

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

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father had announced the serious accidents which had befallen his assistants. No secret monitor whispered that fate, in her bold and merciless dramatic action, had roughly removed two characters from the stage to clear it for more striking events.

Not once in twenty years has it happened that two out of the three keepers maintained on a rock station within signaling distance of the shore have become incapacitated for duty on the same day. The thing was so bewilderingly sudden, the arrival of Constance and Enid on the scene so timely and unexpected, that Brand, a philosopher of ready decision in most affairs of life, was at a loss what to do for the best now that help, of a sort undreamed of, was at hand.

The case of Jackson, who was scalded, was simple enough. The Board of Trade medicine chest supplied to each lighthouse is a facsimile of that carried by every sea-going steamship. It contained the ordinary remedies for such an injury, and there would be little difficulty or danger in lowering the sufferer to the boat.

But Bates's affair was different. He lay almost where he had fallen. Brand had only lifted him into the store-room from the foot of the stairs, placing a pillow beneath his head, and appealing both to him and to Jackson to endure their torture unmoved whilst he went to signal for assistance.

The problem that confronted him now was one of judgment. Was it better to await the coming of the doctor or endeavor to transfer Bates to the boat?

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He consulted Ben Pollard again; the girls were already climbing the steep stairs to sympathize with and tend to the injured men.

"Do you think it will blow harder, Ben, when the tide turns?" he asked.

The old fellow seemed to regard the question as most interesting and novel. Indeed, to him, some such query and its consideration provided the chief problem of each day. Therefore he surveyed land, sea and sky most carefully before he replied:

"It may be a'most anything afore night, Misser Brand."

At another time Brand would have smiled. Today he was nervous, distraught, wrenched out of the worn rut of things.

"I fancy there is some chance of the doctor being unable to land when he reaches the rock. Do you agree with me?"

His voice rang sharply. Ben caught its note and dropped his weather-wise ambiguity.

"It'll blow harder, an' mebbe snaw agin," he said.

"I shall need some help here in that case, so I will retain the young ladies. Of course you can manage the boat easily enough without them?"

Pollard grinned reassuringly.

"We'm run straight in wi' thickey wind," he said.

So they settled it that way, all so simply.

A man sets up two slim masts a thousand miles apart and flashes comprehensible messages across the void. The multitude gapes at first, but soon accepts the thing

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as reasonable. "Wireless telegraphy" is the term, as one says "by mail."

A whole drama was flowing over a curve of the earth at that moment but the Marconi station was invisible. There was no expert in telepathic sensation present to tell Brand and the fisherman that their commonplace words covered a magic code.

Jackson, white and mute, was lowered first. The brave fellow would not content himself with nursing his agony amidst the cushions aft. When Bates, given some slight strength by a stiff dose of brandy, was carried, with infinite care, down three flights of steep and narrow stairs, and slung to the crane in an iron cot to be lowered in his turn, Jackson stood up. Heedless of remonstrances, he helped to steady the cot and adjust it amidships clear of the sail.

"Well done, Artie," said Brand's clear voice.

"Oh, brave!" murmured Enid.

"We will visit you every day at the hospital," sang out Constance.

Jackson smiled, yes, smiled, though his bandaged arms quivered and the seared nerves of his hands throbbed excruciatingly. Speak aloud he could not. Yet he bent over his more helpless mate and whispered hoarsely:

"Cheer up, old man. Your case is worse'n mine. An' ye did it for me."

Pollard, with a soul gnarled as his body, yet had a glimpse of higher things when he muttered:

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"D'ye think ye can hold her, mate, whiles I hoist the cloth?"

Jackson nodded. The request was a compliment, a recognition. He sat down and hooked the tiller between arm and ribs. Ben hauled with a will; the *Daisy*, as if she were glad to escape the cascades of green water swirling over the rock, sprang into instant animation. The watchers from the lighthouse saw Ben relieve the steersman and tenderly arrange the cushions behind his back. Then Brand closed the iron doors and the three were left in dim obscurity.

They climbed nearly a hundred feet of stairways and emerged on to the cornice balcony after Brand had stopped the clockwork which controlled the hammer of the bell.

