

### *The Pillar of Light*

mention, his relief was again due within a week, just as on the occasion of Enid's first appearance on the rock. The fact struck him as singular. In all probability he would not return to duty. He had completed twenty-one years of active service. Now he would retire, and when the commercial arrangements for the auriscope were completed, he would take his daughters on a long-promised Continental tour, unless, indeed, matters progressed between Stanhope and Enid to the point of an early marriage.

He had foreseen that Stanhope would probably ask Enid to be his wife. He knew the youngster well, and liked him. For the opposition that Lady Margaret might offer he cared not a jot. He smiled inwardly — as the convenient phrase has it — when he reviewed the certain outcome of any dispute between himself and her ladyship. He would surprise her.

Brand, the lighthouse-keeper, and Brand urging the claims of his adopted daughter, would be two very different persons.

Of course, all Penzance knew that he was a gentleman, a scientist in a small way, and a man of means: otherwise Constance and Enid would not have occupied the position they held in local society. Those unacquainted with English ways oftentimes make the mistake of rating a man's social status by the means he possesses or the manner of his life in London. No greater error could be committed. The small, exclusive county town, the community which registers the family connections of many generations, is the only

### *The Hurricane*

reliable index. Here, to be of gentle birth and breeding — not bad credentials even in the court of King Demos — confers Brahminical rank, no matter what the personal fortunes of the individual.

Brand, it is true, did not belong to a Cornish county family, but there were those who conned him shrewdly. They regarded him as a well-meaning crank, yet the edict went forth that his daughters were to be "received," and received they were, with pleasure and admiration by all save such startled elderly mammas as Lady Margaret Stanhope, who expected her good-looking son to contract a marriage which would restore the failing fortunes of the house.

All unconscious of the thoughts flitting through his brain, for Brand was busy trimming a spare lamp, the two girls amused themselves by learning the semaphore alphabet from a little hand-book which he found for them.

When the night fell, dark and lowering, the lamp was lighted. They had never before seen an eight-wicked concentric burner in use. The shore lighthouses with which they were better acquainted were illuminated by electricity or on the catoptric principle, wherein a large number of small Argand lamps, with reflectors, are grouped together.

To interest them, to keep their eyes and ears away from the low-water orgy of the reef, he explained to them the capillary action of the oil. Although they had learnt these things in school they had not realized the exactness of the statement that oil does not burn,

### *The Pillar of Light*

but must first be converted into gas by the application of heat. On the Gulf Rock there were nearly 3,000 gallons of colza oil stored in the tanks beneath, colza being used in preference to paraffin because it was safer, and there was no storage accommodation apart from the lighthouse.

Requiring much greater heat than mineral oil to produce inflammable gas, the colza had to be forced by heavy pressure in the cistern right up to the edge of the wicks, and made to flow evenly over the rims of the burner, else the fierce flame would eat the metal discs as well.

He read them a little lecture on the rival claims of gas and electricity, and demonstrated how dazzlingly brilliant the latter could be on a dark, clear night by showing them the fine light on the Lizard.

"But in hazy weather the oil wins," he said, with the proper pride of every man in his own engine. "Fishermen sailing into Penzance along a course equidistant from the two points tell me that if they can see anything at all on a foggy night they invariably catch a dull yellow radiance from the rock, whilst the Lizard is invisible. The oil has more penetrative power. Its chemical combination is nearer the mean of nature's resources."

At the proper time he banished them to the kitchen to prepare dinner, a feast diverted from the hour of noon by the chances of the day. He adopted every expedient to keep them busy, to tire them physically and mentally, to render them so exhausted that they

### *The Hurricane*

would sleep in blissful calm through the ordeal to come.

As he could not leave the lamp, and they refused to eat apart from him, the dinner, in three courses, was a breathless affair. Going up and down five flights of stairs with soup, joint and pudding, whilst one carried the tray and the other swung a hand lantern in front, required time and exertion. They were cheerful as grigs over it.

Enid, whose turn it was to bring up the plates of tapioca, pleaded guilty to a slight sensation of nervousness.

