

THE PILLAR of LIGHT

... By ...
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Author of
"The
Wings
of the
Morning"
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CHAPTER I.

ALL night long the great bell of the lighthouse, slung to a stout beam projecting seaward beneath the outer platform, had tolled its warning through the fog. The monotonous ticking of the clock-work attachment that governed it, the sharp and livelier click of the occulting hood's machinery, were the only sounds which alternated with its deep boom. The tremendous clang sent a thrill through the giant column itself and pealed away into the murky void with a tremolo of profound diminutions.

Overhead the magnificent lantern, its eight ringed circle of flame burning at full pressure, illumined the drifting vapor with an intensity that seemed to be born of the sturdy granite pillar of which it was the fitting diadem. Hard and strong externally as the everlasting rock on which it stood, replete within with burnished steel and polished brass, great cylinders and powerful pumps, the lighthouse thrust its glowing torch beyond the reach of the most daring wave. Cold, dour, defiant it looked. Yet its superhuman eye sought to pierce the very heart of the fog, and the furnace white glare, concentrated ten thousand fold by the encircling hive of the dioptric lens, flung far into the gloom a silvery cloak of moonlike majesty.

At last an irresistible ally sprang to the assistance of the unconquerable light. About the close of the middle watch a gentle breeze from the Atlantic followed the tide and swept the shivering wraith landward to the northeast, while the first beams of a June sun completed the destruction of the routed specter.

So once more, as on the dawn of the third day, the waters under the heaven were gathered into one place and the dry land appeared, and, behold, it was good.

On the horizon the turquoise rim of the sea lay with the sheen of folded silk against the softer canopy of the sky. Toward the west a group of islands, to which drifting banks of mist clung in melting despair, were etched in shadows of dreamy purple. Over the nearer sea floor the quickly dying vapor spread a lazy pall of opal tints. Across the face of the waters glistening bands of emerald green and serene blue quivered in fairy lights. The slanting rays of the sun threw broadcast a golden mirage and gilded all things with the dumb gladness of an English summer's day.

A man, pacing the narrow gallery beneath the lantern, halted for a moment to flood his soul afresh with a beauty made entrancing by the knowledge that a few brief minutes would resolve it into maturer and more familiar charms.

He was engaged, it is true, in the unromantic action of filling his pipe, a simple thing, beloved alike of poets and navvies, yet his eyes drank in the mute glory of the scene, and, captive to the spell of the hour, he murmured aloud:

"Floating on waves of music and of light, Behold the chariot of the fairy queen! Celestial coursers paw the unyielding air; Their filmy pennons at her word they fur! And stop obedient to the reins of light."

The small door beneath the glass pane was open. The worker within, busily cleaning an eight inch burner, ceased for an instant and popped his head out.

"Did you hall me?" he inquired. The matter of fact words awoke the dreamer. He turned with a pleasant smile.

"To be exact, Jim, I did hail somebody, but it was Aurora, Spirit of the Dawn, not a hard bitten sailorman like you."

"Oh, that's all right, cap'n! I thought I heard you singin' out for a light." The other man bent his head to shield a match from a puff of wind, thus concealing from his companion the gleam of amusement in his eyes. His mate sniffed the fragrant odor of the tobacco longingly, but the Elder Brethren of the Trinity maintain strict discipline, and he vanished to his task without a thought of broken rules.

He left a piece of good advice behind him.

"If I was you, cap'n," he said, "I'd turn in. Jones is feelin' A1 this mornin'. He comes on at 8. You ought to be dead beat after your double spell of the last two days. I'll keep breakfast back until three bells (9:30 a. m.), an' there's fresh eggs an' haddock."

"Just a couple of whiffs, Jim. Then I'll go below."

Both men wore the uniform of assistant keepers, yet it needed not their manner of speech to reveal that one was a gentleman born and bred and the other a bluff, good natured, horny handed A. B., to whom new laid eggs

and recently cured fish appealed far more potently than Shelley and a summer dawn at sea.

He who had involuntarily quoted "Queen Mab" turned his gaze seaward again. Each moment the scene was becoming more brilliant, yet nearer to earth. The faroff islands sent splashes of gray, brown and green through the purple. The rose flush on the horizon was assuming a yellower tinge, and the blue of sky and water was deepening. Twenty miles away to the southwest the smoke of a steamer heralded the advent of an Atlantic liner, and the last shreds of white mist were curling forlornly above the waves.

The presence of the steamship, a tiny dull spot on the glowing picture, peopled the void with life and banished poetry with the thinly sheeted ghosts of the fog. In a little more than an hour she would be abreast of the Gulf Rock light. The watcher believed—was almost certain, in fact—that she was the Princess Royal, homeward bound from New York to Southampton. From her saloon deck those enthusiasts who had risen early enough to catch a first glimpse of the English coast were already scanning the trimly rugged outlines of the Scilly isles and searching with their glasses for the Land's End and the Lizard.

