THE Pillar of Light

By Louis Tracy

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(Continued)

The behavior of the mercury puzzled him. In the barometer it fell, in the thermometer it rose. Increasing temperature combined with low pressure was not a healthy combination in January. Looking back through the records of several years, he discovered a similar set of conditions one day in March, 1891. He was stationed then on the Northeast coast and failed to remember any remarkable circumstances connected with the date, so he consulted the lighthouse diary for that year. Ah! Here was a possible explanation. The chief-keeper, a stranger to him, was something of a meteorologist.

He had written: "At 4.15 p.m. the barometer stood at 27.15 degrees, and There was a heavy sea and a No. 7 gale blowing from the S. S.W. About five o'clock the wind increased to a hurricane and the sea became more violent than I have seen it during five years' experience of this station. Judging solely by the clouds and the flight of birds, I should imagine that the cyclonic centre passed over the Scilly Isles and the Land's End."

Then, next day:

"A steady northeast wind stilled the sea most effectually. Within twenty-four hours of the first signs of the hurricane the Channel was practicable for small craft. A fisherman reports that the coast is strewn with wreckage."

Brand mused over the entries for a while. With his night glasses he peered long into the teeth of the growing storm to see if he could find the double flash of the magnificent light on the Bishop Rock, one of the Atlantic breakwaters of the Scilly Isles. It was fully thirty-five miles distant, but it flung its radiance over the waters from a height of 143 feet, and the Gulf Rock lamp stood 130 feet above high-water mark. A landsman would not have distinguished even the nearer revolutions of the St. Agnes light, especially in the prevalent gloom, and wisps of spindrift were already striking the lantern and blurring the glass.

Nevertheless, he caught the quick flashes reflected from clouds low, but unbroken. As yet, there was a chance of the incoming tide bringing better weather, and he bent again over the record of the equinoctial gale in 1891. Soon he abandoned this hope. The growing thunder of the reef as the tide advanced gave the first unmistakable warning of what was to come. As a mere matter of noise the reef roared its loudest at half-tide. He understood now that a gale had swept across the Atlantic in an irregular track. Howsoever the winds may rage the tides remain steadfast, and the great waves now rushing up from the west were actually harbingers of the fierce blast which had created them.

Of course, the threatened turmoil in no wise disconcerted him. It might be that the rock would remain inaccessible during many days. In that event the girls would take the watch after the lamp was extinguished and they must learn to endure the monotony and discomforts of existence in a storm-bound lighthouse. They would be nervous unquestionably—perhaps he had forgotten how nervous—but Brand was a philosopher, and at present he was most taken up with wonderment at the curious blend of circumstances which resulted in their presence on the rock that night.

Ha! A tremor shook the great pillar. He heard without the frenzied shriek of the first repulsed roller which flung itself on the sleek and rounded wall. Would the girls sleep through the next few hours? Possibly, if awake, they would attribute the vibration of the column to the wind. He trusted it might be so. Shut in as they were, they could not distinguish sounds. Everything to them would be a confused hum, with an occasional shiver as the granite braced its mighty heart to resist the enemy.

But what new note was this in the outer chaos? An ordinary gale shuddered and whistled and chanted its way past the lantern in varying tones. It sang, it piped, it bellowed, it played on giant reeds and crashed with cymbals. Now—he looked at the clock, after midnight—there was a sustained screech in the voice of the tempest which he did not remember having heard before. At last the explanation dawned on him. The hurricane was there, a few feet away, shut off from him by mere sheets of glass. The lighthouse thrust its tall shaft into the merciless tornado with grim steadfastness, and around its smooth contours poured a volume of unearthly melody which seemed to surge up from the broad base and was flung on into the darkness by the outer sweep of the cornice.

The wind was travelling seventy, eighty, mayhap a hundred miles an hour. Not during all his service, nor in earlier travels through distant lands, had he ever witnessed a storm of such fury. He thought he heard something crack overhead. He looked aloft, but all seemed well. Not until next day did he discover that the wind-vane had been carried away, a wrought-iron shank nearly two inches thick having snapped like a piece of worsted at the place where the tempest had found a fault.

