POOR DOCUMENT

MC 2033

The Pillar of Light

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CHAPTER XIV.

The Way They Have in the Navy.

"Some people are never satisfied," said Pyne, whilst he helped the cook by smashing a ham bone with a hammer. The bone had been picked clean of meat and marrow on the first day after the wreck, but it occurred to Enid that if were broken up and boiled she might procure some sort of nourishment for the two children, who were fast running down in condition.

"What is the matter now?" inquired Constance, whose attentive ears were hovering between the cooking stove and a distilling kettle.

All the flour and biscuits, with the exception of two tins reserved for extremities, had been used. She was striving to concoct cakes of chocolate out of cocoa, an article more plentiful than any other food of its kind in stock, but water could not be spared, and eating dry powder was difficult to parched palates.

"There are two tug-boats, a trawler and a Trinity service-boat not half a mile away," said Pyne, "and the cliffs at Land's End are peppered with people."

"Surely that is satisfactory. Dad told me that the Falcon signaled this morning he was to expect a special effort to be made at half tide on the flow, and not on the ebb as was arranged yesterday."

"Yes, that is all right so far as it goes," Pyne leaned forward with the air of one about to impart information of great value. "But the extraordinary thing is that whilst every man on board those vessels is thinking like steam how best to get into the lighthouse, we are most desperately anxious to get out of it. So you see, as I said before, some people—"

"Oh, dash!" cried Enid, "I've gone and burnt my finger all through listening to your nonsense."

"Are there really many people on the cliffs?" demanded Constance.

Pyne pounded the bone viciously.

"I go out of my way to inform you of a number of interesting and strictly accurate facts," he protested, "and one of you burns her fingers and the other doubts my word. Yet, if I called your skepticism unfeeling, Miss Enid would be angry."

"I don't know why kettle lids are so cantankerous," said Enid. "They seem to get hot long before the water does."

"The hottest part of any boil is on the top," said Pyne.

Enid smiled forgiveness. "I believe you would be cheerful if you were going to be electrocuted," she said, pensively. "Yet, goodness knows, it is hard to keep one's spirits up this morning. The sea is as bad as ever. What will become of us if we get no relief today?"

"Mr. Pyne," interrupted Constance suddenly, "do you think that any of the men can have gained access to the store-room during the night?"

"I can't say for sure," he replied. "What has put that into your mind?"

"The purser and I examined all that was left this morning, and we both agreed that some of the things had disappeared. It is very strange."

Pyne was not wholly prepared for this mine being sprung on him. So he essayed to gain time.

"It doesn't appeal to me in that light. There was a miscalculation about the water. Why not about the food?"

"Because my father went through all the stores personally and portioned them out. Some flour and tinned meat have gone; I am quite sure of it. The question is—who can have taken them? The flour, at least, must have attracted attention if anybody tried to eat it."

"Did you say all that to the purser?" he asked, suspending his labors and looking at her steadily.

"No. We could not remember exactly what proportion of the various articles there ought to be left."

"Then take my advice, Miss Constance, and keep on forgetting," he said.

A quick flush came into her pale cheeks.

"You are not saying that without good cause?" she murmured.

"I have the best of reasons. If the least hint of such a thing goes round among the men there will be ructions."

Constance went to the door and closed it.

"Enid," she said, "I believe father and Mr. Pyne have got some dreadful plan in their minds which they dare not tell us about."

But the American was not to be cornered in such fashion. He opened the door again and went out, pausing on the threshold to say:—

"I wouldn't venture to guess what might be troubling Mr. Brand, but you can take it from me that what he says, goes. Talk about grasping a nettle firmly, I believe your father would grab a scorpion by the tail if he felt that way."

And with this cryptic utterance he quitted them, intending to warn Brand at the first opportunity that the time was at hand when he must harden his heart and take the decisive step of cutting off communication between the service-room and the remainder of the building.

This could be done easily. The flanges of the uupermost iron staircase were screwed to the floor above and below. A few minutes' labor would remove the screws; the steps could be lifted bodily into the service-room and there utilized to seal the well.

"What a howling menagerie will break loose here when they find out," thought Pyne. "It's a hard thing to say, but we ought to have the door open. Quite a stack of folks will need to be pitched outside."

