

THE PILLAR OF LIGHT

By Louis Tracy

Author of "The Wings of Morning"

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SYNOPSIS OF THE FIRST CHAPTER.

CHAPTER I.—A dark and stormy night. The lighthouse keeper, Stephen Brand, is alone on duty. He is a man of middle age, with a stern but kindly face. He has been in the lighthouse for many years. He is looking out at the sea, which is dark and choppy. He hears a sound in the distance, but he is not sure what it is. He goes to the window and looks out. He sees a light in the distance, but he is not sure what it is. He goes back to his work, but he is still thinking about the light in the distance.

CHAPTER III (Continued).

He gave the last a vigorous push and stood for a little while at the foot of the steps, ostensibly to light a cigar. He watched Constance slipping the rubber while End looked on with interest. The old Ben pulled a pair of oars to carry the boat into the fair way of the channel.

They reached the harbor lighthouse. The brown sea filled and the Daisy got way on her. Then she sped round the end of the solid pier and vanished, whereupon Lieutenant Stanhope walked slowly to the promenade, whence he could see the diminishing speck of canvas on the shining sea until it was hidden by Clement's Island.

At last the devotee of twist and shag, resting his tired arms on the railing, was able to exchange comments.

"Brace of fine galls, them," observed the acknowledged leader, a broken down "captain" of a mine abandoned soon after his birth.

"Fine," agreed his nearest henchman. Then, catching the gleam of the captain's gaze after Stanhope's retreating figure, he added:

"But what does that young spark want, turning their pretty heads for them, I should like to know?"

"They didn't seem particular struck on 'im," ventured another.

"The ways of women is curious," pronounced the oracle. "I once knew a girl—"

But his personal reminiscences were not of value. More to the point was the garbled, but, in the main, accurate account he gave of the rescue of an unknown child by one of the keepers of the Gulf Rock lighthouse on a June morning eighteen years earlier.

Stephen Brand was the name of the man, and there was a bit of mystery about him too. They all knew that a light keeper earned a matter of £70 a year—not enough to maintain a daughter and an adopted child in slap-up style, was it? A small villa they lived in, and a governess they had, and ponies to ride when they were big enough. The thing was ridiculous, wasn't it?

Everybody agreed that it was. People said Brand was a swell. Well, that might or might not be true. The speaker did not think much of him. He was a quiet, unobtrusive chap, though Jones, a Trinity pensioner, who kept the "Pichard and Seine" now, wouldn't hear a wrong word about him and always called him "captain."

A pretty sort of a captain, but, then, they all knew what an old slow coach Jones was. They did. Jones' plans were retailed on the premises for money down.

Then there was Spence, lame Jim, who lived at Marston. He was a tale about a fight with a shark before Brand reached the boat in which was the blessed baby—that very girl, End, they had just seen. Was it true? How could he say? There was a lot about it at the time in the local papers, but just then his own mind was given to thoughts of enlisting, as a British expedition was marching across the desert to relieve Khartoum, and cause Gordon's death.

No, Brand and the two girls had not dwelt all the time in Penzance. The light keepers went all over the kingdom, you know, but he had hit upon some sort of fog signal. End—Brand was always a man of facts. He once told the speaker that all the Polwena huns wanted was work—and the Gulf Rock was the best place for trying it. At his own request the Trinity people sent him back there two years ago. Some folk had queer tastes, hadn't they? And talking so much had made him dry.

Then the conversation languished, as the only obvious remark of any importance was not forthcoming.

Meanwhile the Daisy sped buoyantly toward the southwest. Although she was broad in beam and stanch from thwart to keel, it was no light undertaking to run fourteen miles out and home in such a craft.

But old Ben Pollard knew what he was about. Not until the granite pillar of the distant Gulf Rock opened up beyond Carn du was it necessary to turn the boat's head seaward. Even then, by steering close to the Runnelstone, they need not, during two-thirds of the time, be more than a mile or so distant from where he pressed his hours of leisure during recent years.

Neither dared to look at the other. They could not trust themselves even to speak. There was relief in action, for thought was torture.

The docile Daisy steadily forged through the waves. The spasmodic clang of the bell came more clearly each minute. Pollard, kneeling in the bows, peered into the gloom of the swirling snow. He listened eagerly to the bell. With right hand or left he motioned to Constance to bring the boat's head nearer to the wind or port the sail to fill out a little more.

End, ready to cast the canvas loose at the first hint of danger, consulted her watch frequently. As last she cried:

"Twenty minutes, Ben."

"That a relief it was to hear her own voice. The tension was becoming unbearable.

"I don't think the weather may be," Ben allowed himself to be persuaded. In after life he would never admit that they were free agents at that moment.

"We had to be," he would say. "It was in me to mind to say 'no' but I just couldn't. An' how often do we see 'em in 'em? Not once in a blue moon? And who would dispute him? No west country man, certainly."

At a distance of two miles one small fishing boat is as like another as two illitians to the eye of Gulliver. In a word, it needs acquaintance and nearness to distinguish them.