He tried to look out into the heart of the gale. The air was full of flying foam, but the sea was beaten flat. If the growling monster beneath tried to fling a defiant crest at the tornado, the whole mass of water, many tons in weight, was instantly torn from the surface and flung into nothingness. Some of these adventurers, forced up by the reef, hit the lighthouse with greater force than many a cannon-ball fired in battles which have made history. Time after time the splendid structure winced beneath the blow.

If Stephen Brand were ever fated to know fear he was face to face with the ugly phantom then. The granite column would not yield, but it was quite within the bounds of possibility that the entire lantern might be carried away, and he with it.

He thought, with a catching of his breath, of the two girls in the tiny room beneath. For one fleeting instant his mortal eyes gazed into the unseen. But the call of duty restored him. The excessive draught affected the lamp. Its ardor must be checked. With a steady hand he readjusted the little brass screws. They were so superbly indifferent to all this pandemonium. Just little brass screws, doing their work, and heeding naught beside. Suddenly there came to him the triumphant knowledge that the pure white beam of the light was hewing its path through the savage assailant without as calmly and fearlessly as it lit up the ocean wilds on a midsummer night of moonlight and soft zephyrs.

"Thank God for that!" he murmured aloud. "How can a man die better than at his post?"

The ring of iron beneath caught his ears. He turned from the lamp. Constance appeared, pale, with shining eyes. She carried the lantern. Behind her crept Enid, who had been crying; she strove now to check her tears.

"Is this sort of thing normal, or a special performance arranged for our benefit?" said his daughter, with a fine attempt at a smile.

"Oh, dad, I am so frightened," cried Enid. "Why does it howl so?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MIDDLE WATCH

It says a good deal for Stephen Brand's courage that he was able to laugh just then, but it is a fine thing for a man, in a moment of supremest danger, to be called on to comfort a weeping woman.

The next minute might be their last—of that he was fully conscious. Even before the girls reached his side he felt a curious lifting movement of the whole frame of the lantern. Steel and glass alike were yielding to the sustained violence of the wind-pressure. Well were they molded, by men whose conscience need harbor no reproach of dishonest craftsmanship; they were being tested now almost beyond endurance.

Some natures would have found relief in prayer. Gladly would Constance and Enid have sunk on their knees and besought the Master of the Winds to spare them and those at sea. But Brand, believing that a catastrophe was imminent decided that in order to save the girls' lives he must neither alarm them nor lose an unnecessary instant.

To desert the light—that was impossible personally. If given the least warning, he would spring towards the iron rail that curved by the side of the stairs to the service-room, and take his chance. Otherwise he would go with the lamp. There was no other alternative. The girls must leave him at once.

The laugh with which he greeted their appearance gave him time to scheme.

"I ought to scold you, but I won't," he cried. "Are you plucky enough to descend to the kitchen and make three nice cups of cocoa?"

Just think what it cost him to speak in this bantering way, careless of words, though each additional syllable might mean death to all three.

His request had the exact effect he calculated. For once, Constance was deceived, and looked her surprise. Enid, more volatile, smiled through her tears. So it was not quite as bad as they imagined, this gale. Their father could never be so matter-of-fact in the face of real peril to all of them. Cocoa! Fancy a man giving his thoughts to cocoa whilst they were expecting the lighthouse to be hurled into the English Channel.

He turned again to manipulate the brass screws.

"Now, do not stand there shivering," he said, "but harden your hearts and go. Use the oil stove. By the time it is ready—"

"Shivering, indeed!"

Constance, of the Viking breed, would let him see that he had no monopoly of the family motto: "Audeo." She, too, could dare.

"Down you go, Enid," she cried. "He shall have his cocoa, poor man."

He looked over his shoulder and caught his daughter glancing at him from the well of the stairs.

"Bad night," he shouted cheerfully, and he cheated her quick intelligence a second time.

They were gone. Perchance it was his last sight of them in this life. Three times the stalwart frame-work creaked. Once it moved so perceptibly that the curtain rings jingled. Then he remembered the words of Isaiah:

"For thou hast been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall."

