

THE PILLAR of LIGHT

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

"I am better," she explained; "quite recovered. I gave up my bunk to one who needed it."

"I am sure we are all doing our best to help one another," volunteered Enid.

"But I am restless. The sight—of your sister—aroused vague memories. Do you mind—I find it hard to explain—your name is familiar. I knew—some people—called Brand—a Mr. Stephen Brand—and his wife."

She halted, seemingly at a loss. Enid, striving helplessly to solve the reason for this unexpected confidence, but quite wishful to make the explanation easier, found herself interested.

"Yes," she said. "That is quite possible, of course, though you must have been quite a girl. Mrs. Brand died many years ago."

Mrs. Vansittart flinched from the feeble rays of the lantern.

"That is so—I think I heard of—of Mrs. Brand's death—in London, I fancy, but they had only one child."

Enid laughed.

"I am a mere nobody," she said. "Dad adopted me. I came here one day in June, nineteen years ago, and I must have looked so forlorn that he took me to his heart, thank God!"

Another solemn chord of the hymn floated up to them:

"Let all thy converse be sincere,
Thy conscience as the noonday clear."

The rest of the verse evaded them. Probably a door was closed.

Mrs. Vansittart seemed to be greatly perturbed. Enid, intent on the occupation of the moment, believed their little chat was ended. To round it off, so to speak, she went on quickly:

"I imagine I am the most mysterious person living—in my early history, I mean. Mr. Brand saw me floating toward this lighthouse in a deserted boat. I was nearly dead. The people who had been with me were gone—either starved and thrown into the sea or knocked overboard during a collision, as the boat was badly damaged. My linen was marked 'E. T.' That is the only definite fact I can tell you. All the rest is guesswork. Evidently nobody cared to claim me, and here I am."

Mrs. Vansittart was leaning back in the deep gloom, supporting herself against the door of the bedroom.

"What a romance!" she said faintly. "A vague one, and this is no time to gossip about it. Can I get you anything?"

Enid felt that she really must not prolong their conversation, and the other woman's exclamation threatened further talk.

"No, thank you. You'll excuse me, I know. My natural interest!"

But Enid, with a parting smile, was halfway toward the next landing, and Mrs. Vansittart was free to re-enter the crowded apartment where her fellow sufferers were wondering when they would see daylight again. She did not stir. The darkness was intense, the narrow passage drafty, and the column thrilled and quivered in an unnerving manner. She heard the clang of a door above and knew that Enid had gone into the second apartment given over to the women. Somewhere higher up was the glaring light of which she had a faint recollection, though she was almost unconscious

when unbound from the rope and carried into the service room.

And at that moment, not knowing it, she had been near to Stephen Brand, might have spoken to him, looked into his face. What was he like? she wondered. Had he aged greatly with the years? A lighthouse keeper! Of all professions in this wide world how came he to adopt that? And what ugly trick was fate about to play her that she should be cast ashore on this desolate rock where he was in charge? Could she avoid him? Had she been injudicious in betraying her knowledge of the past? And how marvelous was the likeness between Constance and her father! The chivalrous, high-minded youth she had known came back to her through the mists of time. The calm, proud eyes, the firm mouth, the wide expanse of forehead were his. From her mother—the woman who "died many years ago," when she, Mrs. Vansittart, was "quite a girl"—the girl inherited the clear profile, the wealth of dark brown hair and a grace of movement not often seen in Englishwomen.

Though her teeth chattered with the cold, Mrs. Vansittart could not bring herself to leave the vaultlike stairway. Once more the hymn singers cheered their hearts with words of praise. Evidently there was one among them who not only knew the words, but could lead them mightily in the tunes of many old favorites.

The opening of a door—caused by the passing to and fro of some of the ship's officers—brought to her distracted ears the concluding bars of a verse. When the voices swelled forth again she caught the full refrain:

"Raise thine eyes to heaven
When thy spirits quail,
When, by tempests driven,
Heart and courage fail."

Such a message might well carry good cheer to all who heard, yet Mrs. Vansittart listened as one in a trance to whom the divinest promise was a thing unasked for and unrecognized. After passing through the greater peril of the reef in a state of supine consciousness, she was now moved to extreme activity by a more personal and selfish danger. There was she, a human atom, to be destroyed or saved at the idle whim of circumstance; here, with life and many things worth living for restored to her safe keeping, she saw imminent risk of a collapse with which the nebulous dangers of the wreck were in no way comparable. It would have been well for her could she only realize the promise of the hymn. "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

Not so ran Mrs. Vansittart's jumble of thoughts. The plans, the schemes, the bulged edifice of many years, threatened to fall in ruin about her. In such bitter mood there was no consolation. She sought not to find spiritual succor, but bewailed the catastrophe which had befallen her.