What a difference up here! The sea, widened immeasurably, had changed its color. Now it was a sullen blue gray. The land was nearer and higher. The *Daisy* had shrunk to a splash of dull brown on the tremendous ocean prairie. How fierce and keen the wind! How disconsolate the murmur of the reef!

Brand, adjusting his binoculars, scrutinized the boat.

"All right aboard," he said. "I think we have adopted the wiser course. They will reach Penzance by half-past two."

His next glance was towards the Land's End signal station. A line of flags fluttered out to the right of the staff.

"Signal noted and forwarded," he read aloud. "That is all right; but the wind has changed."

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Enid popped inside the lantern for shelter. It was bitterly cold.

"Better follow her example, Connie," said Brand, to his daughter. "I will draw the curtains. We can see just as well and be comfortable."

Indeed, the protection of the stout plate glass, so thick and tough that sea-birds on a stormy night dashed themselves to painless death against it, was very welcome. Moreover, though neither of the girls would admit it, there was a sense of security here which was strangely absent when they looked into the abyss beneath the stone gallery. Constance balancing a telescope, Enid peering through the field-glasses, followed the progress of the *Daisy* in silence, but Brand's eyes wandered uneasily from the barometer, which had fallen rapidly during the past hour, to the cyclonic nimbus spreading its dark mass beyond the Seven Stones Lightship. The sun had vanished, seemingly for the day, and the indicator attached to the base of the wind vane overhead pointed now sou'west by west. It would not require much further variation to bring about a strong blow from the true southwest, a quarter responsible for most of the fierce gales that sweep the English Channel.

Nevertheless, this quick darting about of the fickle breeze did not usually betoken lasting bad weather. At the worst, the girls might be compelled to pass the night on the rock. He knew that the tug with the two relief men would make a valiant effort to reach the lighthouse at the earliest possible moment. When

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the men joined him the girls could embark. As it was, the affair was spiced with adventure. Were it not for the mishap to the assistant-keepers the young people would have enjoyed themselves thoroughly. The new airt of the wind, too, would send the *Daisy* speedily back to port. This, in itself, justified the course he had taken. On the whole, a doubtful situation was greatly relieved. His face brightened. With a grave humor not altogether artificial, he cried:

"Now, Constance, I did not take you aboard as a visitor. Between us we ought to muster a good appetite. Come with me to the store-room. I will get you anything you want and leave you in charge of the kitchen."

"And poor me!" chimed in Enid.

"Oh, you, miss, are appointed upper house-maid. And mind you, no followers."

"Mercy! I nearly lost my situation before I got it."

"How?"

"We met Jack Stanhope and asked him to come with us."

"You asked him, you mean," said Constance.

"And you met him, I meant," said Enid.

"I don't care a pin how you treated Stanhope, so long as you didn't bring him," said Brand, "though, indeed, he would have been useful as it turned out."

When lunch was ready they summoned him by the electric bells he had put up throughout the building. It gave them great joy to discover in the living room a code of signals which covered a variety of messages.

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They rang him downstairs by the correct call for "Meal served."

It was a hasty repast, as Brand could not remain long away from the glass-covered observatory, but they all enjoyed it immensely. He left them, as he said, "to gobble up the remains," but soon he shouted down the stairs to tell them that the *Daisy* had rounded Carn du. He could not tell them, not knowing it, that at that precise moment old Ben Pollard was frantically signaling to Lieutenant Stanhope to change the course of the small steam yacht he had commandeered as soon as the murmur ran through the town that the Gulf Rock was flying the "Help wanted" signal.

The officials did not know that Brand was compelled by the snowstorm to use rockets. All the information they possessed was the message from Land's End and its time of dispatch.

Jack Stanhope's easy-going face became very strenuous, indeed, when he heard the news.

The hour stated was precisely the time the *Daisy* was due at the rock if she made a good trip. Without allowing for any possible contingency save disaster to the two girls and their escort, he rushed to the mooring-place of the 10-ton steam-yacht *Lapwing*, impounded a couple of lounging sailors, fired up, stoked, and steered the craft himself, and was off across the Bay in a quarter of the time that the owner of the *Lapwing* could have achieved the same result.

