

THE PILLAR of LIGHT

... By ...
Louis Tracy,
Author of
"The Wings of the Morning"
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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—At daybreak an assistant keeper of the lighthouse, discovers in the distance a ship in distress. Stephen Brand agrees to swim out to it. In so doing he comes in contact with a shark which he kills and boards the ship. He finds on board the body of a dead man and a strange bundle under a sail. Jones the lighthouse keeper lowers a basket and hauls Brand and his strange bundle safely up. II.—The bundle contains a live baby of which Jones assumes charge. Letters "E T" are found on child's clothing. Baby is placed in charge of nurse who has charge also of Stephen Brand's children. Child is named "Enid Trevillion. III.—Eighteen years later, Constance, daughter of Brand, and Enid go to the lighthouse with an old fisherman named Ben. They are caught in a storm and as they near the lighthouse hear the danger signal from the rock. They land safely and find that two men have been hurt. Brand sends the injured men back with Ben. IV.—Jackson and Bates are lowered into the boat and Ben takes them back to Penance. The Daisy is met by Lieutenant Stanhope who is devotedly in love with Enid. He assists in caring for the wounded men. V.—Enid spies a boat approaching the rock. It is the Lapwing. Brand discovers that it is sailed by Stanhope. He signals for them not to land, and Stanhope returns to Penance. The girls spend the night at the rock. VI.—During the night a furious storm renders sleep impossible. At dawn Brand makes out a ship in distress. VII.—A young American named Pyne throws a rope to Brand who makes fast to the lighthouse and by means of a pulley arrangement seven or eight are saved before the ship goes down. VIII.—Mrs. Vansittart, Pyne's aunt, is strangely moved at sight of Constance.

Higher and nearer swung the staid 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 yelled.

"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 stanchion 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 sea 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. 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 coals 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 whisky) 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, while 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, storeroom and service room were to be kept clear, and the storeroom 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 ever less ceremony and greater expeditious 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 lifeboat. 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 on to an even keel, and the foremost, which had so providentially reached 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, admirable diction, 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 quartet 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 retreating 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

1907		JANUARY						1907	
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	7		
		1	2	3	4	5	13		
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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 foremast tottered and fell, and when the water subsided again all that



"I was wondering what had become of you."

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 fearful 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 shipwrecked 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 pleasantly 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, open 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 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 tonight. 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 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 while we wait."

CHAPTER VIII.

PLEASE be careful. These stairs are very steep," said Constance, swinging the lantern close to her companion's feet as they crouched 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 lost with the first batch of victims. Enid discovered that among the few steerage passengers saved 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 was 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 stupidity. 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 didn't 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," explained 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 not 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. "Which you mind letting me know in which rooms you have located the ladies?"

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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 with 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 fiancée'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, while 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 considerably 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.

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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 overwrought, 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.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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