It assuredly contributed to that "affliction which is but for a moment" that Constance should happen just then to run up the stairs toward the hospital. Each flight was so contrived that it curved across two-thirds of the superficial area allotted to the stairway. Any one ascending made a complete turn to the right about to reach the door of the room on any given landing and the foot of the ladder to the next.

Hence the girl came unexpectedly face to face with Mrs. Vansittart. The meeting startled her. This pale woman, so thinly clad in the demitole of evening wear on shipboard, should not be standing there.

"Is anything wrong?" she cried, raising her lantern just as Enid did when she encountered the sailors.

"No, no," said the other, passing a nervous hand over her face. Constance, with alert intelligence, fancied she dreaded recognition.

"Then why are you standing here? It is so cold. You will surely make yourself ill."

"I was wondering if I might see Mr. Brand," came the desperate answer, the words bubbling forth with unrestrained vehemence.

"See my father?" repeated the girl. She took thought for an instant. The lighthouse keeper would not be able to leave the lamp for nearly three hours. When dawn came she knew he would have many things to attend to—signals to the Land's End, the arrangement of supplies, which he had already mentioned to her, and a host of other matters. Four o'clock in the morning was an unconventional hour for an interview, but time itself was topsy turvy under the conditions prevalent on the Gulf Rock.

"I will ask him," she went on hurriedly, with an uncomfortable feeling that Mrs. Vansittart resented her judicial pause.

"Thank you."

To the girl's ears the courteous acknowledgment conveyed an odd note of menace. If the eyes are the windows of the soul surely the voice is its subtle gauge. The more transparently simple, clean minded the hearer, the more accurate is the resonant impression. Constance found herself vaguely perplexed by two jostling abstractions. If they took shape it was in mute questioning. Why was Mrs. Vansittart so anxious to revive or, it might be, probe long buried memories, and why did her mobile smile seem to veil a hostile intent?

But the fresh, gracious maidenhood in her cast aside these unwonted studies in mind reading.

"He has so much to do," she explained. "Although there are many of us on the rock tonight he has never been so utterly alone. Won't you wait inside until I return?"

"Not unless I am in the way," pleaded the other. "I was choking in there. The air here, the space, are so grateful."

So Constance passed her. Mrs. Vansittart noted the dainty manner in which she picked up her skirts to mount the stairs. She caught a glimpse of the tailor made gown, striped silk underskirt, well fitting, low heeled,

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As the girl went out of her sight a reminiscence came to her.

"No wonder I was startled," she murmured. "That sailor's coat she wears helps the resemblance. Probably it is her father's."

Then the loud silence of the lighthouse appalled her. The singing had ceased or was shut off by a closed door. One might as well be in a tomb as surrounded by this tangible darkness. The tremulous granite, so cold and hard, yet alive in its own grim strength, the murmuring commotion of wind and waves swelling and dying in ghostlike echoes, suggested a grave, a vault close sealed from the outer world, though pulsating with the far-away existence of heedless multitudes. Thus, brooding in the gloom, a tortured soul without form and void, she awaited the return of her messenger.

Constance, after looking in at the hospital, went on to the service room. Her father was not there. She glanced up to the trimming stage, expecting to see him attending to the lamp. No. He had gone. Somewhat bewildered, for she was almost certain he was not in any of the lower apartments, she climbed to the little door in the glass frame.

Ab! There he was on the landward side of the gallery. What was the matter now? Surely there was not another vessel in distress. However, being relieved from any dubiety as to his whereabouts, she went back to the service room and gave herself the luxury of a moment's rest. Oh, how tired she was! Not until she sat down did she realize what it meant to live as she had lived and to do all that she had done during the past four hours.

Her respite was of short duration. Brand, his oilskins gleaming with wet, came in.

"Hello, sweetheart! What's up now?" he cried in such cheerful voice that she knew all was well.

"That was exactly what I was going to ask you," she said.

"The Falcon is out there," he replied, with a side nod toward Mount's bay.

Constance knew that the Falcon was a sturdy steam trawler, a bulldog little ship, built to face anything in the shape of gales.

"They can do nothing, of course," she commented.

"No, I stood between them and the light for a second, and they evidently understood that I was on the lookout, as a lantern dipped several times, which I interpreted as meaning that they will return at daybreak. Now they are off to Penzance again."

"They turned safely then?"

"Shipped a sea or two, no doubt. The wind is dropping, but the sea is running mountains high."

He had taken off his oilskins. Constance suddenly felt a strong disinclination to rise. Being a strong willed young person, she sprang up instantly.

"I came to ask you if you can see Mrs. Vansittart," she said.

"Mrs. Vansittart!" he cried, with a genuine surprise that thrilled her with a pleasure she assuredly could not account for.

"Yes. She asked if she might have a word with you."

He threw his hands up in comic de-

spair.

"Tell the good lady I am up to my eyes in work. The oil is running low. I must lie me to the pump at once. I have my journal to fill. If there is no sun I cannot heliograph, and I have a host of signals to look up and get ready. And a word in your ear, Connie, dear. We will be 'at home' on the rock for the next forty-eight hours. Give the lady my very deep regrets and ask her to allow me to send for her when I have a minute to spare some hours hence."