In a few hours they would be in Southampton; that afternoon in London—London, the Mecca of the world, from which two years ago he fled with a loathing akin to terror. The big ship out there, panting and straining as if she were beginning, not ending, her ocean race of 3,000 miles, was carrying eager hundreds to the pleasures and follies of the great city. Yet he, the man smoking and silently staring at the growing bank of smoke—a young man, too; handsome, erect, with the clean, smooth profile of the aristocrat—had turned his back on it all and sought and found peace here in the gaunt pillar on a lonely rock.

Strange how differently men are constituted. And women! Bah! A hard look came into his eyes. His mouth set in a stern contempt. For a little while his face bore a steely expression which would have amazed the man within the lantern, now singing lustily as he worked.

But, as the harp of David caused the evil spirit to depart from Saul, so did the music of the morning chase away the lurking devil of memory which sprang upon the lighthouse keeper with the sight of the vessel.

He smiled again, a trifle bitterly perhaps. Behind him the singer roared genially:

"Soon we'll be in London Town, Sing, my lads, yoo ho-o! And see the king in his golden crown, Sing, my lads, yoo ho!"

The man on the platform seemed to be aroused from a painful reverie by the jingle so curiously apropos to his thoughts. He tapped his pipe on the iron railing and was about to enter the lantern—and so to the region of sleep beneath—when suddenly his glance, trained to an acuteness not dreamed of by folk ashore, rested on some object seemingly distant a mile or less and drifting slowly nearer with the tide.

At this hour a two knot current swept to the east around and over the treacherous reef whose sunken fangs were marked by the lighthouse. In calm weather, such as prevailed just then, it was difficult enough to effect a landing at the base of the rock, but this same smiling water race became an awful, raging, tearing fury when the waves were lashed into a storm.

He pocketed his pipe and stood with hands clinched on the rail, gazing intently at a white painted ship's lifeboat, with a broken mast and a sail trailing over the stern. Its color, with the sun shining on it, no less than the vaporous eddies fading down to the surface of the sea, had prevented him from seeing it earlier. Perhaps he would not have noticed it at all were it not for the flashing wings of several sea birds which accompanied the craft in aerial escort.

Even yet a landsman would have stared insolently in that direction and declared that there was naught else in sight save the steamer, whose tall masts and two black funnels were now distinctly visible, but the lighthouse keeper knew he was not mistaken. Here was a boat adrift, forlorn, deserted. Its contour told him that it was no local craft straying adventurously from island or mainland. Its unexpected presence, wafted thus strangely from ocean wilds, the broken spar and tumbled canvas, betokened an accident, perchance a tragedy.

"Jim!" he cried.

His mate, engaged in shrouding the gleaming lenses from the sun's rays,

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came at the call. He was lame, the result of a wound received in the Egyptian campaign; nevertheless, he was quick on his feet.

"What do you make of that?" The sailor required no more than a gesture. He shaded his eyes with his right hand, a mere shipboard trick of concentrating vision and brain, for the rising sun was almost behind him. "Ship's boat," he answered laconically. "Collision, I expect. There's bin no blow to speak of for days. But they're gone. Knocked overboard when she was took aback by a squall. Unless them birds"—

He spoke in a species of verbal shorthand, but his meaning was clear enough, even to the sentence left unfinished. The craft was under no control. She would drift steadily into the bay until the tide turned, wander in an aimless circle for half an hour thereafter, and then, when the ebb restored direction and force to the current, voyage forth again to the fabled realm of Lyonesse.

For a little while they stood together in silence. Jim suddenly quitted his companion and came back with a glass. He poised it with the precision of a Bisley marksman and began to speak again jerkily:

"Stove in forrard, above the water line. Wouldn't live two minutes in a sea. Somethin' lyin' in the bows. Can't make it out. And there's a couple of cormorants perched on the gunwale. But she'll pass within 200 yards on her present course, an' the tide'll hold long enough for that."

The other man looked around. From that elevated perch, 130 feet above high water mark, he could survey a vast area of sea. Excepting the approaching steamer—which would flit past a mile away to the south—and a few distant brown specks which betokened a shoal of Penzance fishing smacks making the best of the tide eastward—there was not a sail in sight.

"I think we should try to get hold of her," he said.

Jim kept his eye glued to the telescope.

"'Tain't worth it, cap'n. The salvage 'll only be a pound or two, not but what an 'extry' suvrin comes in

useful, an' we might get a buoy on the off chance until she comes or we signal a smack, what's the good o' talkin'? We've no boat, an' nobody'd be such a fool to swim to her."

"That is what I had in mind."

Jim lowered the glass.

