures, that I was wrong in that supposition," Lance concluded. "The young monkey's subsequent antics tend to show that I was right. He must have bolted from here, when he heard I was on my way home, because he funk'd seeing me."

"I don't agree; he maintained all along that he would explain the mystery of his being left behind as soon as you returned," Mrs. Pengarvan dissented.

They could make nothing of it, and so turned to discussing what course Lance should pursue on the morrow. He had hired a motor-cycle to come out to them, and he was for using it to return to Falmouth after breakfast so as to "have it out" with Wilson Polgleaze at the earliest opportunity. The two women pleaded with him to remain and wait developments at The Tower. If nothing happened quickly, Mrs. Pengarvan insisted, he would be in a much stronger position to take the offensive.

In the end he yielded, and they all went up to bed determined to make the best of the respite while it was accorded to them, though Hilda, with her unshared secret about the dead man's letter of dismissal, could not hope that it would last very long. Whatever had caused Wilson Polgleaze to disregard her summons it was most certain that the quality of mercy had not influenced him.

But in the morning her outlook on the whole situation, and in a lesser degree that of Lance and his mother, was sharply switched into a new direction by one of those swift strokes which Fate, in sheer delight in up-

setting mortal calculations, loves to deal.

Hilda and Lance were loitering in the weed-grown drive, when through the gates came John Pentreath, the ancient postman, who trudged a long round, from the village where the letters were sorted, among the scattered hamlets of the lonely district. The old fellow handed out a couple of circulars, but ignored the friendly greeting of Lance, whom he had known from boyhood. He was evidently bursting to impart information which he was half afraid might have been forestalled.

"I shouldn't have troubled to have come up with that trash," he made naive admission, pointing a scornful finger at the halfpenny wrappers which he had given to Hilda, "if so be as I didn't think you might wish to hear what's happened below yonder on the road to Falmouth. Young Polgleaze, the son of the shipowner what was killed in town a while back, lies by the road-side with his throat cut, and his moty-car in the ditch. Dead as a chunk of stone, he is."

Hilda gave a little cry, but Lance only breathed heavily, scanning the postman's wizened face with sombre eyes.

"'Tis true enough," persisted the weather-beaten figure in the tarnished uniform, scenting incredulity, and proud to be able to defeat it. "Got it first hand, so to speak. The mail-cart driver found him before daybreak, and brought the news on to the post-office at St. Enoch's. With my own ears I heard him tell the tale."

With a chuckle at having clinched his information, the old letter-carrier shuffled away, and Lance and Hilda faced each other with a hundred unspoken questions. But it was no question which Lance voiced at last.

"Can't profess to be sorry," he said dully. "Except that there will be kind folk about who will assert that I killed the black-hearted swab."

Hilda hardly heard him. She was stricken with a terrible dread lest Jacob Polgreaze's letter, with all its suggestion of incriminating motive should have been found on the corpse.

CHAPTER XX.

The Grip of the Law.

MR. Superintendent Grylls sat at the desk in his room at the police-station, poring over the last of a collection of "exhibits" which were likely to figure in the most sensational murder case which had stirred the Delectable Duchy for many a long year.

He had just returned from St. Enoch's, the village near which the mail-cart driver had found the body of Wilson Polgleaze in the small hours. The articles which he had examined with such careful scrutiny were those which he had removed from the dead man's pockets—a number of coins of the realm, a watch and chain, a well-filled cigar case, a whiskey flask and a letter.

One by one he had laid the articles aside till he came to the last item in the list, which with official precision he had already tabulated. But the letter held him spellbound, and he was now reading it for the third time, his grizzled brows puckered in a frown.

"I couldn't have believed it," he said to himself at last. "Such a nice, clean-living, young fellow, with never a word against him. But this doesn't leave much room for doubt. There's the motive right enough—for the old man's murder as well as this. I wonder what line the Major will take. He's about due, if he caught his train."

The officer referred to was the Chief Constable of the county, Major Patrick Considine, a warm-hearted and impulsive Irishman, who had obtained his singularly inappropriate post on the strength of distinguished war ser-



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