A comforting reflection truly, yet his face bore no token thereof as he joined the lighthouse-keeper and several of the Chinook's officers and men on the gallery.

The wind had shifted another couple of points to the north, and the sea, apart from the reef, was running in a heavy unbroken swell. That was the tantalizing part of it. Any ordinary ship's boat, properly managed, could live in perfect safety in the open.

But the iron-toothed reef, with its tortuous channel and battling currents changing with every stage of the tide, surrounded the pillar with an apparently impassable barrier, whilst the lighthouse itself offered as frowning a front as any of the black rocks which reared their weed-covered crests at low water.

Signals were being exchanged between the gallery and the Trinity tender. Brand seemed to be very emphatic in his answers to the communications made to him by Stanhope.

"No, no," he muttered aloud, whilst the anxious man near him wondered why he was so impatient.

"It is utterly impossible!" he said again. "No boat can do it—some one should stop him. It means certain loss of life!"

At last, becoming aware that his companions could not understand what was going on, he turned to them with passionate explanation.

"That brave fellow Stanhope says that, with two others at the oars, he intends to row near enough to the rock at half flood to endeavor to spring onto the ladder. I cannot persuade him that no man has ever yet succeeded in such a mad project. Look below, and see how each wave climbs around eighteen or twenty feet of the base. The thing is wildly impracticable. He will be swept off and smashed to pieces before our eyes, even if the boat escapes."

"If the boat can come near enough for that purpose couldn't we heave a line aboard her?" asked one of the ship's officers.

"We can try. I shall signal them to that effect. Anything is better than to sanction an attempt which is foredoomed to failure, and must result in the death of the man who tries it."

Thereupon more energetic flag-waving took place. Finally Brand desisted in sheer exasperation.

"I cannot convince him," he cried. "He has made up his mind. May the Lord preserve him from a peril which I consider to be a mortal one."

"Has he put forward any theory?" asked Pyne. "He was doing a lot of talking."

"Yes," explained Brand. "He believes that a strong boat, rowed to the verge of the broken water, might watch her opportunity and dart in close to the ladder on the backwash of a big wave, allowing its successor to lift her high enough for an active man to jump onto the rungs. The rowers must pull for their lives the instant the wave breaks, and leave him clinging to the ladder as best he can. There is more chance of success in that way, he thinks, than in trying to make fast a line thrown by us, even if it fell over the boat. It is all a question of time, he argues, and I have failed to convince him that not only he but his companions will be lost."

"Is there no chance?" inquired the second officer.

"Look below," repeated Brand hopelessly, and indeed, when they obeyed him, craning their necks over the rail to examine the seething cauldron from which the granite tower tapered up to them, no man could say that the lighthouse-keeper deplored Stanhope's decision without good reason.

They understood matters a little better, perhaps, when, one by one, they re-entered the lantern, the Falcon having flitted away to make her final preparations. Brand asked them not to make known the nature of the pending undertaking.

"If I thought it would do any good to the suffering people I would gladly see them enlivened by the news," he said. "I confess, however, I expect nothing but disastrous failure—and—gentlemen—Lieutenant Stanhope is practically engaged to be married to one of my daughters."

What was to be said? They quitted him in the silence that was the dominant note of their lives just then. Pyne alone remained. He wondered why one man should be called on to endure so much.

Though each of those present on the gallery was loyal to Brand's sorrowful request, it was impossible to prevent others from seeing that something of exceptional interest was in progress afloat and on the rock.

Brand did not know that the officials of the Trinity House had only agreed to help Stanhope's hazardous project under compulsion. The sailor informed them that he was determined to carry out his scheme, with or without their assistance. So, when the Falcon, the tender, and a strong tug hired by Mr. Traill, rounded the distant Carn du headland at eleven o'clock, the lighthouse-keeper felt that further protest was unavailing. It behooved him to take all possible measures to help the men who were about to dare so much to help him.