"That's the first time I've ever heard you say such a silly thing, Stephen Brand."

There was no wavering judgment in his voice now. He was angry and slightly alarmed.

"Why is it so emphatically silly, Jim?" was the smiling query.

"How d'ye know what's aboard of her? What's them fowl after? What's under that sail? What's that lyin' crumpled up forrard? Dead men, mebbe. If they are, she's convoyed by sharks."

"Sharks! This it not the Red sea. I am not afraid of any odd prowler. Once— Anyhow, I am going to ask Jones."

"Jones won't hear of it."

"That is precisely what he will do, within the next minute. Now, don't be vexed, Jim. Stand by and sing out directions if needful when I am in the water. Have no fear. I am more than equal to Leander in a sea like this."

Jim, who trusted to the head keeper's veto—awed, too, by the reference to Leander, whom he hazily associated with Captain Webb—made no rejoinder.

He focused the telescope again, gave a moment's scrutiny to the steamer and then re-examined the boat. The stillness of the morning was solemn. Beyond the lazy splash of the sea against the Gulf Rock itself and an occasional heavy surge as the swell revealed and instantly smothered some dark tooth of the reef he heard no sound save the ring of Stephen Brand's boots on the iron stairs as he descended through the oil room, the library and office to the first bedroom, in the lower bunk of which lay Mr. Jones, keeper and chief, recovering from a sharp attack of sciatia.

During one fearful night in the March equinox, when the fierce heat of the lamp within and the icy blast of the gale without had temporarily deranged the occulting machinery, Jones experienced an anxious watch. Not for an instant could he forego attendance on the lamp. Owing to the sleet it was necessary to keep the light at full pressure. The surplus oil, driven up from the tanks by weights weighing half a ton, must flow copiously over the brass shaft of the burner or the metal might yield to the fervent power of the column of flame.

The occulting hood, too, must be helped when the warning click came or it would jam and fall to fall periodically, thus changing the character of the light, to the bewilderment and grave peril of any unhappy vessel striving against the exterior turmoil of wind and wave.

So Jones passed four hours with his head and shoulders in the temperature of a Turkish bath and the lower part of his body chilled to the bone. He thought nothing of it at the time. This was duty. But at intervals throughout the rest of his life the sciatic nerve would remind him of that lonely watch. This morning he was convalescent after a painful immobility of two days.

Watching the boat, Jim centered her in the telescopic field and looked anx-

iously for a sharp arrow shaped ripple on the surface of the sea. The breeze which had vanquished the fog now kissed the smiling water into dimples, and his keen sight was perplexed by the myriad wavelets.

Each minute the condition of affairs on board became more defined. Beneath some oars ranged along the starboard side he could see several tins, such as contain biscuits and compressed beef. The shapeless mass in the bows puzzled him. It was partly covered with broken planks from the damaged portion of the upper works, and it might be a jib sail fallen there when the mast broke. The birds were busy and excited. He did not like that.

Nearly half an hour passed. The Princess Royal, a fine vessel of yachtlike proportions, sprinting for the afternoon train, was about eight miles away, sou'west by west. According to present indications, steamer and derelict would be abreast of the Gulf Rock light simultaneously, but the big ship, of course, would give a wide berth to a rock strewn shoal.

At last the lighthouse keeper heard ascending footsteps. This was not Stephen Brand, but Jones. Jim, whose rare irritated moods found safety in stolid silence, neither spoke nor looked around when his chief joined him, binoculars in hand.

Jones, a man of whitewash, polish and rigid adherence to framed rules, found the boat instantly and recapitulated Jim's inventory, eliciting grunts of agreement as each item was ticked off.

A clang of metal beneath caught their ears—the opening of the stout doors, forty feet above high water mark, from which a series of iron rungs sunk in the granite wall led to the rocky base.

"Brand's goin' to swim out. It's hardly worth while signalin' to the Land's End," commented Jones.

No answer. Jim leaned well over and saw their associate, stripped to his underclothing, with a leather belt supporting a sheath knife slung across his shoulders, climbing down the ladder.

This taciturnity surprised Jones, for Jim was the cheeriest nurse who ever brought a sufferer a plate of soup.

"It's nothing for a good swimmer, is it?" was the anxious question.

"No. It's no distance to speak of."

"An' the sea's like a mill pond?"

"Aye, it's smooth enough."

"Don't you think he ought to try it? Every fine mornin' he has a dip off the rock."

"Well, if it's all right for him an' you it's all right for me."

Jim had urged his plea to the man whom it chiefly concerned. He was far too sporting a character to obtain the interference of authority, and Jones, whose maritime experiences were confined to the hauling in or paying out of a lightship's cable, had not the slightest suspicion of lurking danger in the blue depths.

(To be Continued)

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"What do you make of that?"