THE Pillar of Light

By Louis Tracy

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(Continued)

Here his face came into the lower focus of the light—strong, clean-shaven, clear-cut features, a square determined chin, two dark, earnest eyes, and a mop of ruffled black hair, for his deer-stalker cap had blown off ere he cleared the spar deck.

"Look out for the line," they heard him shout. The wind brought his voice plainly, but evidently he could distinguish no syllable of Brand's answering hail:

"Shall I make fast?"

"Can't hear a word," he cried. "If you can hear me hold a hand up."

Brand obeyed.

"Catch the line," he went on. "It is attached to a block with a running tackle. Haul in and make fast."

"The megaphone!" shouted Brand to Constance. She darted away to bring it, and when the adventurer clinging to the fore-mast had thrown a coil successfully, Brand took the instrument.

"Why don't you come this way? The others will follow," he bellowed.

"There are women and children down below. They must be saved first, and they cannot climb the mast," was the reply.

"All right, but send up a couple of sailors. We are short-handed here."

"Right-o," sang out the other cheerily, though he wondered why three men should anticipate difficulty.

Down he went. Without waiting, Brand and the girls hauled lustily at the rope. It was no child's play to hoist a heavy pulley and several hundred feet of stout cordage. More than once they feared the first thin rope would break, but it was good hemp, and soon the block was hooked to the strong iron stanchions of the railing. To make assurance doubly sure, Brand told Enid to take several turns of the spare cord around the hook and the adjacent rails.

Meanwhile, Constance and he saw that the rope was moving through the pulley without their assistance. Then, through the whirling scud beneath they made out an astonishing figure clinging to it. Soon he was close to the gallery. Catching him by arms and collar they lifted him into safety. He was one of the junior officers, and Constance, though she hardly expected it, experienced a momentary feeling of disappointment that the first man to escape was not the handsome youth to whose cool daring some at least of the ship's company would owe their lives.

The newcomer was a typical Briton.

"Thanks," he said. "Close shave. Have you a light? We must signal after each arrival."

Enid brought the small lantern, and the stranger waved it twice. The rope travelled back through the pulley, and this time it carried a sailor-man, who said not one word but stooped to tie his boot-lace.

"How many are left?" inquired Brand of the officer.

"About eighty, all told, including some twenty women and children."

"All wet to the skin?"

"Yes; some of them unconscious, perhaps dead."

"Can you hold out "

"Yes; a nip of brandy—"

"I will send some. We must leave you now. These with me are my daughters."

At last the crust of insular self-possession was broken. The man looked from one to the other of the seeming lighthouse-keepers.

"Well, I'm ——," he blurted out in his surprise. "That American youngster wondered what the trouble was."

A shapeless bundle hove in sight. It contained two little girls, tied inside a tarpaulin and lashed to the rope. This, evidently, was the plan for dealing with the helpless ones.

Brand instantly divided his forces. Enid he dispatched to make hot cocoa in the quickest and most lavish manner possible. Constance was to give each new arrival a small quantity of stimulant (the lighthouse possessed a dozen bottles of brandy and whiskey) and act as escort. The women and children were to be allotted the two bedrooms. Any bad cases of injury or complete exhaustion could be disposed of in the visiting officer's room, whilst all the men fit to take care of themselves were to be distributed between the entrance, the coal-room, the workshop and the stairways. The kitchen, store-room and service-room were to be kept clear, and the store-room door locked. Eighty! Brand was already doing problems in simple arithmetic.

A similar problem, with a different point to be determined, was occupying the active mind of the "American youngster" who had solved the knottiest proposition put forward during that eventful night.

He watched the forwarding of the shrieking, shuddering, or inanimate women. He timed the operation by his watch as the reflected light from the lamp was quite sufficient for the purpose.

Then he approached the captain.

"Say, skipper," he cried, "how long do you give the remains of her to hold out?"

"It is not high-water yet," was the answer. "Perhaps half an hour. Forty minutes at the utmost."

"Then you'll have to boost this thing along a good deal faster," said the cheerful one. "They're going up now at the rate of one every two minutes. That's thirty in half an hour. Fifty of us will travel a heap quicker at the end of that time if your calculation holds good."

The captain, who appeared to be in a stupor of grief, roused himself.