In the first place, he caused a rope to be swung from the gallery to the doorway. If any doubt were entertained as to the grave risk attending Stanhope's enterprise it was promptly dispelled by the extreme difficulty met with in accomplishing this comparatively simple task. Even a heavy piece of wood, slung to the end of the ninety odd feet of cord necessary, did not prevent the wind from lashing the weighted end in furious plunges seaward. At last a sailor caught the swinging block with a boat-hook. The man would have been carried away by a climbing wave had not his mates perceived his danger and held him. Then two life-buoys were attached to other ropes, in case there might be some slight chance of using them. The tackle which the unfortunate captain of the Chinook had cast adrift was utilized to construct safety lines in the entrance way. Loops were fastened to them, in which six of the strongest men available were secured against the chance of being swept through the door to instant death.

Meanwhile, the three vessels had steamed close to the mooring buoy, which, it will be remembered, lay in full view of the kitchen window. Constance gave them a casual glance. Being versed in the ways of the sea, she instantly discovered that some unusual event was astir.

She called her sister's attention to the manoeuvres of the steamers; one, the Trinity tender, lay broadside on to the incoming tide.

"They are lowering a boat, I do declare," she announced, after they had watched the proceedings for a little while with growing curiosity. At the distance, nearly six hundred yards, it was difficult to discern exactly what was taking place.

"No boat can live if it comes near the rock," cried Enid. And then a wild thought brought her heart to her mouth.

"Oh, Connie!" she cried in a sudden access of terror, "I feel sure that Jack is doing something desperate to save us. Dad knows. They all know, but they would not tell us. That is why Mr. Pyne has not been near us for hours."

"It cannot be. No one would permit it. Father would never give his sanction. Enid, my dear one, why do you say such things? You frighten me!"

But Constance's lips were bloodless, and her eyes dilated with the fear which she, too, would fain deny.

They were perched so high above the sea that the dancing hillocks of green water could not wholly obscure the stoutly built craft which bobbed into startling prominence round the stern of the tender.

"It is, it is!" shrieked Enid. "Look, Connie! There is Jack kneeling in the bow. Oh, dear! oh, dear! Is he mad? Why don't they stop him? I cannot bear to look. Connie, tell me—shall I see him drowned before my eyes?"

The girl was distraught, and her sister was in little better plight. Fascinated, speechless, clinging to each other like panic-stricken children, they followed the leaping boat with the glassy stare of those who gaze, open-eyed, at remorseless death.

They scarce understood what was toward.

As the boat, a strong craft, yet such a mere speck of stanch life in the tumbling seas, was steadily impelled nearer, they saw the tug lurch ahead of the other vessels until a line was thrown and caught by Stanhope, who instantly fastened it round his waist. The rowers wore cork jackets, but he was quite unprotected. Bare-headed, with his well-knit limbs shielded only by a jersey, loose-fitting trousers and canvas shoes, he had declined to hamper his freedom of movement with the cumbrous equipment so essential for anyone who might be cast adrift in that dreadful sea.

The girls, even in their dumb agony, were dully conscious of a scurry of feet up and down the stairs. What did it matter? They paid heed to naught save the advancing boat, now deep in the trough of a wave, now perched precariously on a lofty crest. Whoever the rowers were, they trusted wholly to the instructions given by the gallant youth who peered so boldly into the wilderness ahead. The flying foam and high-tossed spray gave to the lighthouse the semblance of alternately lifting and lowering its huge frame amidst the furious torrents that encircled it. Nerves of steel, strong hearts and true, were needed by those who would voluntarily enter that watery inferno.

Yet the men at the oars did not falter nor turn their heads. They pulled evenly and well, with the short, deep-sunken stroke of the fisherman, and Stanhope, now that they were almost in the vortex where the waves lost their regularity, produced a paddle wherewith to twist the boat's head to meet each turn and swirl.

Stealthily the powerful tug-boat crept in the wake of the smaller craft, until it became clear to the girls' strained vision that watchful helpers, lashed in the vessel's bows, were manipulating another rope as a drag, thus helping the sailors' efforts to prevent his frail argosy from being swamped by a breaking sea.

Then a miracle did happen, a miracle of science. When the boat was yet two hundred yards away, Brand, looking out from the gallery in stony despair, suddenly behaved as one possessed of a fiend.

"Follow me!" he roared. "Come, every man!"

He rushed into the lantern. As if he wanted wings rather than limbs, he swung himself by his hands to the floor of the service-room.

Galvanized into activity, those who were with him on the ledge raced after him. They knew not what had happened. Their leader had spoken, and they obeyed.