His amazement was complete when he encountered the redoubtable *Daisy* bowling home before a seven-

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knot breeze. He instantly came round and ranged up to speaking distance. When he learnt what had occurred he readily agreed to return to Penzance in order to pick up the relief lighthouse-keepers, and thus save time in transferring them to the rock.

In a word, as Enid Trevillion was safe, he was delighted at the prospect of bringing her back that evening, when the real skipper of the *Lapwing* would probably have charge of his own boat. There was no hurry at all now.

If they left the harbor at three o'clock, there would still be plenty of light to reach the Gulf Rock. Ben Pollard, glancing over his shoulder as the *Daisy* raced towards Penzance side by side with the *Lapwing*, was not so sure of this. But the arrangement he had suggested was the best possible one, and he was only an old fisherman who knew the coast, whereas Master Stanhope pinned his faith to the Nautical Almanac and the Rules.

The people most concerned knew nothing of these proceedings.

When Constance and Enid had solemnly decided on the menu for dinner, when they had inspected the kitchen and commended the cleanliness of the cook, Jackson, when they had washed the dishes and discovered the whereabouts of the "tea-things," they suddenly determined that it was much nicer aloft in the sky parlor than in these dim little rooms.

"I don't see why they don't have decent windows," said Enid. "Of course it blows hard here in a gale,

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but just look at that tiny ventilator, no bigger than a ship's port-hole, with a double storm-shutter to secure it if you please, for all the world as if the sea rose so high!"

Constance took thought for a while.

"I suppose the sea never *does* reach this height," she said.

Enid, in order to look out, had to thrust her head and shoulders through an aperture two feet square and three feet in depth. They were in the living-room at that moment — full seventy feet above the spring tide high-water mark. Sixty feet higher, the cornice of the gallery was given its graceful outer slope to shoot the climbing wave-crests of an Atlantic gale away from the lantern. The girls could not realize this stupendous fact. Brand had never told them. He wished them to sleep peacefully on stormy nights when he was away from home. They laughed now at the fanciful notion that the sea could ever so much as toss its spray at the window of the living-room.

They passed into the narrow stairway. Their voices and footsteps sounded hollow. It was to the floor beneath that Bates had fallen.

"I don't think I like living in a lighthouse," cried Enid. "It gives one the creeps."

"Surely, there are neither ghosts nor ghouls here," said Constance. "It is modern, scientific, utilitarian in every atom of its solid granite."

But Enid was silent as they climbed the steep stairs. Once she stopped and peeped into her father's bedroom.

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"That is where they brought me when I first came to the rock," she whispered. "It used to be Mr. Jones's room. I remember dad saying so."

Constance, on whose shoulders the reassuring cloak of science hung somewhat loosely, placed her arm around her sister's waist in a sudden access of tenderness.

"You have improved in appearance since then, Enid," she said.

"What a wizened little chip I must have looked. I wonder who I am."

"I know who you soon will be if you don't take care."

Enid blushed prettily. She glanced at herself in a small mirror on the wall. Trust a woman to find a mirror in any apartment.

"I suppose Jack will ask me to marry him," she mused.

"And what will you reply?"

The girl's lips parted. Her eyes shone for an instant. Then she buried her face against her sister's bosom.

"O, Connie," she wailed, "I shall hate to leave you and dad. Why hasn't Jack got a brother as nice as himself."

Whereupon Constance laughed loud and long.

The relief was grateful to both. Enid's idea of a happy solution of the domestic difficulty appealed to their easily stirred sense of humor.

"Never mind, dear," gasped Constance at last. "You shall marry your Jack and invite all the nice men to dinner. Good gracious! I will have the pick of the navy. Perhaps the Admiral may be a widower."

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With flushed faces they reached the region of light. Brand was writing at a small desk in the service-room.

"Something seems to have amused you," he said. "I have heard weird peals ascending from the depths."

"Connie is going to splice the admiral," explained Enid.

"What admiral?"

"Any old admiral."

"Indeed, I will not take an old admiral," protested the elder.

"Then you had better take him when he is a lieutenant," said Brand.