A few short and sharp orders changed the aspect of affairs. Frightened and protesting ladies were securely tied together, and hoisted, four at a time, like so many bags of wheat. When it came to the men's turn, even less ceremony and greater expedition were used.

Indeed, already there were emphatic warnings that much valuable time had been lost in the early stage of the rescue. Though the wind was now only blowing a stiff gale, the sea, lashed to frenzy by the hurricane, was heavier than ever. The ship was vanishing visibly. A funnel fell with a hideous crash and carried away a life-boat. The rest of the spar deck and nearly the whole of the forward cabins were torn out bodily. By repeated thumping on the reef the vessel had settled back almost onto an even keel, and the fore-mast, which had so providentially neared the summit of the lighthouse, was now removed far beyond the possibility of a rope being thrown.

The survivors on deck worked with feverish energy. The time was drawing short. They did not know the second that some unusually tempestuous wave would devour them utterly.

"Now, Mr. Pyne, you next," cried the chief officer, addressing the young Philadelphian, who, mirabile dictu, had found and lighted a cigar.

"Guess I'll swing up along with the captain," was the answer.

"Up with him," shouted the captain, fiercely, himself helping to loop Pyne to the fourth officer.

All others had gone. The officers were leaving the ship in order of seniority, the juniors first. Just as the quartette were about to swing clear of the ship the captain grasped Pyne's hand.

"Thank you, lad," he said, and away they went.

There were left on the vessel the third, second, and first officers, the purser, and the captain. The others wanted the captain to come with them. He resisted, held out for his right to be the last to quit a ship he had commanded for more than twenty years, and hoarsely forbade any further argument.

Very unwillingly, they left him hauling alone at the rope, though their predecessors, knowing the need of it, helped vigorously from the gallery. Indeed, it was with difficulty that Pyne was held back from returning with the descending rope. They told him he was mad to dream of such a piece of folly, and perforce he desisted.

But when the captain deliberately cast off the deck-pulley from which the rope had been manipulated they knew that the boy had read his soul. The now useless cordage dangling from the gallery was caught by the wind and sea and sent whipping off to leeward.

Brand, brought from the lantern by the hubbub of shouting, came out, followed by Constance. He suggested, as a last resource, that they should endeavor to fire a line across the vessel by means of a rocket.

They agreed to try, for the spectacle of the captain, standing bareheaded on all that was left of the bridge, moved them to a pitch of frenzy not often seen in an assemblage of Anglo-Saxons, and especially of sailors.

Brand turned to procure the rocket, but a loud cry caused him to delay. The expected wave had come, the vessel was smothered in a vortex of foam, the tall fore-mast tottered and fell, and when the water subsided again all that was visible of the great steamer was some portion of her hull and the solidly built bow, which was not wrenched from the keel-plate until another hour had passed.

The agonized cry of a strong man is a woful thing. Constance, by reason of the gathering at the side of the gallery, was unable to see all that was taking place. But the yell which went up from the onlookers told her that something out of the common, even on this night of thrills, had occurred.

"What is it, dad?" she asked, as her father came to her.

"The end of the ship," he said. "The captain has gone with her."

"Oh dear, why wasn't he saved?"

"I think he refused to desert his ship. His heart was broken, I expect. Now, Connie, duty first."

Indeed, she required no telling. As each of the ship-wrecked men entered the lantern, she handed him a glass of spirits, asked if he were injured, and told him exactly how many flights of stairs he had to descend. But cocoa and biscuits would be brought soon, she explained. Greatly amazed, but speechless for the most part, the men obeyed her directions.

One of the last to claim her attention was the young American, Mr. Pyne. Her face lit up pleasurably when she saw him.

"I was wondering what had become of you," she said. "My sister has asked me several times if you had arrived, and I imagined that I must have missed you by some chance."

Now all this was Greek to him, or nearly so. Indeed, had it been intelligible Greek, he might have guessed its purport more easily.

Holding the glass in his hand he looked at her in frank, one-eyed wonder. To be hailed so gleefully by a good-looking girl whom he had never to his knowledge set eyes on, was somewhat of a mystery, and the puzzle was made all the more difficult by the fact that she had discarded the weather-proof accoutrements needed when she first ventured forth on the gallery.

