

THE PILLAR OF LIGHT

By Louis Tracy, Author of "The Wings of the Morning" Copyright, 1904, by Edward J. Clode

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 wandrous beam of the light fought and conquered its unwearied foes. Constance caught the three quick flashes of the Seven Stones lightship, 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 light nor sound until Brand pointed steadily toward 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 farsighted, 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 on to the reef?" "I fear so," he answered.

"Then she will be lost!" "Yes, unless they manage to pass to southward."

Luckily for poor human nature, mental stress 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 to steer clear of the reef," he shouted. "Twice they have got her head around, 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 daubs on the heaving desert of froth. The plunging 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 sweep her away from the horrible reef and help 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 grudging by fate. They could plainly hear the hoarse blasts of the steamer's fog horn, 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 northwest, and the tide at this stage eddied in toward 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.

maignity 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.

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 hectic 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 5,000 tons. The solid looking colossus cracked like a carrot, and the after part fell back into the watery chasm, there to be swallowed instantly amid a turmoil which happily drowned 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 rushing 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 upward, 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 skillful 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 trunk 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 torques arose

into the darkness and licked out hapless victims by the score. Of this appalling incident those in the lighthouse knew nothing until long afterward.

When the ship struck, the electric dynamo stopped, and all her lights went out. The lighthouse lamp, owing to its rays being concentrated by the dioptric lens, helped in 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 spray which 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 backwash from the stonework and the shattered hull. Even if the passage could be made, of what avail was it? The iron entrance door was full fifty feet above the present level of the sea. It could only be approached by way of the rungs of iron imbedded 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 shipwrecked 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 foremast. 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 center of observation carried a line with him. Not until he essayed the second portion of his perilous 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.

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 deerstalker 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 foremast 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 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 coil around the block and the adjacent rail.

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 ascending 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 traveled 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. Send 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 beaming lighthouse keepers.

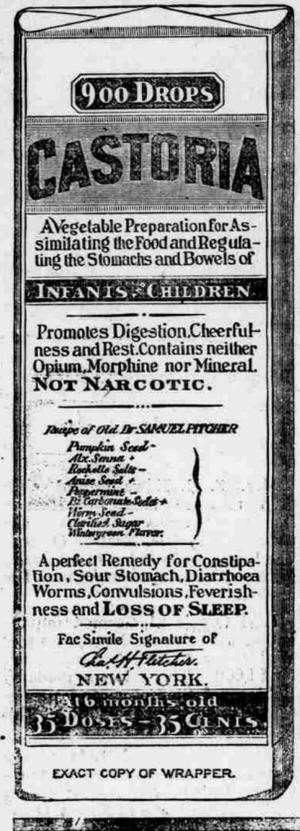
"Well, I'm"— he blurted out in his surprise. "That American youngster wondered what the trouble was."

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.

(To be Continued)

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Notice is hereby given to all persons concerned that the undersigned has been duly appointed Executor of the last Will and Testament of James C. Taylor, deceased, by the County Court of Benton County, State of Oregon. All persons having claims against the estate of said James C. Taylor, deceased, are hereby required to present the same, with the proper vouchers, duly verified as by law required, within six months from the date hereof, to the undersigned at her residence in Corvallis, Oregon. Dated this 25th day of June, 1906. LILLIAN L. TAYLOR, Executor of the last Will and Testament of James C. Taylor deceased.

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