

THE LADY OF THE TOWER

A Continued Story of Romantic Adventure

CHAPTER XVI.

Wilson Polgleaze "Comes Again."

CONSTERNATION prevailed at St. Runan's Tower. No sooner had Marigold Craze sought the protection of its young mistress than the other refugee whom the two ladies were sheltering mysteriously vanished. The hour and the manner of his going could not be ascertained, but the fact that he was missing was clearly established on the evening of the day after Marigold's arrival.

He did not put in an appearance at breakfast, but little importance was attached to that. The boy was in the habit of absenting himself from meals, subsisting on stray viands which he had saved, and camping out in one of the outbuildings or shutting himself up in his turret room. Mrs. Pengarvan, firm in her belief that Billy was a sort of mascot, who would prove to be their salvation, had worried about these absences at first, but as he always turned up with a grin in an hour or two she had become reconciled to his impish ways. She knew that he was terrified of his grim father, and that he would not be likely to go beyond the grounds.

This time, however, by the time dusk fell he had not turned up, and a search was instituted inside and outside the house. He was nowhere to be found, and at a hasty conference it was decided that he must either have left voluntarily, for some utterly inexplicable reason, or that he had fallen over the precipice on to the rocks below. Timothy Pascoe, despatched by Hilda with a lantern, quickly returned with the news that there was no trace of the lad on the beach, and the anxious women had to be content with the surmise that he had gone away of his own accord.

Marigold was greatly distressed, and would not be comforted till on the following morning Pascoe had made cautious inquiries in the cove, and had satisfied himself that Billy had not fallen into the clutches of Nathan Craze. The messenger brought back the intelligence, gleaned among the neighbours, that the fisherman had not been at home for two nights. He was supposed to be scouring the country in search of his daughter, who had not been seen in the cove for two days.

"Their tongues are fair wagging," Timothy concluded his report. "Lucky there ain't many of 'em to wag. Mrs. Penolva says Nathan has been acting like a mazed man this week past, though that's nothing new to them ones down along."

Hilda did her best to comfort Marigold with assurances of her own safety, and with the confident prediction that nothing serious could have happened to a boy of her brother's resource, but his unaccountable absence lay heavy on all the dwellers in the lonely house till on the third day something happened which gave the brave Lady of the Tower a burden of her own to bear—a burden more terrible than all these mutterings of the storm which had lurked on the horizon so long.

Mr. Wilson Polgleaze fulfilled the threat that he "would come again and speak with his own voice."

The noisy hooter of his brand new car announced his arrival just as the ladies had finished their frugal lunch. Mrs. Pengarvan was for refusing him admission, but Hilda took a contrary view. So long as she was mistress of the Tower she clung desperately to the hope that something might occur to prevent Trehawke's impending foreclosure—some flaw in the title deeds, or possibly a dispute between the solicitor and his client—which should defer the evil day when she should be driven from the last vestige of her ancient patrimony. It would be better to see the visitor, she insisted, and learn his business.

By HEADON HILL

So Martha Pascoe was bidden to show him into the faded drawing-room, and Hilda and Mrs. Pengarvan went in together. From the young man's manner as they entered it was evident that he did not come in amity. War was to be declared at last, and Hilda hailed the signs of it with relief. Anything, almost, would be better than the suspense and the veiled threats of the last few weeks. If it was to be a fight to a finish let the battle be joined at once.

Wilson did not offer to shake hands. "I, I say," he began rudely, "my call was for Miss Carlyon. I didn't reckon on having to tackle the two of you."

"Then you had better go, sir," Hilda eyed him with disdain. "This, I presume, is a business interview. Mrs. Pengarvan is fully acquainted with all my affairs. As I should consult her on any proposals you may wish to make before coming to a decision on them it will save time if she is present. In any case I decline to receive you alone."

Polgleaze shot a venomous glance at the proud young speaker. "Oh, all right," he said after a moment's pause. "After all I've got the whip hand of the old cat as well as the kitten. Let her stay and face the music, though I can promise you she won't like the tune. I am not whining and beating about the bush to-day, Miss Hilda Carlyon. You used the word proposal. It's a very good word. It is what I am here for, in your beggarly house, that'll be sold over your head, maybe, before many weeks are over. Will you marry me and save the old ruin? It shan't be a ruin any longer if you'll be Mrs. Wilson Polgleaze. I'll rebuild the Tower. Damme, and I'll take the name of Carlyon if you like. Then it'll all be as you were."