"I'm real glad you're pleased. My name is Charles A. Pyne," he said, slowly.

It was now Constance's turn to be bewildered. Then the exact situation dawned on her.

"How stupid of me," she cried. "Of course you don't recognize me again. My sister and I happen to be alone with my father on the rock to-night. We were with him on the balcony when you acted so bravely. You see, the light shone clear on your face."

"I'm glad it's shining on yours now," he said.

"You must go two floors below this," said she, severely. "I will bring you some cocoa and a biscuit as quickly as possible."

"I am not a bit tired," he commented, still looking at her.

"That is more than I can say," she answered, "but I am so delighted that we managed to save so many poor people."

"How many?"

"Seventy-eight. But I dare not ask you now how many are lost. It would make me cry, and I have no time for tears. Will you really help to carry a tray?"

"Just try me."

At the top of the stairs Constance called to her father:

"Anything you want, dad?"

"Yes, dear. Find out the chief officer, and send him to me. He can eat and drink here whilst we talk."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN INTERLUDE

"Please be careful; these stairs are very steep," said Constance, swinging the lantern close to her companion's feet as they climbed down the topmost flight.

"If I fall," he assured her, "you will be the chief sufferer.

"All the more reason why you should not fall. Wait here a moment. I must have a look at the hospital."

The visiting-officer's room, which also served the purposes of a library and recreation room in normal times, now held fourteen injured persons, including two women, one of them a stewardess, and a little girl.

Most of the sufferers had received their wounds either in the saloon or by collision with the cornice of the lighthouse. The worst accident was a broken arm, the most alarming a case of cerebral concussion. Other injuries consisted, for the most part, of cuts and bruises.

Unfortunately, when the ship struck, the surgeon had gone aft to attend to an engineer whose hand was crushed as the result of some frantic lurch caused by the hurricane; hence the doctor was last with the first batch of victims. Enid discovered that among the few strange passengers was a man who had gained some experience in a field-hospital during the campaign in Cuba. Aided by the plain directions supplied with the medicine chest of the lighthouse, the ex-hospital orderly had done wonders already.

"All I want, miss," he explained, in answer to Constance's question, "is some water and some linen for bandages. The lint outfit in the chest is not half sufficient."

She vanished, to return quickly with a sheet and a pair of scissors.

"Now," she said to Mr. Pyne, "if you come with me I will send you back with a pail of water."

She took him to the kitchen where Enid, aided by a sailor, pressed into service, was dispensing cocoa and biscuits. Pyne, who remained in the stairway, went off with the water and Constance's lantern. The interior of the lighthouse was utterly dark. To move without a light, and with no prior knowledge of its internal arrangements, was positively dangerous. All told, there were seven lamps of various sizes available. Brand had one, four were distributed throughout the apartments tenanted by the survivors of the wreck, two were retained for transit purposes, and the men shivering in the entrance passage had no light at all.

Constance took Enid's lantern in order to discover the whereabouts of Mr. Emmett, the first officer, the tray-carrying sailor offering to guide her to him.

When Pyne came back he found Enid in the dark and mistook her for Constance.

"They want some more," he cried at the door.

"Some more what?" she demanded. It seemed no time for elegant diction. Her heart jumped each time the sea sprang at the rock. It seemed to be so much worse in the dark.

"Water," said he.

"Dear me. I should have thought everybody would be fully satisfied in that respect."

He held up the lantern.

"Well, that's curious," he cried. "I imagined you were the other young lady. The water is needed in the hospital."

"Why didn't you say so?" she snapped, being in reality very angry with herself for her flippancy. She gave him a full pail and he quitted her.

Constance, having delivered her father's message to Mr. Emmett, was greeted with a tart question when she re-entered the kitchen:

"Why on earth did'nt you tell me that young man was attending to the injured people? Is he a doctor?"

"I think not. What happened?"

"He came for a second supply of water and nearly bit my head off."

"Oh, Enid, I am sure he did not mean anything. Didn't you recognize him? It was he who climbed the mast and flung the rope to us."

"There!" said Enid, "I've gone and done it. Honestly, you know, it was I who was rude. He will think me a perfect cat."

"That isn't what people are saying," exclaimed Mr. Pyne, whose approach was deadened by the outer noise. "There's a kind of general idea floating round that this locality is an annex of heaven, with ministering angels in' attendance."