This offered too good an opening to be resisted.

"Enid has already secured the lieutenant," she murmured, with a swift glance at the other.

Brand looked up quizzically.

"Dear me," he cried, "if my congratulations are not belated —"

Enid was blushing again. She threw her arms about his neck.

"Don't believe her, dad," she said. "She's jealous!"

Constance saw a book lying on the table: "Regulations for the Lighthouse Service." She opened it. Brand stroked Enid's hair gently, and resumed the writing of his daily journal.

"The Elder Brethren!" whispered Constance. "Do they wear long white beards?"

"And carry wands?" added the recovered Enid.

"And dress in velvet cloaks and buckled shoes?"

"And —"

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"And say 'Boo' to naughty little girls who won't let me complete my diary," shouted Brand. "Be off, both of you. Keep a lookout for the next ten minutes. If you see any signals from the mainland, or catch sight of the *Lancelot*, call me."

They climbed to the trimming stage of the lantern, which was level with the external gallery. Obedient to instructions, they searched the Land's End and the wide reach of Mount's Bay beyond Carn du. Save a scudding sail or two beating in from the Lizard and a couple of big steamers hurrying from the East — one a Transatlantic Transport liner from London — there was nothing visible. In the far distance the sea looked smooth enough, though they needed no explanation of the reality when they saw the irregular white patches glistening against the hull of a Penzance fishing-smack.

"O, Connie, the reef!" said Enid, suddenly, in a low voice.

They glanced at the turbid retreat of the tide over the submerged rocks. The sea was heavier, the noise louder, now that they listened to it, than when they arrived in the *Daisy*, little more than an hour earlier. Some giant force seemed to be wrestling there, raging against its bonds, striving feverishly to tear, rend, utterly destroy its invisible fetters. Sometimes, after an unusually impetuous surge, a dark shape, trailing witch-tresses of weed, showed for an instant in the pit of the cauldron. Then a mad whirl of water would pounce on it with a fearsome spring and the fang of rock would be smothered ten feet deep.

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For some reason they did not talk. They were fascinated by the power, the grandeur, the untamed energy of the spectacle. The voice of the reef held them spell-bound. They listened mutely.

Beneath, Brand wrote, with scholarly ease:

"Therefore I decided that it would best serve the interests of the Board if I sent Bates and Jackson to Penzance in the boat in which my daughter —" he paused an instant and added an "s" to the word — "fortunately happened to visit me. As I would be alone on the rock, and the two girls might be helpful until the relief came, I retained them."

He glanced at the weather-glass in front of him and made a note:

"Barometer falling. Temperature higher."

In another book he entered the exact records. A column headed "Wind direction and force," caused him to look up at the wind vane. He whistled softly.

"S. W.," he wrote, and after a second's thought inserted the figure 6. The sailor's scale, ye landsman, differs from yours. What you term a gale at sea he joyfully hails as a fresh breeze. No. 6 is a point above this limit, when a well-conditioned clipper ship can carry single reefs and top-gallant sails, in chase full and by. No. 12 is a hurricane. "Bare poles," says the scale.

Slowly mounting the iron ladder, he stood beside the silent watchers. The Bay was nearly deserted. No sturdy tug-boat was pouring smoke from her funnel and staggering towards the rock. Northwest and west the darkness was spreading and lowering.

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He did not trouble to examine the reef. Its signs and tokens were too familiar to him. Its definite below or muttered threat was part of the prevailing influence of the hour or day. He had heard its voice too often to find an omen in it now.

"This time I must congratulate both of you," he said quietly.

"On what?" they cried in unison, shrill with unacknowledged excitement.

"Ladies seldom, if ever, pass a night on a rock lighthouse. You will have that rare privilege."

Enid clapped her hands.

"I am delighted," she exclaimed.

"Will there be a storm, father?" asked Constance.

"I think so. At any rate, only a miracle will enable the tug to reach us before tomorrow, and miracles are not frequent occurrences at sea."

"I know of one," was Enid's comment, with great seriousness for her. He read her thought.

"I was younger then," he smiled. "Now I am fifty, and the world has aged."