

THE Pillar of Light

By Louis Tracy

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The behavior of the mercury puzzled him. In the barometer it fell, in the thermometer it rose. Increasing temperature combined with low pressure was a peculiar combination in January. Looking back through the records of several years, he discovered a similar set of conditions on a day in March, 1897. He consulted the then on the Northeast coast and tried to remember any remarkable circumstances connected with the date, as 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. A heavy gale blowing from the S.W. About five o'clock the wind increased to a hurricane and the sea became more violent than I have ever in my thirty years' experience of this station. Judging solely by the clouds and the flight of birds, I should have expected a cyclonic center to pass over the Selly Isles and the Land's End."

Then, next day: "A steady north wind stilled the sea most effectively. Within twenty-four hours of the first signs of the hurricane the Channel was practically calm. The lighthouse 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 lighthouse light on the Bishop Rock, one of the Atlantic breakwaters of the Selly Isles. It was fully thirty-five miles distant, but it should be visible from the waters from a height of 143 feet, the Gulf Rock lamp stood 130 feet above high-water mark. A lighthouse light, especially in the prevalent gloom, and wisps of smidrig were almost striking the lantern and blurring the glass.

Nevertheless, he caught the quick flashes reflected from clouds lower, but as yet, there was a chance of the incoming tide bringing better weather, and he bent again over the record of the equinoctial gales. The storm 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. However, the winds may rage the tides remain steadfast, and the great waves now rushing up from the west were actually harbored by the fierce blast which had created them.

Of course, the threatened turmoil in no way disconcerted him. It might be that the rock would remain inaccessible during many days. In that event the tides would be a chance to reach the lighthouse. He must learn to endure the monotony and discomfort of existence in a storm-bound lighthouse. They would be nervous unquietude—perhaps he had forgotten how nervous—but Brand was a philosopher, and at present he was not 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 sea, a repulsive rattle which hung itself on the lead of the rounded wall. Would the girls sleep through the next few hours? Possibly, if awake, they would attribute to the vibration of the column to the wind. He trusted it might be so. Shut in as they were, they could not distinguish sounds, they would be a confused hum, with an occasional shiver as the granite traced its mighty heart to resist the enemy.

But what new note was this in the outer chaos? An ordinary gale shuddered and whistled and changed its way past the lantern in varying tones. It sang, it piped, it belloved, it played on glass reeds and crashed with cymbals. Now, the sound was different, it was a steady, sustained, and a sustained screech in the voice of the tempest which he did not remember having heard before. The wind was a constant dawn on him. The hurricane was there, a few feet away, shut off from him by mere sheets of glass. The lighthouse thrust its shaft into this 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-eight, maybe a hundred miles an hour. Not during all its service, not 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 wire 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 growing monsoon 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 adventures, 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 catch 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 this panicking monium. 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 heaving its path through the savage assault, without a quiver and fearlessly, as it lit up the ocean lids 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 sobs.

"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 supreme danger, to be called on to comfort a weeping woman.

The next minute might be their last—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 save 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 lantern, 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 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 meant death to all three.

His request had the exact effect he calculated. For once, Constance was deceived, and looked her surprise. To more volatile, smile through her tears. So it was not quite as bad as they imagined, this gale. Their father could never be so matter-of-factly in the face of 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 sea!

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?"

Up clattered Enid with the steaming beverage. Constance, the lantern-bearer, providing the foreground.

"I do believe you are doing more than ever," said Enid, striving desperately to be unconvicted. In reality, the angry wind was no longer able to hinder the girls. With a quick dash and the aid of assisting there would be a sea worthy of Turner in his best moments.

"Now, my dear girls, do!" cried Constance, "How can you do that? And your heads are 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 chimney. The micrometer valve required adjustment."

"She eyed him narrowly. The margin of suspicion was not wide. "There is nothing else wrong?" she asked.

"I approached and kissed her ear. "Since when did my little girl begin to doubt me?" he said quietly.

Her eyes flicked. Enid the hint of a reproach. As soon as she saw the life of her mother could no longer control the flood of terror which welled up beyond restraint.

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pouring out the lantern. Constance called forward, with hands on knees. Her large eyes leaped into his.

"I am sorry you should think that," she said. "I tested each phrase with singular care. Never mind, but be glad to see you are a speaker. The best preparation is prepared beforehand."

"You dear old thing!" she cried. Now the quiet grandeur of the scene which followed the reappearance of Enid and Constance from their bedroom was manifest to her. Enid, too, was looking out into the other in a way that was not to be mistaken.

"Please attend, both of you," he growled, with mock severity. "I am not here to do anything that will console you."

His voice was drowned by the whistle 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 a speech. As soon as the tide rises sufficiently to gain an unintermittent run across the reef we have at least two hours of comparative quiet. About midnight there will be a second edition for an hour or so. I suppose that any suggestion of a rest will be regarded as treason."

"I'll be scolded," exclaimed Enid. "A nice pair of beauties you will be in the morning!"

He pointed his pipe. "The nearest looking-glass is yards away. He pointed to his pipe. "The nearest looking-glass is yards away. He pointed to his pipe. "The nearest looking-glass is yards away."

They ran together, and found the little motor-car. The next wave passed unheeded. Smiling, he went up to the lamp. Even yet he was hoping they might go to bed when the rope came.

After much talk of disordered hair, cracked lips, and other outrageous doings, Constance called him.

"Have you heard any steamer ho?"

"No," he answered. Bending betwixt close to the lantern, he saw the pointer of the auriscope bore due southwest, though the last sign 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. "It is a little trumpet which I use to affect the auriscope. On a night like this they give the coast a wide berth."

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

He joined in the watch. The needle of the compass pointed in obedience to the soundwaves created in the room. Suddenly, it swung round nearly half the circumference of the dial.

"Push," he said. They listened intently to the sound 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 high that he could see nothing but a vast expanse of water where the light fell on the flying auriscope.

To make sure of the light, he turned the auriscope, and with the same result. "A vessel is approaching from the side," he announced, gravely. "Evidently, it is in the distance. I hope she will not attempt to approach too near the reef. I must have a look out on the ocean coast and tied the strings of a sou'wester firmly beneath his chin.

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Children Cry for Fletcher's



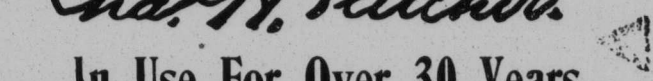
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CHAPTER VII. THE LOTTERY

Just as the spin of a coin may mean loss or gain in some trifling 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. Being a matter of chance, it is a matter of chance, it is a matter of chance, it is a matter of chance.

The hoarse words had scarce left Brand's lips before a third wave, higher and more truculent than its predecessor, sprang right over the lost ship and smothered her in an avalanche of water. No doubt this monstrous catastrophe, which was the destruction of the splendid vessel, there was little evidence of other than a blind fury in the fashion of her undoing.

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.

Constance, roused half frantic by the thought that the steamer would be lost before their eyes.

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

One of the girls, he never remembered the name, spoke to him. He could not answer. For a second time that night he knew what fear meant.

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 sea, and the lofty foremast thrust its trunk to within a few feet of them.

They were spared one ghastly scene after another. The girls of the first-class passengers had gathered in the saloon. Some clung like limpets to the main gangway.

Higher and nearer swung the starboard 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 the hull yielded, the spacious saloon was exposed to the vicious waves. The girls, with a mad joy, arranged their sou'westers. When Constance called forward, with hands on knees. Her large eyes leaped into his.

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