In the half light of the tiny lamps he could see Enid's scarlet face. There was a moment's silence, and this very self-possessed youth spoke again.

"The nice things we all have to tell you will keep," he said. "Would you mind letting me know in which rooms you have located the ladies?"

Constance, as major domo, gave the information asked for:

"They are in' the two bedrooms overhead. Poor things! I am at my wits' end to know how to get their clothing dried. You see, Mr. Pyne, my sister and I have no spare clothes here. We only came to the rock this afternoon, by the merest chance."

"That is just what was troubling me,' he answered. "I am sort of interested in one of them."

"Oh," said Constance, "I do wish I could help. But, indeed, my own skirts are wringing wet."

"From what I can make out, then, my prospective step-aunt will catch a very bad cold."

The queer phrase puzzled the girls, but Constance, rarely for her, jumped at a conclusion.

"Your prospective step-aunt. You mean, perhaps, your fiance's aunt?" she suggested.

"I don't know the lady. No, ma'am. I was right first time. Mrs. Vansittart is going to marry my uncle, so I keep an eye on her stock to that extent."

"How stupid of me!" she explained, whilst a delighted giggle from Enid did not help to mend matters . So Constance became very stately.

"I will ask Mrs. Vansittart to come out and speak to you—" she began.

"No, no!" I don't wish that. You might tell her I am all right. That is the limit. And—may I make a suggestion?"

"Pray do."

"It will help considerable if the women-folk take it in turn to get into the beds or bunks. Then, some of their linen could be dried at the stove. I will take charge of that part of the business, if I may. Otherwise, some of them will die."

The girls agreed that this was a capital idea. Constance went upstairs. In the first room she inquired:

"Is Mrs. Vansittart here?"

"Yes," said a sweet but rather querulous voice.

A lady, who had already appropriated the lower bunk, raised herself on an elbow.

The little apartment, like every part of the building, save the rooms reserved by Brand's directions was packed almost to suffocation. This, if harmful in one respect, was beneficial in another. The mere animal warmth of so many human beings was grateful after the freezing effect of the gale on people literally soaked to the skin.

The girl, not unmoved by curiosity, held the light so that it illumined Mrs. Vansittart. A woman of forty, no matter how good-looking and well-preserved she may be, is in a sorry plight under such conditions. Constance saw a beautiful face, deathly white and haggard, yet animated and clearly chiseled. The eyes were large and lustrous, the mouth firm, the nose and chin those of a Greek statue. Just now there were deep lines across the base of the high forehead. The thin lips, allied to a transient hawk-like gleam in the prominent eyes, gave a momentary glimpse of a harsh, perhaps cruel disposition. A charming smile promptly dispelled this fleeting impression. Instantly Constance was aware of having seen Mrs. Vansittart before. So vivid was the fantastical idea that she became fascinated.

"Do you want me?" asked the stranger, with a new interest, and still smiling. Constance found herself wondering if the smile were not cultivated to hide that intensely caught suggestion of the bird of prey. But the question restored her essential poise.

"Only to say that Mr. Pyne—" she began.

"Charlie! Is he saved?"

Mrs. Vansittart certainly had the faculty of betraying intense interest. The girl attributed the nervous start, the quick color which tinged the white cheeks, to the natural anxiety of a woman who stood in such approximate degree of kin to the young American.

"Oh, yes," said the girl, with ready sympathy. "Don't you know that all of you owe your lives to his daring? He asked me to—to say he was all right, and—that he hoped you were not utterly collapsed."

The addendum was a kindly one. No doubt, Mr. Pyne had meant her to convey such a message. Mrs. Vansittart, it was evident, had received a shock. Perhaps she was a timorous, shrinking woman, averse to the sudden stare of others.

"I know nothing," she murmured. "It was all so horrible. Oh, God! shall I ever forget that scene in the saloon. How the people fought. They were not human. They were tigers, fierce tigers, with the howls and the baleful eyes of wild beasts."

This outburst was as unexpected as her staccato question. Constance bent over her and placed a gentle hand on her forehead.

"You must try to forget all that," she said, soothingly. "Indeed, it must have been very terrible. It was dreadful enough for us, looking down at things through a mist of foam. For you— But there! You are one of the few who escaped. That is everything. God has been very good to you!"

