

THE PILLAR of LIGHT

... By ...
Louis Tracy,
Author of
"The Wings
of the Morning"
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(CONTINUED.)

A light splash came to them, and, a few seconds later, Brand's head and shoulders swung into view. After a dozen vigorous breast strokes he rolled over on to his side and waved his left hand to the two men high above him.

With a sweeping side stroke he made rapid progress. Jones, unincumbered by knowledge, blew through his lips. "He's a wonderful chap, is Brand," he said contentedly. "It ticks me what a man like him wants messin' about in the service for. He's eddicated up to the top notch, an' he has money too. His lodgin's cost the whole of his pay, the missus says, an' that kid of his has a hospital nuss, if you please."

Jones was grateful to his mates for their recent attentions. He was inclined to genial gossip, but Jim was watching the boat curving toward the lighthouse. The high spring tide was at the full. So he only growled: "You can see with half an eye he has taken on this job for a change. I wish he was in that blessed boat."

Jones was quite certain now that his subordinate harbored some secret fear of danger.

"What's up?" he cried. "He'll board her in two ticks."

On no account would the sailor mention sharks. He might be mistaken, and Jones would guffaw at his "deep sea" fancies. Anyhow, it was Brand's affair. A friend might advise; he would never tattle.

The head keeper, vaguely excited, peered through his glass. Both boat and swimmer were in the annular field. Brand had resumed the breast stroke. The swing of the tide carried the broken bow toward him. He was not more than the boat's length distant when he dived suddenly and the cormorants flapped aloft. A black fin darted into sight, leaving a sharply divided trail in the smooth patch of water created by the turning of the derelict.

Jones was genuinely startled now. "My God!" he cried. "What is it?" "A shark!" yelled Jim. "I knew it. I warned him. Eh, but he's game, is the cap'n."

"Why didn't you tell me?" roared Jones. Under reversed conditions he would have behaved exactly as Jim did.

But it was no time for words. The men peered at the sudden tragedy with an intensity which left them gasping for breath. More than 200 yards away in reality, the magnifying glasses brought this horror so close that they could see—its almost thought they could hear—its tensely dramatic action. The rapidly moving black signal reached the small eddy caused by the man's disappearance. Instantly a great sinuous, shining body rose half out of the water and a powerful tail struck the side of the boat a resounding whack.

Jim's first expletive died in his throat.

"He's done it!" Jones heard him say. "He's ripped him. Oh, bully! May the Lord grant there's only one."

For a single instant they saw the dark hair and face of the man above the surface. The shark whirled about and rushed. Brand sank, and again the giant man eater writhed in agonized contortions and the sea showed masses of froth and dark blotches. The flutterings of the birds became irregular and alarmed. Their wheeling flights partly obscured events below. The gulls, screaming their fright, or it might be interest, kept close to the water, and the cormorants sailed in circles aloft.

Jones was pallid and streaming with perspiration.

"I wouldn't have had it happen for fifty quid," he groaned.

"I wouldn't ha' missed it for a hundred," yelled Jim. "It's a fight to a finish, and the cap'n'll win. There ain't another sea lawyer on the job, an' Brand knows how to handle this one."

Their mate's head reappeared, and Jim relieved the tension by a mighty shout:

"He'll swim wild now, Brand. Keep out of his track."

Sure enough, the ugly monster began to thrash the water and career around on the surface in frantic convulsions. The second stab of the knife had reached a vital part. Brand, who perhaps had seen a Malay diver handling his lifelong enemy, coolly struck out toward the stern of the boat. The shark, churning the sea into a white foam, whirled away in blind pursuit of the death which was rending him. The man, unharmed but somewhat breathless, clambered over the folds of the sail into the boat.

"Glory be!" quavered Jones, who was a Baptist.

Jim was about to chant his thanks in other terms when his attention was caught by Brand's curious actions.

In stepping across the after thwart he stopped as though something had stung him. His hesitation was momentary. Pressing his left hand to mouth and nose, he passed rapidly forward, stooped, caught a limp body by the belt which every sailor wears and, with a mighty effort, slung it into the sea, where it sank instantly. So the shark, like many a human congener of higher intellect, had only missed his opportunity by being too precipitate, while the cormorants and gulls, eying him ominously, did not know what they had lost.

Then the man returned to the sail and peered beneath. Neither of the on-lookers could distinguish anything of special interest under the heavy canvas sheet. Whatever it was, Brand apparently resolved to leave it alone for the moment.

He shipped a pair of oars and, with two vigorous sweeps, impelled the derelict away from the charnel house atmosphere which evidently clung to it.