"I could not help remembering," she said, "what an awful lot of dark iron steps there were beneath me. I felt as if something were creeping up quickly behind to grab me by the ankles."

"You should go up and down three times in the dark," was Brand's recipe. "When you quitted the door level for the third ascent you would cease to worry about impossible grabs."

Constance looked at her watch.

"Only eight o'clock! What a long day it has been," she commented.

"You must go to bed early. Sleep in my room. You will soon forget where you are; each of the bunks is comfortable. Now I will leave you in charge of the lamp whilst I go and lock up."

They laughed. It sounded so home-like.

"Any fear of burglars?" cried Enid.

"Yes, most expert cracksmen, wind, and rain, and — sleet," he added quietly. "I must fasten all the

### *The Pillar of Light*

storm-shutters and make everything snug. Don't stir until I wake you in the morning."

"Poor old dad!" sighed Constance. "What a vigil!"

He was making new entries in the weather report when she remarked thoughtfully:

"It is high-water about half past one, I think?"

He nodded, pretending to treat the question as of no special import.

"From all appearances there will be a heavy sea," she went on.

"Just an ordinary bad night," he said coolly.

"Do the waves reach far up the lighthouse in a gale?" she persisted.

Then Brand grasped the situation firmly.

"So that your slumbers may be peaceful," he said, "I will call your kind attention to the fact that the Gulf Rock light has appeared every night during the past twenty-five years, or since a date some four years before you were born, Constance. It contains 4,000 tons of granite and is practically monolithic, as if it were carved out of a quarry. Indeed, I think its builder went one better than nature. Here are no cracks or fissures or undetected flaws. The lowest course is bolted to the rock with wrought-iron clamps. Every stone is dovetailed to its neighbors, and clasped to them with iron, above, below and at the sides. If you understand conic sections I could make clearer the scientific aspect of the structure, but you can take it from me you are far safer here than on a natural rock many times the dimensions of this column."

### *The Hurricane*

"That sounds very satisfactory," murmured Enid, sleepily.

"I am overwhelmed," said Constance, who grasped the essential fact that he had not answered her question.

Soon after nine o'clock he kissed them good-night. They promised not to sit up talking. As a guarantee of good behavior, Enid said she would ring the electric bell just before she climbed into her bunk.

The signal came soon and he was glad. He trusted to the fatigue, the fresh air, the confidence of the knowledge that he was on guard, to lull them into the security of unconsciousness.

The behavior of the mercury puzzled him. In the barometer it fell, in the thermometer it rose. Increasing temperature combined with low pressure was not a healthy weather combination in January. Looking back through the records of several years, he discovered a similar set of conditions one day in March, 1891. He was stationed then on the Northeast coast and failed to remember any remarkable circumstance connected with the date, so he consulted the lighthouse diary for that year. Ah! Here was a possible explanation. The chief-keeper, a stranger to him, was something of a meteorologist.

He had written: "At 4.15 P.M. the barometer stood at 27.16°, and the thermometer at 45.80°. There was a heavy sea and a No. 7 gale blowing from the S. S.-W. About five o'clock the wind increased to a hurricane and the sea became more violent than I have seen it during five years' experience of this station.

### *The Pillar of Light*

Judging solely by the clouds and the flight of birds, I should imagine that the cyclonic centre passed over the Scilly Isles and the Land's End."

Then, next day:

"A steady northeast wind stilled the sea most effectually. Within twenty-four hours of the first signs of the hurricane the Channel was practicable for small craft. A fisherman reports that the coast is strewn with wreckage."

Brand mused over the entries for a while. With his night glasses he peered long into the teeth of the growing storm to see if he could find the double flash of the magnificent light on the Bishop Rock, one of the Atlantic breakwaters of the Scilly Isles. It was fully thirty-five miles distant, but it flung its radiance over the waters from a height of 143 feet, and the Gulf Rock lamp stood 130 feet above high-water mark. A landsman would not have distinguished even the nearer revolutions of the St. Agnes light, especially in the prevalent gloom, and wisps of spindrift were already striking the lantern and blurring the glass.