Down, down, they pelted, taking the steep stairs with break-neck speed, until they reached the oil-room, with its thousands of gallons stored in great tanks.

Big empty tins stood there, awaiting the next visit of the tender, and Brand wrenched the cover off the nearest cistern. He scooped up a tinful of the oil.

"Bring all you can carry," he shouted, and was off again with an energy that was wonderful in a man who had endured the privations and hardships of so many hours.

They understood. Why had none of them thought of it earlier? In its cold granite depths the lighthouse carried that which had the power to subdue the roaring fury of the reef.

The first man to reach the gallery after Brand was Pyne, who chanced to be nearest to him when the hubbub arose. He found the other man flinging handfuls of the oil as far to windward as the thick fluid would travel.

"Quick!" gasped Brand. "Don't pour it out! It must be scattered."

So the colza fell in little patches of smooth tranquility into the white void beneath, and, before Stanhope had piloted his boat half the remaining distance, the wave-currents surging about the rock ceased to toss their yellow manes so high, and the high-pitched masses of foam vanished completely.

The seamen stationed in the entrance were astonished by the rapidity of the change. In less than a minute they found they were no longer blinded by the spindrift cast by each upward rush right into the interior of the lighthouse. The two nearest to the door looked out in wonderment. What devilment was the reef hatching now, that its claws should relax their clutch on the pillar and its icy spray be withheld?

Each wave, as it struck to westward of the column, divided itself into two roaring streams which met exactly where the iorn rungs ran down the wall. There was a mighty clash of the opposing forces and a further upward rearing of shattered torrents before the reunited mass fell away to give place to its successor.

Full twenty feet of the granite layers were thus submerged and exposed whenever a big comber traveled sheer over the reef.

But these straight-forward attacks were spasmodic. Often the eddies created by the rocks came tumbling pellmell from the north. Sometimes they would combine with the incoming tide, and then the water seemed to cling tenaciously to the side of the lighthouse until it rose to a great height, swamping the entrance, and dropping back with a tremendous crash. There were times when the northerly ally disdained to merge with its rival. Then it leaped into the hollow created by the receding wave, and all about the lighthouse warred a level whirlpool.

Stanhope's plan was to rush the boat in when one of these comparatively less dangerous opportunities offered. He would spring for the ladder, run up if possible, but, if caught by a vaulting breaker, lock himself with hands and feet on the iron rungs and endeavor to withstand the stifling embrace of the oncoming sea. He was sure he could hold out against that furious onslaught, once at least. He was an expert swimmer and diver, and he believed that by clinging limpet-like to the face of the rock, he had the requisite strength of lungs and sinews to resist one if not more of those watery avalanches.

The rope around his waist was held from the tug. The instant he made his leap, the men with him were to back water, the crew at the drag to haul for all they were worth, and consequently pull the boat clear of the next wave ere it broke. That is why he selected a handy craft in place of the life-boat offered to him as soon as his resolve was whispered ashore. It was on rapidity, quick judgment, the utilization of seconds, that he depended. The unwieldy bulk of the life-boat not only detracted from these all important considerations, but made it more than probable that she would be capsized or touch the reef.

For the same reason he timed his approach on the rising tide. He could venture nearer to the lighthouse itself, and the boat could be rowed and dragged more speedily into safety. With him, too, were men who knew every inch of the Gulf Rock. He knew he could trust them to the end.

Although he had mapped out his programme to the last detail, Brand's inspiration in using the oil created a fresh and utterly unforeseen set of conditions.

Mountainous ridges still danced fantastically up and down the smooth granite slopes, but they no longer broke, and it is broken water, not tumultuously heaving seas, that an open boat must fear.

With the intuition of a born sailor, ready to seize any advantage given by human enemy or angry ocean, Stanhope decided, in the very jaws of opportunity, to abandon his original design totally, and shout to the men he saw standing in the entrance to heave him a rope. He would have preferred the danger of the jump. He almost longed to endure the fierce struggle which must ensue before he reached those waiting hands. He thought he would have his reward in the tense joy of the fight, in bringing salvation to Enid and those with her, in seeing her sweet face again after these days and nights of vigil.

