

CHAPTER VII
THE LOTTERY

JUST as the spin of a coin may mean loss or gain in some trumpety dispute or game of the hour, in like manner, apparently, are the graver issues of life or death determined at times. It is not so, we know. Behind the triviality on which men fasten with amazement as the governing factor in events there lies an inscrutable purpose. Yet, to those watching the destruction of the splendid vessel, there was little evidence of other than a blind fury in the fashion of her undoing.

The hoarse words had scarce left Brand's lips before a third wave, higher and more truculent than its predecessors, sprang right over the lost ship and smothered her in an avalanche of water. No doubt this monster swept away some of the officers and crew. It was impossible to be certain of aught save the one thing — that the steamer would surely break up before their eyes. The wind, now blowing in fierce gusts, the sea, rising each minute, the clouds of spray chasing each other in eerie flights through space, the grinding, incessant, utterly overwhelming noise of the reef, made all sights and sounds indefinite, nebulous, almost fantastic.

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But when the giant billow receded, leaving the ship like a dark rock in the midst of innumerable cascades, the catastrophe took place which Brand would have foreseen were his thoughts less tumultuous. With the support of the sea withdrawn from half its length the huge hull must either slip back into deep water or break in two. The slender steel shell of an ocean liner is not constructed to resist the law of gravity acting on full five thousand tons. So the solid-looking colossus cracked like a carrot, and the after part fell back into the watery chasm, there to be swallowed instantly, amidst a turmoil which happily drowned the despairing shrieks of far more than half of those on board.

Constance and Enid screamed bitterly in their woe, but again they were saved from utter collapse by the exigencies of the moment. Brand, who expected to see the remainder of the ship blown up by the inrushing of the sea to the furnaces, dragged them forcibly below the level of the protecting balustrade.

Yet nothing of the sort took place. A vast cloud of steam rushed upwards, but it was dissipated by the next breath of the gale. This incident told the lighthouse-keeper much. The vessel had been disabled so long that her skilful commander, finding the motive power of no further avail, and certain that his ship must be driven ashore, had ordered the fires to be drawn and the steam to be exhausted from all boilers except one. Therefore, her shaft was broken, reasoned Brand. Probably the accident had occurred during the height of the hurricane, and her steering gear, of little use with-

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out the driving force of the engines to help, might have been disabled at the same time.

When the horror-stricken watchers looked again at the wreck the forward part had shifted its position. It was now lying broadside on to the seas, and the lofty foremast thrust its truck to within a few feet of them.

They were spared one ghastly scene which must surely have bereft the girls of their senses. The majority of the first-class passengers had gathered in the saloon. Some clung like limpets to the main gangway. A number, mostly men, crowded together in the drawing-room on the promenade deck. Farther than this they could not go, as the companion hatchways had been locked by the officer of the watch, the decks being quite impassable.

When the hull yielded, the spacious saloon was exposed to the vicious waves. Finding this new cavern opened to them, great liquid tongues sprang into the darkness and licked out hapless victims by the score. Of this appalling incident those in the lighthouse knew nothing until long afterwards.

When the ship struck, the electric dynamos stopped and all her lights went out. The lighthouse lamp, owing to its rays being concentrated by the dioptric lens, helped not at all to dissipate the dim and ghastly vision beneath, but the great frame of the fore part of the vessel served as a break-water to some extent, and temporarily withheld the waves from beating against the column.

Hence Brand, straining his eyes through the flying

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ruck, fancied he could make out the figure of the captain as he left the bridge, and, with some of the crew, took shelter behind the structure of the library and state cabins on what remained of the promenade deck. At the same moment the frenzied occupants of the library and gangway contrived to burst open the door of the main companion.

