

THE PILLAR of LIGHT

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

"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 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 woeful 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 outlookers 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 accouterments 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 talk."

CHAPTER VIII.

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 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 pair 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

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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 reentered 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 denuded 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. "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 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 were so that it was a capital idea, Constance was up stairs. In the first room she found Enid.

"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 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 hawklike 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 fanciful idea that she became tongue tied.

"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 faintly caught suggestion of the bird of prey. But the question restored her mental 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. O 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 glomed 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.

Telling the women of the plan to dry their underclothing 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.

(To be Continued)

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