The blast of the terrible ones! What a vivid pen-picture of the awesome forces of nature. How long would this tornado continue? Already it must have strewed its path with havoc at sea and on land. His physical senses were elevated to the supernatural. He seemed to acquire abnormal powers of sight and hearing. He could see the trees bending before the wrathful wind, hear the crashing tiles and brickwork as houses were demolished and people hurled to death. But there was no ecstasy of soul, no mental altitude. In quick reaction came the fanciful memory of the hardy old salt who cheered his shipmates during a terrific gale with the trite remark:

"I pity the poor folk ashore on a night like this."

What a curious jumble of emotions jostled in his brain. A step from the sublime to the ridiculous! Not even a step. They were inextricably interwoven, the woof and the warp of things. He recalled the odd expression of an officer who had passed unscathed through the inferno of Spion Kop.

"I had no sense of fear," said he, "but my teeth began to ache."

Brand, a student, even of himself, discovered that his dominant sensation was one of curiosity.

"If it has to be," said his nervous system, "let it come quickly." He felt like a man lying on the operating table waiting for the chloroform.

Suddenly, the bright flame of the lamp lessened. The use that was his second nature caused him to raise the wicks and admit more draught. Even whilst his deft fingers arranged the complex burner, his ear caught a change in the external din. The shriek of the wind dropped to a thunderous growl. This was a gale, not a tempest. God be praised, the crisis had passed!

The hurricane had lasted thirty-five minutes. A similar tornado sufficed to wreck one-half of the City of St. Louis. This one, as he learnt afterwards, swept around the south of Ireland, created a tidal wave which did great damage to the Scilly Isles and the headlands of the south coast, yet spent itself somewhere in the North Sea. Dwellers in inland cities were amazed and incredulous when the newspapers spoke of its extraordinary violence. A truth is harder to swallow than a lie, all the time.

Up clattered Enid with the steaming beverage; Constance, the lantern-bearer, providing the rear-guard.

"I do believe it is blowing worse than ever," said Enid, striving desperately to be unconcerned. In reality, the angry wind was no longer able to be heard the waves. With a rising tide and the gale assisting there would soon be a sea worthy of Turner in his maddest mood.

"Good gracious, dad," cried Constance, "how pale you are. And your forehead is wet. What have you been doing?"

Brand hastily mopped his face with a handkerchief.

"During some of the heavy gusts," he explained, "I was compelled to stand on the trimming stage. And—the micrometer valve required adjustment."

She eyed him narrowly. The margin of suspicion was wider.

"There is nothing else wrong?" she asked.

He approached and kissed her ear.

"Since when did my little girl begin to doubt me?" he said quietly.

Her eyes filled. Even the hint of a reproach from him was intolerable. For the life of her she could no longer control the flood of terror which welled up beyond restraint.

"Forgive me, dad," she murmured, "but I thought, and I still think, that we were and are in a position of the utmost peril. I can't help knowing that it is high-water about two o'clock. It is now only a quarter to one. The worst is not over. Do you think I cannot read your dear face! Dad! if there is danger, don't send us away again."

Tears were streaming down her white cheeks. Enid holding the tray in speechless bewilderment during this outburst from her proud and self-reliant sister, set it down on the writing-desk with a crash.

"Oh dear," she wailed, "I don't want any cocoa if we're gug-gug-going to be drowned."

Certainly if Stephen Brand had imagined, two minutes earlier, that he was about to laugh long and loudly, in a genuine surrender to an uncontrollable spasm of mirth, he would have feared lest his wits were leaving him. Yet he laughed now until his vision was blurred. And the wonderful relief of it! What a tonic, after the ordeal he had endured!

It chanced, just then, that an emancipated wave embraced the granite column, hit the cornice, and deluged the lantern, its disintegrating mass striking the glass with force enough to break any ordinary window. The astounded girls could not refuse the evidence of eyes and ears. Here was the frantic sea leaping to a height of one hundred and forty feet and more, yet their father was treating the incident as the merriest joke of many a month.