She was stooping low and holding the lantern in her left hand.

Suddenly, Mrs. Vansittart's eyes gleamed again with that lambent light so oddly at variance with her smile. The slight flush of excitement yielded to a ghostly pallor. With surprising energy she caught the girl's arm.

"Who are you?" she whispered. "Tell me, child, who are you?"

"My father is the lighthouse-keeper," said Constance. "I am here quite by chance. I—"

"But your name! What is your name?"

"Constance Brand."

"Brand, did you say ? And your father's name?"

"Stephen Brand. Really, Mrs. Vansittart, you must try to compose yourself. You are over-wrought, and—"

She was about to say "feverish." Indeed, that was a mild word. The strange glare in Mrs. Vansittart's eyes amazed her. She shrank away but only for an instant. With a deep sigh, the lady sank back on the pillow and fainted.

Constance was then frightened beyond question. She feared that the seizure might be a serious one, under the circumstances. To her great relief, another woman, who could not help overhearing the conversation and witnessing its sequel, came to the rescue.

"Don't be alarmed," she said. "Mrs. Vansittart is very highly strung. She fainted in the saloon. She does not realize that Mr. Pyne not only saved her, but nearly every woman here, when the door was broken open. Now, don't you worry, my dear, I will look after her. You have a great deal to do, I am sure."

Constance realized that the advice was good. She could not attend to one and neglect many.

Telling the women of the plan to dry their under-clothing in sections, she asked them to help her by arranging matters so that their garments should be divided into lots. Then she went to the second bedroom and made the same suggestion. The case of the sufferers in the hospital required more drastic measures. The little girl she stripped with her own hands and clothed her in one of Brand's flannel shirts and a commandeered reefer jacket.

Two of Brand's spare suits and a couple of blankets enabled the two injured women, who were able to walk, to get rid of their wet garments in the crowded room beneath, and the lockers of Jackson and Bates made it possible for the men who most needed attention to be made comfortable by the invaluable hospital orderly.

Constance was kept busy flying up and down to the kitchen, whilst Enid, having met all immediate demands in the matter of a hot beverage and something to eat, supplemented her labors.

Pyne worked like a Trojan. As each pile of sodden garments was delivered to him he squeezed out as much water as possible with his hands and then applied himself to the task of baking them dry. He did this, too, in a very efficient way, speedily converting the kitchen into a miniature Turkish bath. At the end of an hour, he had succeeded so well that more than one-half of the females were supplied with tolerably dry and warm under-clothing. With their heavier garments, of course, nothing could be done.

Once, on the stairs, Enid detained Constance for a moment's chat.

"Mrs. Vansittart is odd," she said.

Constance, so taken up was she with many errands, had forgotten the lady.

"How thoughtless of me," she cried. "Is she better?"

"Yes. But when I went in just now to give her her clothes, she said to me: 'Are you the sister of the other—of Constance Brand?' It was no time for explanations, so I just said 'Yes.' She gave me such a queer look, and then smiled quite pleasantly, apologizing for troubling me."

Constance laughed.

"Perhaps she knew dad years ago," she said.

"What do you think Mr. Pyne said about her?"

"How can I tell? Did you speak of her to him?"

"I told him she had fainted when you delivered his message. He said: 'Guess she can faint as easy as I can fall off a house.' Isn't he funny?"

"I think he is splendid," said Constance.

The wreck was now wholly demolished. The first big wave of the retreating tide enveloped the lighthouse and smote it with thunderous silence. Screams came from the women's quarters.

"Go, Enid," said Constance. "Tell them they have nothing to fear. They must expect these things to happen for nearly two hours. Tell them what dad said. Twenty-five years, you know."

Brave hearts! What infinite penetration inspired the man who first said "Noblesse oblige!"

Constance looked in at the kitchen. Pyne loomed through a fog of steam.

"Pay no heed to these—" she was interrupted by another mighty thump and cataract roar— "these blows of Thor's hammer," she cried.

"Play me for an anvil," he returned.

