

THE PILLAR of LIGHT

... By ...
Louis Tracy,
 Author of
 "The Wings of the Morning"
 Copyright, 1906, by
 Edward J. Clode

PYNE found End red and inclined to be fearful. The dying light of day was still strong enough in the service room to permit these things to be seen.

"No bad news, I hope?" he inquired, though the sight of Stephen Brand seated at his desk and placidly writing was reassuring.

The question steeled her to an extent.

"It is nothing of any consequence," she said and darted past him.

Brand looked up from his journal. He smiled, though the American thought there was a hint of pain in his eyes.

"I am going to lose one of my girls," he said. "Oh, no; this is not a loss by death, but by marriage. If I were a Frenchman I would describe it as gaining a son. End has just received what is tantamount to a proposal."

"By flag waving?" Pyne was naturally astounded.

"Yes. You would not expect one of the people from the Chinook to be so enterprising."

"I don't know," said Pyne, punctuating each word with a deliberate nod.

"Well, in any case, I would not have forwarded the application after an acquaintance of eighteen hours," observed Brand, with equal deliberation.

"They're two powerful fine girls," said Pyne, steering clear of the point.

"They have just been telling me how Miss End happened along. It reads like a fairy tale."

"She was given to me by the winds and waves, yet she is dear to me as my own child. I shall miss her greatly—if all goes well here."

"I've cottoned on to both of them something wonderful. But, if I am not intruding into private affairs, how comes it that Miss End is being telegraphed to?" Of course I can understand the gentleman being in a hurry. I would feel that way myself if the conditions were favorable."

Pyne could be as cold as a red Indian when the occasion demanded it. Brand found no hint in his face of the hidden thought in his mind.

"Have they said anything to you of a man named Stanhope?" inquired the lighthouse keeper, resuming the entry in his diary after a sharp glance upward.

"Yes. They pointed him out to me this morning, in the navy, I think; follow with a title and that sort of thing."

"No. His mother is Lady Margaret Stanhope, being an earl's daughter, but his father was a knight. He has been paying attentions to End for a year and more to my knowledge and to his mother's exceeding indignation. I fancy."

"That is where we on the other side have the pull of you."

"Have you? I wonder. However, Lady Margaret's views have not troubled me. I will deal with her when the time comes. At present it looks fairly certain that Master Jack has settled matters on his own account. I may be mistaken, of course. How do you interpret this?"

He closed the journal and handed to Pyne a memorandum taken down letter by letter by a sailor as Brand read the signal:

"Mother sends her love to End."

"Did mother ever convey her love to End before?" asked Pyne.

"No."

"Then I call that neat. I take off my hat to Stanhope. He and mamma have had a heart to heart talk."

Brand leaned his head on his hands, with clinched fists covering his ears. There was a period of utter silence until the lighthouse keeper rose to light the lamp.

Pyne watched him narrowly.

"I may be trespassing on delicate ground," he said at last. "If I am, you are not the sort of man to stand on ceremony. In the States, you know, when the authorities want to preserve a park section they don't say, 'Please do not walk on the grass.' They put up a board which reads, 'Keep off.' We never kick. We're used to it."

"My notice board, if required, will be less curt, at any rate," replied Brand, and they faced each other. Though their words were light, no pleasant conceit lurked in their minds. There was a question to be asked and answered, and it held the issues of life and death.

"What did you mean just now by saying, 'If all goes well here'? Is there any special reason why things should not go well?"

The young Philadelphian might have been hazarding an inquiry about a matter of trivial interest, so calm was he, so smooth his utterance. But Brand had made no mistake in estimating this youngster's force of character, nor did he seek to temporize.

He extended an arm toward the roof.

"You hear that?" he said.

"Yes."

"It may hold that way for weeks."

"So I have been told."

"By whom?"

"Mr. Emmett told me."

"Ah! He and I have discussed the matter already. Yet I imagine that neither he nor any other man in the place save myself grasps the true meaning of the fact."

"I've been theorizing," said Pyne.

"It occurred to me that this light isn't here for amusement."

He looked up at the lamp and smiled. The pillar in these days must have been a haunt of illusions, for Brand, like Constance and Pyne himself, thought he caught an expression familiar to his eyes long before he had seen that clear cut, splendidly intelligent face.

But there was no time for idle speculation. He glanced into the well of the stairs to make sure that no one was ascending.