No better cure for their hysteria could be contrived. Brand was obviously not acting. The hearty pulsations of laughter had restored his ruddy color. Evidently they were alarmed about nothing.

"Here, Enid, drink your parting cup," he cried at last. "Have no fear. It is only the duchan doris before many another feast."

Feeling somewhat ashamed of themselves, though smiling very wistfully, they obeyed him. He sipped his cocoa with real nonchalance. Another wave turned a somersault over the lantern. Brand's only anxiety was to blow at the steaming liquid and cool it sufficiently.

Yet was he watching them and hammering out the right course to adopt. He alone understood that, to the novice, the amazing ordeal from which the lighthouse had successfully emerged was as naught compared with the thunderous blows of the waves, the astounding reverberations of the hollow pillar, the continuous deluge of spray striking the lantern, which the infuriated sea would inflict on them.

To urge any further effort to sleep was folly. They must remain with him and be comforted.

Being reasonable girls, of fine spirit under conditions less benumbing, it was better that they should grasp the facts accurately. They would be timid, of course, just as people are timid during their first attempt to walk 'twixt rock and cataract at the Falls of Niagara, but they would have confidence in their guide and endure the surrounding pandemonium.

"Here's to you, Enid. Still we live," he cried, and drained his cup.

"I sup-pup-pose so," she stammered.

"Better sup up your cocoa," said Constance. "Now I am quits with you for this afternoon.'

"I'll tell you what," went on Brand, confidentially. "In that locker you will find a couple of stout pilot-coats. Put them on. As I cannot persuade you to leave me you must sit down, and it is cold in here. Moreover, for the first time in twenty-one years I will smoke on duty. I have earned a little relaxation of the law."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Constance, if not Enid, had not missed the subtle hint in his words. But she was quite normal again. She gave no sign; helped her sister into the heavy reefer, and made herself comfortable in turn.

"Neither of you will ever regret tonight's experience—when it is nicely over," he said. "You are like a couple of recruits in their first battle."

"I am sure—" began Enid.

A huge wave, containing several hundred tons of water, smote the lighthouse, and cavorted over their heads. The house that was founded upon a rock fell not, but it shook through all its iron-bound tiers, and the empty cups danced on their saucers.

Not another word could Enid utter. She was paralyzed.

"That fellow—arrived—in the nick of time—to emphasize my remarks," said Brand, lighting his pipe. "This is your baptism of fire, if I may strain a metaphor. But you are far better situated than the soldier. He gets scared out of his wits by big guns which are comparatively harmless, and when he has been well pounded for an hour or so, he advances quite blithely to meet the almost silent hail of dangerous bullets. So, you see, in his case, ignorance is bliss."

"Are we in bliss?" demanded Constance.

"You have been. The lighthouse has outfaced a hurricane such as has not visited England before in my lifetime. It is over. The wind has dropped to a No. 10 gale, and we have not lost even a bit of skin to my knowledge. Now the cannonade is beginning. Certainly, we may have the glass broken, by a rare accident, but no worse fate can befall us.'

A heavy thud was followed by a deluge without. They heard the water pouring off the gallery.

Constance leaned forward, with hands on knees. Her large eyes looked into his.

"This time dad, you are not choosing your words, she said.

"I am sorry you should think that," was the reply. "I selected each phrase with singular care. Never be misled by the apparent ease of a speaker. The best impromptu is prepared beforehand."

"You dear old humbug," she cried.

Now the quiet deadliness of the scene which followed the reappearance of Enid and herself from their bed-room was manifest to her. Enid, too, was looking from one to the other in eager striving to grasp the essentials of an episode rapidly grouping its details into sequence. Brand knew that if he carried his daughters' questioning they would be on their knees by his side forthwith, and he wished to avoid any further excitement.

"Please attend, both of you," he growled, with mock severity. "I am going to tell you something that will console you."

His voice was drowned by some part of the Atlantic whirling over the lantern.

"This kind of thing does not go on all the time," he continued. "Otherwise we should have five hours of spasmodic conversation. As soon as the tide rises sufficiently to gain an uninterrupted run across the reef we will have at least two hours of comparative quiet. About four o'clock there will be a second edition for an hour or so. I suppose that any suggestion of bed—"

"Will be scouted," exclaimed Enid.