As it happened, Stephen Brand did happen to note the busy and the course she was shaping. But, during the short interval when his telescope might have revealed to him the identity of her occupants, he was suddenly called by telephone from the oil room to the kitchen. When next he ran aloft in a wild hurry to signal for assistance, he found, to his despair, that the Land's End was already blotted out in a swirling snowstorm, and the great plate of blue sea had shrunk to a leaden patch whose visible limits made the reef look large by comparison.

With the mechanical precision of habit he set the big bell in motion. Its heavy boom came fitfully through the pelting snowflakes to the ears of the two girls and old Ben. The latter, master of the situation now, announced his intention to "ketch ship and make for Mount's bay."

"I don't think we try'n' to sail close to Gulf Rock when we can't see a boat's length ahead," he said emphatically. "I be sorry, ladies both, but 'ee know how the tide runs over the reef, an' 'ee nags to drive to the wrong side of the light. We try'n' again tomorrow. Only the flowers 'll spile. All the rest—"

A loud explosion burst forth from the dense heights of the storm. The Daisy, sturdy as she was, seemed to stagger. The very air trembled with the din. Pollard had his hand on the sail to swing it to starboard when Constance put the tiller over to bring the boat's head up against the wind. For an instant he hesitated. Even he, versed in the ways of the sea, was startled. Both girls positively jumped, the sudden bang of the rocket was so unexpected.

"Mr. Brand must ha' zard us," pronounced Ben. "That's a warnin' to go to back."

The words had scarce left his lips when another report made the great silence, otherwise unbroken save by the quiet splash of the sea against the bows and the faint reverberations of the distant bell.

"That is too urgent to be intended for us," said Constance. "We were just halfway when the snow commenced."

"I did not notice any vessel near the rock," cried End tremulously. "Did you, Ben?"

Pollard's slow utterance was not quick enough. Before he could answer a third rocket thundered its overpowering summons.

"That is the 'help wanted' signal," cried Constance. "Ben, there is no question now of going back. We must keep our present course for twenty minutes at least and then take to the oars. The bell will guide us."

"Oh, yes, Ben," agreed End. "Something has gone wrong on the rock itself. I am quite sure there was no ship near enough to be in trouble already."

"By gum, we're see what's the matter," growled Ben. "Steady it is, Miss Brand. Ef we'm in trouble I'd as soon ha' you two galls aboard as any two men in Penzance."

At another time the torment would have earned him a torrent of sarcasm. Now it passed unheeded. The situation was bewildering, alarming. There were three keepers in the lighthouse. The signal foreboded illness, sudden and serious illness. Who could it be?

In such a crisis charity begins at home. Constance, with set face and shining eyes, End flushed and on the verge of tears, feared lest their own beloved one should be the sufferer.

To each of them Stephen Brand was equally a kind and devoted father. He never allowed End to feel that she was dependent on his bounty. Only the other day, when she blushed at the adoption of an art career as a future means of earning a livelihood, he approved of the necessary study, but laughed at the reason.

"With your pretty face and sunny ways, End," he said, "I shall have trouble enough to keep you in the nest without worrying as to the manner of your leaving it. Work at your drawing, by all means. Avoid color as one of true art. But where Constance and I live you shall live, until you choose to forsake us."

No wonder these girls thought there was no other man in the world like "dad." Their delightful home was idyllic in its happiness, their only sorrow that Brand should be away two months out of three on account of the "End," in which he passed his hours of leisure during recent years.

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"Right 'y' are, missy. No need to slack off yet. 'Tee clear'n' a bit. We'm heave to alongside the rock in less'n five minutes."

The fisherman was right. His trained senses perceived a distinct dimming in the volume of snow. Soon they could see fifty, a hundred, two hundred yards ahead. On the starboard quarter they caught a confused pushing noise, like the subdued rumble of a mill race. The tide had covered the rock.

"Luff it!" roared Ben suddenly. "Steady now!"

Out of the blurred vista a ghostly column rose in front. Smooth and sheer were its granite walls, with dark little casements showing black in the weird light. The boat rushed past the Trinity mooring buoy. She held on until they heard the sea breaking.

"Lower away!" cried Ben, and the yard fell with a sharp rattle that showed how thoroughly End had laid to heart Bellard's tuition.

Constance brought the Daisy round in a wide curve, and Ben got out the oars to keep her from being dashed against the reef.

End's eyes were turned toward the gallery beneath the lantern.

"Lighthouse boy!" she screamed in a voice high pitched with emotion. There was no answering clang of the door leading from the room on a level with the balcony. Not often had the girls visited the rock, but they knew that this was the first sign they might expect of their arrival being noted if there were no watchers peering the "promenade."

"Help us, Ben," cried Constance, and their united shouts might be heard a mile away in the prevailing stillness. A window halfway up the tower was opened. A man's head and shoulders appeared.

It was Stephen Brand.

"Thank God!" murmured Constance. End, on whose sensitive soul the storm, the signal, the hissing rush of the boat through the waves, had cast a spell of indefinite terror, bit her lip to restrain her tears.

Brand gave a glance of amazement at the three uplifted faces, but this was no time for surprise or question.

"I am coming down," he shouted. "Providence must have sent you at this moment."

"What can it be?" said Constance, outwardly calm now in the assurance that her father was safe.

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