If they had to die they might as well die in the open and not boxed up in impenetrable darkness. As a matter of fact, the bolts were forced by a man who fired his revolver at them. The sea quickly discovered this new outlet. The next wave, passing through the saloon, sent tons of water pouring through the open hatch. One good result accrued. The strong canvas awning which prolonged the spar deck was carried away, and the group of survivors, benumbed with cold and wholly overcome by their desperate position, could see the entire height of the granite column in front crowned with its diadem of brilliance. The liberated passengers saw it for the first time.

The sight brought no hope. Between ship and lighthouse was a true maelstrom of more than sixty feet of water, created by the back-wash from the stone-work and the shattered hull. Even if the passage could be made of what avail was it? The iron entrance door was full fifty feet above the present level of the sea. It could only be approached by way of the rungs of iron embedded in the granite, and every wave, even in the comparative moderation caused by the obstructing wreck, swept at least twenty feet of the smooth stone

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tiers. It is this very fact that prevents rock lighthouses from seldom if ever serving as refuges for ship-wrecked sailors. The ascending ladder is so exposed, the sea usually so turbulent under the least stress of wind, that no human being can retain hand-hold or footing.

Yet, there was one faint chance of succor, and it was not a sailor who grasped it. The first that Brand knew of the desperate venture was the sight of a spectral man climbing up the shrouds of the fore-mast. On a steamer, whose yards are seldom used for sails, the practicable rope-ladder ceases at the fore, main, or mizzen-top, as the case may be. Thenceforward, a sailor must climb with hands and feet to the truck, a feat which may occasionally be necessary when the vessel is in dock; it is hardly ever attempted at sea.

The venturesome individual who thus suddenly made himself the center of observation carried a line with him. Not until he essayed the second portion of his perilous ascent did Brand realize what the other intended to do, which was nothing less than to reach the truck, the very top of the mast, and endeavor to throw a rope to the gallery.

And he might succeed, too — that was the marvel of it. The tapering spar came very near to them, perhaps twelve feet distant, and the wind would certainly carry the rope across the chasm if carefully thrown. A few strong and active men might use this aerial ferry. Well, better they than none. Brave fellow; would that the Lord might help him!

Higher and nearer swung the stalwart youngster, for

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none but a lithe and active boy could climb a pole with such easy vigor. At last he reached the truck, and a faintly heard cheer from beneath mingled with the hysterical delight of Enid and Constance, when, with legs twined round the mast, he rested his arms for an instant on the flat knob of the truck.

Here his face came into the lower focus of the light — strong, clean-shaven, clear-cut features, a square, determined chin, two dark, earnest eyes, and a mop of ruffled black hair, for his deer-stalker cap had blown off 'ere he cleared the spar deck.

"Look out for the line," they heard him shout. The wind brought his voice plainly, but evidently he could distinguish no syllable of Brand's answering hail:

"Shall I make fast?"

"Can't hear a word," he cried. "If you can hear me hold a hand up."

Brand obeyed.

"Catch the line," he went on. "It is attached to a block with a running tackle. Haul in and make fast."

"The megaphone!" shouted Brand to Constance. She darted away to bring it, and when the adventurer clinging to the fore-mast had thrown a coil successfully, Brand took the instrument.

"Why don't you come this way? The others will follow," he bellowed.

"There are women and children down below. They must be saved first, and they cannot climb the mast," was the reply.

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"All right, but send up a couple of sailors. We are short-handed here."

"Right-o," sang out the other cheerily, though he wondered why three men should anticipate difficulty.

Down he went. Without waiting, Brand and the girls hauled lustily at the rope. It was no child's play to hoist a heavy pulley and several hundred feet of stout cordage. More than once they feared the first thin rope would break, but it was good hemp, and soon the block was hooked to the strong iron stanchions of the railing. To make assurance doubly sure, Brand told Enid to take several turns of the spare cord around the hook and the adjacent rails.

Meanwhile, Constance and he saw that the rope was moving through the pulley without their assistance. Then through the whirling scud beneath they made out an ascending figure clinging to it. Soon he was close to the gallery. Catching him by arms and collar they lifted him into safety. He was one of the junior officers, and Constance, though she hardly expected it, experienced a momentary feeling of disappointment that the first man to escape was not the handsome youth to whose cool daring some at least of the ship's company would owe their lives.