Then the shark engaged his attention. It was floating belly upward, its white underskin glistening in the sunlight. Two long gashes were revealed, one transverse, the other lengthwise, proving how coolly and scientifically Brand had done his work. An occasional spasm revealed that life was not yet extinct, but the furtive attack of a dogfish, attracted by the scent of blood, which stirs alike the denizens of air, land and ocean, was unresisted.

The rower stood up again, drove a boat hook into the cruel jaws and lashed the stock to a thorn pin with a piece of cordage. This accomplished to his satisfaction, he looked toward the Gulf Rock for the first time since he drew the knife from its sheath, gave a cheery hand wave to the shouting pair on the balcony and settled down to pull the recovered craft close to the rock.

Jim closed the telescope with a snap. "He heaved the dead man overboard," he announced, "so there's a live one under the sail."

"Why do you think that?" said Jones, whose nerves were badly shaken.

"Well, you saw what happened to the other pore devil. Either him or the cap'n had to go. It 'ud be the same if there was a funeral wanted aft. Them there birds— But come along, boss. Let's give him a hand."

They hurried down to the iron barred entrance. Jones shot outward a small crane fitted with a winch, in case it might be needed, while the sailor climbed to the narrow platform of rock into which the base blocks of the lighthouse were sunk and bolted.

Affording but little superficial space at low water, there was now not an



A shining body rose half out of the water.

inch to spare. Here, at sea level, the Atlantic swell, even in calm weather, rendered landing or boarding a boat a matter of activity. At this stage of the tide each wave lapped some portion of the granite stones and receded quickly down the slope of the weed covered rock.

The gulls and cormorants, filling the air with raucous cries, were rustling in rapid flight in the wake of the boat, darting ever and anon at the water or making daring pecks at the floating carcass.

Soon Brand glanced over his shoulder to measure the distance. With the ease of a practiced oarsman, he turned his craft to bring her stern on to the landing place.

"Lower a basket!" he cried to Jones, and, while the others wondered what the urgency in his voice betokened, there reached them the deep, strong

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blast of a steam whistle, blown four times in quick succession.

Each and all, they had forgotten the Princess Royal. She was close in, much nearer than mail steamers usually ventured.

At first they gazed at her with surprise, Brand even suspending his maneuvers for a moment. Then Jim, knowing that a steamship trumpets the same note to express all sorts of emotion, understood that the officers had witnessed a good deal, if not all, that had taken place and were offering their congratulations.

"Blow away, my hearties!" crowed Jim, vainly apostrophizing the vessel. "You'll have somethin' to crack about when you go ashore tonight or I'm very much mistaken. Now, cap'n," he went on, "take the cover off. It's alive, I suppose. Is it a man or a woman?"

CHAPTER II.

BRAND was slow to answer. For one thing, he was exhausted. Refreshing as the long swim was after a night of lonely vigil, itself the culmination of two days of hard work, the fierce battle with the shark had shocked into active existence the reserve of latent energy which every healthy animal unconsciously hoards for life and death emergencies.

But there was another reason. He had scarce gained the comparative safety of the boat before he was, in the same instant, horrified and astounded to a degree hitherto beyond his experience. Not even the stiff pull of 200 yards sufficed to restore his senses. So Jim's question fell on his ears with the meaningless sound of the steamer's siren.

"What is it, mate?" repeated his fellow keeper, more insistently. "You ain't hurt anyways, are you?"

"It is a baby," said Brand, in a curiously vacant way.

"A baby!" shrieked Jones, stretched out over the crane above their heads.

"A what-a?" roared the sailor, whose crudely developed nervous system was not proof against the jar of incredulity induced by this statement. Had Brand said "a tiger" he could not have exhibited greater concern.

"Yes, a baby—and it is living. I heard it cry," murmured the other, sitting down rather suddenly.

Indeed, a faint wail, suggestive of a kitten, now came from beneath the tumbled canvas quite near to Jim. But the royal navy does not encourage neurosis. The lighthouse keeper felt that a minor crisis had arrived. It must be dealt with promptly.

The evil odor which still adhered to the boat told him that Brand had exchanged one inferno for another when he clambered out of the reach of the blindly vengeful shark.

He looked up to Jones.

"Lower away," he said promptly.

"Swing the derrick until I grab the tackle, and then hoist me aboard."

This was done. Ungainly in his walk, owing to his wounded limb, Jim, clinging to a rope, had the easy activity of a squirrel.

"Now lower a jug with some brandy. He's dead beat," he added.

While Jones hastened for the spirit, the sailor stooped and threw back the sail.

Lying in the bottom of the boat, wrapped in a blanket which unavailing struggles had rumbled into a roll be-

neath the arms, was an infant whose precise age it was impossible to estimate forthwith owing to the emaciated condition of its body.