Then he approached nearer to Pyne and said in an intense whisper:

I have been thinking about this, and now I will tell you what I have decided. I will take the watch from 8 until 12. At 12 you will relieve me and I will go below to secure provisions and water sufficient to maintain the lives of my daughters, you and myself for a few hours longer than the others. By right, if I followed the rules I have promised to obey, I alone should live. That is impossible. A Spartan might do it, but I cannot abandon my girls and yet retain my senses. I trust you because I must have a confederate. If the weather does not break before tomorrow night we must barricade the stairs—and fight—if necessary."

His face was drawn and haggard, his eyes blazing. He shook as one in the first throes of fever. He seemed to await his companion's verdict with an overpowering dread lest any attempt should be made to question the justice of his decree.

"Yes. I figured it out that way, too," said Pyne. "It's queer, isn't it, to be in such a fix when there's all sorts of help within call, so to speak? We might as well be in a mine closed up by an explosion. And, I'll tell you what, I'm real sorry for you."

Brand, collapsing under the strain, sank into a chair.

"It is an awful thing," he moaned, "to condemn so many men, women and children to such a death."

A spasm of pain made Pyne's lips tremulous for an instant. He had forgotten Elsie and Mamie.

But his voice was fully under control when he spoke again.

"You can count on me in the deal in all but one thing," he said.

The older man looked up fiercely. What condition could be imposed in the fulfillment of a duty so terrible?

"I am here by chance," went on Pyne. "One of your daughters may have told you that Mrs. Vansittart came from New York to marry my uncle. Anyhow you would know she was dear to him by his message today. She is sort of in my charge, and I can't desert her. It's hard luck, as I don't care a cent for her. She's the kind of woman an old man adores—fascinating, birdlike creature—when the cage is gilded."

Brand sprang to his feet and raced up to the trimming stage. When his hands were on the lamp he felt surer of himself. It gave him strength during the hurricane, and it would strengthen him now.

"There can be no exceptions," he said harshly. Pyne waited until the lighthouse keeper rejoined him.

"I want to have put my proposition before you first and made a speech afterward," he said. "Constance and End will join you here when you say the word, but I will be on the other side of the barricade."

"Nonsense!" cried Brand. "You have no right to thrust away the chance that is given you. You saved all these people once. Why should you die uselessly?"

"What! Suppose it pans out that way. Suppose we live a couple of weeks and escape. Am I to face the old man and tell him the truth? No, sir, you don't mean it. You wouldn't do it yourself. What about that shark the girls told me of? I can guess just what happened. He wanted the light refreshment in the boat. Did you scoot back when you saw his fin? I'm a heap younger than you, Mr. Brand, but that bluff doesn't go."

"Thank heaven, we have twenty-four hours yet!" murmured Brand.

"It will be all the same when we have only twenty-four seconds. Let us fix it that way right now. Don't you see, it will be easier to decide the girls? And there's another reason. Barbecue and shoot as you like. It will be a hard thing to keep three score desperate men boxed up down below. When they begin to diet on coals there will be trouble. A few of us, ready to take chances, will be helpful. Some of them may have to die quick, you know."

Brand closed his eyes in shut affliction. In that way he tried to shunt off a vision.

"Be it so," he gasped. "May the Lord help us."

It was the responsibility that mastered him. Judges on the bench often break down when they sentence a criminal to death, but what judge, humane, tender hearted and God fearing, ever pronounced the doom of seventy-eight people snatched from a merciful death to be steeped in horrors?

At last his iron will predominated. The knowledge that the path of duty lay straight before him cheered his tortured soul. No man could say he erred in trying to save his children. That was a truth as solemn as any conferred by the Elder Brethren of the Trinity.

He placed a hand on Pyne's shoulder, for this youngster had become dear to him.

"Had I a son," he said, "I should wish him to be like you. Let us strive to forget the evils that threaten us. Brooding is useless. If need be you will take charge of the lower deck. There is starvation allowance for three more days at the worst, but I hate the thought of starting the new scale tomorrow."

"It may not be necessary."

"Candidly, I fear it will. I know the Cornish coast too well. When bad weather sets in from the southwest at this season it holds for a week at the lowest computation."

"Is there no other way? Can nothing be done out there?"

"Able men, the best of sailors, the most experienced of engineers, have striven for half a century to devise some means of storm communication with a rock lighthouse placed as this is. They have failed. There is none."

"That's good," cried Pyne pleasantly. "Where is your pouch? I feel like a smoke. If I hadn't fired that question at you I should have wasted a lot of time in hard thinking."