Nevertheless, he caught the quick flashes reflected from clouds low, but unbroken. As yet, there was a chance of the incoming tide bringing better weather, and he bent again over the record of the equinoctial gale in 1891. Soon he abandoned this hope. The growing thunder of the reef as the tide advanced gave the first unmistakable warning of what was to come. As a mere matter of noise the reef roared its loudest at half-tide. He understood now that a gale had swept across

### *The Hurricane*

the Atlantic in an irregular track. Howsoever the winds may rage the tides remain steadfast, and the great waves now rushing up from the west were actually harbingers of the fierce blast which had created them.

Of course, the threatened turmoil in no wise disconcerted him. It might be that the rock would remain inaccessible during many days. In that event the girls would take the watch after the lamp was extinguished and they must learn to endure the monotony and discomforts of existence in a storm-bound lighthouse. They would be nervous unquestionably — perhaps he had forgotten how nervous — but Brand was a philosopher, and at present he was most taken up with wonderment at the curious blend of circumstances which resulted in their presence on the rock that night.

Ha! A tremor shook the great pillar. He heard without the frenzied shriek of the first repulsed roller which flung itself on the sleek and rounded wall. Would the girls sleep through the next few hours? Possibly, if awake, they would attribute the vibration of the column to the wind. He trusted it might be so. Shut in as they were, they could not distinguish sounds. Everything to them would be a confused hum, with an occasional shiver as the granite braced its mighty heart to resist the enemy.

But what new note was this in the outer chaos? An ordinary gale shuddered and whistled and chanted its way past the lantern in varying tones. It sang, it piped, it bellowed, it played on giant reeds and crashed with cymbals. Now — he looked at the clock, after

### *The Pillar of Light*

midnight — there was a sustained screech in the voice of the tempest which he did not remember having heard before. At last the explanation dawned on him. The hurricane was there, a few feet away, shut off from him by mere sheets of glass. The lighthouse thrust its tall shaft into this merciless tornado with grim steadfastness, and around its smooth contours poured a volume of unearthly melody which seemed to surge up from the broad base and was flung off into the darkness by the outer sweep of the cornice.

The wind was traveling seventy, eighty, mayhap a hundred miles an hour. Not during all his service, nor in earlier travels through distant lands, had he ever witnessed a storm of such fury. He thought he heard something crack overhead. He looked aloft, but all seemed well. Not until next day did he discover that the wind-vane had been carried away, a wrought iron shank nearly two inches thick having snapped like a piece of worsted at the place where the tempest had found a fault.

He tried to look out into the heart of the gale. The air was full of flying foam, but the sea was beaten flat. If the growling monster beneath tried to fling a defiant crest at the tornado, the whole mass of water, many tons in weight, was instantly torn from the surface and flung into nothingness. Some of these adventurers, forced up by the reef, hit the lighthouse with greater force than many a cannon-ball fired in battles which have made history. Time after time the splendid structure winced beneath the blow.

### *The Hurricane*

If Stephen Brand were ever fated to know fear he was face to face with the ugly phantom then. The granite column would not yield, but it was quite within the bounds of possibility that the entire lantern might be carried away, and he with it.

He thought, with a catching of his breath, of the two girls in the tiny room beneath. For one fleeting instant his mortal eyes gazed into the unseen. But the call of duty restored him. The excessive draught affected the lamp. Its ardor must be checked. With a steady hand he readjusted the little brass screws. They were so superbly indifferent to all this pandemonium. Just little brass screws, doing their work, and heeding naught beside. Suddenly there came to him the triumphant knowledge that the pure white beam of the light was hewing its path through the savage assailant without as calmly and fearlessly as it lit up the ocean wilds on a midsummer night of moonlight and soft zephyrs.

“Thank God for that!” he murmured aloud. “How can a man die better than at his post?”

The ring of iron beneath caught his ears. He turned from the lamp. Constance appeared, pale, with shining eyes. She carried the lantern. Behind her crept Enid, who had been crying; she strove now to check her tears.

“Is this sort of thing normal, or a special performance arranged for our benefit?” said his daughter, with a fine attempt at a smile.

“Oh, dad, I am so frightened,” cried Enid. “Why does it howl so?”