With the rocking of the boat the foul bilge water washed around the child's limbs and back. Instant alone had saved it from drowning. Perhaps during the first hours of vigor after abandonment the little one might have rolled over in infantile search for food and human tendance, but the rush of salt water into eyes and mouth must have driven the tiny sufferer to seek instantly the only position in which life was possible.

So far as the man could judge in a first hasty glance, the child's clothing was of excellent quality. Yet he gave slight heed to such considerations. Jim was the father of three lusty youngsters who were snugly in bed in Penzance, and the sight of this forlorn sea waif made his eyes misty.

He reached down, unpinned the blanket, which was secured with a brooch, and lifted the infant out of its unpleasing environment. It was piteous to see the way in which the shrunken hands at once strove to clasp his wrists, though they were all too feeble to achieve more than a gentle clutch which relaxed almost as soon as the effort was made.

Jones, also a husband and father, be-thought him when he reached the storeroom; hence when the windlass lowered a basket there was not only a supply of brandy within, but also a bottle of fresh milk, which reached the Gulf Rock, by arrangement with a fisherman, whenever weather permitted.

Jim handed the jug to his exhausted companion.

"Here, cap'n," he said cheerfully. "Take a couple of mouthfuls of this. It'll warm the cockles of your heart. An' the sooner you shin up the ladder and get them soaked rags off you the better. Can you manage? It's a near thing for the kid, if not too late now."

Brand needed no second bidding. He did not wish to collapse utterly, and the soft breeze, rendered chilly by his wet garments, had revived him somewhat.

The resourceful sailor did not attempt the foolish process of pouring even the smallest quantity of milk into the baby's mouth. He produced a handkerchief, steeped a twisted corner in the milk and placed it between the parched, salt blackened lips.

This rough expedient for a feeding bottle served admirably. The child's eagerness to gulp in the life giving fluid was only matched by the tender care of the sailor in his efforts to appease its ravenous hunger.

He was so intent on this urgent task

that for a little while he paid no heed to Brand. Jones, forty feet overhead, took the keenest interest in the baby's nurture.

"Mind you don't let it suck the handkerchief into its little throat," he cried.

"Not too much, Jim. It's on'y a young 'un. 'Half milk, half water an' a lump of sugar,' my missus says. Pore little dear! However did it come to live, when that man must ha' been dead for days? Now, Jim, slow an' sure is the matter. S'pose you shove it into the basket an' let me hoist it up here. A warm bath an' a blanket is the next best thing to milk an' water."

"All right, skipper. Just hold on a bit. She's doin' fine."

"Is it a he or a she?"

"I dunno. But I guess it's a gal by the duds."

The baby, in the sheer joy of living again, uttered a gurgling cry, a compound of milk, happiness and pain.

"There! I told you!" shouted Jones angrily. "You think every kid is a hardy young savage like your own. You're overdoin' it, I say."

"Overdoin' wot?" demanded the sailor. "You don't know who you're talkin' to. Why, when I was on the West Coast I reared two week-old monkeys this way."

Soon these firm friends would have quarreled—so unbounded was their anxiety to rescue the fluttering existence of the tiny atom of humanity so miraculously snatched from the perils of the sea.

But Stephen Brand's dominant personality was rapidly recovering its normal state.

"Jim," he said, "Mr. Jones is right. The child must be made comfortable. Her skin is raw and her eyes sore with inflammation. The little food she has already obtained will suffice for a few minutes. Send her up."

The "Mr. Jones" was a gentle reminder of authority. No further protest was raised, save by the infant when supplies were temporarily withheld, and Jones was too pleased that his opinion should be supported by Brand to give another thought to his subordinate's outburst.

"Now, back up to the rock," said Brand. "I will dress and rejoin you quickly. The boat must be thoroughly examined and swabbed out. Jones will signal for help. Meanwhile you might moor her tightly. When the tide falls she will be left high and dry."

The sailor's momentary annoyance fled. There was much to be done, and no time should be wasted in disputes concerning baby culture.

"Sure you won't slip?" he asked as Stephen caught hold of the ladder.

"No, no. It was not fatigue, but sickness which overcame me. The brandy has settled that."

Up he went, as though returning from his customary morning dip.

"By jingo, he's a plucky 'un," murmured Jim admiringly. "He ought to be skipper of a battleship instead of housemaid of a rock light. Dash them sea crows! I do hate 'em!"

He seized an oar and lunged so hard and true at a cormorant which was investigating the shark's liver that he knocked the bird a yard through the air. Discomfited, it retired, with a scream. Its companion darted to the vacant site and pecked industriously. The neighborhood of the rock was now alive with sea gulls. In the water many varieties of finny shapes were darting to and fro in great excitement. Jim laughed.

"They'd keep me busy," he growled. "When all's said an' done, it's their nater, an' they can't help it."

(To be Continued)

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