Brand had to scheme that night to reach the storeroom unobserved. The Falcon, steaming valiantly to her observation post near the buoy, aided him considerably. He permitted the night watch to gather in the service room while he supplied the men with tobacco and stationed the officer on the gallery to observe the traveler in case she showed any signal lights.

Since the attempt on the lock Constance gave the key to her father after each visit. For the rest, the inmates of the pillar were sunk in the lethargy of unsatisfied hunger. Constance and End, utterly worn out with fatigue, were sound asleep in the kitchen, and the tears coursed down the man's face as he noted the part of a thief in securing the measured allowance of flour and bacon for one meal. The diet of



"Had I a son I should wish him to be like you."

one hungry meal for eighty-one people gave twenty-seven hungry meals for three. He ought to have taken more, but he set his teeth and refused the ungrateful task.

It is oftentimes easy for a man to decide upon a set course, but hard to follow it.

"A week," he murmured. "Perhaps ten days! That is all. Pray heaven I may not go mad before they die!"

Pyne, watching the light, knew that Brand had succeeded. The Falcon went. Gradually the watch dispersed.

"Where is the guard?" asked Pyne, making believe that they were playing some comedy.

"Hidden in the kitchen lockers. I could obtain only distilled water. You must persuade the girls in the morning that something went wrong with the apparatus."

As opportunity offered Brand transferred the tin to the lockers of the service room. Pyne, who missed nothing, shook his head when it became evident that the last consignment was safely stored away.

"Not much there," he commented.

"I will take no more," was the fierce cry.

"You ought to."

"I refuse. I tell you! Don't torture me further."

"Any chance of a row in the morning?" The purser and Mr. Emmett mounted guard when the storeroom is opened.

"I acted my role well. I built up the vacancies with empty tins."

"My salutes," cried Pyne pityingly. "You deserve to win through!"

"I think my heart will break," muttered Brand. "But look! The lamp! It needs adjusting."

Indeed, a fresh gale seemed to be springing up. The wind having gone, the index was useless. It was not until a burst of spray drenched the lantern that Brand knew of a change taking place. The wind was backing round toward the north.

The barometer fell slightly. It portended either more wind and dry weather or less wind, accompanied by rain. Who could tell what would happen? Fair or foul, hurricane or calm, all things seemed to be the ungovernable blundering of blind chance.

When the rock was left in peace after the fall of the tide Pyne promised to keep the light in order if Brand would endeavor to sleep until daybreak. Rest was essential to him. He would assuredly break down under the strain if the tension were too long maintained, and a time was coming when he would need all his strength, mental and physical.

"Here have I been snoozing in odd corners ever since I came aboard," urged the American, "and I have nothing to do but starve quietly. It's ridiculous. My funeral is dated; yours isn't. You can't be on deck all the time, you know. Now, just curl up and count sheep jumping over a wall, or any old game of the sort, until your eyes close of their own accord."

Brand yielded. He lay on the hard boards, with a chair cushion for a pillow. All the rugs rescued by Constance were now needed in the hospital. In less than a minute he was sound asleep.

"That was a close call," mused Pyne. "In another hour he would have cracked up. He's a wonder anyhow."

The lighthouse keeper slept until long after daybreak. Pyne refused to allow any one to disturb him.

Soon after 7 o'clock the watch reported that two vessels were approaching from the bay. One was the Falcon, and the sailors soon made out that the other was the Trinity tender from Plymouth.

When they were both nearing the buoy Brand was aroused.

It was evident that the brief rest had cleared his brain and restored his self confidence. Instantly he took up the thread of events, and his first words showed how pleased he was that some one of authority in the lighthouse service should be in active communication with him.

Through his glasses he distinguished Stanhope on board the Trinity steamer, standing by the side of the inspecting officer of the south coast lights. Other officials were there, but near Stanhope was a tall elderly man, unknown and certainly a stranger in Penzance.

The Falcon was now chartered by press men, so the civilian on the official boat was evidently a person of consequence. Indeed, Brand imagined, long before Pyne was able to verify the impression, that the newcomer was Mr. Cyrus J. Traill, whom he had failed

to notice in the poor light of the previous evening.

He knew quite well that the experienced chief of the Lighthouse service would appreciate fully the disabilities under which he labored, with eighty-one mouths to feed from a stock already far below the three months' maximum.

The first telegraphed question betrayed the prevalent anxiety.

"Hope all is well?"