"A nice pair of beauties you will be in the morning," he grumbled artfully.

Not even Constance was proof against this new burthen of woe. She glanced around.

"You say that," she cried, "knowing that the nearest looking-glass is yards away.

He pointed with his pipe.

"In the second drawer of the desk you will find a heliograph It is only a toy, but will justify me."

They ran together, and found the little circular mirror. The next wave passed unheeded. Smiling, he went up to the lamp. Even yet there was hope they might go to bed when the respite came.

After much talk of disordered hair, wan cheeks, rings round the eyes, cracked lips, and other outrageous defects which a pretty woman mourns when divorced from her dressing-table, Constance called him

"Here is a queer thing," she said. "Have you heard any steamer hooting?"

"No," he answered. Bending between the two of them he saw the pointer of the auriscope bore due southwest, though the last siren of which they had any knowledge sounded from the opposite direction.

He picked up a little trumpet resembling the horn of a motor-car.

"I use this for tests," he explained. Its tiny vibrator quickly brought the needle round towards his hand.

"It is improbable in the highest degree that any steamer is near enough to affect the auriscope," he said. "On a night like this they give the coast a wide berth."

He quitted them again. The girls, having nothing better to do, watched the dial to see if any change occurred. He heard them use the small trumpet three times. Then Enid sang out:

"Oh, do come, dad. It goes back to the southwest regularly."

He joined in the watch The needle was pointing north in obedience to the sound-waves created in the room. Suddenly, it swung round nearly half the circumference of the dial.

"Hush!" he said. They listened intently, but the roar of the wind and water was too deafening. They could hear naught else. He went to the southwest point of the glass dome, but the lantern was so blurred with rivulets of water that he could see nothing save a tawny vastness where the light fell on the flying spindrift.

To make sure, he tested the auriscope again, and with the same result.

"A vessel is approaching from the southwest," he announced, gravely. "Evidently she is whistling for help. I hope she will not attempt to approach too near the reef. I must have a look out."

He put on an oilskin coat and tied the strings of a sou'wester firmly beneath his chin.

The small door of the lantern opened towards the Bay, so he had no difficulty in gaining the gallery. The girls watched him forcing his way against the wind until he was facing it and gazing in the direction of the Scilly Isles.

"Perhaps some poor ship is in danger, Connie," whispered Enid. "It makes me feel quite selfish. Here was I, thinking of nothing but my own peril, yet that little machine there was faithfully doing its duty."

"It was not alone in its self-abandonment. We shall never know, dearest, how much father suffered when he sent us off with a jest on his lips. I am sure he thought the lantern would be blown away."

"And he with it! Oh, Connie!"

"Yes. He believed, if that awful thing took place whilst we were below, we might escape. I can see it all now. I had the vaguest sort of suspicion, but he hoodwinked me."

"Had we known we would not have left him," cried Enid, passionately.

"Yes, we would. Think of him, sticking to his post. Was it for us to disobey?"

Overcome by their feelings, they stood in silence for a little while. Through the thick glass they could dimly distinguish Brand's figure. A great wave assailed the lantern and Enid screamed loudly.

'Don't, dear!" cried Constance, shrilly. "Father would not remain there if it were dangerous."

Nevertheless, they both breathed more freely when they saw him again, an indeterminate shape against the luminous gloom.

Constance felt that she must speak. The sound of her own voice begat confidence.

"I have never really understood dad until to-night," she said. "What an ennobling thing is a sense of duty. He would have died here quite calmly, Enid, yet he would avoid the least risk out there. That would be endangering his trust. Oh, I am glad we are here. I have never lived before this hour."

Enid stole a wondering glance at her sister. The girl seemed to be gazing into depths immeasurable. Afterwards the words came back to her mind: "That would be endangering his trust."

Brand faced the gale a full five minutes. He returned hastily.

"There is a big steamer heading this way—a liner, I fancy," he gasped, half choked with spray . "I fear she is disabled. She is firing rockets, and I suppose her siren is going constantly, though I cannot hear it."