HILDA took a step towards the bell. She would have summoned Timothy Pascoe to throw her insulter out of doors, but Mrs. Pengarvan's restraining arm prevented her.

"Better hear his alternative, dear," the elder woman pleaded. "He is sure to have one. Curs of that breed don't bark except over stolen bones. Let us see what bone he has stolen and how."

Polgleaze laughed boisterously. "I made no error in having you stay, old lady," he declared. "I ought to have known you'd be on my side, though you do show a chap the rough side of your tongue." Then he turned to Hilda. "She calls it an alternative," he said. "That is a bit of a jaw-breaker, but I guess I know what she means—that you will be up against something nasty if I don't get my way. Here it is. Take it or leave it. If you don't agree I'll chuck the fat in the fire, and a fine old blaze there'll be. Lance Pengarvan killed my father. I've got evidence to prove it. I came out to make this bargain the night the 'Lodestar' sailed, only I didn't expect to find him at the Tower. And then he knocked me out before I could have my say."

Though both devoted women had for weeks been vaguely conscious of the peril overshadowing their absent loved one, and though in a way this direct accusation came as a relief, they could only stare speechlessly at the repellent, dissolute face of their persecutor.

"It's your own fault that I acted like this," he continued. "I courted you fair and square, as a gentleman should, but you treated me like dirt—you can't deny it. Now which is it to be? Let Lance Pengarvan hang, or stay at St. Runan's as Mrs. Wilson Polgleaze?"

White to the lips through the tan

of her weather-beaten face, Mrs. Pengarvan stepped forward.

"You seem to forget," she said in a voice that for all her effort at control shook a little, "that, assuming your vile charge to be true, you would be an accessory to my son's crime by having concealed your knowledge."

Polgleaze closed one of his blood-shot eyes with an assumption of cunning. "Who said anything about knowledge?" he retorted. "I only said that I had evidence to prove that Lance killed my old dad, and I can also prove that I gave Superintendent Grylls a straight tip, which, if he wasn't a thick-skulled fool, would have enabled him to get the evidence for himself. I don't say that I couldn't have made it plainer if I had wanted him to act at once, or that I didn't rely on his being as blind as a daylight owl. But I told him so at to make myself as safe as a church—don't you make any mistake. All I've got to do is to poke him up again, and tell him another little point that I'd forgotten at our first interview, and it'll be a sure thing for Master Lance at the next Bodmin Assizes."

The mother and sweetheart of the threatened man glanced at each other. They had grown calmer during the fit of vain-glorious boasting, and the same inspiration had come to them simultaneously. At a nod from Hilda, Mrs. Pengarvan put it into words.

"Granted that you can dodge one felony," she said, "how do you propose to escape the consequences of the other?"

"Which one?" demanded Polgleaze with an impudent leer.

"Marrying Miss Carlyon when you were married last January to a girl whom we know very well, and who is still alive," Mrs. Pengarvan replied with a sinking at her heart. For the scoundrel's manner told her that the shaft had missed its mark.

"So that is to be the game, my gentle ladies," he sneered. "You think you've got a pull over me because of some lying story that jade, Marigold Craze, has stuffed you with. Well, I give you warning, if you try to defeat justice by bringing that against me you'll burn your fingers worse than ever. There'll be a conspiracy charge for St. Runan's Tower to meet, as well as one of murder. I never married Marigold, nor ever meant to, and she knows it as well as I do."

"But you pretended to marry her by a mock ceremony," Hilda threw herself into the breach, staking her last card on gaining an admission that should give her some power over this man. She reckoned without appreciating the lengths to which perjury, backed by an equally unscrupulous accomplice, could carry such as he.

"My dear girl, I don't want to be rude to the lady who is going to be my wife, but if you really believe that story it is high time I took you in hand," was the outrageous answer. "You mustn't allow yourself to be imposed on by the attempt of a light-of-love wench to whitewash herself. There isn't a word of truth in what Marigold Craze says, and I'll defy her to prove it. You wouldn't have listened to such piffle if you hadn't wanted a chance to blacken me. I'll meet your accusations fair and square all along the line directly you're fool enough to make them. They won't count for much after Lance Pengarvan has been locked up for murder, as he will be within an hour of his reaching port. And he'll be home quicker than you are reckoning on."

THE Lady of the Tower drew herself up, and at the same time moved a little away, as from a reptile she would have spurned.

"Go!" she insisted. "Not another word, but go—before I call my servant to do things to you which I shall regret."

But when the motor-car had snorted its clumsy way out of the drive, Hilda



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