What was he to say? Was it not best to speak boldly and let men know the truth, not alone as to their present desperate plight, but revealing the measures he had devised for the protection of the light? He could not make up his mind to launch out into a full explanation that instant.

So he stammered:

"Every one alive, but many cases of grave collapse."

Stanhope was again the signaler—evidently he had arranged matters with the admiral at Portsmouth—so Brand expected the prompt reply:

"How are Constance and End?"

"Quite well and cheerful."

The tall man near Stanhope bent closer.

"Are Mrs. Vansittart and Pyne all right?"

Brand assumed that the lady was in no worse condition than others. Constance, telling him the state of the sick during a hasty visit, had not mentioned her name.

So he sent the needed assurance and went on forlornly:

"Suppose no effort can be made to open communication?"

To his great surprise the answer came:

"We are constructing a raft. When the tide falls this afternoon we will try what can be done."

Ah, how glad he was that he had not obeyed his earlier impulse and hurried the anxious rescuers by a prophecy of lingering death for many, with the prelude, perchance, of murderous excesses committed by men on the verge of madness. If that story had to be told he would not flinch, but it was a grateful thing that the hour of its telling might at least be deferred.

A long message followed, a string of loving words from relatives ashore to those known to be imprisoned on the rock. During the merely perfunctory reading off of the signals his active mind was canvassing the probabilities of success or failure for the venture of the afternoon. It was high water about 3 o'clock, and, in his judgment, with the wind in its present quarter, about northwest by west, the cross seas which would sweep the reef and engulf the lighthouse at half tide would render it utterly impossible for any raft ever built by man's hands to live in the immediate vicinity of the rock.

However, the issue lay with others now. He knew that they would do all that brave men would dare. He was tempted to make known the inspiring news to all hands, but refrained, because he feared ultimate failure. Beneath his feet was a human volcano. Stirred too deeply, it might become active and dangerous.

So the sympathetic multitude in his charge, literally awaiting a scanty morsel of food which only provoked what it failed to gratify, must rest content with the long statement written out by the purser and read by him at the door of each room.

Pyne took to Mrs. Vansittart the news of his chief's presence on the steamer.

"If you would like to see him," he said, "I have no doubt Mr. Brand will let you stand on the gallery for a little while."

She declined, expressing herself on the ground of weakness.

"In this high wind," she said, "it will be very cold out there, and any further exposure would make me very ill."

"That's true enough," he agreed, though he wondered why she raised no question concerning the message she wished him to convey to Mr. Traill.

Had she forgotten the urgency of her words overnight? He had carried her instructions quite faithfully to Brand and the latter smiled at the fantasy.

"Time enough to think of such things when we are assured of the lady's departure," he said, and they left it at that.

Thinking to interest her, Pyne told her of the crowd on the Falcon.

"Mostly reporters, Brand thinks," he said. "What a story they will build up in the New York papers! It will be more fun than a box of monkeys to get hold of this week's news and read all the faddoos they are printing."

But Mrs. Vansittart was not to be roused from her melancholy. She dreaded the least physical suffering. Privacy was a new thing in her life. Today she was lonely, timid, a woman who covered away from the door and was obviously anxious that he should leave her to the quiet misery of the packed bedroom.

As the day passed, a wearisome iteration of all that had gone before, a new feature in the relations of the crowded community made itself disagreeably apparent. Men drew apart from each other singly or in small groups. An inconspicuous gloom settled on the women. By some means the knowledge spread that they might all starve to death in the heart of this cold dungeon. They began to loathe it, to upbraid its steadfastness with spoken curses or unrestrained tears. The sanctity of one day was becoming the tomb of the next. No longer was there competition to look at land or sea from the open windows. Everywhere was settling down a pall of blank, horrible silence and suspicion.

Even Constance yielded to the common terror once when the men of the watch escorted the bearer of a tray load of provisions to the occupants of the coal cellar.

"End," she whispered, "did you see the light in their eyes? What is it? Does hunger look that way?"

"It must be so, yet it is almost unbelievable. They are far removed from real starvation."

"One would think so. But it is so hard to realize things beforehand. And they have nothing to do. They are brooding all the time. We are slaves to our imagination. Many a sick person is allowed to eat far less than these men have been given, and the deprivation is not felt at all."

"What will become of us, Constance, if we are detained here for many days?"

"Dear one, do not ask me. We must not think of such things."

"But dad is thinking of them. I watched his face when I took him a scrap of food just now, and—"

"Hush, dear. Let us pray—and hope."