He ran to the room beneath. Flushed with this new excitement, the girls donned their oilskin coats and arranged their sou'westers. When he hurried up the stairs he was carrying four rockets. He noted their preparations.

"Don't come out until I have fired the alarm signals," he shouted, "and tie your dresses tightly around your knees."

They heard the loud hissing of the rockets, and the four reports travelled dully from the sky Three white starbursts and one red told the Land's End coast-guards that a ship in need of help was near the Gulf Rock. Probably they had already seen the vessel's signals. In any event, they would not miss the display from the lighthouse.

Walking with difficulty, the girls crept out on to the balcony.

Brand had already gone to the windward side. The first rush of the gale made them breathless, yet they persevered and reached him. They were greeted by a climber, but their father, with a hand on their shoulders, pressed them down, and the spray crashed against the lantern behind them. He knew they would take no harm. When the vessel passed, their boots and stockings would be soaked. Then he could insist that they should go to bed.

At first they distinguished nothing save a chaotic blend of white and yellow foam, driving over the reef at an apparently incredible speed. Overhead, the black pall of the sky seemed to touch the top of the lantern. Around, in a vast circle carved out of the murky wilderness, the wondrous beam of the light fought and conquered its unwearied foes. Constance caught the three quick flashes of the Seven Stones light-ship away to the right. She fancied she saw a twinkling ahead, but this was the St. Agnes light, and neither girl could make out other sight or sound until Brand pointed steadily towards one spot in the darkness.

Before they could follow his indication they were compelled to duck to avoid another wave. Then, as if it had just popped up out of the sea, they divined a tiny white spark swinging slowly across a considerable area. It was by that means that Brand had estimated the size and nearness of the steamer, and soon they glimpsed the red and green side-lights, though ever and anon these were hidden by the torrents of water sweeping over her decks. Of the vessel they could see nothing whatever.

Steadily she rolled along her fearful path. Having once found her, there was no difficulty in estimating the rapidity of her approach. Enid, whose eyes were strong and far-sighted, fancied she caught a fitful vision of a big, black hull laboring in the yellow waves.

Though it was difficult to speak, she crept close to Brand and screamed:

"Is she drifting onto the reef?"

"I fear so," he answered.

"Then she will be lost!"

"Yes. Unless they can manage to pass to s'uth'ard."

Luckily for poor human nature, mental stress and and physical effort rarely unite forces. The mere attempt to resist the wind, the constant watchfulness needed to avoid the ambitious seas, though these, strange to say, appeared to be diminishing in size and volume as the tide rose, served to dull the horror of the threatened tragedy.

Brand quitted them for an instant to glue his eyes to the lantern, after wiping a space on the glass: he must see if the lamp needed tending. Satisfied by the scrutiny, he stood behind the girls, who had shrunk closely together the moment he retired.

"They are trying hard to steer clear of the reef," he shouted. "Twice they have got her head round, but the sea is too strong for them. I am afraid she is doomed."

Now, they unquestionably saw the great body of the ship. Her funnels showed most clearly, making sharply defined black dashes on the heaving desert of froth. The planning whirls of the masthead light were enough to prove how the unfortunate vessel was laboring in what might prove to be her final agony.

And the pity of it! The wind was dropping. In another hour the weather might moderate appreciably, the tide would be forthcoming. Indeed, even then, a powerful steam trawler was preparing to fight her way out of Penzance harbor, with brave men on board ready to take any risk to save a ship in distress.

But the hour was grudged by fate. They could plainly hear the hoarse blasts of the steamer's foghorn, and again a rocket spurted its path to the clouds. She was barely a mile away, and, if anything, in a worse position than before, as the wind remained fixed in the southwest, and the tide, at this stage, curved in towards the land ere it began to flow back again to the Atlantic.

"Can nothing be done?" screamed Constance, rendered half frantic by the thought that the steamer would go to pieces before their eyes.

"Nothing," was the answer. "Pray for them. They are in the hands of God."