She descended to the depths, to reassure the men. Talking with shrill cheerfulness at each doorway was easy. It helped her to go down, down, feeling stone and iron trembling as every surge was hurled many feet above her head. At last, she stood on the lowest floor. Beneath her feet was naught but granite and iron bars. Here was solidity. How grateful to know of this firm base, rooted in the very world. Her heart leaped to her mouth, but not with fear. She was proud of the lighthouse, strong in the knowledge of its majestic strength.

Nevertheless, in this place, the source of her own sense of security, she found uneasiness among the men. They were all sailors in this lowest habitable region. Their pre-conceived ideas had been rudely reversed. The ship, the noble structure which defied the storm by yielding to its utmost fury, had for them no terrors. But the stark pillar which flinched from no assault bewildered them. it was impossible to believe that it could withstand the strain. Ha! Listen to that. The battering-ram of ocean applied to a thin shaft of stone. Surely it must be pounded into fragments.

Said one, with indefinite bellow amidst the black turmoil: "I can't stand this, mates."

"Up aloft for me!" cried another.

"Let's die with our eyes open, anyhow," chimed in a third.

But a light flashed in the rolling orbs of the man who was already on the stairs. Astounded, he drew back. Constance stood in their midst, a mere girl, radiant, smilingly unconcerned, addressing them in calm wards, broken only by the fitful noises.

"Sorry your quarters—so very unpleasant. Only last a—couple of hours. Twenty-five years—far worse gales. Want any more cocoa?"

"Thank you kindly, miss, we're quite comfortable." This from the man who wished to die with his eyes open.

"Please, miss, may we smoke?" said he who couldn't stand it.

Constance hesitated. Blithely unconscious that a whiff of mutiny had swept through the storm-tossed fold, she pondered the problem. She saw no harm in it.

"Yes," she said. "Smoke by all means. I will ask my father, and if it should be dangerous I will come back and let you know. In a few hours it will be daylight, and if the sea falls he will come and open the door."

By sheer inspiration she had uttered the formula destined to annihilate the necromantic bluster of the hammering waves. Open the door! So this ponderous racket was a mere tidal trick, a bogey, which each passing minute would expose more thoroughly.

"All right, miss, an' Gawd bless yer," growled one who had not spoken hitherto. There was a chorus of approval. Constance gave a little gulp. The cultured and delicate lady lying in the bunk above had not spoken so.

"Indeed," she gasped. "God has blessed some of us this night."

Then she fled, further utterance failing her.

Nearer the sky, Brand tended the lamp and discussed matters with chief officer Emmett. The sailor, with the terse directness of his class, told how the Chinook had made an excellent voyage from New York until she ran into bad weather about four hundred miles west of the Lizard.

"It seems to me," he said, "as if we dropped onto the track of that hurricane after it had curved away to the norrard, and that the d——d thing swooped down on us again when we were abreast of the Bishop Light."

Brand nodded. This surmise agreed with his own theory of the storm, as indicated by the sea.

Mr. Emmett held out a clenched fist with thumb jerked towards the reef.

"I wouldn't breathe a word if he wasn't gone," he said, "but the old man was drivin' her too hard. I knew it, an' the chief knew it"—he meant the chief engineer—"but he wouldn't listen to either Mac or me. Fact is, he was fair crazy to set up a new record for the boat. She's been crossin' the Atlantic forty times a year for upwards of twenty years, and the recent alterations, although they added fifty feet to her length, only increased her engine-power in proportion."

"You surprise me," broke in Brand. "You speak as if the Chinook were nearly as old as this lighthouse, yet I have never even heard her name before."

"You know her well enough all the same," said the other ruefully. "This is her maiden voyage since she was altered; an' they rechristened her, too—always a d——d unlucky thing to do, I say. Bless your heart, man, she is the old Princess Royal. Eh? What's that?"

He guffawed mournfully at Brand's involuntary exclamation.

"Certain! Well, surely I ought to know. I have passed most of my service with the company in her, and when I took a crew to Cramp's to navigate her to New York after she was smartened up I little imagined I would see her laid by forever the next time we saw the lights of Old England. My goodness, even what was left of the old girl ought to know her way better'n that."

"But what did really happen?"

"Drivin' her I tell you—drivin' her full pelt to land the mail's at Southampton twelve hours ahead of schedule. With that awful sea liftin' her, and a shaft twenty feet longer, what could you expect? Poor Perkins! A rare hard worker, too. Now he's gone down with the ship an' over two hundred passengers an' crew."