But the paramount need was to succeed. The extraordinary and, to him, quite inexplicable, change in conditions which he had studied during tortured hours passed on the bridge of the Falcon or the Trinity tender, made it possible to remain longer in the vicinity of the rock than he had dared to hope. Therefore he knew it was advisable to adopt the certain means of communication of the thrown rope in preference to the uncertainty of his own power to reach and climb the ladder.

Flinging out his right arm, he motioned to the men in the lighthouse to be ready to heave a coil. The wind was the chief trouble now, but he must chance that.

"'Vast pulling," he yelled over his shoulder as a monstrous wave pranced over the reef and enveloped the column.

"Ay, ay," sang out his crew.

Up went the boat on the crest and a fearsome cavern spread before his eyes, revealing the seaweed that clung to the lowest tier of masonry. In the same instant he caught a fleeting glimpse of a lofty billow rearing back from the rocks on the north.

Down sank the boat until the door of the lighthouse seemed to be an awful distance away. She rose again, and Stanhope stood upright, his knees wedged against the wooden ribs. One piercing glance in front and another to the right showed that the antagonism of the two volumes of water gave the expected lull.

"Pull!"

The boat shot onward. Once, twice, three times, the oars dipped with precision. These rowers, who went with their backs turned to what might be instant death, were brave and stanch as he who looked it unflinchingly in the face.

"Heave!" roared Stanhope to the white-visaged second officer standing in the doorway far above him.

The rope whirred through the air, the boat rose still higher to meet it, and the coil struck Stanhope in the face, lashing him savagely in the final spite of the baffled gale which puny man had conquered.

Never was blow taken with such Christian charity.

"Back!" he cried, and the oarsmen, not knowing what had happened, bent against the tough blades. The tug's sailors at the drag, though the engines grinding at half speed were keeping them grandly against the race not more than a hundred and fifty yards in the rear, failed for an instant to understand what was going on. But their captain had seen the cast and read its significance.

"Haul away!" he bellowed in a voice of thunder, and, to cheer them on, added other words which showed that he was no landsman.

Stanhope deftly knotted the lighthouse line to the loop taken off his wrist. He cast the joined cords overboard.

"Thank God!" he said, and he looked up at the great pillar already growing less in the distance.

Now, from the kitchen, owing to its height above sea level and the thickness of the wall pierced by the window, as soon as the boat came within fifty yards or so of the lighthouse, the girls could see it no longer.

When it dropped out of sight for the last time Constance could not endure the strain. Though her dry tongue clicked in her mouth she forced a despairing cry.

"Enid," she screamed, "lean out through the window. It is your place."

"I cannot! Indeed, I cannot! He will be killed! Oh, save him, kind Providence, and take my life in his stead!"

Constance lifted the frenzied girl in her strong arms. This was no moment for puling fear.

"If I loved a man," she cried, "and he were about to die for my sake, I should count it a glory to see him die."

The brave words gave Enid some measure of comprehension. Yes, that was it. She would watch her lover whilst he faced death, even though her heart stopped beating when the end came.

Helped by her sister, she opened the window and thrust her head out. To her half-dazed brain came the consciousness that the sea had lost its venom. She saw the boat come on, pause, leap forward, the rope thrown and the knot made.

As the boat retreated she caught Stanhope's joyous glance. He saw her, and waved his hand. Something he said caused the two rowers, for the first time, to give one quick glance backward, for they were now scudding rapidly away from the danger zone. She knew them; she managed to send a frantic recognition of all three.

Then, in an almost overpowering reaction, she drew back from the window and tears of divine relief streamed from her eyes.

"Constance," she sobbed, "he has saved us! Look out. You will see him. I cannot."

Yet, all tremulous and breathless, she brushed away the tears and strove to distinguish the boat once more. It appeared, a vague blot in the mist that enshrouded her.

"Connie," she said again, "tell me that all is well."

"Yes, dear. Indeed, indeed, he is safe."

"And do you know who came with him? I saw their faces—Ben Pollard and Jim Spence—in the Daisy. Yes, it is true. And Jack planned it with them. They have escaped; and we, too, will be rescued. It is God's own doing. I could thank him on my knees for the rest of my life."

CHAPTER XV.

Enid's New Name.

