

THE PILLAR of LIGHT

... By ...
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Author of
"The Wings
of the Morning"
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[CONTINUED.]

The last two packages ferried to the lighthouse contained not only warm woolen wraps for the women and children, but a big bundle of letters and telegrams.

Pyne was the postman. There were at least twenty notes addressed to the girls and several to Brand from friends ashore.

Mr. Traill, of course, wrote to his nephew and Mrs. Vansittart. Naturally Pyne carried his own missive to the kitchen, where he found that Constance and Enid had managed to wash in distilled water.

They were cutting sandwiches and endeavoring to read their letters at the same instant. He bowed with sarcastic politeness.

"I see you are ready for the party," he said.

Certainly he offered a deplorable contrast to them. His face was incriminated with salt and blackened with dirt and perspiration. His hands were like those of a sweep, but smeared with oil, which shone on his coat sleeves up to both elbows. His clothes were torn and soiled, his linen collar and cuffs limp as rags, and his waistcoat was ripped open, having remained in that condition since it caught in a block as he descended the mast.

"Oh, you poor fellow!" cried Constance. "How you must envy us! Here is a kettleful of hot water. I can't say much for the towel, but the soap is excellent."

Refreshed, Pyne opened his uncle's letter. The girls were keeping up a running commentary of gossip.

"Mousie (Mrs. Sheppard) says she hasn't slept for three nights."

"Edith Taylor-Smith says she envies us."

"That letter you are reading now is from Lady Margaret. What does she say?"

"She sends all sorts of love, and—that kind of thing," cried the blushing Enid, who had just learned from Jack's mother that Stanhope had appropriated her as his intended wife without ever a proposal.

"Is that all—in four closely written pages?"

"Well—she hopes soon to see me—to see both of us!"

Constance was too kindly to quiz her sister. Maybe she saw something in Enid's eye which threatened speedy retaliation.

"Here's a note from the vicar. They have held a special service of intercession at St. Mary's."

"And Hettie Morris writes—Good gracious, Mr. Pyne! Have you had any bad news?"

Enid's wondering cry was evoked by the extraordinary way in which the young American was looking at her.



"I see you are ready for the party."

Some intensely exciting knowledge had mastered stoicism. His eyes were distended, his lips quivering. He leaned with one hand on the kitchen table. In the other he had clinched his uncle's letter.

Constance stood near to him. That he, of all the men she had ever met, should yield to an overpowering emotion startled her greatly.

She caught his arm.

"Mr. Pyne," she said softly, "it—it is any ill tidings—you have received—we are indeed sorry for you."

He pulled himself straight and gave Constance such a glance that she hastily withdrew her hand. It seemed to her that he would clasp her in his arms forthwith without spoken word. Her action served to steady him, and he laughed, so softly and pleasantly that their fear was banished.

"Girls," he said slowly, "I have been parachuting through space for a min-

ute or so. I'm all right. Everybody is all right. But my head swims a bit. If I come back forgetting my name and the place where I last resided, remember that once I loved you."

He left them. He could not trust himself to say more.

"That letter was from his uncle, I suppose," said Enid, awe-stricken.

"It must be something very dramatic which would make him act so strangely. Why has he run away? Was he afraid to trust us with his news?"

There was a sharp vehemence in Constance's voice which did not escape her sister's sharp ears.

"Connie," said Enid quietly, "as sure as Jack loves me, that man is in love with you."

"Enid!"—

But the other girl laughed with a touch of her saucy humor.

"Why did he look at you in that way just now? Didn't you think he was going to embrace you on the spot? Confess!"

"It was at you he was looking."

"Not in the way I mean. He gazed at me as if I were a spirit. But when you touched him he awoke. He might have been asleep and suddenly seen you near him. I wonder he didn't say, 'Kiss me, dearest, and then I will be sure it is not a dream.'"

Constance discovered that she must defend herself.

"Mr. Pyne hardly conveyed such unutterable things to me," she said, conscious that a clean face betrays a flush which smudges may hide. "Have you had a letter from Jack that you can interpret other people's thoughts so sweetly?"

"No, dear, Jack has not written. I have found out the cause. His mother expresses the hope that he will be the first to convey her good wishes. So I think he meant to try to bring the rope himself. Dad knew it and Mr. Pyne. That is why they did not tell us."

Constance gathered her letters into a heap. The tiny pang of jealousy which thrilled her had gone.