The newcomer was a typical Briton.

"Thanks," he said. "Close shave. Have you a light? We must signal after each arrival."

Enid brought the small lantern, and the stranger waved it twice. The rope traveled back through the

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pulley, and this time it carried a sailor-man, who said not one word but stooped to tie his boot-lace.

"How many are left?" inquired Brand of the officer.

"About eighty, all told, including some twenty women and children."

"All wet to the skin?"

"Yes: some of them unconscious, perhaps dead."

"Can you hold out?"

"Yes; A nip of brandy —"

"I will send some. We must leave you now. These with me are my daughters."

At last the crust of insular self-possession was broken. The man looked from one to the other of the seeming lighthouse-keepers.

"Well, I'm —," he blurted out in his surprise. "That American youngster wondered what the trouble was."

A shapeless bundle hove in sight. It contained two little girls, tied inside a tarpaulin and lashed to the rope. This, evidently, was the plan for dealing with the helpless ones.

Brand instantly divided his forces. Enid he dispatched to make hot cocoa in the quickest and most lavish manner possible. Constance was to give each new arrival a small quantity of stimulant (the lighthouse possessed a dozen bottles of brandy and whiskey) and act as escort. The women and children were to be allotted the two bedrooms. Any bad cases of injury or complete exhaustion could be disposed of in the visiting officer's room, whilst all the men fit to take care of themselves were to be distributed between the en-

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trance, the coal-room, the workshop and the stairways. The kitchen, store-room and service-room were to be kept clear, and the store-room door locked. Eighty! Brand was already doing problems in simple arithmetic.

A similar problem, with a different point to be determined, was occupying the active mind of the "American youngster" who had solved the knottiest proposition put forward during that eventful night.

He watched the forwarding of the shrieking, shuddering, or inanimate women. He timed the operation by his watch, as the reflected light from the lamp was quite sufficient for the purpose.

Then he approached the captain.

"Say, skipper," he cried, "how long do you give the remains of her to hold out?"

"It is not high-water yet," was the answer. "Perhaps half an hour. Forty minutes at the utmost."

"Then you'll have to boost this thing along a good deal faster," said the cheerful one. "They're going up now at the rate of one every two minutes. That's thirty in half an hour. Fifty of us will travel a heap quicker at the end of that time if your calculation holds good."

The captain, who appeared to be in a stupor of grief, roused himself.

A few short and sharp orders changed the aspect of affairs. Frightened and protesting ladies were securely tied together, and hoisted, four at a time, like so many bags of wheat. When it came to the men's turn even less ceremony and greater expedition were used.

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Indeed, already there were emphatic warnings that much valuable time had been lost in the early stage of the rescue. Though the wind was now only blowing a stiff gale, the sea, lashed to frenzy by the hurricane, was heavier than ever. The ship was vanishing visibly. A funnel fell with a hideous crash and carried away a life-boat. The rest of the spar deck and nearly the whole of the forward cabins were torn out bodily. By repeated thumping on the reef the vessel had settled back almost onto an even keel, and the fore-mast, which had so providentially neared the summit of the light-house, was now removed far beyond the possibility of a rope being thrown.

The survivors on deck worked with feverish energy. The time was drawing short. They did not know the second that some unusually tempestuous wave would devour them utterly.

"Now, Mr. Pyne, you next," cried the chief officer, addressing the young Philadelphian, who, *mirabile dictu*, had found and lighted a cigar.

"Guess I'll swing up along with the captain," was the answer.

"Up with him," shouted the captain, fiercely, himself helping to loop Pyne to the fourth officer.

All others had gone. The officers were leaving the ship in order of seniority, the juniors first. Just as the quartette were about to swing clear of the ship the captain grasped Pyne's hand.