The twisted strands of tough hemp might have been an electric cable of utmost conductivity if its powers were judged by results. When willing hands had carefully hauled in the rope until the knot could be unfastened, and the end secured to the cord connecting the gallery with the entrance, a man was dispatched to warn Brand that all was in readiness for the next step.

The rough sailor was the messenger of the gods to those who waited on each story. As he ran upwards, climbing the steep stairs with the nimbleness of a monkey, he bellowed the great news to each crowded doorway. Seeing the girls in the kitchen, though already his breath was scant, he blurted out:

"It's all right, ladies! He's done the trick!"

On the next landing pallid women's faces gleamed at him.

"Rope aboard!" he gasped. "They're tyin' on legs o' mutton now."

Yet again he was waylaid on the floor above. Hard pressed for wind, he wheezed forth consolation.

"Just goin' to haul the bottled beer aboard," he grunted.

It would never do to pass the hospital without a word.

"Beef-tea an' port wine swimmin' here," he panted.

Brand was peering through the lantern door, awaiting this unwashed Mercury, who caught sight of the lighthouse-keeper 'ere his shaggy head had emerged from the well.

The man stopped, almost spent. He gave an off-handed sailor's salute.

"Haul away, sir!" he yelled, and his voice cracked with excitement. Indeed, they who remained quite coherent on the Gulf Rock, on the ships, and even on the cliffs nine miles away, were few in number and to be pitied exceedingly. There are times when a man must cheer and a woman's eyes glisten with joyous tears, else they are flabby creatures, human jellyfish. The steamboats snorted with raucous siren-blasts, and although the hoarse shouting of men and the whistling of steam were swept into space by the north wind in its rage, those on shore could read the riddle through their glasses of the retreating boat and the white vapor-puffs.

The first to grasp Stanhope's hand when he swung himself onto the deck of the tender was Mr. Cyrus J. Traill.

"Well done, my lad!" he cried, brokenly. "I thought it was all up with you. Did you see her?"

"Yes, but only for a second."

"You thought it best not to join them?"

"You know that I would gladly go now and attempt it. But I dared not refuse the better way. I can't tell you what happened. Something stilled the sea like magic. Look at it now."

Assuredly the waves were breaking again around the pillar with all their wonted ferocity, but one among the Trinity House officers noticed a smooth, oily patch floating past the vessel.

"By Jove!" he shouted, "Brand helped you at the right moment. He threw some gallons of colza overboard."

Traill, a bronzed, spare, elderly man, tall and straight, with eyes set deep beneath heavy eyebrows, went to Jim Spence and Ben Pollard where they were helping to sling the Daisy up to the davits.

"I said five hundred between you," he briefly announced. "If the rope holds, and the three people I am interested in reach the shore alive, I will make it five hundred apiece."

Ben Pollard's mahogany face became several inches wider, and remained so permanently his friends thought, but Jim Spence only grinned.

"You don't know the cap'n, sir. He'll save every mother's son—an' daughter, too—now he has a line aboard."

Then the ex-sailor, chosen with Ben from among dozens of volunteers owing to his close acquaintance with the reef, bethought him.

"You're treatin' Ben an' me magnificent, sir," he said, "but the chief credit is due to Mr. Stanhope. We on'y obeyed orders."

The millionaire laughed like a boy.

"I have not forgotten Mr. Stanhope," he said. "I am sure your confidence in Mr. Brand will be justified. You watch me smile when I ante up your share."

On board the tug, and on the gallery of the lighthouse, there was no time for talk. The vessel, with the most skilful handling, might remain where she was for about four hours. She was already more than a hundred fathoms within the dangerous area marked by the buoy, and there was much to be done in the time.

The strongest rope, the best wire hawser, has its well-defined limit of strain, and the greater the length the greater the tension. From the buoy itself naught save a chain cable would hold in such a sea. The tug must operate from the nearer base. She was pitching and tossing in a manner calculated to daunt anyone but a sailor, and the slightest mistake made by the skipper, the burly oil-skinned man balancing himself on the bridge with his hand on the engine-room telegraph, would snap any line ever twisted.

So, briefly, this was the procedure adopted. A stout rope was bent onto that carried to the rock by Stanhope. With this was sent a whip, thus establishing a to-and-fro communication. The rope itself, when it had reached the rock, was attached to a buoy and anchored. Thus, it could be picked up easily if the thin wire hawser next dispatched should happen to break.