In gruesome distinctness they watched the vessel's approach. The siren ceased. Had those on board abandoned hope? Pitching and rolling in a manner that suggested the possibility of foundering in deep water, she came on with fatal directness. Suddenly, a dreadful thought came to Brand's mind. The lighthouse stood on the easterly and most elevated portion of the reef, whose bearings ran southwest by west and north-northwest. At low-water, some two acres of jagged rocks were exposed. On all sides the soundings fell to sixteen and eighteen fathoms. What if this helpless leviathan, of ten thousand tons or more dead weight, were to strike the pillar? This was quite possible with the tide at its present level. It all depended whether her bows were raised or lowered at the moment of impact. In the one case she would smash away many feet of rock, and perhaps damage the foundations of the lighthouse; in the other, her sharp prow would stab into the vitals of the granite, and the huge column might collapse in common ruin with its colossal assailant.

One of the girls, he never remembered which of them, spoke to him. He could not answer. For a second time that night he knew what fear meant. He watched the onward plunging of the vessel with stupefied eyes. He saw, as in a dream, that her officers and crew were still making desperate efforts to weather the reef. But, with the utter malignity of fate, though they might have swung her to port, she would not budge a yard to starboard, for now both wind and waves assailed her most vehemently on the starboard quarter.

Then when she was little more than twice her own length distant, he was certain that a dim form on the bridge signaled to the chart-house. With a miraculous deftness, on the assumption that her wheel was put hard over, she fell away from the racing seas. Her red light disappeared; her green light curved into full view. The next wave lifted her bodily, with a mad joy that it should be able to use her to batter its enemy, the rock.

Then she struck, with a sickening crash that was plainly audible above the roar of the reef. This was not enough. Another rush of foaming water enveloped her and smashed her again on an inner ledge. There she lodged, falling inertly over to starboard.

And Brand found his voice once more, for, as sure as this terrible night would have its end, so surely had the gallant captain of the steamer refused to imperil the lighthouse when all hope of saving his ship had vanished.

The tears were in Brand's eyes. His arms encircled the two girls.

"There goes a fine ship, commanded by a brave man," he cried.

And that was the beginning of the captain's requiem.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOTTERY

Just as the spin of a coin may mean loss or gain in some trumpery dispute or game of the hour, in like manner, apparently, are the graver issues of life or death determined at times. It is not so, we know. Behind the triviality on which men fasten with amazement as the governing factor in events there lies an inscrutable purpose. Yet, to those watching the destruction of the splendid vessel, there was little evidence of other than a blind fury in the fashion of her undoing.

The hoarse words had scarce left Brand's lips before a third wave, higher and more truculent than its predecessors, sprang right over the lost ship and smothered her in an avalanche of water. No doubt this monster swept away some of the officers and crew. It was impossible to be certain of aught save the one thing—that the steamer would surely break up before their eyes. The wind, now blowing in fierce gusts, the sea, rising each minute, the clouds of spray chasing each other in eerie flights through space, the grinding, incessant, utterly overwhelming noise of the reef, made all sights and sounds indefinite, nebulous, almost fantastic.

But when the giant billow receded, leaving the ship like a dark rock in the midst of innumerable cascades, the catastrophe took place which Brand would have foreseen were his thoughts less tumultuous. With the support of the sea withdrawn from half its length the huge hull must either slip back into deep water or break in two. The slender steel shell of an ocean liner is not constructed to resist the law of gravity acting on full five thousand tons. So the solid-looking colossus cracked like a carrot, and the after part fell back into the watery chasm, there to be swallowed instantly, amidst a turmoil which happily crowned the despairing shrieks of far more than half of those on board.

Constance and Enid screamed bitterly in their woe, but again they were saved from utter collapse by the exigencies of the moment. Brand, who expected to see the remainder of the ship blown up by the inrushing of the sea to the furnaces, dragged them forcibly below the level of the protecting balustrade.

Yet nothing of the sort took place. A vast cloud of steam rushed upwards, but it was dissipated by the next breath of the gale. This incident told the lighthouse-keeper much. The vessel had been disabled so long that her skilful commander, finding the motive power of no further avail, and certain that his ship must be driven ashore, had ordered the fires to be drawn and the steam to be exhausted from all boilers except one. Therefore, her shaft was broken, reasoned Brand. Probably the accident had occurred during the height of the hurricane, and her steering gear, of little use without the driving force of the engines to help, might have been disabled at the same time.