"Thank you, lad," he said, and away they went.

There were left on the vessel the third, second, and

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first officers, the purser, and the captain. The others wanted the captain to come with them. He resisted, held out for his right to be the last to quit a ship he had commanded for more than twenty years, and hoarsely forbade any further argument.

Very unwillingly, they left him hauling alone at the rope, though their predecessors, knowing the need of it, helped vigorously from the gallery. Indeed, it was with difficulty that Pyne was held back from returning with the descending rope. They told him he was mad to dream of such a piece of folly, and perforce he desisted.

But when the captain deliberately cast off the deck-pulley from which the rope had been manipulated they knew that the boy had read his soul. The now useless cordage dangling from the gallery was caught by the wind and sea and sent whipping off to leeward.

Brand, brought from the lantern by the hubbub of shouting, came out, followed by Constance. He suggested, as a last resource, that they should endeavor to fire a line across the vessel by means of a rocket.

They agreed to try, for the spectacle of the captain, standing bareheaded on all that was left of the bridge, moved them to a pitch of frenzy not often seen in an assemblage of Anglo-Saxons, and especially of sailors.

Brand turned to procure the rocket, but a loud cry caused him to delay. The expected wave had come, the vessel was smothered in a vortex of foam, the tall fore-mast tottered and fell, and when the water subsided again all that was visible of the great steamer was

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some portion of her hull and the solidly built bow, which was not wrenched from the keel-plate until another hour had passed.

The agonized cry of a strong man is a woful thing. Constance, by reason of the gathering at the side of the gallery, was unable to see all that was taking place. But the yell which went up from the onlookers told her that something out of the common, even on this night of thrills, had occurred.

"What is it, dad?" she asked, as her father came to her.

"The end of the ship," he said. "The captain has gone with her."

"Oh, dear, why wasn't he saved?"

"I think he refused to desert his ship. His heart was broken, I expect. Now, Connie, duty first."

Indeed, she required no telling. As each of the shipwrecked men entered the lantern, she handed him a glass of spirits, asked if he were injured, and told him exactly how many flights of stairs he had to descend. But cocoa and biscuits would be brought soon, she explained: greatly amazed, but speechless for the most part, the men obeyed her directions.

One of the last to claim her attention was the young American, Mr. Pyne. Her face lit up pleasantly when she saw him.

"I was wondering what had become of you," she said. "My sister has asked me several times if you had arrived, and I imagined that I must have missed you by some chance."

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Now all this was Greek to him, or nearly so. Indeed, had it been intelligible Greek, he might have guessed its purport more easily.

Holding the glass in his hand he looked at her in frank, open-eyed wonder. To be hailed so gleefully by a good-looking girl, whom he had never to his knowledge set eyes on, was somewhat of a mystery, and the puzzle was made all the more difficult by the fact that she had discarded the weather-proof accoutrements needed when she first ventured forth on the gallery.

"I'm real glad you're pleased. My name is Charles A. Pyne," he said, slowly.

It was now Constance's turn to be bewildered. Then the exact situation dawned on her.

"How stupid of me," she cried. "Of course you don't recognize me again. My sister and I happen to be alone with my father on the rock tonight. We were with him on the balcony when you acted so bravely. You see, the light shone clear on your face."

"I'm glad it's shining on yours now," he said.

"You must go two floors below this," said she severely. "I will bring you some cocoa and a biscuit as quickly as possible."

"I am not a bit tired," he commented, still looking at her.

"That is more than I can say," she answered, "but I am so delighted that we managed to save so many poor people."

"How many?"

"Seventy-eight. But I dare not ask you now how

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many are lost. It would make me cry, and I have no time for tears. Will you really help to carry a tray?"

"Just try me."

At the top of the stairs Constance called to her father:

"Anything you want, dad?"

"Yes, dear. Find out the chief officer, and send him to me. He can eat and drink here whilst we talk."