"Eighty-one hungry mouths expect to be filled to repletion tonight," she said. "No more gossip. What curious creatures women are! Our own affairs are sufficiently engrossing without endeavoring to pry into Mr. Pyne's."

"Connie, don't press your lips so tightly. You are just dying to know what upset him. But, mark my words, it had nothing to do with any other woman."

Wherein Enid was completely mistaken; she would never commit a greater error of judgment during the rest of her days.

When Pyne quitted the kitchen his intent was to reach Brand without delay. As he passed Mrs. Vansittart's bedroom he paused. Something had delighted him immeasurably once the first shock of the intelligence had passed.

He seemed to be irresolute in his mind, for he waited some time on the landing before he knocked at the door and asked if Mrs. Vansittart would come and speak to him.

"Are you alone?" she demanded, remaining invisible.

"Yes," he said.

Then she appeared, with that borrowed shawl still closely wrapped over head and face.

"What is it?" she said wearily.

"You have had a letter from my uncle?"

"Yes, a charming letter, but I cannot understand it. He says that some very important and amazing event will detain him in Penzance after we reach the place. He goes on—but I will read it to you. I am quite bewildered."

She took a letter from her pocket and searched through its contents until she found a paragraph. She was about to read it aloud when some one came down the stairs. It was one of the officers, yet Mrs. Vansittart was so flustered that she dropped the sheet of paper and bent to pick it up before Pyne could intervene.

"Oh, bother!" she cried. "I am dreadfully nervous, even now that we are in no further peril. This is what I wish you to hear."

And she read:

Nothing but the most amazing and unlooked-for circumstances would cause me to ask you to postpone the date of our marriage for at least a month after you reach shore. This is not the time nor are your present surroundings the place for telling you why I make this request. Suffice it to say that I think—indeed, I am sure—a great happiness has come into my life, a happiness which you, as my wife soon to be, will share.

The American, while Mrs. Vansittart was intent on her excerpts from his uncle's letter, studied all that was visible of her face. That which he saw

more puzzled him, she had never seen no more than others, so he wondered why she wore such an air of settled melancholy. Throughout the lighthouse gloom was dispelled. The sick became well, the lethargic became lively. Even the tipplers of methylated spirits, deadly ill before, had worked like Trojans at the rope, as eager to rehabilitate their shattered character as to land the much needed stores.

What trouble had befallen this woman, so gracious, so facile, so worshipful in her charm of manner and utterance during the years he had known her, that she remained listless when all about her was life and joyance, she, the cynosure of many eyes by her costumes and graceful carriage, covering from recognition? Here was a mystery, though she had repudiated the word, and a mystery which, thus far, defeated his subconscious efforts at solution.

She lifted her eyes to his. Her expression was forlorn, compelling pity by its utter desolation.

"What does he mean?" she asked plaintively. "Why has he not spoken clearly? Can you tell me what it is, this great happiness which has entered so strangely into his life and mine?"

"I have never met any man who knew exactly what he meant to say and exactly how to say it better than Cyrus J.," said Pyne.

"But he has written to you surely. Does he give no hint?"

"His letter is a very short one. To be candid, I have hardly made myself acquainted with its contents as yet."

"You are fencing with me. You know, and you will not tell."

Her mood changed so rapidly that Pyne was not wholly prepared for the attack.

"It is a good rule," he said, "never to pretend you can handle another man's affairs better than he can handle them himself."

He met her kindling glance firmly. The anger that scintillated in her eyes almost found utterance, but this clever woman of the world felt that nothing would be gained, perhaps a great deal lost, by any open display of temper.

She laughed scornfully.

"Mr. Traill is certainly the best judge of those worthy of his confidence. Excuse me if I spoke heatedly. Let matters remain where they were."

"Just a word, Mrs. Vansittart. My uncle has written you fairly and squarely. He has not denied you his confidence. If I understood you, he has promised it to the fullest extent."

"Yes, that is true."

"Then what are we quarreling about?"

He laughed in his careless way to put her at her ease. She frowned meditatively. She who could smile in such a dazzling fashion had lost her art of late.

"You are right," she said slowly. "I am just a hysterical woman, starting at shadows, making mountains out of molehills. Forgive me."

As Pyne went up the stairs his reflections took this shape:

"The old man shied at telling her outright. I wonder why. He is chock full of tact, the smoothest old boy I ever fell up against. He thinks there may have been little troubles here, perhaps. Well, I guess he's right."

In the service room he found Brand cleaning a lamp calmly and methodically. All the stores had been carried downstairs and the storeroom key given over to the purser.