She kissed him.

"You dear old thing," she cried. "You will tire yourself to death, I am sure."

He caught her by the chin.

"Mark my words," he laughed. "You will feel this night in your bones longer than I. By the way, no matter who goes hungry, don't prepare any breakfast until I come to you. I suppose the kitchen is your headquarters?"

"Yes, though Enid has had far more of Mr. Pyne's company. She is cook, you know."

"Is Pyne there too?"

"He is laundry maid, drying clothes."

"I think I shall like him," mused Brand. "He seems to be a helpful sort of youngster. That reminds me. Tell him to report himself to Mr. Emmett as my assistant—if he cares for the post, that is."

He did not see the ready spirit of mischief that danced in her eyes. She pictured Mr. Pyne "fixing things" with Mr. Emmett "mighty quick."

When she reached the first bedroom floor Mrs. Vansittart had gone.

"I thought it would be strange if she stood long in this draft," mused Constance. She opened the door. The lady she sought was leaning disconsolate against a wall.

"My father"—she began.

"I fear I was thoughtless," interrupted Mrs. Vansittart. "He must be greatly occupied. Of course I can see him in the morning before the vessel comes. They will send a ship soon to take us off."

"At the earliest possible moment," was the glad answer. "Indeed, dad has just been signaling to a tug which will return at daybreak."

There was a joyous chorus from the other inmates. Constance had not the requisite hardihood to tell them how they misconstrued her words.

As she quitted them she admitted to herself that Mrs. Vansittart, though disturbing in some of her moods, was really very considerate. It never occurred to her that her new acquaint-

ance might have suddenly discovered the exceeding wisdom of a proverb concerning second thought.

Indeed, Mrs. Vansittart now bitterly regretted the impulse which led her to betray any knowledge of Stephen Brand or his daughter. Of all the follies of a wayward life, that was immeasurably the greatest in Mrs. Vansittart's critical scale.

But what would you? It is not often given to a woman of nerves, a woman of volatile nature, a shallow worshipping, yet versed in the deepest wiles of intrigue, to be shipwrecked, to be plucked from a living hell, to be swung through a hurricane to the secure insecurity of a dark and hollow pillar standing on a Calvary of storm tossed waves, and then, while her senses swam in utmost bewilderment, to be

confronted with a living ghost.

Yet that was precisely what had happened to her.

Fate is grievous at times. This haven of refuge was a place of torture. Mrs. Vansittart broke down and wept in her distress.

CHAPTER X.

A PRIMROSE light in the east heralded a chilly dawn. The little world of the Gulf Rock bestirred itself in its damp misery at the news. The fresh watch, delighted by the prospect of activity, clattered up and down the iron stairs, opened all available windows, unclamped the door when Brand gave the order and bustled itself exceedingly with the desultory jobs which offered to so many willing hands.

It was now by the nautical almanac dead low water on the reef, but the strong southwesterly wind, hurling a heavy sea completely over the rocks, showed that the standards of war and peace differ as greatly in the matter of tides as in most other respects.

As the light increased it lost its first warm tinge. Steel gray were sky and water, somber the iron bound land, while the whereabouts of the sun became a scientific abstraction. Therefore the heliograph was useless, and Brand, helped by some of the sailors, commenced to flaunt his flag signals to the watching telescopes on the faroff promontory of the Land's End. The Falcon, strong hearted trawler, was plunging toward the rock when the first line of gay bunting swung clear into the breeze. And what a message it was—in its jerky phrases—its profound uncertainties—for communication by flag code is slow work, and Brand left much to an easier system of talk with the approaching steamer.

Chinook—New York to Southampton—struck reef during hurricane—propeller shaft broken—73 survivors in lighthouse—captain, 201 passengers, officers and crew—lost with ship.

The awful significance of the words sank into the hearts of the signalers. For the first time the disaster from which, by God's providence, they had emerged safely became crystallized in set speech. Seventy-eight living out of 280 who might have lived! This was the curt intelligence which leaped the waves to fly over the length and breadth of the land, which sped back to the States to replace the expected news of a safe voyage, which thrilled the civilized world as it had not been thrilled for many a day.

Not a soul in the lighthouse gave thought to this side of the affair. All were anxious to reassure their loved ones, but in their present moribund condition they could not realize the electric effect of the incident on the wider world which read and had hearts to feel.

Even while Stephen Brand was signaling to the Falcon with little white flags quickly extemporized as soon as she neared the Trinity buoy, newspaper correspondents ashore were busy at the telegraph office and their associates on the trawler were eagerly transcribing the lighthouse keeper's words wherewith to feed to fever heat the sensation which the night had provided for the day.

Brand, foreseeing the importance of

(Continued on page 6.)