"Judging by the number saved I feared that more were lost."

"it's the off season, you know. The passenger list was light. For the Lord's sake, think of what it might have been in May or June!"

"It is bad enough as it is. All has not ended with the disappearance of the vessel."

The sailor shot a sharp glance at Brand.

"You can't be thinkin' anyone was to blame—" he commenced. But Brand waved aside the fancied imputation.

"Blame!" he said. "With a broken shaft! In that whirlwind! No, no, I sent for you to talk over the new difficulty which has to be faced. There are food, water and fuel here for three men for two months. If you do a little sum you will find that the available stores on the basis of full rations will maintain eighty-one people for two days and a quarter."

"But we're only six miles from the mainland." Mr. Emmett had not yet grasped the true meaning of the figures.

"I have been here more than once for six weeks at a stretch, when, for all the assistance we could receive, we might as well have been within the Arctic Circle."

Again the sailor jerked his thumb towards the reef.

"Is it as bad as all that?" he queried anxiously.

"Yes."

"But six weeks. Good Lord!" Mr. Emmett had done the little sum.

"That is exceptional. A week is the average unless the unexpected happens, after a gale like this. And a week will test our endurance to the limit."

Mr. Emmett whistled softly. A grisly phantom was creeping at him. He shivered, and not from cold.

"By Jove!" he said. "What's to be done?"

"In the first place, you must help me to maintain iron discipline. To leave the rock to-day or to-morrow will be an absolute impossibility. On the next day, with luck and a steady moderation of the weather, we may devise some desperate means of landing all the active men or getting fresh supplies. That is in the hands of Providence. I want you to warn your officers, and others whom you can trust, either sailors or civilians. Better arrange three watches. My daughters will have charge of the stores. By going through the lists in the store-room I can portion out the rations for six days. I think we had better fix on that minimum."

"Of course I will back you up in every way," said Mr. Emmett, who felt chillier at this moment than at any time during the night. "I know you are acting wisely, but I admit I am scared at the thought of what may happen—if those days pass and no help is available."

Brand knew what would happen, and it was hard to lock the secret in his heart. He alone must live. That was essential, the one thing carved in stone upon the tablets of his brain, a thing to be fought out behind barred door, revolver in hand.

Whatever else took place, if men and women, perhaps his own sweet girls, were dying of thirst and starvation, the light must shine at night over its allotted span of the slumbering sea. There, on the little table beside him, lay the volume of Rules and Regulations. What did it say?

"The keepers, both principal and assistant, are enjoined never to allow any interests, whether private or otherwise, to interfere with the discharge of their public duties, the importance of which to the safety of navigation cannot be overrated."

There was no ambiguity in the words, no halting sentence which opened a way for a man to plead: "I thought it best." Those who framed the rule meant what they said. No man could bend the steel of their intent.

To end the intolerable strain of his thoughts Stephen Brand forced his lips to a thin smile and his voice to say harshly:

"If the worst comes to the worst, there are more than three thousand gallons of colza oil in store. That should maintain life. It is a vegetable oil."

Then Constance thrust her glowing face into the lighted area.

"Dad," she cried, cheerfully, "the men wish to know if they may smoke. Poor fellows! They are so miserable—so cold and damp and dreary down there. Please say 'Yes.'"

CHAPTER IX

MRS. VANSITTART

The purser, faithful to his trust, had secured the ship's books. He alone, among the survivors of the Chinook, had brought a parcel of any sort from that ill-fated ship. The others possessed the clothes they wore, their money, and in some cases their trinkets.

Mr. Emmett suggested that a list of those saved should be compiled. Then, by ticking off the names, he could easily classify the inmates of the lighthouse and evolve some degree of order in the community.

It was found that there were thirty-seven officers and men, including stewards, thirty-three saloon passengers, of whom nineteen were women, counting the two little girls, and seven men and one woman from the steerage.

"It isn't usual on a British ship, for the crew to bulk so large on the list," said Mr. Emmett, huskily. "But it couldn't be helped. The passengers had to be battened down. They couldn't live on deck. We never gave in until the last minute."

"I saw that," said Brand, knowing the agony which prompted the broken explanation.

"An' not a mother's soul would have escaped if it wasn't for young Mr. Pyne," went on the sailor.