A few words may cover a vast amount of exertion. Before the second line, with its running gear, was safely stayed around the body of the lantern—even the iron railing might give way—a precious hour had elapsed, and Stanhope was impatiently stamping about the bridge of the tender, though none knew better than he that not an unnecessary moment was being lost.

At last a signaler stationed on the tug was able to ask:

"What shall we send first?"

And the answer came back:

"Water, milk, bread."

All night tinsmiths had labored to enclose food and clothing in water-tight cylinders ready for transport, and the shining packages now began their voyaging from the tug's trawl-beam to the lofty gallery, three-fourths of the journey being through the sea. When the first consignment reached the rock, another lusty cheer boomed from the watching vessels.

Stanhope, at least, could picture the scene in progress behind the grim granite walls—Constance and Enid, with others whom he did not know, serving out generous draughts to thirsty and famished women and men, helping themselves last, and hardly able to empty the eight-gallon supply of fresh water before they were called on to distribute a similar quantity of milk.

And then, the bread, the cooked meat all cut in slices, the tinned soups and meat extracts, the wines—for Traill had taken charge of the catering and his arrangements were lavish—what a feast for people almost on the verge of starvation!

The hours flew until the tug signaled that she must cast loose and back away from the reef. The tide was running westward now. Soon the danger would be active, and in any case, the Gulf Rock was saved from the possibility of famine during the next forty-eight hours. So the hawser, in its turn, was buoyed, and Brand's parting instruction was not to attempt to reopen communication during the dark hours of the morning tide.

The wisdom of his advice was manifest. With farewell trumpetings the vessels scurried off to Penzance, and the telegraph office was kept open all night transmitting the word-pictures of newspaper correspondents to thrill the world with full descriptions of the way in which the Gulf Rock's famished denizens had been relieved.

The two last packages ferried to the lighthouse contained not only warm woolen wraps for the women and children, but a big bundle of letters and telegrams.

Pyne was the postman. There were at least twenty notes addressed to the girls, and several to Brand, from friends ashore.

Mr. Traill, of course, wrote to his nephew and Mrs. Vansittart. Naturally, Pyne carried his own missive to the kitchen, where he found that Constance and Enid had managed to wash in distilled water.

They were cutting sandwiches and endeavoring to read their letters at the same instant. He bowed with sarcastic politeness.

"I see you are ready for the party," he said.

Certainly he offered a deplorable contrast to them. His face was encrusted with salt and blackened with dirt and perspiration. His hands were like those of a sweep, but smeared with oil, which shone on his coat sleeves up to both elbows. His clothes were torn and soiled, his linen collar and cuffs limp as rags, and his waistcoat was ripped open, having remained in that condition since it caught in a block as he descended the mast.

"Oh, you poor fellow!" cried Constance. "How you must envy us. Here is a kettleful of hot water. I can't say much for the towel, but the soap is excellent."

Refreshed, Pyne opened his uncle's letter. The girls were keeping up a running commentary of gossip.

"Mousie (Mrs. Sheppard) says she hasn't slept for three nights."

"Edith Taylor-Smith says she envies us."

"That letter you are reading now is from Lady Margaret. What does she say?"

"She sends all sorts of love, and—that kind of thing," cried the blushing Enid, who had just learnt from Jack's mother that Stanhope had appropriated her as his intended wife without ever a proposal.

"Is that all—in four closely written pages?"

"Well—she hopes soon to see me—to see both of us—"

Constance was too kindly to quiz her sister; maybe she saw something in Enid's eye which threatened speedy retaliation.

"Here's a note from the vicar. They have held a special service of intercession at St. Mary's."

"And Hettie Morris writes— Good gracious, Mr. Pyne! Have you had any bad news?"

Enid's wondering cry was evoked by the extraordinary way in which the young American was looking at her. Some intensely exciting knowledge had mastered stoicism. His eyes were distended, his lips quivering. He leaned with one hand on the kitchen table; in the other he had clenched his uncle's letter.

Constance stood near to him. That he, of all the men she had ever met, should yield to an overpowering emotion, startled her greatly.

She caught his arm.

"Mr. Pyne," she said softly, "if—it is any ill tidings—you have received—we are, indeed, sorry for you."