There was a clatter of feet down the iron stairs. The men of the watch were hustling to unbar the iron door. A solidly built, circular raft had been lowered from the Trinity tender.

An assistant keeper, wearing a cork jacket, with a rope about his waist, was clinging to a stumpy mast in the center. Two stout guide ropes were unspooled from the deck of the vessel, and the raft, unwidely mass of timber was slowly drifting nearer to the lighthouse with the tide.

The door of the column opened toward the east, so the wind, with its pelting sheets of spray, was almost in the opposite quarter, and the stout granite shaft itself afforded some degree of protection for the entrance.

The scheme signaled from the steamer was a good one. None but a lunatic would endeavor to approach the rock itself, but there was a chance that the raft might be made to drift near enough to the door to permit a grapple to be thrown across the rope held by the gallant volunteer on the raft.

It was his duty to attach the two ropes and thus render it possible for a stronger line to be drawn from the vessel to the pillar. There was no other way. The lighthouse did not possess a rope of sufficient length to be drawn back by the raft without the intervention of some human agency.

This was precisely the puny, half despairing dodge that the reef loved to play with. Catlike, it permitted the queer, flat bottomed craft to approach almost within hailing distance.

Then it shot forth a claw of furious surf, the heavy raft was picked up as if it were a floating feather, turned clean over and flung many fathoms out to sea, while both of its guiding cables were snatched with contemptuous ease.

The assistant keeper, kept afloat by his jacket, was hauled, half drowned, back through the choking froth, while the wave which overwhelmed the raft whirled up a spiteful tongue and almost succeeded in dragging out several of the men stationed in the doorway.

With a clang the iron shutter was closed into its place, and when the sailor was rescued the Trinity boat steamed away to try to secure the raft.

So joyous hope gave way once more to dark foreboding, and the only comfort was the faint one to be extracted from the parting signal:

"Will try again next tide."

CHAPTER XIII.

DISCIPLINE slackened its bonds that night. For one thing, Mr. Emmett fell ill. Although inclined to hardship in the elemental strife, being of the stocky manner race which holds the great Atlantic in no dread, he had never before been called on to out-ridden land, to drink condensed steam drenched with vinegar, and to chew sustenance from the rind of raw bacon. These drawbacks, added to the lack of exercise and the constant wearing of clothes not yet dry, placed him on the sick list.

Again there were ominous whispers of unfair division in the matter of food. It was not within the realm of accomplishment that the purser, Constance, End and others who helped to apportion the eatables could treat all alike. Some fared better than others in quality if not in quantity. The unfortunate ones growled and talked of favoritism.

A crisis was reached when the second officer muttered the night watch.

When one sheep leads the others will follow. A stout German from Chicago asked bluntly:

"Vere de goat of Maylin' at mound-in' part? Dere is bud von ting to part, und det is der hidden."

Community of interest caused many to huddle closer to him. Here was one who dared to say what they all thought. Their feet shuffled in support. The officer, faithful to his trust, was tempted to tell the man, but he thought the circumstances warranted more gentle methods.

"Why are you dissatisfied?" he sternly demanded. "What do you suspect? Are you fool enough to imagine that you are being cheated by people who are dividing their last crust with you?"

"How do we know that? Dose girls—dey are chokin' mit Mr. Pyne all der day. Dey can't do dat und be hungry like us."

"You ungrateful ass!" said the disgruntled officer. "There is food here for three people. They have fed eighty-one of us for two days and will keep us going several more days. Can't you figure it out? Isn't it a miracle? Here! Who's for guard and who not? Let us quit fooling."

And the doubters were silenced for the hour.

The hymn singer endeavored to raise a chorus. He was not greeted with enthusiasm, but a few valiant spirits came to his assistance. A couple of hymns were feebly rendered—and again silence.

"Say when," observed Pyne calmly when he entered the service room to find Brand trimming the spare lamp.

"Not tonight," said Brand.

"Why not? Hell may break loose at any moment downstairs."

"What has occurred? I heard something of a dispute when the watch mustered at 8 o'clock."

"Things are worse now. One of the men found a gallon of methylated spirit in the workshop."

"Good heavens! Did he drink any of it?"

"He and his mates have emptied the tin. Eight are helplessly drunk, the others quarrelsome. The next thing will be a combined rush for the storeroom."

"But why did not the second officer tell me?"

"He thought you had troubles enough. If he could depend on the remainder of the crowd he would rope the sinners. Says he knows a slave knot that will make 'em tired."

Brand's eyes glistened.