

The Pillar of Light

catching the gloom 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 did n't seem partic'lar stuck on 'im," ventured another.

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

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 a mystery about him, too. They all knew that a light-keeper earned a matter of £70 to £80 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, unsociable chap, though Jones, a Trinity pensioner, who kept the "Pilchard and Seine" now, wouldn't hear a wrong word about him, and always called him "cap'n." A pretty sort of a captain! But then, they all knew what an old slow-

The Signal

coach Jones was. They did: Jones's pints were re-tailed on the premises for money down.

Then there was Spence, lame Jim, who lived at Marazion: he told a fine tale about a fight with a shark before Brand reached the boat in which was the blessed baby — that very girl, Enid, 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 fad — Brand was always a man of fads: he once told the speaker that all the Polwena Mine 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 towards the southwest. Although she was broad in beam and staunch 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

The Pillar of Light

head seawards. 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 one of the many creeks in which they could secure shelter in case of a sudden change in the weather.

Thenceforward there was nothing for it but a straight run of six miles to the rock, behind which lay the Scilly Isles, forty miles away, and well below the boat's horizon.

So, when the moment came for the final decision to be made, Pollard cast an anxious eye at a great bank of cloud mounting high in the north.

There was an ominous drop in the temperature, too. The rain he anticipated might turn to snow, and snow is own brother to fog at sea, though both are generally absent from the Cornish littoral in winter.

"Ben," cried Enid, breaking off a vivid if merciless description of a new disciple who had joined the artistic coterie at Newlyn, "what are you looking at?"

He scratched his head and gazed fixedly at the white battalions sweeping in aerial conquest over the land.

"She do look like snaw," he admitted.

"Well, what does that matter?"

Without waiting for orders Constance had eased the helm a trifle. The *Daisy* was now fairly headed for the rock. With this breeze she would be there in less than an hour.

"It be a bit risky," grumbled Ben.

"We will be alongside the lighthouse before there can be any serious downfall," said practical Constance.

The Signal

"Surely we can make the land again no matter how thick 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.

"It had to be," he would say. "It wur in me mind to argy wi' she, but I just couldn't. An' how often do us zee snaw in Carnwall? Not once in a blue moon." And who would dispute him? No West-country man, certainly.

At a distance of five miles one small fishing craft is as like another as two Liliputians 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 *Daisy* 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 snow-storm, and the great plain 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 snow-flakes to the ears of the two girls and old Ben. The latter, master of the situation now, announced his intention to 'bout ship and make for Mount's Bay.

The Pillar of Light

"'Ee doan' ketch me tryin' to sail close to Gulf Rock when 'ee can't zee a boat's length ahead," he said, emphatically. "I be sorry, ladies both, but 'ee know how the tide runs over the reef, an' 'tes easy to drive to the wrong side of the light. We'm try again tomorrow. On'y the flowers 'll spile. All the rest —"

Crash! A loud explosion burst forth from the dense heights of the storm. The *Daisy*, sturdy as she was, seemed to shiver. 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.

"Mister Brand must ha' zeed us," pronounced Ben. "That's a warnin' to we to go back."

The words had scarce left his lips when another report smote the great silence, otherwise unbroken save by the quiet plash 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 half way when the snow commenced."

"I did not notice any vessel near the rock," cried Enid, 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.

The Signal

"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 Enid. "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'm zee what's the matter," growled Ben. "Steady it is, Miss Brand. Ef we'm in trouble I'd as soon ha' you two gells aboard as any two men in Penzance."

At another time the compliment 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, Enid, 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 Enid to feel that she was dependent on his bounty. Only the other day, when she hinted 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 saucy ways, Enid," 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

The Pillar of Light

as the bane of true art. But where Connie 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 pursuit in which he passed 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 permit the sail to fill out a little more.

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

"Twenty minutes, Ben."

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

"Right y' are, missy. No need to slack off yet. 'Tis clearin' a bit. We'm heave to alongside the rock in less'n no time."