He pulled himself straight, and gave Constance such a glance that she hastily withdrew her hand. It seemed to her that he would clasp her in his arms forthwith without spoken word. Her action served to steady him, and he laughed, so softly and pleasantly that their fear was banished.

"Girls," he said slowly, "I have been parachuting through space for a minute or so. I'm all right. Everybody is all right. But my head swims a bit. If I come back forgetting my name and the place where I last resided, remember that once I loved you."

He left them. He could not trust himself to say more.

"That letter was from his uncle, I suppose," said Enid, awe-stricken.

"It must be something very dramatic which would make him act so strangely. Why has he run away? Was he afraid to trust us with his news?"

There was a sharp vehemence in Constance's voice which did not escape her sister's sharp ears.

"Connie," said Enid, quietly, "as sure as Jack loves me, that man is in love with you."

"Enid—"

But the other girl laughed, with a touch of her saucy humor.

"Why did he look at you in that way just now? Didn't you think he was going to embrace you on the spot? Confess!"

"It was at you he was looking."

"Not in the way I mean. He gazed at me as if I were a spirit. But when you touched him he awoke. He might have been asleep and suddenly seen you near him. I wonder he didn't say, 'Kiss me, dearest, and then I will be sure it is not a dream.'"

Constance discovered that she must defend herself.

"Mr. Pyne hardly conveyed such unutterable things to me," she said, conscious that a clean face betrays a flush which smudges may hide. "Have you had a letter from Jack that you can interpret other people's thoughts so sweetly?"

"No, dear. Jack has not written. I have found out the cause. His mother expresses the hope that he will be the first to convey her good wishes. So I think he meant to try and bring the rope himself. Dad knew it and Mr. Pyne. That is why they did not tell us."

Constance gathered her letters into a heap. The tiny pang of jealousy which thrilled her had gone.

"Eighty-one hungry mouths expect to be filled to repletion tonight," she said. "No more gossip. What curious creatures women are! Our own affairs are sufficiently engrossing without endeavoring to pry into Mr. Pyne's."

"Connie, don't press your lips so tightly. You are just dying to know what upset him. But, mark my words, it had nothing to do with any other woman."

Wherein Enid was completely mistaken: she would never commit a greater error of judgment during the rest of her days.

When Pyne quitted the kitchen his intent was to reach Brand without delay. As he passed Mrs. Vansittart's bedroom he paused. Something had delighted him immeasurably once the first shock of the intelligence had passed.

He seemed to be irresolute in his mind, for he waited some time on the landing before he knocked at the door and asked if Mrs. Vansittart would come and speak to him.

"Are you alone?" she demanded, remaining invisible.

"Yes," he said.

Then she appeared, with that borrowed shawl still closely wrapped over head and face.

"What is it?" she said wearily.

"You have had a letter from my uncle?"

"Yes, a charming letter, but I cannot understand it. He says that some very important and amazing event will detain him in Penzance after we reach the place. He goes on—but I will read it to you. I am quite bewildered."

She took a letter from her pocket and searched through its contents until she found a paragraph. She was about to read it aloud when someone came down the stairs. It was one of the officers, yet Mrs. Vansittart was so flurried that she dropped the sheet of paper and bent to pick it up before Pyne could intervene.

"Oh, bother!" she cried. "I am dreadfully nervous, even now that we are in no further peril. This is what I wish you to hear."

And she read:

"Nothing but the most amazing and unlooked-for circumstances would cause me to ask you to postpone the date of our marriage for at least a month after you reach shore. This is not the time, nor are your present surroundings the place for telling you why I make this request. Suffice it to say that I think, indeed, I am sure, a great happiness has come into my life, a happiness which you, as my wife soon to be, will share."

The American, whilst Mrs. Vansittart was intent on her excerpts from his uncle's letter, studied all that was visible of her face. That which he saw there puzzled him. She had suffered no more than others, so he wondered why she wore such an air of settled melancholy. Throughout the lighthouse gloom was dispelled. The sick became well, the lethargic became lively. Even the tipplers of methylated spirits, deadly ill before, had worked like Trojans at the rope, as eager to rehabilitate their shattered character as to land the much-needed stores.

(To be continued.)

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