When the horror-stricken watchers looked again at the wreck the forward part had shifted its position. It was now lying broadside on to the seas, and the lofty foremast thrust its truck to within a few feet of them.

They were spared one ghastly scene which must surely have bereft the girls of their senses. The majority of the first-class passengers had gathered in the saloon. Some clung like limpets to the main gangway. A number, mostly men, crowded together in the drawing-room on the promenade deck. Farther than this they could not go, as the companion hatchways had been locked by the officer of the watch, the decks being quite impassable.

When the hull yielded, the spacious saloon was exposed to the vicious waves. Finding this new cavern opened to them, great liquid tongues sprang into the darkness and licked out hapless victims by the score. Of this appalling incident those in the lighthouse knew nothing until long afterwards.

When the ship struck, the electric dynamos stopped and all her lights went out. The lighthouse lamp owing to its rays being concentrated by the dioptric lens, helped not at all to dissipate the dim and ghastly vision beneath, but the great frame of the fore part of the vessel served as a breakwater to some extent, and temporarily withheld the waves from beating against the column.

Hence Brand, straining his eyes through the flying ruck, fancied he could make out the figure of the captain as he left the bridge, and, with some of the crew, took shelter behind the structure of the library and state cabins on what remained of the promenade deck. At the same moment the frenzied occupants of the library and gangway contrived to burst open the door of the main companion.

If they had to die they might as well die in the open and not boxed up in impenetrable darkness. As a matter of fact, the bolts were forced by a man who fired his revolver at them. The sea quickly discovered this new outlet. The next wave, passing through the saloon, sent tons of water pouring through the open hatch. One good result accrued. The strong canvas awning which prolonged the spar deck, was carried away, and the group of survivors, benumbed with cold and wholly overcome by their desperate position, could see the entire height of the granite column in front crowned with its diadem of brilliance. The liberated passengers saw it for the first time.

The sight brought no hope. Between ship and lighthouse was a true maelstrom of more than sixty feet of water, created by the back-wash from the stone-work and the shattered hull. Even if the passage could be made of what avail was it? The iron entrance door was fully fifty feet above the present level of the sea. It could only be approached by way of the rungs of iron embedded in the granite, and every wave, even in the comparative moderation caused by the obstructing wreck, swept at least twenty feet of the smooth stone tiers. It is this very fact that prevents rock lighthouses from seldom if ever serving as refuges for ship-wrecked sailors. The ascending ladder is so exposed, the sea usually so turbulent under the least stress of wind, that no human being can retain hand-hold or footing.

Yet, there was one faint chance of succor, and it was not a sailor who grasped it. The first that Brand knew of the desperate venture was the sight of a spectral man climbing up the shrouds of the fore-mast. On a steamer, whose yards are seldom used for sails, the practicable rope-ladder ceases at the fore, main, or mizzen-top, as the case may be. Thenceforward, a sailor must climb with hands and feet to the truck, a feat which may occasionally be necessary when the vessel is in dock; it is hardly ever attempted at sea.

The venturesome individual who thus suddenly made himself the centre of observation, carried a line with him. Not until he essayed the second portion of his perilious ascent did Brand realize what the other intended to do, which was nothing less than to reach the truck, the very top of the mast, and endeavor to throw a rope to the gallery.

And he might succeed, too—that was the marvel of it. The tapering spar came very near to them, perhaps twelve feet distant, and the wind would certainly carry the rope across the chasm if carefully thrown. A few strong and active men might use this aerial ferry. Well, better they than none. Brave fellow; would that the Lord might help him!

Higher and nearer swung the stalwart youngster, for none but a lithe and active boy could climb a pole with such easy vigor. At last he reached the truck, and a faintly heard cheer from beneath mingled with the hysterical delight of Enid and Constance, when, with legs twined round the mast, he rested his arms for an instant on the flat knob of the truck.

(To be continued)

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