"Is that the name of the youngster who climbed the fore-mast?"

"That's him. It was a stroke of genius, his catching onto that way. He was as cool as a cucumber. Just looked up when he reached the deck an' saw the lighthouse so near. Then he asked me for a rope. Planned the whole thing in a second, so to speak."

"He is not one of the ship's company?"

"No, sir, a passenger, nevvy of Cyrus J. Traill, the Philadelphian millionaire. Haven't you heard of Traill? Not much of a newspaper reader, eh? There was a lady on board, a Mrs. Vansittart, who was coming over to marry old Traill, so people said, and the weddin' was fixed to take place in Paris next week. Young Pyne was actin' as escort."

The chief officer glanced down the purser's lists and slapped his thigh with much vehemence.

"No, by gosh! Here she is, marked O. K. Well, that beats the band."

"So the lad has discharged his trust to his uncle?"

Mr. Emmett was going to say something, but checked the words on his lips.

"Queer world," he muttered. "Queer world."

With that he devoted himself to planning out the watches. Soon he and the purser betook themselves to the depths with a roll-call. As they crept below gingerly—these sailor-men were not at home on companion ladders which moved not when the shock came—they met Enid for the first time. She, coming up, held the swinging lantern level with her face. They hung back, politely.

"Please come," she cried in her winsome way. "These stairs are too narrow for courtesy."

They stepped heavily onward. She flitted away. Emmett raised his lantern between the purser's face and his own.

"What do you think of that?" he whispered, awestricken.

The man of accounts smiled broadly.

"Pretty girl!" he agreed, with crudely emphatic superlatives.

Emmett shook his head. He murmured to himself: "I guess I'm tired. I see things."

Enid handed an armful of dry linen to the damp, steaming women in the lower bedroom. She was hurrying out; someone overtook her at the door. It was Mrs Vansittart.

"Miss Brand," she said, with her all-suffising smile, "give me one moment."

They stood in the dark and hollow-sounding stairway. The seas were lashing the column repeatedly, but the night's ordeal was nearly ended. Even a timid child might know now that the howling terror without had done its worst and failed. From the cavernous depths, mingling with the rumble of the storm, came the rhythm of a hymn. Those left in gloom by the withdrawal of Mr. Emmett's lantern were cheering their despondent souls.

Surprised, even whilst Enid awaited the older woman's demand, the listeners heard the words:

"Awake my soul, and with the sun
"Thy daily stage of duty run;
Shake off dull sloth, and joyful rise
To pay thy morning sacrifice."

The rough tones of the men were softened and harmonized by the distance. It was a chant of praise, of thanksgiving, the offering of those who had been snatched from death and from mortal fear more painful than death.

The singing ceased as suddenly as it began. Mr. Emmett and the purser were warning the first watch.

The interruption did not seem to help Mrs. Vansittart. She spoke awkwardly, checking her thoughts as though fearful she might be misunderstood or say too much.

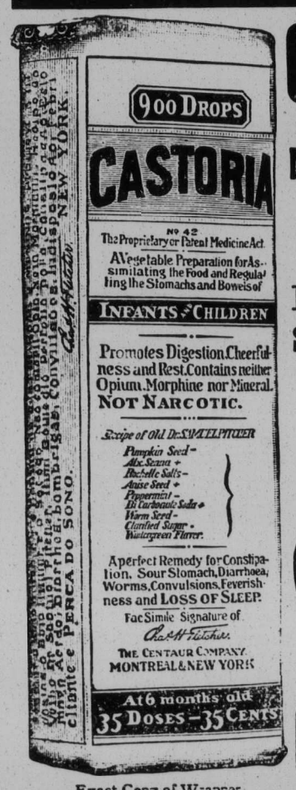
"I am better," she explained, "quite recovered. I—gave up my bunk to one who needed it."

"I am sure we are all doing our best to help one another," volunteered Enid.

"But I am restless. The sight—of your sister—aroused vague memories. Do you mind—I find it hard to explain—your name is familiar. I knew some people—called Brand—a Mr. Stephen Brand—and his wife."

She halted, seemingly at a loss. Enid, striving helplessly to solve the reason for this unexpected confidence, but quite wishful to make the explanation easier, found herself interested.

(To be continued)



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