The fisherman was right. His trained senses perceived a distinct diminution in the volume of snow. Soon they could see fifty, a hundred, two hundred yards

The Signal

ahead. On the starboard quarter they caught a confused rushing noise, like the subdued murmur of a millrace. The tide had covered the rock.

"Luff et is!" 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 Enid had laid to heart Pollard'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.

Enid's eyes were turned towards the gallery beneath the lantern.

"Lighthouse ahoy!" 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 pacing the "promenade."

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

It was Stephen Brand.

The Pillar of Light

"Thank God!" murmured Constance.

Enid, 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."

He vanished.

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

"Must ha' bin a accident," said Ben. "That signal means 'Bring a doctor.' An' there ain't a blessed tug in harbor, nor won't be till the tide makes."

"That will mean delay," cried Enid.

"Five or six hours at least, missy."

The main door at the head of the iron ladder clamped to the stones swung back, and Brand leaned out. He had no greeting for them, nor words of astonishment.

"When will the tug reach here, Ben?" he asked.

The fisherman told him the opinion he had formed.

"Then you girls must come and help me. Jackson scalded his hands and arms in the kitchen, and Bates was hurrying to the store-room for oil and whitening when he slipped on the stairs and broke his leg. We must get them both ashore. Ben, you can take them?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Now, Constance, you first. Hold tight and stand in the skip. Your boat cannot come near the rock."

The Signal

He swung the derrick into place and began to work the windlass. Constance, cool as her father, whispered to the excited Enid:

"Let us divide the parcels and take half each."

"Oh, I should have forgotten all about them," said Enid, stooping to empty the lockers.

Constance, without flickering an eyelid, stepped into the strong basket with its iron hoops, and, having arranged some of the plethoric paper bags at her feet, told her father to "hoist away."

She arrived safely. Enid followed her, with equal *sang froid*, though a lift of forty odd feet whilst standing in a skip and clinging to a rope is not an every-day experience.

"Dang me," said Ben, as Enid, too, was swung into the lighthouse, "but they're two plucked 'uns."

The great bell tolled away, though the snow had changed to sleet, and the heights beyond the Land's End were dimly visible, so its warning note was no longer needed. The sky above was clearing. A luminous haze spreading over the waters heralded the return of the sun. But the wind was bitterly cold; the fisherman watching the open door, with one eye on the sea lest an adventurous wave should sweep the *Daisy* against the rock, murmured to himself:

"'Tis a good job the wind 's i' the norrard. This sort o' thing's a weather-breeder, or my name ain't Ben Pollard."

And that was how Enid came back to the Gulf Rock to enter upon the second great epoch of her life.

The Pillar of Light

Once before had the reef taken her to its rough heart and fended her from peril. Would it shield her again — rescue her from the graver danger whose shadow even now loomed out of the deep. What was the bell saying in its wistful monotony?

Enid neither knew nor cared. Just then she had other things to think about.

CHAPTER IV

THE VOICE OF THE REEF

THERE comes a time in the life of every thinking man or woman when the argosy of existence, floating placidly on a smooth and lazy stream, gathers unto itself speed, rushes swiftly onward past familiar landmarks of custom and convention, boils furiously over resisting rocks, and ultimately, if not submerged in an unknown sea, finds itself again meandering through new plains of wider horizon.

Such a perilous passage can never be foreseen. The rapids may begin where the trees are highest and the meadows most luxuriant. No warning is given. The increased pace of events is pleasant and exhilarating. Even the last wild plunge over the cascade is neither resented nor feared. Some frail craft are shattered in transit, some wholly sunken, some emerge with riven sails and tarnished embellishments. A few not only survive the ordeal, but thereby fit themselves for more daring exploits, more soul-stirring adventures.

When the two girls stood with Stephen Brand in the narrow entrance to the lighthouse, the gravity of their bright young faces was due solely to the fact that their