"I am glad you have turned up," said the lighthouse keeper. "Oblige me by opening that locker and taking back the articles I purloined recently. If the purser asks for an explanation, tell him the truth and say I am willing to eat this stuff now for my sins."

Pyne noticed that Brand's own letters lay in a small pile on the writing desk. With two exceptions, they were unopened. As a matter of fact, he had glanced at the superscriptions, saw that they were nearly all from strangers and laid them aside until night fell and the lighting of the lamps would give him a spare moment.

"I'll do that with pleasure," said the American, "but there's one thing I want to discuss with you while there's a chance of being alone. My uncle says he has written to you."

"To me?"

"Yes. It deals with an important matter too. It concerns Enid."

"Mr. Traill has written to me about Enid?" repeated Brand, stopping his industrious polishing to see if Pyne were joking with him.

"That's so. See; here is his letter. It will tell its own story. Guess you'd better read it right away."

The young man picked up one of the sealed letters on the table and handed it to the other.

Setting aside a glass chimney and a wash leather, Brand lost no time in reading Mr. Traill's communication.

Save that his lips tightened and his face paled slightly, there was no outward indication of the tumult the written words must have created in his soul, for this is what met his astonished vision:

Dear Mr. Brand—I hope soon to make your acquaintance. It will be an honor to meet a man who has done so much for those near and dear to me, but there is one reason why I am anxious to grasp your hand which is so utterly beyond your present knowledge that I deem it a duty to tell you the facts—to prepare you, in a word.

Circumstances have thrown me into the company of Lieutenant Stanhope. We

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had a kindred inspiration. He, I understand, is, in effect if not in actual recorded fact, the accepted suitor of your adopted daughter, known as Miss Enid Trevillion. I, although an older man, can share his feelings, because I am engaged to be married to Mrs. Vansittart, a lady whom you have, by God's help, rescued. Hence Mr. Stanhope and I have almost lived together, ashore and afloat, during these troubled days. Naturally, he spoke of the girl he loves and told me something of her history. He described the brooch found on her clothing, and a Mr. Jones, retired from the lighthouse service, who was present when you saved the child from speedy death, informs me that her linen was marked "E. T."

These facts, combined with the date and Mr. Jones' description of the damaged boat, lead me to believe that the girl is my own daughter, Edith Traill, whom you have mercifully preserved to gladden the eyes of a father who mourned her death and the death of her mother for nineteen years.

I can say no more at present. I am not making inferences not justified in other ways; nor am I setting up a father's claim to rob you of the affections of a beautiful and accomplished daughter. I will be content—more than content—if she can give to me a tithe of the love she owes to you, for, indeed, in Mr. Stanhope and in all others who know you, you have eloquent witnesses. Yours most sincerely,
CYRUS J. TRAILL.

—Let me add as an afterthought that only my nephew and you have received this information. The agonized suspense which the ladies must have endured on the rock is a trial more than sufficient to tax their powers. If, as I expect, Mr. Stanhope meets you first, he will be guided wholly by your advice as to whether or not the matter shall be made known to your Enid—to my Edith—before she lands.

Brand dropped the letter and placed his hands over his face. He yielded for an instant to the stupor of the intelligence.

Pyne came near to him and said, with an odd despondency in his voice:

"Say, you feel bad about this. Guess you'll hate our family in future."

"Why should I hate any one who brings rank and fortune to one of my little girls?"

"Well," went on Pyne anxiously, "she'll be Mrs. Stanhope, anyhow, before she's much older."

"That appears to be settled. All things have worked out for the best. Most certainly your excellent uncle and I shall not fall out about Enid. If it comes to that we must share her as a daughter."

Pyne brightened considerably as he learned how Brand had taken the blow.

"Oh, bully!" he cried. "That's a clear



"Say, you feel bad about this."

way out. Do you know, I was beginning to feel scared. I didn't count a little bit on my respected uncle setting up a title to Enid!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THEY were interrupted. Elsie, with her golden hair and big blue eyes, pink cheeks and parted lips, appeared on the stairs. All that was visible was her head. She looked like one of Murillo's angels.

"Please, can Mamie 'n' me see the man?" she asked, a trifle awed. She did not expect to encounter a stern faced official in uniform.

"What man, dearie?" he said, and instantly the child gained confidence, with that prompt abandonment to a favorable first impression which marks the exceeding wisdom of children and dogs.

She directed an encouraging sotto voce down the stairs:

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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